



**YOUNG
SAMURAI**
THE WAY OF FIRE

CHRIS BRADFORD



PUFFIN

For Charlie Viney, my agent

PUFFIN BOOKS

Published by the Penguin Group

Penguin Books Ltd, 80 Strand, London WC2R 0RL, England
Penguin Group (USA) Inc., 375 Hudson Street, New York, New York 10014, USA
Penguin Group (Canada), 90 Eglinton Avenue East, Suite 700, Toronto, Ontario, Canada M4P 2Y3
(a division of Pearson Penguin Canada Inc.)
Penguin Ireland, 25 St Stephen's Green, Dublin 2, Ireland (a division of Penguin Books Ltd)
Penguin Group (Australia), 250 Camberwell Road, Camberwell, Victoria 3124, Australia
(a division of Pearson Australia Group Pty Ltd)
Penguin Books India Pvt Ltd, 11 Community Centre, Panchsheel Park, New Delhi - 110 017, India
Penguin Group (NZ), 67 Apollo Drive, Rosedale, North Shore 0632, New Zealand
(a division of Pearson New Zealand Ltd)
Penguin Books (South Africa) (Pty) Ltd, 24 Sturdee Avenue, Rosebank,
Johannesburg 2196, South Africa

Penguin Books Ltd, Registered Offices: 80 Strand, London WC2R 0RL, England

puffinbooks.com

First published 2010

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Set in Bembo 11.5/15.75pt

Typeset by Palimpsest Book Production Limited, Grangemouth, Stirlingshire

Made and printed in England by Clays Ltd, St Ives plc

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British Library Cataloguing in Publication Data

A CIP catalogue record for this book is available from the British Library

ISBN: 978-0-956-28777-9

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GASSHUKU

Koya-san, Japan, October 1612

‘RUN!’ bellowed Sensei Hosokawa, directing Jack over a fallen log in the forest.

Driven on by his swordmaster’s command, Jack sprinted along the narrow log. His feet slid from under him and Jack flung out his arms in a desperate attempt to keep his balance.

Out of nowhere a thick shaft of bamboo swung straight at his head. Jack ducked, the rock-hard stem barely missing his skull. He stumbled on a few more paces and had almost reached the end of the log, when he was caught in the gut by a second bamboo cane. It sprang out of the forest, knocking him to the ground.

Reeling from the blow and spitting dirt, Jack struggled to all fours. His right hand grabbed at the log for support, then flared with pain as someone stamped on his fingers. He cried out. Through eyes screwed up in

agony, Jack glimpsed the receding figure of his archrival, Kazuki, running across the clearing ahead of him.

‘Keep up, *gaijin!*’ shouted Kazuki over his shoulder.

The throbbing in Jack’s hand was now replaced by a burst of anger at seeing Kazuki’s gloating face disappear among the tall cedar trees in the direction of the next training challenge.

A dark-haired Japanese girl dropped down beside Jack.

‘Are you all right?’ she asked, breathless from just having crossed the log herself. ‘He didn’t break your fingers, did he?’

‘I’ll be fine,’ replied Jack through gritted teeth, looking into the face of his best friend Akiko.

‘He did that on purpose!’ she exclaimed, her pretty half-moon eyes narrowing in annoyance.

‘Don’t worry about it,’ said Jack, having spotted Sensei Kyuzo, their *taijutsu* master, emerge from the forest. ‘It looks like I’ve got worse problems than Kazuki.’

‘Get up!’ snarled Sensei Kyuzo, his beady eyes boring into Jack. The ill-tempered sensei was smaller than Jack, but as ferocious as an Akita fighting dog. He taught unarmed combat at the *Niten Ichi Ryū*, the samurai school in Kyoto that was governed by Jack’s guardian, the legendary swordmaster Masamoto Takeshi.

Sensei Kyuzo briefly glanced at Akiko. ‘What are

you waiting for? This is a *gasshuku*, not a tea ceremony. Keep moving!

Akiko threw Jack an uneasy smile and ran on.

