

Miki's Mad

Chapter 1

A gray and white cat arched its back, pushed its front paws forward, and dropped from the open porch to the gravel path by the pond ringed with ice slivers moistured by the morning sun. It shook its fur, puffing it out, walked through the open gate to the road, and headed to Bungo Bridge and the sprawling bamboo grove beyond it. Neighbors would ordinarily have been out, sweeping the street and setting up stands to sell sandals, umbrellas, and pickled vegetables to travelers on their way to Kyoto. But on that cold January morning of 1868, rumors had emptied the street, and the cat trotted quickly across the bridge before the children could run out, grab it by its neck and scold it for trying to run away again.

The cat entered the bamboo grove and stopped. It sniffed the air, and moved forward cautiously. It stopped again, adjusted its sight, and saw a pair of eyes staring out from under a pile of dried leaves. The cat sniffed its way closer, meowing a few feet away from the stranger, a fourteen-year old samurai attendant, who tried to shoo the cat away by glaring at it. *Chikusho! Stupid cat!* The forward scout had just returned moments earlier, nearly stumbling over the boy, and reported in a whisper that the advancing enemy soldiers, only twenty minutes away, still did not suspect an ambush. The cat meowed louder, and stepped closer to the boy, who looked at Master Yoshida crouching behind a large boulder, and saw him draw his index finger slowly across his neck. The boy gripped his sword under the leaves in front of him, turned its cutting edge up, let the cat come within range, then jerked the sword upward and sliced off its head, which dropped to the ground with barely an audible gurgle. Master Yoshida's disciple had scored a perfect, truly elegant, first kill.

An icy breeze swept through, knocking the bamboo stalks together in an unordered clacking of hollow sounds. Gombei Taga released his sword and shoved his hands under his stomach, then put his head down to ease the pain in his shoulders and neck. In the privacy of the frozen earth, he gave in to silent tears, and stretched tightly to keep his shivering from becoming a panic rising from the blood draining from his head, down and out, seemingly through his feet. He wiped his eyes, trying to erase the image of his father, himself a fencing master in the service of the ruler of Iwakuni on the western coast of the Inland Sea.

A swordsman gains honor by killing enemy warriors, Father had said, but should he take innocent life, then he must die. Gombei reached out and gripped his sword, still coated with the blood of the cat, surely an enemy cat, whose innocence had been compromised by its threat of exposing his hidden position. He had done what he had to do, what Master Yoshida had ordered. He shoved his sword under some leaves again, and prayed that the burning from his stomach rising to his throat would not be followed by the remains of his morning meal of boiled barley and pickled plums.

When the thirty warriors from Iwakuni had been taking up their positions in the grove, Master Yoshida himself had covered Gombei with dried leaves and spoke reassuring words. “Trust your training, and you’ll be all right. This is your first battle, so stay close to me. Remember that we fight for Emperor Meiji, and we will destroy the Shogun’s guards. The traitors.” Master Yoshida commanded the combined force of traditional samurai and modern infantry armed with muzzle loading rifles and revolving pistols. Knowing that the Shogun’s guards likewise mixed the old with the new, he had positioned his men according to whether they fought with blades or bullets.

Gombei rested his neck again, then forced himself to look out over the ground—how else would he see the enemy, soon to arrive at any moment? Master Yoshida was a specialist in the art of reconnaissance, a new term for what used to be called spying, and was expert in detecting enemy scouts. It would not be hard to spot them since anyone approaching the grove had to pass through the small settlement of families, then cross Bungo Bridge before entering the grove. Gombei and Master Yoshida were closest to the bridge, and Gombei tried hard to remember his training.

Their eyes, Master Yoshida had said repeatedly, watch their eyes. They can mask everything else, but not their eyes. Gombei cleared away some leaves, pressed one ear to the exposed earth, forcing himself to bear the cold; all the better, Master Yoshida had said, to hear footsteps when the ground is frozen solid. They're coming! Oh, yes, they're coming! A dozen, no, fifty, maybe a thousand soldiers all marching in step to the beatings of a racing heart. One of them will come running up to me and stop, plant his feet in a challenge, sword angled toward my head. His eyes, Master Yoshida had said, when you face your opponent, watch his eyes...and lips. He will stare at you, sword at ready, and when his eyes widen ever so slightly, he will fix his glare and tighten his lips, and that is when you know he will strike. You must never give yourself away; keep your own face blank by emptying your mind of all thoughts. When fish escape, they dodge and dart, they do not think. When the *mamushi* snake is ready to attack, it coils itself like a spring and does not think. Thinking slows your action, betrays your strategy across your face. Do not think. So much to remember! So little time! They're coming, hundreds of angry boots on the frozen ground. Oh yes, stance, almost forgot, right foot forward, knee bent but not too much, back straight, firm grip but not tight, and do not think, do not think.

