



# SUN OF SANEMATSU

小侍鳥



KEI SWANSON

***If Mototsugu recognized her, he did not indicate it.***

Something about him led her to believe he would love to announce the secret of Sanematsu's heir to the world.

A hard, cold stare met hers. His dark eyes reflected no light, the look akin to a reptile's, blank and deep. No expression crossed his round face as he held his thick lips in a straight line.

Mototsugu's bo moved, Washi's followed, and their weapons clashed. The two circled, the wooden staffs pressed together. Power pushed against power. Washi's strength increased, and she thrust forward, shoving Mototsugu back. She stepped away, her guard up, her eyes on the man. Her opponent was strong; she would find his weakness. Every fighter had one.

Mototsugu whirled, whipping the staff around his body, gaining momentum until he aimed it at Washi's head. His moves required a lot of energy—energy he should have reserved for fighting. She parried, spinning away and out of range, using only the effort needed to defend herself. When she extended her staff, it met his with a resounding clack.

The dance went on.

Strike and parry.

Whirl and twist.

Grunt and groan.

***Also by Kei Swanson***

*Seabird of Sanematsu*  
*Season of Sanematsu*

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## KEI SWANSON

ZUMAYA EMBRACES

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SUN OF SANEMATSU

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**TO JACKYE PLUMMER**

who pestered me to finish the story of “that  
Sanematsu brat!”

# CHAPTER 1

1500 A.D.  
Kyoto, Nihon

**Sanematsu Yoshihide stood in the front room of the uyu-ba**, cuddling the newborn to his chest. The hours-old infant fussed, drawing his attention back from the second room of the birthing hut where the child's mother lay dead.

Sanematsu suppressed a groan as his heart continued to crumble. Not long ago he had delivered the katana strike putting an end to his seabird's ordeal. Through her tears she had begged him to take the baby from her, having been unable to deliver it herself. He gave in only after she convinced him it was the only way she could fulfill her *giri*. As her liege lord and husband, her duty was to give him an heir.

Yet the baby he had taken from her womb did not fulfill that need. The baby was not male.

Gazing into the newborn's dark-blue eyes, Sanematsu made a bold decision. This female child *would* become his heir, because no one would know her gender.

Racked with grief, Sanematsu threw his shoulders back and lifted his chin. He would attack this obstacle with samurai resolve. He was sengoku-daimyo of Kyushu's Satsuma Province; no one would

dare question him. He would have the heir Ko-tori had died to give him.

With great care, he laid the infant on the bedding then stood. He pulled his hitatare closed, covering the bare chest where the baby had been warmed.

A quick flip of the ends tightened his girdle around his waist. He tucked in his swords and returned to the baby. Lifted her—*him*—from the small pallet. He must think of the child as masculine, lest he be the first to slip and destroy his plans.

Sanematsu felt complete with the baby next to his heart.

He pushed the curtain away from the doorway and stepped out of the *uyu-ba*. As he had requested, Lady Sachi, his wife's friend and teacher, had assembled his household. The household guards knelt in the courtyard in even rows, clad in everyday uniform without armor or helmets. At the rear, armed foot soldiers held their spears erect, butts against the gravel.

The servants, from least maid to highest houseman, knelt behind the army; the horse master and stable boys positioned themselves near the barns.

Seagulls lined the curved eaves of the *yashiki*, as though they, too, awaited Sanematsu's words.

He swallowed to move the lump grief had lodged in his throat. "I present to you..." He lifted the baby high over his head, his hands beneath the child's arms, careful to keep the small robe around the body. The little one wiggled and cried, frightened by being held so roughly. "...my heir. The Sanematsu clan will continue."

The samurai raised a rousing cry, and a murmur followed from the household servants. As he lowered the child back to his chest, settling her over his heart, he could not meet Sachi's gaze. She would have many questions, but she would not confront him before his troops and household.

He would explain his plan as soon as he could, as she was one of the people he needed to make it work.

"Sadly, Lady Tori has crossed into the Void."

Tears clogged his voice and welled in his eyes. Grief subdued the crowd, too, as they mourned the passing of the foreigner who had become one of them.



The announcement complete, Sanematsu stepped away, carrying the infant with him as he entered his yashiki. The seagulls flew silently away in the direction of the open ocean.



***Sachi sat in the sun-filled room in the west wing of the yashiki, not daring to leave the baby alone.***

She had followed Lord Sanematsu, at his beckoning, to Lady Tori's chamber after the announcement. There, he had explained his plan, handing the infant over to her. Then he disappeared, leaving her bewildered.

Her daimyo had drawn her into a web of deception without her consent, but she would do as he asked for two reasons—the first, her duty to her liege lord; the second, her loyalty to Tori.

Her eyes misted once more as she thought of the barbarian who had become her friend.

She looked at the infant on the small futon. Her tears dried, and she smiled at this plan to defy Nihonese custom yet again. Tradition decreed a child be given to into the care of a foster mother after its naming day. As her time drew near, Tori had readied a nursery in her own chamber, planning to keep her baby at her side.

Tori's presence remained here within her chamber in the women's quarters. Her laughter echoed under the high ceiling, the walls keepers of whispered secrets. Sachi longed to sit with her friend again, exchanging stories of each other's culture, teaching the *yaban-jin* the language of the Land of the Gods or playing one of the games Tori had mastered without difficulty.

The baby cried, interrupting her grief. Sachi adjusted the diapering cloth, and the baby quieted then sucked her tiny fist. She lifted her to her shoulder, stroking her back as she knelt on the tatami. The baby found the soft skin of her neck, and Sachi let her suckle, trying to decide what to do.

