

ASAGAO

Written by
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EXT. THEATER - NIGHT

SUPER: "1368, SOUTHERN JAPAN"

A small audience of NOBLES sit around a pavilion. A towering castle looms just beyond.

An ACTOR (M) in women's clothing and porcelain mask takes centerstage. He freezes in an elegant pose, arms to the heavens.

DRUMMERS (all M) kneel upstage.

After great anticipation, the drummers STRIKE.

The actor flirts with a hand-fan around the stage to slow, rhythmic drumbeats.

In the audience, LADY OYODO HONOKA (F, mid-20s), a noblewoman in lavish silks, thick makeup, and long brown hair pinned in a bun watches the play with half-hearted interest.

At her side, LORD OYODO SAISEI (M, late 30s), stoic *Shōgun* with faded scars.

Honoka whispers in Saisei's ear. He looks at her with a raised brow and a smirk. Returns his focus to the stage.

She keeps her eyes on him while inconspicuously reaching into his lap. Caresses up his leg. He holds his composure amidst the crowd.

On stage, another actor in a bloody demon mask theatrically chases the cross-dressing actor.

INT. CHIHAYA CASTLE - HALLWAY - NIGHT

Honoka and Saisei amble past translucent paper walls.

HONOKA
I had that dream again.

SAISEI
The one with the talking heron?

HONOKA
Sai. You know which one I mean.

SAISEI
Dreams are dreams, Honoka. You shouldn't put so much faith in them.

HONOKA

It's something to hope for. A
child, Saisei. Tell me you believe,
or I'll haunt you like that ghost
from the play.

She jumps in front of Saisei and bares her teeth, but can't
hold back a smile.

Saisei pulls away. Honoka's smile fades.

SAISEI

Maybe I was never meant to have a
son.

HONOKA

You mean a daughter.

Saisei smiles half-heartedly.

SAISEI

Yuki. Child of snow. That's what
we'll name her.

HONOKA

But there is none here?

SAISEI

It is my promise to her. That I
will unify *Nihon*, and she will know
the scent of Northern snow.

HONOKA

And what if it's a boy?

Saisei coyly shrugs.

SAISEI

We'll never know.

Honoka grabs his hand.

HONOKA

Let's find out.

She leads Saisei to their bedroom.

A shadow passes outside the hallway window. Saisei startles.

HONOKA (CONT'D)

You always get so nervous. We
wouldn't have so much trouble if
you'd relax.

SAISEI
I thought... You're right.

He follows Honoka inside. The doors slide shut.

INT. CHIHAYA CASTLE - PRIVATE CHAMBERS - NIGHT

Immaculately clean. Traditional.

Honoka looks over her shoulder at Saisei.

HONOKA
Wait for me.

He smirks. She disappears into an adjoining room.

INT. CHIHAYA CASTLE - DRESSING ROOM - NIGHT

Honoka kneels in front of a low table with an assortment of cosmetics. She removes the brooch and her hair cascades down to her ankles.

INT. CHIHAYA CASTLE - PRIVATE CHAMBERS - NIGHT

Saisei removes his robes and undershirt to reveal a chest of latticed battle scars. He heads for the futon.

A breeze... The ominously cloudy moon shimmers through an open window.

Saisei retrieves a tantō dagger from a nearby drawer.

He tip-toes to the window. The floor CREAKS BEHIND HIM.

He checks his shoulder— A hand covers his mouth. Jerks his head back.

A near-silent scuffle. Saisei swings the *tantō* behind. Nicks the INTRUDER's brow.

The intruder backs off. He brandishes a *kusarigama* (a sickle-like weapon attached to a chain) and spins its head.

He launches the blade at Saisei, which he masterfully dodges. The intruder recoils the blade before it hits the floor.

Saisei inches toward the intruder. Just as he throws the blade again, Saisei grabs it mid-air and pulls the intruder in. He STABS through the intruder's outstretched hand and PINS him to the ground. The *kusarigama* CLATTERS to the floor.

DRESSING ROOM / PRIVATE CHAMBERS [INTERCUT]

- Honoka looks at the door for a moment.

HONOKA

Sai?

Nothing. She picks up a hand-mirror and gazes at her reflection.

- The intruder takes the *tantō* from his hand and drives it into Saisei's chest. Saisei GASPS.

The intruder rips the bloodied *tantō* out. Saisei stumbles backward.

- Honoka uses a damp sponge to wipe away a stroke of makeup.

- The intruder SLASHES Saisei's chest. A spray of scarlet.

- Another stroke of makeup.

- Another SLASH.

- Honoka wipes away the last bit of her face clean.

- The intruder drives the *tantō* into Saisei's chest. Saisei exhales a last breath. Collapses onto the futon with a-

- THUMP. Honoka looks back again.

HONOKA (CONT'D)

Saisei?

Silence... She sets down the mirror.

INT. CHIHAYA CASTLE - PRIVATE CHAMBERS - NIGHT

The side door opens. Honoka petrifies in horror.

Saisei lies dead on the bloodied futon, the *tantō*'s hilt protruding from his chest. A violet asagao flower (Japanese morning glory) lies in the pooling blood.

Honoka SCREAMS a chilling wail.

