

The 47 Ronin

by
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DARKNESS...

Then a VOICE rises from the pitch.

NARRATOR (VO)

Feudal Japan. The Age of Shoguns and Samurai. A time when the ideals of Loyalty and Honor are prized above all else by the people of the Land of the Rising Sun...

(beat)

In Edo, the Emperor has been reduced to a ceremonial puppet. All power rests with the Shogun -- military warlord Tokugawa Tsunayoshi -- and is enforced by his provincial barons -- the *Daimyo*. The peace of the realm is kept by the swords of their loyal retainers, the *samurai* -- warriors of incomparable skill and honor, who live their lives by the strict code of ethics known as *bushido* -- the "Way of the Warrior". To these loyal knights, their duty to their lord comes above all else...even their own lives.

(beat)

A samurai who should ever lose or fail his master, suffers the greatest shame in all Japanese society. They become *ronin*. Masterless drifters. Men without honor. To be *ronin* is to be banished from every city, to be despised by Japanese society, to know humiliation without end.

(beat)

And yet...to know the story of the 47 Ronin...is to know the story of all Japan.

SUPER:

The following is based on a true story...

NOW OPEN ON:

EXT. THE PROVINCE OF AKO - DAY - ESTABLISHING

The small and peaceful "jewel" of western Honshu...

Jade-green hillocks terraced with rice paddies. Stands of ruby-red cherry blossom trees overlooking a sapphire slash of river. And crowning it all stands the magnificent AKO CASTLE -- a six-tiered architectural poem written in wood and stone.

We can't help but to sense the harmony of this place.

SUPER:

Ako Castle.

Western Honshu, 1701 A.D.

Suddenly a PRIMAL YELL shatters the scene.

OISHI (VO)
READY!

SFX: The DEADLY RASP of ONE HUNDRED SWORDS drawn in unison.

OISHI (VO) (CONT'D)
KESA!

Instantly -- SCHUNK-SHUNKK-SCHUNKK! The sound of a hundred swords CUTTING through a hundred bodies. A great percussion of limbs thumping to the ground, which TAKES US TO:

A FOREST OF EMERALD-GREEN BAMBOO TREES

Each five inches thick and tough as iron. So many, we can't see ten feet into the forest when --

OISHI (OS)
NORTH FRONT! READY!

SFX: A company of men turning in unison.

OISHI (OS)
MISU-GAESHI!

On command, a hundred razor-sharp KATANAS flash diagonally up through frame, SHEARING through the bamboo as easily as a knife slices tofu. But before the trees can fall, the swords slice back, lightning fast -- SHWOPP! -- cleaving them a second time horizontally!

The pieces of bamboo tumble away...REVEALING an ARMY OF SAMURAI WARRIORS. Behind them, shouting the orders, is their commander, and chief samurai of the Asano Clan, OISHI KURANOSUKE.

Oishi is in his mid-forties. A proud, stubborn throwback to the great warriors of times past.

OISHI
EAST FRONT! READY!

As the hundred warriors pivot with machine precision, PULL BACK TO REVEAL that we are not in a forest at all, but actually a CASTLE COURTYARD.

What we thought to be a bamboo jungle, our new angle now reveals are simply a multitude of TARGETS; Oishi is drilling them at *tameshigiri* -- test-cutting with their swords.

Oishi calls out another strike. Swords flash, bamboo falls. And as the music RISES, we CUT TO:

INT. AKO CASTLE - 6TH FLOOR - WOMEN'S APARTMENTS

A beautiful young woman, MIKA (19), stands at the window watching the soldiers practice below, her gaze falling on one in particular.

Everything about MINORU (late-20's) is different. Of half-European/half-Japanese descent, he is relegated to a lower caste and practices away from the others. While the others wear samurai armor, Minoru practices in peasant pants and without a shirt, revealing a sheen of washboard muscle. And rather than a steel sword, he practices with a *bokken* -- a wooden blade -- and thin air as his target.

But despite his lower status -- perhaps even *because* of it -- Minoru has dedicated himself more seriously to the sword than any around him. His moves have a fluidity and speed unequalled by anyone else we've seen.

Suddenly, the ricepaper door behind Mika slides open and she jumps with a start. The young *daimyo* of Ako castle, LORD ASANO (36), enters the room.

LORD ASANO

Mika-chan.

MIKA

Father.

LORD ASANO

I thought you would be practicing your dance.

MIKA

I was, I just got caught up in the...

(awkward beat)

...the beauty of the day.

Asano puts his hands on his daughter's shoulders.

LORD ASANO

This is important, Mika-chan. Of all the provinces we have been honored to host the Shogun and must make every effort --

(glances out the window at the warriors practicing)

-- despite the view.

MIKA
 (blushes)
 Of course, father.

He kisses her forehead and, as he moves off, is rewarded to the first few footsteps and flutters of her FAN as she begins to practice the dance of *The Shrine Maiden's Ghost*.

INT. AKO CASTLE - VARIOUS

TRACK with Asano as he descends through the castle. With a visit from the Shogun imminent, the place is a beehive of activity: paper lanterns being hung, flowers being arranged in dramatic displays, children practicing the farmer's folk song "*Teru-Teru-Bozu*".

Asano offers a kind word or a gentle command to almost everyone he passes.

LORD ASANO
 (to a lantern hanger)
 Beautiful, Yasu.
 (to a child singing)
 Excellent. Very good.

The child beams with pride. As Asano passes through the kitchen, we overhear the MASTER CHEF speaking to his APPRENTICE in the b.g.

MASTER CHEF
 ...finish cleaning the pheasants,
 then make sure that all the knives
 are locked away well before the
 Shogun arrives.

APPRENTICE
 Of course, Master, but why..?

MASTER CHEF
 Shogunate law. To draw an edged
 blade while the Shogun is in
 residence, even a chef's knife,
 carries a mandatory sentence of
 death.

The Apprentice blanches. Then turns and shouts at the kitchen staff.

APPRENTICE
 All blades away now! NOW, I SAID!!

Asano moves on, a smile wrinkling the corner of his mouth.

It's clear that Ako castle is Camelot at its height -- the people of the province living happy, contented lives -- and Asano is its Arthur; noble, just and kind.

EXT. AKO CASTLE - COURTYARD - MOMENTS LATER

The young lord enters the training grounds. Oishi and his samurai instantly sheathe their weapons and bow.

OISHI

My Lord.

Asano calls out to Minoru.

LORD ASANO

Bring my horse. And another for the swordmaster.

Minoru takes off for the stables like a shot. Asano then turns to the massed samurai.

LORD ASANO

Training is finished for the day. I need your captain. You men are dismissed.

As the men move off to their posts, Minoru arrives with the horses. As the two men mount up, Minoru speaks to Oishi.

MINORU

Do you need someone to accompany you?

Oishi looks down at Minoru. It pains him to say this:

OISHI

You know it wouldn't be appropriate.

Minoru bows his head.

MINORU

Of course not. Thank you for considering.

Oishi wants to say more, perhaps a word of comfort, but Lord Asano turns his mount and begins to ride off.

LORD ASANO

Come, Oishi.

And Oishi must follow his young master.

The moment they're gone, Minoru's icy control melts. He grabs up a sword and, with a roar of rage, attacks the *tameshigiri* targets with a STUNNING MARTIAL DISPLAY.

A blur of movement, he cuts a swath through the field of targets CHOPPING and SLICING, severing DOZENS of lengths of bamboo -- then cutting them each into TWO, THREE, FOUR smaller pieces before they can hit the ground.

It's a lethal DANCE OF DEATH that grows FASTER AND FASTER until he wheels around to give the target behind him a FINAL DECAPITATING CHOP --

-- and finds MIKA standing right there.

Minoru's blade whirls into his sheath faster she can blink. Bows his head and AVERTS his eyes from the Lord's daughter.

For an awkward moment, the two stand there, hidden from everyone else's view in the heart of the bamboo field. Then Mika reaches out and gently lifts his chin with a finger, intentionally raising Minoru's eyes to look into her own.

The act is more intimate than a kiss.

After a moment, Minoru remembers his place and pulls away.

MINORU

We cannot --

MIKA

What we "cannot" do is deny our feelings.

MINORU

Mika...
(serious)
It can never be.

MIKA

Silly, boy. Do you care for life so much to cease living it?
(she caresses his face)
Deny me if you can, my sweet Minoru, but I warn you, you'll find my love a stronger opponent than your doubt.

She smiles and begins to kiss him.

And before long, it is he who is kissing her.

With all his heart.

EXT. AKO CASTLE - BEYOND THE MAIN GATE - SAME TIME

Asano and Oishi ride along the road leading away from the castle.

OISHI

Where are we going?

LORD ASANO
I wanted to personally verify that
the roads are presentable for the
arrival of the Shogun.

Oishi waits a beat, then --

OISHI
So where are we *really* going?

Asano smiles.

EXT. AKO COUNTRYSIDE - DAY

A land of mythic beauty...

Asano hops about and shouts excitedly as he tries to land a
fish on the grassy banks of the Seto inland sea.

LORD ASANO
Come, my beauty! Don't tease!

And with a whoop he lands the fish -- a nice-looking RED SEA
BREAM. Its scales glimmer with ruby iridescence in the sun.

LORD ASANO
Will you not look at this Goddess!

Asano whispers a few words of praise to the wriggling fish,
then releases it back into the water.

OISHI
Will you never keep one of those?
You go to such effort to catch
them.

LORD ASANO
I know I caught it. It knows I
caught it. That's enough for me.

OISHI
Is this what happens when you get
promoted from warrior to statesman?
You become sentimental about the
lives of fish?

LORD ASANO
I prefer to think of it as
enlightened.

OISHI
It is foolishness.

Asano mock arches an eyebrow at the older swordsman. But
Oishi is serious.

OISHI

And it's dangerous.

(beat)

Sentiment is a deception, Takumi.
An imbalance in the Way of things.
It's choosing to look at life as
how you'd wish it, rather than how
it truly is.

LORD ASANO

(smiles)

And you get all this from releasing
a fish?

OISHI

(frustrated)

All life is about balance. About
order. I'm certain the fish would
rather not be caught, but even it
knows its duty is to give its life
for its lord.

(beat)

In a fight, it is a matter of death
to lose one's balance. Political
life is no different.

LORD ASANO

Fine. Next time I'll eat the fish.

OISHI

It's not about the damned fish!
The Shogun arrives in a matter of
days and here we are, dipping our
toes in the lake.

LORD ASANO

The castle is prepared.

OISHI

Yes, but are you?

(beat)

They call this visit a celebration,
but it is an inspection, Takumi.
Don't delude yourself. I believe
Lord Kira selected your province to
try and convince the Shogun that
your lands aren't being used
wisely. Do not underestimate him.
He has the Shogun's ear and an
ambition not to be trifled with.
The lands of the last two daimyo to
have displeased the Shogun have
gone to Lord Kira.

LORD ASANO

Lord Kira may have his ear, but
like us, the Shogun is a samurai of
the old ways.

(MORE)

LORD ASANO (CONT'D)
 (picks up his fishing
 pole)
 Now, if you'll excuse me...

Oishi throws up his hands.

OISHI
 I give up. Talking to you is like
 talking to a geisha.

A twinkle of mirth glitters in Asano's eye. He rises.

LORD ASANO
 Is *that* what you do with geisha?
 No wonder you're so frustrated --

But as they turn, they are surprised to find a band of
 BRIGANDS atop the bank. A half-dozen murderous sellswords,
 armed to the teeth: swords, *yari* spears, even a heavy
 wheellock arquebus.

BRIGAND LEADER
 We'll take the horses.

It is impossible to tell when Oishi's sword is drawn, it
 happens so fast. But Asano places a calming hand on his
 shoulder.

LORD ASANO
 No.

Oishi looks the brigands over, disgusted.

OISHI
 Ronin.

He practically spits the word.

LORD ASANO
 Come now. Just because they are
 masterless samurai, doesn't mean
 they are *honorless* samurai.

He turns back to the grim-faced thugs.

LORD ASANO
 Do you know who I am?

BRIGAND LEADER
 Someone who's going to see what his
 guts look like dancing on the
 ground if you don't hand over the
 horses.

LORD ASANO
 You're very insulting.

BRIGAND LEADER

And you're very stupid.

LORD ASANO

I didn't mean to me.

(points to Oishi)

You're insulting *him*. Talking so brashly and thinking only a half-dozen men is enough to protect you.

(tsk, tsk)

Very arrogant.

BRIGAND LEADER

Kill him.

Asano shrugs and turns to Oishi as the thugs close in.

LORD ASANO

Diplomacy fails.

OISHI

In this instance, I can't say I'm too sorry.

LORD ASANO

Leave one alive for questioning.

OISHI

If I must.

And as the ronin close in, intent on killing the young lord, Oishi takes a moment to look around. It seems as though he's taking in his final seconds of life. But really he's --

OISHI'S POV

-- formulating a plan. He sees them coming and MENTALLY DISSECTS THE SCENE. From a WIDE ANGLE, we RACK IN on particular geographic features: the POSITION OF THE SUN, a TANGLE OF ROOTS. Then on the WEAPONS EACH MAN CARRIES, noting each in VFX of its effective lethal range.

And in the blink of an eye, Oishi's got his plan.

THE BATTLE

Oishi wades in. In the BRIGANDS' POV, it's lightning fast. In OISHI'S, it's all in SLOW MOTION.

As the first attacker (BRIGAND #1) charges in with a spear, Oishi moves sideways, putting his back to the sun.

POV SPEARMAN: With the sun shining in his eyes, Oishi appears in SILHOUETTE.

On reflex, the attacker uses Oishi's shadow to BLOCK the bright sun -- which is exactly what Oishi counted on. With explosive speed, Oishi CRABS LEFT, momentarily BLINDING the spearman and STEPPING IN with a DIAGONAL UPWARD STRIKE.

Like the *tameshigiri* targets he was training his men on, Brigand #1 is CUT COMPLETELY IN TWO on a diagonal bias.

Without a pause, Oishi snatches the falling man's spear and RAMS it into Brigand #2's eye, killing him instantly.

BRIGANDS 3, 4 and 5 charge into the gap, but in a surgical display of skill and ferocity, Oishi performs a *happo giri* ("the cut of eight directions") CLEAVING them clean through the torso, then further BISECTING their upper-half from skull to waist.

Like so much bamboo, the bodies FALL APART IN THREE PIECES. It's like nothing we've ever seen before.

Now Oishi charges on the survivors. The tide of battle turns and the brigands quick-step back...right into the TANGLE OF ROOTS. They TRIP and go down hard.

Brigand #6 raises his musket to get off a shot, but Oishi strikes. SEVERES the arquebus' barrel -- but his sword SHATTERS to half its length in the process.

No matter. Even with jagged stub of blade left, Oishi is the deadliest thing out there. He JABS his ragged blade into the musketeer's throat, then WHEELS on a stunned axeman and performs "The Hourglass" -- a four-stroke zig-zagging cut that ends with the man's body EXPLODING APART IN SIX PIECES!

Now only the Brigand Leader is left, laying on the ground, screaming in panic.

Oishi flicks blood off his shattered blade and approaches.

OISHI
They've forgotten how to make a
decent blade.

BRIGAND LEADER
(hysterical)
..h..he said to keep one alive...

But Oishi's blade lashes out and CUTS OFF the Brigand Leader's sword arm.

OISHI
Unfortunate for you.

Suddenly Asano CRIES OUT from behind.

Oishi whips around in panic, gore-covered sword ready to strike --!!

Only to find Asano capering around at the water's edge again, bamboo fishing rod bowed, another fish on the line.

LORD ASANO
Come now, my beauty! My little
Empress of the Waves!

Oishi shakes his head. And as he jams his broken katana into its sheath, we --

SMASH CUT TO:

THE BEAUTIFUL SEA BREAM

On a cutting board. Then -- CHOP!

As the fish's head is slid aside and a knife begins delicate work, WIDEN TO REVEAL we are:

INT. OISHI'S HOME - KITCHEN - SUNSET

A humble dwelling, as opposed to the majesty of Ako castle. Clean. Simple. Comfortable.

Oishi's wife, HISAE (early 40's) stands at the board; a natural beauty with a smile that belies a deep inner-strength. The kind of woman every man wants to marry.

Humming a folksong, her fingers nimbly turn the fish into sashimi while she stares out the window at her husband and their 16-year-old son, CHIKARA, sparring with wooden swords in the yard.

She smiles contentedly.

EXT. OISHI'S HOUSE - CONTINUOUS

The swords CLACK with the rhythm of war until Oishi senses an opening and slaps Chikara on the leg with his *bokken*.

OISHI
You switched to a left-handed
stance. Try again.

But time and again, Chikara falls back into defending with his left and gets struck by his father's sword. Hard. Blows meant to be remembered and learned from.

Tears of frustration rise in the boy's eyes. Oishi sees this and changes tacks. Removes his *obi* from his kimono.

OISHI
Here. Let's try this...

Oishi begins to tie his son's left hand down to his side.

CHIKARA
I don't understand. Why all this?

OISHI
Because every time you're hit with strength, you switch to your left hand, and when you do that, you leave your flank exposed to right handed samurai --

Oishi cinches the knot down hard to emphasize the point.

OISHI
-- which is everyone.
(ruffles his son's hair)
It's for your own good.

The two go back to practicing until Hisae comes outside.

HISAE
Enough practice, Oishi. You've been out here for hours. He's a growing boy. He needs to eat as much as he needs to practice.

Oishi relents with a smile.

OISHI
All right. Practice is over.

He unties Chikara's left hand.

OISHI
(grins)
...but you *will* be eating with your right.

As they move to walk inside, a RIDER comes galloping down the footpath at full-speed. Stops only inches from Oishi.

Oishi's second-in-command -- and best friend -- HANJO (late 50's) dismounts the panting beast.

OISHI
You're going to kill that horse, Hanjo.

HANJO
An envoy from the Shogun has arrived at the castle.

Oishi stops dead.

OISHI
So early?

HANJO

Lord Asano requests your presence
to receive him.

Like a flipped switch, Oishi goes into command mode.

OISHI

Gather the men. Have them ready
for presentation in an hour.

Chikara looks up at his father, hopefully.

OISHI

No. You stay with your mother.

It's kindly said, and stings all the more for it.

And with that, Oishi mounts up. As he rides off, Hisae turns
to her despondent son.

HISAE

He's hard on you because he loves
you.

But Chikara shakes his head.

CHIKARA

He loves me...but I'll never be
good enough in his eyes.

And Chikara walks off, leaving Hisae alone on the path,
staring after the two men in her life departing in very
separate directions...

DISSOLVE TO:

INT. AKO CASTLE - DAIMYO'S *SHOIN* - 7TH FLOOR - MOMENTS LATER

The private room where the castle Lord receives audience...

The paper walls and *tatami* mats are spotless. In fact, the
only bits of color come from the black and gray kimonos of
Lord Asano and Oishi, who kneel at the rear of the room.

Just then, the shoji doors slide open and LORD KIRA enters --
an explosion of pomposity and sumptuous silk. Rather than
the plain formal robes that Asano and Oishi wear, Lord Kira
floats along in the most GAUDILY ORNATE ROBE we've ever seen.

A dozen ATTENDANTS follow behind, wrangling Kira's arm and
leg sleeves that trail twenty feet behind.

After countless precise steps, Lord Kira and his entourage
stop and a COURTIER steps forward.

COURTIER

The exalted Shogunate's Master of Protocol and most-honorable Lord of the Ryogoku domain, Lord Kira Kozukenosuke Yoshinaka.

Asano and Oishi bow.

When Kira speaks, we see his teeth are BLACKENED in the trendy, effeminate style of court aristocrats.

LORD KIRA

Daimyo Asano Takumi no kami
Naganori... you may look upon me.

LORD ASANO

Fortune truly smiles upon us to receive so august a member of the Shogunate.

Asano waits for a return compliment, as is the custom... but after a moment, it's clear none will be forthcoming.

LORD ASANO

We were surprised at your early arrival --

Kira cuts him off.

LORD KIRA

You should be grateful for my early arrival. I went over the presentations you have planned for the Shogun. They were riddled with errors in court protocol. I have done my best to correct them, thereby saving you from myriad humiliations before the Shogun.

Asano again bows his head to the floor. Oishi is clearly annoyed with Kira's attitude.

LORD ASANO

Thank you, Lord Kira. In return, the people of Ako and I wish to offer you this token of appreciation.

Asano claps two summoning sticks together and two retainers enter the room bearing a lacquered CHEST. Kira waves impatiently, and the chest is opened -- revealing a BOUNTY OF GOLD COINS.

But Kira stares at the glittering fortune, unimpressed.

LORD KIRA

Token...

(beat)

A token gift indeed.

Asano and Oishi are struck by the comment. Kira doesn't care.

LORD KIRA

A true gift is what has been
bestowed upon you, Lord Asano.
Wasted, in truth.

Kira glances out the window at the countryside.

LORD KIRA

Only twenty percent of the land in
the entire country is capable of
producing crops. And yet here you
sit with your cherry blossom trees
and your grassy hills.

(beat)

A man could raise an army to dwarf
all others with fertile soil such
as this. An ambitious man.

Kira takes a handful of gold coins. Lets them slip
disdainfully through his fingers, unwanted as pennies.

LORD KIRA

Pity.

And in a flurry of silk and arrogance, Kira exits the room.

When he's gone, Oishi rises, knuckles white on his sword.

OISHI

I'd like to strike that smug head
from his shoulders.

But the young lord puts a calming hand on Oishi's shoulder.

LORD ASANO

The world is changing, my friend.
Courtiers like Kira are the new
samurai. Guns are replacing
swords. And the swords that remain
are mostly ornamental.

(indicates)

Like yours. There was a time when
it would've been unthinkable for
your blade to shatter against the
inferior ones of those *ronin* at the
sea. But that was when the art of
true swordmaking was still valued.
Still cared for.

