



SEASON
OF
SANEMATSU

KEI
SWANSON

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Aderyn managed to answer. "Matsumoto."

"Very good." Matsumoto pushed a stray lock of hair out of her face, his palm brushing back over her head. "Our master resides within his castle. So worried about you, he is insane." He threw his head back and bellowed again with evil laughter. His oily hair, dressed in the traditional topknot, moved slightly as his head bobbed.

"Why have you done this to me?" Aderyn choked out. Anger rose, not at his actions toward her but at the pain he had caused Sanematsu. She did not matter. Only Yoshihide mattered. "You have nothing to fear from him. He knows all of your dirty little secrets and still will not hurt you."

"Because I hate Sanematsu-uji."



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KEI SWANSON



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CHAPTER I

The Satsuma Province of Kyushu waited in anticipation. The peasants went about their daily tasks, farmers planted crops to nourish the province, the yashiki's servants continued their courses, samurai prepared for battle and the government oversaw the politics of Nishikata. Yet, Sanematsu Yoshihide, daimyo of the ryo-chi, addressed only the most pressing matters. He delegated his personal bodyguard, Hikita Takayasu, to the minor tasks of running his domain.

"My husband," Sachi broke the calm silence between Hikita and herself. She sat at the side of her husband's futon in the samurai's quarters of Nishikata-jyo. Hikita watched as she combed her lengthy hair, the front of her light kosode gaping open, the robe failing to cover her firm, small breasts. He had tossed away all covering in deference to the heat and humidity, and to the intensity of their passion.

Once she had recovered her energy, Sachi had opened the shoji in hopes of a breeze. Now she tilted her head to reach beneath the layers of black tresses with her comb and studied the stars in the clear sky. The bright yellow moon had reached its zenith and would soon begin to set.

"Yes, Sa?" Hikita reminded her she had addressed him. With one hand he played with her hair, the other he tucked underneath his head.

"Is our master concerned with Ashikaga-sama and matters of Kyoto?" She spoke of civil war, the result of the Shogun's controversial abrupt abdication. Derision stirred even more over his

named successor and dissolved the governmental gathering of the Bakafu.

“I do not believe so. He has brought the daimyo of Kyushu under the Sanematsu banner and feels as long as he does not cross the water to Honshu at the head of his army, Kyoto’s enemies will not come to Kyushu.” Hikita’s fingers worked at her hair and Sachi’s hip rested intimately next to his. “It is fortunate the Sanematsu ryo-chi is isolated.”

Sachi set the fine-toothed wooden comb aside and arranged her kosode for greater modesty. “I have not seen Matsumoto-sama in a few days.”

Sanematsu’s karou, his highest-ranking samurai general, was not a pleasant man and his presence was not missed. She mentioned his absence only to discover what her husband knew without actually asking.

“Lord Sanematsu granted his request to visit his own ryo-chi. He departed after escorting the Council lords to their new residences.” He pulled her garment away to prevent Sachi from covering herself.

“It was not easy to prepare Lady Haru’s caravan in the short time Sanematsu-sama had ordered.” Pretending not notice her husband’s fingers dancing over her skin, Sachi continued to talk of their daimyo’s banished stepsister. “I was forced to demand an exact accounting of Sanematsu-sama’s finances.”

When Lord Sanematsu had asked for her assistance in running his household after he banished Haru from the yashiki, Sachi had accepted the position as a matter of course. Sanematsu was also her childhood friend.

“Very wise, my wife.” Hikita’s hand cupped her breast, and his calloused thumb rubbed her taunt nipple.

“Our master is obsessed with finding Tori-sama.”

This was the situation she truly wished to speak of. Since the barbarian woman was shipwrecked on Kyushu three years before, Sachi had spent almost every minute of every day with her, teaching her the language and culture of Nihon. Then Ko-tori, as Sanematsu named her, had vanished. Sachi missed her companion and worried for her.

“His maid reports he sleeps little, eats less and is very short-tempered. When he and his aide-de-camp ride out, the servants see the trips as brief reprieves from our daimyo’s rage.”

