

ONNA-BUGEISHA

by

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Taiko battle drums play over BLACK during the overture.

The *battle drums* give way to somber *strings*.

This is a silent film.

FADE IN:

INT. LORD MORI'S BED CHAMBER (FEUDAL JAPAN) - DAY

LORD MORI(60's) lies dead. Long white hair draped over a silk kimono adorned with cranes. His skin pulled tight around his jaw. Plastic-looking.

Mori's son, LORD JIRO(20), blubbers into his father's kimono.

LADY TAKARA(30), Mori's daughter, mourns gracefully. Not a tear.

Two dozen SAMURAI stand in a circle, in solemn reverence.

They bow as one.

EXT. MORI'S CASTLE - COURTYARD - DAY

Hundreds of SUBJECTS kneel, facing the castle. Heads bowed low.

Banners whip in the wind. White cranes over blue.

INT. LORD MORI'S BED CHAMBER - DAY

Lord Jiro dries his eyes. Lifts his head slowly.

As do the Samurai.

EXT. GRASSY HILL - DAY

A mantis climbs a blade of grass.

The *music* turns whimsical.

HITOSHI(13), a spirited boy, drops a cricket on its head. Trying to feed it.

But the mantis sits frozen.

Another boy, NATSUKO(13), tackles Hitoshi to the ground.

They grapple for each others' legs, violently yet laughing with wide white smiles, as other CHILDREN parade up the hill to watch.

Their faces turn beat red. Out of breath. But keep wrestling as the children egg them on and cheer.

The children go quiet once KATSURO(40) appears. Samurai. And Hitoshi's father.

INT. KATSURO'S HOME - DAY

MAIKO(40's), Katsuro's wife, chases her son, AKIHIRO(2), through the house.

He's naked, running frantically and laughing. Clutching something in his hands. He darts from room to room until caught by his mother at the front door.

She opens his hand and removes a clump of feces.

INT. KATSURO'S HOME - BATH - DAY

Maiko scrubs Akihiro from head to toe in a steaming tub. He wails.

INT. KATSURO'S HOME - DAY

Maiko, along with two SERVANTS, scrubs the floor on hand and knee.

EXT. UNFINISHED HOUSE - DAY

A MAN hangs from a beam and hammers wooden pins into a joint.

The frame is nearly finished. The floor is rough and missing boards.

Wind rocks the uprights back and forth slowly, rhythmically.

But nothing falls.

Clack clack clack of the hammer on pins...

EXT. GRASSY HILL - DAY

Clack clack clack as wooden swords clash.

Katsuro and Hitoshi spar.

Hitoshi's sword, called a bokken, flies off into the grass.

Hitoshi, wearing a chest protector, turns to retrieve his sword.

Katsuro flicks the back of his head with the tip of his bokken.

Hitoshi snaps his head around, then backpedals to retrieve his sword, eyes on his father the whole way.

He steps on the handle. Reaches down.

Katsuro attacks again.

Hitoshi picks up his bokken and parries just in time. Blocks repeated attacks while retreating.

EXT. LAKE - DAY

Dimpled water with reeds poking up from the surface.

A FISHERMAN, standing in his dingy, casts a net.

INT. SMITHY - DAY

A SWORDSMITH prods the embers in a kiln. Excites the flames.

He removes a bright yellow steel brick from the fire.

Hammers and folds it over an anvil.

Applies clay to the blade.

The sword is heated and quenched, heated and quenched.

EXT. MORI'S CASTLE - COURTYARD - DAY

Katsuro and Hitoshi enter through the main gate.

They ascend the many steps to the castle garden.

LOW-RANKING SAMURAI bow their heads as they pass.

Hitoshi bows to each in return.

INT. SMITHY - DAY

The sword is polished.

The Swordsmith chisels characters into the blade. A name.

EXT. MORI'S CASTLE - GARDEN - DAY

Lord Jiro feeds pieces of fish to his falcon in its cage.

Three HIGH-RANKING SAMURAI confer around a flattened map.

Like a game of *Risk*, flagged figurines dot the island of Japan. Armies of tigers, fish, monkeys, cranes and dragons.

One of the High-Ranking Samurai moves a dragon to swallow a tiger.

Katsuro enters the garden.

Hitoshi waits by the entrance, holding the chest protector and two bokken.

Lord Jiro nods to the boy, so Hitoshi drops the gear and trots down the path behind his father.

The *music* turns somber.

INT. LADY TAKARA'S BED CHAMBER - DAY

On the highest floor of Mori's castle.

Lady Takara stands sullen in the window light, as a young SEAMSTRESS fits her for a white silk kosode and headdress. A wedding gown.

The Seamstress pricks her own finger.

A drop of blood falls on the white silk.

Takara smears the blood down her sleeve. Gestures for the Seamstress to continue.

EXT. MORI'S CASTLE - GARDEN - DAY

Another High-Ranking Samurai moves a dragon to swallow a fish.

Lord Jiro removes the falcon from its cage and places it flapping on Hitoshi's arm. Much to his delight.

The third High-Ranking Samurai slides a monkey and crane figurine together, side by side.

Katsuro bows, accepting his orders.

INT. HITOSHI AND AKIHIRO'S BEDROOM - DAY

Hitoshi writes at a desk. Ink on paper. One letter after another.

Katsuro enters. Leans in over Hitoshi's shoulder and gives a disapproving shake of the head.

He takes his son's hand and completes a new stroke just below the last. Longer and more fluid.

Hitoshi throws the quill and stomps off.

Katsuro grabs him by the collar, but Hitoshi pulls away.

Maiko enters. Gives Katsuro a sympathetic smile.

Katsuro picks up the quill and places it on the table.

Maiko grabs Katsuro's hand, and with the quill, draws the character for "patience".

His lips find hers.

EXT. MORI'S CASTLE - HACHIMAN SHRINE - DAY

Katsuro leads Hitoshi down a stone path to an old but well-kept shrine, slightly larger than a trailer.

INT. HACHIMAN SHRINE - DAY

Upon entering they both slip out of their shoes and set them by the entrance.

They bow to a statuette of the kami Hachiman. The god of warriors. He sits jovially on the body of a demon, shoving a spear through its chest.

Katsuro kneels.

Hitoshi kneels beside him.

Katsuro bows his head to the floor.

Hitoshi follows suit. But then lifts his eyes and spots a suit of armor in the corner of the room. Its red and black markings almost blend with the color of the red wooden walls. He barely contains his excitement.

Katsuro stands. Walks to the armor. Bows again before picking it up, as well as a katana with a red sheathe.

Hitoshi stands.

Katsuro sets the katana on the floor, then takes the armor and pulls it down over Hitoshi's head.

It slides down over his torso, much too big.

He pulls it back up and sets it on the floor.

He hands Hitoshi the sword instead.

Hitoshi pulls the blade from its sheathe.

Etched in the blade is his new name in kanji: AKAKOMARU.

EXT. KATSURO'S HOME - DAY

Hitoshi dashes out the door with his bright red sword.

The children from earlier all wait outside. Their eyes pop when they see.

Hitoshi pulls the blade out just enough to uncover the inscription.

Maiko stands in the doorway, arms folded across her chest.

Hitoshi slides the sword back in its sheathe.

The children run off with Hitoshi in the lead.

Katsuro comes up from behind and embraces his wife.

EXT. GRASSY HILL - DAY

Hitoshi sits on the grass with his bright red sword over his lap.

