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Opening extract from

Young Samurai: The Ring of Wind

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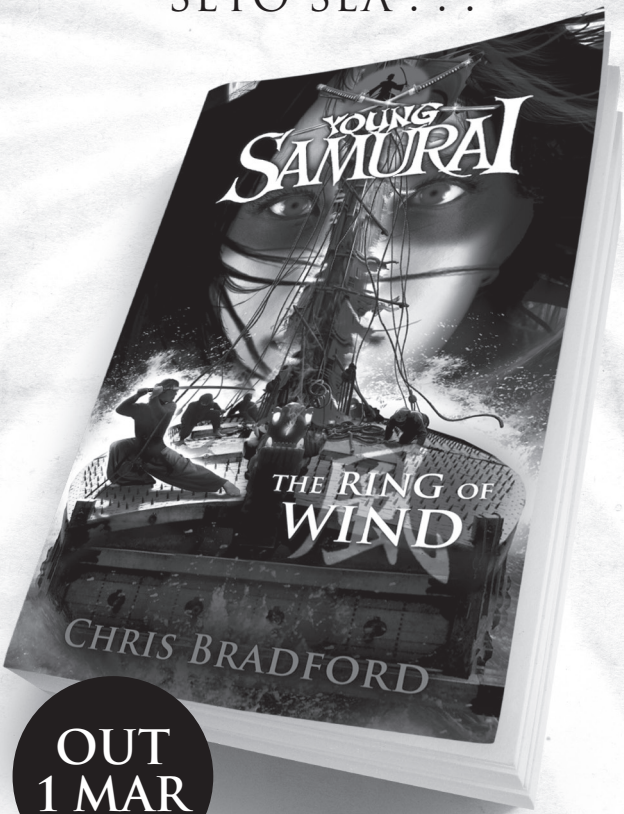
AMBUSHED BY THE SHOGUN'S SAMURAI, **JACK FLETCHER** MUST FLEE ACROSS THE SETO SEA . . .



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THE RING OF WIND

Stooping to clear the cabin doorway, a ninja pirate of Herculean proportions stepped out on to the deck. Three times the size of Jack, he had a bald head solid as a cannonball, a wiry beard and fists like hammers. Muscles rippled across his broad chest and his tree-trunk legs thudded with every step upon the wooden deck. Aside from the black spider tattoo, he had a screaming demon bursting from his brick-

like stomach. To complete his terrifying presence, he had *kanji* symbols branded on to the backs of his hands. His right bore the character for 'thunder':

雷

His left bore the symbols for 'lightning':

稲妻

Manzo banged them together and, fists raised, thundered towards Jack.

Jack felt his heart stop at the sight of this colossus. Manzo was the stuff of nightmares – a hulking mass of muscle, bearing down on him like a charging bull. The pirate wasn't carrying any weapons. This was clearly to be a fist fight. Not that it mattered – Manzo's hands *were* his weapons and could demolish Jack in a single swipe.

Dressed only in his breeches, Jack was unencumbered and would be able to move fast. And he'd have to. He couldn't afford to let his guard down against such a dangerous opponent. Bouncing on the balls of his feet, he prepared to engage with the pirate.

As Manzo lumbered towards him, Jack recalled his *taijutsu* match in the *Taryu-Jiai* three years ago. During that inter-school martial arts contest, Jack had fought Raiden, a samurai student of similar proportions to Manzo. Jack had stood little chance of beating him then. But, prior to the fight, he'd had a vision of a red demon and a butterfly. The demon had tried to squash the butterfly with an iron bar, but the butterfly had survived by evading the attacks until the demon collapsed with exhaustion, subdued by its own efforts.

This ninja pirate boasted a tattoo of a screaming red demon. *The vision had*

spoken again! If Jack could tire Manzo out first, then he might be able to defeat him.

A huge fist – Thunder – rocketed towards Jack's head. Jack ducked and skipped aside. Lightning now came at him, a devastating hook punch to the ribs. Jack sucked in his stomach and arched his body. The fist shot past, grazing his skin but doing no other damage. He backed away as Thunder returned for an uppercut. Then Lightning attempted a savage cross punch.