(beat)

(MORE)

LORD ASANO (CONT'D)
 Now the legendary *koto* blades are
 long since forgotten. Now outward
 expression takes precedence over
 inner core.

Asano turns to the window and stares at the same countryside
 Kira did moments before.

LORD ASANO
 It is not Kira that is the problem
 in this age...but *us*.

Then, almost to himself --

LORD ASANO
 Because we remember.

DISSOLVE TO:

INT. AKO CASTLE - STOREHOUSE - NIGHT

Safely ensconced among barrels of sake and bolts of silk,
 Mika and Minoru hold each other in the moonlight.

Gently, Mika traces his eyebrows with the tip of her finger.

MIKA
 I like the shape of your eyes.

But he lowers his face, ashamed.

MINORU
 They set me apart.

MIKA
 Yes, but in a good way.
 (beat)
 I look at your eyes and I see that
 your father loved your mother.
 Your face tells their story.
 Clearly, and to the world.
 Unashamed.
 (looks him in the eye)
 As someday I hope our children's
 will tell ours.

And as she smiles at him --

SFX: A LOW RUMBLING BEGINS

Barely audible at first, but GROWING. Soon, loose grains of
 rice on the ground begin to VIBRATE and DANCE.

Minoru is the first to notice. Stops, listening.

MIKA
What is it?

Minoru doesn't answer, but races to an arrowslit.

POV MINORU: The darkened hillside. Then the low clouds begin to GLOW ORANGE from beneath as eight thousand torches CREST THE RISE!

The Shogun's ARMY has arrived.

BACK TO SHOT: As Mika watches, Minoru races for the storehouse door -- then catches himself. Stops. Races back. Kisses her.

And races out to find Oishi.

EXT. AKO CASTLE - MAIN GATE - NIGHT

The mist-shrouded castle looks like something out of myth -- a pagoda of the gods alight with the glow of ten thousand paper lanterns.

Asano and his Honor Guard, headed by Oishi, stand within the castle's enormous main gate as the Shogun's company arrives.

Bearing the HERALDIC CHARGE OF THE TOKUGAWA CLAN, the great sea of warriors passes through the ancient gate. MYTHIC-LOOKING SAMURAI UNITS from the fifty provinces, each with its own distinctive STANDARD or DEVICE:

-- Kyoto's CRIMSON DEVIL SQUAD in their lacquered, BLOOD-RED ARMOR...

-- The IRON BOARS of Hizen, with two-foot-long sharpened iron TUSKS on their great helms...

-- The Izumi TIGERS in their enameled TIGER-STRIPE PLATE ARMOR, bristling with STEEL CLAWS...

And more. Edo's PHOENIX REGIMENT. Shima's SCORPIONS. Osaka's WHITE CRANES. Five thousand mythic shapes filling the courtyard like warriors from some dark god's fever dream.

Suddenly, all at once, they STOP.

There's a charged moment. Asano and Oishi exchange a glance.

Then, as if by telepathy, the armies SEPARATE, clearing a path for a SHADOWY FIGURE to walk forward.

From a spiked chain wrapped about his fist, the Figure leads four monstrous DOGS OF WAR. Snarling, snapping, they are each as large as a bullock; muscles rippling, ready to kill.

But they're nothing compared to the man on the other end of the chain:

SHOGUN TOKUGAWA TSUNAYOSHI (54)

is easily the most intimidating figure we've ever seen. Born in the Year of the Dog, his fearsome *kabuto* helm is rendered in the shape of a great snarling DOG OF WAR.

Six feet of heavy, scarred-covered muscle, the Shogun is the survivor of a hundred grim battles and has been hard-tempered into the very image of control. Of Law.

As his dogs growl menacingly, the Shogun stalks up Asano and stands there, weighing the young *daimyo* with his gaze.

It's an uncomfortable moment. But Asano bows regally.

LORD ASANO

Shogun Tokugawa Tsunayoshi, the people of Ako bid you welcome.

The fierce Shogun pins Asano with his gaze.

Then nods.

COURT ANNOUNCER (VO)

The rules of the melee are simple. If a warrior is struck, he is out.

HARD CUT TO:

EXT. AKO'S OUTDOOR COMBAT ARENA - DAY

The stands are full of various LORDS AND RETAINERS from the Shogun's entourage. In the crowd, FIND Lord Asano. Oishi and his daughter sit to either side of him.

COURT ANNOUNCER

The last warrior standing wins the exhibition in the name of their clan, and a boon from the Shogun.

The Announcer nods to the Shogun who sits like a grim statue.

Suddenly, an oily voice speaks behind Asano.

LORD KIRA (OS)

I did not know your concubine was so lovely, Lord Asano.

Asano turns to see the effete Kira staring at Mika.

LORD ASANO

She is my daughter.

LORD KIRA
 All the better.
 (bows before Mika)
 Your father forgets his manners. I
 am Kira Kozukenosuke.

MIKA
 Asano Mika.

Kira's eyes crawl over her bowed form.

LORD KIRA
 We will become better acquainted,
 you and I, Lady Asano.

Kira maintains his gaze. It feels like hands roaming over her skin. Mika quickly becomes uncomfortable and just as Asano rises to intervene --

The Master of Protocol moves on to take his seat beside the Shogun.

EXT. COMBAT ARENA - READY AREA - CONTINUOUS

Over fifty SAMURAI COMBATANTS are lined up to enter the ring, each wearing the DISTINCTIVE ARMOR and CRESTS of their clans. One by one, they enter as the Announcer calls their province.

TOWARD THE REAR OF THE LINE, Hanjo paces worriedly.

HANJO
 Where in the Eighteen Hells is
 Taro? Minoru, check his house!

Minoru sprints off to --

EXT. TARO'S HOUSE - MOMENTS LATER

Thatch roof and earthen walls. Minoru bursts --

INSIDE

-- startling the COURTESAN who leaps up and tries to cover her nakedness. TARO keeps on sleeping.

MINORU
 (shaking him awake)
 Taro, get up! The melee's about to
 start! TARO!

TARO
 (hungover)
 What..? Huh? Oh yes, yes. Get my
 armor.

Minoru turns and grabs up the heavy cuirass bearing the CREST of House Asano -- two falcon feathers crossed over one another -- but when he turns back, Taro is passed out again.

EXT. COMBAT ARENA - SAME TIME

The combat floor has filled with the samurai combatants. The Announcer calls the last warrior.

COURT ANNOUNCER
And finally, fighting on behalf of
our noble host. Clan Asano's Torii
Taro!

But no one enters the arena. There's a horribly awkward pause. Asano and Oishi share a look.

IN THE READY AREA

Hanjo is sweating it... until Taro races up in his armor.

HANJO
Oh thank the gods! Get in there!
Get in there!!

But as he runs past, we get a glimpse under his kabuto helm and see that it's not Taro at all, but --

MINORU

He enters the arena and takes his place among the sea of samurai. So much MYTHOLOGICALLY-INSPIRED ARMOR, the battlefield looks like someone has sprung the gates of hell.

Beneath his disguise, Minoru's heart is racing, his breath coming too fast, skin sheened in sweat.

And in that moment, he CLOSES HIS EYES and takes a breath. Holds it until his mind is calmed...

COURT ANNOUNCER
Begin!

And when his eyes FLASH OPEN, there's steel in them, all fear evaporated.

And the contest starts.

The combat floor ERUPTS in a motion. *Bokken* flashing faster than the eye can follow. The SOUND of wood striking metal. Leather. Flesh.

Minoru SWEEPS under the guard of a fighter with a MONSTROUS LEVIATHAN FISH HELM, and STRIKES his abdomen. In an instant, the man is out -- and so are half the other combatants.

But there's no time to rest as a Noto HARE springs forward and attacks with the jackrabbit speed his clan is known for. Minoru loses his footing and TRIPS, making an easy target for the Hare. He's a sitting duck --

But when he catches sight of Mika in the stands, he refuses to go down like this. As the Hare leaps to deliver the eliminating blow, Minoru WHIRLS OUT OF THE WAY and RIPOSTES with a clean shot to the man's legs. The Rabbit cries out as he crumples to the ground.

Other fighters close in --

But Minoru's switch has been flipped. He picks up another sword off the ground and DUAL-WIELDS -- one in each hand.

POV MINORU - as the field of battle swirls around him, impossibly slow. As an IRON BOAR charges, Minoru easily redirects with one sword and STRIKES the man's helm with the other, SNAPPING OFF AN IRON TUSK and sending him SPRAWLING into the dirt.

BACK TO SHOT - as Minoru wades through the fray like a killing machine, an ambidextrous engine of death, eliminating fighter after fighter after fighter.

IN THE STANDS - a corpulent daimyo turns to Asano.

CORPULENT DAIMYO
Your man is good.

Asano nods, but beside him, Oishi is beginning to suspect.

OISHI
(under his breath)
Not *that* good.

With Minoru coming on like a cyclone of swordwork, the surviving samurai start joining forces to take him out.

It does no good.

THE SHOGUN watches the display -- Minoru taking on two fighters simultaneously. Then three. The Shogun is impressed. Kira grimaces, wishing the fighter was anyone but Asano's.

OVERHEAD SHOT - the contest has separated into two distinct maelstroms of battle across the arena from each other, swirling in opposite directions.

IN MINORU'S FRAY - Every remaining fighter joins forces against Minoru, six samurai against one. The rapid-fire CLACKING OF BLADES sounds like dominoes in a blender.

And just when we think it can get no faster, Minoru takes it up a level, INCREASING THE TEMPO and turning the attackers into defenders.

Minoru establishes a RHYTHM to his double attacks, and once the defenders settle into it -- he BREAKS it, exploding in an UNHOLY ONSLAUGHT that takes them all out.

OVERHEAD SHOT - In the end, both battles resolve simultaneously, leaving only two fighters standing. Minoru on one end of the arena...and a warrior from nightmare on the other.

Minoru's opponent is a muscular giant, a foot taller than he and clad in battle gear ripped from H.P. Lovecraft's most horrific delirium. His armor is composed of lacquered black SCALES; his helm wrought into the shape of a DEMON OCTOPUS wrapped around his head, eight long STEEL TENTACLES dangling down his back.

MIKA

turns worriedly to Asano.

MIKA
Father, who is that?

But before Asano can answer, Kira leans in.

LORD KIRA
The victor from last year, my dear.
(smugly)
My fighter...

The audience is holding its breath. And at a nod from Kira, his fighter marches on Minoru. Minoru waits for the sonofabitch to get in range, then BLAZES INTO A WHIRLWIND ATTACK WITH BOTH SWORDS!

But the Lovecraftian Samurai counters every single strike easily and continues marching on Minoru, relentless as a golem.

Recovering, Minoru executes a tricky three-way cut, but the Knight WHIPS his head around and LASHES Minoru's leg with his steel tentacles, YANKING him from his feet.

In a heartbeat, the knight rushes forward and unleashes a blow at full-strength at Minoru's head. Minoru blocks with both *bokken* --

And both of his swords explode into a thousand splinters!

The audience gasps. Only the handles of his obliterated swords remain in Minoru's hands. Realizing his defeat, he rises and bows to the knight.

But the Octopus turns to Kira, who nods --

And the bastard STRIKES MINORU IN THE FACE with all his might. WHAM! Minoru flies ten feet and crashes, sprawling, into the ground. Again the audience GASPS and the entire world STOPS...

But this time it's because the helmet that has hidden Minoru's identity...lays twenty feet away in the dirt.

IN THE STANDS - Mika GASPS. Asano GAPES. Oishi lowers his head.

LORD KIRA uses the thunder of the moment, pointing at Minoru.

LORD KIRA
This is an outrage!
(looks to Asano)
Who is responsible for this?!

Asano begins to rise -- but Minoru prostrates himself before the great warlord.

MINORU
This was my vanity. Lord Asano
knew nothing of this.

LORD KIRA
How dare you wear the armor of a
samurai! You're a halfbreed!

MINORU
I cannot deny it.
(turns to the Shogun)
But my father was an honored
samurai. He fought alongside you
at Sekigahara, Lord Shogun. I only
wanted to display my skills before
you to honor his memory.

Mika's heart skips a beat as Minoru stands at the center of the ring. The Shogun's stony eyes consider him. Then --

SHOGUN
You have demonstrated great
ability...

Minoru's eyes fill with pride.

SHOGUN
...but no matter what you
accomplish, a halfbreed will never
be worthy of being a samurai.

And the dream shatters.

SHOGUN
 (to his men)
 Strip him of his armor and have it
 burned. It is tainted.

Instantly, the Shogun's elite guard come forward and start VIOLENTLY RIPPING the armor off his body. It's brutal to watch, a public beating, and Minoru offers no resistance.

The sheer intensity of the humiliation forces Mika to look away.

When they are done, Minoru, bloodied, bows low before the Shogun.

MINORU
 Forgive my arrogance.

SHOGUN
 You are dismissed.

And as Minoru makes the long walk of shame out of the arena, Asano turns to his daughter -- and is surprised to find her eyes filled with TEARS. Almost as if she was WEEPING.

He watches her, genuinely confused by her emotion...until REALIZATION hits. Asano's jaw drops as it all clicks together in his head. He looks again at Minoru; at his daughter...

And realizes that they are lovers.

As Asano sits back, stunned, mind reeling -- RACK FOCUS across the stands to Lord Kira, who has been watching the whole exchange.

And he has realized it, too.

SLOW DISSOLVE TO:

EXT. AKO CASTLE - HOURS LATER

The Shogun's armies have bivouacked in the greensward around the castle -- a city of tents billowing in the breeze, each flying the PENNON and CREST of the unit housed within.

INT. AKO CASTLE - BANQUET HALL - NIGHT

A feast has died down and people are retiring for the night. The Shogun rises to leave, sending a courtier to Asano's table.

COURTIER

The Shogun will now retire for the evening.

LORD ASANO

Of course.

Asano turns to the Shogun across the room and bows low. The Shogun's face is an emotionless mask as he moves off.

When the Shogun is gone, Asano's calm veneer cracks and his eyes begin to search the room for something. Oishi clocks it.

OISHI

You are troubled. I take full responsibility for Minoru's actions today --

LORD ASANO

It's not that.

OISHI

What then?

LORD ASANO

I have to speak to my daughter. It's urgent.

TRACK WITH Asano as he moves off through the castle.

As he nears the women's chambers, Asano HEARS Mika's voice WHISPERING around a corner. Small sounds of passion.

Asano's face hardens and he rounds the corner to find Mika in the embrace of:

LORD ASANO

MINORU!

But as the man turns, it's not Minoru at all -- rather LORD KIRA. And the sounds Mika was making were not passion, but STRUGGLE.

Seeing Asano, Mika's eyes plead for help.

MIKA

Father!

Asano is there in a heartbeat, wrenching Kira away and HURLING him against the wall.

LORD ASANO

What is the meaning of this?!

But Kira is a tower of fury.

LORD KIRA
*HOW DARE YOU LAY YOUR HANDS UPON A
 COURTIER OF THE SHOGUN!*

MIKA
 (hysterical)
 Father, he was --

LORD KIRA
 Hold your tongue if you wish to
 keep it, girl!

LORD ASANO
 That is enough!

Kira's hand moves to his sword.

LORD ASANO
Don't you dare.

MIKA
 He was going to --

LORD KIRA
 I said SHUT YOUR MOUTH!

And in a blur of motion, Kira DRAWS HIS SWORD at Mika and
 Asano SLASHES OUT to parry the blow --

-- only to find that he's been tricked.

Kira does not have a sword in his hands...but one of Mika's
 FANS severed in half by Asano's gleaming blade.

ECU as the slashed half of the fan falls to the floor.
 Though it's light as a feather, the sound of it hitting the
 wooden floor is like the toll of Doom's bell.

BACK TO SHOT as Asano looks up...and sees Kira LEERING.

LORD KIRA
 Drawing a weapon while the Shogun
 is in residence...
 (ominous)
 ...is punished by death.

And as the enormity of what Asano's just done hits home,
 WIDEN TO REVEAL that several shocked onlookers stand in the
 hall -- castle retainers and a growing number of the Shogun's
 samurai -- staring at Asano's UNSHEATHED BLADE in horror.

LORD KIRA
 Guards! Take him!

MIKA
 No!

LORD ASANO
 Mika... Mika-chan... Look at me.
 (when she does)
 It's all right. Do you hear me?

The Shogun's samurai advance threateningly. Asano sets his sword on the ground.

LORD ASANO
 There is no need for that. I will not resist.

MIKA
 (as they seize him)
 NO, LET HIM GO --!

Asano sees Oishi appear at the edge of the crowd.

OISHI
 MY LORD --?!

LORD ASANO
 Oishi, take her away from here.

MIKA
 FATHER!!

And as Asano is marched off, Oishi does as he was told.

CUT TO:

INT. AKO CASTLE - PREPARATION CHAMBER - NIGHT

Asano kneels in prayer at an altar of his ancestors. The robes he wears are pristine white.

OISHI (O.S.)
 Let me see him, gods damn you, or there will be two more funerals this night.

The doors are opened and Oishi enters the chamber. Oishi crosses the room to kneel beside Asano. Whispers.

OISHI
 I can get you out of here. I have several horses readied --

But Asano holds up a hand, stopping him mid-sentence.

LORD ASANO
 Would you have me run from honor?

Oishi searches for an answer that will stop this madness...but finds none. Asano meet Oishi's eyes.

LORD ASANO

You know I cannot. You taught me too well, old friend. I broke the law and must pay the price.

OISHI

You drew out of defense of your daughter! You were deliberately tricked --

LORD ASANO

I *knew* the law.

(beat)

Over the generations, people may come to question the honor of Lord Kira, but never the integrity of the Asano name.

The door opens and one of the Shogun's COURTIERS enters.

COURTIER

The Shogun awaits.

Asano nods and rises.

LORD ASANO

Oishi... I would be honored if you would act as my second.

OISHI

Don't ask me to do that. I cannot--

LORD ASANO

I trust no one else.

(then quietly, pleading)

Don't make me do this alone, Oishi. I may appear calm, but fear threatens to unman me. Without you there, I don't know if I can..if I will be able to--

As emotion begins to edge into his voice, Oishi calms him.

OISHI

You will not be alone. Never alone. I will stand for you. Always.

And slowly, the fear melts away from Asano and a flinty resolve returns to his eyes.

LORD ASANO

(taking Oishi's hand)

Thank you...old friend.

INT. AKO CASTLE - CORRIDOR

The men are lead toward where the Shogun waits. In his white robes, Asano looks like a ghost floating through the hall.

MIKA

Father -!!

Mika comes running and Asano embraces her. The guards clearly want to continue on, but Asano raises a hand.

LORD ASANO

A moment...

They grant it. Mika weeps into her father's shoulder.

MIKA

This can't be happening. This isn't true.

LORD ASANO

(gently)

What is true...is that you have been, and ever will be, the joy of my life.

As she begins to weep, he kisses her forehead. Then, out of everyone in the crowded corridor, Asano locks eyes with Minoru.

LORD ASANO

Care for her.

MINORU

I wil--

But Asano grabs the hafu's hand and repeats himself...this time imparting a deeper meaning.

LORD ASANO

Care for her.

Minoru is rocked by the revelation. *He knows about us.*

Just then, a massive arm separates them, pushing Minoru and Mika back. It's Kira's best fighter -- the LOVECRAFTIAN SAMURAI that bested Minoru in the arena.

LOVECRAFTIAN SAMURAI

Move.

His heavy hand grips Asano's shoulder and forcefully leads him away. Into the chamber where the young lord will end his own life.

As he closes the door, Kira's fighter looks back at Mika...and grins, enjoying the moment.

The doors close behind him with a crushing finality.

MIKA
FATHER -!!

Mika races forward and yanks at the door, but it is barred.

MIKA
No!

As she pounds at it, Minoru appears beside her.

MINORU
Mika...

He gently takes her hand.

MINORU
Mika-chan...

And the endearment her father has used since the day of her birth reaches her. She stops struggling.

MINORU
I'll take you to him.

And as grief overwhelms her...she allows herself to be led away.

INT. AKO CASTLE - CEREMONIAL CHAMBER

Asano and Oishi enter. The Shogun sits at the far end of the chamber with a grim-looking contingent of VERIFYING OFFICIALS, including Kira, who's clearly enjoying the moment.

A small table sits in the center of the room. On it is a RITUAL DAGGER.

Asano crosses the room with a calmness that belies the event about to take place here and kneels at the table.

LORD ASANO
(bowing to the Shogun)
I thank you for allowing me to end my life with honor, with my own hand, rather than the execution as a criminal as I deserve.

The Shogun nods.

Asano closes his eyes, contemplating for a moment...

And then he takes up the dagger.

MATCH CUT TO:

EXT. AKO CASTLE - COUNTRYSIDE - NIGHT

Minoru leads Mika to a MOONLIT HILLTOP outside the castle. A gentle breeze stirs the branches of a lone CHERRY BLOSSOM TREE that grows there.

Minoru sits Mika down.

MIKA
But where is my father?

Minoru moves to the tree...and plucks a *sakura* BLOSSOM. Presses the delicate flower into her hands.

MINORU
Here.
(beat)
The *sakura* is the most beautiful of all flowers. It blooms for only three days, intensely beautiful, and falls at the height of its glory rather than withering away.
(poignantly)
It is the flower of the samurai.

Mika stares at the tiny flower in her hand -- the poetic representation of the life of her father -- and allows herself to lose her grief in its beauty.

MATCH BACK TO:

INT. AKO CASTLE - CEREMONIAL CHAMBER - SAME TIME

Asano sets the dagger down.

LORD ASANO
Oishi.

Oishi leans close, where only he can hear the trembling in Asano's voice.

LORD ASANO
I fear I will shame myself. If I should cry out --

OISHI
You will not.
(then)
You will not.

