





SEABIRD OF SANEMATSU

KEI SWANSON



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SEABIRD OF SANEMATSU
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DEDICATION

To my understanding husband Tom and in memory of my supportive mother Helen. I'd like to thank my father Bill and sister Carol for all of their help. Without cooperative families, authors would never be successful.

CHAPTER I

*Western coast of Kyushu
Nihon 1480*

“Ryn!” *The shouting of her name startled Aderyn* awake. “Come on, now, girls! Up, up!”

Her sense of impending doom perked up. Something had to be terribly wrong for her mother to speak Welsh after so many years of Portuguese. She climbed over her sister to get out of the bunk they shared as Ana responded to their mother’s command with listless motion. The two eldest, Adelaide and Alicia, were already up.

Fighting over the dresses cluttering the deck, the four girls bumped and collided. Aderyn cursed her luck at having grabbed Ana’s gown as she struggled to push her well-developed bosom into the smaller bodice.

“Girls!” Kathryn returned to gather her daughters.

No time to find another dress.

“You must hurry! Get topside, now!” Her mother disappeared again.

At first, Aderyn thought a storm had engulfed the ship, flooding it with rainwater, as the sound of her mother’s wet dress slapping sloppily against her thin legs echoed in the hall. She changed her mind as she listened to the sounds from topside. The sound of steel and exploding gunpowder told her a battle was in progress.

Who could be attacking? Their ship was a trading vessel with only one small cannon. Besides, the Portuguese flag allowed them free navigation in the Pacific.

She recalled a violent lurch sometime before dawn, a movement more abrupt than she was accustomed to yet not enough to

completely rouse her. A lifetime of seafaring had left her unfazed by the ocean's frequent rages.

Fussing with her bodice buttons, Aderyn followed her sisters through the hallway to the ladder leading to the deck. They lifted their hems out of the water soaking their brocade slippers and rising up their ankles. The lack of time to don petticoats was now a blessing.

Adelaide and Alicia were already at the gangway. A few steps up the ladder Alicia blocked the way. Nearby, her mother screamed with fervent urgency.

"Go on, 'licia, up wi' you now!"

"No, Mama! I cannot!" Alicia cried.

They had to get out of the bowels of the ship. Aderyn took charge, stepping toward the ladder and her terrified big sister.

"Yes, you can!" she shouted. "Now, go!"

She placed her shoulder against her sister's broad hips and shoved so hard she forced Alicia to move upwards or be crushed against the stairs.

The girls erupted from the hatch like so much vomit from a drunken sailor. The sun rose at the edge of the ocean behind the ship. In front, Aderyn caught a glimpse of mountainous land before her attention was drawn to the furious activity on the deck.

In chaotic bedlam, men rushed across the deck, slipping in the seawater and blood washing the planks of the small frigate. Their shouts and cries filled the air along with the clank of steel and burst of gunfire. Kathryn shepherded her daughters amid the pandemonium into a corner. Her sisters' bodies squeezed Aderyn against the cabin.

Alicia's frenzy spread to Adelaida, whose tears and screams were out of control. Aderyn fought to remain calm. A clear head and steady nerves would show her the way out of this.

Huddled on the deck, peeking out beneath Ana's skirts, she glimpsed the pistol the girls kept in their cabin at their father's order. The thought to come up armed was fortunate; but in the nervous outburst, Ana had forgotten the weapon, and it slipped from her hand. Aderyn reached for the flintlock and squirmed about so her fingers could touch then close around the cold barrel.

She struggled to rise from her prostrate position but was only able to come to her knees. Now her view was through the open areas between her sisters' arms, and she watched the crew fighting the Asian warriors pouring over the rails. Before long, the few who

remained alive ran out of gunpowder and shot. They drew short daggers in an attempt to defend themselves against the army of skilled swordsmen.

The attackers were small men, with an occasional one a head or so taller than their fellows. All were dark, their skin a tanned bronze different from the Chinese and Filipinos Aderyn was familiar with. They had shaved their raven hair from the crown of their heads and tied the rest back. Their intense slanted brown eyes shown with ferocity.

They wore a uniform of flowing jackets wrapped around their bodies and tight leggings, all of dark blue with some sort of white detail on the sleeves and the front and back. They used their long, razor-sharp weapons as if they were extensions of their hands.

As more of the crew fell to the swift swords, a small heroic band remained to guard the women. One-by-one, they were slain. A scream rose to Aderyn's throat and emerged in a loud wail as she watched her father's body drop. The echo died, not to be replaced with another. Overcome with emotion, she could not cry out again.

