

The Secret History of the Lord of Musashi

Written by

Richard Stanley

Darkness.

And the pulse of Drums.

FADE IN:

INT. DUSK. OJIKA CASTLE. AUTUMN. 1549

The setting sun casts a fading shaft of light through a narrow arrow-slit, a crimson beam penetrating the shadowy interior of the castle keep. The smoky glow falls for an instant across an ornately decorated screen emblazoned with an infernal tableau of warring armies, blazing castles, fallow fields and looted villages. The stylized figure of a man in a western style breastplate and the horned helmet of a feudal warlord squats amidst the carnage, seated cross legged on a tiger skin at the very gates of Hell, his left hand splayed against his thigh, thumb lightly touching the scabbard of his sword.

TERUKATSU (V.O.)

I am Terukatsu...

The figure's helmet bears the crest of Taishakuten, the Buddhist guardian of the east, crushing a demon underfoot, and in his right hand the painted warrior holds a tasselled baton of command. The beam of light falters, the sounds of battle coming from somewhere just beyond the walls of the keep. The clash of steel and the intermittent crack of gunfire.

TERUKATSU (V.O.)

I am the eldest son and heir of  
Terukuni, Lord of Musashi...

The screen trembles and is yanked abruptly aside to reveal the face of the heir apparent. TERUKATSU is not yet in his thirteenth year, but his dark eyes already have an intelligence and gravitas beyond his age. He takes half a step forward but then his retainer, the aging, one-eyed samurai AOKI SHUZEN motions for his young charge to stay put. Lowering his hand to the hilt of his sword the loyal AOKI peers nervously out into the fiery half light.

TERUKATSU (V.O.)

When I was six years old I was  
separated from my parents and sent  
as a hostage to the castle on Mount  
Ojika, the seat of the Lord Tsukuma  
of the Ikkansai dynasty, with whom  
my father had attempted to reach a  
reconciliation...

The boy's eyes widen as he hears the dull, rhythmic thud of a battering ram against the castle gate. Behind him the other hostages huddle silently together, calmly awaiting their fate.

There are no mature men among their ranks, only children, but there are women of all ages, including young girls, middle aged wives and grandmothers of fifty or sixty who sit quietly in the far corners of the chamber, reserved and discreet.

Then the sound of a horn comes from the direction of the courtyard and AOKI glances anxiously back at him.

AOKI

That was the trumpet shell signalling the survivors to regroup within the gate.

TERUKATSU

Then you must go show them what the men of our clan are made of.

AOKI nods tensely, steeling himself for what is to come.

AOKI

My lord.

TERUKATSU

I would go with you if I could.

AOKI

I know, my lord. Your father's blood runs in your veins.

The old samurai manages an affectionate smile, seeing the frustrated bloodlust flickering like a nascent spark in his charge's bright young eyes.

AOKI (CONT'D)

You'll be safe enough here. For now. Lord Tsukuma will not give up his hostages until the very last.

TERUKATSU

Go, Aoki. And come back to me.

AOKI SHUZEN bows, taking his leave of his master. TERUKATSU watches as the aging retainer makes his way hurriedly towards the courtyard and the sound of encroaching battle.

TERUKATSU (V.O.) (CONT'D)

When I look back on those days, even events that seemed humiliating at the time have become precious memories. It was customary then to maintain a rigid division between the sexes, but, during the siege of Mount Ojika, I was forced to share my quarters with no account women and children. Worst of all, I was kept at a distance from the fighting and could learn nothing of battle strategy.

The young warlord stands at a distance from the other boys, ears straining as he tries in vain to follow the course of the carnage taking place beyond the walls.

TERUKATSU (V.O.) (CONT'D)

I was mortified. But in retrospect  
it was an interesting experience...

He stiffens, hearing the musical tinkle of laughter coming from behind him, half convinced the women must be making fun of him. Then, as if to confirm his suspicions one of them calls his name.

LADY IDA

Terukatsu!

He turns with a start. The woman who hailed him is an elder of comparatively high rank - LADY IDA of Suruga. She sits on a thick cushion surrounded by a circle of some twenty other relatives and retainers, her elbow propped on an arm rest as she dabs laconically at a fresh crimson stain on her silken sleeve.

LADY IDA (CONT'D)

Come, join us.

The young warlord hesitates for a moment. The gathering of women before him is like a flower garden seen for the first time, sparkling with colour and redolent with strange incense. The LADY IDA gives him a reassuring look before turning once more to her companions.

LADY IDA (CONT'D)

He is an admirable child. He pretends not to listen when we talk about the battle, but nothing escapes him. No doubt he will grow up to be a fine general.

The eyes of the group turn as one towards him and for a moment TERUKATSU experiences an irrational terror - something like the panic an explorer might feel when surrounded by an exotic tribe. One of the younger women meets his gaze, lips moving as languidly as the petals of an orchid in the summer breeze.

FIRST PRINCESS

He has his father's eyes...

The second princess, seated beside her, giggles at this, her fan fluttering like the wings of a moth.

FIRST PRINCESS (CONT'D)

Don't you want to hear about the  
fighting, Terukatsu?

SECOND PRINCESS

Oh, please! Come sit with us!

FIRST PRINCESS

Sit here! Don't be afraid...

TERUKATSU nods, settling himself onto the mat with a loud thump to hide his embarrassment.

SECOND PRINCESS

You'll be able to go into battle yourself in two or three years.

LADY IDA

Yes, indeed. He's tall and sturdy. You can see he has promise...

FIRST PRINCESS

I should like to see him in his first campaign. The Lord of Musashi is fortunate to have such an heir.

TERUKATSU looks awkwardly from one painted face to another, wishing they would hurry up and tell him about the fighting.

TERUKATSU

I too would like to see that. But surely the keep will fall in a day or two at best?

LADY IDA

Have you observed the enemy's movements from afar, my lord?

TERUKATSU blushes, shaking his head.

TERUKATSU

I want to, but he won't let me. He says children can't go out to the second citadel.

LADY IDA

Who said that to you?

TERUKATSU

Aoki. Aoki Shuzen. The samurai attending me. He's always telling me I can't do this and I can't do that. But you've seen the battle up close, haven't you?

LADY IDA

Sometimes, when the fighting is brisk, as it is today, we do what we can to help. Sometimes, we go up into the turrets, or even as far as the gate...

TERUKATSU gazes up at the old woman's face with naked envy.

LADY IDA (CONT'D)  
Sometimes, we get too close.

The boy's eyes fall to the deep red stain on her embroidered sleeve.

TERUKATSU  
Take me with you. Tomorrow. Will you? Unless the castle falls tonight...

He pricks his ears, hearing the clash of steel from the distant ramparts and the screams of the dying.

LADY IDA  
Oh dear. What a pity.

TERUKATSU  
Please, my lady. I...

The old woman shakes her head, gently but firmly.

LADY IDA  
I'm afraid that we really couldn't do that. If we did we might be scolded by Aoki Shuzen.

There is a stirring of polite laughter from her entourage.

TERUKATSU  
Shuzen won't find out. And I won't get in your way, I promise! I can do anything you can.

LADY IDA  
But a young gentleman like you simply does not help with women's work. People will laugh at you.

The boy nods, a scowl knotting up his face as he considers his options.

TERUKATSU  
In another day or so we'll all be dead. Then what will any of this matter?

LADY IDA  
Poor Terukatsu! Your day will come. Have faith.

TERUKATSU  
Then at least let me see the bodies of my enemies! At least let me see that!

LADY IDA

I suppose if you wanted to see a few heads it could be arranged.

TERUKATSU

I'd be much obliged, my lady. If you could...

LADY IDA

You must promise never to tell anyone...

She leans closer, her voice falling to a conspiratorial whisper.

LADY IDA (CONT'D)

But every night, five or six of us are selected to attend to the heads taken in battle. We check them against a list and wash off the blood. The heads of common soldiers are one thing, but those of noted warriors have to be carefully dressed before being presented to the commander of the castle garrison.

TERUKATSU

What does that mean?  
To...uhhh...'dress' a head?

LADY IDA

We fix the hair, touch up the dye on the teeth. Slap on a little make up. It's women's work, but there's a shortage of women in the keep these days so some of the hostages have been asked to help. If anyone finds out there'll be trouble so you'll have to follow without a word when I come for you.

TERUKATSU nods.

TERUKATSU

I promise.

CUT TO:

INT. NIGHT. THE KEEP.

The light dies, the sounds of combat fading with it. The various hostages billeted in the chamber sleep in rows without regard to age or rank. Only TERUKATSU and AOKI SHUZEN sleep apart from the rest, behind the ornamental screen at the head of the room.

The young warlord lies awake in the darkness, watching over his wounded attendant as he turns in his sleep, utterly spent by the day's exertions. With his sword arm bandaged in a soggy field dressing, AOKI seems as helpless as a child huddling beneath his quilt as he awaits a dawn that scarcely promises to come.

TERUKATSU (V.O.)

In truth I knew little about war  
and death then, and still less  
about life in the fragrant  
bewitching inner suites of the  
castle and the ways of women. But I  
was soon to find out...

A shadow looms against the paper screen, hunched outline weirdly distorted by the guttering firelight. A tortured moan escapes AOKI's dreaming lips as the shadowy figure taps lightly on the screen and TERUKATSU stiffens. His eyes fall to his retainer's discarded sword, quite convinced for a moment that his nocturnal visitor must be a witch or revenant spirit come to drag him away to some nether hell.

Then the old woman draws the screen aside

LADY IDA

Sssh...

Raising a wizened finger to her lips she takes a pair of straw sandals from the folds of her kimono and places them before him.

LADY IDA (CONT'D)

Put these on.

Creeping around the foot of AOKI's bed the young warlord slips past the screen.

TERUKATSU

Which way?

She points to the door at the far end of the room with her chin and as he walks behind her the boy can hear the rhythmical swishing of the elder matriarch's silk robes, like the lapping waves on a quiet sea. It is a cold night in the middle of the Tenth Month and the old woman wears a long starched robe over her white kimono. The LADY IDA hunches her narrow shoulders as she walks, holding up her skirt with both hands to keep it from brushing the sleeping figures and to try and check its rustling sound. She does not carry a lantern but the glow of the watch fires falls through the half open portal, reflecting off the polished floorboards and shining red in her face.

LADY IDA

This way...

CUT TO:



EXT. NIGHT. OJIKA CASTLE.

The boy steps out into the night, finding himself on a wooden platform at the head of a flight of stairs leading down the outer wall of the keep. Because of the night beacons and the glare of the encircling campfires, the young warlord hadn't noticed the moon before, but now he is outside TERUKATSU can see that it is full and clear.

The whitewashed walls all around him catch the moonlight, reflecting it brightly onto the narrow wooden steps and in its eerie effulgence the boy can see his companion no longer resembles the refined, warmhearted matron he has grown used to seeing by day. The deep shadows in her sunken flesh give her the haggard look of a demon mask. She seems unkempt and somehow older than she was before and as a fire flares in the distance the silver strands in her hair catch the light and glow like wires. She moves surprisingly swiftly for her age and it is all the young TERUKATSU can do to keep up with her, following her down the steps, through alternating patches of light and shadow he takes a winding path along the base of the zigzagging outer wall.

At length she comes to the door of a small, two story building. She beckons to TERUKATSU and the boy sniffs the air, noticing the smell that comes from within. It is a complex odor, a blend of many things, all of them unpleasant.

