

The Samurai Revival Trilogy (Vol. 1)

BITTER TRUTHS

2nd Edition

by

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CHAPTER 1 & 2

AUTHOR'S NOTE

Although predominantly accurate geographically, this is a work of fiction. Any resemblance in the story between people or events and real life is unintended and purely coincidental. Also, use of the Japanese language and historical references have been simplified; a glossary and map are included at the back.

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1 ~ Japan, August 2023

The remote town of Iga Ueno lay sweltering beneath a burning sun and clear blue sky. The searing heat stopped even the adventurous from visiting the first Ninja castle and the birthplace of the renowned haiku poet, Matsuo Basho; remnants from the town's prestigious past. But the one truly remarkable association of which Iga Ueno could still boast stayed hidden, as it had for centuries.

Deep within the inhospitable mountains to the north, craggy hillsides came together to leave a narrow gully through which most people thought only a stream passed. But there was a footpath too. It started inconspicuously on the plains below, zigzagged up the steep forested incline and scrambled over the brows of several hills before finally squeezing into the secluded valley beyond. With its fertile plateau cradled by thickly wooded slopes, the valley was sublimely peaceful. Indeed, its owner's right to this serene solitude had been enshrined in law many generations earlier by the Emperor of Japan.

The path meandered up the valley and, after a while, passed through a cluster of wooden cottages where the farmers lived, eventually petering out by another huddle of buildings. Beside the largest, a massive old water wheel dipped rhythmically into the fast-flowing stream. But today, the forge it powered was silent.

At the head of the valley, central within a walled enclosure, stood an archetypal Samurai house, its ancient timbers and graceful scalloped roofs with grey glazed tiles testament to the builder's supreme craftsmanship. A mulberry-coloured flag fluttered listlessly from a nearby pole. It bore the distinctive emblem in black and gold of a tiger in a bamboo tree alongside a stylised gold chrysanthemum.

A flagstone path led from the roofed gateway across the front courtyard. Where it reached the house, lattice doors had been slid apart to reveal a substantial audience hall. However, in an alcove to the left was a smaller, more private, ceremonial room. Its walls were of beautifully finished sandalwood, with intricately carved beams punctuating the subtly panelled ceiling. The atmosphere inside was one of timeless sophistication, charged with expectation.

Thick tatami mats covered the floor, in the middle of which was an exquisite, highly polished, low black lacquer table. On it stood two ornate gold stands, proudly presenting a newly made Samurai sword, the graceful beauty of its slender curved sheath masking the deadly blade within.

The master sword-maker sat on a mulberry-coloured zabuton, dressed in finest hand-painted silk. Without a sound, strong but sensitive hands lifted the sword reverently off its stands. One last time the end result of many months' hard work was scrutinised.

Twelve hundred years before, Keitaro Amakuni had discovered this valley and its unique sword-making materials and conditions. He had built a forge and settled down, and his descendants had made weapons here ever since. For a thousand years, Amakuni swords had been accepted as the undisputed best in the world. Nobody had

ever been able to produce weapons of comparable quality or artistry. Admittedly a couple had come close, one workshop near Kyoto and another in Toledo, but apart from them, other weapons were vastly inferior.

Formal recognition came in the late-1860s after Amakuni weapons helped return the Emperor to power during the civil war that culminated in the Meiji Restoration. As a reward, their family, together with one other, earned the right to incorporate the Imperial chrysanthemum within their family crest.

The sword-maker's right hand moved to the hilt and, with an agile flick of the wrist, unsheathed the weapon. Rejoicing at being released, the blade glistened and hummed with anticipation, keen to follow its calling...

"Patience," murmured the sword-maker. "All in good time."

Although not shiny, the grey blade possessed a remarkable sheen; deep enough to reflect the sword-maker's smile. The wavy misted line of the hamon marked the boundary between the toughened body and the thousands of incredibly sharp hardened cutting edges at the front of the folded steel blade. Unusually, a second hamon ran close to the back edge of the blade. Although pointed, it was not surgically sharp. Unlike the first edge, its task was to cut through steel and stone rather than flesh and bone.

With a noise like a lament, the blade was slid back into its sheath and carefully returned to the stands. For several minutes, its maker gazed at the weapon with the same pride, satisfaction and sense of anticipation as a mother adoring her new-born child.