Where was the baby's father, who had put her in this quandary?

"My lady?" a timid female voice asked from the servant's hallway.

A woman sat at the panel. Was she a spy? Had she seen the child's gender? They would all have to be more careful. One false move would doom the clan.

"Yes?" Sachi took on a practiced calm.

“I am Deushi.” The young woman crossed the threshold then knelt to close the shoji. When the panel snapped shut, she moved to Sachi’s side and knelt again. “The Lady Tori employed me as nurse to this little one. She asked for women who would deliver their own child close to hers, although she never truly said that I should be his wet nurse.”

Deushi put out a hand to stroke the thatch of fine black hair on the small skull. Sachi snatched the child out of her reach, and Deushi dropped her hand.

“So sorry. I meant no disrespect.” She studied her hands. “It is just that he is so hungry, and my breasts ache. I lost my own child three days ago.”

Sachi looked closer at the girl. Painfully thin, Deushi could be no more than fifteen. Beneath her scarf, a thick rope of braid hung down her back, and straight bangs covered her forehead. A soft smile curved the lips on her smooth round face. Bright eyes took in her surroundings eagerly when not downcast as custom and respect required. She had on a drab kosode of the sort peasants wore.

Sachi gave in to a slight smile. It was just like Tori to choose such a lowly person as nurse to her infant, as the residents of the castle town had held a special place in the barbarian’s heart. How would she make certain Deushi spoke the truth?

As if reading her mind, the girl slipped her small hand into her robe where it overlapped at mid-breast and brought out a small scroll.

“Our lady gave me this so I could pass through the castle gate when her time came.” She presented the scroll to Sachi in a small, soft hand. “Perhaps it will settle your questions. I only wish to help our lady’s child.”

Once more the spell Tori had woven over Nishikata was made apparent.

Sachi took the scroll, keeping one hand on the infant as she held her protectively against her chest. When she unrolled the paper, she immediately recognized Tori’s calligraphy. Her artist’s skill had helped her learn to write Nihonese, yet it was not the perfect script a forger would use.

She re-rolled the scroll and gave it back.

“Very well. Let us seek Lord Sanematsu and ask his permission first.” Sachi stood and secured the baby to her back, wrapping the

wide sash of her *uchiki* around her. The baby curled into a knot, for the moment content and warm. “He is in the Hachiman shrine.”

“Of course.” Deushi nodded, tucking the scroll back inside her robe.



***As they made their way through the yashiki, Deushi freely*** explained to Sachi how Lady Tori had selected her to care for the Sanematsu heir.

Several months before, a messenger had ridden into Nishikata. At his command, the signal drum sounded, and the townspeople stopped their tasks and assembled at the town’s center. The samurai, sitting astride a grey stallion, waited with unaccustomed patience until the most far-flung farmer and his family arrived.

The citizenry bowed, their foreheads pressed on their overlapped hands. Even the youngest children prostrated themselves, no one daring to look at the samurai.

“Loyal servants of the Sanematsu Clan,” he intoned loudly once he was certain every adult knelt before him. “The Lady Tori, wife of your liege lord Sanematsu Yoshihide, has requested any woman who has recently or will soon deliver a child present herself at the castle so that she may choose one of you to serve as wet nurse to the Sanematsu heir. Failure to offer your services will be considered dishonorable and will be dealt with accordingly. You will be expected by sunrise tomorrow.”

Having delivered his message, the samurai whirled the grey horse around and headed to the yashiki on its high hill overlooking the town.

No one moved for long minutes. Then, one by one, the villagers returned to their work, the pregnant women counting the months till their children would be born.

Deushi, the fourth daughter of a fisherman, had joined with Fusa a half-year before, and he had sown his seed one month before he drowned. Fusa’s family, not interested in housing his widow, cast her aside, as was their right; and she returned to her father’s house, her body swollen with child, to increase his burden.

Lady Tori’s summons was a welcome relief.

Deushi accompanied the other women in presenting themselves as instructed. Once inside the gate, they knelt in uneven rows in

the garden, waiting for whatever sort of interview the master's wife had designed. The sun had yet to peak when small groups, no more than five at a time, were led to Lady Tori's audience chamber.

When Deushi's turn came, she accompanied three other women, trailing the samurai guard named Nagai Naotora. She kept her eyes downcast but managed to catch glimpses of the fine wooden panels and smelled the rich oils used to polish them. Fresh tatami added the aroma of greenery. Inside the lady's chamber, urns filled with colorful flowers added their fragrances to the breeze passing through the room.

"Ladies." Lady Tori sat before them on a large cushion. "Thank you for coming to my home."

Deushi chanced a quick look at her, noting the waves of thick brown hair draping slender shoulders. Uchiki of vivid color and elaborate embroidery swathed her rounded body. As rumored, the barbarian studied the village women with eyes as deep green as the forest.

When Lady Tori spoke to her, Deushi listened intently so as to understand the *yaban-jin's* words. Her language was childish and simple, spoken with an odd accent. The young widow answered the questions promptly, hoping to say the right words to be chosen. Then they were dismissed.

Days passed, and Deushi gave up hoping to escape her plight. Then, without warning, the samurai Nagai appeared at her father's house and gave her a scroll with instructions to come to the yashiki when she saw the koi-shaped banner flying from the gate post; the banner signaled the birth of a son. He also handed her father a small pouch of coins and another scroll allotting the family staples from the Sanematsu food stores.