She could just watch, her eyes wide in horror. Kathryn, the only woman able to shake herself from the shock of death, grasped her husband's fallen dagger in a desperate attempt to defend her children. Before she could raise the weapon, a single slash of a long sword cut along her shoulders, dissecting her head from her body.

The echo of her mother's abbreviated scream rattled in Aderyn's brain as blood pumped through it, driven by an adrenaline frenzy. Struggling to calm her nerves, she brought the pistol up and, without thought, aimed it into the melee. As her father had taught her, she took a deep breath to steady her aim, then closed her eyes and fired.

The shot hit the man who had killed her mother squarely in the chest. As he fell forward into the huddled girls, he knocked the pistol away; and Aderyn slipped. Unable to regain her feet, she curled beneath her three sisters. She squeezed her eyes close as if to blot out the threat of death.

Free of the view of the carnage, she cowered behind her human shield. The battle came back to her when a blade slid through Alicia's body, cutting Aderyn's side in a glancing blow. A seemingly endless scream came from her gut as she reacted to the pain and her sister's death. Her other two sisters' voices were soon silenced as well.

A startling calm settled in as she lay beneath the mass of corpses. She trembled and struggled to control the hysteria spreading through her. She fought to blot out the smell of death and blood and to forget the cries of the slain. As much as she wanted to, she dare not allow the screams to begin. If she did, she would never stop.

For fear of drawing attention to herself, she held her breath. She forced her eyes open to see what was happening in the stillness and touched her stinging wound with tentative fingertips. Blood oozed from it, but she didn't worry about it. Although it was painful, she took heart in the fact she could feel, therefore she was alive.

The mid-morning sun invaded her dark, cramped space to create unbearable heat and humidity beneath the suffocating pile of flesh crushing her. The weight pressed her shoulder into the wet, rough deck. She fought to suppress the fear swelling in her throat again.

What was she going to do now? Her family was dead, leaving her alone. Alone where? She could not give up. What she needed was a plan.

The first thing she had to do was survive, and that meant getting off the ship. It would be better if she were unseen. Then she would worry about the next step.

The fear settled in the pit of her stomach, and she resisted it by concentrating on her escape. If she allowed the panic to grow any further, it would take over her existence and she would die. Would her death help her parents and sisters? Nothing could help them now. And they could not help her.

She would think about the plan, not her plight. If the invaders went away, she would have a chance to escape to the nearby shore. Her muscles twitched, threatening to cramp. They wanted to move, telling her it was necessary. To avoid giving away her existence became harder.

The victors explored the floundering hulk as the sounds of hoofbeats and whinnying horses approached from a distance. With caution, Aderyn wiggled around to peek through the corpses, and witnessed a great flurry of activity among the men. They gathered near the opening in the rail that led to the gangplank. Were they getting ready to depart?

No. An air of expectancy fell over the group. Something, or someone, important approached.

Anxiety seeped through her, making Aderyn's breath shorter. The feeling grew, and her breath caught in her chest. Concentrating on the air moving in and out of her lungs, she slowed her breathing. She tried to be silent and, as expectantly as the warriors, waited for whatever would happen next.



Lord Sanematsu Yoshihide of the Clan Minamoto led the parade of superb horses carrying the leaders of his great army to the ocean's edge. His magnificent bay stallion held his head high and tossed it as the smell of battle and blood filled his nostrils. Sanematsu sat in the saddle, tall and straight, his eyes focused on the ship listing in the rocky surf.

His entourage came to a halt, and grooms ran forward to hold the warhorses as their masters dismounted. Sanematsu moved to the small rowboat manned by two samurai, his strides long and purposeful. He stepped in, found his balance with ease and stood as the men rowed out to the frigate.

He ascended the ladder and stepped onto the deck. Ignoring his bowing warriors, he wandered the deck. He did not like what greeted him, though Sanematsu Yoshihide had seen enough bodies to be untouched by the carnage.

He quickly came to the conclusion that the assault had been for nothing, the ship unimportant, the cargo pitiful. The one cannon and few flintlocks would do little to arm his forces, and the crates of who-knew-what would be useless. What bothered him the most was that these people had died for no reason—every death should be for a purpose.

From the least of his servants to his highest general, every life had a use and each man or woman reason to be born and die. Only in this light could he accept the role to which he had been born. The title of daimyo—"Great Lord"—bestowed upon him many rights and privileges while bringing burdens and obligations enough to weigh on his young shoulders. He felt twice as old as his twenty-five years.

He came back to the foredeck and stopped next to the corpses. The bodies of four women lay sprawled in a heap before the cabin, surrounded by the men who had died defending them.