LADY IDA

This is the place...

CUT TO:

INT. STORE ROOM. NIGHT

Most of the weapons have been removed for use in battle, leaving the store room nearly empty. It is strangely warm and moist in the room thanks to the steam rising from a kettle on the makeshift stove in one corner.

LADY IDA

Here are the stairs. Watch your step.

TERUKATSU follows the woman to the upper floor, sitting down in the bright lamplight at the top of the steps. He rivets his eyes on the most terrifying objects in the room, determined to let nothing frighten him. He looks first at the head placed before the woman nearest him, then, one by one, at the other heads set in a row. He is pleased to find he can gaze calmly at any of them. The heads are so clean they don't look real and the longer TERUKATSU looks at them the more artificial they seem.

The other women nod politely to the young warlord as he enters the room and then return quietly to their chores.

Of the five women present, three sit with one head each before them, while the other two assist.

The first woman pours hot water into a basin and with the help of one of the assistants, washes a head, grasping it by the topknot and twisting its hair around her wrist for a better grip. When she is finished she places the head on a 'head board' and passes it to her neighbour. The second woman dresses the hair and the third attaches a wooden label. Finally the head is placed in line with the other finished heads on a long plank behind them. So they won't slide off the heads are pressed firmly onto spikes that protrude from the surface of the plank.

The women always treat the heads with respect, never roughly. Their movements are deliberate, modest and graceful, which only serves to enhance the strange beauty of their pale hands, yet their faces are just as lovely. Several of the women had been present that afternoon when the LADY IDA first addressed him, but he scarcely noticed them at the time and it baffles TERUKATSU that they seem so alluring to him now.

Entranced the young warlord settles himself in one corner of the steamy attic, watching the women work, their faces as unfeeling as stone, yet somehow their impassivity is different from that of the heads. The one is hideous, the other sublime. The woman on the far right, the older of the two sisters who sat beside him a few hours earlier, ties a string to another label, attaching it to the topknot of the head before her. When a bald head - a 'lay-priest head' - is passed to her, she pokes a hole in one ear with an awl and threads the string through it. TERUKATSU blushes, feeling an intense pleasure as he watches her make the hole.

TERUKATSU (V.O.)

Only later would I understand the emotion that seized me. It was an agitation I had never experienced before. An inexpressible delight...

He is particularly enraptured by the girl who sits in the middle, washing hair. She is the youngest of the three sisters - perhaps 15 or 16. Her round face has a natural charm and her hands are more supple, more graceful as they dress the hair than the hands of the other women. When she receives a freshly washed head from the woman on the left she first cuts the cord that binds the topknot. Then she combs the hair carefully, caressingly. Sometimes she applies a bit of oil, touches up the shaven area with a razor, or, taking an incense burner from the sutra stand at her side, holds the hair over the smoke. Next she takes up a new cord with her right hand and holding one end in her mouth, gathers the hair together with her left before tying up the topknot - all exactly as a professional hairdresser might do. She works with detachment, but whenever she pauses to scrutinize a finished head, as if to inspect its hairstyle, an unconscious smile invariably creeps across her cheeks.

TERUKATSU (V.O.)

I found myself growing jealous of the heads placed before this beautiful girl. It was not simply that I envied them for having her dress their hair, shave their pates or simply gaze upon them with that look of simple, guileless cruelty. I wanted to be killed and transformed into a head myself so that I might be manipulated by those pale voluptuous hands...

Tying up the hair and adjusting the topknot on another satisfied customer the young princess taps the head lightly with the back of her comb in what appears to be a gesture of sympathy. Then, passing it on to her sister for labelling she reaches for a fresh head. It is an attractive head belonging to a young samurai of twenty one or two but for some reason its nose is missing, cleanly sliced off as if by a sharp blade, bone and all, from brow to upper lip, leaving a flat crimson wound. No doubt the warrior had been an extremely handsome man but the wound gives his mutilated features an oddly comical appearance.

The young princess carefully runs her comb through the noseless head's lustrous hair and reties the topknot. Then she gazes at the centre of the face, where the nose should be, and smiles.

TERUKATSU catches his breath, unprepared for the intensity of the emotions that surge through him. Unable to contain himself any longer he finally breaks the silence.

TERUKATSU

What happened to that one? That head you're holding...

Realizing that his voice is quavering he stops, gathering himself together before speaking more forcefully.

TERUKATSU (CONT'D)

What's going on? The head doesn't have a nose...

FIRST PRINCESS

No, sir.

Placing her hands, glossy with oil on the headboard in front of her, she assumes the respectful posture customary when addressing a noble. In doing so she glances up at TERUKATSU's face for a moment but then immediately lowers her head.

TERUKATSU

He must have been a fool to get his nose cut off.

A husky laugh, more like an old man's cough than the laugh of a child wells up from his throat, echoing strangely in the attic.

TERUKATSU (CONT'D)

Why was he cut there?

FIRST PRINCESS

But, sir, this is a woman-head.

TERUKATSU

A woman's head?

FIRST PRINCESS

No, sir. A woman-head is not a woman's head. I don't know much about it, but I'm told that when a warrior is unable to take the head of an enemy he sometimes takes only the nose so that he can return when the battle is over to retrieve his prize.

TERUKATSU gazes at the naked wound. In the lamp light the lips of the wound are pale and bloodless.

TERUKATSU

But why? Why is it called a woman-head?

FIRST PRINCESS

Well, I suppose if only a nose was brought in no-one would be able to tell if it belonged to a man or a woman...

Again he sees that strange smile teasing the corners of her lips.

TERUKATSU

Are such things common?

FIRST PRINCESS

As a rule we don't get many of them in. This is the first I've see in the current siege...

She glances up, meeting his eyes and for a moment it is as if she understands him perfectly.

FIRST PRINCESS (CONT'D)

Such heads really aren't... desirable...

TERUKATSU stiffens, hearing the whisper of the old woman's robes behind him. He turns, blushing violently, expecting a reprimand, but the LADY IDA merely looks down at him, smiling pleasantly.

LADY IDA  
Shall we go now?

CUT TO:

INT. NIGHT. THE KEEP.

An uneasy silence hangs over the stricken castle, broken only by the snores of the hostages and AOKI's tortured breathing. TERUKATSU crouches beside him, watching the shifting shadows flickering across the paper screen as he waits for the sound of the old woman's footsteps to die away.

TERUKATSU (V.O.)  
Nothing is so strange as the heart  
of a man...

Reaching out he impulsively gathers up AOKI's discarded sword. The hilt of the blade feels good in his hand. Strapping on the scabbard TERUKATSU draws back the screen, slipping silently into the night.

CUT TO:

INT. NIGHT. CASTLE CORRIDOR.

The boy flattens himself into an archway as a phalanx of armored warriors in Ikkansai colors march past him, bearing back more of the wounded from the second citadel.

TERUKATSU (V.O.)  
If I had not met that girl or ever  
seen a 'woman-head' I should never  
have given myself over to such  
shameful activities...

Drawing aside a musty tapestry the young warlord reveals the entrance to one of the countless secret passageways known only to the children of the inner court. Crouching, he starts into the gloom, trailing hand searching for and finding the ancient glyphs and cyphers cut into the stonework that mark the way through the labyrinth.

Feeling a breath of fresh air against his cheeks TERUKATSU pauses, finding himself at the mouth of a narrow stairwell, the glimmer of firelight falling on his face from somewhere high above.

TERUKATSU (V.O.)  
My eventual disgrace arose from the  
memory of that girl's face, so  
deeply embedded in my heart I could  
not forget it...

He climbs until the aged steps give out, forcing him to rely on a series of small footholds that lead precipitously up the concave interior of the shaft. He works his way higher, bats flurrying silently about him. Then his head brushes against a solid thing and raising his free hand he tests the barrier to find it yielding. A sliver of firelight falls across his face, flickering redly in his upturned eyes.

TERUKATSU (V.O.)

I wanted to see her smile again...

With a supreme effort, he forces the slab aside, seeing the full moon shining down through the thinning clouds.

CUT TO:

EXT. NIGHT. OJIKA CASTLE/BATTLEFIELD.

It is almost three in the morning and the full moon already rests on the summit of Mount Ojika.

Emerging from beneath a tangle of corpses TERUKATSU finds himself on the far side of the moat. He crawls on his hands and knees so as not to draw the attention of the sentries, making for the mouth of the valley and the lights of the encircling camp. There are bodies everywhere. Many of them already headless. The bodies of men and beasts. Bodies and bits of bodies.

The enemy camp has been erected in the shape of a horseshoe. A bamboo fence watched over by guard towers and fires built every ten or twenty yards enclose a number of temporary shelters serving as barracks.

TERUKATSU (V.O.)

With the enemy concentrated at the second and third citadels I knew the guard would be relaxed at the main camp...

Staying low, the boy circles the fence until he reaches the bottom of the horseshoe.

TERUKATSU (V.O.)

With so few warriors about I was bound to get my chance.

CUT TO:

INT. NIGHT. THE STOCKADE.

Finding a space in the fence TERUKATSU sets to work widening the gap between the bamboo poles. He manages to get his head and shoulders through the hole and the rest of him follows.

The watch fires are offset by the light of the moon which seems to obscure the lookout's view and to his surprise no-one challenges him.

Creeping past a group of crouching guards as they huddle about their fire, TERUKATSU flits from the doorway of one barrack to the next. The buildings are enclosed by camp curtains bearing the crests of their various occupants and various banners and spears lie discarded at their entrances. The boy examines the crests as he passes, searching for a likely victim.

Then, catching sight of a particularly handsome curtain bearing the crest of a golden dragon, he stops in his tracks.

TERUKATSU (V.O.)

It was the crest of Yakushiji Danjo Masataka himself. If the enemy general were asleep therein I realized I might accomplish a feat of unparalleled distinction...

Circling behind the building he finds a stable with five or six tethered horses. They too are sleeping peacefully. Lifting the curtain, TERUKATSU draws himself up against the plank wall of the barrack. He listens intently for a moment, hearing nothing. Steeling himself he quietly slides open the back door.

CUT TO:

INT. NIGHT. GENERAL MASATAKA'S QUARTERS.

The door at the end of the passage is ajar. In the room beyond TERUKATSU glimpses two sleeping pages approximately his own age. He tiptoes past them, seeing a lamp burning behind a screen on the far side of the room. Gently drawing the screen aside he gazes on the face of the warrior who sleeps within.

The man appears to be in his early fifties and wears his hair in a style reserved for generals. A scroll depicting Hachiman, the God of war, hangs in an alcove beside his pillow and a portable shrine bears an image of the ferocious Fudo Myoo, God of fire. These accessories, along with the armor, sword rack and furnishings of gold and silver leave TERUKATSU with little doubt as to the sleeper's identity.

From where he stands TERUKATSU can peer directly into the flaring, aristocratic nostrils of the general's upturned nose. The light from the small oil lamp sways in the draft and with each flicker the shadow of the nose trembles too as if it is deliberately inciting the boy.

TERUKATSU (V.O.)

Once again I recalled that girl's smile.

(MORE)

TERUKATSU (V.O.) (CONT'D)

I would turn this face into a  
noseless head, place it before her  
knees and expose it to her gaze.  
There could be no greater pleasure!