The strength and assuredness in Oishi's voice flows into Asano. With resolve, he again picks up the dagger.

MUSIC RISES and we INTERCUT with MIKA staring at the cherry blossom in her hand. With ASANO opening his robes to expose his abdomen.

With OISHI drawing his sword to stand behind his lord, preparing cut off the head of his student -- *his friend* -- should the pain become too great.

And as the music reaches CRESCENDO, Asano PLUNGES the dagger into his belly, CUTTING SIDEWAYS then UP, disemboweling himself before the Shogun. The seconds stretch out. OISHI is in turmoil as Asano remains utterly stoic. Glances up to see KIRA with a slight smile curving his lips -- a memory that burns itself in his brain forever.

ASANO holds on as long as he can, but as the suffering overwhelms him and he begins to CRY OUT -- SCHWOP!

OISHI is there to strike down and preserve his dignity.

ASANO'S BODY topples forward, a pool of red blood spreading across the white floor...

AND AT THAT EXACT MOMENT ON THE HILLTOP,

A breeze stirs the sakura tree and a thousand cherry blossoms float down through the moonlight to embrace Mika in a rain of otherworldly beauty...

FADE TO:

INT. AKO CASTLE - ARMORY - LATER

Lord Asano's entire army of three-hundred-and-fifty samurai has amassed in the heart of the castle. An argument is going on. Some are shouting for calm, most are GIRDING THEMSELVES FOR WAR.

AGING SAMURAI

This is madness! The Shogun issued a direct mandate: there are to be no reprisals against Lord Kira!

A hot-tempered samurai, ISOGAI, straps on his sword.

ISOGAI

The Shogun be damned! Bushido says we avenge our master at all costs!

On the far side of the room, OISHI stands, peering through a SHOOTING HOLE, lost in thought.

Outside, the Shogunate's samurai are massing before the armory, Lord Kira's men in the vanguard. Oishi's forces are desperately outnumbered. It will be a slaughter.

Reverently, Minoru steps up beside Oishi.

ISOGAI

What say you, Blademaster?

The question wakes Oishi from his thoughts. He turns from the window. Then, quietly:

OISHI
We fight.

A great cheer goes up from the men. Minoru moves to a stand holding many swords.

MINORU
Which weapon shall you choose, my Lord?

Oishi takes one last look out the window. Sees Kira grinning like a demon.

OISHI
Patience.

ISOGAI
(confused)
What..?

And Oishi issues the last order they would ever expect.

OISHI
There will be no more bloodshed today. Set down your weapons.

As one, the samurai are staggered with disbelief.

OLDER SAMURAI	SAMURAI #2
You mistake us for cowards!	We must avenge the death of
We are not afraid to die!	our Lord!

OISHI
Look outside. You will not succeed.

ISOGAI
Success or failure does not matter!
The only thing that is important is
that we uphold Honor by trying!

OISHI
No.

ISOGAI
You craven dog --!

With a shocking display of speed, Oishi reaches out and HURLS the haughty young samurai to the floor. Oishi has his short sword out and at the gasping man's throat in an instant.

OISHI

It *matters*...because if we fail,
Kira lives and our Lord's murder
will go unavenged. Put your honor
aside. I have a duty.
(pointedly)
As do you all.

Now Oishi pulls from his robes the dagger with which Asano took his own life.

OISHI

Because of Kira, our master took
his own life with this blade.
(beat)
I will not rest until Kira does the
same.

As his words sink in, Oishi removes his blade from Isogai's throat and stands.

Hanjo, Oishi's right-hand man, steps up.

HANJO

So what are you saying?

OISHI

A great warrior once told me, "If
the enemy thinks of the mountains,
attack like the sea; and if he
thinks of the sea, attack like the
mountains."
(beat)
We wait.

Oishi scans the room, meeting each man's eyes.

OISHI

We wait until this day is but a
memory to them, until they believe
our spirit is broken and the danger
has passed... And when all their
suspicions have been quenched and
their guard has finally dropped, we
will gather as one --

In a blink, Oishi turns and buries the sword in a thick wooden beam -- THUNKK!

OISHI

And then we will strike.

Oishi takes the dagger and draws the blade across his palm, making a thin slice across his sword hand. Then holds the blade out to the others.

One by one, they all do the same.

The blood pact is complete. SMASH TO:

EXT. CASTLE - ARMORY - MOMENTS LATER

We hear a lockbar sliding... Then the great doors swing wide to reveal OISHI, weaponless. He and his men exit and are marshalled by a thousand Shogunate soldiers to be stood before:

THE SHOGUN AND LORD KIRA

Forced to stand beside him, Mika watches with a soulless stoicism as Lord Kira addresses the surrendered samurai.

LORD KIRA
Drop your weapons, all of you.

The sound of over three hundred swords striking the ground is the sound of the death of an entire clan.

LORD KIRA (CONT'D)
Now remove your crest.

Oishi's men look to one another in shock, reluctant to do so.

LORD KIRA (CONT'D)
REMOVE THEM!

As one, they turn to Oishi...but he does not meet their eyes. Merely nods.

Across the gulf of soldiers, Mika meets Minoru's eyes...and cannot endure the shame she sees there. Tries to turn away, but Kira reaches out and GRASPS her wrist, wrenching her around so she must watch.

Minoru sees it and instantly reaches for his sword -- but Oishi restrains him with a firm hand on his shoulder.

OISHI
Patience.

And slowly, Minoru's muscles unbunch...and he relents.

In utter shame, Oishi's men drop their formal kimonos bearing the crossed-feather crest of House Asano into the mud.

LORD KIRA
Your master is dead. House Asano is no more. You have failed them both.
(beat)
You are no longer worthy of the title "samurai". From this moment forward, you are *ronin*.

The word strikes Asano's men like a slap to the face.

LORD KIRA (CONT'D)
 Honorless. Reviled. Cowards.
 (venomous)
 You are banished from these lands.
 Those of you still here by the ring
 of the third bell will be hunted
 down and executed.

With a nod from their Lord, Kira's warriors SURGE IN and begin driving Asano's disgraced men from the castle grounds.

LORD KIRA (CONT'D)
 Except you.
 (indicates Oishi)
 Arrest him.

Kira returns to his place beside the Shogun as a dozen men knock Oishi brutally to the ground. Oishi offers no resistance as they roughly begin binding his wrists.

The Shogun turns to leave, but stops before Kira.

SHOGUN
 (re: Oishi)
 He is not to be killed. He was a
 hero at Nagoya.

Kira bows his assent as the Shogun strides away. When he's gone, he turns to the soldiers holding Oishi.

LORD KIRA
 He is not to be executed.
 (beat)
 Break him instead.

The soldiers nod, and as Oishi is dragged away in chains --

CUT TO:

EXT. AKO CASTLE - RECEPTION HALL - LATER

Mika is brought before the Shogun and Lord Kira by soldiers.

The Shogun speaks in an imperial tone that brooks no nonsense.

SHOGUN
 Lord Kira wishes to shield you from
 the shame of your House. He has
 petitioned for your hand in
 marriage.

Mika is taken aback for a moment... Turns to Kira, whose face remains placid.

SHOGUN (CONT'D)

I have agreed.

But Mika is Asano's daughter and made of sterner stuff. Thinking quickly, she quells the rising horror and rallies.

MIKA

That is most generous, my Lord...but as the Master of Protocol must himself know, tradition demands a period of mourning for my father.

LORD KIRA

(riled)

Such is not always the case.

But the Shogun has come to a decision.

SHOGUN

I will allow it. You are granted one year to mourn. During that time you will not be touched....

Mika revels in the small victory, until --

SHOGUN (CONT'D)

...but will remain a guest of Lord Kira's, and he the steward of your lands.

MIKA

But--

SHOGUN

You are dismissed, Lady Asano.

There's nothing more to be done. Trembling, with defeat weighing heavily on her small frame, Mika bows to the Shogun, and we --

SLAM TO:

PITCH BLACK

Sounds of a struggle, then --

A heavy stone LID is opened twenty feet above us. In the weak light, we can make out dank stone walls, rats scuttling in the shadows. This is the "Ako Pit" -- the worst dungeon in the province.

Up above, four of Kira's Elite Guard BEAT Oishi within an inch of his life, then HURL him down into the pit.

WHAM! Oishi's body crashes to the stony floor and lays still. Laughing, the guards start sliding the dungeon lid closed, and as the dark moves in, so do the rats.

The sound of the pit door closing is the sound of despair -- BOOOOM!

And the world is swallowed in darkness...

SLOW FADE UP ON:

EXT. AKO CASTLE - MORNING

A bright summer sun is in the sky.

SUPER: "*Ten months later.*"

The castle gate opens and Oishi -- gaunt, stooped -- is led into the blinding sunshine for the first time in a year and hurled into the mud.

GUARD
On your way, ronin!

Oishi cowers in the muck, confused. He is no longer the strong, noble warrior we knew, but a broken wretch.

The Guard KICKS him in the ribs.

GUARD
Ronin filth! You make me sick!
Out of my sight!

When the guard goes to kick him again, Oishi scrambles away like a beaten dog. He's still grovelling when the Guard slams the gate in his face.

HIGH ABOVE, from the castle's seventh floor balcony, Kira watches Oishi weeping in the road. Deeply satisfied, he turns to one of his trusted SPIES.

LORD KIRA
(re: Oishi)
Have him watched. If he gives any
sign of rebellion, cut him down.

EXT. AKO VILLAGE - ROAD - DAY

Oishi limps into the village...to find that everything has CHANGED.

The land has been STRIPPED and the *sakura* trees have all been CHOPPED DOWN. The once-beautiful hills and meadows have been FURROWED into UGLY CROP FIELDS to feed Kira's legions that patrol the streets in number.

As Oishi enters the marketplace, people begin to point. To whisper. Every mouth forming the despised word:

Ronin.

As he passes, villagers turn away, refusing to acknowledge his now pathetic existence. The murmuring increases, until someone shoves him from behind, knocking him into the dust.

Oishi turns skittishly to see a group of three VENDORS looming over him. Men he once knew. Men who respected him.

BURLY VENDOR
Cowardly scum! You don't belong
here!

The man SPITS on him. Another KICKS him while he's down. The mob closes in, blows starting to really rain down when --

A HAND reaches in and clutches the collar of Oishi's robe, yanking him to his feet. It's --

CHIKARA

Oishi's son turns on the crowd, wooden *bokken* in hand, and the crowd backs a step from his burning gaze.

As the boy takes his father's hand, Oishi looks at his son -- only one year older, but the eyes staring back at him are a man's eyes.

Unlike his own.

As the boy leads his father away from the jeering mob, RACK FOCUS to Kira's SPY, watching from a distance, satisfied that Oishi is harmless...

EXT. SHANTY VILLAGE - DAY

Chikara leads Oishi to tinry rundown shack in the poorest section of the village.

Oishi's wife is on her knees out front, digging burdock root from the tiny garden. Clearly times have been tough.

Oishi look at Chikara.

CHIKARA
When they took you away, they took
away everything.

As Oishi takes this in, Hisae looks up and sees them.

HISAE
Oishi...

Hisae stops like she's been heartshot. Gasps. Trembling so hard she can't even rise.

And she cries, Oishi kneels by her side to comfort her.

DISSOLVE TO:

INT. OISHI'S HOUSE - NIGHT

Chikara lay asleep on the floor, curled near the warmth of the brazier.

Quietly, Hisae tiptoes in and removes a gently bubbling kettle from the fire. Carries it across the house to where --

OISHI

waits. Hisae settles beside him, dipping two soft cloths in the warmed water.

HISAE

All right.

Oishi removes his robe...and the visual shock of his INJURIES steals her breath. Scars, scabs and bruises of every kind crisscross his back: puncture wounds, lacerations, burn marks; hard lumps where broken ribs have healed.

Hisae is frozen by the sight of so much pain.

OISHI

(gently)

It's all right, Hisae. My scars are nothing compared to what you must have endured as the wife of a *ronin*.

HISAE

That's all behind us now.

Blinking back tears, she begins to wash her husband's tortured body, and we DISSOLVE TO:

SAME SHOT - LATER

Hisae is finishing cleaning his wounds.

HISAE

...Lady Asano is still being held by Lord Kira. The end of her time of her mourning draws near, and Kira has arranged for them to be wed that very day. I fear for what will happen to her after.

Hisae wrings out her cloth, and Oishi begins to dress.

OISHI
What of my men?

Hisae hesitates, fearing this line of questioning.

HISAE
Scattered to the winds. Some
fought. Others protested and were
cut down. Eventually all were
driven off.
(beat)
I heard Ryoichi now works a farm in
Matsumae. Ayame says he's happy.

Hisae moves around to look in her husband's eyes.

HISAE
We could be happy. We have a
second chance, Oishi, we should
take it. We can leave the village
tomorrow and start a new life.
Watch our son become a man. Grow
old together. Is that not all we
need?

Her smile is heartbreaking. So filled with hope...

Oishi enfolds her in his arms, so she will not see the lie.

OISHI
Yes...

She closes her eyes, burying her face in his chest and
holding him tight, never wanting to let go.

HISAE
Don't widow me to an ideal, Oishi.

But as we DOLLY AROUND we see the fire in Oishi's eyes and
realize for the first time that this is not a broken man.

And never was.

INT. BEDROOM - LATE NIGHT

Hisae wakes -- to find Oishi missing from bed. She rises
from the futon and makes her way to the window where she
spies her husband sitting atop a low hill in the pre-dawn
dark.

EXT. OISHI'S HOUSE - MOMENTS LATER

In the quiet dark, Oishi stares up at the stars, conflicted emotions upon his face.

Then:

HISAE (O.S.)
Some of the men went to find work
with the Dutch at Dejima.

Oishi turns to find his wife standing there, a silk-wrapped BUNDLE in her hands.

HISAE
You'll find Hanjo there.

Oishi reaches out and crushes her to his chest.

After a moment she pulls away and hands him the bundle. Oishi opens it...revealing the DAGGER Lord Asano used to take his own life.

Oishi starts to say something, but she stops him.

HISAE
I am the wife of a samurai.
Whatever your duties and
obligations, they are mine, too.

Oishi looks at his wife...his incredible wife...and realizes she accepts what he has to do.

With no words strong enough to carry the emotion, Oishi takes her in his arms again.

AND FROM THE WINDOW OF HIS ROOM

Chikara watches the silhouettes of his parents against the moonlight...and knows that his father is leaving.

SLOW DISSOLVE TO:

EXT. MOUNTAINS OUTSIDE EDO - ESTABLISHING

Breathtaking in their beauty, yet...

Dominating the landscape from three thousand feet up the steep snowy mountainside is Kira's impregnable *yamashiro* -- CASTLE FORTRESS -- which looms over the world like a grim stone threat.

INT. KIRA'S MOUNTAIN CASTLE - DAIMYO'S GREATHALL - CONTINUOUS

Mika stands alone at the window, a prisoner in a jail without bars. She's staring out at the world below, at freedom, when Lord Kira enters the room behind her.

He moves close, but when she senses him, she turns and backs away in fear.

LORD KIRA

(disappointed)

All that you see from this window
could be yours. Why do you resist
me so?

Again, he approaches her slowly, like he would a timid animal. Reaches out to stroke her face, but the moment his black-lacquered fingernails touch her face, she SLAPS his hand away defiantly.

Kira's shock flashes to anger and he STRIKES her across the face. And just as he rears back to strike her again --

Behind them, the door opens and Kira's Spy enters.

KIRA'S SPY

Lord Kira. I have word of the
ronin.

Kira turns on an emotional dime, his anger instantly replaced by a mask of calm.

LORD KIRA

Tell me.

KIRA'S SPY

Oishi is broken. I've watched
peasant farmers spit on him. Kick
him. Humiliate him. There's not
an ounce of fight left in him.

LORD KIRA

You sound disappointed.

KIRA'S SPY

It's just that... The stories I
have heard. He was such a great
warrior. To see him like this...

Kira strides to table in the center of the room holding several BONSAI TREES.

LORD KIRA

What do you know of bonsai trees?

The Spy is taken aback.

KIRA'S SPY
I know they are beautiful.

LORD KIRA
Yes, but only as beautiful as an
artist makes them.

Kira picks up one of the trees -- an ugly shrub. Then takes
up a pair of razor sharp shears.

LORD KIRA
Left on their own these trees grow
wild and out of control. It takes
the meticulous eye of an artist to
see, to understand, to recognize a
single branch that may mask the
beauty within. A branch that left
on its own would overtake the
whole. Not unlike *ronin*.
(beat)
It is up to the artist to recognize
this blight, for it is not until he
clips that branch away --

Kira cruelly snips off a branch.

LORD KIRA
-- that the beauty of what lies
beneath is revealed.

Kira turns and looks at Mika. Though he's speaking of the
tree, it's clear he's speaking about her.

LORD KIRA
Now, it is up to the artist to
gently manipulate the remaining
branches. Not to cut, but to
coerce its shape. To coax it. To
train it.

Kira grabs a branch and bends it down, using a piece of twine
to tie it down. He considers it for a second, then sets the
tree aside. Takes another from the shelf.

LORD KIRA
Slowly. Steadily. With increasing
pressure so that in time, with
patience, the branch eventually
ceases to resist the artist's
desires...

Kira releases a branch that has been tied -- and it stays in
position.

LORD KIRA
And the work is complete.

Kira considers the tree with a critical eye. Then turns to Mika and does the same.

LORD KIRA
 In the end the tree succumbs. It
 is a truth.
 (pointedly)
 And it is inevitable.

And off Mika's frightened expression, we --

CUT TO:

INT. KIRA'S FORTRESS - LORD'S CHAMBERS - MOMENTS LATER

Kira enters and shuts the door behind him. A SHADOWY FIGURE stands with his back to us at the edge of the balcony overlooking the thousand foot drop below.

LORD KIRA
 Thank you for waiting.

The figure nods almost imperceptibly. As Kira angles around, we get a better look at the man. Tall, stacked with corded muscle. Dressed in a traditional *ninjutsu* outfit so dark red it is almost black. A mask across the lower half of his face conceals his identity and leaves only his EYES exposed -- eyes that burn with an intelligence and remorselessness that chills our blood.

The NINJA CLANLORD is quite possibly the most imposing figure this side of the Shogun.

LORD KIRA (CONT'D)
 I wish to hire your ninja clan to
 deal with the *ronin*. Oishi in
 particular.

The Clanlord's voice is the unfathomable crack and rumble of deep-earth coal being crushed to diamonds.

NINJA CLANLORD
 Did I not just overhear your spy
 say he was broken?

There's a smirk in his voice.

LORD KIRA
 I have not gotten to where I am
 without taking precaution.

Kira tosses a heavy purse of gold *kobans* to him. Only the Ninja Lord's hand moves, snatching it out of the air like a snake grabbing a bird in flight.

LORD KIRA (CONT'D)
Will this cover your expense?

NINJA CLANLORD
(weighing the bag)
For now.

LORD KIRA
There can be no evidence. I need
you to make them disappear.

NINJA CLANLORD
My Lord --
(mock bows)
That is what we do best.

And the Clanlord steps off the balcony, plummeting into the
abyss.

Kira rushes to the edge...but sees only the thousand foot
drop below.

The Clanlord has disappeared.

DISSOLVE TO:

AERIAL SHOT - NAGASAKI BAY - DAY

A bustling port city surrounds Nagasaki's gorgeous harbor...
But floating in the middle of the Bay FIND:

DEJIMA ISLAND

A small, ARTIFICIAL ISLAND built as a trading outpost for the
Dutch. The fan-shaped islet is kept separate from the
mainland by a LONG STONE BRIDGE -- Japan's equivalent of the
proverbial "ten-foot-pole" to keep foreigners from ever
touching Japanese soil.

Despite looks from the locals --

OISHI

crosses the quarter-mile span of stone and steps onto the
island. Speaks to the first man he finds, a Japanese LABORER
in ridiculous Western clothes.

OISHI
I need to speak to the man in
charge.

The Laborer nods and motions for Oishi to follow.

Now TRACK WITH OISHI as he is led across the synthetic island. Though a CLAUSTROPHOBIC MAZE of cargo crates and livestock. Past laborers struggling to unload the two Dutch East-India MERCHANT SHIPS moored there: the 18 sail "Dolphijn" and the enormous "Rotterdam".

POV - OISHI: scanning each worker's face as he passes, searching for signs of his men. All the laborers are Japanese, clad in the cornflower blue coats of the Dutch, and to a man, they are gaunt, dejected, STRUNG OUT.

As they pass the open door of a warehouse, Oishi sees why. The interior of one structure has been converted into an OPIUM DEN. Inside, scores of Japanese workmen lay in a stupor, inhaling their pay. They are slaves kept not in chains of steel, but wisps of opium smoke.

Oishi notes HANJO and several other men are among them.

Reaching the office, Oishi is motioned to wait as his guide disappears inside. A moment later, he reappears.

GUIDE

The *Kapitan* will see you.

INT. DEJIMA - KAPITAN'S OFFICE - CONTINUOUS

The room is dark and filled with the blue-gray haze of tobacco smoke. Oishi nearly thinks he's alone...until the bowl of a pipe GLOWS CHERRY RED as someone in the shadows takes a long draw.

We can almost make out the man's features --huge and unreal-- but then the dark closes in once again.

KAPITAN

You look as though you have travelled far.

The voice is harsh and startling as an anchor chain clanking.

The man fills two sake cups and pushes one forward.

KAPITAN

Here... Slake your thirst.

Oishi sips. The Kapitan downs his.

KAPITAN

So..you have come for work?

OISHI

I have come to collect my men.

KAPITAN

Your men?
 (mulls this)
 You are samurai, then? Under which
 lord do you serve?

Oishi says no more. The Kapitan laughs, refilling his glass.

