



Young Samurai: The Way Of The Warrior

By

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Prologue – Masamoto Tenno

Kyoto, Japan, August 1609

The boy snapped awake. He seized his sword.

Tenno hardly dared to breathe. He sensed someone else was in the room. As his eyes grew accustomed to the dark, he searched for signs of movement. But he could see nothing, only shadows within shadows, the moonlight seeping ghostlike through the lucent paper walls. *Perhaps he had been wrong . . .* His samurai training, though, warned him otherwise.

Tenno listened intently for the slightest sound, any indication there might be an intruder. But he heard nothing unusual. The cherry blossom trees in the garden made a faint rustle like the sound of silk as a light breeze passed through. There was the familiar trickle of water as it flowed from the small fountain into the fishpond, and nearby a cricket made its persistent nightly chirp. The rest of the house lay silent.

He was overreacting . . . It was just some bad *kami* spirit disturbing his dreams, he reasoned.

This past month the whole Masamoto household had been on edge with the rumour of war. There was talk of a rebellion and Tenno's father had been called into service to help quell any potential uprising. The peace Japan had enjoyed for the past twelve years was suddenly under threat and the people were afraid they would be plunged back into war. No wonder he was so on edge.

Tenno lowered his guard and settled back to sleep on his *futon*. As he did so, the night cricket chirped a little louder and the boy's hand tightened round the hilt of

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his sword. His father had once said, ‘A samurai should always obey his instincts’, and his instincts told him something was wrong.

He rose from his bed to investigate.

Suddenly a silver star spun out of the darkness.

Tenno threw himself out of the way but was a second too late.

The *shuriken* sliced through his cheek before burying itself deep into the *futon* where his head had just been. As he continued to roll, he felt a rush of hot blood stream down his face. Then he heard a second *shuriken* thud into the *tatami*-matted floor, and in one fluid movement he sprang to his feet, bringing his sword up to protect himself.

Dressed head-to-toe in black, a figure drifted ghost-like out of the shadows.

Ninja! The Japanese assassin of the night.

With a measured slowness, the ninja unsheathed a vicious-looking blade from his *saya*. Unlike Tenno’s large curved *katana* sword, the *tanto* was short, straight and ideal for stabbing.

The ninja took a silent step closer and raised the *tanto*, a human cobra preparing to strike.

Tenno, anticipating the attack, cut down with his sword, slicing across the body of the approaching assassin. But the ninja deftly evaded the boy’s sword, spinning round to kick him squarely in the chest.

Thrown backwards, Tenno crashed through the paper-thin *shoji* door of his room and out into the night. He landed heavily in the middle of the inner garden, disorientated and fighting for breath.

The ninja leapt through the torn opening and landed cat-like in front of him.

Tenno attempted to stand and defend himself, but his legs gave way. They had become numb and useless. In a panic, he tried to scream – to call for help – but his throat had swollen shut. It burned like fire and his cries became suffocating stabs for breath.

The ninja shifted in and out of focus before vanishing in a swirl of black smoke.

The boy’s vision folded in on itself and he realized the ninja’s *shuriken* had been dipped in poison, paralysing him limb by limb. His body quickly succumbed to its lethal powers and he lay there at the mercy of his assassin.

Blinded, Tenno listened for the ninja’s approach, but could only hear the *chirp-chirp* of the cricket. He recalled his father once telling him that ninja used the insect’s calls to mask the noise of their own movements. *That* was how his assassin had slipped by the guards undetected!

Briefly his eyesight returned and under the pale light of a waning moon, a shrouded face floated towards him. The ninja drew so close that Tenno could smell the assassin’s hot breath on his face, sour and stale like cheap *saké*. Through the slit in the hood of its *shinobi shozoko*, the boy could see a single emerald-green eye blazing with hatred.

‘This is a message for your father,’ hissed the ninja.

Tenno felt the deadly cold tip of the *tanto* on the flesh above his heart.

A single sharp thrust and his whole body flared white-hot with pain . . .

Then nothing . . .

Masamoto Tenno had passed into the Great Void.

Ch.1 Fireball

Pacific Ocean, August 1611

The boy snapped awake.

‘*All hands on deck!*’ bellowed the Bosun. ‘That means you too, Jack!’

The Bosun’s weather-beaten face loomed out of the darkness at the boy, who hastily dropped from his swaying hammock to the wooden floor of the ship’s middle deck.

Jack Fletcher, only twelve, was nonetheless tall for his age, slim and muscular from two years at sea. Hidden behind the straggly mess of straw-blond hair he had inherited from his mother, his eyes were an azure blue and glinted with a determination and fire far beyond his years.

Men, weary from the long voyage on board the *Alexandria*, slumped from their bunks and pushed past Jack, heading urgently for the upper deck.

‘Get going, boy!’ snarled the Bosun.