FADE TO:

INT. CHIHAYA MONASTERY - PRIVATE CHAMBERS - DAY

Sunshine spills onto the pristine sheets of the futon. No trace of that day remains.

Honoka stares emptily at the bed. Her hair is now shoulder-length and dark circles surround her hollow eyes. She winces as she wraps plain grey Buddhist robes around her chest.

Honoka sits before a wooden tea set— A wedding gift.

Inscribed: "MAY YOU BE HAPPY FOREVER".

She lingers on the *kanji* symbol for "forever".

Honoka ceremoniously spoons ground tea leaves into a shallow bowl. She uses a wooden ladle to scoop hot water onto the leaves. Whisks the mixture.

She gazes out the window. TWO SAMURAI ride on horseback toward the castle-monastery.

Honoka downs half the tea then grimaces. She clutches her stomach, struggling to hold it down.

She takes a deep breath then finishes the drink. She puts the bowl aside and hurries out the door.

EXT. CHIHAYA MONASTERY - DAY

Perched at the summit of a hill overlooking the capital city, the castle undergoes conversion into a Buddhist monastery.

MONKS and NUNS meander the grounds. BUILDERS lift a Buddha statue into place beneath a bell.

INT. CHIHAYA MONASTERY - CONTINUOUS

The two samurai ride through the castle gates then dismount. EDA (M), barrel-chested and brawny, and UNAGI (M), bony with a fidget, make their way inside.

INT. CHIHAYA MONASTERY - PRAYER HALL - CONTINUOUS

Wholesome with Thai-inspired motifs. Monks meditate beneath a smaller, golden Buddha.

One monk approaches Eda and Unagi. He thumbs through a string of prayer beads. Blesses the samurai.

As the praying monk exits, Honoka gracefully enters.

She bows to Eda and Unagi. The samurai bow in return.

EDA
Venerable. A pleasure.

UNAGI

Indeed. To witness the conversion of this castle is a blessing in itself. We hope your monastery enjoys—

HONOKA

Thank you. But the spirits of this place have not yet found rest. Tell me, what of my request?

Unagi averts his eyes.

UNAGI

Your request is...

EDA

Unfavorable.

HONOKA

Unfavorable?

EDA

Lord Oyodo will still entertain you at court, but do not expect any action to be taken.

HONOKA

H-How can he ignore this?

UNAGI

He is *Shōgun* now. Oyodo's will is law.

EDA

If we are to find peace then you must set an example. It is in the Oyodo clan's best interest if you dropped this lust for revenge.

HONOKA

Revenge? This is justice.

EDA

Regardless, it is straining negotiations.

HONOKA

Damn the negotiations!

The hall goes quiet. Monks stare as tears involuntarily stream down Honoka's cheeks.

UNAGI

We did not mean to offend...

EDA

We only deliver Lord Oyodo's word.

Honoka breathes heavily, face pale and sickly. She braces against a wall. Retches.

UNAGI

Venerable!

The samurai approach. Honoka puts a hand out to stop them.

HONOKA

I'm fine. I must have forgotten to eat this morning. Come, I won't allow him to settle this in my absence.

Eda and Unagi bow. Honoka follows them to their horses.

EXT. YOSHINO - MAIN STREET - DAY

A forested town nestled in the hills. Lumber parades across the street on the shoulders of OLDER MEN not fit for extraneous work. Women FISH MONGERS and FARMERS sell their products, enticing CUSTOMERS with wafted hands.

YOUNG MEN dressed in leather and tightly-bound reeds wish tearful goodbyes to their FAMILIES.

Under the shade of a metal awning, a CROWD gathers around an intense arm-wrestling match.

On one side of the table, a BURLY MAN, red in the face with neck-veins bulging. The other, DAZAI MIZUKI (F, 20s). Two *wakizashi* (shorter *katana*) are strapped to her back, a tightly-wound bow and quiver at her side.

With a grunt, Mizuki SLAMS the burly man's hand to the table. The coins between them JINGLE.

The crowd GROANS in disappointment.

Mizuki jumps up.

MIZUKI

YES!

In the background, Eda and Unagi enter. Honoka rides side-saddle on the back of Eda's horse.

Mizuki shovels her winnings into her shirt.

The burly man stands and crosses his arms intimidatingly.

MIZUKI (CONT'D)
Come on boys, let's not be sore
losers...

Mizuki pivots and SLAMS right into Eda and Honoka's horse.

EDA
Hey!

Mizuki leans in toward Honoka.

MIZUKI
Put in a good word with the Buddha
for me, would you?

Mizuki clamors around the horse. The burly man and his friends give chase.

Honoka watches, perplexed.

EXT. OYODO CASTLE - DAY

Honoka and the samurai cross a bridge to an imposing six-storied fortress with curled, shingled roofs.

INT. OYODO CASTLE - COURTROOM - DAY

Honoka bows to the bamboo wood floor.

Eda and Unagi shut the heavy doors. Post themselves there.

NOBLEMEN perch in benches surrounding Honoka while her brother-in-law, LORD OYODO YUSEI (M, late 20s), sits in front with ACCOMPANYING SERVANTS. His slender hands rest within opposite sleeves, back impeccably straight.

HONOKA
Honorable Lord Oyodo. Great and
mighty *Diamyo*. I come to you today
in search of an answer.

She raises her head slightly.