KAPITAN

Ah... So you are *ronin*. You
 Japanese are a funny people.
 Distorting honor until it is a
 perversion beyond recognition.

Oishi ignores the slight and the Kapitan downs his drink.

KAPITAN

The problem is this: your men came
 here willingly to work, but they've
 accrued many debts during their
 time here.

OISHI

I will pay.

KAPITAN

How?

Oishi removes his sword from his belt and places it
 reverently on the table.

The Kapitan's hands reach out from the dark; monstrous grit-
 crusted paws covered in ROPE SCARS and SAILOR TATTOOS. So
 big, it's hard to believe they're human.

The Kapitan clicks the scabbard open to examine the blade --
 a ceremonial work of art, razor sharp. He runs his thumb
 along the edge until a DROP OF BLOOD trickles down the blade.

Then he slams the sword back in its sheath and sets it back
 on the table.

KAPITAN

Done! In Rotterdam, we drink to a
 deal.

The Kapitan fills both their glasses.

KAPITAN

Kampai.

Oishi downs his sake.

OISHI

And now you will get my men.

The room glows red as the Kapitan takes another draw on his pipe, and this time we glimpse his EYES -- two cruel chips of soulless blue sea ice.

KAPITAN

Will I?

Oishi rises...but suddenly feels UNSTEADY.

KAPITAN

You Japanese... The arrogance is staggering. I mean, here you sit, despised by your own people, unwanted, unhireable...and yet you presume to give *me* orders.

Oishi collapses forward as the world TILTS CRAZILY. And with horror he realizes he's been DRUGGED.

KAPITAN

You forget yourself, *ronin*. We may not be allowed to step foot onto Japanese soil without risking our entire shipping operation, but the blade cuts both ways. This is Dutch land.

You can almost hear the bastard grinning.

Oishi goes for his sword -- but the table EXPLODES UP, thrown across the room as easily as a toy.

Oishi stumbles back and watches in horror as the Kapitan steps into the light. The man is enormous. An eight-foot bearded hulk, stacked with the heavy, unnatural muscle only the sea can give.

This is why they call the Dutch "barbarians". The Kapitan makes Conan look like a sissy kid brother.

Oishi's sword lay at his feet. He moves for it, but the Dutch giant's hand snatches out and grips him by the collar. Lifts him as easily as a child -- awesome strength -- then HURLS him across the room!

WHAM! Oishi SMASHES against the wall and slams to the floor.

POV OISHI: As the Giant stomps toward him, the world turning SURREAL from the drugs.

Oishi tries to crawl to his sword, but the Kapitan grabs him by his topknot and SMASHES him -- CRRRAAAASH! -- into his desk with enough force to SHATTER it to kindling.

And then the Dutchman lifts him up, CHOKING HIM to death. Oishi struggles as the bastard laughs, and just as the lights are about to go out forever --

OISHI'S FINGERS close on a WICKED SPLINTER from the shattered desk -- ten inches long and deadly sharp -- and STABS it down through his collar bone and DEEP into his trunk.

KAPITAN
GRRAAAAAUGHH!

The barbarian captain roars in pain and HURLS him with enough force to SNAP the wall boards.

Hearing his cry, another giant DUTCH OFFICER races in, WHEELLOCK PISTOL out and ready to fire.

KAPITAN
Shoot him!

The Officer pulls the trigger, but in the blink of an eye, Oishi grasps his sword and whips the blade out of its scabbard -- AND RIGHT BETWEEN THE CAP AND THE POWDER!

The gun clicks harmlessly and, as the confused Officer stares, trying to figure out what just happened, Oishi lashes the blade up and BISECTS HIS ENORMOUS HEAD.

Making his move, Oishi staggers out of the room, the Kapitan roaring behind him.

KAPITAN
TO ARMS! TO ARMS!!

EXT. DEJIMA - CONTINUOUS

OISHI'S POV: The drugs hit FULL-EFFECT and reality slips into a WHORLING NIGHTMARE LANDSCAPE.

As GARGANTUAN DUTCHMEN come running to aid their Kapitan, Oishi ducks into the labyrinth of cargo crates, making his way toward where he last saw his men.

BACK IN THE KAPITAN'S OFFICE - the Dutch leader BUSTS OPEN the ARMS CHEST and starts handing out weaponry to his men: PISTOLS, CUTLASSES, CURTAL AXES...

BACK TO OISHI

Making his way through the maze when --

Suddenly, TWO DUTCHMEN race around the corner. The one with the pistol FIRES, but Oishi reacts instantly, whipping the flat of his blade up as a narrow, VERTICAL SHIELD and bracing with both hands as -- SPANGGG! -- the bullet RICOCHETS OFF!

As he tries to reload, Dutchman #2 ROARS DEFIANTLY and CHARGES with a naval cutlass -- but as he swings, Oishi SLAPS THE BLADE DOWN with the flat of his left hand and HACKS THE MAN'S HEAD FROM HIS SHOULDERS with his right.

No time to reload, the Pistoleer flips the gun around to use as a club. When he swings, Oishi HALF-STEPS BACK and the butt of the pistol SWISHES PAST his face to OBLITERATE a wooden crate!

Oishi then HALF-STEPS FORWARD and separates the titan's arm from the rest of his body.

Oishi continues on, arriving at --

THE OPIUM DEN

A Dutch attendant rises -- but then falls back as his legs are HEWN from his trunk.

Myth blends with reality as Oishi moves through, DRAGONS OF SMOKE swirling around the room. Dozens of Japanese lay everywhere in an opium stupor. Fallen samurai, ruined geishas.

Oishi finds HANJO laying on the floor.

OISHI
(shaking him)
Hanjo!

Hanjo opens his eyes, struggling to rise from his narcosis.

HANJO
Oishi... You came. They made
me... They made--

OISHI
I know. Where are the others?

Hanjo points to a BACK ROOM. But suddenly -- BLAM! -- a pistol ball flips the collar of Oishi's kimono, so close it actually SINGES the silk.

Oishi turns on the GUNMAN standing in the doorway, then springs forward and LANCES the man through the heart so fast we almost miss it.

Then he's back by Hanjo's side.

OISHI
We have to go. Now.

Oishi hefts Hanjo to his feet and races into the back room just as the Kapitan and his men storm the den.

INT. OPIUM DEN - BACK ROOM

Lockdown for problem slaves...

With pistol balls thunking into the wood around them, Oishi slams the heavy door closed behind them.

Instantly, two Dutchmen rise, one brandishing a pistol, but before he can get off a shot, Oishi slices up, CHOPPING OFF the man's hand with the pistol -- which Hanjo GRABS OUT OF MID-AIR and FIRES POINT BLANK into the face of giant #2.

Stopping #1's screams with a nonchalant cut, Oishi turns to find ten of his men secured to the wall by CHAINS around their necks.

Oishi's men can't believe their eyes.

ISOGAI
Blademaster..?

Oishi CLEAVES the wood beam their chain runs through, FREEING them all.

ON THE OTHER SIDE OF THE DOOR

the Dutch giants BATTER at the wood as the Kapitan watches on in a fury.

BACK INSIDE

Oishi sees the wood grain in the door begin to separate. There's no escape. No time left.

One of the older ronin, OKUDA, kneels before Oishi.

OKUDA
Let us at least die with honor.

And he exposes his neck for a clean strike. Oishi considers. Then raises his sword high and CLEAVES DOWN!

But not through Okuda's neck. Through the FLOORPLANKS to the CRAWLSPACE below.

OISHI
You have duty yet to fulfill,
samurai.

ON THE OTHER SIDE OF THE DOOR

The Dutch use all their might and CRASH THROUGH THE DOOR -- just in time to see Oishi disappearing down the rabbit hole.

BOOM-BOOM-BOOM!! They unload a hellfire of pistols, but the ronin are already gone.

EXT. OPIUM DEN - CONTINUOUS

A squealing wave of rats comes surging from beneath the building, followed by Oishi and his men.

OISHI
Run for the dock! Let nothing stop
you!

And as a swarm of Dutchmen race around the corner, Oishi turns and dispatches them while the ronin run. Oishi is Jack the Giant Killer, cutting down hulking barbarians and buying time for his men -- until the Kapitan rages forward with sixty armed men.

Then Oishi, too, turns and runs, cutting a rope that secures a stack of cargo which comes TUMBLING DOWN, CRUSHING one of their enemies and HAMPERING the pursuit.

EXT. DEJIMA - CONTINUOUS

Oishi and his men run, a hailstorm of lead ripping past as they charge out onto the dock -- a quarter-mile of stone standing between them and freedom.

BEHIND THEM, the Dutch begin to gain. Firing. Firing.

WITH OISHI AND HIS MEN RUNNING ACROSS THE DOCK - as bullets start finding their marks. One ronin's head EXPLODES. Another is GUTSHOT and falls behind. Hanjo goes down with a bullet in his thigh -- but Oishi is there, hefting him up and RACING DOWN THE FINAL STRETCH.

THE DUTCH try to reload while they chase, but give up, drawing KNIVES and CUTLASSES instead. Pouring on the steam. GAINING UNTIL THE KAPITAN IS ONLY FEET AWAY --

And just as he hauls back to bury his cutlass in Oishi's skull --

Oishi DIVES, dragging Hanjo with him...onto Japanese soil.

The Dutch skid to a stop at the end of the dock, millimeters from crossing the line.

Oishi stares up from the ground at his pursuers, breathing hard, separated by an invisible wall. Safe.

The Kapitan stares hatefully at Oishi, a seething inferno of impotent fury. With a roar, he reaches into his shoulder and pulls out the wicked spike -- nearly a foot of bloody wood -- and casts it aside.

Then, as he and his men retreat back down the dock, Oishi slumps exhausted to the ground, and we--

DISSOLVE TO:

A SMALL CAMPFIRE

The survivors from Dejima have camped in a wooded spot for the night. All of the men are sleeping, save for Hanjo, who shivers mercilessly from opium withdrawal.

Oishi lifts a small bubbling pot from the fire.

OISHI
Here. Drink this.

With trembling hands, Hanjo does.

HANJO
(ashamed)
Look at me...

OISHI
I do. In pride.

HANJO
What is there to be proud of? I am weak. Even now I crave the opium, Oishi.

OISHI
The opium craves itself. And that will pass.
(beat)
But the man I see before me was willing to sacrifice all, to reduce himself beyond what is endurable without thought for himself, in the hopes of one day returning honor to his lord's name.
(beat)
No, the man I see before me...humbles me by his example of *bushido*.

Oishi bows his head and Hanjo lets the moment infuse him, settle into the deep steel of his soul. Strengthen him.

HANJO
So how can I help?

OISHI (VO)
These are the names of all the Ako samurai.

MATCH TO:

HILLTOP - DAWN

Oishi draws his tanto...and SLICES it through a LIST OF NAMES he holds before him. He severs the paper into eight equal portions, then hands one out to each man.

OISHI
All must be contacted.

The men bow. But only Hanjo does not have a list. He turns to Oishi, empty handed.

HANJO
But what of me? I am able --

Oishi quiets him with a gesture, then withdraws SMALL SCROLL from his robe. Presses it into Hanjo's hands.

OISHI
Find *him*.

SERIES OF SHOTS - THE GATHERING OF THE RONIN ACROSS JAPAN

As the SUN and MUSIC both RISE dramatically, Oishi and his *ronin* strike off in all eight directions of the compass.

Now INTERCUT between:

-- ISOGAI traveling along a mountain path, seasonal rains making for slow going.

-- OKUDA trekking through a land of hot springs

-- HANJO making his way along the coast to a seaport village. SMASH TO:

-- EXT. A PEACEFUL RIVER. One of Asano's older samurai, HAZAMA (68) now sits in a boat as a peasant, using a pet CORMORANT on a leash to catch sweetfish. When he rows in, he is surprised to find Oishi waiting for him...

OISHI
It is time.

-- INT. SUMO STABLE. Two behemoth *rikishi* (wrestlers) collide with a titanic clash. The larger of the two is BASHO, one of Asano's ronin. They struggle mightily...until Basho sees ISOGAI watching in the doorway. Isogai flashes Lord Asano's FAMILY CREST and Basho ROARS, pitching his opponent out of the ring with superhuman strength to end the bout...

-- And as HANJO pays for passage aboard a ship to cross the sea...

-- A DRUNKARD in a bar gulps down his sake...only to find Asano's CREST at the bottom of his glass. He turns to look and finds OKUDA beside him...

-- A BEGGAR squats at a bridge calling for alms when Asano's CREST clinks into his donation blanket. He touches it and looks up...to see ISOGAI before him...

-- LABORERS straining to lift giant stones against a slope for the foundation of a castle when BASHO appears. Three familiar faces instantly drop what they're doing and move to him. ..

-- In China, HANJO speaks to a Mercenary Officer, who ties Oishi's scroll onto the leg of a hawk and urges the bird skyward...

-- A MONK is in meditation outside his temple. When he opens his eyes, he is surprised to see ASANO'S CREST before him.

-- In a sapling forest, a group of BRIGANDS spring from concealment to rob a traveller...only to find the traveller is HAZAMA bearing Asano's CREST. The Brigand Chief, one of Asano's principal retainers, kneels and weeps at Hazama's feet.

-- In a rice paddy, a FARMER and his WIFE are harvesting knee-deep in muck when a shadow falls over them. It's Oishi.

AERIAL SHOT - SKIMMING ABOVE CHINA

We're on a visual rollercoaster ride FOLLOWING the falcon as it navigates the wild air currents over Mongol China. We wheel through the sail rigging of junks on the river, then barely skim over the top of the Great Wall --

-- to REVEAL a MASSIVE DUST CLOUD where an EPIC BATTLE is underway.

In no time, we fly into it. ARROWS fly past like a steel-tipped rainstorm.

The falcon doesn't care, dipping down into the carnage where we see a company of MERCENARIES battling against the MONGOL HORDES.

We fly just overhead, the machinery of war turning men into mincemeat, until the falcon spots what it's looking for: the STANDARD of the merc company.

Dodging crazily through sword swipes and speartips, the falcon makes it to the STANDARD BEARER and lands on his shoulder.

The man glances at SCROLL the falcon carries, then runs forward to find --

MINORU

at the heart of the hottest fighting. The man is a tireless whirlwind of destruction, letting his two swords unleash all the anger he's ever felt over his ignoble birth, the loss of Mika. He takes out one Mongol with an ankle-severing strike known as *Harvesting Rice*, then two more in an acrobatic maneuver called *Mantis Catches the Fly*.

At a momentary break in the battle, the Standard Bearer runs up to Minoru.

STANDARD BEARER

A message!

Minoru takes the scroll. Cracks the seal and reads the paper within. It reads:

It is time.

It's signed by Oishi.

As Minoru looks at the paper, BEHIND HIM a GIGANTIC NEANDERTHAL MONGOL RISES UP!

Seeing him too late, the Standard Bearer panics as the Mongol swings his GREAT DIRE AXE --

But Minoru turns and dispatches the giant with a casual swipe. Then SHEATHES his swords.

MINORU

I am needed.

And Minoru begins to WALK AWAY.

STANDARD BEARER

What?! Where do you think you're going?! Minoru!

And just like that, he walks away from the battle.

DISSOLVE TO:

EXT. SENGAKUJI GRAVEYARD - NIGHT

A sea fog has rolled in from the coast, lending the moment a serene, spiritual feel.

Oishi kneels before Lord Asano's grave in prayer. The knife with which young Asano took his own life sits with honor on a small length of silk before him.

Quiet footsteps behind him bring him from meditation.

HANJO
Sir... The men have gathered.

But when Oishi opens his eyes, there is a curious look on Hanjo's face.

OISHI
What is it?

HANJO
There are less than expected.

EXT. SENGAKUJI TEMPLE - MOMENTS LATER

Oishi quickly makes his way down the foggy path toward the temple. The glow of many lanterns blaze through the mist ahead.

Oishi mounts the temple steps and ascends --

INSIDE

And where he expects to find Asano's three-hundred-and-fifty loyal samurai warriors, fully-armed and ready to restore their Lord's name to glory --

He is shocked to find only forty-three...

Oishi stares at the men, a quarter of them in their fifties and sixties. One of them, HORIBE, is even in his late seventies.

And there isn't a stitch of steel between them.

OISHI
Where are the others?

Oishi stands momentarily dumbfounded. A man awaking from a dream of heaven...only to find himself in hell.

Finally, an elderly warrior (CHUZAEMON) speaks up.

CHUZAEMON
We were once 350 strong. Now look at us.

MURAMATSU
We're only 45.

KIMURA
You promised us honor, Oishi!

ISOGAI
We should have fought! What good are we now?

The moment turns quiet. Despairing.

Nearby, Sujo's FALCON ruffles its feathers, sending a snow of downy underfeathers to the temple floor.

Oishi steps forward.

OISHI
What good are we now?

Oishi extends his arm and takes the bird from Sujo. Removes its hood.

OISHI
Look at this falcon. Powerful.
Proud. Utterly without fear. His
skill at flying makes him the
unmatched hunter in the sky.
(beat)
Yet despite the thousands of
feathers that cover the falcon's
body...only twenty give it flight.

Oishi swings his arm, casting the falcon into the air where it BEATS THE AIR POWERFULLY with its wings, SOARING back to Sujo. It settles on his wrist with a proud, noble shriek.

There's real power in the moment. Each man stares at the bird...then turns back to Oishi, who meets every one of their eyes.

OISHI
You are the ones that came back.
You are the strongest, most loyal
samurai of the Asano clan. Will
you fight with me?

There is a beat as every man searches his soul, the decision hanging in the balance until --

VOICE (OS)
I will fight.

Everyone turns to see MINORU stride into the chamber. His time in the mercenary company has hardened him. Honed him. He is a serious warrior now.

The campaigner meets the gaze of every man in the room, challenging.

MINORU
I may not be samurai, but I owe
everything that I am to Lord
Asano...and I'm willing to give my
life if I can help you avenge his
death.

One by one, the others stand. The tide turns and soon everyone has risen.

Oishi looks at the forty-six loyal men standing before him -- ranging in age from 24 to 77 -- all willing to die for what they believe in.

It's not nearly enough...

But they will have to make do.

OISHI
Then we are forty-six united.

VOICE (OS)
Forty-seven.

Oishi turns to see --

CHIKARA

-- entering the ring of men. The sixteen-year-old moves to stand before his father; a boy on the precipice of manhood.

CHIKARA
Asano was my Lord as well.

Oishi considers his son's words...

Then suddenly HURLS a sword at him lightning fast! Chikara CATCHES the blade by the hilt with ease.

In his RIGHT hand.

Oishi meets his son's eyes with respect...and nods.

OISHI
(with finality)
Then if the gods will it...we shall
fight as forty-seven.

CUT TO:

INT. SENGAKUJI TEMPLE - LATE NIGHT

Many of the men are still talking, catching up. Others sleep. Oishi is sitting beside a small fire, contemplating his son who dozes peacefully nearby, when Minoru quietly walks over and sits down.

Minoru speaks quietly so as not to wake the boy.

MINORU
(re: Chikara)
He's grown.

OISHI
So have you. You look like
Hachiman.

MINORU
I feel like him. Ancient.
Eternally exhausted.

Oishi looks at Minoru, genuine mirth touches his features.

OISHI
It is good to see you again,
Minoru.

The two fall into a peaceful silence. But it cannot last and
dissolves into more serious matters at hand.

MINORU
Lady Asano?

OISHI
(nods)
Alive.

Minoru reads between the lines.

MINORU
What aren't you telling me?

OISHI
She is to be married to Kira on the
eve of the new moon.

We sense it takes every ounce of iron control Minoru has to
keep from going after her that very second.

MINORU
Then how shall we proceed?

OISHI
To fight a war, an army needs two
things: fire in its belly and
steel in its hand... The first we
have.
(dramatic beat)
Now it's time to get the latter.

And as the two men meet eyes, HARD CUT TO:

ECU - A JAPANESE WOODBLOCK

with an image carved in relief. Carefully, an ARTISAN coats
the surface with ink, then presses a large canvas against it,
creating an amazing WOODBLOCK PRINT of Mt. Fuji at sunrise as
seen from a busy marketplace at Edo.

Now TILT UP from the canvas to reveal the exact same image...but this time it's real. We are:

EXT. CITY MARKETPLACE - OUTSIDE EDO - DAY

The Artisan's quarter. Metalsmiths' Alley, specifically.

Chikara wanders through in wonder. Past Isogai who critically examines a sword maker's wares. Then on past another stall where Minoru is doing the same -- until his eye catches on something in particular.

Minoru lifts a smooth white cube from the table.

MINORU

How much for the block of ivory?

VENDOR

Set it down, halfbreed. We don't sell to your kind.

But Minoru is used to this. Simply pulls his entire coin belt and sets it down. Ten times what the thing is worth. Everything he's ever saved.

The vendor stares at the money...and his prejudice is overcome by practical greed.

VENDOR (CONT'D)

Take it and go. And don't tell anyone where you bought it!

Chikara continues on, to where he hears his father ahead.

OISHI (OS)

And these are your best fighting pieces?

Chikara joins his father at a swordsmith's stall, where Oishi is inspecting a regal-looking katana.

SWORDMAKER

The highest quality in all Edo. Officially recognized by the Emperor.

Working the bellows in the rear of the stall, an elderly ONE-ARMED AINU (an aboriginal Japanese) CHUCKLES at the Swordmaker's sales pitch. The guy is 80 if he's a day and has a beard to his navel.

The Swordmaker throws an irritated glance to shut him up, and tries to continue.

SWORDMAKER (CONT'D)
 Examine the detail of the
 scrollwork. So delicate. So
 beautiful --

In response, the AINU blows his nose like a trumpet, using his dirty beard as a Kleenex, and laughs like a madman.

The Swordmaker has had enough, hurling a handful of iron *tsuba* at the toothless old man.