He abruptly kicks at the sleeping man's pillow. Before his adversary can reach for his sword, TERUKATSU jumps on his chest, straddling the man as he tries to sit up and piercing his throat with a single thrust. There is no time for his victim to cry out. TERUKATSU sees his panic filled eyes, his mouth open and ready to speak and then an instant later, the face of death, frozen.

Having struck home with one thrust TERUKATSU extracts his blade, rising so quickly he is scarcely touched by the spurting blood. Then he stiffens, catching the flash of steel out of the corner of one eye. The two boys who were sleeping in the antechamber have drawn their swords and come rushing at him simultaneously.

TERUKATSU bounds up into the alcove where he stands, his own sword at the ready with the scroll of Hachiman behind him. This position puts him at an advantage as half the space in front of the alcove is taken up by the corpse and the portable shrine, forcing his assailants to approach from one side.

The pages circle the body, clearly disconcerted by the sight of their dead master and the realization that his killer is a boy of their own age, yet poised in the alcove TERUKATSU looks more like a demon sprung from the earth than the offspring of any human mother. Keeping their sword tips aligned, the pages inch cautiously towards him. As they approach the shrine, the more timid of the two falls back and TERUKATSU transfers his attention to the movements of the boy in front. The moment the page sets foot on the sill of the dais, the young warlord dashes forward, striking a blow that cuts deeply into the boy's shoulder. The boy steps backward with a startled grunt and embracing him tightly TERUKATSU stabs him in the side. His assailant crumples slowly in his arms, like a sinking ship, blood pouring from his wounds.

Then discarding the boy's body TERUKATSU rounds on his companion.

Overawed, the surviving page has no will to fight, but stands his ground out of determination to follow his master in death. Averting his eyes from the flash of TERUKATSU's blade, he parries two or three times, but it is a resigned, apologetic, tearful sort of resistance. TERUKATSU strikes the sword from his hand, kicks him down and stabs him in the chest.

Kneeling beside the corpse TERUKATSU grasps the topknot in his left hand and starts to cut off the general's head with his right.



He hears the footsteps of several men running towards him down the corridor and redoubles his efforts, but it proves more difficult than he had guessed to sever the head neatly from the body. He panics, hearing voices from immediately behind him, his blade still stuck in the general's neck bone. Knowing he has no choice other than to abandon his objective or be cut to pieces, he tugs his sword free, gnashing his teeth in frustration. Then, rounding on the general's body, he slices off the corpse's nose. The lump of flesh tumbles to the floor. Snatching it up, TERUKATSU pushes open the sliding door and bolts for his life.

CUT TO:

EXT. NIGHT. THE STOCKADE.

At first only two or three men give chase, apparently mistaking the boy running in front of them for one of their own pages. TERUKATSU makes a bee line for the perimeter fence, but before he is halfway across the open space, he hears the trumpet shells and drums resounding from the watchtowers on all sides of him.

Jolted from their dreams, men pour out of the barracks.

Weaving a path among the steadily multiplying torches, TERUKATSU pulls a burning brand from a watch fire, waving it about himself as if he too is searching for the fleeing assassin. The entire camp is in an uproar, but the confusion is to the boy's advantage. Reaching the outside of the compound safely, he discards the torch and, after running six or seven hundred yards, dissolves into the boundless light of the moon.

CUT TO:

INT. NIGHT. GENERAL MASATAKA'S QUARTERS.

The CAPTAIN OF THE GUARDS ushers an old man with a shaven head and long white beard into the bed chamber. This newcomer wears the regalia of the Ikko sect and is in fact none other than the dreaded KOMBU SUKEZAEMON, one of the principal advisors to the Yakushiji clan.

CAPTAIN

General Masataka has been  
assassinated, my lord. Murdered in  
his bed...

SUKEZAEMON

I can see that, Captain.

SUKEZAEMON slowly takes in the carnage, one eyebrow twitching.

SUKEZAEMON (CONT'D)

What happened to his nose?

CAPTAIN

That's just the thing, my Lord, it seems...

SUKEZAEMON

Find it.

CAPTAIN

Yes, my Lord.

The guardsmen poke fearfully about the room, searching for the missing piece of the general's face.

SUKEZAEMON

What happened here must remain a secret. Have the barracks sealed and fire set in the camp to provide a pretext for the commotion.

CAPTAIN

At once, my Lord.

SUKEZAEMON's eyes return to his master's mutilated head, still trailing from the corpse's trunk by a knot of sinew.

SUKEZAEMON

Heads will roll. Ours too, unless we act swiftly...

CUT TO:

EXT. DAWN. OJIKA CASTLE/BATTLEMENT.

A plume of black smoke rises into the clear, morning sky. A young man perched high on the ramparts silently observes the proceedings through a battered, western style telescope. The youth's long hair, the crest on his breastplate and pale, aristocratic features mark him as the eldest son of the lord of Ikkansai - ORIBENOSHO NORISHIGE.

NORISHIGE is a good two years older than Terukatsu, and although he has been doing his best to conduct the faltering defence of the castle in his father's absence, his armor still appears somehow ill-fitting. He has the look of a poet about him rather than that of a warrior.

NORISHIGE

I don't understand. Why do they not attack?

SERGEANT JIMBEI, the head of the castle garrison, stands behind him, awaiting his orders.

SGT. JIMBEI

The men are waiting, sir...

NORISHIGE

I don't like the smell of this, sergeant. Have the marksmen fire off a volley or two to see if you can provoke a response.

NORISHIGE lowers the telescope, increasingly puzzled by the behaviour of their enemy. Like the other members of his clan assembled on the battlement, the young prince had expected only to die a swift, glorious death, the outcome of the siege having grown increasingly inevitable. This sudden change of tactics leaves him baffled and not a little crestfallen.

NORISHIGE (CONT'D)

I must consult with my father.  
He will know what to do...

CUT TO:

INT. DAY. OJIKA CASTLE/INNER SUITE

The surviving guardsmen and retainers silently draw aside, genuflecting as NORISHIGE hurries through the winding corridors. A small dog, one of his father's beloved Shiba Inu, whimpers as he approaches, drawing back into the shadows, ears trembling at the distant crack of gunfire. NORISHIGE pauses, listening for a response to the fusillade, but inexplicably the enemy refuse to return fire.

Shaking his head, he thrusts aside a decorative screen, making his way towards the dais beyond.

The lord of the castle rests beside his favorite dog, his frail, jaundiced body swathed in a damask silk nightgown. Despite the ministrations of his concubines and the efforts of the most renowned healers and herbalists in the realm, the LORD IKKANSAI has settled into a seemingly terminal decline, his energy sapped by the prolonged siege as if his fate and that of the castle are irrevocably intertwined.

As NORISHIGE enters, the midget with the painted face who sits reading from the Sutras at the head of the dais falls silent. The LORD IKKANSAI raises his head from the black lacquer pillow trying to focus on his heir apparent.

LORD IKKANSAI

Why have I not heard the battle drums ?

NORISHIGE

Something is wrong, father. Last night they pressed until the castle had all but fallen, but today they refuse to engage with us or even return our fire...

LORD IKKANSAI

There is no reason for them to pull back. Not unless there has been some political change in Kyoto.

NORISHIGE

If there had, our spies would have told us.

The lord of the castle nods slowly, eyes clouding in thought.

LORD IKKANSAI

It really is most... perplexing...

NORISHIGE

There was a fire in their camp last night. Perhaps some misadventure has befallen them. Sergeant Jimbei thinks we should launch an immediate counter-attack. It may be the last chance we have.

LORD IKKANSAI

It's too dangerous. There's no way of telling what the enemy have in mind. Tell Sergeant Jimbei to wait until they make the first move. It's best that way. Best to...

His voice trails off as even this effort is too much for him.

NORISHIGE

Father?

LORD IKKANSAI

Just wait here a while and see what happens. All will come clear...

The lord of the castle lies back on the dais, composing his features, one hand reaching to idly pet the aging Shiba Inu that crouches beside him, feeding obliviously from an antique silver bowl.

LORD IKKANSAI (CONT'D)

In time...

CUT TO:

INT. DAY. OJIKA CASTLE/KEEP

AOKI SHUZEN sits up, drawing aside the screen, a little surprised to find himself still alive. A strange, expectant silence hangs over the fortress. The guard has been relaxed and the other hostages mill in the open doorway, trying in vain to make head or tail of the events unfolding outside.

AOKI

What's happening? Has the castle fallen?

AOKI catches the attention of the SECOND PRINCESS, who bows gently, stepping aside as the wounded samurai passes.

SECOND PRINCESS

They say the siege is over.  
The Yakushiji clan have halted their attack.

AOKI

Surely not...

He sees his young charge standing beside the LADY IDA and the FIRST PRINCESS on the balcony beyond and starts towards them.

AOKI (CONT'D)

There must be some mistake...

CUT TO:

EXT. DAY. OJIKA CASTLE/KEEP

TERUKATSU watches sullenly as their besiegers furl their banners and begin to withdraw from the trenches.

LADY IDA

They say that General Masataka has been taken ill. Some believe he is already dead.

AOKI

Then we are to be spared after all.  
You hear that, my Lord? It is a miracle...

TERUKATSU nods, barely acknowledging his retainer. Instead his eyes go to the FIRST PRINCESS, gazing at her with a furtive adoration.

TERUKATSU (V.O.)

In truth, all I could think of was my own failure. If the siege were raised then I would all too soon be parted from the object of my desire.

(MORE)

TERUKATSU (V.O.) (CONT'D)  
 Instead I prayed silently that the  
 enemy might renew their attack.

A smile creeps across the FIRST PRINCESS' face. It is the  
 happy smile of an innocent young girl realizing her freedom  
 is at hand, yet to her enraptured admirer it provokes  
 crueller, darker thoughts.

AOKI  
 My lord?

CUT TO:

EXT. DAY. OJIKA CASTLE/BATTLEMENT.

The surviving defenders watch in growing astonishment as the  
 enemy strike camp and abandon their hard won positions.

SGT. JIMBEI  
 It's over, sir. They're retreating!  
 Let us sally after them and show  
 them a thing or two...

NORISHIGE  
 A samurai does not profit from  
 another's misfortune. If Lord  
 Masataka has really fallen ill then  
 we must let him go in good grace.

NORISHIGE lowers his telescope, unable to believe his good  
 fortune.

NORISHIGE (CONT'D)  
 Some providence has spared us,  
 sergeant. For what purpose I cannot  
 say...

CUT TO:

EXT. DAY. OJIKA CASTLE/KEEP

TERUKATSU is still sitting silently on the wooden balustrade,  
 momentarily forgotten amidst the rejoicing.

TERUKATSU (V.O.)  
 I longed to speak out when I  
 considered how brilliantly I had  
 conducted myself and how my father  
 would praise me if he knew what I  
 had accomplished at such a tender  
 age, yet I was terrified that the  
 shameful motivation underlying my  
 act might be exposed...

He returns his attention to the two princesses who are  
 helping to distribute celebratory sake to the men.

Only a few hours ago the occupants of the castle were resigned to certain death, but now banquets are being spread in the turrets.

TERUKATSU (V.O.)

I knew I would never see her again,  
or realize my dreams unless they  
was another siege...

Slipping a blood stained paper parcel from his breast, the young warlord unwraps his trophy, gazing furtively down at the stolen nose.

