

# Sengoku: Koi Monogatari

## Prologue

HASHIBA MINAMOTO looked out the window of the teahouse where he was staying. The smell of raw fish and vegetables came wafting through. The city of Kyoto was brimming with life as usual and he felt a sense of wonder at his situation. Only a few days ago, he had spent his time in precarious battlefield, where the prospect of a bed with clean sheets never occurred to him. Now, he was spending his leave in the legendary city of Kyoto; a slave living as a king. The hustle and bustle of everyday life was as magical as the first frost in his village and strangely, this was infinitely more complex. This was amazing. This was paradise!

On the other side of town, Otomo Yoshitsune was cleaning his sword and getting ready for battle. The Imagawa and Oda clans were squabbling over the Mikawa Province. Battle was imminent. He looked out the window and saw a young boy staring at a group of samurai in hopeful earnest and anticipation; waiting to do them any service. He recalled his young son; Imagawa Yoshitsune, only five years old, but still quite the young warrior. At two, the boy had been swinging his father's *shinai*. Of course, there had been no technique, no real form, but it was a promising start nonetheless. He would become a great samurai warrior. The constant war had Otomo worried, though. Although a skilled swordsman and gunner, he was not immortal, and all it would take to bring him down was a young boy's first lucky swing, and he would never see his son, never see his wife. His wife... They had grown up together in their Mino province village, and as long as he could remember, he was always fond of her. She always had a kind heart; she used to give fruits to the local boys from her father's trees. Otomo had never taken advantage of her kindness, however. He had always respected her, her kindness, her beauty, and her will. It was because of these qualities that he later married her. Admitted, being a samurai-born did influence the girl's father's decision somewhat. She would be in good hands, and his family will get much respect and reverence. It still hurt Otomo's heart whenever he remembered her name: Kaori. She was a good mother and wife. He would trust her more than the soldier beside him in a battle. He was lucky to have gotten her. He would have to see her soon. Right then a commotion from outside caught his attention. A crowd had gathered in the middle of the road.

### Chapter-1

Hashiba Minamoto got ready to go outside. It was a beautiful morning and he would not waste it indoors. Surely Takeda Daimyo [Daimyo = feudal lord] would understand. As he walked outside admiring the markets and commuters, he was awestruck at the level of ignorance these people showed. A war was raging on right outside this city and they were acting as if nothing was happening at all. One of these days, Kyoto would be attacked and then these people would understand. Right now, life was a visit to the market. He decided to visit a local restaurant for some late breakfast. For once in his life he was going to a real restaurant. Yet he took measures to hide his sword. He wanted to eat in peace, without feeling the eyes of the patrons inspecting his weapon, marvelling their newest 'Protector'.

He ate a quiet meal, yet he was quite aware of the fact that one small boy had seen his weapon and was looking at him quite intently. The sight occurred to him as comic; the look on the boy's face was like the one on a lovesick teenager gazing upon his first infatuation. He ignored the boy; he would use him to get some snacks later on. Let him follow like a little lap dog. He finished his meal and left, paying the cute waitress a little more than the bill asked for. As soon as he got out, he was treated to the unwelcome sight of a band of young ruffians; no older than twenty years; harassing a small shopkeeper. These sights were common in that part of Kyoto, but in Hashiba's eyes, this was quite intolerable. These youngsters should respect their elders; much less treat them so disrespectfully. As if he was nothing but a stray dog to be kicked out of the way. It seems they wanted money in exchange for their not harming the little man. Being short in stature and surely courage, the man was cowed and went on trying to make excuses. This was the worst scene Hashiba had ever seen in his life. He had seen his comrades, weary with battle; charge on towards a battalion of cavalymen, only to be cut down in a mist of blood. This, this was the worst. The open degradation of a fellow man, especially by these youngsters, hardly out of their mother's apron strings. This had to be stopped. Hashiba called out to the four ruffians, telling them to stop this harassment. He was hoping that they would respond negatively; he would send them back to their mothers with their legs in their arms, or, he would send them to their deathbeds. The ruffians did not notice his sword, as he had already hidden it back in the restaurant. Thus, being arrogant and in their prime, they rushed forward, brandishing small swords, daggers and a large bamboo stick. A crowd had already formed around them. This would be fun.

### Chapter-2

Otomo Yoshitsune looked away from the commotion outside. This type of scene was of no interest to him. He had seen soldiers charge into battle, knowing their doom. This little 'commotion' would mean nothing. He was still thinking of his wife

and son. He could not think about anything right now; not until he had seen his family. He readied his bags and left. He headed for his home in the Mino Province. There was no battle which needed his strength; if otherwise, they would contact him at his home in Mino.