Another day passed, and the banner flew, proudly announcing the heir to the Sanematsu *ryo-chi*. A grieving Deushi, breasts aching for relief, made her way up the hill, a small bundle containing a change of clothes and a comb tucked beneath her arm. Her only joy came from knowing she would no longer be a burden to her family.



***The walk took Sachi and Deushi along the hallways until they left the cool interior. The sun warmed them, and Sachi belatedly***

thought of the need to protect her skin from the sun's darkening rays. Fine gravel spread along the path crunched beneath their feet as they crossed the courtyard.

She hoped Deushi would not be overwhelmed by the elegance of the yashiki, which was a nothing like her home in Nishikata.

Servants moved around them, eyes cast downward in respect for Sachi and the infant. Ashigaru trained in the practice area to maintain their warrior skills, and the snap of their canvas practice clothes, the crack of the wooden weapons, and the sound of their responses to the blows echoed in the stone walls.

The gardeners took pride in keeping Sanematsu's gardens lush with colorful and fragrant blossoms. Butterflies hovered alongside bees gathering pollen to make golden honey in the hives within the forest of Sanematsu's *ryo-chi*. Red birds fluttered from bush to bush, twittering their displeasure at being disturbed. Sachi was tempted to linger, but the fussing baby reminded her of her duty.

No woman had ever entered the shrine of Hachiman before the night Tori's labor pains began and she had stumbled inside. Now, Did Sachi dare again break tradition to enter the male-dominated *ryo-chi* of the shrine?

She must. Only Lord Sanematsu could direct her. She slipped off her geta and went in; Deushi remained outside.

Sanematsu knelt before the statue of Hachiman, Nihon's war god and patron of the Sanematsu Clan, set at a right angle to the entrance. This position protected the daimyo, as his back was not to the door, and allowed Sachi to see his profile. He knelt with his back rigid, his head high, his eyes closed. Flickering candlelight was reflected by the tears on the cheeks of his angular face.

Sachi's heart contracted with sorrow. She hesitated to break the silence. In its cocoon, the baby wiggled.

"Sanematsu-sama."

"Yes, Sachi-sama?" He pivoted on his knees to face her. The tears looked more like raindrops now. Nevertheless, Sachi saw grief in his brown eyes. In the short time they had been apart, his sorrow seemed to have grown. His face showed the strain of the secret they shared. He was samurai, bound by the warrior code. How would he reconcile his breach of duty with his honor?

“Excuse me, my lord.” She pulled the baby out of the cloth cradle and held her in her arms. “We must confer on what we are to do about *him*.” She emphasized the pronoun as she uncovered the baby’s face.



**“*Ko-tori’s child.*”**

Sanematsu sighed as he caressed the baby’s round cheek. His warrior image crumbled, and in that instant, it was clear to him this child would always threaten his façade. If he was not careful, he would be over-sentimental with her. *Him*. He must remember.

“I am not sure I know what we are to do,” he admitted to one of the two people he could confide in. “Tori gave her life for this child. On her deathbed, my mother spoke of the child being special. The kami of our ancestors have spoken. We must do whatever is necessary to insure sh—he survives and takes his rightful place as my heir.”

“But, sire, how can she—*he*—be lord of the Satsuma Provinces?”

Feudal law required that firstborn males inherit all lands and titles held by the father. All other children, older or younger, were subservient to that male.

Sanematsu took the baby, who almost disappeared in his large, sword-callused hands. He gauged her to be as long as his forearm, destined to be tall for either a man or a woman of Nihon. The infant nestling in his arm brought him comfort.

Until he had removed the infant from Tori’s womb, he had never held a baby so new. His wives never presented his daughters until they were thirty-one days old. Had they delivered a son, the time would have been one day less.

He wanted to cherish the child, his only link to his beloved wife, but he dared not. She would have to be molded into a male—mentally since it could not be physically.

“When we have completed speaking within these walls, neither of us will speak of her again. My fourth child will be *he*, given all respect and courtesy as a boy, then as a man. She will do only masculine things, be treated as any samurai boy, taught as I was taught. We must see to it she does not think of herself as female.”

He gave the infant a longing look. She squirmed, her tiny face wrinkling. A pink tongue thrust between pouting lips. The path he

chose for her would be difficult, but his child could withstand the trial. She would have Tori's spirit.

"We will help her, Sachi-sama."

"Yes, my lord." Sachi bowed her head for an instant.

"Sachi-sama, you have always served me well." Sanematsu read pain and confusion in her moist eyes. He could not console the woman any more than he could his child. Her soft, round face, small mouth and flat nose reminded him of his other wives.

Yet they had never meant as much to him as the barbarian who had been stranded on his island. Tori had tapped an inner, secret part of him, a part never touched before or, he doubted, to be again.

"As you say, I am a man, so I do not know much about these matters. What would you do if you could not tend your child?"

Women of Sachi's status seldom cared for their own children; they birthed their babies only to hand them over to the care of nurses. If the children were male, once they reached toddler age they were sent to stay with foster mothers, to be reared without the over-indulgence of a mother's love. Girls remained at their father's residence, isolated in the nursery, taught the skills their social status would require.

Sanematsu's newest daughter, as she grew, would present more and more challenges to the adults around her.

"My lord." Sachi found her voice. "I have cared little for my own sons, foster mothers having been given charge over them."

"Tori's child will need such a person," Sanematsu concluded.

"A woman presented herself for the position this morning. Lady Tori was told of the custom so interviewed women of the village and chose Deushi. Although I have a suspicion she never intended to let the child leave her side."

"You are probably right. She defied many of our ways." Sanematsu smiled as though recalling a most intimate way Tori had shown her defiance.

A candle sputtered out, breaking his reverie.