TERUKATSU (V.O.)

But who would believe such a thing  
if I tried to take credit without  
witnesses or evidence.

CUT TO:

EXT. NIGHT. LADY KIKYO'S PAVILLION

Firelight flickers across the painted face of a young noblewoman, dancing like pale sparks in the black orbits of her liquid eyes. The LADY KIKYO is thirteen years old and already an orphan, her delicate features perfect as a porcelain doll, poised on the verge of womanhood.

She trembles, her loyal nurse OHARU starting towards her as if to comfort her. Determined not to show the slightest sign of weakness the LADY KIKYO brushes the nurse aside, drawing her kimono more tightly around herself as she steps out into the autumn dark. A funeral drum stirs like a slow heartbeat in the recesses of the pavillion as the remaining members of her entourage gather behind her, silently following their young mistress out into the courtyard to face whatever indeterminate fate awaits them. At their forefront are the LADY KIKYO's two most ardent retainers, OHARU's courageous son MATOBA DAISUKE and his handsome older brother ZUSHO. The two brothers have been raised since birth to serve the young mistress and protect her with their lives if necessary.

A palanquin bearing GENERAL MASATAKA's mutilated body has been placed at the base of the steps surrounded by a phalanx of grim faced warriors in Yakushiji colours, their brands upraised. KOMBU SUKEZAEMON hovers at the edge of the flickering puddle of light, gaunt features waxen as a death's-head.

LADY KIKYO

Who is responsible... for this...

She struggles to find the right words, mesmerized by the sight of the gaping hole in the centre of her father's ravaged face.

LADY KIKYO (CONT'D)  
 ...intolerable humiliation?

SUKEZAEMON  
 Your father was struck down in his barracks by an unknown assassin, my lady...

The old monk seems to shrivel as he bows.

LADY KIKYO  
 What we do not know we will find out, Sukezaemon. Your life depends on it.

The young mistress glides down the steps towards him, moving slowly as if walking on knives.

SUKEZAEMON  
 Whoever penetrated your father's bed chamber may not have been an agent of the castle after all but a thief or a hired killer sent by someone who held a grudge against him. If I may speak freely, my lady, I suspect a conspiracy...

He averts his eyes in order to avoid looking directly at the noblewoman's naked face. Instead he abases himself further, grovelling in the dirt.

LADY KIKYO  
 You blind even yourself with your incessant plotting, old man. My father's death was the result of one thing and one thing alone. Dereliction of duty.

SUKEZAEMON  
 No samurai would have perpetrated such a senseless prank, my lady! If a warrior from the castle had stolen your father's nose then surely the Lord Ikkansai would have declared his trophy, if only to deepen our humiliation.

The young mistress pauses before him, raising her sandaled foot so that he might kiss the sole of her shoe.

LADY KIKYO  
 Your duty, Sukezaemon. And the duty of the Ikko sect. To my family...

SUKEZAEMON  
 I...



She kicks the old man hard on the side of his head, returning her attention to the palanquin and her father's desecrated body.

LADY KIKYO

What will become of us now?

OHARU

That is for the Lord Ikkansai to decide, my lady. The master of Ojika castle and his heir apparent, Oribenosho Norishige.

LADY KIKYO

Norishige...

She whispers the name under her breath, trying it on to see if it fits the faceless outline she has already begun to draw in her mind's eye of her father's assassin. She senses the presence of OHARU's obedient sons behind her without having to turn - MATOBA DAISUKE to her left and brave ZUSHO on her right.

ZUSHO

Rest assured, my princess. We will see that justice is done.

LADY KIKYO

Find him. And when you do, mutilate him in the same manner so that your lord and master's dignity might be restored.

ZUSHO

My lady's will is sweet!

The brothers grovel obsequiously before the palanquin as the LADY KIKYO reaches out to caress her father's lifeless face, finding it cold and hard to the touch.

LADY KIKYO

Avenge his memory by doing to the living face of the Tsukuma leader what has been done to my father's death face...

She allows ZUSHO to kiss the hem of her kimono, feeling the rage rise within her as she traces the hole in her father's impassive countenance with her fingertips, the surge of indignation giving her the resolve to face the consequences of what she has set in motion.

LADY KIKYO (CONT'D)

If you accomplish this for me, it will be an act of the greatest devotion.

CUT TO:

INT. DAY. OJIKA CASTLE/TEMPLE

TERUKATSU bows.

He is sixteen years old and although still not particularly tall has a physique unsurpassed by the other boys of his age. He kneels on a raised dais in the centre of the ancient temple as the monks drone a litany of prayer. The air about him is thick with incense and candle smoke. Even with his eyes closed TERUKATSU can feel the attention of the others gathered in the room focussed on his praying figure as if he had been singled out for ritual sacrifice.

TERUKATSU (V.O.)

I came of age on the eleventh day of the First Month - in what you would call the spring of 1552. I was sixteen years old and still serving in the castle on Mount Ojika as Norishige's page...

A shadow crosses TERUKATSU's face as he casts a fleeting upward glance at the fearsome figure standing over him.

The squat, black garbed newcomer's features are as emotionless as those of a graven idol. A straggly, greying moustache and goatee adorn his cheeks and, while he is certainly not an ugly man, the deep wrinkles that run from the side of his nose to the corners of his mouth give him an irritable look as if he has just chewed something bitter.

The monks abruptly cease their litany and TERUKATSU nervously averts his eyes, deferentially lowering his head as if to offer his bare neck to an executioner's gaze. Instead of drawing his sword, however, the older man mutters a Buddhist sutra as he places an odd looking long-corded hat on the boy's freshly shaven head.

TERUKATSU (V.O.)

My father, Terukuni, Lord of Musashi, came all the way from his domain to place the symbolic cap on my head and bestow upon me the honorary title of 'Vice-Governor of Kawachi'...

TERUKATSU opens his eyes, a boy no longer. He catches his breath, a smile teasing the corners of his lips, feeling a flood of relief that the ceremony is over and he is finally a man in full.

TERUKATSU (V.O.)

It was strange to come face to face with a figure more familiar to me from song and story than any actual memory. I had, for instance, imagined he would be taller...

The black garbed warlord turns away and as TERUKATSU rises to follow him it is immediately apparent that he and his father are exactly the same height. Seeing the two of them, father and son, moving together for a moment, in slow ceremonial steps, the one behind the other as the monks resume their chanting is like catching a fleeting glimpse of two halves of the same divided soul.

The LORD IKKANSAI watches silently from his bier, one hand petting his listless mascot. Then he turns away.

LORD IKKANSAI

He will be a man to fear. What will  
become of the house of Tsukuma when  
I am gone?

The painted midget who attends him shakes his head.

ONI

Warlords like yourself, my liege,  
are best suited to times of war.  
It demands a more subtle blend of  
qualities to rule in times of  
peace. And peace reigns in the  
land...

LORD IKKANSAI

But for how long?

The lord of the castle focusses his fading gaze upon his son who is seated towards the back of the chamber, surrounded by his favourite concubines. NORISHIGE is eighteen years old, but has yet to cast off the dreamy, addled look of his adolescence. A handscroll bearing an illuminated transcript of the 'Tale of Gennji' lies half open on his lap. Paying scant attention to the timeless ceremony unfolding before him NORISHIGE appears instead to be deep in whispered conversation with the monk beside him, an old man wearing the regalia of the mystical Ikko sect.

LORD IKKANSAI (CONT'D)

My do-nothing son is more  
interested in poetry than in  
pacifying a kingdom.

ONI

They say marriage has a way of  
tempering a man, my Lord. Your 'do-  
nothing' son knows there can be no  
peace in this land so long as the  
Yakushiji and the Tsukuma clans  
continue their heedless feuding.  
It is in the interest of the  
Muromachi shogunate to approve the  
union of your two great houses...

LORD IKKANSAI watches as KOMBU SUKEZAEMON genuflects, vouchsafing a locket to his eager son.

The tiny painted cameo depicting NORISHIGE's future spouse is a western style affectation recently adopted by some of the more modish members of the Kyoto court.

ONI (CONT'D)

Besides they say the bride to be is a great beauty and your son, as you know, my Lord, is a born amorist.

LORD IKKANSAI

I knew her mother. The daughter of the Middle Counselor of the Chrysanthemum Pavilion...

LORD IKKANSAI nods his slow assent, lightly petting the aging hound.

LORD IKKANSAI (CONT'D)

She was an exceptional woman...

ONI

And her daughter is in no way inferior.

NORISHIGE expectantly slips the clasp on the locket to gaze for the first time at the face of his betrothed.

ONI (CONT'D)

If your son doesn't learn how to comport himself on the battlefield then I don't doubt the young lady will make a man of him in bed...

CUT TO:

EXT. DAY. BATTLEFIELD.

A smudgy, infernal landscape swims into focus, drifting in and out of resolution as if viewed through the lens of an old fashioned telescope. From not far off comes the thud of cannon fire and the familiar litany of the dying and the maimed.

TERUKATSU (V.O.)

Shortly after his wedding night in the winter of 1553, the young heir to the Tsukuma dynasty, Oribenoshō Norishige, received reports of an insurrection by his vassal Yokowa Buzen, master of Tsukigata Castle, and was forced to lead a cavalry of seven thousand to retake the fortress...

There is a thunder of approaching hooves and a flock of crows rise shrieking from the branches of a leafless copse of trees.

The lens trembles, panning with the carrion birds as they wheel into a sulphurous firmament already black with whirling ash.

TERUKATSU (V.O.)

As his attendant, I rode with him...

NORISHIGE draws up his horse amidst the stunted trees, TERUKATSU and a valiant young guardsman named DOAMI bringing up the rear. DOAMI dismounts, taking hold of the bridle of the young lordship's horse as NORISHIGE raises his telescope, seeking to observe the course of the battle from afar. The details of the blighted landscape are softened by the drifting smoke, making it difficult to tell the standards of one army from the other.

NORISHIGE fumbles to adjust the focus, utterly oblivious to the sniper's rifle that even now frames him in its antiquated crosshairs. The unseen sniper leads his lordship for a moment with his gun barrel, keeping him locked in his sights until he can het a clear line of fire on NORISHIGE's nose.

TERUKATSU (V.O.)

On the tenth day of the Third Month the young master was directing the attack from the cover of a grove about a mile from the castle gate when he came under fire from an unknown assassin...

The telescope flies from NORISHIGE's hands. With a gasp he claps his hands to his nose, the bullet missing him by a hair. The sound of the gunshot follows an instant later along with a second round which very nearly sweeps the nose from his face. The horse rears as NORISHIGE reels backwards almost falling from his saddle, a blister forming across the ridge of his nose as if he has been burned by a sparkler, a trace of blood already seeping through the broken skin.

NORISHIGE

My nose...

DOAMI

The prince! The prince is ambushed!

DOAMI tries to shield his master, leading NORISHIGE's neighing mount deeper into the thicket while TERUKATSU stands his ground, turning his gaze in the direction from whence the bullets were fired.

The field beyond has become the scene of a brutal melee as the battle lines grow increasingly confused amidst the smoke. Despite the deepening chaos TERUKATSU's eyes are drawn at once to a helmeted figure standing not two hundred yards away, the sun at his back. The masked samurai wears a shiny, black breastplate adorned with a golden dragon and cradles an unusually long barreled musket in his mailed hands.