“He rants and raves about insignificant matters,” her husband agreed as he brought his hand back to join the other behind his head. “He ordered the execution of a stablehand who failed to feed his war horse promptly enough.”

“Oh, my.” Sachi pushed Hikita’s hair off his face.

Hikita rolled onto his side. “The kami have surely possessed him. Uesugi-uji, that young upstart, has taken it upon himself to keep our daimyo from causing irreparable damage to himself or his reputation. He says Sanematsu goes searching with high hopes and talks animatedly of Tori’s return. His lighthearted mood is broken when the captain of the search party reports no success. His rage engulfs him and results in violence. Three captains are dead of seppuku and two by Sanematsu’s own katana.” Hikita’s large eyes held his wife’s gaze. Her stare crept down his torso to take in his rising passion.

“We can do nothing for him, I suppose,” Sachi sighed. Her tiny hand touched the swelling. Experienced fingers caressed him.

“We could do something for ourselves. That is all we are responsible for.”

Hikita reached to his wife’s neck and with gentle pressure pulled her to him.



Sanematsu Yoshihide walked his estate, haunted by a specter, unable to drive her from his thoughts. She filled his dreams, disrupting sleep. He watched the builders repair the North Wing that had been destroyed by fire the day she was kidnapped, and fantasized her walking out of the ruins, whole, safe and very much alive. He wandered the beach and envisioned her emerging from the sea.

Retracing the steps he had covered with his seabird comforted him.

He called for Dai-tan, his battle stallion, and rode out the coastal road to the glen she had found so pleasant. The hours passed slowly as he rode, and he returned to the yashiki walls as the sun set. The season of spring had arrived quickly to change the flora of the island and dry the rains of winter. Soon, great waves of humid vapors would rise from the forest.

Remembering the night he first spoke with her, he smiled. They had sat, two swords’ lengths apart, in his large audience chamber. No one sat with them, which allowed her to talk with

him without revealing her knowledge of their language to others. He had asked her name, and when he repeated it, she began to giggle, failing to hide her mouth behind her hands as the women of his world did. Her laughter was full of life.

At first, anger had filled him, rising from his embarrassment; then he calmed.



“Why do you laugh like a silly maid?” he demanded.

“I am sorry, Sanematsu-sama. I know your language does not have a place for certain sounds. My nurse Hana-sama could not pronounce my name, either. The lack of proper sounds makes it...funny.”

“Does your name have a meaning?”

“It is Welsh for bird.”

“Hmmm. Maybe I should call you Ko-tori or Tori. They are our words for bird, and since our women are given names of two syllables, Tori will fit you.”

“As you wish, Sanematsu-sama.”

“Yes, Tori is much better, formally. Personally, I will call you Ko-tori—little bird.”



They had shared hours of conversation—he could speak honestly with her, open and free, as he could with no other?. Over time, she had come to be more than a prisoner. He had fallen in love with her, the emotion rare in his culture.

Now, as he entered his quarters, his heart was heavy. In his silent room, Sanematsu removed his clothes and settled on the futon. Nets draped his bedding to keep the night insects plentiful to the season away. A book of poetry, read by the illumination of a single candle, failed to hold his interest as the night’s sounds fell on his ears.

He listened to his warriors in the courtyard as they entered the barracks to find their own beds. He wished them a good night’s rest. For him to try to sleep was useless. It came in brief naps, if at all, when his over-weary body overruled his troubled mind.

Morning found Sanematsu standing at his open shoji, facing eastward to where the sun peeked above the horizon. The early breeze cooled his bare skin; the days would soon be intolerable. From the upper-story vantage point, he saw the barley fields

planted up the mountain's slopes. His hair stirred as his gaze wandered to the far country. The new day's sun silhouetted a rider traveling the road away from the city.

Desperate for a way to find Tori, Sanematsu turned away from the outside world. Had he turned his back on the very solution he sought?

CHAPTER 2

Aderyn woke from her stupor. She would die, and wished it would happen soon. Having forgone trying to mark her days because she slept too often to be accurate, she no longer knew, or cared, how long she had been held captive.

A noise had wakened her. Voices. A commotion. Shouts. Cries. Joy overwhelmed her. Was she to be rescued? Her heart raced. Sanematsu had come for her. Blood pounded in her temples. Her ordeal was over. She would be free, bathed, fed and healed, all by Yoshihide's hand.