HONOKA (CONT'D)
There is no doubt that my husband
was a strong and resilient leader.
(MORE)

HONOKA (CONT'D)

Proving himself a skilled tactician in the Siege of Kyoto, and an architect of the ongoing treaty. But there was more to him. So much more. For my husband was also a devoted and caring son... and an even more loving brother.

Honoka sits up.

HONOKA (CONT'D)

He once told me a story between him and his younger brother. His junior was attempting to pluck a peach in their orchard, but he was too small to reach the branches and too scared to climb the tree. For hours he cried for the peaches. And though their parents did not, his brother saw. So the next day, Saisei awoke his brother with a whole basket of peaches. And they shared them. Together.

She taps the floor definitively with her fingertips.

HONOKA (CONT'D)

That is who my husband really was.

Smiles cross the Lords' faces.

Honoka's joy drains.

HONOKA (CONT'D)

Then why, my Lords, can you not find worthy enough cause to avenge his death? Were his years of service not enough? Was his love not enough, Yusei?

Yusei's nose crinkles almost imperceptibly, but Honoka catches it.

HONOKA (CONT'D)

My apologies. It just seemed you had forgotten since you refuse the mere thought of finding justice.

YUSEI

Justice is a profound word. One that carries the connotation that it must be acted upon immediately or else it is ineffective.

(MORE)

YUSEI (CONT'D)

But in this war, haste is our number one killer. It is what compels a general to lead his men to slaughter, the fisherman to lose his catch. And it is what controlled me in that story you so *delightfully* retold... If only I had known to wait just a day, the peaches would have fallen— Riper than on the tree! I deeply apologize for not being able to grieve with you as a family, but the needs of the clan come before mine. And certainly before yours.

He raises a palm-sized gavel, about to adjourn the meeting, when LORD MATSUTAKE DOKUTSU (M, 40s) rises.

MATSUTAKE

Perhaps the Lady has a point.

YUSEI

(falsely pleasant)
Lord Matsutake...

MATSUTAKE

Forgive me, Oyodo-sama. But perhaps poor Honoka is right. By exacting justice on the Northerner who took Saisei's life, we would show ourselves as a force not to be trifled with.

Honoka glances about the room. Other Lords nod.

YUSEI

Might I remind Lord Matsutake that our border towns can not handle another raid. Our soldiers grow weary, insurrection may grip us at any moment, as is the case with our Northern neighbors.

A sly grin grows on Lord Matsutake's lips.

MATSUTAKE

But with great risk comes great reward, Lord Oyodo.

YUSEI

I appreciate your... enthusiasm for violence, but my brother sought peace.

(MORE)

YUSEI (CONT'D)

I won't allow his legacy to be threatened by wanton aggression. Unlike what *poor Honoka* suggests.

HONOKA

I have devoted myself to my husband's memory, I have kept myself to the holy scriptures—

YUSEI

Yes. And you should continue to do so! Chihaya's conversion has been a much-needed guiding light for our people.

HONOKA

Power does not suit you. You have so much but not an ounce of spine to use it.

The Lords explode at the accusation!

Yusei SLAMS the gavel a few times. The room dims to a disconcerted grumble.

YUSEI

You dishonor the Oyodo name. And if you do not abandon these fantasies of revenge, I will have no choice but to strip you of your late husband's estate. You make a fool of yourself this day.

HONOKA

A fool I may have been for believing in any of you.

Yusei looks down at Honoka, full of distress and pity.

He tosses a hand up.

YUSEI

Effective immediately, Lady Oyodo Honoka has been placed under confinement in Chihaya monastery and is forbidden from leaving the city walls, for the safety of herself and others... Court adjourned.

The Lords rise. SHUFFLE to the backroom.

Lord Matsutake shrugs at Honoka. Melds in with the herd.

With her attention diverted, Honoka startles as Yusei places a gentle hand on her chin.

He scans her face before shaking his head disappointedly.

YUSEI (CONT'D)
You were so beautiful.

Yusei joins the rest of the Lords.

Eda and Unagi move to escort Honoka out, but she brushes past them to exit herself.

EXT. CHIHAYA MONASTERY - NIGHT

Noiseless lightning. Rain TIP-TAPS on the ceramic roof.

INT. CHIHAYA MONASTERY - SHRINE ROOM - NIGHT

A dim room. Half of it is full of offerings- Coins, smoking incense, memorial tablets of prayers...

Fresh flowers lay underneath a watercolor painting of Saisei, all scarred imperfections accounted for. Beneath it, the *tantō* dagger. The masterfully carved handle displays the family crest: Two fish swim clockwise forming a medallion.

Honoka bows before the shrine. Dissolves into sobs, strained and painful.

HONOKA
I tried. I tried- I fought, but
Yusei wouldn't listen. They have
put peace between the clans above
our own!

Honoka SLAMS her fist. The picture skews.

She sobs into her hands. Thunder RUMBLES.

Honoka wipes away her tears. Cautiously takes the dagger from the alter.

HONOKA (CONT'D)
Before I join you in the next life,
I swear to honor you in this one.

She unsheathes the dagger.

Inscribed, in Japanese *kanji*: "FALL SEVEN // RISE EIGHT"

HONOKA (CONT'D)

If others call it revenge, so be
it. I will destroy the earth
beneath these backstabbers. Your
blade will run through them! I will
make them pay!

