

TARŌ

太郎

by BLUE SPRUELL

Illustrated by MIYA OUTLAW

TARŌ

Blue Spruell

Tarō is a work of fiction. Names, characters, places, and events are either the product of the author's imagination or used fictitiously. Any resemblance to actual persons, living or dead, places, or events is entirely coincidental.

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TO MY MOTHER

who inspired me on so many adventures, imaginary and real

AND MY WIFE

who inspired me on this adventure

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3 Faces of Taro

INTRODUCTION

Blue Spruell

Tarō is the quintessential hero of three timeless Japanese folktales: *Kintarō* (Golden Boy), *Urashima Tarō* (Island Boy), and *Momotarō* (Peach Boy). Each legend stands alone, bearing no relation to the others except in name.

Some years ago, I saw a parallel between the personalities of Japan's three Great Unifiers and Momotarō's animal companions, the pheasant, monkey, and dog. I thought it might be amusing to write a short story drawing on this comparison. What began as a little excursion became a grand adventure. While the rest may not be history *per se*, I hope the reader will enjoy this new yarn as much as I enjoyed spinning it.

Many of the people and places in this story are real, although the circumstances are fictitious and bear no intentional resemblance to any locations or persons, living or dead. This story reimagines the pivotal period in Japan's unification, *sengoku jidai*, the age of the country at war.

In the sixteenth century, feudal Japan was a collection of warring provinces, nominally affiliated with the imperial family, which wielded little to no real power. For all intents and purposes, the sword of the *samurai*, the warrior class, ruled the realm. The three great warlords of Japan were, in order of their preeminence, Oda Nobunaga, Hashiba (Toyotomi) Hideyoshi, and Tokugawa Ieyasu. Each *daimyō* demonstrated qualities critical to Japan's unification. Oda was notoriously ruthless and cruel; Hashiba, cunning and manipulative; Tokugawa, diplomatic and patient.

A famous Japanese poem about their respective, formidable methods translates:

If the cuckoo does not sing, kill it. [Oda]

If the cuckoo does not sing, coax it. [Hashiba]

If the cuckoo does not sing, wait for it. [Tokugawa]

Another famous verse describes their roles in the history of Japan's unification:

Nobunaga pounded the rice.
Hideyoshi kneaded the cake.
Ieyasu ate.

Quite naturally, each of these men possessed legendary personalities. Oda was infamously mercurial but surprisingly liberal in his adoption of Western influences, most notably the matchlock gun, as well as his patronage of the arts, especially *chanoyu*, the tea ceremony. Unlike his contemporaries, Hashiba had not been born to the warrior class but rose through the ranks from his appointment as Oda's sandal-bearer and ultimately succeeded his lord who, ironically, had cruelly nicknamed his vassal "little monkey" because of his slight frame and reputedly ugly face. Tokugawa claimed birthright to the hereditary title of *shōgun*, a de facto military dictator, and ushered in three centuries of peace when he secured his title following the decisive Battle of Sekigahara in 1600.

Another contender in this celebrated conflict deserves special mention, Takeda Shingen, the warlord whose death Akira Kurosawa popularized in his superb film, *Kagemusha*, the "shadow warrior." A contemporary of the three Great Unifiers, Takeda was an exemplary *samurai* and military tactician. Had his life not been cut short, who knows how high he might have risen in the annals of Japan? As a final introductory note, before Takeda received his Buddhist name of Shingen, his family called him *Tarō*.