Two other CHILDREN battle it out with their wooden swords.

A GIRL(13) sits on the other side of the duel and smiles at Hitoshi.

Hitoshi smiles back. He springs to his feet and brushes off his backside before running over to her.

He sits and shows her the inscription on his sword.

She puts a finger to the blade.

He claps the sheathe closed on her finger.

She jerks back, shocked.

He smirks.

She throws a clump of grass and dirt in his mouth.

INT. KATSURO'S HOME - DINING ROOM - NIGHT

Katsuro's family sits at the table over fish and rice.

Maiko pours tea.

INT. KATSURO'S HOME - DEN - NIGHT

Katsuro sits on the floor, smoking a pipe and playing a shamisen(lute).

Maiko dances elegantly in the center of the room. A career performer before two children put her in retirement.

Katsuro smiles at her lovingly, watching her every move, and feeling the music with his fingertips. Never once does he take his eyes off her.

Maiko keeps her eyes to the floor, entranced in the simple perfection of her own movement.

EXT. MORI'S CASTLE - COURTYARD - DAY

Katsuro escorts Lady Takara to a waiting palanquin. A covered box litter for transportation.

FIVE SAMURAI wait on horseback, poised ready to follow.

Lady Takara turns back toward the castle. An impulse.

Katsuro grabs her arm and holds her steady. Wipes a tear from her cheek. Smiles like an adoring father figure, before urging her into her transport. This is her duty.

The FOUR CARRIERS(two front, two rear) lift the palanquin and march.

Katsuro follows beside on horseback.

Hitoshi runs into the courtyard, carrying his red breast plate. He hands it to Katsuro, who smiles and lays it over his horse's hind.

It's too big for Hitoshi, too small for Katsuro. But he takes it anyway.

INT. PALANQUIN IN MOTION - DAY

Lady Takara watches as--

SUBJECTS in the courtyard dwindle to specs.

INT. HITOSHI AND AKIHIRO'S BEDROOM - NIGHT

Akihiro lies in bed as Maiko tucks him in. She kisses his wet, recently washed hair.

Maiko goes to Hitoshi and does the same.

She takes his new sword from beneath the sheets and places it, to his dismay, on the stand by the wall.

She leaves the room, sliding the paper door shut.

INT. LORD JIRO'S BED CHAMBER - NIGHT

A paper door opens.

A CONCUBINE(20's) with long dark hair and wearing a silk robe enters the room.

A HIGH-RANKING SAMURAI removes her robe. Circles her. Inspects between her fingers. Kneels down and inspects her toes. Between her legs. Then stands and checks inside her mouth. And beneath her tongue.

Six other SAMURAI stand vigilant along the walls.

Lord Jiro enters.

EXT. VILLAGE ROAD - NIGHT

Lady Takara's escort trudges along.

Three Samurai on horseback lead the convoy, while two others follow at the rear.

Katsuro rides beside the palanquin. Eyes darting from the box, to the woods, to the moon and back to the box. He keeps a hand on his sword.

INT. PALANQUIN IN MOTION - NIGHT

Lady Takara stirs, impatiently. Keeps peering out the open window.

EXT. MORI'S CASTLE - MAIN GATE - NIGHT

Two SAMURAI GUARDS stand at either side of the large wooden gate. Their eyelids get heavy.

INT. LORD JIRO'S BED CHAMBER - NIGHT

The High-Ranking Samurai removes Lord Jiro's robe. Gently and precisely folds and places it on the floor at the foot of the bed.

The Concubine lies, waiting. Legs crisscrossed in such a way that accentuates the curve of her supple hips. Perfectly straight hair cascades down her shoulders and covers her breasts.

She uncrosses her legs as Lord Jiro enters the bed.

EXT. WOODED ROAD - NIGHT

A *gunshot* sounds.

The lead Carrier drops like a rock and the palanquin hits the ground.

INT. PALANQUIN - STOPPED - NIGHT

Lady Takara recovers. Mussed hair in her face. Panicked breathing. Eyes dart to the trees.

EXT. WOODED ROAD - NIGHT

Katsuro raises his hand and the convoy freezes.

A second *gunshot* sounds and a Samurai at the rear falls from his horse.

Katsuro dismounts and the other Samurai follow suit, nock and draw arrows.

The three Carriers circle the palanquin, shielding it with their bodies.

Katsuro spots a cloud of smoke from a clump of trees. He inches toward it. Bow ready.

The wounded Samurai *gasps*. Grabs at the hole in his breastplate. Cries out.

Katsuro screams for him to be quiet.

A third *gunshot* sounds with a puff of smoke.

Another Samurai falls.

Four arrows are loosed.

The GUNMAN in the tree falls dead.

Five other GUNMEN WITH ARQUEBUS aim and fire from various pockets along the road. Cloaked behind leaves and shadow.

Three bodies drop.

Katsuro pulls Lady Takara from her palanquin and drags her into the wood as they make a run for it.

INT. HITOSHI AND AKIHIRO'S BEDROOM - NIGHT

Hitoshi wrestles out from under the sheets and lights a nearby candle. Places it on the floor by his new sword then climbs back into bed. He watches the firelight glisten off the painted red sheathe.

INT. LORD JIRO'S BED CHAMBER - NIGHT

Naked bodies glisten with sweat. Lord Jiro grabs the Concubine's legs and turns her onto her stomach. He brushes her hair aside and kisses and bites at her nape. She turns around and smiles sweetly. Pulls him inside her. He climbs clumsily on top.

INT. KATSURO'S HOME - NIGHT

A *sharp scraping* sound comes from the front door.

Maiko slides the door open and finds...

EXT. KATSURO'S HOME - NIGHT

A rolled up letter, pinned to the post by a string. The edge of the paper scratches against the wood. Swaying back and forth with the wind.

Maiko pulls it down.

INT. KATSURO'S HOME - NIGHT

Maiko opens the letter and reads by candlelight. Her tension shows.

A hand-written warning is translated: YOU MUST TAKE YOUR CHILDREN AND LEAVE TONIGHT.

EXT. WOODS - NIGHT

With the moon at their backs, Katsuro drags Lady Takara through the foliage.

A Samurai and Carrier follow close behind.

A *gunshot* sounds.

The Samurai falls.

INT. LORD JIRO'S BED CHAMBER - NIGHT

The Concubine goes down on Lord Jiro, her hair falling on his stomach. He starts to run his fingers through her hair, but she grabs his hands and pulls them to her breast as she climbs on top.

INT. KATSURO'S HOME - NIGHT

Maiko continues to read the letter, translated: COME UNARMED AND ALONE, AND YOUR HUSBAND WILL BE WAITING.

There's a map drawn at the bottom of the letter. A cave entrance marked in red.

EXT. WOODS - NIGHT

Katsuro urges Lady Takara to hide beneath the foliage.

She crawls behind a tree.

A *gunshot* takes out the Carrier.

Katsuro raises his sword, tense and ready for death.

As TWO DOZEN MASKED GUNMEN close in on all sides.

EXT. FIELD - NIGHT

A large black horse, barely visible by moonlight, stomps and snorts. Fidgets while a MAN in armor secures the saddle.

The NINJA wears dark, metal plate with chain mesh at the joints. A helmet wraps around his head and scoops in the front like a quail.

Other NINJA ON HORSEBACK form into columns and march.

Hundreds.

Thousands.

An ARMY.

A horse bays and whinnies.

Its RIDER jerks the reins and grabs the side of its neck.