Honoka slices the dagger across her palm. Holds back a cry.

She brings her balled fist over the flowers. Blood PLINKS on
the petals.

HONOKA (CONT'D)

(whispered)

I swear it.

END OF ACT ONE.

ACT TWO**EXT. CHIHAYA MONASTERY - GARDEN - DAY**

Monks dot the lawn, tending to shrub and tree with intensity.

At the stairs, Honoka interrogates a ROYAL GUARD (M).

HONOKA

And you trained... Where, again?

She jots down notes into a woodblock, opposite hand bandaged. One side houses the now wilted *asagao* flower, the other, a wax writing-pad.

ROYAL GUARD

Kyoto, Venerable. Where I hail from.

HONOKA

Kyoto... *Hm*, too far. Was there a base you were stationed at before arriving here? Somewhere closer?

The royal guard draws his lips tight.

Honoka puts the stubby stylus to her lip.

HONOKA (CONT'D)

What about a friend of yours?

SUPERIOR (O.S.)

You continually deny it, yet you seek forgiveness?

Honoka peers behind a pillar. A grizzled SUPERIOR (M, 50s) berates a STABLEBOY (M, 12).

STABLEBOY

It was just one fight!

The Superior gives the boy a firm SMACK across the face.

SUPERIOR

Violence is something we simply cannot overlook.

HONOKA (O.S.)

Superior?

Honoka pops out from behind the pillar.

HONOKA (CONT'D)
 Forgive me, but I couldn't help but
 overhear and—

SUPERIOR
 This is a private matter!

The stableboy's eyes shoot between Honoka and the Superior.
 He slowly side-steps away.

HONOKA
 Of course, I apologize, but I heard
 mention o-of a ring of some kind?

SUPERIOR
 This is not some flashy jewelry you
 ladies find so appealing. It is—

The stableboy breaks into a run. Dust trails at his feet.

SUPERIOR (CONT'D)
 HEY! Now look what you've done.
 He's going back to that damned
 fighting ring, no doubt. Poison to
 a young mind. And so many
 mercenaries...

Honoka cannot hold back a crazed grin.

HONOKA
 I'll set him straight.

SUPERIOR
 But— The *Shōgun's* orders!

Honoka jogs after the stableboy.

EXT. YOSHINO STREETS - DAY

The stableboy dodges produce carts as MERCHANTS (all F) pack
 up their wares.

HONOKA (O.S.)
 Hey!

Honoka follows into a throng of NOISY PEDESTRIANS. She scans
 the crowd. The stableboy's head peeks out from under a log
 hoisted by two WOODCUTTERS (M). He slips between them, around
 a corner, and into an alleyway.

HONOKA (CONT'D)
 Boy! Stop!

She pursues.

EXT. YOSHINO STREETS - ALLEYWAY - DAY

Vacant. An old BEGGAR holds out a chipped bowl. A stray cat skitters by.

HONOKA

Little boy? I'm not looking to get you in trouble, I just want to know where this fighting ring is. It would be great help if...

Behind, a HOODED THUG steps into the alley.

The beggar picks up his cup. Runs off.

The thug closes in. Honoka turns. Takes a step back.

HONOKA (CONT'D)

Do you need something?

The hooded thug smirks. Two other thugs step out of the shadows. Block the other end of the alley.

HOODED THUG

We just need something real quick from ya, shouldn't take too long.

Honoka attempts to step past the two thugs, but one grabs her. She strikes him. The other nips at her side.

HOODED THUG (CONT'D)

Come on, indulge us. We're in a mood.

A SCRAAAPE on the cobblestones behind them. The thugs turn.

NAKANO SHUN (F, 20s), a tall, heavily armored and done-up woman stands in the alley, *katana* in hand.

She sheathes the *katana*.

SHUN

Unhand the nun.

HOODED THUG

Yeah? Why?

Shun folds her hands behind her back.

The hooded thug laughs. Takes a swing at Shun. She easily sidesteps and trips him.

Shun shifts in front of Honoka protectively.

A thug reaches for Shun. She flips him over her shoulder instead.

The hooded thug throws a weak punch. Shun kicks his chest. He flies onto his back. Scrambles away.

Shun turns to the final thug.

SHUN

Last time. *Leave.*

He cowers. Darts away.

SHUN (CONT'D)

(to Honoka)

Can you walk?

HONOKA

Yes. Is everyone here so polite?

SHUN

You must not frequent the city.
Protecting women of your station
has always been my duty as a
bugeisha. I'd be happy to guide you
back to your estate.

HONOKA

I can handle—

A lavish palanquin stops at the mouth of the alley on the backs of SERVANTS.

Lord Matsutake pokes his head out from behind a curtain. Shun bows to him.

SHUN

My Lord.

MATSUTAKE

Ahhh. Thank you for finding our
little wildflower amidst the muck,
Shun.

(to Honoka)

Care for a ride?

EXT. YOSHINO MARKET - NIGHT

The city bursts with GEISHAS, VAGABONDS, and oily food carts.

Lord Matsutake's palanquin, led by Shun, TRUNDLES through the crowd. PASSERSBY shout as it squeezes through.

MATSUTAKE (V.O.)
It's absurd!