Hashiba Minamoto looked on expectantly as the boy with the bamboo stick rushed towards him first. With one fluid motion, Hashiba had the stick in his hands and he swung at the attacker, who immediately fell unconscious. Recovering from the shock of their fallen comrade, the other youngsters rushed forward as well. Hashiba swung the stick at their feet, tripping one of them. The others were fumbling for their swords and daggers, obviously awe-struck at this man's strength. But one of them had some nerves; he brought out his *kodachi* (short sword) and swung at Hashiba. Hashiba grabbed the *kodachi* mid-swing and pulled back the blunt edge to hit the attacker; it was meant to merely shock the boy, and so he fell back. The other boys were beginning to attack him. Outnumbered but far from beaten, Hashiba unsheathed his *katana* and in one deft move had cut off three fingers from one of the dagger-wielders. The boy who attacked Hashiba with the *kodachi* got up and; blinded by anger and

where he had spent time practising with his katana, with his small son looking on with pride and wonder. Then there was of course the garden, with its trees. The trees under which he and Kaori often sat down to eat a leisurely lunch. He was finally home. He would see his wife and son, they would be happy to see him. He rushed into his house with the joy only a father and husband long separated from his family would feel. He went in, and found his son; by now five years old, trying to play with his mother, who was busy cleaning up. Otomo had a lump in his throat. He walked towards them. Hearing the sound, Kaori and the child both looked at his direction in surprise; they had never imagined him to come so soon. Kaori ran towards her husband, embracing him with the love that only ten years of devotion can bring, their son trying frantically to climb up to his father. The following evening was the most agreeable Otomo had in recent years. The taste of a good home-cooked meal and the company of his dearest ones were all but forgotten by him. There was fresh sashimi, sushi and rice, with fish caught by him that very day. The next few days, Otomo found himself spending each and every moment with his family. He found refuge in the thought that no matter what ever happens, he will always have a place to come home to; where his son and wife are waiting for him.



humiliation; attacked him. Hashiba, however, with his decades of meticulous training, would not be beaten today, and thus, with another skilful move, cut off the boy's right hand. The hand fell, still clutching the *kodachi*; and the boy, clutching the bloody stump that remained, fell to his knees. This move was not due to any type of anger on Hashiba's part. He was always in a state of *mushin* (concentration) whenever he fought. No, this move was meant as a punishment for the boy's audacity at attacking an elder so impudently. Seeing their comrade's right hand on the ground, and another clumped in an unconscious heap on the floor; the other boys finally brought their eyes upon the cause of their woes; the katana. The katana was indeed a sight to bring the bravest man there to cowardice. Shining in the waning sunlight, it looked like the weapon of some god of war. It was this sight that the youngsters beheld and with it they carried their fallen comrades to their feet and continued to drag them to safety; away from Hashiba.

### Chapter-3

Three days later, Otomo Yoshitsune set foot in his native village in the Mino province. Things were the same as when he had left. There was his house. Not as large as some of the others in the town, and of course, with a small terrace in the front of it. That was

These days of bliss, however, were short-lived. About a week later, word had reached him; the lord Oda Nobuhide was ordering troops to the Mikawa province in the Tokai Coast. The Imagawa Clan was extending its influence eastwards from Suruga into the Mikawa province and further eastwards towards Owari province-the Oda domain. The defence would be held in Mikawa Province, with a quick retaliation against the invaders. This would be the blow that would let Oda keep a greater hold on the region. Otomo packed up and duly left. He left out of concern and loyalty to his lord. He left without seeing his son; he left without kissing his wife. As suddenly as he came to them a week ago, he left.

### Chapter-4

Otomo arrived in Anjō, the Mikawa castle taken from the Matsudaira family, the previous lord of the province who had now joined forces with the Imagawa. The defensive strike would be initiated from this point. He got ready. His armour, with the design of the cherry tree next to his home; his katana, the craftsmanship he marvelled at; his musket, a weapon he was skilled at even though he disliked it. He stood with his fellow samurai and was ordered to stand guard here while Lord Oda Nobuhide himself would lead the defensive strike at the invading army. The invaders were led by Taigen

Sessai, Lord Imagawa Yoshimoto's monk-general uncle. He was a very talented general and everyone in that castle knew that victory would be hard but they had their lord to lead them on. The Anjō defense was also given orders that if by any chance fate decided to stand against them, and the strike should fail, they were to go to the Owari province. Otomo said a prayer for his family and went to his post.