It quiets down again.

EXT. MORI'S CASTLE - MAIN GATE - NIGHT

One of the Samurai Guards watches the grass grow.

The *sound of piss and rustle of bushes* nearby signifies the Second Guard. He finishes and shakes. Steps back out from the growth near the wall. He returns to his place by the gate while fixing his belt.

The First Guard collapses with an arrow through his skull.

The Second Guard pulls his sword halfway from its sheathe.

But an arrow in the throat stops him cold.

He falls to his knees, choking on blood. But he's not finished. He draws his sword and grasps the arrow with his other hand.

A Ninja reveals himself from the shadows. He cuts off the Guard's sword arm at the elbow and runs him through the back. Then wipes his piss-covered boot on the Guard's body.

Other Ninja appear and spider up the wall.

A moment later, the large wooden gates open.

EXT. MORI'S CASTLE - GARDEN - NIGHT

Lord Jiro's falcon screeches. Flaps wildly. Rattles the cage.

Ninja tiptoe across the roof.

A Samurai below takes notice. Grabs the handle of his sword and tries to yell out.

But a kusari-gama(sickle and chain) tightens around his neck and pulls him off his feet.

A Ninja drags the Samurai onto the roof and plunges the sickle into his chest.

INT. LORD JIRO'S BED CHAMBER - NIGHT

Lord Jiro lies back as the Concubine does all the work.

She catches one of the Samurai watching. Smiles at him.

The Samurai stares at the wall, hiding his own smile.

EXT. MORI'S CASTLE - GARDEN - NIGHT

A Ninja lights an arrow and raises his bow...

Then he notices the falcon in the cage.

He extinguishes the arrow and throws the bow on his back.

Pulls the falcon from its cage.

It belts out an *ear-piercing screech*.

EXT. MORI'S CASTLE - COURTYARD - NIGHT

A handful of Samurai hear the falcon. Turn toward the garden and take the stairs.

EXT. MORI'S CASTLE - GARDEN - NIGHT

The Ninja dowses the falcon with burning oil.

It shoots up like a flare.

The entire castle hears its death cry.

INT. HITOSHI AND AKIHIRO'S BEDROOM - NIGHT

The boys jump. Climb out of bed and look out the window.

INT. LORD JIRO'S BED CHAMBER - NIGHT

All six Samurai go to the window to see the commotion.

The Concubine pulls a strangling cord from her hair. Slides the two metal rings around her fingers. Tightens it around Lord Jiro's neck and locks him in a bear hug.

Lord Jiro struggles as blood covers the sheets.

The Samurai turn. Draw swords.

The Concubine spits and curses, laughing.

Her head comes off.

But it's too late.

Blood pours from Lord Jiro's neck in plumes.

EXT. MORI'S CASTLE(AT A DISTANCE) - NIGHT

The burning falcon flies through the air.

The ARMY ON HORSEBACK charges through the main gate.

EXT. MORI'S CASTLE - COURTYARD - NIGHT

SAMURAI pour out of the castle with swords and spears.

The NINJA ON HORSEBACK charge in and meet them.

Arrows fly.

Swords clash.

Men scream and fall.

INT. KATSURO'S HOME - NIGHT

A loud *bang* hits a post outside.

Maiko jumps. Moves cautiously to the front door.

She's met by Hitoshi, with sword in hand. He puts his arm up to hold her back and goes to investigate.

Maiko grabs his arm and moves him aside. She slides the door open and finds...

The falcon, charred and smoldering on the ground. And a black spot left on the post.

INT. LORD JIRO'S BED CHAMBER - NIGHT

A Samurai wraps a cloth around Lord Jiro's neck. Tries to keep pressure on the wound.

Lord Jiro gurgles up blood, hanging on by a thread.

EXT. KATSURO'S HOME - NIGHT

An alarm bell *thunders* from the castle.

Hitoshi bolts toward the door.

Maiko grabs him and pulls him back into the house.

INT. KATSURO'S HOME - NIGHT

Maiko closes the door.

Akihiro hides beneath the dinner table.

EXT. MORI'S CASTLE - COURTYARD - NIGHT

The bodies pile up.

A second wave of Samurai pour into the yard, met by arrows, knives and throwing stars from the roof.

Some Ninja leap down and meet the Samurai with swords, spears, cat claws and kusari-gama.

INT. KATSURO'S HOME - NIGHT

Hitoshi struggles against his mother's iron grip.

Maiko rips the sword from his hand and throws it to the floor. She picks Akihiro up, grabs Hitoshi by the arm...

But freezes when she hears a *crackling* sound from above.

Ash falls to the floor. Fire spreads. Black smoke floods the house.

EXT. KATSURO'S HOME - NIGHT

Ninja on horseback gallop past, throwing lit torches onto the roofs of every home.

EXT. MORI'S CASTLE - COURTYARD - NIGHT

The dust settles.

The Samurai victorious. Twenty in all, standing over hundreds. They form a circle, *kiai*, and get ready for the next wave.

A stone *plunks* and *skips* down ceramic roof tiles and lands in the circle. A *hissing* stone. Wait. Not a stone, but a BOMB!

PHOOOOM!

A bright flash of light sends the twenty Samurai in all directions. Through paper walls, and wooden columns. Missing limbs, covered in blood and burns.

Another wave of Ninja descends. They pour down from the walls and through the main gate. Up the stairs and into the castle. An endless wave.

The battle is won.

INT. KATSURO'S HOME - NIGHT

Maiko gathers her two children and they run to the back door.

A NINJA(#1) appears, just outside, blocking their path.

She slides the paper door shut as a spear rips it back open.

A SECOND NINJA(#2) appears at the front of the house. Grabs Maiko by the hair, punches her and throws her across the floor into an armor display.

Akihiro cries out. Hides back under the table.

Hitoshi runs to his sword.

Ninja#1 grabs Hitoshi by his collar.

Hitoshi rips free of his robe and grabs his sword. He draws, deflects a spear thrust and cuts Ninja#1's hand.

Ninja#2 wraps a chain around Maiko's neck. Picks her up off her feet.

Maiko heels him in the groin, headbutts him with the back of her head, reaches for a sword...

But can't grab it.

Ninja#2 tightens the chain and slams her into the wall.

Ninja#1 parries a few swipes from Hitoshi and kicks him in the face.

Hitoshi regains his balance. Readies his sword.

Maiko throws elbows into Ninja#2 but his armor is too thick.

Akihiro runs to her.

Ninja#1 trips him.

Akihiro's head hits the wooden floor. He stops crying.

Hitoshi strikes. Cuts Ninja#1's spear in half. But his sword flies from his grip. Hitoshi's unarmed.

Maiko jabs her fingers into Ninja#2's eyes. Grabs his helmet and flings it. Strikes Ninja#1 in the back. She turns, drops her elbow on the chain and kicks Ninja#2 away.

Ninja#1 draws his sword.

Maiko draws her sword.

Ninja#2 pulls out a sickle.

Maiko fights brilliantly. Shatters their defenses. Cuts into their extremities like they were being torn apart by a propeller. Soon, there's nothing left of the Ninja but pools on the floor.

Hitoshi stares at his mother in awe and *gasps*.

Maiko goes to Akihiro. Blood stains her gown. He's dead.

The ceiling crumbles as smoke fills the room.

Hitoshi grabs his sword.

Maiko grabs Hitoshi by the hand and leads him out the front door. She carries Akihiro in her other arm.

She stops. Runs back.