Suddenly there was an almighty crash, followed by a shrieking of the timbers and Jack was thrown to the floor. The small oil lantern suspended from the central beam of the dinghy hold swung wildly, its flame spluttering.

Jack landed among empty water casks, sending them spinning across the bucking floorboards. He struggled to find his footing as several other grime-ridden, half-starved crewmen stumbled past in the flickering darkness. A hand grabbed the back of his shirt and dragged him to his feet.

It was Ginsel.

The short stocky Dutchman grinned at Jack, revealing a set of broken jagged teeth that made him look like a great white shark. Despite his severe appearance, the sailor had always treated Jack with kindness.

‘Another storm’s hitting us hard, Jack. It sounds as if Hell itself has opened up its gates!’ growled Ginsel. ‘Best get yourself up on the foredeck before the Bosun has your hide.’

Jack hastily followed Ginsel and the rest of the crew as they scrambled up the companionway and emerged into the heart of the storm.

Menacing black clouds thundered across the heavens and the complaints of the sailors were immediately drowned out by the relentless wind ripping through the ship’s rigging. The smell of sea salt was sharp in Jack’s nostrils and ice-cold rain slashed at his face, stinging him like a thousand tiny needles. But before he could take it all in, the ship was rolled by a mountainous wave.

The deck flooded and foamed with seawater and Jack was instantly drenched to the skin. The water cascaded away through the scuppers, and as he gasped for air, another tumultuous wave roared across the deck. This one, stronger than the first, swept Jack off his feet and he barely managed to grab hold of the ship’s rail to stop himself being washed overboard.

Jack recovered his footing as a jagged line of lightning scorched its way across the night sky and struck the main mast. For a brief moment, the entire ship was illuminated by a ghostly light. The three-masted ocean trader was in turmoil. Her crew were scattered across the decks like pieces of driftwood. High up on the yardarm, a group of sailors battled against the wind, attempting to furl the mainsail before the storm ripped it away, or worse, capsized the ship entirely.

On the quarterdeck, the Third Mate, a seven-foot giant of a man with a beard of fiery red hair, was wrestling with the wheel. Beside him was Captain Wallace, a stern figure who shouted commands at his crew, but all in vain; the wind whipped his words away before anyone could hear them.

The only other man on the quarterdeck was a tall and powerful sailor with dark brown hair tied back with a thin piece of cord. This man was Jack's father, John Fletcher, the Pilot of the *Alexandria*, and his eyes were fixed on the horizon as if hoping to pierce the storm and seek out the safety of land beyond.

'You lot!' ordered the Bosun, pointing at Jack, Ginsel and two other crewmembers. 'Get yourselves aloft and unfurl that topsail. Now!'

They immediately headed for the bow of the ship, but as they crossed the main deck to the foremast, a fireball plummeted out of nowhere – straight towards Jack.

'*Watch out!*' cried one of the sailors.

Jack, having already experienced several full-on attacks from enemy Portuguese warships during the voyage, instinctively ducked. He felt the rush of hot air and heard the deep howl as the fireball flew past and plunged into the deck. However, the impact was unlike the sound of a cannonball. It didn't have the same fearsome crack of iron against wood. This was dull and lifeless as if it were a bale of broadcloth. With sickening horror, Jack's eyes fell upon the object now at his feet.

It was no fireball.

It was the burning body of one of the crew, struck dead by the lightning.

Jack stood transfixed, sickness rising from the pit of his stomach. The dead man's face was etched in agony and so disfigured by fire that Jack could not even recognize him.

'Holy Mary, Mother of God,' exclaimed Ginsel, 'even the Heavens are against us!'

But before he could utter another word, a wave crested the rail and swept the body out to sea.

'Jack, stay with me!' said Ginsel, seeing the shock rise in the boy's face. He grabbed hold of Jack's arm and tried to pull him towards the foremast.

But Jack remained rooted to the spot. He could still smell the charred flesh of the dead sailor like an overcooked pig on a spit.

This was by no means the first death he had witnessed on the voyage and he knew it would not be the last. His father had warned him that crossing both the Atlantic and the Pacific would be fraught with danger. Jack had seen men die from frostbite, scurvy, tropical fever, knife wounds and cannon shot. Still, such familiarity with death did not make Jack numb to its horror.

'Come on, Jack . . .' urged Ginsel.

'I'm just saying a prayer for him,' Jack finally replied. He knew he should follow Ginsel and the rest of the crew, but the need to be with his father at this very moment outweighed any duty to the ship.

'Where're you going?' yelled Ginsel, as Jack ran for the quarterdeck. 'We need you aloft!'

Jack, though, was lost to the storm, struggling towards his father in a chaotic battle against the elements as the ship pitched and rolled.

He had barely managed to reach the mizzenmast when another colossal wave ploughed into the *Alexandria*. This one was so powerful that Jack was whipped off his feet and washed across the deck, all the way to the larboard rail.

The ship lurched again and he was tossed over the side, swallowed whole by the dark seething ocean . . .

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