The sword-maker sighed, reflecting on how times had changed. After much recent global turmoil, guns, explosives and weapons of mass destruction had been banned; day-to-day law enforcement was once more maintained by Samurai sword-wielding Peacekeepers. High-quality weapons were in demand again; but the Amakuni had always been very selective about their swords' owners.

Kimi Amakuni stood up and walked to the open window. The view down the sun-drenched valley was magnificent. She sighed again and turned back to face the sword, pulling a thin burgundy-coloured mobile phone from behind her kimono's obi. She flipped it open, entered a number from memory and pressed the call button. It was answered in seconds.

"It is done," she said. "The sword is ready."

"Kimi-san," answered the softly spoken man at the other end of the line, "I am grateful. I accept this is an unusual commission, but I am sure it will be a force for good and benefit both our clans."

"I understand. I feel it too," she replied quietly. "Nevertheless, do not forget our agreement. You will not let the sword out of your care until its true owner claims it; and even then, if that person is not of sound character and an expert, you will return it to me?"

"Yes, I promise. Kimi-san," continued the man, after a moment tentatively adding, "are you pleased with it?"

She paused as her eyes lingered on the elegance and brutal artistry of what she had created.

“Oh, yes,” she replied with a proud smile. “This is the finest sword I have ever made. I believe it is the finest blade any Amakuni has ever made. Few swords will even dare threaten it. This weapon is certainly capable of ending the feud, provided its owner wields it wisely ... and can be persuaded to do what needs to be done.”

The man breathed out, relieved and encouraged.

“Thank you, Kimi-san. Thank you very much indeed. You have done all you can, the rest is up to us. I will make the necessary arrangements for the sword’s arrival here, and will inform you when the owner comes to collect it.”

2 ~ London, two weeks later

In a well-appointed mews house in affluent South Kensington an Internet radio clicked on quietly. Tessa Pennington heard it because she'd hardly slept; she had too much on her mind. The business she owned and managed was being sold. So far, she had confined the stress of the transaction to the daytime hours, but now it was invading her nights too. There was a lot at stake for her, not least financial security for life.

She groaned and waited for the farming report to start; shortly afterwards a woman cheerily began describing the ins and outs of inoculating battery chickens. In an hour the taxi would arrive to take her to Heathrow. She had used this firm many times before and knew all the drivers. However, today would still be different. Bleary-eyed, she staggered into the bathroom and stood in front of the mirror, her hand automatically reaching towards the left-hand side of the shelf beneath the power socket. Then she stared at the reflection of the shapely young blonde woman studying her from the mirrored front with steely blue-grey eyes, and lowered her hand to her side, smiling.

She showered, dressed and went downstairs for a hasty breakfast. Quickly gathering her papers, she threw them into a bag and added her laptop. As she closed the zips, the gentle rumble of a taxi reversing slowly down the cobbled mews could be heard. She grabbed her bag, switched off the lights and armed the house alarm. As she went out, the back door of the taxi swung open.

"Morning," said Tessa brightly. "Heathrow, please."

The driver studied her in his mirror and waited a moment before sighing lugubriously. "Which terminal?"

"Oh, number one, please. What's the traffic like?"

"Same old, same old. Makes me wanna puke," he replied as the taxi started up the mews. "They say getting to the new one'll be better, but who believes politicians these days?"

Concluding that cheery conversation would be wasted on him, Tessa studied some papers until it was time to pay at Heathrow. As she handed over the notes, the cabbie remarked: "Been to your gaff before... I remembered 'cos it's a bloody awkward turning. Must have been your fella I picked up last time."

Tessa was silent for a moment, deliberately taking her time selecting the money for his tip. Finally she looked up and smiled as her eyes met his.

"Yes," she said. "It must have been."

Penny Reid looked confident and eye-catching in a dark grey tailored skirt suit and towering black patent heels; her turquoise blouse contrasted perfectly with her neatly styled blonde bob. She checked in for her early-morning flight and went to the Executive Lounge in search of an espresso.

Thirty minutes later, she settled into her usual Business Class window seat and

glanced at the empty seat beside hers, shaking her head.

Not long afterwards another smartly dressed young woman joined her.

“Cutting it fine, aren’t you? One day you’ll miss the flight,” Penny observed.

“Morning,” laughed Tessa. “It’s the family motto: *just in time.*”

“So I see.”