"Can she nurse the baby without knowing its sex?"

"She must, my lord, if that is what you wish. I do not know that Tori-sama planned for Deushi to be a wet nurse, working our ways to hers once more, but Deushi has lost her child recently and can feed your heir."

“Are you sure Ko-tori truly engaged her?” He used his intimate name for his seabird.

“She has a message written by Tori-sama. It is authentic. Tori’s writing was imperfect, her grammar and syntax childish. Few in either the castle or Nishikata even knew of her ability to write, much less be able to incorporate her flaws into their Nihonese.” Sachi’s face softened with the thought of her friend.

“Well, then. Deushi will nurse my son. As for daily care, until his naming day, I will help you.” Sanematsu traced the infant’s rosebud mouth with his little finger. The baby’s lips puckered, seeking to suckle. Perhaps they could do this.

He continued forming his plan.

“When the time comes, Sou Kiyohara will take him to Aso-yama for fostering, as I was. The monks will protect him and teach him what he must know. However, they will not be told our secret. That is reserved for you, me, and Sou Kiyohara. I may, in time, divulge it to others, but I will make the judgment should it be necessary.”

The fewer who knew the secret, the more likely it would be kept.

Sanematsu paused to study the baby, who nestled quietly, his fingertip between her lips. Once more the question nagged at him. Could this be carried out? Could he live with the consequences, if not? Once on the road, he would have to see it through to the end. There was no room to turn back.

“My lord,” Sachi interrupted his rumination, “normally, a baby would have nursed by now. May I bring Deushi?”

“Yes.”

The infant squirmed and cried, no longer satisfied with the finger. Summoned to join them, Deushi took fearful steps into the room. When Sachi took the baby from Sanematsu and placed it in her arms, the girl relaxed. She opened her shirt, freeing one engorged breast to the greedy mouth.

Soft suckling sounds broke the strained silence. Lord Sanematsu and Sachi took in the scene; Deushi seemed to forget the elite man and woman sitting with her as she sang softly to the nursing baby.

Sachi interrupted her lullaby to explain the daily care routine Sanematsu had outlined. She never once faltered, never called the infant by her true sex, and did not inform Deushi of the deception.



Then, she returned her attention back to the plans Sanematsu had been discussing.

“Perhaps he should remain here until the putting-on-of-trousers ceremony?” She no longer considered Deushi’s presence but did use the language of the higher social stratum, words Deushi would not understand. “As good as the monks are, he is an infant, and women need to care for him.”

“I will have to consider that.” Sanematsu was ashamed to admit his reluctance to have the child taken from him in so short a time as thirty days. If he waited until the putting-on-of-trousers ceremony, he would have three years with his child. “Prepare a place beside my futon. He will sleep there.”

“You will care for him, sire?” Sachi could hardly keep the surprise out of her voice. “It is not customary for men to care for an infant. There will be many matters not proper for samurai,” she protested without thought.

“I am aware of that,” he stated, unconcerned for his breach of etiquette. “You and Deushi will help.”

In their time together, Tori had taught him many things about life and himself. He had come to recognize the complexity of his being, uncovering the compassionate side within the warrior. He had been comfortable with those feelings with Tori in his life; without her, he would struggle to keep from dipping back to his miserable self.

“Sachi-sama, it will be necessary for you sleep at my side, also.” He raised a free hand to stop her protests. “Only to tend my son. Let the household think what they may. He cannot be unattended in the nursery, lest others discover our deception.”

Deushi raised her eyes as she switched the baby to her second breast. She gave no indication of having heard or understood the conversation, continuing to serenade the feeding infant.

“If you request it, my lord, it must be done.”

A widow without ties, Sachi had spent the last year in Sanematsu’s residence overseeing her daimyo’s household affairs. The arrangement he now demanded might seem odd, but a nurse cared for her own two-year-old daughter, and her sons resided at Aso-yama, leaving her only obligation to Sanematsu Yoshihide.

“I will make the necessary arrangements.”

“I must see to the documents attesting to his birth and lineage.”  
he gathered himself to stand.

Deushi laid the baby on her shoulder and patted its back.

“Is he finished?”

“I believe so, my lord. For now.” Deushi nodded, pleased with the infant’s burps. She removed it from her shoulder and wiped the spit-up off the tiny lips. “He has also soiled his undercloth.”

“I will attend him in my chambers.”

Sanematsu took the child and stood with awkward movements, careful not to drop the bundle. Sachi moved to the sword rack and took up his katana. With the skill acquired over years as a samurai’s wife, she placed it in his sash, the hilt to the left. She tucked the short wakizashi alongside the katana.

One-handed, Sanematsu adjusted them, settling his child along his forearm. Sachi bowed and ushered father and “son” out. While Sanematsu became acquainted with infant care, she settled Deushi in her new quarters.

## CHAPTER 2

***Days moved on in orderly fashion. Sanematsu's first order*** of business was to bury his wife, *bury* being the operative word.

In Nihon, the Buddhist and Shinto religions prescribed funeral pyres and cremation. The woman he'd loved was of two other lands—Portugal and Wales—and another religion—Christianity. Her people put their dead in the ground, and so would he.

He directed his carpenters to fashion a cedar box long enough for her to lie in, as wide as her shoulders, with a lid. This differed little from the Buddhist funeral traditions, in which the priest would prepare the body and place it in a tub-shaped coffin for storage. Nishikata's priests, however, would not remove Tori's body from the *ubuya*, for taking it to their temple would defile the holy place. So, they performed their task inside the birthing hut.