Suddenly, silence. Aderyn tried to call out, but her tongue stuck to the roof of her dehydrated mouth. No sound came from outside as she struggled to produce enough saliva to speak. Was there any use trying? Maybe she had imagined it all. Oh, God, she was losing her mind.

A hand pulled back the tattered cloth covering the doorway, and the sun silhouetted a man. A samurai. Unable to see his face for the bright light blinding her, Aderyn would not concede it was anyone except Lord Sanematsu.

It had to be.

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“Because I hate Sanematsu-uji.”

She could almost feel Matsumoto’s gaze as he took in her ravaged body. The burns on her lower legs had destroyed large areas of her skin. The spot where the poisoned dart had pierced her breast was inflamed and swollen. Added to her injuries were days of filth and body waste plastered to her, making her appearance even more repulsive. Yet, she knew the Evil One would not be put off by her condition.

“You add too much to his pleasure,” Matsumoto continued. “If I cannot have you, neither will he. Moreover, you know and see too much. Here...” He looked around the straw hut where she had been dumped what seemed ages ago. “...you are no threat.”

“Sanematsu-sama does not need anyone to think for him.”

Over time, she had become aware of what Sanematsu hid from himself. Responsible to a Council of Elders, he had allowed himself to be directed by the old warriors, appearing to hold to their ideals instead of ruling according to his own. Yet, when she was at his bedside after the battle of Kamaga, where he had been gravely wounded, Sanematsu told her his inner thoughts about the Council of Elders and Matsumoto.

“What is more important,” she continued to the karou, “he knows he does not need you.” It took all of her meagre strength to confront Matsumoto. Before, she had avoided making him angry out of concern for his retaliation. Now, so near death, she did not fear him.

“You do not know him as well as you think, barbarian. You meddle in that of which you have no knowledge.” Matsumoto stood, drawing his sword with a smooth, even motion. “You do not understand our ways.”

“You will kill me?” Privately, Aderyn wished he would. She no longer feared the oblivion death brought. However, what of Yoshi? Was he insane, as Matsumoto said? It was not fair for her to wish for death while he needed her.

“No.” Matsumoto slid the sword back into its scabbard and adjusted it more comfortably in his girdle.

A short, squat man, he was the polar opposite of Sanematsu. Sanematsu Yoshihide was tall and lean and hard of muscle. Matsumoto had the physique of a warrior hidden beneath layers of fat. Yet now, towering over her, the samurai looked ominous.

“I shall not have to. Death will find you on its own.”

He turned and, with a brisk step, exited the hut.

Receding hoofbeats followed muffled sounds and then all was quiet. Aderyn sighed, tears forming. Help would never come. Her eyes blurred, and tears rolled from them.

“God, if You exist in this strange and beautiful land, please take me now.”

Closing her eyes, she let emptiness descend over her. Before long, she was released from her agony.



As Matsumoto rode into the courtyard, he contemplated his scheme. Twenty-four hours after the fire, he had known the whereabouts of the Sanematsu’s barbarian. Although she was held less than a day’s ride away, he had not visited her, not wanting to risk being seen by a spy or followed. He had kept Sanematsu’s troops at bay by assigning his own retainers to search in that area. Their presence and pretense of search kept others from suspecting his hand in the deed.

Paid to kill her, the assassin had failed. Still, her suffering pleased Matsumoto. Leaving her to die in the remote area was wise. If what he saw was any indication, it would not be long. Every step had been made so precisely; he was about to make his final move on the goh board.

The barbarian woman’s arrival in Nihon had been quite fortuitous for Matsumoto, providing him with an easy tool to use for Sanematsu’s destruction. Without her, Sanematsu would not have

found the strength to dissolve the Council and exile his grandfather, removing the last of Matsumoto's obstacles. She wormed her way into Sanematsu's soul so deeply the sudden extraction had ripped open a fatal void. The hole now consumed the daimyo little by little. A swift, fatal blow to the same wound would cause Sanematsu to be lost to the ghost world forever.