Wait. Did the cat just open its eyes? Is that head still alive? Gombei blinked to clear his tears, then saw the little girl walking toward him, calling for her lost cat.

She was five or six years old, her brown and yellow striped kimono tied loosely with a hemp cord, a white cotton pouch hanging around her neck. “Bungo Bridge” was written in black ink on the face of the pouch; “Miki,” her name, below it. In her innocence, she looked brave, walking into a grove full of warriors coiled like springs. Miki spotted her cat, stopped, and leaned forward to get a better look as she tried to comprehend the bloody separation of the head from its body. Gombei shouted in his mind, *Go back! Go back!* but she kept coming closer, and Master Yoshida signaled Gombei again, drawing his finger across his neck.

Gombei shook his head. *But she’s just a child, a baby sister!* She stopped, covered her mouth with her tiny hands, just as a grown woman would in horror, and Gombei looked at Master Yoshida, who was slicing his finger furiously back and forth across his neck. He glared at Gombei, mouthed a silent curse, then drew out his sword, and shifted his gaze to the girl.

Gombei jumped from his cover and snatched the startled child. She started to scream, but he covered her mouth with his hand, and ran to the aged camphor tree off to one side. “Shh, Miki, don’t cry, you’ll be all right,” he whispered to the disbelieving girl. He heard Master Yoshida clicking his tongue like a bush cricket to signal the approach of the first enemy scout. Miki struggled, and Gombei pressed his hand harder over her mouth, and was surprised at how she kicked wildly in anger, not fear.

Thwack! The archer crouching next to Gombei behind the large tree hit his mark, dead center in the throat of the unsuspecting scout, a perfect to-the-spine shot. The silence of the arrow still had a tactical advantage over the giveaway noise and flash of firearms. They waited for the rest. A minute...was it five? The enemy soldiers clattered over the bridge, saw their

dead scout still gripping the feathered shaft with both hands, and realized too late that they should not have entered the grove, which erupted in gunfire and warriors bursting out of their concealments. Gombei let go of Miki and ran back to his sword lying in the leaves. The Iwakuni infantrymen fired in volleys, taking turns to reload, shoving powder packets and bullets down muzzles as fast as they could. After the first two or three rounds, their orderly maneuver fell into a fire-at-will confusion, and in the struggles at close quarters, the swordsmen and lancers proved their place equal to the modern gunners. The cries of the afflicted were all the same, lead slugs or steel blades making no difference in the sounds of wounding and dying. Master Yoshida rushed two reloading riflemen, taking away their advantage of distance, and Gombei followed him with his sword, finally able to perform his duty of protecting his Master's back.

Holding his sword in his right hand, Gombei turned to his left just in time to see an enemy soldier staggering toward him, his chest shattered in a tangle of flesh and fabric. The falling rifleman's outstretched arm caught Gombei in the face, knocking him down. Gombei managed to shove the dead man off, and thrashed the thick layer of leaves, trying to find his dropped sword. Master Yoshida pursued the two guards fumbling to reload their rifles as they retreated backwards, bouncing their backs off bamboo and brush, not daring to take their eyes off Yoshida's upheld blade. One of them spun around and broke into a run, while the other veered to one side, threw his spent rifle on the ground, picked up a spear, circled around Yoshida, and charged him from the back. Gombei screamed, apologizing for allowing the man to get between him and the Master, and grabbed a cocked rifle from a dead enemy soldier, aimed it at the back of his master's assailant, and pulled the trigger. The roaring kickback knocked Gombei flat, and when he shook off his daze and picked himself up, he saw his victim writhing on the ground close to Master Yoshida lying still.

Gombei screamed again and ran up to the two bodies. The dying guard held his slimy guts in his hands, reasonably trying to stuff them back into the jagged hole torn open by the exiting slug. Master Yoshida was lying on his back, shot through his chest, a small hole spurting blood in slowing pulses. Like the girl trying to understand the separation of the cat from its head, Gombei tried to figure out what had happened. Had the fleeing rifleman managed to reload, turn around and shoot the Master? That was impossible since Gombei remembered seeing Master Yoshida wheel around to face his rear attacker just at the moment Gombei pulled the trigger. He looked down at the two bodies and saw the lineup: the bullet had gone right through the guard's back, tore out his belly and hit the Master in his heart. Gombei fell forward, his own weight suddenly unsupported by consciousness, and when he came to, smeared with heavings of boiled barley and pickled plums, the battle was over.