Swift as the wind

疾如風

Quiet as the forest

徐如林

Fierce as the fire

侵掠如火

Firm as the mountain

不動如山

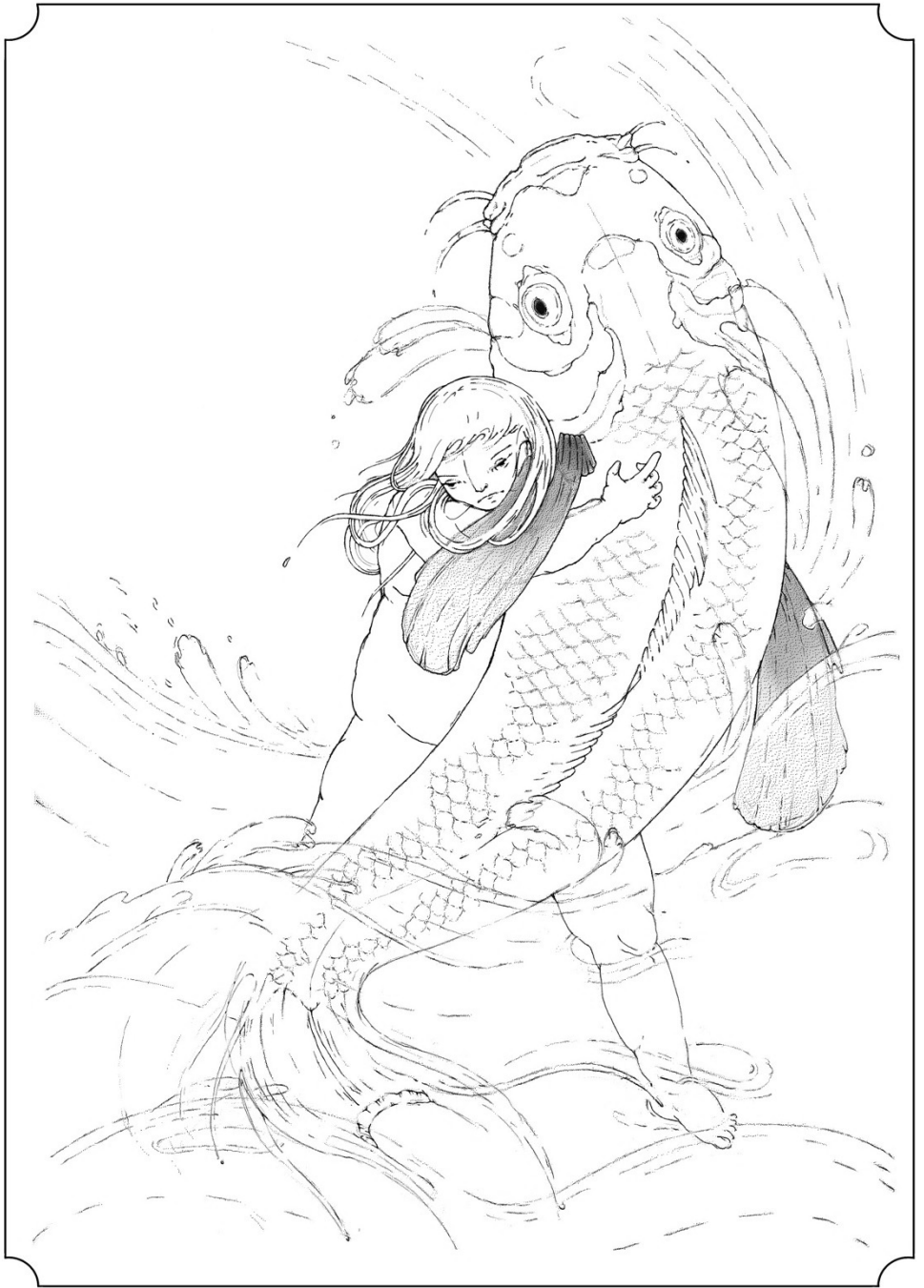


Nihon

PART ONE

KIN TARŌ

金太郎



Kin Taro

SWORD OF THE SAMURAI

太

Kai Province

New Year's Day, Year of the Monkey

“Once upon a time—” the story began.

The boy cradled the loosely bound book in his lap, enchanted by a brush-and-ink drawing of the full moon rising over majestic Mount Fuji. Tiny figures stood in the foreground, a humble woodcutter discovering a princess in bright, flowing robes in the middle of a feathery bamboo forest. In Japanese script the title read, *Tale of the Bamboo Cutter*.

“Tarō!” a woman’s voice called to the boy, disturbing the cold quiet around him.

Tarō hunched over his book. He did not want to be found. Cold as it was, he had thought to hide himself outside and fled the warm confinement of the castle in search of a peaceful place to read—his secret retreat—for stories carried him away, far from the harsh life to which he had been born. In a time ruled by the sword, Tarō read books as the horseman gallops and with a marksman’s focus that far exceeded his practical ability in such skills as were to be expected of a boy of his birth and age. He longed for greatness only in a boyish way, naively, effortlessly, and often out of spite when he growled how he would show his father someday.