The usual care of the dead included shaving the body before wrapping it in a white shroud. Sanematsu could not bear to see Tori's long brown locks shorn so forbade this. He also exchanged the plain shroud for her lavender uchiki with the dark purple sash.

When the priests were finished, Sanematsu visited the birthing hut carrying his child. Nothing stirred in the quiet room, candles casting shadow and light on the unfinished walls. Incense infused the air with a light fragrance to mask the odor of death.

Tori's body lay on a pallet. Her osode wrapped her in proper style, the wide sash encircling her midriff. Sanematsu could envision the strips of plain cloth holding her split body together. The vision of the gaping wound he had inflicted to deliver the child refused to fade from his memory.

"Ko-tori-sama." He knelt at her side and stroked her hair. The priests had arranged it over her shoulders, covering her breasts. Candlelight reflected shots of gold hidden in the thick curls. "My seabird, I come to say goodbye and present your baby."

Before Tori crossed into the Void, he had shown the baby to her, hiding its genitals to allow her to die thinking she had given him his heir. Now, at the side of her corpse, he told her spirit the truth.

"You have given me my heir, even if not in a conventional way. She will be a fine, powerful daimyo because of you. You have given her much. Be proud of her and watch over her."

He removed the clothes from the baby, leaving only its cotton undergarment and laid the infant next to her mother's cold body. The baby snuggled against the soft hair then began to cry. Sanematsu picked her up, rewrapped her, and left the *uyu-ba*.

The next day, he ordered the *ubu-ya* burned to the ground.

He met with a stonemason to fashion a cross resembling the one hanging from the rope of black beads Tori had carried. The grave marker was not much different from those in Nihon, except for the shape.

The sun was rising over the mountains in the east as Sanematsu led his household to the place he had chosen to lay his seabird to rest. Preceded by foot soldiers and a priest intoning the proper chants while striking a small drum, six samurai pulled a cart laden with the coffin up the cliff. Among them were Uesugi Tadakuni and Nagai Naotora, men who had served Tori with blind loyalty.

To Uesugi, she had been an older sister. When he first met Tori, he was a scared, untried warrior. She had helped him secure Aya, Lord Sanematsu's stepdaughter, as his wife, and guided him to the confident man he had become.

Naga had become Tori's personal bodyguard after the death of Hamasaki Hiro, the young man who had held the position before Sanematsu's enemy killed him. As with most who had come to be close to the barbarian, Naga had grown to respect her unwaveringly.

Sanematsu Yoshihide followed the coffin, dressed in the formal kami-shimo with its stiff overmantle.

The procession ended with women of the household and came to a halt at the edge of the grave.

The villagers had turned out to honor and show respect for their daimyo's foreign-devil wife, the woman the people of the Satsuma Provinces had come to care for. The high-ranking retainers knelt on the ground near where Sanematsu stood.

The roar of the ocean, carried up the cliff, was created by the same waves that had wrecked Tori's ship on the island of Kyushu. Since she had grown up near the ocean in China and Portugal, it was important to Sanematsu that her body reside near the water.

The infant nestled in his arms, pressed to his chest, her bottom resting on the hilt of his katana. She slept contentedly in the warrior's arms, and he had become accustomed to her weight.

When the chants were completed, the chief priest, not sure how to proceed, looked to Sanematsu. The daimyo motioned for the men to lower the box into the grave. This done, he dropped a folded paper bird onto the box and walked away. The onlookers broke up and departed as the men filled the grave.

A seagull rode the air currents high above the cliff, its plaintive cry echoing across the sky.



***Sou Kiyohara Yoshisuke entered the gates of Nishikata-jyo*** as the sun rose over the yashiki. The courtyard was quiet, with guards only at the walls. The morning, his favorite part of the day, was cool, the quiet lending itself to meditation.

He had spent the months since his return from Kyoto with the Sanematsu household in prayer, reciting mantras for both the daimyo's mother, Lady Michi, and wife, Lady Tori. The recitations, composed of appropriate passages of Buddhist scriptures translated from Min-koku writings, were repeated at specific times after death. Prayers were offered for the departed from the seventh day after death until the forty-ninth day, the time chosen because of the belief that karmic judgment about the next life was made at these fixed periods.

Mourning periods were also dictated by the relationship of the departed. A wife was mourned twenty days, a parent fifty. Thus, the

baby's naming day was delayed while Sanematsu grieved his mother's death. Now, Sou Kiyohara arrived to celebrate a new life.

Kiyohara, a tall man with iron-gray hair pulled into a samurai topknot without the shaven pate, went into the house, leaving his dirty sandals at the step. A newborn's cries filled the corridors. As he followed the sound, contentment filled his chest.

For years, he had yearned to hear the sound of a Sanematsu heir who would, in truth, be his grandson. Sanematsu Yoshihide had only learned the truth of his parentage recently.

Fatally wounded during the battle at Amagasakigehara, Lady Michi had confessed to her son that Kiyohara Yoshisuke was his father, not Sanematsu Shigeni. Kiyohara had feared the daimyo's reaction, but the *yaban-jin* helped Sanematsu accept his mentor as his father.

Instrumental in raising Sanematsu, Kiyohara had lived with the boy daily, teaching him the fighting arts and the etiquette of bushi. He had molded Sanematsu into a formidable warrior and wise leader.

Now, he paused outside Sanematsu's chamber. The baby's cries had ceased. Household servants had spread the rumor Sanematsu kept the boy at his side, and that Lady Sachi shared his futon. The strange arrangement did not surprise Kiyohara or any dweller of the *ryo-chi*. The daimyo began acting odd when the seabird came into his life.