Tessa opened the luggage compartment and stowed her bag next to her friend’s. As she sat down an unnatural hush spread throughout the Business Class cabin. An impressive-looking Asian man wearing a Samurai sword had just boarded. The weapon was slipped through his wide black belt to which it was tied with a violet cord. Like everyone else, Tessa and Penny studied him with open curiosity.

“Excellent! The probability of our plane being hijacked just plummeted,” remarked Penny contentedly.

“Hardly likely anyway with all that airport security.”

“You wait. In a few years’ time, when there are more Peacekeepers around, I bet all other security will be relaxed, and not just in airports. The armed police in flak jackets are already gone, aren’t they?”

“True, but since when have Peacekeepers acted as air marshals?”

“Oh, they don’t. It’s too difficult to draw a sword within a cabin.”

“Great! And why don’t they wear anti-stab vests?”

“Because they’re either too cumbersome to be practical, or too light to be effective. Apparently the best protection is a modern take on traditional Samurai armour, but hardly any of them wear it.”

Tessa pulled a face.

“I daresay it all worked well in Japan four hundred years ago, but the world’s a very different place now. Look what’s been achieved so far.” She held up her newspaper which announced: *New Crime booms as gang tightens its grip on London’s criminal underworld: Calver Cats disembowel victims alive...* “Aren’t you worried when even the *FT* fills its front page with stories about alliterative thugs who treat people like the Japanese preparing fish?”

“Well, we’re not the only ones in a transitional phase. The world’s changed and criminals have had to adapt to disarmament too.”

Tessa responded by pointing to an article in Penny’s paper, which stated: *As Special Forces struggle to maintain control, New Crime continues to capitalise on the shortage of trained Peacekeepers and reduced weaponry for Police.*

Penny smiled. “I accept we live in troubled times,” she conceded. “But too many people have invested too much in the International Peacekeeper Treaty to let it fail now.”

“Maybe, but the world isn’t facing the same challenges that the Samurai were up against. Our problem today is the way new technologies are being applied by politicians and religious fanatics. Are you really sure these so-called fundamental changes to global peacekeeping are going to fix that?”

“Yes, absolutely,” replied Penny, with a degree of confidence that never ceased to

surprise Tessa. “Ever since the Three Tragedies, people have rejected the old weapons stand-off. I hardly need to remind you that millions died in that horrific North Korean nuclear catastrophe. And then there was the Iranian Taliban attempt to explode dirty bombs in London and Tokyo, and the IS plot to release Sarin gas simultaneously on the New York, Moscow and Beijing subways. Well, the Peacekeeper Treaty was agreed so as to counter terrorist and criminal violence globally, and it will. But it’s early days yet...”

People had indeed had enough. Exasperated by politicians’ duplicity, greed and overt distancing of themselves from the needs and values of the populations they were supposed to represent, virtually everyone had wanted an end to violent feuding between nations and religions. More than three billion united via Internet petitions and, after a year of intensive lobbying by peace activists and global political stalemate, the UK and Japanese governments took the initiative. They jointly proposed the banning of all guns, explosives and weapons of mass destruction together with the reintroduction of capital punishment for those carrying arms illegally. Funds previously set aside for national defence were to be invested in the environment. Only the revamped, and at last effective, United Nations for World Peace would have an army and it would source weapons components from all over the world in UNWP-controlled factories. Individual countries could only have a small fully armed Special Forces division and Police armed with truncheons; not even Taser stun guns. Furthermore, it was proposed that day-to-day law and order would be maintained by independent Samurai sword-wielding International Peacekeepers. These were effectively a cross between the marshals of the American Wild West and the Samurai of Ancient Japan.

Amazingly, these ground-breaking proposals received almost universal support. The International Peacekeeper Treaty was drafted and soon signed by most governments throughout the world. Countries with entrenched gun cultures, notably America, Israel and Switzerland, resisted doggedly. However, even they acquiesced when faced with punitive trade and financial embargoes.

The impact of these changes was dramatic. Free trade blossomed and traditional crime syndicates disintegrated as they struggled to obtain firearms to bolster their power. Initially crime levels fell dramatically, but there were still too few Peacekeepers. Organised crime quickly adapted and filled the vacuum caused by the rapid disappearance of guns. They trained their own people to use swords, and New Crime was born.

The authorities had encouraged more people to enrol on the arduous Peacekeeper-training courses. However, not many were able to meet the stringent requirements, which no one wanted to relax since Peacekeeper powers were so far-reaching, not least with regard to their licence to kill. The number of Peacekeepers in circulation only increased slowly and soon they themselves had become targets. Though glancing at the stony-faced individual seated on his own at the back of the

cabin, Tessa doubted anyone who wanted to keep their hands and head would mess with him.