“Be careful what you wish for,” his mother warned whenever he ran off in protest, but Tarō paid no heed.

Climbing into the wintry sky, the sun had just crested the castle wall. The air frosted his breath and made him shiver in his light robe. He slid across the veranda to a warm patch of sunlight. One hand in salute, he shaded his eyes from bright *Amaterasu* as the Sun Goddess melted the shimmering snowfall over the stone garden. Camellia trees with dark green, waxy leaves and bright red blossoms grew along the castle wall and around the garden, the crimson heads of their fallen flowers littering the borders. Four massive rocks, the centerpiece, marched across a rippling sea of glittering, snow-laden gravel. When Tarō winked, a trick of the eye fused the four stones into one.

“Smaller stones will sink beneath the Sea, but one great stone may withstand the tide,” his father once said.

At the time, his father had been speaking to his vassals. Tarō crept close to the audience chamber to listen—but not too close, so the stalwart guards at the closed doors did not see him.

“Lord Oda holds too much influence over the young Emperor,” his father continued his rant. “He abuses his position to sanction his brazen conquests, and these petty rivalries among the provinces only weaken the country, exposing all of us to his devilry. And Hashiba, that scheming sandal-bearer—”

“Tarō!” the voice came more sharply than before from somewhere within the castle quarters, recalling him from his daydream. He glanced over his shoulder, frowning as the voice drew near, accompanied by the sound of footsteps hurriedly thumping on the wooden veranda.

“Tarō! Wake up!” his mother said sharply. “What are you doing out here in the cold—you’ll catch your death!”

Tarō turned as his mother shuffled up to him, her elegantly patterned *kimono* of richly colored silk whispering around her feet as she fought to keep her trailing gown from tripping her up. She was already out of breath, but she did not stop. She grabbed his shoulders gently but firmly and gave him a reproachful shake as a prelude to a real scolding, but he hung his head to save her hand.

Looking him over, she could not resist a smile. She adored her boy, thinking him so handsome with his bushy eyebrows and thick, black bangs. She pinched his pudgy cheek, and Tarō winced.

“Wake up now, this is a big day! No time for daydreaming,” she said, taking him firmly by his arm. “What will your father say!”

She led him off the way she had come, while Tarō protested, dragging his feet as she shuffled down the paneled corridor, pulling on him with one hand and doing her best to keep her unruly *kimono* at heel with the other.

“Why do we have to go *now*?” he groaned.

“Tarō, now don’t be difficult,” she chided, tugging on his arm. “This is an important day, your *seventh* birth day,¹ and we must go to the shrine, and that is that.”

Tarō’s mother ushered him into his room where his nurse was busily arranging his clothes for the big day. A sumptuous *kimono* of golden silk, a matching jacket with a golden, brocade clasp, and handsome, pleated *hakama* trousers lay spread upon the *tatami* floor. The room smelled grassy from the *tatami* mats.

“There you are!” his nurse said upon seeing him. She bowed to her mistress. “Off hiding with a book again? I’ve never seen such a bookworm!” she said, taking his treasure and setting it aside. “Just a moment and I will have him ready for you, my Lady.”

Tarō’s mother gave him another reproachful look, then disappeared to attend other matters in preparation for the big day.

Tarō liked the look of the golden silk, and he marveled at the matching brocade *obi* sash his nurse unfurled for him. His dour matron stripped off his checkered robe and quickly draped him in a light undergarment before clothing him in his golden *kimono*.

“Hiding yourself away again,” she scolded, “Lord Takeda won’t be pleased, you know!”

Tarō fussed and fidgeted as she bound him with the golden sash, frustrating her pains to dress him in his finery. The more she tugged and tucked, the more Tarō growled like a tiger cub.

“If you don’t stand still—” his nurse complained, suddenly warning, “Yama Uba will come for you for sure!”

At this, Tarō stopped fidgeting, not for fear but because he loved his nurse’s stories.

“Tell me!” he demanded.

“Oh, she’s a terrible witch,” his nurse said, as she tugged and tucked on his *kimono*, “with wild white hair and black eyes. She just loves plump, undisciplined little boys! She will steal you away

¹ Child mortality was common, and children were considered offspring of the gods until they attained age seven, so a vital rite of passage for *samurai* boys included visiting a shrine to expel evil spirits and pray for a long, healthy life.

and carry you off to her lair, and then fatten you up and—” she paused for effect, pinching his cheek, and teased, “eat you!”

