



SANDOKAN

THE FALL OF A PRINCE

A NEW NOVEL IN THE SANDOKAN SERIES
INSPIRED BY TRUE EVENTS AND REAL CHARACTERS

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SANDOKAN

PROLOGUE

“You have just turned thirteen, you are a man now. It is time for you to make your own discoveries. Go! Don’t come back until the monsoon season is over.”

Those had been King Seumas’ last words to Sandokan, his son and heir to the kingdom, before he sent him away for a year to learn the ways of the world.

A bag of gold, a family ring and a dagger would be his only companions from now on. Sandokan wondered whether he had learned enough to survive in the wild lands outside of his kingdom.

He would soon find out.

CHAPTER I

THE DEVIL'S HOME

The China Sea.

Sandokan steered the tiller hoping to gain some speed, but he was not favoured by the wind, and his one masted outrigger was not cooperating. The calm turquoise sea blended with the intense blue sky on the horizon. That peaceful sight might evoke the image of Paradise to some, but Sandokan knew that only the foolish and lost wanderers could think of this as heaven. This sea was the hell of Borneo, souls cried as they died, destined to wander the black waters of the sea for eternity...

Pirates.

The wind whispered the names of terrifying pirates along the ripples of the sea surface; merciless assassins hunting and scavenging for treasures that would ensure them a reward of women and liquor, as well as any other sins they might want to commit.

Sandokan shrugged at the thought, and comforted himself caressing the handle of his dagger. His blade was not just any blade but his family one. The hilt was engraved with two eagles facing each other, the crest of his house and kingdom. Sandokan never knew how the two eagles were connected to his family nor had his father ever wanted to explain it to him.

You will have to find the answer within yourself, his father had often told him.

What was the reason for his year-long exile?

Was it meant to be a soul-searching journey, which would make him understand the meaning of his family emblem?

Maybe so, but at the moment Sandokan focused on surviving the sea voyage to the Island of Labuan. He pulled out a spyglass he had exchanged for a few coins at the busy market in Elopura, the city that was an important trading post and where one could get anything desired.

Sandokan had been to the city many times before with his father but never by himself, so this time he enjoyed the fact that nobody knew who he was. *Having a royal escort with you at all times can be tiresome and very frustrating*, he thought.

Sandokan looked through the lens, but after having sailed for three days, he couldn't be sure he was on the right route to the Island of Labuan. He had never been there, but the stories his wet nurse had told him about its beauty had excited his curiosity.

He was annoyed with himself. From a very young age he had been able to sail almost anything along the river, all the way to the Sulu Sea but now he wished he had listened to his tutors instead of having to rely on his own natural skills, which, at the moment, were failing him.

Sandokan sailed on westward, studying a small sea chart, hoping he wasn't too far off course. He kept inspecting the sea around him through the spyglass, not so much to find the way as to avoid the dangers lurking in those waters.

Nothing in sight but better to be alert, this sea is damned, he reminded himself.

The China sea is the only route which connects the East to the West and all the ships, carrying goods to make the white people's empires powerful, had to sail across it in order to reach the Malacca straight.

In this part of the world everything was for the taking by the strongest predator, and the white man was exactly that. First the Portuguese, then the Spaniards had come, followed by the British and the Dutch, bringing their superior firepower to show their strength to the various kingdoms and sultanates in Borneo and beyond. Soon the greed of the kings and sultans took the better of them as they thought they could control the foreigners to their advantage and gain more power for themselves.

How wrong they had been.

The white people not only had a stronger military advantage but their greed was insatiable. They did offer their services to kingdoms struggling to keep their reign, but their friendship came at a great price. Soon many kingdoms and sultanates fell into their hands. These new lands, bursting with riches and placed in a strategic position for trading, fitted in perfectly with the greed of the western empires as they claimed ownership of anything within their reach: the sea, the land, and even the faith.

Sandokan had been accustomed to their presence as he was growing up and, even if he was just thirteen years old, being the son of the king, he had had to deal with them on many occasions. His kingdom's wealth came from their trade of spices and raw materials and their cooperation and tolerance had been their key to survival.

His father taught him how to deal with them and how to avoid waking their wrath, but thankfully his father's alliances with other kingdoms and their own army of brave soldiers helped prevent the foreigners' hands from meddling into their affairs.

Sandokan stared at the sea, lost in his thoughts. He had only been away from home a few days and he knew that his exile was partly meant to help him learn the survival skills needed by a king to rule his people and, though he understood it was his duty to endure the journey, he missed home.

He shook off his feeling of loneliness, he was a man now and he had to prove it to his father, his family and his people for, one day, they would look for his guidance and he would have to be ready for that.

Sandokan brought his attention back on finding the way, the infinite sea was the only thing visible for miles, he sailed forward but he knew he was lost and, even with his chart and spyglass, he could not be sure where he was heading.

Then something caught his attention.

A short distance behind him, Sandokan noticed a small speck on the horizon. He looked through the spyglass but it was too far away to determine what it was.

Definitely a ship. But whose? Sandokan thought.

He looked again but the ship was still too far to determine under which flag it was sailing. If it were from a kingdom he'd had dealings with he would not have any problems, but if it belonged to far away empires or, even worse, to pirates, he would be in danger.

The wind finally turned and started blowing his sail as he veered northwest, calmly changing his course, in the hope of continuing on his way undetected by the mysterious ship...but, unfortunately, that was not the case. The ship changed its route as well, clearly sailing in the same direction as Sandokan.