"Please inform Lord Sanematsu I have arrived," Kiyohara instructed the guard standing at the side of the door.

The man moved through the shoji then reopened it to allow entry. Kiyohara knelt and bowed to Sanematsu.

"Good morning, great lord."

"And the same to you, priest." Sanematsu's head bobbed in reply.

"He is an early riser." Kiyohara sat on his heels, settling his dark robe around him.

"Perhaps mornings are his preferred time of day, as they are for his grandfather."



***Sanematsu was clad in his sleeping robe, a short hitatare*** over his fundoshi, his lean legs bare. As he cradled the baby against his heart, the infant nuzzled his bare chest.

"Excuse me, my lord."

"Ah, Deushi."

The warrior leaned forward to shift the babe into his large, calloused hands with practiced skill. One palm supported the small head covered with thick raven hair, the other the rump. The baby continued to sleep, secure in its father's grasp.

Sanematsu transferred the infant into the waiting woman's arms with an air of reluctance.

"His loincloth has been seen to," he informed her.

Sachi had questioned him about how much to tell the girl, but he had not yet made that decision. Someday it might be necessary, but he had to be assured of her loyalty first.

The inhabitants of Nishikata, as well as in the entire Sanematsu *ryo-chi*, gave their trust and obligation without second thought to the man seated as their daimyo. A just man received undying fidelity, whereas a cruel and ill-tempered master was likely to find his servants turning against him if the opportunity presented itself.

Sanematsu did not doubt his retainers' allegiance, as he provided abundant support, low taxes and fair treatment of wrongdoers. His vassals did not fear his rule but prospered under it. Filled storehouses and plump children evidenced the prosperity and peace of the Sanematsu fief.

Still, he could not risk telling an unknown servant something that could destroy them all.

"Very well, sire."

Deushi gathered the infant to her full breast and made a move to depart. Since that first day, the woman had nursed the baby out of Sanematsu's presence. For protection of the child, Sachi oversaw Deushi's tending the Sanematsu heir.

"Remain here," Sanematsu ordered. "Sachi-sama has gone to see about the ceremony."

From that point, the men ignored her, discussing trivial matters such as Kiyohara's journey from Aso-yama.



***Deushi sat on the zaibuton in a far corner and opened her*** kosode. Bringing the fussing baby to her bare breast, she guided his small mouth to the pink nipple. She welcomed the discomfort inflicted as the infant grabbed on and pulled hard; the pain passed in a moment, and she smoothed the soft, downy hair.

She felt happiness only when Lady Tori's baby eased the ache of her full breasts and the pain of her broken heart. She and the baby shared the same circumstances. Like her, he would grow up with an empty heart, with no mother and only a warrior only concerned with matters of men for a father. Deushi had no one, had been but a burden to her family, until called to the yashiki.

She lifted the baby to her shoulder and patted his back. Rewarded with a gusty burp, she placed him on the opposite breast. Looking into his face, she acknowledged her attachment to the baby. Her mother had warned she would be sent back home after the boy was weaned; nevertheless, Deushi hoped to find a position to fill after her milk was no longer needed.

"Sire, your son is finished," she interrupted the men's discussion. She hefted the infant's buttocks. "His cloth feels wet."

"Very well." Sanematsu took the child. "I will see to it."

"As you wish." Deushi gave the baby a final glance before leaving.



***"You will change the boy's clothing?" Kiyohara's voice*** showed his surprise. "Do you even know how?"

"I have reason for learning such skills." Sanematsu gave the priest a restrained smile. "It is a skill you will find it necessary to acquire as well."

He moved over to Kiyohara, and when they were side-by-side, their backs to the door, he spread a blanket to lay the infant on. With tender care, he opened the baby's robe to expose the soiled loincloth.

"I wish to introduce you to my son." He opened the cloth, allowing the legs to splay. "*Your grandson.*"

Kiyohara chuckled then whispered, "He seems to be missing a most valuable part."

"Possibly." Sanematsu put the fresh cloth on the baby's bottom. "But he is my heir. Only Sachi-sama, and now you, know the reality. We have kept the secret from his nurse, but she may need to know eventually."

"Why are you attempting to carry out such a charade?" Kiyohara's face did not register emotion, no dismay or concern. His words were as calm as if he were asking Sanematsu if he would like tea.

"Do you not recall Lady Michi's prophecy of his being special? Ko-tori said as much also, when she begged me to take her life to



give him his. I must do whatever is necessary to see he takes his rightful place as daimyo.” He handed the child to Kiyohara, who accepted her as if the offering were a dangerous viper. “It is a unique experience to hold such a new person,” Sanematsu reassured him. “Nor did I know caring for a baby was such work. My respect for women is growing.”

The monk held the baby, precariously at first then, over time, gaining confidence. As he looked at the tiny girl resting in the comfort of his arms, she stared back. Her eyes were bright, and lighter than those of other babies he had seen. Nihonese infants had brown eyes, but those of the mother of this child had been green. Why should the baby’s color not be light, then? Would they become a hypnotic emerald green specked with golden brown that seemed to dance?

Already they seemed aged, as if she were weary of her father’s plans.

The baby smiled at her grandfather, a relative she would never know as such. More at ease, Kiyohara smiled back, running a finger across the soft cheek with gentle touch.

“Your son resembles you as an infant, Yoshi.” A lump of affection grew in his throat as he used Sanematsu’s boy name. “But I only saw you once at that age.” There would be no doubt this was the product of Sanematsu’s seed.

“You have no doubts about the naming ceremony?” Sanematsu was asking the priest to lie, to agree to the deceit.