As Tarō yowled and rubbed the sting from his cheek, she ordered, “Now, off you go! You must not keep your father waiting any longer or he will have your hide—and my head!”

太

“Where is my son?” Lord Takeda roared.

With a furrowed brow, Tarō’s father rapped the low table with his bamboo *sensu* folding fan, rattling the slate inkwell in front of him. Seated on a *zabutō* cushion on a raised portion of the floor overlooking the room, Lord Takeda wore his Buddhist *kesa* draped over his *kimono*. His squire sat in silent attendance behind him.

Only a little natural light filtered through the cypress transoms, but tall tallow candles lit the corners, their shadows falling across the *tatami* floor and upon the plastered walls and sliding doors partitioning the room. A magnificent painting of a tiger decorated the wall in the alcove behind them, its eyes glowing fiercely in the candlelight. A stack of two *kagami mochi*, “mirror” rice cakes, food of the gods, topped with a small, bitter orange, sat on the shelf in the alcove as an offering to the New Year.

An attendant bowed nervously at his Lord’s displeasure, humbly displaying his tonsured bald spot and topknot as he backed away to investigate, but when the nervous fellow pushed aside the sliding door, Lady Takeda was already seated just outside the room, her two ladies-in-waiting and Tarō’s nurse behind her. She knelt beside the door, carrying herself as if she had been there for some time, and bowed her head so elegantly that Lord Takeda quickly forgot himself. Although they had been married nearly eight years, his consort was still pleasant to behold, her porcelain face delicately framed by the long black tresses of her hair.

“Ah! My lady,” he sighed. “Where is my son?”

Tarō appeared from behind his mother, jumping forward to strike a confident pose in his golden *kimono*, legs straight and arms raised as if he were about to somersault into the room.

“Yesterday in rags, today in gold brocade,” Lady Takeda quoted the old saying, thinking herself witty, but it fell flat on her husband’s ears.

Lord Takeda inspected his son for a tense moment until Tarō forgot himself. He was small, and his father was an imposing figure, even without his armor and sword. Tarō wore his hair in a ponytail since he had not come of age to shave his head and wear a topknot, nor did he have the nearly perpetual scowl that only aggrandized Lord Takeda's fearsome appearance, but anyone could see where Tarō got his bushy brows and piercing eyes.

"*Kin Tarō!*" Lord Takeda said at last in an equally fearsome voice, as he beheld his golden boy. "Already seven years old?"

Tarō nodded timidly.

"Then what are you thinking?" his father roared suddenly, slamming his fist on the low table, the inkwell rattling once again.

Tarō flinched. The servants quickly bowed their heads.

"Always idle," Lord Takeda blustered, "always absent-minded, sticking your head in books when you should be training with the General! Well? What do you have to say for yourself?"

"My Lord—" His wife tried to speak, but he cut her off.

"Nothing! Not a word! You should attend my son better!"

His stab hurt her deeply. She quickly bowed her head and tugged on Tarō's *kimono*, prompting him to do the same. Tarō immediately complied, kneeling with head bowed so it touched the floor. His backside knew well what came of non-compliance.

"Tarō is the heir to Yōgaiyama Castle and the whole dominion of Kai Province," Lord Takeda pressed his rant. "He should be attending his training, and you should not be filling his head with all your books and stories. Fairy tales! Nonsense! You are both soft! A soft *samurai* will not do!—" He beat the table again, rattling the inkwell once more. "Not in these times," he trailed off, muttering and shaking his head. For reassurance, he glanced at his *katana*, the sword on the rack beside him.

Following an awkward silence, Lord Takeda waved for his son to come to him. Cautiously, Tarō slid forward, keeping his head down until he sat next to his father. After a tense moment and another flinch from Tarō, Lord Takeda pulled his boy into his arms, feeling guilty for having lost his temper. Lady Takeda smiled and relaxed.

"Are you ready to go?"

"Yes," Tarō lied for he knew better than to fight the Tiger.²

² Lord Takeda's given name was *Nobutora* [信虎], "trusty tiger."