INT. LORD MATSUTAKE'S PALANQUIN - NIGHT

Priceless artwork decorates the interior— Painted trees stretch across the walls. Blue and green *Oni* (demons) chase half-naked women while fierce samurai battle to their gruesome deaths.

A pot of incense smokes beside Lord Matsutake.

MATSUTAKE
They squawk for hours about honor and legacy and heritage. Hogshit, all of it. Most are relics, spending their lives behind castle walls writing poetry. And the rest, well, your removal would make many breathe easier.

HONOKA
Do the others know of your... travels?

MATSUTAKE
Few ask questions. And those that do, I simply drop a bag of gold at their door and say, "I am Lord Matsutake Dokutsu, piss off!"

Honoka grimaces.

MATSUTAKE (CONT'D)
Shocked? Yet I find you, of all people, wandering alone out here.

HONOKA
We all have our distractions.

Lord Matsutake winks.

MATSUTAKE
We'll keep our secrets.

HONOKA
It was never about tradition, then. The other Lords are all against me.

MATSUTAKE

Why not? Your "justice" certainly causes problems for their precious peace. Self-righteous cowards. Think kowtowing to the enemy will save us. I warned them we couldn't negotiate with those Northern whoresons. Now look what happened. *Errr*— Condolences, by the way.

The palanquin stops. A KNOCK on the door.

MATSUTAKE (CONT'D)

Finally, we're here!

HONOKA

Where is here exactly?

MATSUTAKE

My distraction.

EXT. IZAKAYA - NIGHT

WORKERS drink to the end of a long day. A FOLK SONG wafts out the open doors.

Lord Matsutake stumbles out, pushing on Shun for balance.

Shun lifts Honoka by the waist onto a dry patch of dirt. She blushes.

Shun trails behind Lord Matsutake and Honoka as they enter the restaurant and bar.

INT. IZAKAYA - NIGHT

Paper lanterns give the space a welcoming glow. Servers speed from table to table with drinks and food for PATRONS.

The stableboy argues with the BARKEEP (M, 30s), a flowery-robed eccentric.

BARKEEP

To take from the pot, you must put something in! You need coin? Go beg in the streets.

The stableboy pivots in defeat, but notices Honoka. He hides his face behind a decorative vase as he scurries away.

HONOKA

Lord Matsutake, this is... I mean,
I've heard rumors of fights here.

MATSUTAKE

As have I. I thought I'd see for
myself.

BARKEEP

Lord Matsutake! Your usual seat?

Caught red-handed.

MATSUTAKE

Well... Shall we?

EXT. BACK ALLEY - NIGHT

The barkeep, Lord Matsutake, Honoka, and Shun step into a narrow, muddy alley. THUNDEROUS CHEERS erupt from the building across.

BARKEEP

There's a newcomer for tonight's
entertainment. Quite the warrior.
So far.

INT. THE RING - CONTINUOUS

A *sake* (rice wine) warehouse transformed into a fight-ring. Spectators CHANT and STOMP in the pit, a balcony above.

The barkeep leads the trio to a luxurious, cushioned space on the balcony— An island amidst the grime.

A fight's already begun below.

A masked titan of muscle, KANABO MAN's, mighty swings slow as MIZUKI flurries around him, jabbing a *bō* staff into every tender area.

Honoka takes in the room. Nearly every man carries a weapon.

Shouted over the noise:

HONOKA

So many *katanas*. Stolen?

MATSUTAKE

You would think so, wouldn't you?

HONOKA
They're all samurai?

MATSUTAKE
Once. But when a clan falls, its
warriors take to the country as
Ronin, trading blood for coin.

He unabashedly looks back at Shun.

MATSUTAKE (CONT'D)
And this war's already taken plenty
of clans.

The crowd ROARS: ***SUPURATTĀ! SUPURATTĀ! SUPURATTĀ!***

IN THE RING

Mizuki ducks a lame swing. Locks eyes with—

IN THE STANDS

—*Shun*.

Mizuki's confidence fades.

INT. SMALL COTTAGE - DAY [FLASHBACK]

A YOUNG MIZUKI (teens) meditates. She peeks open an eye to
YOUNG SHUN (teens) across from her, also meditating.

A shadow falls in front of Mizuki.

A stern MASTER, face obscured, brings down a rod—

KANABO MAN (V.O.)
HUUUAAAGGGHHH!

END OF FLASHBACK.

INT. THE RING - NIGHT [PRESENT]

Mizuki snaps back. No time to dodge. She raises the staff.

CRACK! The staff SNAPS in half. Mizuki tumbles. The crowd
CHEERS.

The club comes down again. Mizuki rolls— JAMS the splintered
ends of her staff into Kanabo Man's thigh.

KANABO MAN
GAAAH! YOU BITCH!

WHAM! Mizuki round-house kicks him across the jaw. Kanabo Man's mask flies off and he collapses with a THUD.

MIZUKI
Keep it down.

A wave of GROANS resonate throughout the room as men pass money back and forth. Several JEER at Mizuki.

THE STANDS

Lord Matsutake begrudgingly hands a pouch of coins to a KID.

Meanwhile, Honoka peers down at the ring and sees Saisei lying in a pool of his own blood, *tantō* in his chest.

She pales. Blinks.

Only Kanabo Man slumped over in a puddle of drool.