It was a quick rout, as would be the rest of the short civil war. The Emperor's warriors would beat the Shogun's guards in other battles, allowing Emperor Meiji to take back his power from the useless Shogun. For 250 years, the Tokugawa Shoguns had ruled Japan in the name of their emperors, but in the age of American black ships powered by steam and armed with cannons, they proved to be pitiful weaklings unable to keep the western bastards out. Pressured to resign and give back his power to the Emperor, the Shogun refused to admit failure, and called the supporters of the Emperor rebels, and the rebels, calling themselves loyalists, had no choice but to overthrow the disobedient Shogun by force. They would call it the Meiji Restoration, and Japan would be a new nation, convinced of the wonders of western technology as the means to eastern supremacy.

The Iwakuni fighters leafed through the grove by Bungo Bridge, and picked up the bodies of their comrades. Gombei wrapped Master Yoshida in a canvas cloth, and helped place

him on a wagon for the journey back to Iwakuni. He found his sword and finally had a chance to scrape off the drying blood of the cat.

On orders from Takamori Saigo, commander-in-chief of the forces fighting for the Emperor, the Iwakuni contingent assembled by Bungo Bridge. Saigo amply filled out his reputation as a strongman—tall, barrel chest, thick neck, mean eyes, booming voice. “I’m proud to tell you,” he said to the twenty survivors, “that the Emperor has officially named our coalition His Imperial Army. You fought with valor, and deserve His Majesty’s blessings.” He walked past every soldier and thanked each one personally. He stopped in front of Gombei, considered the smell of vomit, and asked, “Young man, who is your master?”

“Yoshida...Master Yoshida.”

“Ah yes, our best spy.” He scanned the line for him.

“He was killed,” Gombei explained, looking at his feet, wiping his eyes.

Saigo placed a fatherly hand on the boy’s shoulder. “How?”

“Bullet...bullet from...an enemy rifle.” Gombei spoke softly but he did not lie.

“And you, your name?”

“Taga...”

Saigo looked up at the rest of the soldiers and issued a command. “See to it that the Taga boy is cared for, that he returns home safely.”

As they walked slowly out of the grove and passed the camphor tree, Gombei saw Miki lying unscathed and serene, staring forever into an unseen sky.

Gombei’s mother took one look at her son entering the garden gate and burst out crying. She saw the distance in his eyes, his fear of focusing. She dropped to her knees and welcomed

him back, but heard nothing in return. If only she could embrace him as a child, but he was returning older, hardened by horrors he would not tell. She respected his reserve, his inner retreat, and she guided him to a bench, made him sit, and bent down to remove his sandals. “Welcome back,” she said again, daring to rub his feet lightly, but he stared at things only he could see.

“Ah,” said his father, appearing in the doorway, “welcome back! Glad to see you are well. Iwakuni is proud of you, all of you, for the glorious victory you have brought home. Come in, come in. We have many matters to discuss, so many changes taking place. What a fine warrior you’ve become!”

Gombei followed his father into the family room, and waited his turn to offer incense at the altar to their ancestors. He removed his sheathed sword from his sash, and laid it next to his cushion. His father asked to inspect it, pulled the sword out from its scabbard slowly, and raised the hilt to his forehead. Turning the cutting edge against the light, he read its signs of use, passing his master swordsman’s thumb lightly against its sharpness.

He smiled. “I see that you struck...at least once.” He noticed a spot of dried blood on the back edge, and scrapped it off with his fingernail, unbothered that Gombei had missed it in his cleaning.

Gombei leaned forward a fraction, and his father bowed deeply, the first time ever to his son in recognition of the daring of one so young. Gombei sat quietly as his father got up, left the room, then returned with a narrow brocade bag. He removed the bag, and unsheathed the sword from its black and gold lacquered scabbard, exposing the wave pattern running the length of its cutting edge, and the Buddhist deity Aizen engraved within a flaming halo at the hilt. With a metal chopstick, he punched out a small bamboo peg from the shark skinned handle, gave a

sharp tap at its base to jar the blade loose, and pulled the handle free. Incised on the unpolished tang was the name of the maker, Kiyomasa, and Chinese characters for “three bodies,” certifying the number of stacked cadavers the sword had cut clean through in a single test swoop.