And retrieves the letter from the floor.

EXT. CASTLE TOWN - NIGHT

Men, women and children run for their lives through the conflagration.

Ninja on horseback plow through the streets, hacking and stabbing with swords and spears.

Maiko chases after Hitoshi. Akihiro tucked in her arms.

A Ninja on horseback charges and divides them.

Maiko rolls across the ground with Akihiro.

Hitoshi runs toward the burning castle.

The Ninja on horseback turns, urges his horse to charge again. Lowers his spear like a lance.

Maiko picks up a broken spear head, two feet long, and deflects the attack. She swipes the horse's hind.

It bucks and throws the rider.

The Ninja lands poorly on his neck with a *snap*.

Maiko finishes him with a spear thrust.

She looks around for Hitoshi, through a fog of scrambling villagers. He's a good hundred feet away toward the castle.

She picks up Akihiro. But she's exhausted. Her arms giving in to the weight. Ponders a moment.

Hitoshi is another hundred feet away.

Maiko lays Akihiro's limp body down on the dirt. She picks up a sword from the fallen ninja and gives chase.

EXT. MORI'S CASTLE - COURTYARD - NIGHT

The castle ablaze. Smoke fills the sky like a wool blanket.

Hitoshi finds the main gate abandoned. Nothing but corpses. Hundreds piled high.

Then one of them moves. A DYING SAMURAI. Pinned beneath burning wood.

Hitoshi grabs him by the arms and pulls him out.

A NINJA ambles down the castle steps. A bow in one hand, Lord Jiro's head in the other.

The Dying Samurai takes one look. Cries out in horror. Picks up his sword.

The Ninja throws the head. Nocks an arrow. And fires at the Samurai. Again and again.

The Dying Samurai keeps charging. Carrying a new arrow every step of the way. A human pin-cushion.

Hitoshi's eyes go wide in shock as Lord Jiro's head lands at his feet.

The Dying Samurai drags his body across the ground. Using his sword as a cane.

The Ninja pulls a knife and slits his throat.

Hitoshi raises his sword. Advances.

The Ninja nocks another arrow. His last one.

Maiko appears. Tucks Hitoshi under her wing. Raises her sword to deflect the arrow.

The Ninja fires. It grazes her knuckle.

Maiko winces at the scratch, then nudges Hitoshi away to the ground. She readies her sword.

The Ninja steals one from the ground. Advances.

Maiko beckons Hitoshi to *Run!*

He doesn't listen.

Hitoshi!

She looks down.

Hitoshi is dead. The arrow plunged in his chest.

Maiko cringes. Whimpers. Drops her guard. Starts to sob.

The Ninja takes a swing.

Maiko parries and splits him from balls to brains. Leaves the sword buried in his skull.

She breaks off the arrow in Hitoshi's chest and carries him through the main gate.

Just as more NINJA pour down the castle steps.

Maiko darts around the corner, and cloaks herself in the shadows. Holds Hitoshi and silently weeps.

BLACK.

FADE IN TO:

EXT. CAVE - DAY

The morning sun rises over a giant hole in the ground.

INT. TUNNEL - DAY

Lady Takara is escorted by a two-dozen MERCENARIES. Men masked and cloaked in black. Carrying arquebuses and Portuguese crab swords.

INT. CAVE - DAY

Lady Takara is led to a large cavity, flush with sunlight from the giant hole in the ceiling.

Where Katsuro hangs from his wrists. Beaten and broken.

Lady Takara wraps her arms around him, sobbing.

A samurai in green armor, TADAO(40), pulls her away. He tosses a bag of gold coins to one of the Mercenaries, and ushers Lady Takara through another tunnel.

Tadao stops when he sees Hitoshi's bright red breastplate in a corner. He picks it up. Too small for him. But he takes it anyway, and tosses the Mercenary another coin.

INT. TUNNEL - DAY

Tadao pulls Takara by the arm, sternly but with care. Sets her atop a horse. Ties her wrists to the saddle with a silken cord. Blindfolds her.

Tadao jumps on his own horse and leads.

Four-dozen other Portuguese Mercenaries line the walls, *cat-calling* and *jeering*, as Lady Takara passes.

INT. CAVE - DAY

The mercenary who caught the gold, FAUSTINO(50), removes his mask and hood. His thinning black hair tied in knots. Smiles wide with blackened teeth.

Faustino draws Katsuro's sword. Slices off the top of a ceramic bottle filled with lamp oil. Douses the oil on Katsuro's legs and sets him ablaze.

Katsuro flails his legs, *screaming*. Engulfed in flame.

EXT. CAVE - DAY

A lone RIDER approaches on the horizon. Too far to make out.

Three mercenary GUARDS drink and play dice with their cut of the gold.

The coins are imprinted with dragons on one side, the head of LORD SHICHIRO on the other. We'll meet him later.

EXT. VALLEY - DAY

The lone rider, Maiko, dismounts and ties her horse, hidden behind a cluster of rocks. She's dressed in more practical garb. Gloves and boots. A bow across her back and Hitoshi's red sword at her hip.

She unfolds the letter and consults the map. The drawing resembles the hole in the ground.

She rereads a section of the last passage, translated: COME UNARMED AND ALONE...

A twinge in her knuckle.

She removes her glove to find the flesh blackened and rotting around the cut. Poison!

She sucks at the wound and spits it out. Flexes her fingers. Puts the glove back on.

She readies her bow.

INT. CAVE - DAY

Faustino draws a line across Katsuro's back with the sword.

Katsuro kicks and wriggles like a fish on a hook. Blood seeps from the wound.

Something blocks the light from above. One of the mercenary Guards.

Faustino calls out to his man.

The Guard drops into the cave and lands on Faustino. Dead. An arrow plunged in his back.

Faustino struggles to push him off.

Maiko stands in the light above. Fires an arrow through Faustino's eye.

She grabs the rope holding Katsuro and starts hoisting him up.

EXT. CAVE - DAY

One of the mercenary Guards is still alive. An arrow through his neck. He stands and rushes Maiko with a knife.

She turns. Avoids the knife.

And the two of them go tumbling into the cave.

INT. CAVE - DAY

The Guard hits the ground.

Maiko slides down Katsuro's rope, easing her fall. She recovers. Draws her sword. Waits, staring at the only entranceway.

She hears the *clatter of armor and footsteps* from deep inside the catacombs.

She cuts Katsuro down. Wipes the sweat and blood from his face. Shakes him to life. But he's barely able to move.

Maiko checks the distance to the hole in the ceiling.

The *footsteps* close in.

EXT. CAVE - DAY

Maiko climbs the rope, with Katsuro hanging from her back.

She looks up to find her horse surrounded by GUARDS.

Maiko and Katsuro skulk away unseen.

EXT. FOREST - DAY

Maiko is asleep, curled up beneath a line of rocks that overhang like a tent. Dried tears crust her face.

Katsuro lies across her feet, head in the dirt. Legs blackened with cloth burnt into his skin.

Blood runs from his nose. He licks it from his upper lip. He puts his filthy hand to his face and wipes away the rest.

He peels off burned flesh. Coughs and spits out blood.

He closes his eyes again.

BLACK.

EXT. FOREST - NIGHT

Katsuro wakes in the same spot.

Maiko dresses the wounds on his legs. Peels off the burnt leggings and then wraps them with clean cloth torn from her sleeves.

She sees his eyes are open. Takes a small tube cut from bamboo and puts it to his lips. A drink of water emerges.