‘So you’re a monk for three days then?’ mocked Sensei Kyuzo, glaring down at Jack as if the blond-haired, blue-eyed English boy was something vile he’d just trodden in.

‘But I’m not training to be a monk,’ Jack replied, getting to his feet and giving his teacher a bewildered look. ‘I want to be a samurai warrior.’

Sensei Kyuzo shook his head with disgust. ‘Ignorant foreigners!’ he snorted. “‘To be a monk for three days” means giving up at the first sign of difficulty. But I shouldn’t be so surprised. I always knew that a *gaijin* like you wouldn’t last long on a *gasshuku*.’

‘I’m not giving up!’ Jack countered, annoyed by his teacher’s unfair harassment. ‘How was I to know you’d spring bamboo traps on me?’

‘*Zanshin*,’ stated Sensei Kyuzo.

Jack stared blankly at his *taijutsu* master. He hadn’t yet been taught about *zanshin* at the *Niten Ichi Ryū*.

Sensei Kyuzo rolled his eyes in irritation. ‘*Zanshin* is a warrior’s awareness of their surroundings and the enemy. It should be instinctive. Give me twenty crescent kicks for failing such a basic training task!’

Several other students sprinted by while Jack carried out his punishment. Having already hiked up the

steep slopes of Mount Koya before dawn as a warm-up to the day's training, Jack soon felt the burn in the muscles of his legs. Every crescent kick was like fighting with feet made of stone.

The gruelling exercise caused Jack's breath to catch in his throat and he thought he was going to throw up. But since he hadn't been allowed to eat breakfast yet, Jack doubted he would vomit anything more than bile.

By his fifteenth kick, he was beginning to question his decision to volunteer so readily for the school's annual *gasshuku*. But Yamato, the second-born son of Masamoto, and one of Jack's few friends, had told him it was a privilege to attend the samurai training camp. Held in Koya-san, an ancient complex of Buddhist temples, the camp was located two days south of Kyoto in a secluded valley thick with forests and surrounded by the eight peaks of the Mount Koya range.

Yamato had suggested the intensive tuition would help them in their preparation for the selection trials for the Circle of Three later that year. This had been all the incentive Jack needed and he'd jumped at the chance.

Besides, since only fifteen students and three teachers were allowed to go, Jack had hoped that the *gasshuku* would give him a break from the bigoted instruction of Sensei Kyuzo and the bullying he'd been suffering at the hands of Kazuki and his gang.

But the *gasshuku* had proved to be no break at all.

It had been nothing but a regime of training, food, training, food, training and occasionally a little sleep. And he hadn't counted on *both* Sensei Kyuzo and Kazuki being there.

Once Jack had finished his kicks, Sensei Kyuzo dismissed him with a bored wave of his hand before returning to the forest to set more bamboo traps for unsuspecting students. Jack ran on as fast as his exhausted legs would carry him. He didn't want to be the final student to complete the test that morning, since the last was always given extra fitness training.

He followed the path that wound through the forest. The immense cedar trees on either side of him stretched so high they seemed to touch the clouds, their branches blocking out the early morning sun and leaving much of the path in shadow. Misty with morning dew, the forest was an eerie place to be alone and Jack was glad when he emerged into another clearing.

A group of students were gathering round Sensei Yamada, the third and final teacher to accompany them on the *gasshuku*. The ancient Zen philosophy master, with his long wispy grey beard floating in the breeze, was pointing to something on the ground beside a large stack of wood.

Jack spotted Yamato among the onlookers, recognizing him by his spiky hair. He joined his friend at the edge of the clearing and leant forward to get a

better look at what Sensei Yamada was talking to the students about. All Jack could see was an uninviting area of swamp.

A tall elegant girl with arrow-straight black hair exclaimed, 'Swim in that! Sensei, is this some sort of joke?'

The girl was Emi, the daughter of *daimyo* Takatomi, the Lord of Kyoto province and one of the most powerful men in Japan.

'I'm perfectly serious,' replied Sensei Yamada with a mischievous twinkle in his eyes.