THE RING

Mizuki hurls the *kanabo* at the spectators. A YELP.

MIZUKI (CONT'D)
YOU CALL THAT A FIGHT?! I came here
for a challenge! Is this the best
you have?! All I see is a bunch of
fancy swords and not one man who
can use his. Or woman...

Mizuki stares pointedly upwards.

THE STANDS

Every thug in the room follows her gaze... to Shun.

Shun rises.

SHUN
Disappointed? Then leave. I won't
waste my time beating scoundrels.

MIZUKI
Typical samurai. All posture. No
spine.

MURMURS fill the room. Several *Ronin* scoff.

Lord Matsutake stands.

MATSUTAKE
Careful, girl. We're not some
drunken bandits.

He stumbles a little.

MIZUKI

Prove it! Give me my swords.

All eyes on Lord Matsutake. He waves a hand.

THE RING

A *RONIN IN RED* (M) holds out Mizuki's *wakizashi*. She pulls them from their sheaths. Performs a couple practice cuts.

THE STANDS

Lord Matsutake nods Shun in.

The wall of bodies part around her as she walks down.

THE RING

Shun ducks under the ropes. Calmly puts a hand on her *katana's* hilt.

Mizuki bounces on the balls of her feet, shaking the nerves.

Everyone in the room holds their breath.

Mizuki feints a slice. Shun doesn't flinch. She feints again. Nothing.

Mizuki lowers her guard. Walks away. Then— She throws her weapons back and launches at Shun.

Shun steps right. Mizuki flies right past.

Mizuki quickly regains her footing. Aims a precise cut at Shun's head.

Shun draws. Blocks Mizuki's blades by an inch.

Both break away. Shun clenches her jaw. Mizuki GROWLS.

Mizuki assaults Shun with a flurry of blows, but Shun stands her ground. She parries Mizuki's attacks with crisp, rigid movements.

IN THE STANDS

Honoka watches the duel with wide eyes. Lord Matsutake notices, pleased.

The CLANGS of steel ECHO. The audience watches them dance around each other in awe.

IN THE RING

Mizuki puts her weapons to her side in an offensive stance.

EXT. OPEN FIELD - DAY [FLASHBACK]

On a grassy hilltop, a young Mizuki laughs as she assumes the same stance with a wooden sparring sword.

Young Mizuki CHARGES.

END FLASHBACK.**INT. THE RING - NIGHT [PRESENT]**

SHWING! Blood trickles from a thin red gash on Shun's cheek.

Shun stares at Mizuki in shock. Mizuki smiles pridefully.

Shun wipes the blood, as well as a little makeup, with a sneer. She attacks Mizuki with inhuman fury.

Mizuki barely deflects the first two advances. The third SLICES her shoulder open.

Mizuki SCREAMS. Falls.

Shun points her blade in Mizuki's face, its end a dark red.

SHUN

Yield.

Mizuki clutches her shoulder. She briefly sulks before kicking Shun's legs out from under her.

The two abandon their blades as they roll across the floor. Mizuki CLAWS at Shun's face. Shun SQUEEZES Mizuki's wounded shoulder.

IN THE STANDS

Honoka swivels to Lord Matsutake.

HONOKA

Stop the fight.

MATSUTAKE

By the look of things, I won't have to.

THE RING/THE STANDS [INTERCUT]

Shun clambers onto Mizuki. Grabs her by the throat. Mizuki squirms, gasping for breath.

Shun's face softens. She loosens her grip— Mizuki PUNCHES her across the jaw.

MATSUTAKE (CONT'D)
(booming)
ENOUGH! Bring them to me!

The *Ronin* in red heaves Shun off Mizuki. Mizuki stumbles after her, but the *Ronin* holds her back.

MATSUTAKE (CONT'D)
Everyone else, *OUT!*

With annoyance, but still urgently, the fight-ring empties.

THE STANDS

The *Ronin* brings Shun and Mizuki up to Lord Matsutake— Shun shameful but obedient, Mizuki with rabid disobedience.

SHUN
Lady Honoka, Lord Matsutake, I
deeply apologize—

MIZUKI
I don't give a shit who you are.
Let me go! LET ME GO!

Mizuki writhes against the *Ronin*, but he holds firm.

Honoka notes the blood soaking through Mizuki's clothes, her breath ragged and on the verge of tears.

SHUN
Please, if you would let me
explain.

HONOKA
(under her breath)
Let her go.
(louder)
Just let her go.

The *Ronin* lets go. Mizuki falls on her hands and knees.

Honoka crouches in front of her, expression soft and genuine.

HONOKA (CONT'D)
A round of tea?

She looks up to Shun as well.

Shun nods. And with her head still down, so does Mizuki.

EXT. IZAKAYA - NIGHT

A heavy rain PELTS a few patrons that stagger out the door. Honoka watches from the porch, steaming tea in hand.

Across the way, Lord Matsutake waves from his palanquin as servants cart him away.

MATSUTAKE

It's been a pleasure, Lady Oyodo!
And please, take good care of my
Shun. She's very dear to me, you
understand.

Honoka waves him off.

Shun emerges beside Honoka, bloody cloth on her cheek. She bows deeply to her.

SHUN

My behavior tonight was
reprehensible. I allowed past
grievances to cloud my judgement. I
beg your forgiveness, Lady Oyodo.