She drops the bamboo tube, stands and draws her sword. She waits, startled, anxious, alert.

After a moment, nothing comes. So she sits back down by her husband. Sword at her side.

Katsuro puts his hand on the sword.

Maiko moves it away, out of his reach.

BLACK.

EXT. RIVER - DAY

Morning.

A fish attempts to swim upstream in a river about three feet deep at its worst.

Maiko stands horse-legged across two stones, sword raised.

She stabs, hits the riverbed, but misses the fish.

She leaps out into the river as it swims away. Stabbing, slashing and then finally throwing the sword like a spear.

She strikes a few rocks and water, but nothing else.

EXT. FOREST - DAY

Maiko, on her hands and knees, digs into the earth with her fingernails. She finds a bug, then a worm, then a few more of each.

She eats a worm.

EXT. FOREST - NIGHT

A fire burns.

Maiko rests Katsuro's head in her lap. Pours water into his mouth using the same bamboo flask.

Katsuro brushes her off and spits. Sits up. Reaches for the katana by the fire.

Maiko grabs his arm, pulls him back.

They wrestle over the sword, briefly. Katsuro finally winning out. Holding the blade with both hands, he points it to his own stomach. Ready to take his life.

Maiko puts her hands on his cheeks and gives him a long passionate kiss. She draws back. Calmly, shakes her head from side to side. Places her hand gently on his forearm.

Katsuro lowers the sword. Defeated.

In a rage, he slashes the sword against a rock and makes a sparking cut across the top.

The blade shatters. A one foot length flies away.

He throws the broken sword to the ground.

Maiko puts her arms around him and holds him close.

EXT. FOREST - DAY

Bullets of rain smack against the rock over their heads as Katsuro and Maiko huddle close.

He stretches his legs out into the water. The cold rain dulls the pain.

Maiko's fingers grow stiff and black.

She cuts her knuckle and lets the pus run under the water.

The rain stops.

Maiko throws the broken sword into its sheathe and ties it to her back.

She kisses her husband and leaves him lying under the rock.

EXT. VILLAGE MARKET - DAY

A village springs up around Maiko. Strangers abound and clutter the main street, shoulder to shoulder. Clothing, artifacts and architecture accented with MONKEYS.

Maiko fights against the flood of people on her way to the market.

She smacks her lips at the sight of food. Dried meats, fruits and vegetables.

She picks up an apple. Starved, she takes a bite.

The MERCHANT takes in her ragged appearance. Demands to see some coin and thrusts an open hand.

Maiko offers him the sword.

Interested at first, the Merchant takes it.

His interest is short-lived when he draws the sword and finds it broken.

He tosses it on the road. Rips the apple from her hand. Raises a switch.

Yells *thief!*.

Maiko picks up her sword and backs away, as other MERCHANTS clamor in support.

EXT. KICHIROU'S SCHOOL - DAY

A sign reads: MASTER KICHIROU'S SCHOOL FOR SWORD TECHNIQUE

Maiko sneaks by and looks inside.

The student body made up of young men from 15 to 30.

One man towers above the others. MASTER KICHIROU(30). He spars with a younger, weaker BOY and pushes him around the room.

Maiko spots a flyer nailed to a post.

Translated, it reads: As the reigning champion of the village, I challenge any to a duel. 10 ryo to the victor.

Maiko grabs the flyer off the post, and brings it in. Holds it up.

All the young men turn at the site of a filthy, ragged woman in their school. Disinterested.

Maiko tears the flyer in half and tosses it on the floor.

The young men all laugh and jeer.

Maiko spits on the floor.

EXT. FIELD - DAY

Master Kichirou walks triumphantly to the top of a hill. He stretches his shoulders. Tightens his belt and rolls up his sleeves.

Two of his STUDENTS meet him under a tree.

One holds two wooden swords.

The other holds the reins of three horses.

Maiko arrives without the fanfare. Filthy, ragged clothes and hair.

She removes the broken katana from her belt. About to draw.

The Student with the wooden swords shakes his head. Hands both Kichirou and Maiko a bokken.

Kichirou twirls it about, stabs the air, showboating.

Maiko wipes the sweat from her hands. Pulls her hair in a tail. Advances.

Kichirou raises his bokken.

Maiko rushes him. Cracks him on the hands, and then on the head.

Kichirou falls to the ground. Face bloody.

Maiko waits for the two Students to attack. Ready.

They get on their horses and scatter. Dumbfounded and terrified.

Maiko takes a purse of coins from Kichirou, and jumps on the last horse.

EXT. FOREST - DAY

Maiko returns to Katsuro with a bundle of food.

Finds a pack of wild dogs chewing at his extremities.

Maiko rides the horse up and scares them off.

She dismounts and goes to her husband's dead and desecrated body. His flesh mangled and half-devoured. The small length of broken blade thrust in his belly.

EXT. FOREST - NIGHT

Lit by fire.

Maiko stands over a fresh mound of dark earth. No tears left to cry.

EXT. VILLAGE - DAY

A new flyer replaces the old. This one has a sketch of Maiko with a bounty beneath.

Translated, reads: Wanted for the murder of Master Kichirou. 100 ryo bounty to any who captures Taira no Maiko. Dead or alive.

EXT. ROAD - NIGHT

Maiko enters another village under pouring rain. Her purse *chimes* with every *clop* of her horse.

The buildings are adorned with FISH sculptures, that swallow the rain and funnel it to barrels below.

A wooden sign, translated, reads: INN.

INT. INN - NIGHT

Maiko enters, soaking wet.

A young girl, KAORI(16), serves tea and supper to a handful of customers. She does so with absolute care and hustle.

Maiko takes an empty table near the back.

Three PORTUGUESE TRADERS sit nearby, smoking pipes and pounding sake.

One, ARTURO LUIS(40's), grabs Kaori when she nears and pulls her onto his lap.

She struggles.

He laughs.

His two friends laugh with him.

Maiko throws a coin on the table.

Kaori pulls herself free of Arturo and hustles to pour Maiko her tea.

Arturo stands. Takes Maiko's coin from the tabletop. Bites into it. And pockets it.

He grabs Kaori by the arm and drags her back to his table, smiling. Spilling tea.

Maiko pulls out a second gold coin and drops it on the table. It rattles and spins.

Arturo looks her up and down. Reaches for it.

With one quick fluid stroke, Maiko draws her broken sword and slices off Arturo's thumb.

He wrenches back a bloody hand.

His two friends stand and draw their pistols.

Maiko places her blade on Arturo's throat.

Kaori screams hysterically, and urges the three Portuguese out of the inn.

One lets his pistol linger on Maiko's head. Steps closer till the barrel is almost touching her nose.

A line of blood cries from Arturo's neck.

Arturo screams in protest, and his friend finally lowers the pistol.

The Portuguese leave drunk and bloody, stumbling into the rain.

Maiko picks the coin up off the floor, drops it on Kaori's tray, and takes a cup of tea and two bowls of rice.

Kaori heads back to the kitchen. On her way, she picks up the thumb and pitches it into the fire.

A moment later, Kaori returns to Maiko with some fish, holding back a smile.

INT. INN - BEDROOM - NIGHT

Maiko lies in bed, shivering.

The wound on her hand throbs. Black veins cover her forearm.

Kaori enters with food and drink. Puts a hand to Maiko's forehead. Finds her sweating, burning.

Kaori leaves in a rush.