Matsumoto could not help but be pleased and anxious at the prospect of moving into the vacancy that would create.

The karou entered the castle and followed the corridors to Sanematsu's audience chamber. The daimyo sat with Uesugi. The young samurai was new to Sanematsu's army, and had been a friend to the barbarian.

Matsumoto glared at the youth, evil emanating from his deepest being. *Your time will come soon enough. Once the foreigner is dealt with, you are next.*

Several scrolls of the barbarian's making were laid out before them. What scheme was Sanematsu up to? Could it have to do with the uprising spreading throughout Honshu, the greater central island of Nihon?

"My lord." Matsumoto knelt and bowed with the most respect he had shown in months. He pretended to be out of breath. "I have news of Tori-sama."



"Ko-tori?" Sanematsu brought his head out of the scrolls.

He spent most of the hours of his day considering ideas on how Nihon could benefit from others like her. Faced with the Shogun's edicts, it would be a difficult task and would probably bring war, but conflict already embroiled the Land of the Gods. Did he think another woman like Tori would come to his island and fill his heart? No woman, yabanjin or Nihonese, would ever fill that void.

Sanematsu regained his composure. Hope was restored. With Tori at his side, he could put his whole heart into these ideas, proof that not all foreigners were evil.

"Where is she?"

"I do not know." Matsumoto faced him steadfastly.

"You said..." Sanematsu came to his feet and moved closer to his general. He stepped from the dais to be on equal footing but remained a foot and a half taller than Matsumoto.

"I said only that I have news."

Sanematsu caught a glimpse of the smirk Matsumoto held back.

“She is dead.”

The words rang through the chamber. Sanematsu felt as though he had been struck in the stomach, pushing the air out of his lungs. Ko-tori. Dead. How could he survive?

Uesugi leaned close to Sanematsu’s shoulder. “My Lord Sanematsu. A word, sire.”

“Yes? What is it?” Sanematsu spoke in a hush, his head angled toward the young warrior. The solemn look on the boy’s face caused him to quell his impatience, and he stepped nearer.

“Perhaps you should question Matsumoto-uji further,” Uesugi whispered to him. “I have a strong feeling he knows more than he is telling.”

Sanematsu remembered the day Ko-tori had whispered “Trust me” into his ear. The day she and Uesugi had saved his life. Uesugi’s words echoed with her voice.

He confronted Matsumoto with confidence. The men stood no more than a foot apart, gazes locked in an unblinking stare.

“Matsumoto-uji, do you have proof?”

“Only this.” He reached into his wide sleeve. Withdrawing his hand with deliberate slowness, he laid a cloth-wrapped packet in his master’s open hand.

Sanematsu unfolded the silk to reveal a tortoiseshell comb. Sachi had told him of the gift he had unknowingly given Tori for her sixteenth birthday. While Sanematsu was away on one of his many journeys, Sachi had taken her to the town. When the young woman admired the combs, the samurai lady suggested she acquire them, billing Sanematsu, as was custom. Sachi thought allowing Tori to think Sanematsu had provided such a gift for her would lift the young woman’s spirits.

He turned the comb over. Several long strands of brown hair were entwined in the fine teeth. Every nerve cried out with recognition. He brought it to his nose. Whether reality or fantasy, he could detect her scent clinging to it—lemon, wintergreen and other aromas he could not name. The perfume of Ko-tori.

“A ninja had that with him when he boasted at a sake shop of how he killed her. After he had ravaged her. My katana meted out justice for his crime.”

“You fool,” Sanematsu screamed as he clutched the comb. “He could have led me to her.” Tears filled his closed eyes, and he pressed the cool tortoiseshell to his lips. His left hand rested on the hilt of his sword in the girdle at his waist.

“Why, sire? She is dead.” Matsumoto was unaware of how dangerous this game had become.

His words echoed in the recesses of Sanematsu’s brain and the empty cavern of his chest.

No.

She could not be dead. Nothing could take his seabird from him. He could not accept Matsumoto’s story. As he turned his back to him, he placed the comb in the fold of his hitatare over his heart.