He starts to bring up the musket as if to fire another round, but then TERUKATSU recklessly spurs his horse towards him, a braying war cry erupting from his lips. Losing his nerve the faceless warrior flings his weapon aside and tries to make a run for it.

TERUKATSU gives chase, following the fleeing man through the very thick of the melee, riding down all who come between him and his prey. Yard by yard he narrows the gap, driving his quarry towards the outer edge of the moat.

TERUKATSU

Stop!

Backed off as far as he can go the masked assassin rounds on his pursuer, sword in hand, but TERUKATSU has the advantage. Circling the man he effortlessly disarms him. Then, knocking off the warrior's helmet with the tip of his spear, he reveals the face of the nurse OHARU's eldest son, ZUSHO.

TERUKATSU (CONT'D)

Identify yourself! I am Terukatsu, Vice-Governor of Kawachi, eldest son of Kiryu Terukuni, Lord of Musashi.

ZUSHO

There is no point in giving my name.

The tip of TERUKATSU's spear flashes at the dragon on ZUSHO's breastplate, driving him back another step.

TERUKATSU

Coward, why did you use a musket?

ZUSHO

I did not.

TERUKATSU

Shut up. I saw you!

He stabs Zusho in the leg, his spear penetrating the braided cord on the skirt of his armor. ZUSHO goes down with a gasp, blood welling between his fingers as he clutches at the wound.

TERUKATSU circles him, levelling his spear at the young samurai's face.

ZUSHO

You've mistaken me for someone else.

TERUKATSU

Alright.

Getting slowly down from his horse TERUKATSU draws his sword.

TERUKATSU (CONT'D)

Deny it if you like.

ZUSHO spits at him and TERUKATSU stabs him in the upper right arm, kicking him into the frozen sludge.

TERUKATSU (CONT'D)

Your name!

He braces himself, the tip of his sword poised over the youth's squirming face.

ZUSHO

No. Cut off my head.

TERUKATSU

I'm going to take you alive.

Hearing this ZUSHO begins to writhe and thrash all the more. TERUKATSU looks around for help, but all he can see is a vast cloud of dust and beyond it, shadowy masses forming, then breaking, like waves on a boiling sea.

Slipping a dagger from his sleeve and clutching at his captor's sash with his wounded right hand ZUSHO begins to strike indiscriminately at TERUKATSU's armoured leg with his left. TERUKATSU snarls. Driving the blade from the youth's fingers he pins ZUSHO's wrist to the ground with his foot.

TERUKATSU (CONT'D)

I'll give you your wish.  
Just tell me your name.

He presses the edge of his blade to ZUSHO's heaving throat.

ZUSHO

Be done with it.

ZUSHO presses his lips tightly together and closes his eyes. TERUKATSU shrugs. Then, raising his sword, he cuts off ZUSHO's head. It takes two blows, the last breath squealing from the young samurai's trachea like the rush of air from the mouth of a balloon. TERUKATSU takes a step back, gazing at his handiwork as if mesmerized by the sheer force of ZUSHO's heart.

TERUKATSU (V.O.)

Killing the boy was the greatest  
mistake of my life. From that  
moment on my heart changed...

Something glitters in the crimson mud. Reaching out TERUKATSU snags a fallen locket with the tip of his blade. Raising the sword so that the locket slides down its shaft into his hand, he looks for the first time upon the painted likeness of his nemesis - the implacable Lady Kikyo.

TERUKATSU (V.O.)

I had not thought of the daughter of Ida of Suruga for many years. Her remembered smile had been set off by a tinge of cruelty, nothing more, but this lady's elegant cheeks harboured an altogether deeper strain of mockery...

CUT TO:

EXT. LATE AFTERNOON. BATTLEFIELD/AFTERMATH.

The melee has thinned, the Tsukuma warriors having gained the advantage. TERUKATSU rides through the drifting smoke, outline shimmering in the fading light as he searches for his wounded master, the blade of his sword glinting redly in his hand.

TERUKATSU (V.O.)

I left his head on the battlefield, concealing the locket and with it all knowledge of the Lady Kikyo's treachery. From that moment I resolved to become her ally and help her realize her desire...

The crows whirl above him and for a moment he thinks it is the carrion birds that call his name.

NORISHIGE

Terukatsu!

TERUKATSU

My Lord...

The young heir to the Tsukuma dynasty sits on a shattered tree stump, attended by the loyal DOAMI, who is busy applying a dressing to the bridge of his master's nose. The bandage gives NORISHIGE a vaguely clown like appearance.

NORISHIGE

Where have you been, old friend.  
I feared you lost.

TERUKATSU

Victory is ours, my Lord.  
A decisive victory. Yokowa Buzen's troops have been set to rout.

DOAMI

And the sniper? Did you find him?

For a moment TERUKATSU considers killing both of them and slicing the young master's nose from his face there and then. Thinking his options through he slowly shakes his head.



NORISHIGE

Pity.

NORISHIGE glance down at the ruined telescope cradled in his lap.

NORISHIGE (CONT'D)

Still, there's nothing broken that can't be fixed. That's what my father says. And for once, I suppose, we'll have good news for him...

TERUKATSU reluctantly sheaths his sword. Hearing the sound of trumpet shells signalling the castle's surrender he realises he has missed his chance, for now at least. He turns away, unable to look the young prince in the eye. The ravaged, corpse strewn terrain looks pale and ghostly in the slanting light as if all of them, the living and the dead alike, have already been consigned to the ashes of memory.

NORISHIGE (CONT'D)

A decisive victory, did you say?

TERUKATSU nods, clenching his mailed fist about the locket, hiding it from the prince's view.

TERUKATSU (V.O.)

Sadly his lordship never did get to hear of his son's victory at Tsukigata castle...

CUT TO:

INT. DUSK. OJIKA CASTLE/INNER SANCTUM

LORD IKKANSAI awakens with a start, staring wide eyed into the darkness.

LORD IKKANSAI

Norishige...

The greying dog at his side snarls as a figure moves in the half light and the old lord props himself up on one elbow, narrowing his eyes. Then he recognizes the nurse, OHARU.

LORD IKKANSAI (CONT'D)

Where is my son?

OHARU

I'm sure he is well, my lord.  
Even now we expect his messenger.

He tries to rise but the nurse gently restrains him, plumping the cushions so that he might rest more easily.

LORD IKKANSAI

I dreamed he was in danger...

Placing one of the larger cushions over the old lord's face  
OHARU presses down, stifling his cries.

TERUKATSU (V.O.)

It is recorded that in the Third  
Month of 1554 the Lord Ikkansai  
died in his sickbed. He was fifty  
three years old. The body of his  
mascot, his beloved Shiba Inu, was  
found beside him...

The aged lapdog snarls, firelight dancing in its eyes as it  
watches its master's death struggle. OHARU begins to sing  
under her breath, crooning a wordless lullaby, pressing  
harder as she rides out the old man's weakening spasms.

OHARU

Sshhh...

Twisting a silk scarf between her pale, supple hands, the  
smiling nurse turns her attention towards the dog.

TERUKATSU (V.O.)

The account of the cause and  
progress of his final illness given  
in the Tsukuma War Chronicles is  
more detailed than usual, and  
somehow does not ring true. But  
rather than probe any deeper into  
the circumstances of my master's  
death, let us proceed to the next  
incident...

CUT TO:

EXT. DUSK. OJIKA CASTLE/GARDENS - SPRING 1554

The cherry trees are in full bloom. The pale blossoms stir in  
the evening breeze, eddying about the shrine containing Lord  
Ikkansai's ashes. From not far off come voices, laughter and  
the sound of a drum.

TERUKATSU (V.O.)

After the stipulated period of  
mourning Tsukuma Oribenoshō  
Norishige held a blossom-viewing  
party at Ojika castle...

A curtained pavillion and a carpet has been placed in the  
shade of the trees. NORISHIGE sits drinking sake, amusing  
himself with poetry and music, accompanied by the LADY KIKYO  
and her attendants. The light is just fading from the day and  
the young lord watches contentedly as the servants begin to  
hang the first lanterns from the boughs of the trees.

TERUKATSU (V.O.)  
 Unfortunately for Norishige a  
 comical episode was soon to  
 follow...

The LADY KIKYO laughs, gently pulling on her husband's sleeve  
 to draw NORISHIGE's attention to the silver arc of the new  
 moon that has just appeared above the treetops.

LADY KIKYO  
 Look, isn't she beautiful?

NORISHIGE  
 So beautiful. So new. So perfect...

The LADY KIKYO blushes, averting her eyes.

LADY KIKYO  
 This night she shines only for you,  
 my liege.

Moved and not a little drunk NORISHIGE gets to his feet, a  
 blind musician accompanying him with a hand drum as he sings  
 and dances a kusemai.

NORISHIGE  
 The blossoms brocade sash  
 Untied, but futilely  
 The willow threads in disarray my  
 heart  
 Never can forget  
 That hair in sleepy disarray...

He turns, as if seeking his wife's approval and, as he turns,  
 an arrow whistles out of the dark, grazing his face. An inch  
 higher and the arrow would have scattered his nose with the  
 cherry blossoms, but it comes low, catching NORISHIGE in the  
 upper lip instead.

A moan of disbelief rises from the confused attendants.  
 Somehow NORISHIGE manages to stay on his feet and, reeling  
 about, the young lord sees a dark figure springing from the  
 branch of a cherry tree not forty feet away. Pressing one  
 hand to his bleeding mouth, he shouts - or tries to shout,  
 for help, but for some reason his pronunciation comes out a  
 little garbled.

NORISHIGE (CONT'D)  
 'ia! 'ia! 'e 'en a' 'ay!

The courtesans stare at him in horror, but the young lord who  
 was spouting poetry only moments before can now only utter  
 strange, inarticulate noises, quite without meaning, like the  
 babblings of an infant.

The arrow has split NORISHIGE's upper lips and gums. The pain  
 makes it difficult for him to move his lips properly, and his  
 breath escapes through the gaping wound as he tries to speak.

When he realises that he can no longer understand his own words, his bewilderment is complete.

NORISHIGE (CONT'D)  
'ia... aaahh... ggh... g

As men are rarely allowed to enter this part of the castle, it is the women in attendance who try to give chase, but NORISHIGE's attacker has already melted into the darkness. Watching happily as the soiree is plunged into chaos the LADY KIKYO raises her fan to hide a helpless smile.

CUT TO:

EXT. NIGHT. OJIKA CASTLE/INNER PALACE

TERUKATSU stands on a battlement overlooking the walled garden, watching as samurai bearing brands and lanterns search the compound. Something in his manner indicates that he already knows their search will be in vain.

DOAMI  
A mystery, my lord...

DOAMI pauses to catch his breath at the top of a narrow stairway leading to the battlement. A tinkle of child like laughter comes from below and glancing back he catches the pale flash of a receding kimono vanishing into the gloom as Lady Kikyo's handmaidens evacuate the area.

DOAMI (CONT'D)  
This place is a veritable Isle of Women, watched over day and night. Strictly off limits to men. To reach the inner palace the intruder would have had to cross any number of guard posts...

TERUKATSU  
Hard to believe that anyone could have gotten in, but impossible to accept that they could then have gotten out.

DOAMI narrows his eyes, hand falling to the hilt of his sword as he tries to follow TERUKATSU's gaze.

DOAMI  
You think the villain is still here then? Hiding someplace?