SWORDMAKER (CONT'D)
 I'll teach you to cackle, you
 filthy dung monkey!

The AINU skitters back into the shadows. As the Swordmaker goes to chase him away, Chikara picks up the regal sword.

CHIKARA
 These are the ones we are looking
 for, right, Father? They are
 beautiful blades.

OISHI
 And nothing more.

Chikara is confused. Oishi takes the beautiful blade from his hands and explains patiently. A good teacher. A great father.

OISHI (CONT'D)
 The steel tells all. If a
 swordmaker is lazy and folds the
 metal only a handful of times, the
 carbon doesn't get distributed and
 the iron remains soft.

Oishi presses on the sword edge with his thumb --

CHIKARA
 Careful, Father!

-- but rather than cut him, the metal BENDS like butter. The sight impresses Chikara...but affects Oishi in a deeper way.

OISHI
 How many samurai have been sent to
 their deaths with a weapon like
 this in their hands?
 (shakes his head sadly)
 Terrible...

Oishi slides the blade back into its scabbard just as the Swordmaker returns.

SWORDMAKER

I'm sorry about that foul creature.
Now, let us back to business --

OISHI

Clearly you are a master
swordmaker...but I'm afraid this is
far beyond what we could afford.
(bows humbly)
I thank you for your time.

SWORDMAKER

Thank me in future by not wasting
it!

As Oishi continues down the line of stalls, Chikara's
attention is drawn to a commotion down the alley.

Three brash samurai -- Noto HARES from their armor -- make
their way through the street, shouting drunkenly and sharply
slapping people aside with the flat of their blades.

HARE LEADER

Move, you louts!

Merchants and customers scramble to get out of their way. As
they near the stall where Chikara stands, the leader of the
Hares turns to a pretty FRUIT VENDOR GIRL in her stall.

HARE LEADER (CONT'D)

We are hungry. Have you any winter
melons?

FRUIT VENDOR GIRL

No, my lords --

NOTO HARE #1

Lies! She hides them here!

#1 suddenly grabs her and tears her silk robes open, exposing
her generous bosom.

NOTO HARE #1 (CONT'D)

I ask you, are those not melons?!

The men laugh as she struggles to cover up, and #1 is giving
her breasts a rough squeeze when the HARE LEADER turns and
sees Chikara staring at him.

HARE LEADER

Is there a problem, peasant?

Chikara hesitates. Knows he shouldn't say anything, but --

CHIKARA

Yes. There is.

The Hares stop and turn on Chikara, who doesn't back an inch.

CHIKARA

Samurai are supposed to protect
their people, not prey upon them.

NOTO HARE #2

How dare you speak so insolently to
your betters!

CHIKARA

I see no betters before me.

There's a dangerous moment. The Leader steps forward.

HARE LEADER

The farmer's got a little pluck in
him.

(turns to Hare #2)

Cut it out.

Hare #2 draws his sword with relish, and as he goes to slap
Chikara with the flat of the blade --

And in that instant, Chikara's instinct overrules all
rational thought. Completely on reflex, Chikara sidesteps
the blow and trap-locks the sword out of #2's hands. Before
the Hares can blink, the sword is now in Chikara's hands and -
- WHAMMM!! -- he smashes #2 across the face with it.

Teeth go flying and #2 drops like a felled tree.

All this happens within a single heartbeat.

The Hares look at one another -- this is no simple farmer.

Now the Leader draws his weapons, two double daggers known as
RABBIT'S TEETH, and springs at Chikara, unleashing an INTENSE
FLURRY OF BLOWS.

Chikara stumbles back, surprised by the speed and ferocity of
the strikes. Chikara blocks, but quickly finds himself so
overwhelmed by the onslaught...

...that he makes a fatal mistake and INSTINCTIVELY SWITCHES
HIS SWORD TO HIS DOMINANT LEFT HAND.

THE HARE LEADER

sees opening and as he moves to deliver the death blow --

CLACKK! The Hare Leader's dual blades are blocked by a
WALKING STICK.

The Leader whips around -- to confront a man standing before him. OISHI. There's a moment...then the Leader recognizes him.

HARE LEADER

Ronin..!

All around, thirty ears perk up at the word. Instantly, Oishi and his men go for weapons, ready to fight -- but the Hares do what they do best and TAKE OFF RUNNING to alert their daimyo.

Oishi turns to his men.

OISHI

If they get away, our plans are doomed.

Without another word, Hanjo and Isogai take off after Noto Hare #1, while Oishi and Minoru follow the Hare Leader, leaving Chikara alone in the dust.

THE HARE LEADER

Trained as a runner since birth, the Leader sprints through the maze of Edo streets, desperately fast, rounding corners, leaping off walls, shoving anyone to the ground who gets in his way.

MINORU does his best to stay on his heels, but the bastard's unbelievably fast.

OISHI quickly realizes he won't be able to keep up, and uses his brain instead of his feet, cutting down an adjacent alleyway, hoping to get ahead of the chase while --

ISOGAI

is in hot pursuit of Noto Hare #1. As nearly 60-year-old Hanjo starts to wheeze and fall back, Isogai calls out --

ISOGAI

Don't worry, old man, I've got it!

And Isogai takes off at speed, the entire hopes of the 47 ronin resting on his shoulders.

Hare #1 runs like a rabbit before the hounds. Were he not drunk, he would certainly leave Isogai in the dust, but his legs have lost their split-second timing and fleetness.

And Isogai is gaining.

Watching his pursuer over his shoulder more than the way ahead, Hare #1 rounds a corner -- and finds himself in a dead end alley.

But just when we think he'll stop, he doesn't -- and runs straight for the alley wall! With every ounce of speed he can muster he LEAPS at the stones and REBOUNDS off them, sailing over the head of Isogai and toward freedom --!!

But Isogai reaches up and grabs a foot as he passes -- and SLAMS him down to the earth. WHAM!!

Now a desperate scabble ensues, Hare #1 wielding his double short swords like steel incisors. Isogai and he grapple on the ground, but the Hare's moves are blazingly fast and he's armored. Isogai's attempts to harm him are thwarted by the steel and slowly, the fight turns. Hare #1 gets the upper hand, double blades poised above Isogai's chest, and just as he's about to stab down --

TWO ELDERLY HANDS reach into frame, grip Hare #1's helm and WRENCH IT VIOLENTLY AROUND -- **KRRRAAAACCKK!** -- BREAKING his neck.

Hare #1 drops, boneless as a doll, and Isogai looks up at his savior. HANJO stands there.

HANJO
(pointedly)
Old man?

ISOGAI
I'm never going to hear the end of
this, am I?

Hanjo just smiles and we SLAM BACK TO--

THE NOTO HARE LEADER

racing through the streets, Minoru hot on his heels. He tries to lose his pursuer by taking a shortcut beneath a building on stilts --

-- to find his only means of escape BLOCKED as OISHI's shape fills the exit. The Leader turns to double back, but now Minoru blocks that way as well.

The Hare Leader's eyes flick back and forth wildly. He's trapped. And as Oishi and Minoru draw their weapons and start closing in for the kill in perfect synchronicity, the Leader sighs, knowing he's well and truly fucked...

CUT TO:

EXT. CITY MARKETPLACE - MOMENTS LATER

Chikara stands at the Fruit Vendor Girl's stall making sure she's okay.

CHIKARA

Are you certain you are all right?

She refuses to make eye contact. A moment later, her FATHER steps up and pushes Chikara away. Glares at him.

GIRL'S FATHER

You aren't welcome here. Your kind only brings trouble.

CHIKARA

I don't understand. I came to your aid --

GIRL'S FATHER

You are *ronin*. You are a disgrace. Nothing you do will ever change that.

(beat)

Now go.

Shocked, Chikara looks around...and sees the entire marketplace FOCUSED on him. Looks of disdain. Anger. Hatred.

And for the first time for Chikara, what it truly means to be *ronin* hits home.

DISSOLVE TO:

EXT. CITY - LATER

The five *ronin* have regathered. Minoru sits beneath a tree, carving the block of ivory he bought. In the b.g., Hanjo and Isogai dump the bodies of the slain Hares in the river.

Now PAN OVER TO REVEAL Chikara sitting on a rock, removed from the group.

After a moment, Oishi approaches his son. Sits beside him. Neither says a word, until finally --

OISHI

(quietly)

Listen, Chikara... The only advantage we have against Kira, the only *possible* chance, is by means of surprise. They must continue to think we are broken and not a threat.

(beat)

(MORE)

OISHI (CONT'D)
 You weren't *thinking*. You must
suppress your pride. There will be
 a time to fight. This is not it.

Humiliated, Chikara looks up at his father.

CHIKARA
 Do you wish me to go home?

Oishi considers...then shakes his head.

OISHI
 No. We are only 47. We cannot
 afford to lose a single blade...

Chikara bows his head in shame as Oishi rises and strides
 off.

CUT TO:

EXT. RURAL ROAD - LATER

Minoru walks beside Chikara, who is drowning in a sea of self-
 doubt.

CHIKARA
 I am so...ashamed.

Minoru looks him in the eye. Man to man.

MINORU
 Then redeem yourself.

CHIKARA
 But, I'm cursed. No matter how
 hard I try to suppress it, my left
 hand is dominant. If not for my
 father intervening back there...

Chikara doesn't finish the thought. It's too terrible.

MINORU
 You mustn't dwell on what's past.

CHIKARA
 That's easy for you to say. My
 father respects you.

MINORU
 Perhaps...but the rest of the world
 does not. And never will.
 (beat)
 My whole life I have known that I
 can never be a samurai...but that
 hasn't prevented me from living as
 though I could.

Chikara looks up at Minoru.

MINORU
You must take what you think holds
you back and find a way to turn it
into a strength.

CHIKARA
But how?

MINORU
You are your father's son. You'll
figure it out.

There is kindness in Minoru's look. And strength. It's just
the salve for Chikara's wounded pride. Minoru walks away,
and as Chikara processes what he's said --

SFX: SOMEONE GIGGLES BEHIND CHIKARA.

Chikara turns to look...but sees no one there.

Chikara continues walking -- and stops short when the MAD
GIGGLING recommences. He spins around, and this time he sees
the ONE-ARMED AINU tottering after him, almost upon him.

ONE-ARMED AINU
..hee-hee...i know who you
are...hee-hee...I know what you're
looking for...

As the toothless old vagabond nears him, Chikara backs away
in panic and trips, falling flat on his ass. The AINU
descends on him, greasy beard falling in Chikara's face.

ONE-ARMED AINU (CONT'D)
...i know...iknowiknowiknow..
heheeeheeeeee...

CHIKARA
Aaaughh!

In an instant, Oishi and the others are there. Hanjo uses
the point of his sword to back the AINU away.

HANJO
Leave him be, old one!

But even then, the wizened creature can only giggle.

ONE-ARMED AINU
I know who you are! Lord Asano's
men! Lord Asano's *ronin* come
looking for weapons.

Minoru and the others look to Oishi, concerned.

ISOGAI
Should I kill him?

ONE-ARMED AINU
Kill me? When I'm the only one in
the city who knows how to find good
blades, *real* blades, instead of
these...ornaments.

He spits out the last word with disgust.

OISHI
Where?

The Ainu begins coughing theatrically, leaning heavily on his walking staff.

ONE-ARMED AINU
So dry out today, is it not? A man
can hardly...(cough, cough)...clear
his throat to speak. A little
drink would ease my--

ISOGAI
Answer him, you little beggar!

OISHI
Isogai.

ONE-ARMED AINU
The tavern is not far. Out of
town. Away from trouble. Away
from pesky little rabbits.

The Ainu indicates behind Oishi with his eyes. Oishi turns and sees two Noto Hares walking down the road.

OISHI
(turning back to the Ainu)
Lead us.

TIME CUT TO:

INT. TAVERN - OUTSIDE THE CITY - LATER

Oishi's men sit around as the One-Armed Ainu loudly finishes a bowl of soup and uses his beard as a napkin. But when he signals for a refill of his sake cup, Isogai explodes.

ISOGAI
Why are we wasting our time?! He
knows nothing! He's simply trying
to beg sake off us!

But before Isogai has finished his rant, the old man slides his walking stick apart to reveal THE MOST BEAUTIFUL EXAMPLE OF SWORDMAKING WE HAVE EVER SEEN.

Even Minoru, completely engrossed in carving his ivory block, looks up in wonder.

In his hands, the Ainu holds a DOUBLE-EDGED KATANA, polished mirror bright. Like liquid silver. A steel dream...

Words choke in Isogai's throat. Oishi stares in open astonishment at the quality.

OISHI
Koto blade...

From the reverence in his tone, we can tell it's the Holy Grail of swordmaking.

OISHI (CONT'D)
How..?

ONE-ARMED AINU
The rest of Japan may have forgotten the true art of swordmaking...but the Ainu have not.

And as the old man begins to tell the story, PUSH IN on the coals in the brazier on the table and --

DISSOLVE TO:

A RIVER OF FLOWING LAVA

-- snaking beneath the earth. We are:

INT. MT. FUJI

-- where we FOLLOW the lava flow through a maze of VOLCANIC TUNNELS formed of solidified molten rock. Orange light suffuses the tunnels, making them glow. From somewhere ahead, and the sound of SMITHS' HAMMERS can be heard.

ONE-ARMED AINU (VO)
Frustrated at the deterioration of the swordmaking art, the descendants of legendary swordmaker Amakuni retreated into the lava tunnels beneath Mt. Fuji to rediscover their ancestor's lost techniques.

Now we round a bend in the tunnel and enter Hell's Foundry -- an awesome chamber of stalactites and stalagmites where an army of ONI (fierce Japanese demons) work iron into steel using bubbling calderas of lava as their furnace.

ONE-ARMED AINU (VO) (CONT'D)

Down there in the dark, they used the earth as their forge. With no sun to tell the time, the swordmakers worked relentlessly, day and night, caring only for their craft, their bodies changing, becoming muscled from the hammer, their skin baked red as kiln bricks from the unending heat, their eyes seared milky white from staring at the glow of molten metal.

CLOSE IN on the largest of the Oni as he pulls a GIGANTIC BLADE from a lava pot. It glows cherry red as he places it on an iron deposit and raises a MASSIVE HAMMER to shape it--

ONE-ARMED AINU (VO) (CONT'D)

(beat)

But all that mattered was the sword.

The Oni SMASHES the hammer down with the force of a god. CLAAAANGG! An EXPLOSION OF SPARKS burst from the metal, and we --

MATCH BACK TO:

THE BRAZIER (INT. TAVERN) - CONTINUOUS

-- as the Ainu pokes the coals and sparks fly.

The tale has spellbound Oishi's men. All except Isogai, who rolls his eyes at the theatrics.

ONE-ARMED AINU

The price for the blades is two-fold. The first is your silence. If the Emperor were to discover the swordmakers, he would claim them and the art would be lost forever.

OISHI

And what is the second?

ONE-ARMED AINU

Gold. Fifty *kobans* apiece.

Everyone reacts. Shocked. Outraged. Isogai physically stumbles back from the figure.

OISHI
We'll take 47.

EXT. TAVERN - WIDE SHOT - LATER

As the group leaves the inn, Oishi SENSES someone or something watching them from the dark forest.

Oishi turns. Scans the woods. But when he finds nothing, he turns back and continues on his way.

It is only when Oishi is gone that a SHAPE moves from its hiding place -- perched high in the shadows of a tree with metal climbing claws on hands and feet. The most feared and loathed type of mercenary in all of Japan.

The NINJA bounds impossibly from treetop to treetop, stalking its prey...

DISSOLVE TO:

EXT. MOUNT FUJI - ESTABLISHING

The world's most-recognizable stratovolcano stands dramatically against the horizon, a THICK COLUMN OF ASH AND SMOKE rising from its snowy cone.

At the base of the mountain --

OISHI

-- leads a half-dozen of his *ronin* and a complement of BEARERS pulling wagons through the bamboo forest known as the "Sea of Trees". Soon, a clearing reveals a STRUCTURE ON STILTS built up against the side of the mountain.

Sitting abandoned for several years, the *Lotus Peak* looks more like a haunted house than a tea room.

INT. ABANDONED TEAHOUSE - CONTINUOUS

Shrouded in cobwebs, dust and deep shadows...

The tea hall is a single greatroom, filled with *shoji* walls that could subdivide the space into numerous private tea rooms.

HANJO
I think we've been had.

Oishi says nothing, moving forward through the darkened space. The others follow. And as they do...

We NOTICE the maze of shoji walls begin to SILENTLY SHIFT around them. Unnoticed by Oishi's men, the ricepaper walls SLIDE into place, SEPARATING the group into smaller and smaller factions. And just as the trap is about to spring --

OISHI notices a BROKEN COBWEB. And then another. And as his eyes track a SERIES OF BROKEN COBWEBS up the walls and into the shadows, realization hits --

Someone has scaled the walls! Someone is in here with us!

OISHI
SHINOBI!

Oishi whips his sword out and up before his face just as a NINJA strikes from the ceiling shadows like a cobra, spitting a SPRAY OF GREEN POISON in his face.

ECU AS THE POISON SPRAY hits the flat of Oishi's blade and is DEFLECTED into two separate streams away from Oishi's nose and mouth!

Oishi wheels away -- just in time to see a small clay BALL with a LIT FUSE tossed among the samurai. BOOOOM!!

The Thunderclap goes off like a cannon, DEAFENING SOUND and BLINDING LIGHT that reveals THE WALLS ARE CRAWLING WITH NINJA!

[SFX NOTE: As a result of the grenade, the only sound in the following scene is the TINNY RINGING of Oishi's ears.]

As the samurai try to shake off the effects of the blast, the Ninja STRIKE. Smouldering flames illuminate glimpses of HOOK AND CHAIN grabbing people under their chins and YANKING them up into the darkness. Ninja MATERIALIZING from the shadows and striking with SHURIKKEN, DISK HARPOONS, TIGER CLAWS.

ONE BEARER tries stay out of range of a ninja with a spear -- but realizes too late when it guts him from across the room that the SPEAR IS EXTENDABLE!

It's like the ambush out of *Aliens*. The ninja materialize from the dark, attack with inhuman ferocity, then disappear back into shadow.

THE BEARERS panic, dying in droves, while --

OISHI'S MEN master their fear and battle for their lives.

Suddenly, a chain wraps around Oishi's sword and RIPS IT AWAY into the dark as another ninja attacks with *ninja-to*, the distinctive ninja straight sword.

Reacting without thought, Oishi STEPS INTO THE ATTACK and SLAPS THE BLADE ASIDE with the flat of his hand -- then grabs the sword's guard with his fingers and YANKS it out of the ninja's hands, dispatching him with a move called *Flowing Water*.

OISHI
Ronin, to me!

MINORU divides one dark warrior into four equal parts, then turns -- as a NINJA POISONER rises from the dark before him! The Poisoner spits like a snake, but Minoru is faster, whipping his sword across the man's neck -- and a GUSH OF PURPLISH TOXIN rushes down the poisoner's chest from his gaping throat!

One by one OISHI AND HIS MEN fight their way to each other. Battle back to back against the dark tide of assassins.

But the Ninja have numbers and surprise, forcing our heroes into --

THE DEPTHS OF THE TEAHOUSE

-- where there are no windows. No doors.

And no hope for escape.

Oishi and his men fight like lions, battling against the crush of assailants, but soon find their backs against the teahouse's rear wall. Nowhere else to go.

Razor-sharp spear points MATERIALIZE from the dark, followed by the ninja warriors who carry them.

OISHI
Come then, you faceless cowards.
(whips blood off his
sword)
My blade still thirsts.

The Ninja spearmen CHARGE. Oishi GRABS a spear thrust at his chest, stopping it from impaling him, but the kinetic force behind the charge is enough to DRIVE HIM BACK into the wall --

-- AND THROUGH IT! Wood cracks and splinters as Oishi and his men are propelled through the false rear wall of the teahouse and into --

A VOLCANIC TUNNEL

-- illuminated by pools of molten lava bubbling up through the earth.

SFX: The demonic percussion of hammers on anvils resounds from the dark ahead.

The ninja onslaught drives them toward it. Around a bend in the tunnel and into --

HELL'S FORGE

The secret Ainu swordworks within Mount Fuji.

Calderas of molten rock act as FORGES. Steam vents as BELLOWS. Raw iron deposits as ANVILS.

Instantly, twenty monstrous OGRES look up from their metalwork. Milky eyes glaring. Rotted teeth snarling. Impossible muscles rippling beneath red, baked skin.

There is a terrible frozen moment, then -- CRRRRAAAASSHH!! -- an ENORMOUS HAMMER turns a chunk of volcanic rock to fine dust an inch from Oishi's face!

Oishi leaps back as a SCAR-FACED OGRE charges from the shadows impossibly fast, BELLOWING, and strikes again.

Oishi blocks the blow with his sword -- which SHATTERS as if it were made of glass.

OISHI

Gods...

And as the inhuman beast strikes again --

ANOTHER ANGLE

As WAVES OF OGRES AND NINJAS crash against Oishi's men, crushing them in nightmarish battle. The ronin fight for their lives in an impossible, terrifying three-way-battle!

OISHI

is driven back by the Scar-Faced Ogre's relentless assault. Hammerblow after hammerblow whooshes past his face with enough force to whip his hair wildly about his face.

But just as the Ogre lunges to strike again, Oishi reverses his footwork and steps in to perform a move known as *Dog Steals Bone* and DISARMS the brute, sending his hammer thudding to the floor.

Defenseless, the Ogre freezes and Oishi STRIKES! But as Ako's swordmaster swings --

OISHI
 (yells at Ogre)
 DOWN!

Oishi shoves the monster down and THRUSTS his sword an inch above its head -- to SKEWER a NINJA about to cleave the Ogre in half!

Then Oishi darts off, running into the heart of the battle.