“It will be as you wish.” Kiyohara sighed. “How shall I tell the war god to recognize this warrior?”

“As the sword of Sanematsu, the blade of Hachiman, a descendant of Minamoto Yorii.” The ancestor he spoke of was a great warrior who had taken on mythical qualities in the centuries since his death. “He shall be Sanematsu Yoshikane, my untried sword. Washi will be his boy name.”

“Ah, an eagle born of a seabird.”

Tradition linked father to son by the first part of their name. Michi had chosen *Yoshihide* for the son born of adultery, perpetuating the *Yoshi* prefix. No one had questioned why the Sanematsu heir did not have the *Shige* name prefix, given his purported father was named Shigeni, and his grandfather Shigehide.

Now, the female Sanematsu heir would carry on the tradition, protector of another secret.



***On the thirtieth day, Sou Kiyohara presided over a naming ritual.*** Dressed in formal kami-shimo, Sanematsu carried the baby to the shrine of the war god.

The villagers and household mingled in the courtyard to view the long-awaited heir as well as partake of the refreshments to be served afterward. As befit her station, Tori's daughter uttered no sound as her father lifted her to Kiyohara, who in turn faced the altar and presented her to Hachiman.

"We are here to acquaint Hachiman with his newest warrior, Sanematsu Washi." Kiyohara's deep voice rang in the shrine's rafters. "It is our prayer He will favor him and bring him to manhood.

"May he be endowed with the skill and wisdom of true bushi. May he be an honorable samurai, serving the emperor as befits a true son of Hachiman."

Kiyohara handed the infant, now and forever identified as a boy, to his father. Washi lay in Sanematsu's arms and blinked at him, as if to say, *Are you sure of what you are doing, Father?*

*Yes, my daughter, my son. You are destined to rule Nihon.*

## CHAPTER 3

*Sixteen years later*

***With a wary eye, Sanematsu Washi approached the*** gates of Kyoto, moving through the cool, damp fog hanging in curtains throughout the valley. Patches of sunlight fought through thick mist to illuminate the hard-packed road, where the young samurai's bare feet slapped through small puddles left by the night's rain.

The distance between Aso-yama abbey on the island of Kyushu and the capital of Nihon, nestled between three mountain ranges on Honshu, gave Washi time for thought, although she ran to cover it in the shortest amount of time. The mission, entrusted to her by Sou Kiyohara seven sun risings ago, was a common task for novice monks at the monastery.



***“Washi-ue.”***

The elderly *sohei* had called to her in the courtyard of the temple. Tall, ancient trees towered over their heads, casting long shadows. She heard him, but did not wish to break off her argument with Kuno.

*“Washi,”* he shouted again.

Washi said farewell to her fellow and sprinted to Kiyohara's side.

“Yes, Sou Kiyohara?” She bowed stiffly, hands held close to her side.

“Come with me,” Kiyohara ordered when she straightened. He led the way toward his room.

Silently, Washi kept up with the man’s long strides, equal to her father’s. The priest was angry with her. She often roused that emotion in the man. This time was probably because she had not responded to his first call—he disliked raising his voice. She had been intent on winning the argument

They entered the monk’s room, and Washi dropped in the middle of the floor, stretching out her long legs and arms.

Kiyohara stepped over her.

“You are such an impertinent child,” he muttered, but she could see his irritation evaporating.

“But you do not mind.” She languished on the tatami floor. The morning’s training had taxed her, although she was not exhausted.

She had entered Aso-yama at the age of three, moving from the protected, privileged household where she had spent her infancy to begin the austere training required of the bushi. She had studied Confucius, Buddhism, Shintoism, Nihon philosophy, the art of war, and Min-koku literature. Along with this, Kiyohara had taught her to carry off the pretense of boyhood and disguise the changes puberty brought to her body. It would be not be long before she would carry herself as a man.

Kiyohara took a seat and sighed.

“What did you wish to say to me?” Washi rolled over onto her stomach to look at him. She pushed long, sweat-drenched tendrils off her forehead. “Or perhaps you just wished to stop my debate with Kuno. I was winning. I had already beaten him in mock combat.”

“Impertinent and insolent,” He handed her a small towel.

Wiping the sweat from her face, Washi studied him. Wrinkles weathered his face around his dark-brown eyes and at the corners of his mouth. He more often than not held his lips in a tight, stern line whenever forced to deal with her mischief, but although he was stern with others, she could easily sway the who-knew-how-old monk to her way. He kept the samurai’s topknot, once raven but now steel-gray, and still thick. He was the most important person in her life, second only to her father.

“Your humility could use some work,” Kiyohara chastised.

Before she could respond, a novice entered carrying a tray with several bowls and a pot of tea. He set it before Kiyohara then departed.

“You are to go on an errand.” Kiyohara poured tea into a small bowl. Washi bounced into a kneeling position and accepted it. “For your father.” The priest poured his own tea. “He wishes for you to take this scroll...” He pulled it from his sleeve and handed it to her. “...to him in Kyoto. You must be there in ten days. You will depart before the sun’s rise.”

“*Hai*, Sou Kiyohara.” Washi pressed her forehead to the floor. She struggled to keep the excitement from her face as her heart raced at the thought of leaving the abbey.

“I know you yearn to visit the capitol while your father is in residence there.”

She straightened. Had Kiyohara read her thoughts? The old monk seemed to possess powers of mythical proportion. Was this yet another of his skills?

“I have not spoken to him for so long.” She reached for the bowl of barley, refusing to meet Kiyohara’s eyes lest he see the eagerness and fear in hers. “Would you not miss your father after so long?”