HONOKA

Strange to hear that name with no
meaning attached to it.

Honoka smiles wearily at Shun.

HONOKA (CONT'D)

Did you not get your tea? Come, let
us talk to that friend of yours.
Hopefully the hot water has soothed
her wounds. And temper.

Honoka retreats inside. Shun follows.

INT. IZAKAYA - TEA CHAMBER - NIGHT

Mizuki sits alone at a low table, an empty cup of tea in front of her. Her shoulder is patched up with fresh bandages.

The door slides open and Honoka and Shun enter.

Honoka sits in front of Mizuki. Shun resumes her usual position at the door.

HONOKA
 (to Shun)
 You too.

Shun awkwardly takes a seat beside her.

Mizuki fiddles with her sheaths' tassels.

HONOKA (CONT'D)
 Greetings. I am Honoka.

Mizuki doesn't look up.

MIZUKI
 I remember. From the market. Any
 word from Buddha?

Honoka curtly chuckles.

HONOKA
 I never expected someone of your
 stature to fight so fiercely. And
 your weapons. Very refined.

MIZUKI
 I stole them.

SHUN
 That is a lie. Those *wakizashi* were
 given to her by her father, Lord
 Dazai of—

MIZUKI
 Why don't you drop dead, Shun.

Shun scoffs dismissively.

HONOKA
 What is the... *relationship* here?

SHUN
 We used to be—

MIZUKI
 Neighbors.

HONOKA
 I see.

MIZUKI
 What are you doing here, Shun?
 Shouldn't you be some hot-shot
 soldier for the *Shōgun* by now? What
 happened to that pipe-dream?

SHUN

I have no reason to answer the likes of you.

MIZUKI

Right, like you shouldn't be slumming it with your *own class*.

Shun grips the hilt of her *katana*.

HONOKA

Lord Dazai. I believe I met him before his passing.

MIZUKI

(incredulously)
Who are you, lady?

Shun grits her teeth. Honoka puts up a passive hand.

HONOKA

I was young, just a consort at the time, but yes, your father was a kind man. Wise beyond his years.

MIZUKI

I'm glad someone liked him.

Honoka sighs.

HONOKA

Growing up knowing I was to be the wife of the *Shōgun*, I was trained in many things. Music, the arts, conversation... But I lack the training you two have.

MIZUKI

Drinking?

HONOKA

Fighting.

SHUN

What do you need from us, my Lady? My services always come at a reasonable price.

Mizuki raspberries childishly at Shun.

HONOKA

I stake my entire inheritance on it if I must.

MIZUKI
And how much is that?

EXT. BACK ALLEY - NIGHT

TWO MONKS sneak in, their light footsteps barely leaving any indentation in the mud.

They approach the golden glow of the tea chamber's window.

INT. IZAKAYA - TEA CHAMBER - SAME TIME

Honoka notices movement outside the window— The monks dip out of sight.

HONOKA
I am being watched. They have
confined me to the castle in a vain
attempt to silence me, but I will
not be silenced.

Honoka SLAMS her fist on the table. She has Mizuki's attention now.

HONOKA (CONT'D)
My husband was murdered in our
chambers not three months ago. I
have tried to appeal to the Lords
of our clan but they'll hear
nothing of me. Peace is what they
want— What about *my* peace? I have
not slept soundly in weeks. I see
him... *everywhere*. Am I to sit idly
by as they slander my husband and
I's names into the dust to be swept
aside and forgotten? Where is the
justice in that?

She leans back. Stirs her tea with a shaky hand.

HONOKA (CONT'D)
If they deem it not theirs, then it
is my responsibility to track this
Northern whoreson and make him feel
just a fraction of what I feel
everyday without my husband.

SHUN
The Lords have failed you, Lady
Honoka. But how could we be of any
service to you?

HONOKA

You burn with the same fire that
rages inside of me. I see that, in
the past, you have been wronged.
Now you live burdened. And angry.
That is what I seek.

Mizuki shakes her head.

MIZUKI

The North is a fortress. With all
due respect, I may be angry, but
not enough to die for it.

HONOKA

You weren't this timid in the ring.
You fought Shun as if it were your
last.

SHUN

But what you insinuate... It is a
suicide mission.

MIZUKI

A suicide *pact*.

HONOKA

I can't let my husband's killer go
unpunished. Every breath he takes
insults his memory! But I
understand. If you will not join me
in the North, there is something
else you can do.

SHUN

If Lord Matsutake trusts you, then
I will do it.

MIZUKI

And I'm not behind bars because of
you so, if I help, are we even?

Honoka nods.

HONOKA

Then here's the plan...

END OF ACT TWO.

ACT THREE**INT. CHIHAYA MONASTERY - HALLWAY - NIGHT**

The royal guard leans on a post, cup of tea in hand.

A KNOCK on the panel door beside him.

HONOKA (O.S.)
Washroom.

ROYAL GUARD
This is the third time tonight.

HONOKA (O.S.)
Must be the tea.

ROYAL GUARD
Use your chamber pot.

A SNIFFLE from the other side of the door. The royal guard sighs. Steps out of the way. The panel slides open.

Honoka bows slightly. Briskly walks down the hall.