Maiko takes a knife from the dinner tray. Makes another slice on her hand. More pus runs.

INT. STABLE - NIGHT

Maiko's horse lays on the ground, over a blanket of straw.

One of the Portugese raises a pistol to its head.

INT. INN - BEDROOM - NIGHT

The faint *pop* of gunfire rings in Maiko's ear.

Her sword is across the room.

The door bursts open and two dark FIGURES grab Maiko by the arms. Drag her out of the room, kicking and screaming. Sheets and all.

INT. INN - NIGHT

Kaori screams frantically.

Arturo Luis holds her by the hair, pins her to the bar. He unrolls the wanted poster with Maiko's likeness for her to see.

The other Portuguese drag Maiko down the stairs, her head wrapped in the bedsheet. They throw her from the railing and she drops the other ten feet. Lands on her face.

Arturo pushes Kaori to the floor, and draws his pistol.

Maiko pulls the bedsheet away, just in time to find herself looking up the barrel.

Arturo lowers the pistol to Maiko's hand and fires. Blows off half her blackened thumb.

Maiko wails in pain. Tucks her hand into her body.

The other Portuguese trot down the steps with her katana and purse. The one holding the katana looks up in shock.

Kaori levels a long musket and fires.

A puff of red flies from the Portuguese as he drops the katana to the floor.

Arturo turns and aims his pistol at Kaori.

Maiko grabs the sword and slices through Arturo's ankle.

Arturo drops to the floor and the pistol shot goes off past Kaori's head.

The third Portuguese starts to draw his rapier...

But Maiko cuts through it, breaking the blade, and slicing into the Portuguese's torso.

She turns and removes Arturo's head.

Kaori pokes her head back up from behind the bar.

The three Portuguese are dead.

Maiko empties Arturo's pockets.

Finds a rolled up parchment.

Translated, it reads: A tournament of warriors to be held in celebration of Lord Shichiro's wedding. Thirty champions will earn a place in Lady Takara's royal guard. Lord Shichiro's wedding gift to his new bride.

Wax of a broken seal flakes under her touch.

A gold dragon.

INT. CARRIAGE IN MOTION - DAY (FLASHBACK)

Lady Takara stares out the window.

Terrified.

END FLASHBACK.

EXT. ROAD - DAY

Maiko walks. Her hand wrapped in bloody cloth. She carries her broken sword on her back and Arturo's pistol and a water flask in her belt.

Snow-capped mountains lie on the horizon.

A wide dirt road leads the way.

EXT. ROLLING HILLS - NIGHT

A small fire crackles.

Maiko lies staring into the flames.

She cocks and uncocks the hammer of the pistol.

The fire dies down.

Maiko drifts to sleep.

A FIGURE approaches.

Maiko wakes.

The Figure's small. Strolling casually.

HITOSHI'S GHOST.

The ghost takes a seat by the blackened wood of the dead fire.

Maiko tears up. Lips quivering.

Hitoshi shakes his head. Speaks but no sound comes out. He grabs his mother's hand and pulls her back the way she came.

The blackened wood bursts into flames.

EXT. ROLLING HILLS - DAY

Maiko wakes.

To find her blackened hand thrust in the glowing embers of the fire.

She pulls it out. Wails in pain. Douses it with water from her flask. The flesh still smolders.

Another, taller FIGURE approaches on horseback. Sunlight glistens off his green metal armor. Wears the long and short curved samurai swords.

Maiko stands. Rewrapping her hand in the same burned cloth.

The samurai in green, Tadao, removes his helmet. Drops it to the grass. Sizes Maiko up.

Maiko draws her broken sword with her off-hand. Readies.

Tadao laughs. Gets down from his horse. Draws.

They dance around each other, neither one striking a successful blow. Tadao just a little bit faster.

Back and forth they move like the lapping of waves on the shore. Every advance followed by a retreat.

Maiko's off-hand starts to tire.

She gets slower and slower with every deflection, barely escaping Tadao's cut in time.

Tadao puts the rising sun to his back.

Maiko hides in his shadow.

He makes a move to the side, blinding her with the sun, and strikes a blow on her wounded hand.

Maiko cries out in pain and drops her sword.

Tadao moves in and strikes across Maiko's neck.

Stops just short.

He flicks her long hair with his blade and smiles. As if to say he wouldn't kill a woman.

Tadao turns his back to her, gets on his horse and leaves.

Maiko goes to her pack and starts a clean bandage.

She looks up when finished.

Finds Tadao gone.

Maiko drops to her back, exhausted and in pain.

EXT. RUINED VILLAGE - DAY

Burned a long while ago. Dead bodies strewn like fallen leaves.

Maiko walks through the carnage. Covers her face against the smell.

Finds a dead woman holding her children.

One of the children holds a small wooden TIGER. Charred and broken.

INT. SOLDIERS BARRACKS - DAY

Tadao walks past a line of ten SOLDIERS. Each carries a long spear.

One by one they thump their spears against the ground and bow their heads as he passes.

Tadao holds up a parchment with the bounty and likeness of Maiko for all to see.

The ten Soldiers march out of the gates and into the light.

INT. INN - DAY

Kaori sweeps up after the damage.

Tadao enters, with Hitoshi's red breastplate in hand.

He sets the breastplate on a chair. Tries to take the broom from Kaori.

Kaori jerks it back. Sullen.

Tadao tries to hold her, comfort her.

But she dismisses him and continues her work.

Finally, he grabs her by the shoulders and forces her eyes up. They're swollen. Bursting with rage.

He gives her a fatherly kiss on the forehead. Picks up the red breastplate. Holds it up as a gift.

When she balks, he chucks it against the wall and leaves.

Three SOLDIERS enter and immediately take over the cleaning duties.

Kaori lets her broom hit the floor and walks outside.

EXT. INN - DAY

Kaori steps out into the street.

Finds Tadao on his horse, galloping away.

EXT. ROAD - DAY

Maiko sets her belongings on the ground. Rises with her broken sword drawn.

The ten Soldiers surrounding, lower their spears at her throat.

Maiko screams for them to come.

The Soldiers advance.

Maiko takes a few swipes. Sword *pings* against wooden shaft.

She reaches behind without looking and pulls one of the spears away from its owner. Grimacing from the pain in her wounded hand. The owner topples forward, and Maiko brings her blade down upon his neck.

Nine left.

Maiko hurls the spear and clears a path. She runs through the opening and removes herself from the middle of the circle.

Another Soldier charges from behind.

Maiko grabs the spear, chops it in half, and strikes the Soldier across the face with the blunt end. The Soldier tumbles to the ground and Maiko finishes him off.

Eight remain.

She spots a cluster of rocks behind and moves toward them.

A Soldier leaps. Maiko plants the spear shaft in the ground and ducks. The Soldier lands, impaling himself. Maiko takes his spear.

Seven remain.

Maiko backs up between two large boulders, creating a bottle neck for the Soldiers to enter.

She slashes and stabs, splattering blood on the rocks, on her sleeves, in her mouth. Two more soldiers fall dead.

Five remain.

One of which comes from behind. Stabs Maiko through the side with a thrust.

Maiko falls to her knees. Cuts the spear in half.

Another pierces her shoulder.

She topples to the ground.

Two Soldiers pick her up by the arms.

Another Soldier moves forward, ready to cut off her head.

A *gunshot* fires.

His head explodes in a puff of red.

The two Soldiers drop Maiko. Ready their swords. Turn toward the gunshot.