“I suppose I would.” He gave her a slight smile.

“Will you accompany me?” Such freedom was seldom allowed to novices. Even when going into the small village for provisions, the students were chaperoned by older monks as if they were young maidens.

“No. I would slow you down, and haste is of the essence.”

Washi swallowed her anticipation. She placed the empty bowl on the tray, and took up the bowl of pickles while her mind raced.

Kyoto.

Alone.

Moreover, *her father*.

“This is a great honor.” Washi washed the last pickle down with a swallow of tea then continued. “I know of no novices who have been allowed to visit the capitol of peace and tranquility.”

“You will not be completely free,” Kiyohara clarified, cutting down to size the young woman’s hopes. “You will reside at the Daigo-ji temple. Do not consider sleeping at the court of Ten-nou Fusahito. That would be too near the Ashikaga Shogunate and danger.” Kiyohara wet his lips. “You are not ready to enter the social sphere of your birth.”

“But my father will be there,” Washi pointed out, without voicing that her heart was there also. She took up yet another bowl, this one with orange slices.

“Indeed, yes.”

Sanematsu Yoshihide had, for the last three years, been engaged in battle or other military concerns in an attempt to end the long years of civil war plaguing Nihon. In the process, he was becoming the most powerful daimyo in Ashikaga’s Court.”

“But he has no need to be distracted by a young upstart. Now, when you have finished consuming everything in sight, you should be off to prepare.”

Washi eyed the still-full bowl of barley resting on Kiyohara’s tray. Self-restraint dictated she leave it untouched, but her stomach rumbled, begging for more. The sensei teased her about her appetite, pointing it out at every turn.

“Washi-ue, do not waver. You are welcome to all that is necessary to fuel your strength. You come by your needs honestly. Your mother was known for her ravenous nature with all things.”

Washi did not respond, just lifted her eating sticks. She stuck them into the thick barley to bring a glob to her lips. Her mother. Kiyohara was always giving her tidbits of the missing piece of her life. The woman had painted her with a foreign brush, making her different in a country that took pride in conformity. In some ways, she envied her, jealous of her father’s love; at other times, she was proud to be her daughter.

Her thoughts moved to Kyoto and her father. Washi wanted to see him more than anything, wanted to begin the life he planned for her. Her youth spurred her to launch her part of Sanematsu’s plot. And she longed for adventure.



***Washi’s thoughts returned to the present as her journey*** came to an end. Traveling down the narrow, tree-lined road, she adjusted the robe she had tied up in front, the ends tucked through her obi to form short trousers, freeing her legs.

Her pace was a steady lope, the rhythm of her callused feet imprinted on her brain. The arduous journey had taken its toll, but she did not notice the fatigue. Twice a day, she had stopped long enough to boil water and cook a handful of barley. While it simmered, she

munched on dried fruit and nuts, washing them down with cool water from a nearby spring.

Once or twice, a farmer had invited her to share his family's meal. Washi had chewed the fish and vegetables as though she had no teeth, careful to savor the taste and texture of the rare foods. In return for the meal, and possibly lodging for the night, she had intoned prayers for the farmer's ancestors and for prosperity for the village.

Her travel had exposed Washi to a part of Nihonese society her isolation at the abbey kept her from. Now she realized how happy she was to be the daughter of a daimyo, happy she would not have to make her livelihood as a farmer or a beggar monk. She would not have to subsist on handouts, performing the ritual prayers in exchange. Nor would she wade for hours in the water and muck of a rice field, at the mercy of the gods for a good harvest.

Washi did not fear physical labor—her strenuous work at martial practice proved she could count on the strength within her when necessary. It was simply that she need not rely on others' charity or karma's whim. She had her own mind, body and will with which to succeed or fail.

She would not fail.

Picking up her pace, Washi descended the hill. She took no notice of the travelers who shared the road. However, whether being carried in kaga or riding horseback, they noticed her. They moved aside and bowed with respect for the banner waving on a tall slender pole strapped to her back—the Sanematsu cipher emblazoned on the *sashimono* gave unhindered passage.

Washi reached the hills surrounding Kyoto. A hot sun bore down on the city, its bright beams coating the temples' gilt roofs, which reflected back to her as she paused to rest. Standing on the hill in the afternoon sunlight, Sanematsu Washi, heir to the Lord of the Satsuma Province, could easily be accepted as an adolescent boy, as had been her father's intention.

Years of studying the fighting arts had made her muscles strong and firm. Her wide, square shoulders tapered to a waist a man could encompass with two hands above small, rounded buttocks. Her abdomen was flat and solid. She stood on long, straight legs, her height almost matching her father's and Kiyohara's.

The men of the Sanematsu Clan had been short in stature, of a height with most men of Nihon. Sanematsu Yoshihide, however, towered over his peers, as did his daughter. Her mother, Lady Tori, had stood head-and-shoulders above the women of Nihon, so Washi credited some of her extra inches to her. She also shared unique eyes with her barbarian mother—almond-shaped and wide, and of a deep green flecked with gold.

Washi pulled the raven hair up off her neck. Her breath slowed beneath the tight binding of silk around her chest keeping her breasts from becoming evident. It would have hindered her running had she not lived with it day and night since her eleventh birthday.

Taking in the spectacle of the capitol, Washi smiled. At Aso-yama, she rarely went a day without Sou Kiyohara's chastising her for some mischief she had incited. At least in Kyoto, her roguish spirit would bring her to her *father's* attention.

This near danger, she pulled the sashimono from her back and rolled the banner; there was no need to call attention to her presence. When her breath came easily, she made her way down the hill.



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