Hashiba Minamoto had just spent two weeks training three boys whom he had met in the streets. Two of them were friends of the boy who had followed Hashiba the day he set the vagrant youths on their ways away from crime. The boys showed an eagerness and talent he rarely encountered. The boy who had followed him that fateful day was called Nabeshima Takanobu and his best friend was one of the students, Takagi Yoshiyatsu. The most talented of the three was a nimble fellow by the name of Shimazu Ujitsuna. It was time for him to leave and he was giving the three their final lesson. They all took his leaving quite badly except one. Shimazu seemed cold and Hashiba knew that he would be an excellent soldier but alas, time was short. After their lesson, Shimazu came to him and told him the news: He would accompany Hashiba, his lord and sensei. His parents were dead and all he had as close to a guardian was his sensei. Hashiba was touched, but all his instincts, all his common sense told him to decline the offer. The father in him, however, made him hold the boy close and accept. Shimazu would be more than his pupil, he would be the closest thing to a son he would ever have.

### Chapter-5

It was the news which started such a commotion in the Oda army that no one would forget for years. It was confirmed, Oda Nobuhide himself would lead the defensive forces spearheading Sessai's invaders. Much to Otomo's displeasure and simultaneous honour, he would be part of the samurai battalion with the great Nobuhide. They set out towards Sessai's armies with hope in their hearts and death in their scabbards. The fighting was quick and brutal. Taigen Sessai was indeed a talented general. Moments after the battle began, Oda Nobuhide and his armies found themselves surrounded by the invaders. It was in effect an ambush. Taigen Sessai had chosen the ground well and his forces obviously had the upper hand. Samurai were falling left and right. Otomo watched in horror as one among a hail of arrows pierced his arm and the two soldiers next to him were cut down in a blinding flash of blade against armour against flesh. The battlefield was covered in the blood of his enemies and his friends. It was in a battle as brutal and bloody as that to remind Otomo of the importance of family, and most of all, life. He himself cut down more than twenty enemy soldiers, men whom probably had families of their own, just like himself. It took many hours of feverish fighting and many casualties until Oda Nobuhide himself declared defeat and ordered a retreat. He and his armies fled to the province of Owari for safety. Thus, on 1548 in the province of Mikawa, ended the battle of the 2nd Azukizaka. It ended with the defeat of the seemingly invincible Oda Nobuhide, who died a year after the battle. Taigen Sessai, the man who so humiliated the great Oda, died only five years after.

### Epilogue

Otomo on the other hand, was in a different situation. He received word in Owari that his village had been struck with cholera. His wife Kaori was one of the victims of the deadly disease. He was on leave after the defeat and so he rushed back home. As soon as he arrived, he saw the most sickening sight of his life. He had seen men get their arms cut off and still fight as blood sprayed the grass red. He had seen men get pierced by ten arrows and still get cut down by enemy katanas. He had seen a battlefield with nothing remaining but a thousand corpses, previously living soldiers who had given their blood and lives to their lord and who would become nothing but a statistic, nothing but a faceless number. Even after all that, after being hardened by countless bloody battles, he was sickened, disgusted with this scene. He saw men he played with as children carting out their fathers, mothers, children, and each other. The victims' faces a visage of unspeakable pain and despair. And Otomo's wife and son were among them. His son... his son. It took all his might to stop himself from breaking down and crying. He set out to search for their bodies. He went to his house, and saw the despair few people have had the misfortune of encountering. He saw his wife, cholera had taken her beauty and life; he saw his son, still alive and clutching his mother's kimono, desperately trying to wake her up. It was this moment when Otomo Yoshitsune realised the love he bore for his dear wife, the love he bore for his son. He went to Young Imagawa and took him in his arms, his tears staining Otomo's clothes. Otomo decided that it was from this moment when he would never let go of his son, he would teach him everything he himself knew and he would be proud. Yes, he would be proud. On that fateful day, Otomo buried his wife and after consulting the doctor, found out that Imagawa mysteriously had not contracted the disease. Otomo burned down his house and the cherry tree under which he had spent so much of his time with Kaori and their son. He saw a peaceful life burn down as well with the cherry tree and his home. Thus started the training of Imagawa Yoshitsune under the tutelage of his father Otomo Yoshitsune, in their home province of Mino.

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