Sandokan veered again for the wind to favour his sails. *Let's stay calm*, he tried to reassure himself. But the wind also assisted the mysterious ship, which was gaining speed and closing the distance between them.

It was obvious now that they were on Sandokan's tail but did they mean to harm him? Sandokan did not want to find out so he quickly changed his course towards southeast.

Let me see what you are up to.

Sandokan nervously kept observing the ship through the spyglass and realised that his trick had not worked. The ship had veered on his same course and it was gaining speed. There was no doubt now that it was after him.

If they are British or Dutch they are probably defending these waters from pirates and they will not harm me, he reassured himself.

The ship, helped by the sudden change in wind direction, was getting close enough for Sandokan to clearly distinguish a three masted schooner but it was still too far for its flag to be recognized.

Sandokan touched his chest and, from under his shirt, he pulled out a leather string, which was tied around his neck, with the ring his father had given him, hanging from it. The ring was solid gold with the family emblem engraved on it. Anybody carrying this ring belonged to the royal house, this was meant to serve as the proof of his identity in case he got into a tight spot. He stroked it gently, while he carried on manoeuvring his ship forward. There was no way his outrigger could outrun the schooner, so the only option was to continue his course in the hope that the ship was sailing under a friendly flag.

The ship was about to catch up with him, Sandokan kept looking at it through the lens until it was close enough for him to finally learn its identity...however they flew no flag, and this could only mean one thing:

Pirates.

Sandokan wondered whether this was just a chance encounter or if he had been too careless while shopping at the market in Elopura. Maybe one of their spotters had noticed him while he was buying things to prepare for the journey. They were known to

go searching in city ports to spot vessels they could ransack, once in the open sea...but another thought crossed his mind:

Could they know who I am?

If the pirates knew he was a prince they would capture him and ask for a hefty ransom, and he knew they would cut his throat after getting it.

Sandokan had to do something and fast. He pulled the string with the ring from his neck. *I don't want to provide the pirates with a clue in case they don't know my identity already.* He took his dagger, another proof of the house he belonged to then he wrapped the precious objects in a small piece of cloth, which he hid inside his leather travelling sack. They would find it eventually but he hoped he could persuade them he had stolen it at the market.

Now that the pirate ship was getting closer and closer, Sandokan could observe it better: the schooner had six gunports broadside with many springalds built on the deck and plenty of dark-skinned men were hustling around. They were not a modest enterprise, they were what Sandokan imagined pirates would be: merciless assassins and determined to get what they wanted...him.

He looked again at his sea chart, studying it and searching around with his spyglass. There was nowhere he could hide, no land was in sight, his only hope now was that white men's ships would come to his rescue.

As a loud shriek called his attention, Sandokan looked around and spotted a seagull flying and squawking just above him. He could not believe what he was seeing: *a seagull!* He screamed! He knew that they never wandered too far from land or food.

Where is your nest? He called out to the bird.

The seagull was flying towards southwest but, looking ahead through the lens, Sandokan could not see any land in that direction. He maneuvered his outrigger to follow the seagull, since this was his only chance at a lucky break. He could not lose sight of that bird.

Maybe he can lead me to land before it's too late.

The pirates noticed the outrigger changing direction and followed it, they were still far away but it wouldn't be long before they would catch up with him.

Sandokan kept following the seagull's trail through his spyglass, watching where the bird was heading and soon it became clear:

A black mass appeared on the horizon: it was an island.

Sandokan was amazed, although he had lost his way, he had finally found the Island of Labuan. He took a deep breath, he needed to sharpen his skills, if anybody could out-sail the pirates and get to land first, it was him. He released his sail outwards to gain more wind and speed, a small outrigger had some advantages and, if sailed faultlessly, it could become a very fast boat.

If I can reach land before they catch me I will be safe.

The pirates, determined to stop him before he reached land, had unfurled all their sails to gain speed on him.

Sandokan noticed it but he was not ready to give up yet, he started to throw anything that was slowing him down overboard, water and food barrels, two rifles, fishing nets, chains, the anchor and finally the oars. The only thing left was his travelling sack, though it didn't really matter, because, if he failed to gain speed and out-sail the pirates, nothing would save him from a horrible death. His strategy worked and he gained a few knots creating some distance between him and his pursuers. Sandokan smiled as he was getting closer to land, maybe he would get away after all.

The island was now visible and he didn't like what he saw: it was completely surrounded by menacing reefs, which made it impenetrable, at least to the big schooner on his tail. Beyond the reefs there was a big cave cut into a huge cliff. On top of this loomed a mountain covered by the thickest jungle he had ever seen, which spread across the whole land. The island seemed completely uninhabited, no village, no port, no ships, just jungle.

What is this place?

An eerie feeling suddenly took hold of him. The island was a very menacing and disturbing sight. Sandokan recalled some stories told by sailors and traders back home about a damned island, which nobody dared to sail to; indeed it could not be found in any of the charts and it was forbidden to talk about it.

It's possessed, a sailor had said, almost scared to talk about it.

By whom? Sandokan had curiously asked.

The devil...he lives there.

Sandokan recalled that shivering feeling running through his whole body when he had heard those words.

Could he have possibly just found the devil's home?

The infamous ISLAND OF MOMPRACEM...