Jack continued to evade the brutal attacks, Manzo being strong but slow.

'Hit him!' cried Tiger.

Becoming more and more frustrated, Manzo started throwing wilder punches. Jack ducked and weaved. He bobbed beneath Thunder, jumped away from Lightning. Not a single punch landed on target and the ninja pirates, who'd been baying for blood, now began to boo and jeer at the pathetic display.

'Stop running, you coward!' heckled Crux.

'Call yourself a samurai!' derided Skullface. He beckoned to the crowd. 'Move in!'

The circle of pirates tightened, restricting the fighting distance between Jack and Manzo. As Thunder and Lightning came at him in a series of chain punches, Jack had to retreat rapidly. Unknown to him, Snakehead stuck out a foot and he tripped over it, sprawling on to the deck.

Manzo seized his chance, raising his leg high to stamp-kick Jack in the chest. There was a horrible crunching sound as his foot connected. But Jack had rolled away at the last second and it was the deck that had taken the full force of the blow. The wooden plank splintered and Manzo's foot shot through, his ankle becoming trapped.

Jack leapt up and went on the attack.

With the devastating speed and power of a trained warrior, Jack launched a roundhouse kick at Manzo's back.

The pirate barely registered the blow. Undeterred, Jack fired off a blazing sidekick into the ribs. Manzo grunted, but didn't crumble. Jack stepped in and drove a spear elbow at his kidneys. The pirate simply batted Jack away as if he was no more than an irritating mosquito. The swipe of his forearm sent Jack careering across the deck. Stunned, Jack cautiously circled the snared pirate. Trying not to panic, he racked his brains for a martial arts technique that might have some effect on this impregnable rock of a man.

Manzo finally managed to free his foot and turned to face Jack once more. He blew across the tops of his fists as if clearing them of dust, then he banged them together and smiled, certain of victory.

But Jack smiled too. He had a secret

weapon . . . one that Sensei Yamada had taught him at the *Niten Ichi Ryū*.

Chō-geri.

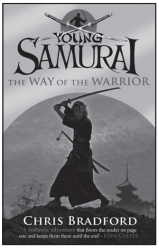
The Butterfly Kick – a highly advanced and indefensible manoeuvre that could cut a swathe through any attack. All the limbs were extended in a position similar to that of a butterfly's wings in flight.

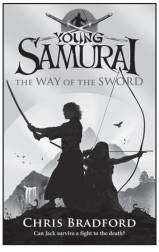
As the ninja pirate advanced, Jack sprang into the air, his torso twisting, his arms swinging in a wide arc. Both his legs shot out, twirling before him. The first would smash Manzo's left guard aside, the second would hammer into his head, connecting with his jaw at the knockdown point. As tough as Manzo was, he'd drop to the deck like a sack of sand.

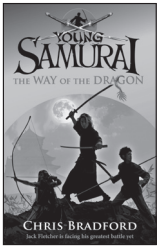
But Jack was out of practice. He misjudged the distance and his legs got tangled up in the complex attack. He flew past Manzo, entirely missing his target. Trying to correct his mistake, he flapped

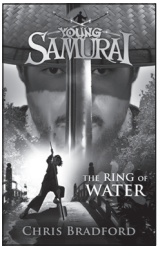
his arms like a crazed bird, only to crash-land on his back.

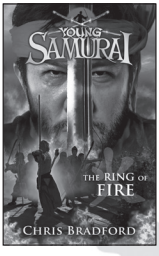
For a moment, there was complete silence. Then an almighty booming laugh burst from Manzo. The rest of the pirates fell about too. Jack felt an utter fool. Not only had he failed to defeat his opponent, he'd made himself a laughing stock.

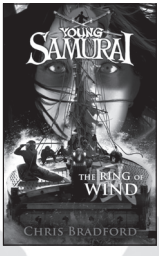


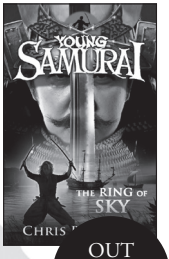












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