Without warning, a rage-induced blindness came over him. A growl emerged from the depths of his soul as his katana slid from its scabbard. He severed Matsumoto’s head from his spine while uttering a scream that reverberated through the castle so loudly it startled servants from their tasks.

Falling to his knees as Matsumoto’s torso collapsed, Sanematsu burst into convulsive groans as his sword dropped to the floor.



Days passed without her keeper’s return. Oddly, though she had not eaten in many days, her strength grew along with her resolution to survive.

Her captor must have been drugging her before, as now she remained awake for hours, and her senses cleared. She could hear small animals nosing around the hut, see the insects feeding on her skin in the night, feel the wind blowing through the cracks in the wall, smell the rain that leaked through the patched roof to form rivulets that ran onto her face, taste the drops falling into her upturned mouth.

Still experiencing weakness and despair, she recalled Sanematsu’s need for her as she struggled to keep her determination high. Matsumoto would rush back to announce her death to her master. If Sanematsu were, indeed, insane, as the evil general indicated, he would not survive the news. Not that she thought herself so important her death could cause his collapse, but Sanematsu was not at his best physically or emotionally. In the past few months, he had recovered from a sword wound he received at Kamaga, been forced to admit to his karou’s betrayal and made a strenuous trip to Kyoto then back to Nishikata. She had to get to him, to reassure him of her love, to share her strength and support.

She concentrated on freeing herself. Though time was a thing she had plenty of, strength was another matter. She twisted the binding on her wrists still held behind her back. The rice-fiber strands had weakened, and the bonds loosened enough she could ease her shoulders. As she flexed her hands and wrists the twine cut into her skin. Perspiration stung as it mixed with her blood in the wounds. Eventually, the twine snapped, and her hands were free. She worked up enough strength to voice a moan of relief.

Aderyn brought her arms forward, laughing and crying. The sockets of her shoulders were stiff, although she had moved them a little bit every time she woke, trying to prevent permanent damage. As she forced her muscles to work, she screamed with the pain. Fighting her way from reclining to sitting took so long she gave up thought of standing. She could stay upright only if propped against the feeble wall. Resting to regain her energies, she closed her eyes and enjoyed the sensation of her hands in her lap.

Her movements stirred the smell of her body. She wrinkled her nose at the stink and pulled off the filthy hitatare and hakama. To her renewed dismay, her left breast was engorged with inflammation from the festering sore where the ninja's poison dart had been embedded. Infection and corruption ran from her burned legs, caused by her kicking over a lantern when the ninja tossed her over his shoulder in the act of abduction. The raw flesh was putrid, and the slightest pressure on what swollen skin remained caused it to rupture and spew pus and blood. Her limbs would never support even her wasted body.

Flopping onto her stomach, she raised herself on weak arms to drag her way out.

If she was to die, she wanted to be in the sun.

CHAPTER 3

The doorway seemed miles away. She used her arms, the strongest part of her body, second only to her heart, to propel herself. What seemed eons later, she pushed through the cloth door and out into the open. The bright sun blinded her. She had entered the hut in late winter; now, it was early summer.

She sobbed. Was her life over at the age of seventeen? Sachi had once said Aderyn's experiences had filled her short two years in Nihon with a lifetime. Since arriving in Nishikata, she had accepted death, fallen in love, had children around her—although not her own. Yet she would never know what it was like to give herself to a man, never bear a man's child.

Never see the man she loved again.

Her heart squeezed with the thought. Pain spread out from the center of her chest, burning up her throat. She squinted away the tears, blaming them on the sun.

Something distracted her. A flutter to her left. A rustle. Looking over her shoulder, she discovered she had not been deserted. Her captor was a few feet away but would do her no more harm. His body lay split from neck to groin beneath a tree.

Matsumoto must have killed him the day he had visited. The stench inside the hut and of her own long-unwashed body had been strong enough to cover the one from outside.

Nature was already at work. Crows and insects picked over the body. Flesh hung from exposed bone, eye sockets, jaw and teeth bared in the half-devoured face. A swollen black tongue lolled out of the gaping mouth.

Aderyn vomited. Her stomach disgorged bile until she could only retch. She fainted from the exertion.

