



**YOUNG
SAMURAI**
THE WAY OF THE DRAGON

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PUFFIN



PROLOGUE THE ASSASSIN

Japan, June 1613

Silent as a shadow, the assassin flitted from roof to roof.

Hidden by the darkness of night, the ninja crossed the moat, scaled the inner bailey wall and infiltrated deep into the castle grounds. His objective, the main tower, was a formidable keep of eight floors that sat at the heart of the supposedly impregnable castle.

Evading the samurai guards on the outer walls had been a simple matter. Lethargic due to the hot, airless night, they were more concerned about their own discomfort than the safety of their *daimyo* lord within the tower. Besides, their very belief that the castle was impenetrable meant the guards were lax in their duty – who would even attempt to break into such a fortress?

For the assassin, the hardest part would be getting inside the keep. The *daimyo*'s personal bodyguard wouldn't be so negligent and the ninja had come as close as he could by traversing the roofs of the outer buildings. He now had to cross open ground to the solid stone base of the tower.

The ninja dropped from the roof and skirted the edge of a courtyard, using the plum and *sakura* cherry trees for cover. Passing silently through a tea garden with an oval pond, he made his way to the central well house. The assassin ducked inside as he heard a samurai patrol approach.

When the way was clear, the ninja darted across to the keep and like a black-skinned gecko effortlessly scaled the steep slope of its immense base. Swiftly reaching the fourth floor, he slipped in through an open window.

Once inside, the assassin knew exactly where he was going. Padding down the darkened corridor, he passed several *shoji* doors then bore right, making for a wooden staircase. He was about to ascend when a guard suddenly appeared at the top of the stairs.

Like smoke, the ninja sank back into the shadows, his all-black *shinobi shozoku* clothing rendering him virtually invisible. Quietly, he drew a *tantō* knife in readiness to slit the man's throat.

Oblivious to his proximity to death, the guard came down the stairs and walked straight past. The assassin allowed the man to live, having no wish to draw attention to his presence within the keep. As soon as the guard rounded the corner, the ninja resheathed his blade and climbed the stairs to the upper corridor.

Through the thin paper *shoji* before him, he could see the halos of two candles glowing in the gloom. Sliding open the door a notch, he put a single eye to the crack. A man knelt before an altar deep in prayer. There were no samurai present.

The assassin crept inside.

When he was within striking distance, the ninja reached

into a pouch on his belt and removed a rectangular object wrapped in black oilskin. He placed it on the floor beside the worshipping man and gave a brief bow.

‘About time,’ growled the man.

Without turning round, the man picked up the package and unwrapped it to reveal a worn leatherbound book.

‘The *rutter*!’ he breathed, caressing its cover, then opening its pages to examine the sea charts, ocean reports and meticulous logging of tides, compass bearings and star constellations. ‘Now we possess what is rightfully ours. To think, the fortune of the world is in my hands. The secrets of the oceans laid bare for our nation to command the trade routes. It’s our divine right to rule the seas.’

The man placed the logbook on the altar. ‘And what of the boy?’ he asked, his back to the ninja still. ‘Is he dead?’

‘No.’

‘Why not? My instructions were explicit.’

‘As you know, the samurai Masamoto has been training the boy in the Way of the Warrior,’ explained the ninja. ‘The boy is now highly skilled and has proven somewhat . . . resilient.’

‘Resilient? Are you telling me a mere boy has defeated the great Dokugan Ryu?’

Dragon Eye’s single emerald-green eye flared in annoyance at the man’s mockery. He contemplated snapping the man’s neck there and then, but he had yet to receive payment for retrieving the *rutter*. Such pleasures would have to wait.

‘I employed you because you were the best. The most ruthless,’ continued the man. ‘Am I mistaken in my judgement, Dragon Eye? Why haven’t you killed him?’

‘Because you may still need him.’

The man turned round, his face cast in shadow.

‘What could I possibly want with Jack Fletcher?’

‘The *rutter* is encrypted. Only the boy knows the code.’

‘How do *you* know that?’ demanded the man, a note of alarm registering in his voice. ‘Have you been trying to break the cipher yourself?’

‘Of course,’ revealed the ninja. ‘After the mistake of acquiring the Portuguese dictionary, I thought it wise to check the contents before delivery.’

‘Did you have any success?’ asked the man.

‘Not entirely. The unfamiliar combination of Portuguese and English made the task somewhat more complex than anticipated.’

‘No matter. It’s of little consequence,’ said the man, evidently pleased that the knowledge remained secret from the ninja. ‘There’s a Franciscan monk in the dungeons, a mathematician and fluent in both the languages. The mere promise of freedom should secure his decoding services.’

‘And what about the *gaijin* boy?’ asked Dragon Eye.

‘Once the code’s broken, complete your mission,’ ordered the man, turning to kneel before the altar once more. ‘Kill him.’

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