EXT. CHIHAYA MONASTERY - HILLSIDE - NIGHT

A clump of bushes part to reveal Shun and Mizuki.

SHUN
Second thoughts?

MIZUKI
I'm still on my first.

Mizuki takes her bow. Loads an arrow.

SHUN
The fact the Lady tasked us *both*
with this is a marvel.

Shun moves off as Mizuki aims up at a small candle flame in the tree-lined courtyard.

MATCH CUT TO:

INT. CHIHAYA MONASTERY - SHRINE ROOM - NIGHT

Honoka extinguishes the flame above Saisei's portrait. She trails a hand down his face to the ceremonial *tantō* dagger. GRABS its hilt.

EXT. CHIHAYA MONASTERY - NIGHT

SWOOSH. An arrow cuts through the night sky.

It SLASHES through the rope holding the bronze bell. It topples the Buddha statue with a resonant CLANG!

Nuns and monks rush out from their dormitories and gather by the demolished statue.

INT. CHIHAYA MONASTERY - HALLWAY - NIGHT

Honoka rushes past a spilled stream of tea.

INT. CHIHAYA MONASTERY - PRIVATE CHAMBERS - NIGHT

Honoka enters. Shun stands at the far end, inspecting a hand-fan. She quickly puts the fan back on the shelf.

SHUN
(flustered)
It is very pretty.

Honoka walks past Shun to the window. Scans below.

HONOKA
Keep it. Is this the way out?

Shun nods. Pockets the fan.

SHOUTS close on the room.

The royal guard and several monks burst in, catching Honoka in the last moments of escape.

EXT. CHIHAYA MONASTERY - NIGHT

Honoka dives into Shun's arms. Guards up top call attention to them. Lanterns ominously approach.

Honoka and Shun dart across the barren courtyard, shadows in the night.

Honoka spares one last glance of the estate.

EXT. CHIHAYA MONASTERY - HILLSIDE - NIGHT

Reclined against a tree, Mizuki fiddles with a pack of cards.

Honoka and Shun emerge from the woods. Honoka pants, hands on her knees.

MIZUKI

Well that was easy. Bring anything for me?

SHUN

Plunder from a *tera*? What do you take me for?

Honoka swallows hard.

HONOKA

We have to keep moving. Follow.

EXT. WOODED TRAIL - NIGHT

Honoka charges like a bull uphill.

Mizuki trails behind Shun.

MIZUKI

(quietly)

I've never seen anyone so desperate.

SHUN

With what you know, can you blame her?

MIZUKI

I'm just surprised at her... tenacity? For a Lady, especially.

SHUN

I trust the Lady.

MIZUKI

(sardonically)

Good for you.

HONOKA (O.C.)

We're here.

EXT. WOODED GLADE - NIGHT

A small stone shrine bathed in moonlight. Two fox statues stand guard, coins at their feet.

Honoka sits behind the shrine, back against it and face pale.

HONOKA

(out of breath)

We will make camp here, but no fire. We can't have the smoke give away our position.

MIZUKI

You're not looking so good, lady.

SHUN

Perhaps there is a stream nearby--

HONOKA

No. Nobody leaves until morning.

SHUN

Lady Honoka, I hope this question is not too intrusive, but... When was the last time your... "*little sister*" arrived?

HONOKA

Last month? No, two? Three...

With each increment, Shun and Mizuki's brows rise.

HONOKA (CONT'D)

No... It can't be...

She runs a hand over her slightly curved belly.

HONOKA (CONT'D)

We did it. We did it, Sai... But at what cost?

Honoka dramatically sobs into her hands.

Shun and Mizuki share a glance. They gingerly sit on either side of Honoka.

SHUN

Just think, my Lady: A summer child! The sun will rise on your family once again.

HONOKA

Sai wanted to name her Yuki. She would be her promise.

MIZUKI

How do you even know it's a girl?

Shun socks Mizuki in the shoulder.

Honoka pathetically chuckles. Tips her head back.

HONOKA

I don't. I don't know anything.
Except this.

Honoka reaches into her robes and tosses a hefty pouch of gold to Shun. She snatches it. Feverishly counts its contents.

HONOKA (CONT'D)

I, and this infant, will die if you do not come with me.

SHUN

My Lady—

HONOKA

The offer stands: My entire estate for the death of one insignificant Northern spy.

Honoka holds both of their hands.

HONOKA (CONT'D)

You're all I have.

Shun's shoulders lax.

SHUN

What do we do next, my Lady?

MIZUKI

We've got to cover our tracks.
Surely that is the next step.
Right?

HONOKA

No. I want them to know we're coming.

MIZUKI

Great. We're going to be hunted for sport. This is it. This is the end.
We're doomed.

Honoka unfurls the woodblock, revealing the *asagao* flower.

HONOKA

All we need is someone who can put
this to use. Then we'll be on our
way.

SHUN

I... might know someone.

HONOKA

Good. Tomorrow, we pay them a
visit. Then, the North. But for
now, we rest.

Shun and Mizuki scuttle to the opposite sides of the shrine.
Settle into sleep.

Honoka puts a comforting hand on her abdomen. Stares up at
the moon.

HONOKA (CONT'D)

(quietly)

We'll come back to you, Sai. I
promise.

She closes her eyes.

FADE TO BLACK.

END.