Kaori appears, on horseback. She drops her musket. Draws her sword.

The last four Soldiers run.

Maiko lies still, bleeding out.

INT. SHICHIRO'S CASTLE - BED CHAMBER - DAY

Lady Takara paces the room in her white silk gown. Fear plastered on her face.

The door opens.

And LORD SHICHIRO(30's) enters. A beautiful man with features chiseled from stone.

Takara runs into his arms, and kisses him passionately, longingly.

Shichiro breaks away. Smiles, and strokes her cheek. Holds her to his chest. She's home at last.

INT. ABANDONED HOME - NIGHT

In the ruined village.

Kaori dresses Maiko's wounds. Cleans her skin with a sponge and hot water.

Maiko stirs. Tries to stand.

Kaori tries to stop her.

But Maiko pushes her away. Gets to her feet. Stumbles and falls.

EXT. ABANDONED HOME - NIGHT

Maiko practices her sword stroke, left-handed, against a charred wooden post. Each cut gets stronger, faster, and more controlled.

Kaori watches from inside.

EXT. RUINED VILLAGE - NIGHT

Rain falls.

Maiko walks the stone road through what's left of the village square. A graveyard. Dimly lit by the moon.

Shichiro's castle looms on the horizon.

A nearby shadow moves. Not Maiko's.

It creeps closer. Slowly at first. Then closes the distance with a leap.

Maiko turns and draws her sword. Stops just short of Kaori's breast.

Startled, Kaori drops her musket in the mud.

Maiko's arm settles. She takes a breath.

Kaori brushes the sword away and picks up her gun. She grabs Maiko by the hand and leads her off the road.

EXT. ALLEY - NIGHT

Maiko and Kaori duck down.

As rising thunder rolls across the ground.

An ARMY on horseback rides through the village.

Kaori and Maiko stay silent and still.

Until the army passes.

Kaori finds a lamp in a window facing the ally. Lights it.

The light reflects on something beneath her kimono.

Maiko notices.

A spot of red with black trim.

Red armor.

Hitoshi's red armor worn beneath Kaori's kimono.

Maiko grabs Kaori by the throat. Pins her to the ground.

Kaori draws a knife to defend herself. She cuts Maiko across the cheek.

Maiko steals the blade from Kaori. Plunges it into her kidney, just below the armor.

Kaori gasps, clutching the handle.

Maiko wraps her hands around Kaori's neck and squeezes.

Kaori grabs Maiko's arms and digs her fingernails in. Carves long bloody lines in her skin.

Maiko punches her in the face. Drags her by the hair across the road. Throws her into a deep puddle. Pushes her head below water.

Kaori thrashes wildly as the water fills her lungs.

INSERT BRIEF FLASHES:

-- Of Katsuro and Maiko holding each other.

-- The taste of lips.

-- The touch of skin.

-- The feel of a newborn baby in her arms.

BACK TO SCENE.

Kaori goes limp.

Maiko pulls her out of the water.

Kaori's two lifeless eyes cry out for help.

A hand grabs Maiko's shoulder from behind.

She turns.

Finds KATSURO'S GHOST.

Maiko wraps her arms around him. Feels him. Solid.

Katsuro smiles. Traces the cuts and bruises on his wife's face. Grabs her long locks and tucks them behind her ears.

He moves in close and whispers something in her ear.

Tears roll down Maiko's cheek.

And then Katsuro is gone.

Maiko grabs the knife from Kaori's side.

She cuts the long locks from her own head.

With her beaten face and short hair, she looks more and more like a young man.

EXT. SHICHIRO'S CASTLE - MAIN GATE - DAY

Maiko enters in blood-stained soldier's armor. A helmet shields her face.

The two SENTRIES at the top of the gate bow to her as she enters.

She nods back reluctantly.

The archway over the gate holds a giant swirling DRAGON.

EXT. CASTLE COURTYARD - DAY

Banners with triumphant gold DRAGONS whip in the wind.

Neatly pruned cherry blossoms dot the yard. Their fallen petals paint the floor in red.

At the other end of the courtyard is a tall flight of steps leading to the palace entrance.

SERVANTS sweep and scrub.

Chase dogs away with their brooms.

String lanterns from corner to corner.

EXT. FIELD - DAY

A KAGURA DANCER, dressed in a dull blue robe and a deep red mask, holds up a rock. Practices his steps.

Children around him try to follow the dance.

EXT. CASTLE COURTYARD - DAY

The festival is in full swing.

MUSICIANS pluck strings and beat drums.

Food is eaten from sticks.

DANCERS dressed as animals throb and turn to the music on stage. They play out the campaign as a joke. A giant DRAGON devours the others one by one... a TIGER... a FISH... a CRANE... a MONKEY.

Maiko, hidden in her armor, tightens her jaw and clenches her fist around her sword, but does not draw.

Everyone seems to be laughing at her expense, and at the sight of the murdered crane, covered in fake paper blood.

Maiko winds her way through the crowd toward the palace.

Rows of armored SAMURAI stand guard on the palace steps. A hundred in all. Too many.

A long line of a few hundred YOUNG MEN-- students, mercenaries, soldiers-- forms to the side. One by one, they sign up for the tournament. They write their names on a piece of parchment and get handed a small unique coin.

Maiko waits her turn.

When it comes time to write her name, like a handful of others who cannot spell, she simply draws a line.

Her coin is pressed with the word KARMA in kanji.

Maiko snickers.

The festival crowd disperses and the would-be warriors all sit in circles around the courtyard.

Lord Shichiro and his new bride, Lady Takara, make their way out of the palace and take a seat at the top of the flight.

The entire courtyard bows.

Maiko bows and spits in the dirt through the slit in her helmet.

Tadao, beside Lord Shichiro, reads from a roll of parchment, MOS.

Written on the parchment: Our Lord and Master Shichiro, in honor of his new bride, welcomes all who have come from every corner of Japan, to win a place in her royal guard.

Beating of the drums signals the start of the tournament.

Two MEN at each circle stand and pitch their coins into a pile. They carry spears with blunted wooden tips.

Maiko watches. Clenches her wounded hand. Blood dribbles through the seams in the gauntlet.

The combatants dance around for a time. Some get a good crack on the arms, legs or head but the fights keep going.

Until finally one falls, clutching his ribs, his leg or his head.

First man to fall or kneel loses.

The winner scoops up both coins and leaves the ring.

And the next match begins.

And on and on it goes...

EXT. RUINED VILLAGE - DAY

Kaori's dead body is found, laying in the filth.

A handful of armored SOLDIERS stand in shock. Including the four that had run off earlier.

One SOLDIER wipes the mud from her face.

EXT. CASTLE COURTYARD - DAY

Maiko pitches her coin into the pile and walks to the center of the circle. Carries a blunted wooden spear. Still in full armor.

Her match is in the circle furthest from the palace steps.

She meets her COMBATANT. A younger, much taller man, beaming with angst. All power and no guile.

Maiko tries to grasp her spear with both hands, but missing a thumb doesn't make it easy.

The Combatant lunges.

Maiko knocks his spear to the side. But the grip of her bad hand slips.

The Combatant lunges again and swipes at her leg.

Maiko steps back and wobbles a thrust.

The Combatant pushes forward.

Maiko blocks as best she can, but gets pushed around the ring. Finally takes a crack across her wounded hand.

Frustrated, she steps on her own spear and snaps it in half. She holds the remaining length as a sword and continues the fight one-handed.