THE SCAR-FACED OGRE watches him go, realization dawning across his brutish face the man could've killed him. That the ronin are not enemies. But the ninja...

Scar-Face picks up his hammer and BELLOWS in his savage tongue at his Ainu brethren.

ALL AROUND

the Ogres immediately CEASE battling Oishi's ronin...and turn their fury on the ninja.

HANJO can't believe it when the monster he's fighting suddenly turns and stands beside him to face two ninja with chain and sickle.

BASHO is getting cut repeatedly by a quick little ninja wielding two daggers when -- WHAM! -- a TITANIC MALLET hammers the little bastard's head down into his chest cavity. The Ogre responsible steps from the dark and hands Basho an extra mallet.

ISOGAI dispatches three ninja and turns in time to see a nearby Ogre get his arm HACKED OFF AT THE ELBOW by a NAGINATA NINJA. But the Ogre isn't done fighting. Instead, it shoves its bleeding stump deep into a red-hot brazier of coals, cauterizing the wound, then ROARS and dispatches the Naginata wielder.

ISOGAI
 Now that he didn't expect!

But just then, a fresh wave of ninja enter the caves, led by a familiar face -- the fearsome Ninja Clanlord -- who dispatches three ogres with terrifying ease.

Seeing them coming --

OISHI

tosses his broken sword aside and pulls an unfinished one from the heat of an Ainu forge. The blade is amazingly beautiful, GLOWING RED HOT like something out of legend.

When a ninja slashes at him, Oishi reflexively blocks with the burning blade -- and SHATTERS the ninja's weapon.

As the ninja tries to draw another weapon, Oishi QUENCHES the molten blade in his belly. SSSSSsssss! The ninja falls, his clothes BURSTING INTO FLAME wherever the blade touches.

Oishi looks at the makers mark on the sword.

OISHI
Koto blade...

Oishi grabs two more from the kiln and hurls them toward --

OISHI
Minoru!

MINORU

dispatches two ninja with his shattered swords, only nubs of blade left, and as a half-dozen more close in -- SSSSSss! SSSSSsssss! -- two red-hot blades thunk into the backs of two of his assailants, impaling them and igniting their clothes.

Minoru wastes no time, snatching the glowing swords from the backs of the fallen and whirling on his attackers like a blazing cyclone.

CHIKARA

is fighting one ninja, when he suddenly finds himself surrounded by a dozen more. The situation is about to turn deadly when --

A HUGE HAND clamps down on his neck from behind and YANKS HIM BACKWARDS. Another ninja?!

No. It's the Scar-Faced Ogre. He's dragged Chikara back to the edge of a LAKE OF LAVA. There's nowhere for them to go. But as the ninja surge forward to kill them, Scar-Face raises his mallet high and SWINGS --

But not at the Ninja. AT THE LAVA!

FWOOOSH! The hammer sends a SHEET OF LAVA at the attacking ninja who scream and burn. Instantly, Chikara and Scar-Face charge forward, slashing and bashing the ninja down.

INT. AINU SWORDWORKS - ANOTHER ANGLE

Now all of Oishi's men begin grabbing up koto blades out of kilns, out of forges. And the battlegrounds becomes alight: flaming swords against shadowy ninja.

And the tides begin to turn.

OISHI fights with the precision and grace of his rank, shattering ninja weapons setting fire to ninja with every stroke of his legendary blade.

Quickly, the ninja are overcome, slain to a man, except for the --

NINJA CLANLORD

-- who sidesteps a battle with SMOKE BOMBS and races off through the caves.

But Oishi and Minoru are already in pursuit, chasing the Ninja Lord through a series of steam-filled tunnels and into--

A STALACTITE-FILLED CHAMBER

-- where a hundred bubbling pools of lava dot the cave floor.

Oishi and Minoru catch the Ninja Lord and the fight is on: the ronin's glowing swords working in tandem against the Ninja Lord's terrible chain and claw.

The tempo of the battle gets faster and faster, until their moves are simply a blur.

And that's when the Clanlord takes it up a notch.

Suddenly, Oishi and Minoru's concentrated attacks are outpaced by the Ninja Lord's IMPOSSIBLE SPEED and, for the first time ever, Oishi finds himself OUTSKILLED and on the defensive.

The Clan Lord unleashes a flurry of chainwork that finds the holes in Oishi's blocks, in Minoru's ripostes, slashing them, bashing them, forcing them back to the edge of a CALDERA OF LAVA where Oishi and Minoru fight, teetering for balance at the edge of the molten pool...

Seeing his opportunity, the Clan Lord SMILES. But just as he moves to force them in --

The Scar-Faced Ogre appears from the dark and SMASHES THE ASSASSIN CLANLORD WITH HIS MIGHTY SLEDGEHAMMER, SENDING THE BASTARD NINJA SCREAMING INTO THE LAVA!

Oishi and Minoru look at one another, then at the Ainu...and exhale for the first time in minutes, knowing how very close they came.

FADE TO:

INT. AINU SWORDWORKS - LATER

The Ainu "Ogres" clean-up, dragging the bodies of the slain ninja and tossing them into the lava pools, while--

EXT. ABANDONED TEAHOUSE - MT. FUJI - SUNSET

-- the *ronin* finish securing their carts now filled with legendary weapons.

With Mt. Fuji pointing heavenward in the plum-colored sky behind them, Oishi bows deeply before the Scar-Faced Ogre, clearly the Ainu leader. Minoru and Chikara do the same.

OISHI

Thank you, noble one.

The Scar-Faced Ogre returns the bow, then looks Oishi in the eye. Speaks with a voice like the grumbling of deep caverns. Something he hasn't done in years.

SCAR-FACED OGRE

May you..be strong and
diligent...in your deeds.

And with a final bow, the *ronin* depart, and we --

TIME CUT TO:

EXT. JAPANESE COUNTRYSIDE - NIGHTFALL - A WEEK LATER

A campsite has been set up. All 47 *ronin* have regathered. It is clear they have been travelling hard, for all sleep on the ground, utterly exhausted.

Except for two.

While the others sleep, Minoru and Chikara, practice swordwork by the light of the campfire. Minoru instructs him in several maneuvers, counterbalancing his left-handedness with a knife in his right hand. And as the two practice maneuvers again and again, Chikara getting better with each try --

SLOW DISSOLVE TO:

AERIAL SHOT - HIGH IN THE JAPANESE MOUNTAINS - DAY

An ESTABLISHING SHOT of a landscape of snowcapped peaks and black pine...

And dominating all from three thousand feet up the steep snowy mountainside, FIND Kira's impregnable YAMASHIRO (castle fortress) looming over the world like a grim stone threat.

Even from our aerial shot, we can see that wedding preparations are underway below. Cheerful silks being arranged. Red lanterns being hung. Excessive pomp and circumstance that is the hallmark of the Master of Protocol.

But even while all these festivities are being prepared, in another part of the castle, the emotional climate is very different.

EXT. KIRA'S FORTRESS - BALCONY

Mika and Lord Kira sit in heavy robes, staring out at a frost-rimed koi pond in a winter garden below. Candles float on the surface, the fish move sluggishly below.

It's majestic and beautiful, but somehow very sad.

They sit in silence, the only sound the quiet movements of a SCRAWNY BOY fanning a brazier to keep them warm while he himself shivers in his thin kimono. Then --

LORD KIRA
 (reciting)
Spring departs.
Birds cry.
Fishes' eyes are filled with tears.
 (to Mika)
 Are you familiar with the works of Basho?

But Mika is more concerned about the shivering boy.

MIKA
 The child is cold.

LORD KIRA
 Is this so?
 (turns to the boy)
 Are you cold, boy? Do you wish for me to send you away?

It's not a threat. Not quite. The boy shakes his head.

SCRAWNY BOY
 (teeth chattering)
 No, my Lord. I am warm.

LORD KIRA
 You see, Lady Asano? You are mistaken.

Kira pours thick green tea into earthenware *raku* tea bowls for the both of them, then rises to stare out at the view.

LORD KIRA (CONT'D)

As you are about a great many things...

With his back momentarily turned away, Mika seizes the opportunity and slips a SMALL SACHET OF POWDER from the sleeve of her robe. Pours the contents into Kira's drink.

She conceals the sachet just in time as Kira turns around and picks up his tea cup. He lifts it to his lips and is about to drink --

-- when he NOTICES Mika watching him with interest. It's the first time she's done so. Kira instantly becomes suspicious.

Realizing her mistake, Mika looks calmly away...but it's too late. Kira notices several GRANULES on the table by his cup.

Kira's eyes narrow.

LORD KIRA (CONT'D)

But perhaps I spoke too soon. The child does look cold.

Kira takes his tea cup -- and offers it to the boy.

LORD KIRA (CONT'D)

Here, boy. Warm yourself. Drink this.

The boy is hesitant, then takes the cup with trembling hands, savoring the warmth. Mika watches the boy. Kira watches her. And just as the boy tilts the cup to his lips --

MIKA

No!

-- Mika breaks and SLAPS the cup out of his hands, shattering it against the ground.

Kira looms over her as she crumples to the ground, weeping.

LORD KIRA

How like your father you are...
Rash. And a fool.

Kira leans down and takes her face in his hands.

LORD KIRA (CONT'D)

And so close to meeting his same fate. You play at games where you do not fully comprehend the stakes. But I promise you this: when we are wed --
(venomous)
I will teach them to you.

Lord Kira strides away, leaving Mika empty and devastated on the balcony, staring helplessly out at the foothills beyond her reach below.

And as she does, PUSH IN and VFX SKIM miles down the mountainside to --

EXT. FOOTHILLS - JAPANESE COUNTRYSIDE - SAME TIME

-- where Oishi, Minoru and a dozen others belly-crawl through the long grass to reach a vantage point at the top of a rise. Far above them, Kira's castle fortress clutches the mountaintop like some sinister stone spider.

The *ronin* stare at it, calculating.

OKUDA

We should attack tonight. It will be a long climb, but our thirst for justice will fuel us --

Oishi shakes his head.

OISHI

Attacking Kira's stronghold would be a futile gesture. The walls are impregnable and he garrisons a thousand soldiers inside.

(beat)

No. Any attempt on his fortress would be doomed to failure.

OKUDA

Then what have we travelled all this way for? To wait for Kira to march down the hill and present himself to us.

(imitating Kira)

Why, hello, Oishi. Here's my neck. Strike swiftly please.

A ironic smirk crinkles Oishi's eyes.

OISHI

That is *exactly* what we are going to do.

Okuda and the others are confused. So Oishi directs their gaze, not up at Kira's fortress...but down at his fiefdom in the valley below.

At the foot of the mountain sits Kira's *jinaimachi* -- or temple town -- comprised of various community buildings and farms that all bear Lord Kira's FAMILY CREST: a red octopus against a golden field.

OISHI (CONT'D)

Lady Asano's period of mourning comes to an end in two days. In honor of their union, Kira has ordered the entire realm to pay a tribute at the Founder's Temple.

Oishi points at the two-story wooden structure in the center of the rural village. *Sohei*, or warrior monks, move about the temple in their distinctive robes the color of dried blood.

OISHI (CONT'D)

And Kira himself will be there to collect the prize.

(beat)

Greed ever diminishes wisdom...

Oishi turns back to his men, determined.

OISHI (CONT'D)

And the very impulse that drove him to betray our lord, is the same weapon we will use against him.

And off Oishi's words, Minoru turns and looks up at the castle. Stares as if searching for Mika.

Almost as if the two are connected, and he is returning her earlier gaze...

CUT TO:

AN ORNATE PALANQUIN

So massive and gaudy, it can only belong to one man.

Thirty men bear the garish litter toward the center of town, escorted by a ring of two hundred heavily-armed soldiers.

When they reach the Temple, Lord Kira steps out in a bombast of silk and blackened teeth.

As he steps inside, PULL BACK TO REVEAL we are:

EXT. KIRA'S TEMPLE TOWN - THE NEXT MORNING

Abuzz with activity, centering on the Founder's Temple. Thousands of merchants, townsfolk and farmers come from all across the land bearing their wedding tributes in the form of rice, livestock, textiles or coin.

Soldiers and monks herd everyone into an orderly line that extends hundreds of yards out of the temple.

At the edge of town, NOTICE a LONE FARMER entering the village, carrying his offering of two bolts of silk. As the farmer gets closer and we get a peek beneath his broad hat, we realize it's OISHI in disguise.

As Oishi nears the temple, he blends in with the crowd, subtly glances around, taking everything in.

Formulating a battle plan...

POV OISHI

Noting the positions of the soldiers around the temple...

The MATCHLOCK MUSKETS they carry...

The four CANNONS stationed beside the temple and, as a soldier exits, a small magazine room where BARRELS OF GUNPOWDER (marked with the Dutch East India crest) are stored...

BACK TO SHOT

as Oishi is goaded by the soldiers into the long line of farmers to make his offering and meekly complies.

Once there, he looks around and SPOTS familiar faces interspersed throughout the crowd.

HANJO disguised as a beet-farmer. ISOGAI disguised as an artist. BASHO as a workman.

As a cart filled with wedding gifts rumbles past on its way up the mountain, MINORU, disguised as a peasant, maneuvers close enough to SLIP IN A SMALL WRAPPED PACKAGE of his own.

The line moves forward and soon Oishi finds himself at the temple steps. Above the doorway hangs an immense painting of the temple's founder, Lord Kira. Below that is a smaller, almost stingy one of the Supreme Buddha.

Oishi stops for a moment, struck by the mind-boggling vanity of it all.

VOICE (OS)
YOU THERE!

Suddenly -- WAAAAP! -- Oishi is struck across the shoulders by a sword scabbard. An IMPOSING SOLDIER looms before him.

Oishi tries to keep his face downcast as the Soldier studies him, but --

IMPOSING SOLDIER

Look at me.
 (when Oishi doesn't)
LOOK AT ME!

Oishi does. And just as we're sure he's about to be caught --

IMPOSING SOLDIER (CONT'D)

Keep the line moving.

Oishi is as surprised as we are. Nods readily and shuffles away, ignoring the Soldier's muttered curse of --

IMPOSING SOLDIER (CONT'D)

Brainless peasants.

-- as he moves off into:

INT. FOUNDER'S TEMPLE - CONTINUOUS

Prayer candles and incense dominate the interior of the two-storied *hondo* -- or main hall -- filled with townsfolk.

LORD KIRA sits in a chair befitting his status, behind a screen of gossamer silk to prevent the gaze of peasants from sullyng him. It is from there he surveys his offerings.

Oishi watches as a PIG FARMER approaches the screen and hands over five piglets in a cart. An ACOLYTE records the information in the official roll. Kira never says a word. Kira's functionary, the temple's CHIEF MONK, does all the interacting with the lesser peoples.

CHIEF MONK

Next.

As the Soldier escorts the farmer away, the Chief Monk turns his gaze on Oishi.

CHIEF MONK (CONT'D)

Step forward.

Oishi steps before the screen shrouding Kira's visage.

CHIEF MONK (CONT'D)

Name and offering?

OISHI

Two bolts of silk, Holy One.

The Chief Monk tries to take the bolts, but Oishi holds fast to them. The Monk sighs and turns to the Acolyte.

CHIEF MONK

Note that they are exceedingly poor specimens. Moth eaten.

(MORE)

CHIEF MONK (CONT'D)

The cheapest sort.

(turns back to Oishi)

Is this insult all you bring your
liege lord?

OISHI

No, there is more...but I fear your
master will enjoy it even less.

The Chief Monk begins to grow suspicious.

CHIEF MONK

Who are you? State your name!

OISHI

With pleasure.

Oishi turns to the screen, eyes steely.

OISHI (CONT'D)

My name is Oishi Kuranosuke --

(the silhouette reacts)

-- and the tribute I bring is the
vengeance of Lord Asano Naganori.

Realizing the danger the warrior monk goes for a weapon, but in one swift move Oishi draws a sword concealed within the bolt of silk -- so sharp that it SLICES through the thousand layers of fabric as it is drawn out -- and SMASHES the monk in the head with the steel butt of the blade.

The Chief Monk DROPS like rag doll.

Faster than anyone can react, Oishi slices through veiled screen -- *SCHRIIIP!* -- and is about to hack Kira down when--

Oishi STOPS DEAD.

The man cowering before him is not Kira...but an effeminate AIDE acting as his double. And as the implications of this sink in--

SFX: THE DISTINCTIVE CLICKS OF TWO DOZEN MUSKET SEAR LOCKS BEING COCKED ECHOES AROUND THE ROOM.

Oishi looks up to see Kira RIFLE AND BOWMEN ringing the balcony above, all with their weapons trained on him. And below, every one of the warrior monks holds an exotic weapon in hand -- WHIP CHAINS, TIGER HOOKS, IRON FANS.

The room goes deathly still, everyone holding their breath.

In the silence that follows, only one sound can be heard. LAUGHTER. Oishi turns to see the Chief Monk, laughing through blood-stained teeth.

CHIEF MONK
We knew you would come.

OISHI
How..?

HEAVY FOOTSTEPS resound from an alcove...and like a demon returned fresh from hell, the NINJA CLANLORD steps from the shadows. Pulls down his mask to reveal half his face has become a MELTED, SCARIFIED HORROR from the lava beneath Mt. Fuji.

It's the last person on earth Oishi wants to see.

CHIEF MONK
Kira is safe in his fortress,
ronin. Unlike you.
(to his musketeers above)
Kill him.

The crowd swiftly moves away from Oishi as the musketeers draw a bead, and just as they are about to fire --

One of the musketeers heads just SLIDES OFF HIS SHOULDERS and TOPPLES to the floor below.

Another's arm simply SEPARATES at the shoulder, dropping his musket.

An archer SCREAMS as two feet of shining steel protrude through his chest, lancing his heart.

Still another is CLEAVED IN 'TWIN, from crown to root, and falls apart in two symmetrical pieces -- revealing Minoru standing behind him.

As other ronin go to work on the rest and blood and body parts rain down, the crowd ERUPTS IN CHAOS. Utter mayhem ensues as two hundred villagers run in every direction.

Instantly --

THE NINJA CLANLORD

turns to look back -- and discovers Oishi gone. Blended back into the crowd.

Around him, soldiers and warrior monks begin to drop as the ronin attack like ghosts, materializing to slit a throat, then vanishing back into the crowd.

In the pandemonium, it's impossible to tell harmless villager from foe. To the Chief Monk, there is only one solution.

CHIEF MONK
LOCK THE DOORS! KILL EVERYONE
INSIDE! LET NO RONIN ESCAPE!

OUTSIDE

a dozen of Kira's men begin to swing the massive temple doors shut.

INSIDE

Muskets THUNDER. Arrows FLY. And Oishi sees their only chance of escape closing. The doors are so colossal that once they're shut, there will be no opening them.

Amid the chaos, Oishi spots the sumo-sized Basho in the crowd.

OISHI
BASHO! THE DOOR!

The giant looks up and responds instantly, surging forward and bowling a path through the crowd to reach the tremendous doors a heartbeat before closing.

He hits them like a force of nature, driving the dozen men trying to close them back a foot, their boots skidding loudly across the stone floor.

But that's where the forward momentum stops and the war of strength begins. OUTSIDE, more men pile on the doors, trying to force them shut, while INSIDE Basho strains mightily against their combined efforts.

KIRA'S SOLDIERS AND WARRIOR MONKS

lash out at anyone within reach -- men, women, children -- but find their weapons BLOCKED by ronin swords that appear from nowhere, protecting the innocents then striking their own lethal return blow.

An arrow about to take a child's life is SEVERED IN MID-AIR by Minoru's saving sword -- and before the cleaved arrow can fall to the ground, Minoru snatches it out of the sky and stabs it into the face of an attacking warrior monk.

OISHI defends against three warrior monks, SHATTERING all three of their weapons with a single angry strike.

But as much damage as they're doing, the ronin are desperately outnumbered and are starting to take heavy casualties.

ISOGAI and others take a hail of musket balls through the shoulders, legs, arms.

HANJO barely slips aside from an iron fan slice chop meant to brain him and loses his left ear for the effort.

MINORU ducks away from a decapitating swipe of a RAZOR-SHARP WHIP CHAIN and we PUSH INTO A SLOW-MO ECU as the tip of the enemy's steel whip NICKS HIS NECK, drawing only a single drop of blood.

And though he fells one opponent after another, OISHI's back is RAKED OPEN by dual tiger hooks.

They have to get out.

OISHI

BASHO!

ACROSS THE ROOM

Basho is a human pincushion of arrows, an easy target for archers who do everything in their power to drop him.

But for all the arrows sticking out of his back, Basho struggles titanically against--

THE NOW TWENTY SOLDIERS ON THE OPPOSITE SIDE

who, in unison, try to force the doors closed enough for the six soldiers waiting to drop the heavy WOODEN LOCK BAR -- thick as the trunk of a great tree -- in place. It's a war of millimeters as the men try to force the lock bar in place...but Basho holds the doors just a hair too wide for it to fit.

INT. TEMPLE - CONTINUOUS

Another arrow buries itself in Basho's back and he loses valuable ground.

OISHI sees his men taking heavy damage and calls out again to their only hope.

OISHI

BASHO!!!

And just as --

THE SOLDIERS OUTSIDE

slide the lock bar in place --

BASHO

hears his master's voice and digs deep to the titan within and SURGES FORWARD WITH EVERY LAST OUNCE OF SUPERHUMAN STRENGTH --!!

AND SHATTERS THE BAR TO SPLINTERS, SENDING THE SOLDIERS TUMBLING AND FORCING THE DOORS OPEN WIDE!

Instantly, the panicking crowd races through the opening, the 47 ronin blending in with them.

THE NINJA CLANLORD

races out of the temple with his soldiers and *sohei* -- and is confronted by the sight of thousands of taxpayers racing away from the temple in every conceivable direction.