When she woke, a full luminous moon shone, casting eerie shadows around her. A breeze rustled through the trees. Like an animal, she caught the smell of water and began to move toward it, dragging herself over the rocky ground. The moon set and the sun rose before she completed the distance from the hut to the bank of the stream. She lost her balance and tumbled down the steep sandy slope to land in the river.



The sound of a splash carried downstream, causing the monk to look up from his fishing. Curious, he walked up the creek bank. He squatted beside the body and studied it

Hair floated around the woman's head like an aura, rippling in the slow current. The monk was frightened as he noticed the color of the hair, and the body was covered with tan skin hanging loosely from its bones.

A barbarian. Dangerous if discovered. He, however, had little to fear, since the person was dead. He did have a duty; the body must be properly dealt with.

He drew the body out of the water and rolled it over. His panic increased—a woman. Then, just as he noticed the faint rise and fall of her chest, she coughed and tried to breathe. The monk turned her over again, beating her back. She sputtered, and vomited brackish water. When she managed to catch her breath, he heaved her across his shoulder and started to his temple.



The castle of Sanematsu waited. A month after the news of Tori's demise and Matsumoto's death, those affected went about their lives like sleepwalkers. Sachi kept Sanematsu's household running, thankful for the tasks, but in the quiet hours of the night she missed her friend. Her husband was in control of the Satsuma Province's government as Sanematsu remained closeted in his quarters, giving orders but not stirring to see them carried out.

Aya, Sanematsu Yoshihide's stepdaughter, sulked, angry that he should be so self-centered. He should be seeing to her betrothal but did not. Sanematsu's daughters were used to having his attention. An indulgent parent, he had never denied them anything, so she decided she would confront him.

Rushing to his quarters, she stopped in the hallway, slowed by her wisdom. She changed her direction and sought out Sachi.

“Sachi-sama, what are we to do about Father?” she asked after finding the samurai woman in the kitchens.

“What do you mean? He is our master. We need do nothing about him.” She moved about the kitchen, inspecting the various dishes Ryorishi and his assistants prepared. Throughout the busy room, vegetable cooks oversaw their assistants, boys and girls who cleaned and cut the produce delivered to the castle early in the morning from the city. Fish chefs worked over the fresh catch. The ever-present rice steamed in a large cast iron pot tended by Ryorishi.

Much of the yashiki’s cuisine was prepared in heavy pots, as the cast iron works of Kyushu were known throughout Nihon for their superior ware. Since the eleventh century, the ironware had been produced on the Ashiya River in northern Kyushu and was sought after by those who wanted the best of things. The enterprise brought wealth to Sanematsu’s coffers.

“Does he expect every one to stop living because Tori is dead? It is not right. He should care more about his family and ryo-chi.” The pathetic whine in her voice revealed the fine line between the girl Aya was and the woman she was becoming.

“You sound angry.” Sachi flipped beads across the rods of an abacus she carried, working at the calculations for the budget. “What concerns you so?”

“It is not the governmental lapse which concerns me. He has neglected an important task he promised he would tend to.” Aya picked at the edges of her sash

“And what would that be?” Sachi set the adding apparatus aside. A smile tugged at her mouth.

“Do you think Father would approve of Uesugi Tadakuni as my husband?” Now she raised her gaze to Sachi.

“I do not see why not. But it is not the habit of brides to choose their husbands.” Sachi wrote the items Ryorishi indicated needed restocking on a piece of paper.

“I know, but Father has failed to see to my joining with anyone. I am fifteen. Most girls are betrothed by now. What harm could come from my suggestion?”

“Then, by all means, suggest. But, beware.” Sachi gave Aya her full attention. “He may not give you the answer you wish for.”

“I will take the chance.” Aya fled the kitchens to find her stepfather before she lost her nerve.



At the age of three, Aya had come to Nishikata-jyo when her mother joined with Sanematsu, having never known her own father. She could not have loved anyone, or been loved, more. Sanematsu showed no preference between her and his natural daughters, treating them all with strong paternal affection. In return, they showered him with devotion.