A lantern flares in the inner sanctum of the court, the silhouette of a young woman perfectly outlined for a moment against an ancient paper screen.

TERUKATSU  
Right under our noses, Doami...

CUT TO:

IN. NIGHT. OJIKA CASTLE/INNER SANCTUM

NORISHIGE moans, his dotting concubines changing the dressing on his mutilated face as ONI steps away from the dais, washing his hands in a bowl held by one of the attendants.

ONI  
Your husband is a lucky man.

LADY KIKYO  
Lucky?

The LADY KIKYO hovers beside him like a predatory moth at the edge of the ring of light, her shadow leaping out behind her as she watches NORISHIGE's trembling, pain wracked body writhing helplessly against the blood soaked cushions.

ONI  
Compared to a cripple or one who has lost an eye, he is scarcely handicapped at all.

NORISHIGE  
'Ai...

Checking his make-up in the proffered mirror the aging midget dries his hands.

ONI  
Such... physical defects, you may find my lady, only serve to enhance a man's dignity. In any case, I don't doubt in your good hands his recovery will be a swift one.

He watches in the mirror as the LADY KIKYO takes a step closer to her husband's dais.

LADY KIKYO  
I won't leave his side, dear Oni.  
Rest assured...

She cranes her neck to get a better look at the naked wound, trying not to smile.

LADY KIKYO (CONT'D)  
He'll have my full attention.

CUT TO:

INT. DAY. OJIKA CASTLE/STORE ROOM

DOAMI and the captain of the guard, SGT. JIMBEI, look on as TERUKATSU pours through a mass of ancient scrolls gathered by two of the elderly retainers from the hidden recesses of the inner palace.

TERUKATSU

I want to see every plan of the castle you can find. The older the better...

He picks out a dusty 14th Century handscroll.

SGT. JIMBEI

And you think this maniac is still hiding here? Even now ? Within these soundly constructed walls?

SGT. JIMBEI raps his fist against the wall as he speaks, as if to reassure himself of the stone's solidity.

TERUKATSU

There are tunnels between the walls, sergeant. Secret passageways known only to children of the inner court. I played in them myself as a boy...

DOAMI

What's this?

Crouching beside TERUKATSU he indicates what appears to be a vertical shaft with an outlet at the base of the wall.

SGT. JIMBEI

That's the... well, I think that's the shaft of... ah... the lady's toilet, sir...

TERUKATSU

It communicates directly with the inner suites...

SGT. JIMBEI

I believe it was added in the 14th Century by the lady of the castle, sir.

TERUKATSU

The lady of the castle?

SGT. JIMBEI

There is only one, sir. So it follows that only she would have access to that area...

TERUKATSU nods slowly, the beginnings of a plan taking shape in his mind.

TERUKATSU

Reinforce the guards on the gate and have the men walk the patrols in double shifts from now on. We're going to pin this place down so tight a bat couldn't fly through it without asking permission.

DOAMI

And then?

TERUKATSU

Then we wait, Doami.

He returns his attention to the scroll, trying to commit the intricate layout of the castle's inner-suites to memory.

TERUKATSU (CONT'D)

And see...

CUT TO:

INT. DAY. OJIKA CASTLE/INNER COURT

SGT. JIMBEI hurries through the tenebrous passageways, glancing uneasily about himself as if the timeworn walls have in a single day grown strange to him and not a little hostile.

The guards posted at the doorway stiffen at the sight of him and JIMBEI bows, making obeisance as the nurse OHARU appears on the threshold, cradling a basin and a blood soaked towel.

SGT. JIMBEI

I have to speak to the young master.

OHARU

I'm sorry but that's quite impossible. The master is not receiving callers.

A low moan comes from within the suite. SGT. JIMBEI cranes his neck but the nurse shuffles from foot to foot, effortlessly blocking his view.

SGT. JIMBEI

I have reason to believe his life is in danger.

OHARU

The orders came from Master Oni himself.

SGT. JIMBEI

Who is in charge here, woman? You,  
me or that damned midget?

OHARU

Until the master is fully  
recovered, sir, I believe the Lady  
Kikyo is in charge...

The moan comes again, a sheep-like mewl of pain followed by a  
low, gently chiding woman's voice.

OHARU (CONT'D)

If you like I can pass on a  
message.

SGT. JIMBEI

I'll wait...

He turns disgustedly away, wondering if he isn't getting too  
old for this job after all.

CUT TO:

INT. DAY. OJIKA CASTLE/INNER SANCTUM

The young lord of the castle cowers on the dais, covering his  
trembling face with his hands.

TERUKATSU (V.O.)

Norishige's 'recovery' was destined  
to be slow...

The noble LADY KIKYO's chalky face floats like a phantom in  
the shadowy alcove above his bed.

TERUKATSU (V.O.)

And unnecessarily painful.

CUT TO:

EXT. DUSK. OJIKA CASTLE/GARDENS

Strolling around the wall of the inner palace TERUKATSU  
directs the placement of look-outs, as has become his nightly  
custom. Seeing the bobbing lanterns appear one by one along  
the ramparts makes him feel like the master of his own  
destiny, as if the inner court and the deserted, blossom  
strewn garden are his own fiefdom to command as he sees fit.

TERUKATSU (V.O.)

The guards redoubled their watch,  
and searches and investigations  
began with the palace orderlies and  
stewards, working their way slowly  
up to the ladies-in-waiting.

(MORE)



TERUKATSU (V.O.) (CONT'D)

A state of terror prevailed within the castle, all of which played perfectly into my plans...

DOAMI follows at a distance. At first he means to hail TERUKATSU and announce his presence, but something in the young warlord's manner causes him to hold his tongue. Instead DOAMI watches silently from beneath the trees as TERUKATSU walks the metes and bounds of his private kingdom, lost in his rhinodectophilic fantasies.

TERUKATSU (V.O.)

The guard posts were at a remove from the inner sanctum as the Lady Kikyo had requested...

He reaches the far end of the compound, looking back at the inner palace as if expecting a sign. DOAMI turns, following his eyeline to see the moon already rising above the tiled roofs of the inner court.

TERUKATSU (V.O.)

But it was enough for one who adored her at a distance to simply wait and watch, knowing that sooner or later she would make the first move...

CUT TO:

INT./EXT. NIGHT. OJIKA CASTLE/INNER SANCTUM/BALCONY

Drawing aside a paper screen the LADY KIKYO gazes out into the dark, the moon's silvery luminescence falling as a blessing on her upturned face.

NORISHIGE

So 'eu'iful...

She turns, a half smile teasing her painted lips and NORISHIGE looks away, drawing back into the shadows to hide his disfigurement.

LADY KIKYO

My lord?

NORISHIGE

'On 'ook a' 'e...

She reaches out, gently wiping the hot tears from his trembling cheek.

LADY KIKYO

It's alright. Don't be afraid.

Bucking up a little he straightens his chin, allowing her to look him full in the face.

Now that his wound has begun to heal it is apparent that NORISHIGE has acquired a hare lip. Two or three of his teeth have been knocked out and there is a triangular gap in the young lord's upper palate that serves to render his every utterance utterly incomprehensible.

NORISHIGE

I 'ove 'ou...

LADY KIKYO

I know.

She draws him closer as if to kiss the wound but NORISHIGE cringes away.

NORISHIGE

I' 'orry...

LADY KIKYO

Sshh...

She places her finger to his lips, the moon's full, voluptuous orb framed perfectly by the open screen behind her.

LADY KIKYO (CONT'D)

Come and look at the moon, my lord.  
She's so full...

Gathering up her short necked biwa, the LADY KIKYO leads NORISHIGE out into the night. Giving up all attempts at resistance he follows meek as a lamb to the slaughter.

LADY KIKYO (CONT'D)

So bright...

NORISHIGE

I...

The LADY KIKYO settles herself in the brightest patch of moonlight at the far end of the balcony. Placing a bottle of sake and two cups beside her, she motions for NORISHIGE to seat himself on the cushion before her.

LADY KIKYO

Don't try to talk. The time for  
talking is done.

She fills his cup, watching as the young lord drinks deep.

LADY KIKYO (CONT'D)

Just listen. Listen to the night...

NORISHIGE does as he's told, allowing himself to relax for the first time since the attack. He takes a deep breath, closing his eyes as the LADY KIKYO slips a plectrum from the folds of her kimono.

LADY KIKYO (CONT'D)

Hear my music...

Cradling her instrument in her arms she begins to serenade the moon. As soon as the LADY KIKYO has touched the biwa's strings an arrow comes flying from a dense grove in the garden, fired from the same direction and the same angle to NORISHIGE's face as before.

NORISHIGE

'O!

He averts his face, leaning back reflexively. Even so, he does not come off unscathed, for the arrow is quicker than his dodge. As NORISHIGE pulls his torso back and twists his neck to the left, the shaft grazes the side of his face and sweeps away his right ear.

NORISHIGE (CONT'D)

'O! 'O! 'O!

The LADY KIKYO plays blithely on as he claps his hand to the side of his head. Doing his best to stem the flow of blood NORISHIGE turns to see his severed ear pinned to the railing behind him by the quivering arrow. The look on his face is so comical that it is all the LADY KIKYO can do not to laugh out loud.

CUT TO:

EXT. NIGHT. OJIKA CASTLE/GARDEN

Hearing the young lord's cry DOAMI turns at once to see TERUKATSU starting towards him across the petal strewn lawn. DOAMI steps out of the shadows as if to challenge him and TERUKATSU stiffens, his hand falling to the hilt of his blade.

TERUKATSU

Behind you.

DOAMI spins as a black garbed figure drops from a tree, swinging it's crossbow like a club. He sees a golden dragon emblazoned on his attackers breastplate and then goes down, catching a glancing blow to the side of the head.

TERUKATSU charges past DOAMI, but his faceless quarry has already melted into the gloom.

DOAMI

Where? By the Gods...

TERUKATSU pauses, noticing a brighter spot at the base of the wall. A pentagonal stone that has been picked clean of moss.

TERUKATSU

Not the Gods, Doami...

Motioning for DOAMI to be silent TERUKATSU drops to his knees, running his fingertips over a row of cyphers cut into the edge of the stone, a series of tiny pictoglyphs symbolising the phases of the moon.

TERUKATSU (CONT'D)

But the Devil's work!

Finding a space just right for inserting his fingers TERUKATSU juggles the stone. It slips right out as he pulls. DOAMI takes a step closer, fascinated, then stops in his tracks, wrinkling his nose at the stench.

DOAMI

By all that is unholy, then...

The stone is hewn to less than half the thickness of its neighbours. A handle seven or eight inches long has been cut into its inner surface so that the stone can be pulled back into place from within the wall.

TERUKATSU

You must swear never to tell anyone what you have seen. The honour of your house, the house of Tsukuma, depends on it...

DOAMI

I swear.

With the stone out of the way, the hole in the base of the wall is just large enough to admit a man's head and shoulders.

TERUKATSU

Now, stay here. Wait for me and keep your eyes wide open!

Removing his scabbard, TERUKATSU squeezes through the gap.

CUT TO:

INT. NIGHT. OJIKA CASTLE/SHAFT OF THE LADY'S TOILET.

TERUKATSU purses his lips, wriggling through the narrow tunnel into the foul smelling void beyond. He gropes for a pebble, dropping it into the void. After a while he hears a faint splash from far below.

