

The Samurai Revival Trilogy (Vol. 1)

BITTER TRUTHS

Chapters 1 & 2

Rheagan Greene



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Authors note:

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 Furthermore, use of the Japanese language and historical references have been simplified; a Glossary is included at the back of the book.

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Hamon Publishing

Suite 55, 28 Old Brompton Road, London, SW7 3SS, UK

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CHAPTER 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. It 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 a distinctive emblem comprising a black-and-gold scene of a tiger in a bamboo tree and a stylised gold chrysanthemum flower.

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 assured 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 ancestors 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 display the reflection of 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 sigh, 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 with which a mother adores her new-born child.

The sword-maker smiled, reflecting on how times had changed. After much 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 and turned back to face the sword, pulling a thin mulberry-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 tentatively, "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. 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 skilfully ... 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.”

CHAPTER 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. However, 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 Barry would arrive with his taxi to take her to Heathrow. She needed to get going. Bleary-eyed, she staggered into the bathroom and stood in front of the mirror. She stared at the reflection of the shapely young blonde woman studying her from the mirror with steely blue-grey eyes, and smiled. After years of being shocked by the face that met her gaze, everything was in order now.

She showered, dressed and went downstairs for a hasty breakfast. Then she gathered her papers, threw them into a bag and added her lap-top. As she closed the zips she heard the gentle rumble of Barry's taxi reversing slowly down the cobbled mews. Boy, he's good, thought Tessa. At 5:30 a.m., most taxi drivers relished the opportunity to wake all the residents by thundering over the cobbles. But not Barry. He would drive into the mews, carefully turn round and quietly reverse down, ready to make a speedy but discreet getaway.

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, Barry," said Tessa brightly. "How's your back?"

"Bloody awful, luv, 'urts like 'ell. I'll have to see 'quack again. What terminal?"

"Oh, number one, please. So those new tablets aren't helping then?"

“Nope, not a bit, luv. They just make me wanna puke,” he replied as the taxi started up the mews.

Concluding that cheery conversation would be wasted on Barry at the moment, Tessa studied some papers until it was time to pay at Heathrow.

Penny Reid was a confident, eye-catching young woman who dressed as she felt every Chief Executive should – smart. Today she was wearing a dark grey designer suit with black patent shoes; her turquoise blouse contrasted perfectly with her neatly styled blonde hair. 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. She glanced at the empty seat beside hers and shook her head.

Not long afterwards another smartly dressed young woman arrived.

“Hon, one day you’ll miss the flight,” Penny chided her.

“Morning, babe,” laughed Tessa. “Suffice to say, I remain a dedicated exponent of *just in time*.”

“So I see.”

Tessa opened the luggage compartment and put her bag next to her friend’s. But as she sat down an unnatural hush spread throughout the plane. 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 watched him with considerable curiosity.

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

“Hardly likely anyway after all that airport security,” goaded Tessa.

“You wait, in a few years when there are more Peacekeepers around, I bet all 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 been acting as air marshals?”

“Oh, they don’t. It’s too difficult to draw a sword within the confines of an aeroplane.”

“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 anyone wears it.”

Tessa pulled a face.

“I daresay this model for peace-keeping 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 Calver Cats tighten their grip on London’s criminals, often living up to their name by disembowelling their victims alive...*” “Aren’t you worried when even the FT fills its front page with the machinations of a bunch of alliterative thugs who treat people the same way the Japanese prepare live fish?”

“Well, we’re not the only ones in a transitional phase. The world’s changed incredibly quickly. Criminals have adapted faster than expected.”

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

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

“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 sure these so-called fundamental changes to global peacekeeping are really going to fix that?”

“Yes, absolutely. Ever since the Three Tragedies, people have rejected the old weapons stand-off. Remember how horrified everyone was when millions died in that North Korean nuclear catastrophe? Not to mention the Iranian Taliban attempt to explode dirty bombs in London and Tokyo, and the Al-Qaeda plot to release Sarin gas on the New York and Chicago subways. Well, the Peacekeeper Treaty is designed to deprive all those who would be violent of their weapons, 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 population they were supposed to represent, virtually everyone had wanted an end to violent feuding between nations and religions. More than three billion people 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. Countries with endemic gun cultures, notably America, Israel and Switzerland, resisted doggedly. However, even they acquiesced when faced with virtually world-wide 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 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 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 became targets...

Five minutes later, Penny whispered to Tessa, "I'm not being bitchy, but are you all right? You look shattered."

Tessa twisted round to face her with an aggrieved expression.

"Thanks, but I'm fine. It's the disposal. It's been full on for weeks now. Getting there though."

"We're letting life get too serious, hon. We've missed catching up for two weekends. How about dinner at the Falcon on Saturday?"

Tessa smiled, "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 and Mutter, had headquarters near Stuttgart and made a wide variety of nuts, screws, washers and bolts, a product portfolio which 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.

"Could be a lot better. Although I control the majority of S&M's shares, BNYI also has some now. Far from ideal for all sorts of reasons, but swapping banks would be very difficult at the moment." Tessa nodded; she knew the Beijing New York International bank didn't have a particularly good reputation. "At the moment we're keeping our head above water, but it isn't much fun; 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 favourites 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 disdain. "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 what we both had to do is compounding the situation."

“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, “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 in its top and screwed the two together with one hand as 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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