“This was used by my father, and before that, his father, and before that...your...great...great grandfather. This is the Taga sword, passed down to each son after his first battle.” He reassembled the sword, sheathed and bagged it, tying the silk straps in a neat ribbon, and held it out horizontally with both hands. Gombei had no choice but to receive his legacy.

“Father...I struck with my sword, yes, but I...I should tell you...I must explain...”

“No,” his father interrupted, stern once again. “A samurai never discloses the details of his kill. It is between you and your opponent, and it must be kept that way. Speak of it and you dishonor the warrior, shaming him by telling others how he lost his life. Nothing can be more private between two men.” He slipped Gombei’s own sword back into its scabbard, and returned it to him. “Two swords,” he said proudly. “You have earned them both.” Gombei looked down at the floor.

“*Oi!*” his father called out. “*Sake!* Bring some *sake!*”

Gombei’s mother brought *sake* on a red lacquered tray, handed her husband a small cup, and filled it to its golden brim. She turned to Gombei, being certain to block her husband’s view, and carefully dripped one drop into his cup. Gombei stared gratefully at his nearly empty cup, and for the first time since his return, looked into his mother’s face. Her eyes widened, ever so slightly, and her lips, pressed together, spread in a faint smile. She filled her own cup, moved back, and joined her husband in toasting their son.

“And now,” she said, even before his father had lowered his cup, “it is time for Gombei to bathe and rest.” She stood up, bent over to touch Gombei lightly on his elbow, and led him out of the room, leaving his two swords by the cushion in front of the altar to the ancestors.

They walked down the long hallway and turned a corner. “Thank you...,” Gombei said quietly, “...thank you.”

“Mother?”

Gombei pulled the futon higher around his neck, and listened to the cold clacking of the bamboo in the garden, the swishing curtains. She moved toward the sliding doors, which she should shut, and would, for sure. Mother had that way of anticipating what needed to be done before he had to ask, even now, at twenty-five, no longer a boy but still her son, dependent despite his years.

“Mother?”

She sat on the threshold in the opening between the doors. Against the sheen of the veranda polished by the moon, she was just an outline of crumpled kimono. Shut the doors. It's cold. Do I have to ask?

She hummed a child's song about a cat.

Gombei jerked the covers over his head. Her humming moved closer, right next to his head. He pressed his palms together and pleaded. Please, please, you don't understand. It was a mistake. I told him you were just a baby sister. Really, I did. Go back to Bungo Bridge, go back to sleep. Under the camphor tree.

But she reached under the futon anyway, and pressed her small hand over his mouth.

Though the New Japan disbanded the samurai and replaced them with everyman soldiers armed with cheating weapons that roared with the pull of any unskilled finger, the Toga Academy of Fencing did well. Gombei's father had transformed the lethal tactics into an art of movement promoting grace and mental discipline beneficial for students, businessmen, government officials, and even women. Gombei maintained the equipment, repairing the breast plates, cleaning the webbed visors, polishing the wooden staves curved gently as swords but thick enough to withstand practice blows. The latest saying borrowed from English summed up his feelings about the school, soon to be passed on to him by his aging father: a "double edged sword" keeping him busy in the present on one hand, but never letting him forget the past on the other. If you take an innocent life, then you must take your own.

Late one afternoon, Gombei walked to a rocky ledge rising straight up from the ocean. He watched the waves surge against the overhang, felt the seaspray against his face, and decided it was the right spot. He took out two swords, the three-body heirloom and his own cat killer, crossed his ankles, and lowered himself into a sitting position, back straight. He placed the swords in front of him, and slipped his arms out of his sleeves, pushing his cotton robe down his waist to expose his belly. Holding the swords in his lap, he inched forward until his knees jutted over the edge. Passing his left hand slowly across his navel, as if to swab the area clean, he leaned forward and looked down into the waves. Yes, the water was deep enough. He thought of Master Yoshida, the Shogun's guard, the cat, and Miki, and he apologized to each one individually. He begged forgiveness from his father and the rest of his ancestors. Gombei held the swords straight out in front of him, and dropped them into the ocean.

He looked across the wrinkling water and watched the clouded sun sink into the sea. Every night the water puts the fire out, but the fire can never dry out the water during the day. I

have had enough of swords forged in fire, and now it is time for me to wash off my bad karma in the ocean, and be reborn a new man, someone Miki will not recognize, even if she meets me. I will become a fisherman.

Gombei stripped down to his loincloth, pinched his nose, leaned forward and let himself tumble into the amniotic sea.