Because of this devotion, the man she found in the garden saddened her. He wore only his hakama, and Aya fought the rise of emotion as she looked at the bones protruding at his shoulders. Finger-deep valleys lay between his ribs. The muscles of his chest, stomach and arms lay flaccid like those of a man of eighty. His cheeks were hollow, his hair limp and tied at his neck with a cloth. Eyes closed, he sat cross-legged on the stones.

“Father?” she choked out as she neared his side.

Sanematsu opened his dull eyes. “Yes, Aya-hime?”

“May I sit with you?”

He fingered the tortoiseshell comb, a reminder of Tori. Once, Aya had blessed the foreign devil for the happiness she brought to her stepfather. Now, she cursed the day Tori set foot on Kyushu.

Sanematsu nodded. Since killing Matsumoto he had spoken few words.

“Father.” Aya did not know how to broach the subject. Sachi’s warning came back to her. Did she really want to ask her heart’s desire? Her culture taught an individual’s desire was of no consequence. Women, especially the daughter of a daimyo, were pawns when given into marriage. To ask to be wed to a particular man was unheard of. Nevertheless, Nihonese women were capable of using innuendo and suggestion to get what they wanted.

“I am fifteen.”

Sanematsu nodded.

“It is time I was promised to a...man.” She blurted out, angry despite her best intentions that he should ignore something so vital.

Sanematsu nodded again, but said nothing.

“Why are you so selfish?” Aya cried. “You sit day after day in your misery, forcing us all to suffer. Simply because you grieve and feel your life finished does not give you the right to end ours. It is unfair.”

Aya covered her face with her hands as she wept. Neither she nor anyone else dared to speak to Lord Sanematsu this way. Her longing for Tadakuni had overruled her judgment.

Her tears subsided over the long minutes it took for Sanematsu to respond to her outburst. Her face rested against her palms as she waited for some response.

“You are correct. It is unjust that I should prevent your happiness.”

Aya’s head jerked up. She read his feeling for her on his face.

“I will prepare for you to be betrothed. What man should I honor?” Sanematsu’s teasing manner showed a glimmer of her stepfather of old. “Ah, yes, I recall. Uesugi Tadakuni. He is your choice, is he not?”

“I would not presume to tell you who I should be joined with, honorable Father,” Aya demurred. Her heart pounded in her chest. “Still, since you asked my opinion, I see no disadvantage in joining the Uesugi clan with the Sanematsu.” Now she was back to blessing the foreigner, for it was her carefully placed word that gave her stepfather the name of the samurai who had captured her heart.

“The Uesugi clan is already allied with us,” Sanematsu pointed out. His solemn brown eyes watched her with a playful glint as she pondered her reply.

The Uesugi clan of Kyushu was an offshoot of the Uesugi clan originating in the Kanta region of Honshu. After the failed Mongolian invasions of the 13th century, Uesugi’s distant patriarchal ancestor had settled on Kyushu along with many others who chose not to return home. He had obtained for himself and his descendants a small province that provided adequate income without the associated governmental requirements; an alliance with the Sanematsu had given the clan stability and power.

“Yes, but a joining would better cement the alliance.” Aya looked into her stepfather’s eyes, a breach in protocol, for one did not look into the eyes of a higher-ranking person. She endeavored to carry herself properly as her teachers had taught, but surely he was not going to deny her. If she could convince her stepfather a joining would benefit both clans, he would agree to it.

“I see.”

Sanematsu appeared to consider her request. Samurai marriages had little to do with love and affection, but were rather based on treaties and allegiances, wealth and power. Although young samurai women were taught such matters so they could better aid their husbands in their political careers, Aya had acquired an understanding of the political history of Kyushu just as she had

learned the manners young samurai women were taught so they help their husbands' political ambitions.

"We must hope that he is not already betrothed. Young men are usually committed at an earlier age than women."

"Fatherrrr," Aya whined.

"Aya-hime, we will have to wait and see." He took her hand in his. "If Uesugi-uji is not committed, we will make the agreement."

"Thank you, Father." Aya embraced his neck, and he held her close for several long seconds.

Aya started away, torn with her emotions. She would have the husband of her choice, something few wives did, but after she joined with Uesugi, she would leave the Nishikata-jyo. The castle-town had been her home since she was three. Her heart ached for another reason. She could see her stepfather was willing himself to die.