TERUKATSU (V.O.)

Now I knew exactly where I was...

His eyes have adjusted sufficiently to make out the underside of the good lady's toilet seat hanging like a dim, grey halo in the darkness above.

TERUKATSU (V.O.)  
 Directly beneath the Lady Kikyo's  
 private chambers!

Now that he has room to move around, he bends to retrieve his sword and just then a figure explodes out of the dark. TERUKATSU lashes out with one foot and hears the chink of steel against stone.

MATOKA DAISUKE, the dead Zusho's younger brother curses, trying to regain his balance. Bringing up his blade TERUKATSU parries the youth's second blow, driving him still closer to the brink. For an instant their swords lock, each straining silently against the other in a brutal, but ultimately uneven, match of strength.

TERUKATSU (V.O.)  
 Later I learned that he was the  
 brother of the man I killed on the  
 battlefield. They were the  
 firstborn sons of Lady Kikyo's  
 nurse, Oharu, and as close to her  
 as her own brothers...

He effortlessly disarms his opponent, stabbing MATOKA in the groin before kicking him backwards into the lightless shaft.

TERUKATSU (V.O.)  
 At least they didn't seem to mind  
 the smell of her shit...

The youth's last, despairing wail is cut short as he splashes into the lightless pool below, his body armor dragging him down. TERUKATSU wrinkles his nose. Then he stiffens, hearing the patter of footsteps on the floor above.

CUT TO:

INT. NIGHT. OJIKA CASTLE/THE LADY KIKYO'S PRIVATE CHAMBERS.

Even though it is a toilet, the room is spacious enough to allow a lady in her bulky robes to move freely. It is floored completely with straw mats and gives the same impression of silent expanse that one might expect of a palace room. The LADY KIKYO glides nervously towards the throne, quite convinced she heard a voice from below.

Steeling herself, she reaches out to lift the toilet lid.

TERUKATSU (O.S.)  
 Your Ladyship?

CUT TO:

INT. NIGHT. OJIKA CASTLE/SHAFT OF THE LADY'S TOILET.

A ray of light falls on TERUKATSU's upturned face as he gazes for the first time on the LADY KIKYO's living features. A celadon incense burner smoulders beside the toilet seat and the LADY KIKYO's pale, moon-like face looks distant and ghostly as it peers down at him.

LADY KIKYO  
Who are you?

TERUKATSU  
I am Terukatsu, Vice-Governor of  
Kawachi, eldest son of Kiryu  
Terukuni, Lord of Musashi.

He speaks as gently and as courteously as possible, trying not to scare her any further.

TERUKATSU (CONT'D)  
May it please you, I have something  
to say. Might I be admitted to your  
presence?

The LADY KIKYO blinks, trying to make up her mind whether or not the young warlord is a demon after all. As if to prove his intentions TERUKATSU draws a keepsake from his breast.

TERUKATSU (CONT'D)  
It concerns this locket. An item of  
your property I believe ?

He thrusts the talisman into the beam of light where she can see it.

LADY KIKYO  
You may rise.

The shaft, which has been used for this purpose before, is provided with suitable footholds, enabling TERUKATSU to climb unsoiled towards the fragrant realms above.

CUT TO:

INT. NIGHT. OJIKA CASTLE/THE LADY KIKYO'S PRIVATE CHAMBERS.

TERUKATSU rises smartly from the toilet and prostrates himself before the LADY KIKYO, pressing his forehead to the matted floor.

LADY KIKYO  
You say you are Terukatsu?

TERUKATSU  
Yes, your Ladyship.

LADY KIKYO  
Lift your face.

TERUKATSU raises his eyes. The lady's face hovering before him in the candle light is almost as hazy as the phantom he has sketched in his mind. All he can make out is the pattern embroidered on her robes in gold thread and leaf, which always shows best in dark places like this. Noticing that she stands with one hand prudently on the hilt of her dagger, he lowers his head once more.

LADY KIKYO (CONT'D)  
You really are Terukatsu.

TERUKATSU  
May it please you, I have come as your ally.

LADY KIKYO  
Give me the locket.

TERUKATSU holds it out as if presenting an offering to a pagan goddess. Turning the keepsake in the feeble candlelight she examines it briefly before clasping it to her breast.

LADY KIKYO (CONT'D)  
Where did you get this?

TERUKATSU  
During the battle of Tsukigata castle I slew a warrior who I thought was trying to kill my lord. After taking his head, I searched him and found this keepsake.

LADY KIKYO  
And why...

Not knowing what to think she breaks off, staring at TERUKATSU for a moment. He might have been a formidable enemy, yet here he is, grovelling at her feet, and begging to be accepted as an ally. Rather than plotting against her he seems, if anything, overcome by her.

TERUKATSU  
I have always kept it with me as a sign that I, inadequate as I am, will carry out your servant's mission.

LADY KIKYO  
And why do you wish to be my ally?

She speaks sternly, but with a touch of tenderness.

TERUKATSU  
Your Ladyship, I have something else to give you...

Without answering her question TERUKATSU reaches into his breast once more, withdrawing a pouch embroidered with the character of a golden dragon.

TERUKATSU (CONT'D)

Inside this pouch is a memento of your father, Lord Masataka.

LADY KIKYO:

My father? What are you talking about?

TERUKATSU

I believe something precious was missing from Lord Masataka's body...

Slowly, reverently, he slips the severed nose from the pouch. There is a great rustle of silk as the LADY KIKYO sways gracefully like a peony. Then she droops, falling to her knees before him.

LADY KIKYO

Terukatsu...

TERUKATSU

Please accept it.

He watches her carefully, observing the look in her eyes as she closes her hands about the withered scrap of flesh.

LADY KIKYO

Where did you get this... this memento of Father?

TERUKATSU

When Lord Masataka laid siege to this castle, he pressed the attack to the third, and then to the second citadel. The castle was about to fall when the late master Ikkansai summoned a spy and commanded him to strike your father down during the night...

LADY KIKYO

Just as I thought.

She heaves a heavy sigh. Then suddenly agitated, she leans closer to him, close enough for him to feel her warm breath against his skin.

LADY KIKYO (CONT'D)

And you alone heard him?



## TERUKATSU

I was a boy of twelve at the time. As I passed through a corridor near the late master's study, I heard him whispering to one of his lackeys, 'Even if you don't kill him, that fop will be sure to pull back his forces and run if he loses his nose.' And then he laughed quietly, 'ha, ha'...

TERUKATSU watches, entranced as what looks like drops of dew gather on the LADY KIKYO's long eyelashes.

## TERUKATSU (CONT'D)

I was indignant when I overheard my master's secret plan. The castle might have fallen at any moment, and perhaps he had no choice, but it was not the sort of conduct I expected from a Samurai.

He catches his breath as the tears roll unbidden down the LADY KIKYO's perfect cheeks. It takes a moment for him to regain the necessary eloquence to complete his story.

## TERUKATSU (CONT'D)

The Lord Ikkansai must have been ashamed of his actions, for as soon as the plan had been carried out and the spy returned to the castle, the master had him put to death and his body was discarded in the hills behind the keep. I found him and searched his clothes for some proof of his deed. This relic is what I found. Whatever my master had in mind, I had to act as a samurai, with honour ! So I took your father's nose back to my quarters and preserved it. I have guarded it ever since in the hope that there might some day be a chance to return it to the Yakushiji family.

## LADY KIKYO

You are too kind, Terukatsu...

With unfeigned gratitude the LADY KIKYO puts her hands on the floor of the toilet room and bows to the youth.

## LADY KIKYO (CONT'D)

I have heard of your courage, but I never thought a young man could be so... so considerate. You did well to understand your position. You can only imagine how I feel...

TERUKATSU

Yes, Your Ladyship. Most humbly, I can imagine.

LADY KIKYO

Can you? Really? Born into a samurai house I knew that I might lose members of my family at any time. If Father had died on the battlefield I could have accepted his loss, but how could I ever forget the way he was killed and the unspeakable humiliation he suffered?

She looks up at him, her long black hair falling across her noble face.

LADY KIKYO (CONT'D)

After his death, Father should have been reborn in the Western Pure Land. Instead his spirit lingers in this world because he has left something behind. Every night in my dreams he appears beside my pillow, pressing a hand to the middle of his face. I hear him crying over and over, 'I want my nose... give me back my nose.'

In the guttering candlelight it is all too easy to imagine a shadowy presence looming over them, but the thought of her father's revenant spirit watching helplessly from the gloom only excites TERUKATSU all the more. Reaching out he gently tidies back her trailing hair. The noble lady makes no effort to resist him.

LADY KIKYO (CONT'D)

I cannot rest until the circle has been closed and his death face erased from my memory.

TERUKATSU

I swear to you, my lady, your father's dignity will be avenged...

Her hand brushes the hilt of his sword and TERUKATSU trembles, drawing her closer, her pale face filling his world, lips slightly parted as if to devour him.

TERUKATSU (CONT'D)

The day of justice is at hand...

CUT TO:

INT. DUSK. OJIKA CASTLE/INNER SANCTUM

A phalanx of guards escort TERUKATSU through the corridors of the inner court. None of them are smiling.

TERUKATSU (V.O.)

The next day I found myself  
summoned to the castle's inner  
sanctum...

NORISHIGE glances up as TERUKATSU prostrates himself before the dais, a fresh bandage covering his new wounds, his face unreadable. His advisor, ONI, is whispering something in his surviving ear and to TERUKATSU's horror he notices the young lord has a telltale locket clasped in his hand.

TERUKATSU (V.O.)

At first I thought the game was  
up...

NORISHIGE mutters something to his advisor, ONI.

ONI

His lordship wishes to know how  
long you have served in this house,  
Terukatsu.

TERUKATSU

Fifteen years, my liege.

ONI

Since you first came here as a  
hostage you have eaten rice from  
the same bowl as my master and  
distinguished yourself in battle  
against our common enemies...

TERUKATSU bows still lower, expecting his head to be cut off at any moment.

TERUKATSU

Fifteen wonderful years...

ONI

There would seem to be no further  
question of your father's loyalty  
to the Tsukuma dynasty...

TERUKATSU

Loyalty is my honour, Lord Oni.  
I have served your master as I  
would have obeyed my father.

ONI

You have been a dutiful son and  
your father has accordingly  
requested your return.

(MORE)

ONI (CONT'D)

He has grown old and has been searching for a bride for you so that he might retire as head of the clan. Now, it seems, a suitable match has been made...

TERUKATSU

My lord?

TERUKATSU looks to NORISHIGE for confirmation of the midget's words.

NORISHIGE

Oetsu...

ONI

The Lady Oetsu of Chirufu. I think you will find she is a woman of most admirable... character...

Crestfallen TERUKATSU focusses on the trinket, realizing that the face depicted on the proffered locket is not that of his true love, but that of his bride to be. The painted likeness of a happy, vivacious girl, four years his junior.

ONI (CONT'D)

I'll be frank with you, Terukatsu. Since the Tsukigata insurrection alarming gossip has begun to spread. Rumours of conspiracies from within and without...

NORISHIGE studies TERUKATSU from between his splayed fingers, silently nursing his wounded face.

ONI (CONT'D)

It runs contrary to his lordship's better judgement to release a man of your calibre from his service at this time.

TERUKATSU

Of course, my liege. I understand most clearly! I wouldn't dream of leaving my master's side...