She's quicker. More precise in her movements. Sneaks through the Combatants guard. Gives him a good crack on the groin.

The Combatant collapses, clutching his privates.

Maiko wins.

Tadao watches, intrigued, from beside his Lord.

A SOLDIER rushes to Tadao discretely and whispers in his ear.

Tadao's smile fades and he begs his Lord's pardon to leave.
Shichiro nods.

INT. TADAO'S HOME - BEDROOM - DAY

Tadao finds his daughter, Kaori, on her bed.

He weeps. Holds her. Squeezes her to his chest.

Places her back down on the bed. Sets her hands neatly over her breast.

Finds torn skin and blood deep beneath her fingernails. He flicks the dried skin away.

IWA(40), Kaori's mother, rushes into the room and throws her body over her daughter, sobbing.

Tadao tries to comfort her.

Iwa turns, enraged.

She grabs Tadao's sword. Pulls it from its sheathe. Makes him take it as if to say, *go kill yourself*.

EXT. CASTLE COURTYARD - DAY

Two men fight in the circle closest to the palace steps. A SOLDIER and a STUDENT. Two wooden swords each. A long and short.

The Student falls.

The Soldier bows with a smile.

The Student gets back to his feet. Pulls out a concealed blade, cuts the Soldier's throat, and makes a run up the steps.

Shichiro grabs Takara, and covers her with his own body.

As the line of Samurai loose a dozen arrows into the Student's chest.

The Student falls, halfway up the steps. Dying slowly.

Shichiro recovers his composure. Marches down the steps, sword in hand.

And removes the Student's head while he's still alive. But not quickly. Slowly. Painfully. Saws through cheek and bone. He takes his pleasure in it.

Maiko watches. Calculating.

EXT. CASTLE COURTYARD - NIGHT

The sunlight fades.

The lanterns ignite.

A crowd gathers.

Musicians kick off the nighttime celebration.

Maiko weaves through the crowd, trying to get a good look at the palace.

She glances up at the shuttered windows. Careful not to appear too interested.

She glances at the GUARDS standing before each entrance.

She could try to sneak in but then what? The palace is huge and she does not know where the Lord sleeps.

A short FIGURE darts past her eyeline.

She looks through the crowd, low.

The Figure darts around again the other way.

AKIHIRO'S GHOST.

He stops. Smiles at his mother.

She smiles back, holding her breath, afraid he'll disappear.

She outstretches a hand.

He approaches slowly.

But before he can take her hand, he's gone.

A dog appears in his place. It barks and snaps at Maiko, who falls back in shock.

People around her laugh.

INT. BEDROOM - NIGHT

Maiko sits in the moonlight through the window.

Pulls out Arturo's pistol. Ties it to her wounded hand with a wrap, her finger on the trigger.

Slides it inside the gauntlet.

But it won't fit.

She pulls her hand back out, and with her sword, removes two of her fingers.

EXT. CASTLE COURTYARD - DAY

Maiko pitches twelve coins into the pile.

Steps into another circle. One step closer to Shichiro.

Stands toe to toe with a tall BURLY MAN, wearing a full mask and carrying two wooden swords.

Maiko carries only one.

Tadao watches intently. A cold stone glare at the gauntlets covering Maiko's arms.

Every other fighter has his sleeves rolled up.

A SAMURAI announces the fight.

They begin. Ten combatants in five circles.

But we're focused on Maiko and the Burly Man.

Maiko takes a few hits.

The Burly Man knocks off her helmet.

Revealing a woman in the match.

Lady Takara recognizes her beneath the cuts, bruises and mangled hair. Shocked, she jumps to her feet. *She wants to call off the fight, but can't.*

The Burly Man turns to Shichiro.

Shichiro nods. *The fight will continue.*

Maiko attacks, enraged.

She disarms one of the Burly Man's weapons.

The fight goes on.

The *scraping* of sand. the *clacking* of wooden swords.

Maiko works her way around the circle.

Puts the sun to her back.

The Burly Man hides in her shadow.

Maiko steps to the side.

Light flashes in the Burly Man's eyes.

Maiko moves in and cracks him in the head.

Removing his mask.

Revealing FAUSTINO, her husband's captor, now missing an eye.

Faustino drops to his knees, clutching his nose.

Shichiro claps. Then signals the match to continue.

Faustino gets to his feet, and they're back at it.

Faustino and Maiko beat each other with wooden swords, over and over. Skin breaks. Blood flies.

Until Faustino lands on his back, and Maiko jams her bokken down his throat.

Faustino gurgles up blood and chokes to death.

Tadao moves down the steps. He grabs a wooden sword. The one Faustino dropped. Gestures for Maiko to meet him in the center ring.

She does.

Tadao strips off his armor. Gestures for Maiko to do the same.

Maiko hesitates.

Tadao calls to his men.

Two SAMURAI strip Maiko of her armor.

When the second gauntlet is removed, she raises the pistol at Lord Shichiro.

A *gunshot* goes off.

Everyone ducks, freezes and turns.

The Samurai grab Maiko. Bring her to the ground, thrashing.

Tadao turns to his Lord.

Who sits in shock but unharmed.

Lady Takara slumps to the floor.

Shichiro holds her.

She's bleeding out but still alive.

Tadao pulls back Maiko's sleeve.

Finds the scratches on her arms from Kaori.

He gestures for his men to let her up.

They hesitate but pull her to her feet.

Tadao tosses the wooden sword away. Draws his real sword.

Gestures for his men to give her a sword.

They hesitate. Turn to Shichiro for confirmation.

But Shichiro is busy sobbing and kissing his dying wife.

Maiko draws a sword from one of the men holding her.

Tadao and Maiko fight.

The *clang* of metal swords rings through the castle courtyard.

Everyone stands silently watching. Holding their breath.

It's an impassioned fight. Maiko and Tadao both foaming at the mouth.

The strikes are a little faster. The grunts a little harder.

Takara brushes her husband's tears away. Smiles. Whispers something.

Gives out her last breath.

Shichiro wails.

Orders his Archers to fire on Maiko.

They raise their bows and draw, but hesitate.

They might strike Tadao.

Shichiro screams again.

The Archers fire.

But miss on purpose.

Arrows pepper the ground in the circle.

Tadao and Maiko continue the fight, deaf to anything else.

They collect bloody scratches and nicks. Until both are nearly dying.

Shichiro steals a bow from one of his men.

Nocks, draws and releases.

Tadao finally makes a deep cut across Maiko's belly.

Maiko drops her sword.

Tadao raises his.

Stops short when the arrow sinks in his chest.

Maiko grabs her sword and slides it into Tadao's back.

Kicks his body off her blade.

Holds her wounded stomach with her wounded hand.

Marches toward the palace steps.

The Archers all nock and draw.

Maiko sets foot on the first step and spits.

Shichiro raises his hand.

The Archers lower their bows.

Shichiro draws his sword. Moves down the steps.

Maiko raises her weapon. Slow. Weak. Exhausted and bleeding.

Shichiro cuts her leg.

Maiko falls on her back to the ground. She drops her sword.

Shichiro leans over, nose to nose, and cuts her throat.

He watches the life drain from her eyes.

With her wounded hand, Maiko draws a blade from inside her robe and jams it under Shichiro's chin. The same sword shard that killed her husband.

Shichiro bolts up to his feet. The blade shoved in his head.

His men watch in horror.

Shichiro takes two steps...

Then falls dead with a *thud*.

BLACK.

THE END