Jack and the others inspected the noxious patch of oozing mud with dismay.

No one in their right mind would walk across it – let alone *swim* in it!



RIVER FIGHT

Huffing and puffing, a rotund boy with thick bushy eyebrows staggered across the clearing. It was Jack's friend Saburo.

'When are we going to have breakfast?' panted Saburo, wiping the sweat from his brow. 'I'm starving!'

Jack knew his friend hadn't wanted to come on the *gasshuku*, but the boy's elder brother had threatened to tell their father if he didn't go.

'As soon as you retrieve this rock from the bottom of the swamp,' explained Sensei Yamada, casting a large round stone into the murky depths.

It briefly floated alongside the rest of the surface scum before being swallowed up whole by the bog. Saburo glanced down at the revolting mud pit, then at all the reluctant students gathered along its edge.

'What's everyone waiting for then?' said Saburo, diving straight in.

Jack's full-figured friend belly-flopped on the surface,

sending clods of marshy mud flying everywhere. One hit Kazuki square in the face, causing a ripple of amusement among the class. Jack couldn't help but laugh loudest. Kazuki glared at him as the stinking sludge trickled down his nose.

'That's *karma* for stamping on your hand,' Akiko whispered, exchanging a knowing look with Jack.

They watched as Saburo sank slowly beneath the surface and emerged several moments later covered in slime, but brandishing the stone.

'See you at breakfast!' he cried, dragging himself out of the pit and running off to the *shukubo*, their temple lodgings in Koya-san.

The midday sun glinted off the fast-flowing waters of Koya-san's Tama River as the two young samurai adopted sword-fighting stances and sized one another up.

'I'm going to feed you to the fish, *gaijin*,' said Kazuki, pointing the tip of his *bokken* at Jack.

Jack raised his own wooden sword and prepared to defend himself. Kazuki had never liked him, for the simple reason he was a foreigner, a *gaijin*. Kazuki believed, like Sensei Kyuzo, that the Japanese were the superior race and that it was wrong to be teaching the secrets of the samurai to an outsider.

'I hope you can swim,' Jack retorted, trying to find a firm footing in the shallows of the river bed.

They couldn't have chosen a worse place to fight. Situated on a wide bend of the Tama River, the ground was carpeted with rocks. The stones closer to the middle of the river were rounded and slippery, while the ones by the bank were jagged and dangerous.

Jack had fought Kazuki before, but not in such challenging circumstances. One false move could mean a broken ankle or, even worse, a humiliating defeat for one of them. And Jack was determined it wasn't going to be him.

A blur of bright blue flashed across the river's surface as a kingfisher snatched a silvery fish from its waters. In that moment Kazuki struck, his blade arcing towards Jack's neck.

Jack was almost caught out, but instinctively blocked the attack. Deflecting it to one side, he retaliated with a lethal slice to the head. Kazuki ducked beneath the blade and thrust the tip of his own *bokken* at Jack's chest. Jack stumbled deeper into the river, barely keeping his balance on the submerged rocks.

Pressing forward, Kazuki cut across Jack's feet. Jack jumped the blade, simultaneously striking at Kazuki's wrist. Kazuki yowled in pain as the blow connected, forcing him to drop his *bokken*.

Jack didn't have time to enjoy his victory. He was too focused on landing. The river bed beneath his feet was a treacherous maze of rocks and potholes.

At the last second, spying two larger boulders, Jack thrust his feet sideways and managed to land, legs spread wide, above the fast-flowing waters. He let out a surprised laugh, amazed by his luck.

But Kazuki, incensed with pain, shoulder-barged Jack in the midriff. Jack lost his balance, toppling backwards with an unceremonious splash into the river. Retrieving his *bokken*, Kazuki leapt on to the two boulders and stood over Jack. He planted the tip of his sword on Jack's throat.

'I win, *gaijin*,' he gloated, forcing Jack's head beneath the surface.

Jack struggled for breath, spluttering as the icy river water rushed up his nose.