"Lord Sanematsu, we have inspected below decks." Matsumoto said in his deep, rough voice. "It seems to be a trading ship, to or from Min-koku. There are numerous crates in the hold."

“Very well, Matsumoto-uji.” Sanematsu turned his face from the pile. His words were soft and gentle in his deep-timbred voice. “Secure the wreckage, then remove the dead and have them burned. When that is complete, have the men unload the cargo.”

Matsumoto bowed and turned his back then spun back around.

“Many pardons, my lord. The vessel is damaged and may be difficult to secure. Unloading will be perilous. The crates do not appear to have anything of value in them.”

Sanematsu stared at him.

“You were the one who advised the council of the necessity of such an attack. You said ships destroyed on our coast would provide marketable goods and weapons from the world outside Nihon. Weapons denied us by the government. It appears you were wrong. I will have to think twice before I rely on your judgment again.”

A touch of bitterness coated his words. Matsumoto’s counsel was often valuable, even if in a sinister way. Since the beginning of both their military careers, he had served Sanematsu as advisor. While Matsumoto’s methods could be harsh, they helped balance his own more moderate tactics. Theirs was a necessary symbiotic relationship, yin and yang to one another, even if Sanematsu didn’t fully trust Matsumoto.

The Matsumoto clan had been *karou* to the Sanematsu clan for several hundred years. The position of trusted and loyal retainer of the highest honor gave Matsumoto’s words more weight than those of other men.

But Matsumoto Katsura made Sanematsu Yoshihide’s skin crawl. Short and stocky, his legs bowed, his round and pock-marked face had an ugly scar across his right cheek and flat nose. His bald shiny pate was also scarred, as if someone had beaten him on the head repeatedly with a dull sword but was never able to give the fatal blow. Thick lips in a permanent snarl exhibited yellow, block-shaped teeth.

Although forced to deal with him, since there was no one in his army to replace him, Sanematsu respected the warrior but despised the man, who had become a villain full of spite. Keeping him on a short rein prevented him from doing too much damage—a valuable ally in war, Matsumoto was, in peace, a questionable friend.

“I want the cargo unloaded no matter the cost. It has already

been too high. Let the bodies remain on the ship for the sea gods to deal with when it is burned.”

He took a deep breath to give further orders.



Aderyn concentrated on the words, happy to have something to consider other than her pain. She recognized the language as Japanese—familiar by her having learned it from a nursemaid. A different dialect than the one she knew, with some words undecipherable, but she could follow the conversation.

The leader of this army, a sure and confident man, interested her. Those around him kept their distance yet were alert to defend him at the slightest hint of need. He would be the one with whom she would have to contend if she were unfortunate enough to be exposed.

He stood a head taller than most of the others. A loose jacket hung open to expose the two swords in a snug girdle around his trim hips; he wore the swords with the hilts to the left. Beneath this was a close-wrapped shirt identical to those of his army. A crest on both sides of the upper chest and the sleeves in white detail cut the dark blue and was repeated on the middle of his back. The shirt had a broad collar and crossed in the front to tuck into wide-legged black trousers.

His hair, so dark it appeared to have a blue tinge, was pulled up into a severe topknot, but the forepart of his head was covered with smooth, glossy hair, not tonsured like that of the others. His clean-shaven jaw was square and set. Even on the rolling and pitching ship, he had a sure and steady stance.

Aderyn’s muscles were in agony. Try as she might, she could not ignore the leg cramps. She bit her bottom lip to keep from crying out and quelled a moan in her throat. If discovered, she would be killed. There was no ally here...unless, some instinct told her, she could prove herself worthy in this man’s eyes.

Oh, God, the pain!

The slightest of unintentional whimpers revealed her hiding place. The warriors standing at their generals’ sides moved with rapid, military precision to pull away the protection of her sisters’ bodies. The weight lifted away from her was a relief; the fresh air rushing over her filled her lungs, replacing the smell of death. Before the glare of the bright morning sun blinded her, a glint flashed off the sword of the one called Matsumoto, drawn in the

swiftest of moves. Was she about to die?

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Japan, 1500. Aderyn Aquilla wakes to the clamor of a battle. An hour later, she is the only European on the ship alive and is face-to-face with an evil samurai with a sword at her throat. How will she survive?

Sanematsu Yoshihide has seen more bloodshed in his short life than he ever imagined and cannot bring himself to spill more. But what will he do with the stranger who could bring civil war to his domain on the island of Kyushu?

Together, Aderyn and Sanematsu defy convention to fall in love and begin a governing partnership unheard of in feudal Japan. Only the shogun can stop the Sanematsu clan's ascent to power and he will stop at nothing to thwart their success.

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