Five minutes later, Penny whispered to her, “Hope you don’t mind my asking, hon, but are you all right? You look shattered.”

Tessa twisted round to face her with an aggrieved expression.

“Oh, thank you! No, it’s OK, I appreciate your concern. I’m fine. It’s selling the company that’s the problem. It’s been full on for weeks now. Getting there, though.”

Penny looked at her gravely.

“We’re both letting life get in the way of us – and that’s something we vowed never to do, remember?”

Tessa closed her eyes, reliving the moment. A toast proposed, two plastic medicine cups raised in agreement within a shared suite in a private clinic. It was a deeply emotional time. But, despite the pain, the expense and the prejudice, they’d managed to share good jokes and bad, always looking forward to the day their real lives would finally begin.

“We’ve missed catching up for two weekends,” Penny continued. “How about dinner at the Falcon on Saturday?”

Tessa smiled. “Good idea. I’ll put it in my schedule now – and I promise not to blow you out.”

Although barely thirty, Tessa and Penny had both been extremely successful; each owned and managed a significant business. Penny’s, Schrauben & Mutter, had headquarters near Stuttgart and made a wide variety of nuts, screws, washers and bolts, a product portfolio that never failed to amuse, as did S&M, the abbreviation of the company name. Tessa’s business, Druckmaschinen + Service, made printing machines. It was also based in Germany, but at the other end of the country, in Düsseldorf.

“So how are you getting on now your investment bank’s been taken over?” asked Tessa.

Penny’s face clouded.

“Could be a lot better. Although I’m still the majority shareholder, BNYI has some now. Far from ideal for all sorts of reasons, but swapping banks would be very difficult at the moment.” Tessa nodded and tactfully did not comment; she knew the Beijing New York International bank didn’t have a particularly good reputation. “We’re experiencing some adverse trading conditions, not unusual for this time of the year, but we’re keeping our head above water. It isn’t much fun though and BNYI is beginning to flex its muscles. I’m sure we’re not the worst of their problems, but we’re not one of their favourite clients either.”

“Who’s your contact there?” asked Tessa.

“Blaise Collins-Clarke.”

“Oh, I’ve heard of him, it’s not exactly an easy name to forget. Slimy, pompous two-faced git was the way I heard him described.”

“Actually, that’s rather unfair on all the other slimy, pompous two-faced gits –

they're probably bearable in small doses! But Collins-Clarke is pure poison, believe me," replied Penny with feeling. She lowered her voice. "I certainly don't want Schrauben & Mutter to go under, so I'm doing my best to keep him on-side. But I'm beginning to wonder whether it's personal... you know, a reaction to what we had to do."

"Fixing a birth defect shouldn't make any difference to anyone, especially BNYI," retorted Tessa.

"No, it *shouldn't*, but perhaps it's unrealistic to expect otherwise. Hardly anyone even tries to understand. It's easier to ignore what's perceived as a problem and take refuge in narrow-mindedness."

"Yes, that's how most people react when something unfamiliar confuses or scares them," agreed Tessa. "It's just a shame they don't realise that eventually the solution's not a choice, it's a necessity, whatever the cost. It's no fun going against convention, but all things considered I haven't been disappointed so far."

"Me neither," agreed Penny with a heartfelt smile, "though it does add an unusual dimension to things."

The plane landed and, once the Peacekeeper had left, the other passengers stood up. Tessa offered to hand Penny her luggage. As she opened the door to the overhead compartment Penny's jacket fell out, together with the top and body of an expensive fountain pen. Letting go of the locker handle, Tessa instinctively caught the jacket with her right hand and the pen top with her left. Then she quickly scooped up the pen using its top and screwed the two together one-handed while she passed the unblemished jacket to Penny.

"Tessa!" gasped her friend. "I do wish you wouldn't do things like that."

"Sorry. Can't help it. I've always had quick reactions. I caught a full glass of wine last week, didn't spill a drop!"

"Well, those aren't quick reactions, they're phenomenal! I've never seen anyone move that fast."

Tessa smiled.

"All part of the unorthodox package. Anyway, are you sure you don't want to stay at my place tonight?"

"No, thanks, I've got to go on to Switzerland."

"OK. I'll call you this evening then."

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