Trying to find the ronin among the stampeding crowd would be like trying to find a needle in a haystack...in the heart of a raging typhoon.

Though suffering staggering injuries, Oishi and his men have gotten away...

SLOW DISSOLVE TO:

A RED SILKEN CLOTH

Then a dozen ORACLE BONES are cast across it.

The turtle shell fragments tumble and come to rest, and two tiny hands ENTER FRAME and begin to search by feel for the ones that have landed with their inscribed Kanji characters facing up.

PULL BACK TO REVEAL we are --

INT. KIRA'S MOUNTAIN CASTLE - THE LORD'S QUARTERS - LATER

Lord Kira waits impatiently for his fortune to be read by the court PROPHETS -- a pair of ten-year-old children. The diviners are fraternal twins, a boy and a girl.

It's the boy whose hands feel the shells.

LORD KIRA

Well..?

When the boy looks up, we see his milky eyes and know that he is BLIND. He looks to his sister and she stares into his eyes. No words pass between them.

Then --

GIRL PROPHET

He says you will travel great distances. That a hundred thousand shall prostrate themselves before you as you pass. That even the Shogun will bow before you in awe.

LORD KIRA

And how shall this honor occur?

The boy casts again and turns to his sister.

GIRL PROPHET

He says two feathers shall lift you up. And on that day, you will live in the minds of your countrymen forever.

LORD KIRA

Hmm. I am glad of pleasant news for a change.

They are interrupted by a knock at the door.

LORD KIRA (CONT'D)

Enter.

A MESSENGER enters. Bows deeply. Kira doesn't even turn to acknowledge him.

MESSENGER

The ronin appeared, exactly as you said they would, my lord.

LORD KIRA

Yes? And how large was their force?

MESSENGER

Several dozen men, I am told.

LORD KIRA

That is all?
(scoffs)
Pathetic...

The Messenger waits as Kira falls silent.

LORD KIRA (CONT'D)

I wish to see the bodies.

MESSENGER

There..are none, my lord.

Now Kira turns.

LORD KIRA

None?

MESSENGER

They ran. Fought free of the trap
and scattered to the wi--

LORD KIRA

Oishi ran?

MESSENGER

Yes, lord.

LORD KIRA

Ronin...

(shakes his head)

It should not, but cowardice such
as that surprises even me. Their
master was a fool, but even he had
enough propriety to take his life
when shamed.

Kira rises and makes his way to the balcony overlooking the
bonsai garden below. Gazes out.

LORD KIRA (CONT'D)

A Lord is the spine of his people.
Do you see now what happens when
that spine is broken? When samurai
have no master? Disgraceful!

(then)

Marshall the troops.

MESSENGER

Which divisions, my lord?

LORD KIRA

All of them.

(beat)

Scour the countryside. Let none of
Oishi's men get away. I want these
ronin hunted down like the gutless
dogs they are.

MESSENGER

And the wedding, Lord?

LORD KIRA

What of it?

MESSENGER

In light of the danger, it's been
suggested we postpone it.

LORD KIRA

The only danger is to Lady Asano.
In their excitement, many accidents
have fallen on brides on their
wedding night.

(malicious)

The moment I wed her, I will become
a widower...and the true legal
ruler of Asano lands in more than
name only.

(grim beat)

No. The wedding goes on.

As the Messenger bows and exits, we PRELAP A MAN CRYING OUT
IN AGONY, and --

HARD CUT TO:

A DEEP AND TERRIBLE SWORD WOUND

HANDS trying to hold the skin together, trying to stop the
gushing blood. The victim is one of Oishi's ronin. The man
trying to staunch the flow (SHIOTA) is another.

SHIOTA

It won't stop!

VOICE (OS)

Hold him down.

It's Minoru. As they hold him, Minoru takes his sword from
the coals of a brazier. The blade GLOWS ORANGE with heat and
SIZZLES as he presses it to the wound.

The injured ronin shrieks...but when the sword is taken away,
the laceration has been CAUTERIZED.

Now WIDEN TO REVEAL the rest of the scene. It's a horror
show of post-battle triage. BASHO having the arrows cut from
his back. OKUDA having his cheek stitched together from a
cut you can see his teeth through. ISOGAI grunting as thick
fingers pull a musketball from his shoulder. We are:

INT. ABANDONED FARMHOUSE - NIGHT

Where the ronin are licking their wounds from their narrow
escape.

IN THE BACK ROOM

Oishi watches the scene in despair. Minoru enters and stands
beside him.

MINORU

The soldiers have passed. We'll be safe for a few hours, but they'll be coming back.

It's a quiet, tragic moment as they stare at the men. Then --

OISHI

I have miscalculated. My pride has brought us to this.

(beat)

Perhaps we should have acted the night of Asano's death. We were vastly outnumbered, but at least we would have died valiantly. With honor. Now we are only ronin...

(beat)

...and we have failed our lord.

Minoru has never seen this side of Oishi, and it scares him a little.

MINORU

What are you saying?

OISHI

We all go our separate ways. Scatter to the wind.

MINORU

We run?

OISHI

We live. For as long as we can. Maybe there will be another day. The one advantage we had was the element of total surprise, and it is gone.

MINORU

Is it?

Oishi looks at him...and amazingly, the man is grinning.

MINORU

A great warrior once said, "If the enemy thinks of the mountains, attack like the sea; and if he think of the sea, attack like the mountains."

Minoru turns then...and Oishi follows his gaze to the snowy peaks looming above Kira's fortress.

MINORU

They expect us to run. Shouldn't we attack?

Oishi slowly smiles at his own words coming back to him. A spark has been rekindled in his eyes.

OISHI
Gather the men.

SLAM TO:

EXT. ABANDONED FARMHOUSE - NIGHT

As the MUSIC RISES, the 47 Ronin don the same formal attire they wore when they first greeted the Shogun -- the TRADITIONAL UNIFORM OF THE ASANO CLAN.

It is the first time they have worn the Asano CREST since their disgrace. Etched in moonlight, they look like a battle force stepped from myth.

Oishi looks them all over with pride.

OISHI
While the result may be uncertain,
by dawn they will know the courage
of the Asano Clan!

The men unleash a cheer that can be heard by the gods.

They're ready.

DISSOLVE TO:

INT. KIRA'S FORTRESS - FORMAL CHAMBER - NIGHT

The room is filled with a sea of colorfully-wrapped WEDDING PRESENTS.

Mika sits among them, despondent. Hopeless. Reality setting in. *There is no getting out of this. This is her future.*

Overcome by frustration, Mika hurls a table of gifts aside.

As the brightly-colored boxes cascade to the ground, a *kaiken* -- or SMALL BRIDAL SWORD symbolically given for good luck -- spills out of one of the packages.

Mika picks up the ceremonial blade, her hands begin to tremble. *Maybe there is a way out of this...* Mika closes her eyes and exhales, trying to calm herself -- then raises the knife to her own jugular.

With the clock running down on the Shogun's decree, Mika gives in to hopelessness and steels herself for this last statement of defiance against Kira. To die among their wedding gifts.

TEARS begin to run down her cheeks. And just as she cries out and makes the move to slash her own throat --

Mika's eyes fall on something she recognizes among the sea of presents. A gift wrapped in a swatch of silk BEARING HER FAMILY CREST.

Mika gasps and drops the knife as she races to pick up the package. Unwraps it the reveal a block of ivory delicately carved into the shape of a single beautiful SAKURA BLOSSOM.

Mika begins to cry, but now in joy.

Minoru is here. He is coming for her.

As hope grows in her eyes, filling her with renewed strength, and Mika laughs for the first time in a year --

SFX: CRUMP-CRUMP-CRUMP! SOUNDS OF SNOW-MUFFLED EXPLOSIONS ROCK THE CASTLE!

Startled, Mika races to the balcony, where a SLITHERING NOISE begins to fill the air, GROWING LOUDER with every passing second. Like a titanic snake sliding down the mountain.

INT. KIRA'S CHAMBERS - SAME TIME

Kira is asleep in his opulent bed...when a sound so deep and powerful begins to VIBRATE the wall stones in their mortar. Softly at first, but then violently enough to wake him in a panic.

Kira races a window...where he sees a LINE OF TORCHES along a path to the top of the mountain begin to WINK OUT as something swallows them, one by one, descending toward the castle.

LORD KIRA
What in hell --?

EXT. KIRA'S MOUNTAIN CASTLE - PARAPET WALK - CONTINUOUS

Kira's GUARDS stand frozen atop the outer defensive wall, staring out at the terrible darkness racing down the mountain, heading straight for them. The noise is DEAFENING.

And as they watch in horror, the cause of the disturbance blasts into the pool of light around the castle --

A MILLION CUBIC FEET OF ICE roars down the mountain, right at Kira's castle! The avalanche speeds downward in a solid mass, like a vengeful tectonic plate sliding downhill, OBLITERATING everything in its path.

A YOUNG GUARD is paralyzed by the sight.

YOUNG GUARD

Gods...

A shout Guard #1 jolts him back to motion.

PARAPET GUARD #1

THE ALARM, YOU FOOL! THE ALARM!

The Young Guard runs through the chaos of the walk to reach a MASSIVE BELL in the tower. But just as he grabs the rope to swing the log clapper --

PARAPET GUARD #1 (CONT'D)

FIND COVER!! FIND CO--

WHAAAAAAMMMM! The entire castle SHUDDERS as the avalanche COLLIDES into the wall and --

WHOOOOOOOOOSH!! The snow sweeps across the parapet walk like the Wrath of God, sending everyone screaming into the abyss.

IN THE ALARM TOWER ALONG THE REAR WALL

The Young Guard swings the clapper -- GONNGGGG! -- but the sound is swallowed as the avalanche reaches the tower and -- CRACKKK! -- tears the entire structure away from the wall like the hand of frost giant child dissatisfied with his toy castle.

The Young Guard screams as the tower shears from its foundation and we TRACK WITH HIM as it tumbles all the way down the cliff.

INT. CASTLE COURTYARD - CONTINUOUS

Kira's elite samurai race from their barracks by the hundreds, each wearing the Lovecraftian armor of House Yoshinaka. Their bodies covered in lacquered black scales and their *kabuto* helms wrought into the shape of the DEMON OCTOPUS that is his sigil, eight bladed STEEL TENTACLES dangling down their backs.

They reach the breach in the wall, but can see nothing through the thick clouds of swirling ice crystals.

Then SHAPES appear in the dense fog.

OCTOPUS SAMURAI #1 is the first to recognize the danger.

OCTOPUS SAMURAI #1

RONIN!

Oishi steps through the mist.

The Octopus rushes him, but Oishi SIDESTEPS and grabs the steel tentacles dangling from the Octopus' helm. YANKS down, exposing a gap beneath his chin, and thrusts his sword with all his pent up rage -- SKEWERING straight through the warrior's brain AND the top of his ornate helm.

With a savage twist, Oishi splits the man's face and helm and WRENCHES his sword free.

Oishi stands there, chest heaving, splattered in blood...and gives the WARCRY he's been waiting to give since the night of his master's death.

OISHI
FOR LORD ASANO!

And the two armies race at one another to begin the greatest swordfight in history: Oishi's ronin against a thousand elite samurai.

And as the entire castle's defenses surge at the invaders --

EXT. A QUIET SECTION OF THE PARAPET WALK - CASTLE FRONT

Now that the defenders are rushing toward the other side of the castle, a half-dozen scaling hooks sail over this abandoned section of perimeter wall and -- CLINK-CLINK! -- latch on!

Moments later, OKUDA, HAZAMA, two other burly *ronin* and CHIKARA clamber up to the walk.

DOWN BELOW

a DARK SHAPE stomps into the courtyard. The NINJA CLANLORD surveys the battle -- and spots OKUDA and his force heading for the CANNON atop the rampart wall.

The Clanlord grits his melted jaw so hard, we can hear the muscles creak.

AT THE REAR OF THE CASTLE

In the midst of battle, Oishi looks up and sees Chikara and the others racing across the wall...and below them, a SQUAD OF NINJA spider-climbing the walls.

Oishi calls out, trying to warn his son --

OISHI
CHIKARA!

-- but he can't hear him over the din of battle.

Then -- *swish!* -- a sword swipe brings his focus back to the battle.

POV OISHI - FORMULATING A BATTLE PLAN

As he did against the Brigands at the beginning of the film.

As Kira's octopodian army closes in, Oishi MENTALLY DISSECTS THE SCENE. From a WIDE ANGLE, we RACK IN on the courtyard's particular geographic features: a three-foot thick INNER GATE that prevents them from reaching the castle proper, the MAZE OF OUTBUILDINGS on this side of that gate, the SLIGHT RISE of a particular path weaving between them. Then on the WEAPONS HIS OPPONENTS CARRY, noting in VFX their effective lethal range and the most immediate threat -- a LINE OF SPEARMEN charging them.

Faster than thought, Oishi has his plan and puts it into action.

OISHI
FORMATION!

Instantly, the *ronin* form up in a particular configuration, and as the enemy spearmen close in as a wave --

OISHI (CONT'D)
KESA!

Oishi's samurai react in unison, MIRRORING the training we saw them practicing on bamboo targets at the start of the film. The ANGLES and CAMERA SHOTS are identical, except this time it's not bamboo they chop, but their opponents' SPEARS.

SCHUNK-SHUNKK-SCHUNKK! Forty of Kira's spears are reaped like wheat. Then -- SCHUNK-SHUNKK-SCHUNKK! -- so are the men that hold them.

OISHI (CONT'D)
NORTH FRONT! MISU-GAESHI!

Koto blades flash diagonally up, CLEAVING through fresh ranks of Kira's spearmen, shattering their enemies' arms and armor with a quality of weapons and skill Kira's fighters cannot match.

Then Oishi charges forward, leading his men into the maze of structures where the narrow walls reduce the advantage of numbers Kira's army has.

At a particular stretch --

OISHI (CONT'D)
WE HOLD HERE UNTIL THEY GET THE
GATE OPEN!

And as Kira's army closes on both sides and the *ronin* defend on two fronts: Oishi and the remaining *ronin* on the right side, and Minoru almost single-handedly holding the left --

ATOP THE WALL - OKUDA AND HIS FORCE

have almost reached the cannon...when the DREAD NINJA CLANLORD and his minions mount the parapet walk between them and it.

The HISS of them drawing their EXOTIC WEAPONS and adopting their FIERCE READY STANCE freezes the blood in the *ronin's* veins.

As the Ninja move forward, Okuda's men try their best to engage them -- but are quickly beaten back, intimidated. That's when Okuda's men break and BACK AWAY.

Chikara retreats with them...until he looks down and sees Kira's legions pushing the *ronin* back in the courtyard. Closing in on his friends. On his father.

And when Oishi looks up at him and they meet eyes, resolve floods back into Chikara veins.

CHIKARA

(stopping)

No! We can't! If we don't open that gate, they die!

But none step forward.

Except Hazama.

HAZAMA

I'm with you, boy.

Alone, the oldest and the youngest of the *ronin* share a look...then charge forward like tigers.

As Hazama engages several ninja, CHIKARA draws his sword and charges the Clanlord. As he nears, he gives a powerful *kirioroshi* downward cut -- but the Clanlord easily turns the blade and delivers an arm crushing overhead chop. CLAAAAANGGG!!

Chikara staggers under the force of the blow, and before he can recover the Clanlord CHOPS again! And again. CLAAAAANGGG! CLAAAAANGGG!!

DOWN BELOW

The sheer weight of numbers against them SQUEEZES Oishi's force closer and closer together like a vice.

Bodies of the enemy pile up, but still they clamber over in an endless tide.

Hanjo turns to Oishi.

HANJO
We can't hold.

OISHI
We must.

ABOVE - CHIKARA

Chikara scrambles back beneath the Clanlord's relentless assault. The Assassin Lord strikes FASTER AND FASTER, and as a mighty *koshi giri* cut bounds off his blade with the force of a sledgehammer -- Chikara winces and reflexively SWITCHES HIS SWORD FROM HIS RIGHT HAND TO HIS LEFT.

MATCH TO:

OISHI - DOWN BELOW

spies his son making the fatal mistake against all his training.

OISHI
No...

THE NINJA CLANLORD'S

mouth twists into a half-melted smile, recognizing the opening. And as he raises his blade for the final coup de grace --

That's when Chikara STRIKES WITH A DAGGER THAT HAS BEEN HIDDEN IN HIS RIGHT HAND, pulling off one of the maneuvers Minoru taught him!

Like lightning, Chikara STABS the Clanlord in the leg, causing the assassin's death blow to swing wide.

And before the Ninja Clanlord can react, Chikara rises up...and with his DOMINANT LEFT HAND, swings his blade and SEVERS THE BASTARD'S HEAD FROM HIS SHOULDERS!

BELOW - ON THE VERGE OF BEING OVERWHELMED

Oishi watches with surprise and pride as his son KICKS the legendary Clanlord from the wall.

There is a moment -- a perfect moment -- where Chikara and he meet eyes.

Then with a warcry, Oishi throws himself back into the fight with renewed energy, driving Kira's hordes back one last time!

OISHI
HOUSE ASANO!!

BACK ATOP THE WALL

Seeing their leader tumble off the wall like a swath of night, the remaining ninja show fear for the first time and hesitate...and it is their undoing.

Okuda and the others race back, and it is only a matter of moments before the *ronin* dispatch them in similar fashion.

Chikara and Hazama then lead the men to the CANNON and, using all their strength, TURN IT to face the INNER GATE. IGNITE the fuse and --

KA-BOOOM! The cannon ball SMASHES a man-sized hole through the gate and SHREDS the few defenders on the other side in a BLAST OF SPLINTERS!

Instantly, the Hazama and Okuda reload the cannon from a pile of ANTI-INFANTRY CHAIN SHOT stored nearby, reposition the cannon and -- BOOOOM!

VFX: we FOLLOW the chain shot as it flies and CLEARS A BLOODY PATH through Kira's samurai from Oishi's main force to the BLAST HOLE in the inner gate.

OISHI

recognizes his chance and --

OISHI
RONIN, TO ME!

-- CHARGES through the GORE PATH before the parted red sea can crash back together.

Oishi and his *ronin* race across the courtyard and duck through the blast hole in the gate -- then turn and plug the gap with their swords.

Kira's legions try to carve their way through, but the gap in the heavy door only allows them through one at a time. The result is a samurai blender -- Kira's men rushing through only to meet their bloody fates at the angry blades of the 47 *ronin*. Stalemate. Kira's overwhelming strength of their numbers has been temporarily neutralized.

OISHI (CONT'D)

This is where we hold. There is no further retreat.

(turns to look at castle)

Hanjo. Minoru. Isogai. With me.

And as they turn and stride for the castle --

INT. FORMAL CHAMBER - CONTINUOUS

Mika sees the battle below. And more importantly --

MIKA

MINORU!!

BACK TO SHOT

As they mount the keep steps, Minoru and Oishi hear her. Look up to spot her in the fourth story window.

Minoru and she meet eyes, and there is a CONNECTION there greater than all other forces in the universe.

Oishi recognizes it. Turns to him.

OISHI

Find her.

Minoru nods, thankful, and races off into the castle. God help anyone in his way.

INT. CASTLE - RECEPTION AREA - CONTINUOUS

A statue of a DEMON OCTOPUS dominates the room. Panicking servants scream and scatter as Oishi, Hanjo and Isogai.

Oishi grabs a COOK as he races by.

OISHI

Where is your Lord?

The man babbles, so Oishi knocks him down and puts his sword to his throat. The Cook points in the right direction.

But as Oishi begins to move that way --

SIX WARRIORS race from the hall in full cephalopdian armor.

Hanjo and Isogai move as one to intercept the threat.

HANJO

Go.

And Oishi does.

EXT. CASTLE - THE WAR AT THE INNER GATE - CONTINUOUS

The *ronin* struggle to hold back immense waves of warriors. The bodies of Kira's samurai are piling high. Blood churns the ground to red mud.

Kira's soldiers work as a unit try to push through en masse, but Basho uses his inhuman strength to hold them back.

It's questionable how long they can hold.

INT. CASTLE - STAIRS - CONTINUOUS

Minoru bounds the stairs three at a time. Kira's samurai pop from shadows -- and fall to the ground in a various assortment of bloody, quivering parts.

Nothing is going to stop him.

MINORU
MIKA?

MIKA (OS)
HERE!!

And like a magnet drawn to true north, he exits the stairs and reaches the room where Mika is held.

MINORU
Mika?

MIKA (OS)
Minoru!

He BASHES the lock, and when he pushes open the door Mika flies into his arms. She's been strong and brave for so long -- a perfect samurai daughter -- but now that Minoru holds her, the dam breaks and she allows herself to be human, and a woman, and sobs.

Minoru just holds her. Never going to let go.

CUT TO:

OISHI

moves through the castle on the hunt. Hysteria has set in and swarms of servants run in every direction -- but like magic, they all move out of Oishi's way as he strides past.

Then, ahead, through the crowd, Oishi spots a flash of pretentious silk.

OISHI

KIRA!!

KIRA wheels and sees Oishi...and the Lord of the castle turns and run in utter panic. Oishi charges forward like a lion after prey.

INT. MIKA'S CHAMBER - SAME TIME

Minoru finally pulls away from Mika.

MINORU

We have to go.

Taking her hand, he leads her down the hall toward the stairs...when someone strides out at the end of the hall, blocking their path.

The LOVECRAFTIAN SAMURAI. Kira's fiercest warrior. The demon that bested Minoru in the competition at Asano's castle. The bastard that lead Mika's father to her doom.

His voice is the basso of funeral drums.

LOVECRAFTIAN SAMURAI

I bested you before, halfbreed.

(beat)

Kneel and I shall make it quick.

Minoru gently pushes Mika back from what's about to occur.

MINORU

But this time I fight for more than honor.