Hesitating, she wanted to rush back and voice her feelings, but it was not her place. Somewhere deep inside Sanematsu was the father he had always been. Perhaps Sachi-sama or Sou—What was his name?—could help. She pondered the answer on her way to her room.



The joining and subsequent Purification Ritual were completed in the shortest possible time. Both bride and groom gained from the marriage. Sanematsu presented his son-in-law and daughter with a house of their own in the samurai estates. Uesugi's family supplied the furnishings and servants. Aya, stepdaughter to a daimyo, belonged now to the Uesugi clan and was less important than when she was in her stepfather's house.

Aya moved from the rooms of her childhood to the home of her womanhood with mixed emotions. She would miss her half-sister and stepsisters, though she looked forward to their first visits, as the house was large and empty for two people. Its vastness was especially apparent at night. In the darkness, it was as if she and Uesugi were the only couple in Nishikata. She also had time to remember her father's deterioration.

"Tada," Aya whispered into her groom's bare chest as she lay over his body. Dawn approached, and they lay spent. "I am afraid."

"Of what?" Uesugi pulled her nearer. One month, and they had not tired of pillowing.

“Father’s grief is consuming him.” She slid to his side, curling against him. Her slender arm snaked across his waist as he held her tightly.

“I, too, see it daily. The men are nervous, hungry for battle. If another daimyo chooses to attack, it would be over quickly.” He did not wish to talk of his father-in-law nor the attitude of the Sanematsu army. The futon should be a sanctuary from the political and war arenas.

“The samurai are loyal to my father.” Aya sat up abruptly and rolled out of Uesugi’s arms. Her small breasts quivered with her movement, and his groin grew hot.

“They are, but they are also warriors, trained for battle and itching to fight.” Just as he itched to take her again. “If they get an offer that meets their desire, they may revolt only to fulfill the hunger for blood. Do not worry. For now, Hikita-uji is holding them in line.” Uesugi raised up to nuzzle Aya’s small breast. His tongue worked at her nipple.

Aya held his head to her as she moved to lie alongside him. “You must seek Sou Kiyohara.”

“Who?” Uesugi rose over her, gazing into her eyes.

“Sou Kiyohara from Aso-san Temple. My father has always sought guidance from him. He was fostered there.” She stroked his smooth jaw. “When I was younger, Kiyohara-sama made many visits to the yashiki, but in the last years I have not seen him. There is a bond between my father and his mentor. Only he can help. Only Sou Kiyohara can keep him alive.” Aya began to weep. “Tada, do not let my father die.”

“I will not, Aya.” He held her close. “I will go for Kiyohara-uji when the sun rises. Now, I am rising...” His voice trailed off, and he began to join with her yet another time.



As he had promised, Uesugi asked Hikita for permission to seek help from Kiyohara. The bodyguard assented, as eager as Aya to have Sanematsu back to his former self.

“Aya-sama is very perceptive,” Hikita commented. “Kiyohara-uji saved our master’s life after the battle of Kamaga. He did not do my wound any harm, either.” Hikita flexed his leg. “You may leave at once. I will give you an introduction.”

To Uesugi, it was as if he were ten years older since that battle. Joining Sanematsu’s army at the battlefield, his katana untried, he

had been afraid of death and dishonor, but more disturbing was being away from the yashiki and Aya. Then, Sanematsu had sent him back to the castle to retrieve his seabird, and Tori had paved the way for his joining. Now, as before, he was not happy to be leaving Aya, yet had an obligation to his master.

He rode in haste. Uesugi had benefited greatly from his relationship with the daimyo. His yearly salary had increased by two, making him one of the wealthiest of all samurai his age. Under the fighting master's training, his muscles, already toned and flexible, became harder and larger, more supple. His martial arts sharpened, and he thought himself more of a man, sure of his prowess, almost eager to be a warrior and live as a worthy, honorable samurai.

He was in Tori's debt, but she was gone. He owed Sanematsu his loyalty and trust. He was obligated to do what he could to bring peace to his daimyo's spirit.

Uesugi arrived at the temple two days later, and at first light of the following day departed with Sou Kiyohara.