The two square off. This is a battle that had to happen. And this time it won't cease at first blood.

This time we will get to see how it truly ends.

LOVECRAFTIAN SAMURAI

So be it.

And with slashing swords and steel tentacles, the Gods of War explode into combat!

SMASH TO:

EXT. CASTLE - PARAPET WALK

Chikara watches as a massive division of Kira's men split away from the group assaulting the gate -- and begin racing up the rampart steps.

CHIKARA
They're after the cannon!

HAZAMA
If they get it, they'll breach the
gate.

CHIKARA
(to Okuda and the others)
Hold them back!

And as Okuda's force races to meet the octopus-armored samurai, Chikara and Hazama position the cannon at the rampart stairs and -- BOOOOM!

Samurai bodies fly and fall as the stairs collapse.

Then Chikara and Hazama charge into the fray.

INT. CASTLE - CORRIDOR MAZE - SAME TIME

Oishi is following Kira's terrified flutter of silk through the labyrinth of hardwood corridors, gaining, when --

OISHI
AUGHH!

-- a *yari* SPEAR flashes out through a hole in the wall and IMPALES him through the shoulder.

Then -- SHUNKK! Another spear flashes out from a hole in the opposite wall and LANCES him through the leg.

With a yell, Oishi then SLASHES DOWN then UP, freeing himself by severing the spears that pins him.

Now, Oishi turns and looks about him...

...and sees 200 other SPEAR HOLES lining the walls. Kira has led him into a trap -- a HALL OF DEATH.

At the end of the hall, Kira watches smugly as Oishi realizes his predicament.

But Oishi is samurai...and doesn't fear death.

Samurai training pulsing through him like a live wire, Oishi continues to move toward Kira. Cautiously. Listening...

And the second he hears wood sliding on wood --

Oishi turns performing a whirlwind cut known as *Sparrows Flying and* -- SHUNKK! SHUNKK-SHUNKK!! -- HACKS DOWN three more spears darting out at him!

As the speartips clatter to the floor, Oishi meets Kira's eyes...and smiles.

Kira's face falls. And Oishi CHARGES. SHUNK-SHUNK-SHUNK-SHUNK! Waves of spears flash out, but Oishi's sword whips around him at blinding speed, his amazing bladework turning the hallway into an EXPLOSION OF SPLINTERS as he races through to the end and after Kira.

INT. CASTLE - OUTSIDE MIKA'S CHAMBERS - SAME TIME

Mika watches in horror as Minoru and the Lovecraftian Samurai hack and slash at each other in the mother of all battles. Minoru's sword versus the demon fighter's blade and whipping tentacles.

The fight is a blur, but like their previous fight in the arena, we again watch helpless as the TIDE SLOWLY TURNS against Minoru.

The Lovecraftian Samurai repeatedly WHIPS OUT his heavy steel dreadlocks to trap Minoru's sword and strike down into his shoulder. His back. His arm.

But the worst happens when Minoru goes to defend a lightning fast attack -- that the Lovecraftian Samurai suddenly REVERSES, COMPLETELY SEVERING Minoru's little and ring fingers from his right hand!

MINORU

GAAAAGHH!

The *koto* blade falls from Minoru's grasp to clatter to the floor. And in that instant, the Lovecraftian warrior SLINGS his head around and LASHES his tentacles around Minoru's throat, YANKS the *ronin* close and --

MIKA

No!

-- STABS Minoru COMPLETELY THROUGH HIS CHEST!

Mika screams as she sees the bloody blade EXPLODE from Minoru's back.

The demon samurai yanks the blade out, then HURLS Minoru to the ground like trash. Stomps on his chest and readies his blade for the final, life-ending thrust.

Minoru lays there gasping, all the fight bleeding out of him onto the floor with his life's blood.

LOVECRAFTIAN SAMURAI

Your father should have done this
the moment you came out of the
womb, halfbreed whelp.

And just as the Lovecraftian Samurai pulls back to strike --

We see Mika RISE behind him, Minoru's sword held high! With righteous fire, she CHOPS DOWN!

VFX - SLOW MOTION: But as the sword nears, the samurai SENSES the threat and wheels around, the blow missing him by the width of a strand of silk.

The sword clangs off the ground, and the demon samurai SMASHES MIKA DOWN with a vicious steel-gauntleted backhand.

Mika crumples to the ground, and seeing that --

MINORU'S

-- switch is flipped. With a cry of rage, he rises from the dead, ignoring the pain to snatch up his sword and throw himself into one final all-consuming attack.

The Lovecraftian Samurai tries to counter with his tentacles -- but Minoru SEVERES THEM WITH A SINGLE MIGHTY BLOW!

The samurai staggers back in shock, unbelieving, severed tentacles clinking to the floor around him.

And that's when Minoru finishes it. Sword whirling like a helicopter blade, Minoru VIVISECTS THE BASTARD INTO NEAT LITTLE SIX-INCH HORIZONTAL SLICES FROM HEAD TO FOOT!

Mika stares until Minoru turns her away from the gruesome sight.

MINORU

Let's go.

And as he leads her away, HARD CUT TO:

EXT. CASTLE - THE WAR AT THE INNER GATE

The *ronin* still hold the portal...but they're taking ghastly injuries and --

SFX: THE SPLINTERING OF WOOD!

Under the weight of the onslaught, the gate is beginning to FRACTURE, while --

INT. CASTLE - CORRIDORS - SAME TIME

Oishi ignores his injuries and TRACKS Kira to:

THE WOMEN'S APARTMENTS

Leaving a trail of blood behind him, Oishi enters...and SPIES Kira hiding among the women and children.

Oishi strides to him like a wraith of vengeance. Grabs the coward by the collar of his robes and drags him across the room.

Kira scrabbles at the floor as Oishi drags him away.

LORD KIRA
No! Please--! NOOOOOO!!

Oishi dumps him in the center of the room.

LORD KIRA (CONT'D)
I beg of you! *I beg of you--!*

Oishi's response is a lump of metal dropped at his feet. The KNIFE Asano committed *seppuku* with.

Oishi's voice is a study in calm and control.

OISHI
You recognize it.

It's not a question.

LORD KIRA
..w-what could I have done? He violated the *law!*

OISHI
And you have violated the honor of your House.
(slides the knife closer)
Redeem it.

Kira looks at the knife...and begins to cry. His tears ruin his perfect powder-whitened face. His blackened teeth. His regal robes.

It's pathetic.

LORD KIRA
Have you no mercy?

Oishi's cold, hard stare says it all -- no.

Eventually, with a trembling hand, Kira picks up the knife. Sniffs and wipes his eyes with the sleeves of his robe.

LORD KIRA (CONT'D)
You will tell them I died with honor?

OISHI
I will tell them the truth.

Kira nods. Readies himself. Exhales and --

SCRAMBLES backwards to grab a CHILD as shield, placing the dagger to the young girl's throat. Kira shrieks at Oishi in a shrill, panicky voice.

LORD KIRA
You get away from me or I will kill
this girl!

But Oishi isn't buying into it. Like a machine, he steps forward and gives Kira a resounding open-handed SLAP across the face. Then again.

It's not a beating for a man.

As Kira sits stunned by the insult, the little girl runs away.

Oishi then seizes Kira's knife hand in an iron-hard grip.

OISHI
Coward... Know now the depth of my
Lord's bravery and honor.

And with that, Oishi forces Kira's hands to slit his own belly, committing SEPPUKU.

Kira's eyes widen in shock and pain ...and something else.

As Oishi forces the tyrant to cut himself open, Kira looks down and NOTICES Lord Asano's FAMILY CREST on the sleeves of Oishi's robes: two HAWK FEATHERS, crossed over one another.

LORD KIRA
...two feathers....

And with horrific realization, the twins' prophesy comes clear in Kira's mind. Kira tries to laugh, but grunts in agony instead.

And dies.

CUT TO:

EXT. CASTLE - THE WAR AT THE INNER GATE

The legions of Kira's samurai make a final massive surge and the gate GIVES WAY! The *ronin* back away as the nightmare army FLOODS THROUGH. There is no hope now.

The octopus-legions unleash a BLOOD-THIRSTY VICTORY CRY, and as they CHARGE forward to utterly obliterate the *ronin* --

Mysteriously, Kira's warriors SLOW. Then STOP. Staring in a daze at the *ronin* only twenty feet from them.

The *ronin* are confused by the sudden cease in battle, then realize the warriors are not staring at them, but *behind* them at:

OISHI

who steps out of the castle...KIRA'S HEAD held by its hair in Oishi's right hand.

And, unknowingly fulfilling the prophesy, Oishi raises the head of the vanquished despot for all to see -- the "two feathers" of Asano's crest on his sleeve "lifting Kira up to live in the minds of his countrymen forever".

Utter stillness and silence descend on the castle.

It's a moment frozen in time, Oishi standing there...

But this ultimate act of loyalty, of bravery, of *bushido*, resonates with Kira's defense force...and one by one, they drop to their knees.

And PROSTRATE themselves before the 47 *ronin*.

DISSOLVE TO:

EXT. KIRA'S MOUNTAIN CASTLE - MINUTES LATER

The stronghold's monstrous front gates groan apart, and the 47 *ronin* walk out. Though none of them have died, most bear mortal or nearly mortal wounds that they will soon succumb to.

But there is one final job to do first.

So huddling together, helping each other, Oishi's exhausted, injured, ragtag band of fighters exit the fortress all of them were certain they would never escape alive.

Behind them, the entire castle remains kowtowed in reverence.

And as the music RISES, it sweeps us into a MONTAGE of:

THEIR JOURNEY HOME

-- The *ronin* descending the mountain. Oishi walks in the lead, Kira's head dangling from his hand like a lantern of truth.

-- Reaching the foothills, they pass a farmer turning his field. The man stops dumbfounded when he sees the head. Bows. Then races away to tell the village the tale.

-- Word travels quickly, and the inhabitants of Kira's village are all waiting when the *ronin* crest the rise. The peasants approach Oishi's men as they pass. The men mutter words of thanks. The women openly weep. The children touch these new heroes in awe.

Even the warrior monks in their blood-red robes bow in reverence as the *ronin* pass.

-- And so it goes, all the way across the countryside. Moved by their tale, villagers line the roads in greater and greater numbers to watch Oishi and his men pass. Giving them offerings of food. Water. Helping them walk.

-- Chikara stumbles, and a hand reaches out to lift him up. It is the FRUIT VENDOR and his DAUGHTER who scolded him in Edo. They help him up, then bow down in reverence. This gesture of respect gives Chikara the strength to continue on.

-- When they reach Ako, they are surrounded by familiar faces. Shamed faces. The BURLY VENDOR who spit on Oishi beseeches him for forgiveness.

BURLY VENDOR

I'm sorry. I'm so sorry. I didn't know... *How could I know?*

Others appeal to Hazama, Basho, Isogai for having thought them honorless.

Oishi's wife, too, is in the crowd. She and Oishi and Chikara meet eyes.

But the 47 *ronin* do not stop, and do not reach the end of their pilgrimage until they arrive at:

EXT. SENGAKUJI TEMPLE - DAWN

The gravesite of Lord Asano...

As they enter the sacred place, Mika goes to Hisae, who hugs her tight as her mother would. And as Mika begins to weep with weariness and relief, PAN AROUND to watch the *ronin* doing what they have literally moved mountains to do.

Oishi reverently washes Kira's in the cool water from the temple well. Then places the tyrant's head and the dagger with which Asano and Kira both took their lives atop his master's grave.

OISHI

Rest now, my lord. You are
avenged.

As if in response, a wind sighs through the ancient trees,
bringing warmth. Peace. And --

SFX: THE SOUND OF HOOFBEATS. HORSES. LOTS OF THEM.

Oishi and the *ronin* turn to the staggering sight of SHOGUN
TOKUGAWA TSUNAYOSHI atop an WARHORSE of mythical proportions.
He is backed by the Shogun's ARMORED CAVALRY -- two hundred
horses the size of tanks, encased in spiked and bladed steel.

There will be no escape from this place.

The Shogun's pinch-faced ADJUTANT steps forward.

SHOGUN'S ADJUTANT

Oishi Kuranosuke!!

Oishi rises calmly and regards the man.

SHOGUN'S ADJUTANT

You and your men stand accused of
treason and the butchery of the
Shogun's envoy and Master of
Protocol, Lord Kira Yoshinaka.

OISHI

It was not butchery, my Lord.

SHOGUN'S ADJUTANT

Is that not his head there!

OISHI

No... What lays atop that grave is
Justice.

SHOGUN'S ADJUTANT

He was your superior!

OISHI

He was corrupt.

(beat)

My men and I followed the Code of
bushido and honored our master by
avenging Lord Kira's treachery.
The Code demanded it. Justice
demanded it. We could do nothing
else.

A murmur rolls through the crowd. Agreement. The Adjutant
senses the support of the crowd. Doesn't like it.

SHOGUN'S ADJUTANT

And in doing so, you defied a direct command from the Shogun forbidding you from exacting revenge!

OISHI

(nods)

This is so.

SHOGUN'S ADJUTANT

The penalty is Death.

(turns to his men)

Cut these criminals down.

But instantly the crowd PROTESTS, surging forward, placing themselves between the soldiers and Oishi's men, shouting to forestall the sentence.

The Adjutant is taken aback by the reaction. The soldiers are taken aback.

The Shogun watches impassively from atop his horse.

With kindness and thanks, Oishi and his men gently extract themselves from the safety of the villagers...and step forward to meet their fate.

The Adjutant knows this is his chance. Turns to his men.

SHOGUN'S ADJUTANT

Kill them.

But now even the soldiers hesitate, unwilling to mow down such courage and honor. Such utter exemplification of the *bushido* code.

The Adjutant loses it.

SHOGUN'S ADJUTANT

I GAVE YOU AN ORDER! BY THE GODS,
YOU WILL DO AS I COMMAND OR I WILL
SEE YOU ALL HANGED --

And just as the situation is about to spin out of control --

SHOGUN

Stop.

The Shogun's voice is the deep basso rumble of the Word of God, cutting through all existence. In the instant silence, the Adjutant goes prone. The soldiers and the crowd stand terrified.

The Shogun steps off his horse like a deity of war descending to earth and strides toward Oishi.

As he nears, Oishi draws his sword -- and, instantly, fifty *ashigaru* infantrymen spring forward drawing their own blades!

But all for naught. Oishi lays his weapon at the Shogun's feet.

Then humbly, Oishi bows before the warlord ruler of all Japan.

The giant removes his iconic snarling dog great helm. And speaks.

SHOGUN

You've put me in an awkward position, Oishi Kuranosuke. Just as your Lord did.

OISHI

Never was that my intention.

SHOGUN

And yet the result is the same.

(beat)

You are criminals. You defied my order, for which I need to make a harsh example of you -- but you exemplified *bushido* in a time that has forgotten the meaning of the word. And the reason for it.

(beat)

That must be honored and never forgotten.

Oishi considers the Shogun's words. Then:

OISHI

We acted, knowing the penalty was death. We are samurai and accepted that. And as samurai, we must meet our punishment. To excuse us of this duty would steal the honor from all we have done...and make us *ronin* in a way Lord Kira never could.

(beat)

This is our fate. We have accepted it. Strike us down.

SHOGUN

The country would never forgive me for shaming you so...and I could never forgive myself.

OISHI

Then let it be our choice. Allow us the honor of a samurai death, to die as our Lord and be buried at his side.

Heart heavy with regret, the Shogun acknowledges the wisdom -- and the right -- of this.

SHOGUN

I will grant you an honorable death...under one condition:
 (as Oishi looks to him)
 That your bloodline continues, Oishi Kuranosuke. Your son shall live so that the heritage of such an honorable man will not be thinned from Japan's future.

Oishi is moved by the gesture. Meets the Shogun's eyes, man to man.

OISHI

Thank you.

INT. SENGAKUJI TEMPLE - A SMALL SHOJI SCREEN ROOM - LATER

Hisae helps her husband into the pristine white robes in preparation for his *seppuku*.

She's fussing with tying the *obi* knot just so and getting increasingly frustrated -- when she simply drops her hands and begins to cry.

Oishi holds her tenderly. Tilts her face up to look into his wife's tear-filled eyes.

And he kisses her. Tragically. Passionately. Perfectly.

When they part, Oishi turns to see Chikara standing at the door struggling to hold the stoicism of a samurai to make his father proud, yet betrayed by the tears rising in his eyes.

No words are needed here. Oishi moves to him and wraps him into a fierce father's hug.

And as the tears begin to fall, Oishi holds him tight and whispers into his ear.

OISHI

I am so proud of you, Chikara. *So proud of you...*

Then pulls back and looks into his eyes.

OISHI

I know you will carry on the family name with honor.

CHIKARA

I love you, father.

OISHI
 (hugs him again)
 We will meet again along the Path.
 Do you understand?

Chikara nods.

INT. SENGAKUJI TEMPLE - HALL

The *ronin* exit their preparation rooms and enter the hall. The sight of so many white robes is disconcerting. Ghosts haunting a hall. As --

MINORU

-- steps out, Mika rushes to him, tears running down her face.

In front of everyone, defying tradition and prejudice, she hugs and kisses him. For in this moment, nothing else matters...save for the words she needs him to hear.

MIKA
 You will live in my heart forever.

From the corner of the room, a SOLDIER speaks.

SOLDIER
 It is time.

The men line up. Oishi steps from his room with one last look at his wife and son, takes his place at the head of the line and begins to leading his men outside.

One by one they pass through the temple portal, but as Minoru reaches the threshold:

SHOGUN
You.

The line stopped. Minoru steps out of line to stand before the towering military giant.

The moment is reminiscent of when the Shogun called him out at the combat challenge in Ako.

The Shogun considers Minoru for a moment. He says nothing. His stern face inscrutable. Then --

SHOGUN
 I remember your father. He served
 by my side. He was a great
 warrior.
 (beat)
 (MORE)

SHOGUN (CONT'D)
 As is his son. You honor the
 family name...*samurai*.

And to Minoru's utter astonishment, the Shogun BOWS to him.
 No longer a halfbreed in his eyes...but a samurai.

Minoru is moved as nothing else on earth could possibly do.

EXT. SENGAKUJI TEMPLE - MAGIC HOUR

Oishi's SAMURAI (no longer *ronin*) walk out to the temple
 steps and sit *seiza*.

The scene is epic. 46 white-robed figures kneeling at the
 foot of the immense temple steps. A crowd gathered around
 them. Soldiers. The Shogun presiding over all.

And as the music swells, capturing the poignancy of the
 moment -- the tragedy and the honor; the faces of the
 villagers and their loved ones watching on -- the samurai
 draw their daggers.

They hold for a moment, daggers before them -- and that is
 how we will remember them, for, as they thrust, we PAN UP to
 the branches of CHERRY BLOSSOM TREE sheltering the temple...

Where a wind blows, warm and peaceful, and as a drift of
 intensely beautiful SAKURA BLOSSOMS wipe frame...

A TITLE CARD rises:

*As a result of the actions of the 47 Ronin,
 Kira's lands were dispossessed and the
 province of Ako returned to House Asano by
 order of the Shogunate.*

*Oishi's son, Chikara lived a long life,
 bearing three sons and a daughter. At his
 death, at the age of 78, he was buried
 alongside his father and his comrades at Lord
 Asano's tomb as the 47th ronin.*

*To this day, every December 14th - the
 anniversary of the attack on Lord Kira's
 stronghold - thousands of people across Japan,
 and the world, still gather at Sengakuji
 Temple to pay tribute to the 47 ronin and
 their example of bravery, loyalty and
 unfaltering honor.*

*This film is dedicated to the memory of the 47
 Ronin:*

OISHI KURANOSUKE YOSHIO
OISHI CHIKARA YOSHIKANE
YOSHIDA CHUZAEMON KANETORA
HARA SOEMON MOTOTATSU
KATAOKA GOEMON TAKAFUSA
MASE KYUIDAEFU MASAOKI
ONODERA JUNAI HIDEKAZU
HAZAMA KIHEI MITSUNOBU
ISOGAI JUROZAEMON MASAHISA
HORIBE YAHEI KANAMARU
CHIKAMATSU KANROKU YUKISHIGE
TOMI MORISUKE EMON MASAO
USHIODA MATANOJO TAKAATSU
HAYAMIZU TOZAEMON MISUTORA
AKAUE GENZOSHIGETAKA
OKUDA MAGODAIU SHIGEMORI
YADA GOROEMON SUKETAKE
OISHI SEZAEMON NOBUKIYO
HORIBE YASUBE TAKEYASU
NAKAMURA KANSUKE MASATATSU
SUGAYA HANOJO MASATOSHI
FUWA KAZUEMON MASATANE
KIMURA OKAEMON SADAYUKI
SEMBA SABUROE MISUTADA
OKANO KINEIMON KANEHIDE
KAIGA YAZAEMON TOMONOBU
OTAKA GENGO TADAO
OKAJIMA YASOEMON TSUNETATSU
YOSHIDA SAWAEMON TANESADA
TAKEBAYASHI TADSHICKI TAKASHIGE
KURAHASHI DENSUKE TAKEYUKI
HAZAMA SHINROKU MITSUKAZE
MURAMATSU KIHEI HIDENAO
SUGINO TOSEIJI TSUGUFUSA
KATSUTA SHIZAEMON TAKEAKI
MAEBARA ISUEK MUNEFUSA
ONODERA KOEMON HIDETOMI
HAZAMA JUJIRO MITSUOKI
OKUDA SADAEMON YUKITAKA
YATOUEMON SHIKI NORIKANE
MURAMATSU SANDAIFU TAKANAO
MASE MAGOKURO MASATATSU
KAYANO WASUKE TSUNENARI
YOKOKAWA KANBEI MUNETOSHI
MIMURA JIROZAEMON KANETSUNE
KANZAKI YOGORO

FADE TO BLACK.