He feels a sudden surge of relief. Like a condemned man granted a reprieve TERUKATSU grovels happily at the midget's feet.

TERUKATSU (CONT'D)

Not now. When he needs me most...

CUT TO:

EXT. NIGHT. OJIKA CASTLE/GARDEN

A violent summer storm closes around the summit of Mount Ojika. TERUKATSU hurries through the deserted garden, slipping unobserved from one puddle of shadow to the next. The sound of the warm rain dripping from the eaves is enough to dampen even his warrior spirit.

TERUKATSU (V.O.)

Normally the sixth month is the occasion for a moon viewing party, the Chrysanthemum Festival and foliage viewing. Instead, with the young master sequestered in his rooms a hush fell over the palace...

Up ahead a feeble light burns in the window of the inner sanctum, casting its paling beam through the fluid night, reminding him of his purpose.

TERUKATSU (V.O.)

Time was against me. If I were to have any chance of realizing my plans and crushing the Tsukuma dynasty forever I knew I would have to take things into my own hands...

Lightning flickers beyond the treetops, etching TERUKATSU's worried features into the gloom as he gazes back to make certain he is not being followed. In the eerie, flickering half light it is hard to be completely sure. Starting towards the base of the palace's inner wall he fumbles with his outstretched hand for the row of pictoglyphs marking the entrance to the secret passageway and the murky shaft beyond.

CUT TO:

INT. NIGHT. OJIKA CASTLE/INNER SANCTUM

In the centre of the broad, high-ceilinged room a solitary lamp burns behind a folding screen. The young lord of the castle crouches at the very centre of the pool of light, his brush moving silently across the strip of heavy paper clasped before him while OHARU, the nurse, fetches sake and grinds the ink. The LADY KIKYO sits demurely beside him, gazing out into the dark as if listening to the rain.

NORISHIGE

'Ere, won' you hrink a li'l more?

NORISHIGE grins bashfully at his wife's perfect profile as he proffers a fresh cup.

Sipping sake and composing collaborative linked renga with a lover on a stormy evening is an exceptionally pleasant pastime for anyone but thanks to his recent run of bad luck NORISHIGE has imbibed more than is customary or prudent for a man in his precarious circumstances.

LADY KIKYO

One more drop and I'll be good for nothing...

NORISHIGE

It's 'ust that the sake tastes especially good tonight.

LADY KIKYO

I'm glad. Nothing makes me so happy as to see you in a good mood.

She rises, gathering her rustling garments about herself. The sight of her alluring smile making NORISHIGE temporarily forget his missing ear and triangular lip.

LADY KIKYO (CONT'D)

Come to bed, my lord...

NORISHIGE

Let me 'ust try to finish this foem.'Ust one more verse, I fromise... while you frefare yourself...

LADY KIKYO

Very good, my lord.

A thin smile haunts her face as she silently withdraws.

NORISHIGE

One more verse to mark this 'ark an' stormy night...

CUT TO:

INT. NIGHT. OJIKA CASTLE/THE LADY KIKYO'S PRIVATE CHAMBERS.

The shadow of NORISHIGE's head, with his hair tied back in the shape of a tea whisk and one ear missing is cast large on the surface of the screen beside the LADY KIKYO as she performs her nightly ablutions. Her husband's recent injuries render his slurred words all but unintelligible yet if she could unscramble those mangled whispers she would be left in little doubt that the young lord is on the verge of producing some of the best poetry of his short, but promising career.

NORISHIGE (O.S.)

Kasumi no Koromo suso wa nurekeri /  
The robe of haze is wet at its  
hem...

Taking the weight off her feet the LADY KIKYO settles herself on the throne, looking like a huge chrysanthemum in her billowing skirts, a faint blush lending her taut, elfin features an almost indescribable voluptuousness.

CUT TO:

INT. NIGHT. OJIKA CASTLE/SHAFT OF THE LADY'S TOILET.

There is a distant flicker of lightning from somewhere beyond the shaft and TERUKATSU raises his eyes, sensing a stir of movement in the chamber above. The shaft darkens, a peal of thunder following a moment later as TERUKATSU stiffens, gaze magnetized by the perfect cheeks of the magnificent moon-like ass that hangs over him. Then a shaft of gold abruptly splits the gloom, a jet of hot, acrid urine striking him full in the face.

NORISHIGE (O.S.)

Saohime no haru tachi nagara shito  
o shite / Princess Sao of spring  
pissed as she started...

CUT TO:

INT. NIGHT. OJIKA CASTLE/INNER SANCTUM

NORISHIGE giggles, the brush wavering in his hand as he defiles the parchment, his hare lip gaping like a cavern in the lamp light. Then, hearing a stealthy footfall behind him, he sobers. Turning, he notices the nurse, OHARU, standing in the doorway, a strange, half pitying look in her eyes.

NORISHIGE

Hasn't stuffed yet. Still  
hrizzling...

OHARU

Yes, sir, it is a depressing rain.

NORISHIGE nods without really listening. Awaiting his wife's return with growing impatience, he casts about himself for his cup, but it is already empty.

NORISHIGE

One last thing, 'efore 'ou go...

He turns to find himself alone in the room.

NORISHIGE (CONT'D)

O...haru?

He takes a half step towards the doorway leading to the toilet area, the lamp flickering ominously behind him.

Feeling a sudden gust of cold air against his face NORISHIGE narrows his eyes, straining his surviving ear against the silence.

NORISHIGE (CONT'D)

Who's there.

For a while the only sound is the steady fall of rain against the planks of the verandah. Then OHARU's strangled voice comes out of the gloom. It sounds as if the nurse's mouth is half covered and the old woman is crying out with her last breath.

OHARU (O.S.)

M-m-my lord!... Quickly...  
quickly...

NORISHIGE

What haffen? Is somebohy here?

NORISHIGE tries to focus on the black shape bearing down on him, unable to distinguish whether it is a man, a monster or a nightmare conjured by his bleary, drink addled eyes.

OHARU (O.S.)

R-r-run, my lord...

Her words break off with a groan as the nurse's body stumbles back into the circle of light, falling headlong at the young lord's feet.

NORISHIGE

What's haffening?

He starts to back away but his assailant is already upon him.

NORISHIGE (CONT'D)

Villain...

Wrapping a powerful arm about the young lord's neck to strangle him, NORISHIGE's faceless attacker rams him up against a beam with terrifying force. As he slowly begins to suffocate, NORISHIGE numbly feels his nameless adversary's hand stroking his face as if licking him with a huge tongue.

NORISHIGE (CONT'D)

Insolent wretch! What are you  
'oing?

The LADY KIKYO watches from the shadows as her husband struggles in vain against his attacker. Something moves in the darkness before NORISHIGE's face like the beat of a wing. The LADY KIKYO sighs, hearing a dull crunch as his assailant loosens his grip slightly, allowing NORISHIGE to breathe more easily. He stumbles forward as his nose leaves his face, cut systematically from its base like a surgeon shaving away an excrescence with a scalpel.



Then the good lady silently extinguishes the lamp, a look of indescribable joy touching her porcelain face as the young lord mercifully loses consciousness.

CUT TO:

EXT. NIGHT. OJIKA CASTLE/GARDEN

TERUKATSU glances back as he makes good his escape. Lights blaze in the windows of the inner sanctum and he hears the distant cries of approaching guardsmen, rallying too late to their master's aid.

TERUKATSU (V.O.)

As head of the guard I knew I would inevitably be brought to book for the attack on Norishige. But I knew also that the senior retainers would be in a quandary over my punishment.

He pauses in the shade of the dripping arbor, panting like a dog as he examines his trophy.

TERUKATSU (V.O.)

Official suicide would have been inescapable had my master been killed but only a scrap of flesh had been lost...

A beatific smile touches TERUKATSU's ghastly countenance as he gazes down at the bloody relic.

TERUKATSU (V.O.)

No Lordship, however great, would want to exchange so loyal a retainer for the sake of a missing nose...

CUT TO:

EXT. DUSK. TAMON CASTLE/VERANDAH.

TERUKATSU's fourteen year old bride, the Lady Oetsu, SHOSETSUIN, sits on the verandah, enjoying the cool air as her ladies-in-waiting fix her hair and nails.

TERUKATSU (V.O.)

I was removed from command for the course of the investigation and accordingly returned to Mount Tamon, where the seventh day of the seventh month I was married to the Lady Oetsu of Chirifu, later known as Shosetsuin, and took my father's place as the seventh Lord of Musashi...

A firefly flickers at the bottom of the garden. SHOSETSUIN glances back to see her husband standing in the doorway behind her, staring silently out over his darkening kingdom.

TERUKATSU (V.O.)

While I could never hope to find another partner comparable to the Lady Kikyo or capable of sharing her needs and desires I was perhaps, after all, fortunate to have a bride too young to understand...

SHOSETSUIN meets his eye and TERUKATSU manages a smile.

TERUKATSU

Let's do something amusing together, shall we?

SHOSETSUIN

But how is your father?

TERUKATSU

There's nothing to worry about. He's been much better the last few days. What concerns me is the way I've been neglecting you...

SHOSETSUIN

What shall we do, then?

She gazes happily at her cheerful husband.

TERUKATSU

Anything at all. What would you like?

SHOSETSUIN

Shall we hunt fireflies? Out in the garden?

Her lovely, bright eyes fill with the sudden joy of a child who has just thought of something wonderful.

SHOSETSUIN (CONT'D)

There are lots of fireflies in the garden, over where the flags are blooming, beyond the hill...

CUT TO:

EXT. DUSK. TAMON CASTLE/GARDEN.

Lights bob between the trees as the young couple happily pursue the fleeting, sparkling insects about the metes and bounds of their walled demesne, their various retainers, guardsmen and ladies-in-waiting doing their best to keep up.

SHOSETSUIN

Over here, over here! Everybody come here!

SHOSETSUIN's bright voice rings out amidst the shrieks of her attendants as she rushes about, now to a clump of grass, now to the water's edge. As the daughter of a feudal lord, she has been reared to be a proper young lady, but at fourteen her arms and legs are stretching and her body is in the prime of health and vigor. Though her voluminous robes are a bit of a nuisance she runs like a young deer about the garden.

TERUKATSU

I've already caught ten.

SHOSETSUIN

Oh! I only have five!

SHOSETSUIN is right behind TERUKATSU as he darts off in pursuit. Running around the pond and along the stream, competing for the same firefly, they look more like brother and sister than newlyweds.

TERUKATSU

There's one, there's one - I'm going to get him!

The guardsmen help place the fireflies in wicker cages while the ladies-in-waiting fetch sake to celebrate the catch. Among the guards TERUKATSU recognizes young DOAMI, his confidant from Mount Ojika.

TERUKATSU (CONT'D)

Ah, there you are.

DOAMI

Yes, sir.

DOAMI bows, his freshly shaven head gleaming in the lamp light.

SHOSETSUIN

Who's is that?

TERUKATSU

His name is Doami. He's here to watch over me until my safe return to his master at Mount Ojika.

SHOSETSUIN

He seems frightfully glum.

DOAMI bows lower, averting his eyes.

TERUKATSU

Yes. But very little escapes him. You really have a very droll personality, don't you, Doami?

DOAMI

Yes, sir.

TERUKATSU

You may raise your head

DOAMI looks up, seeing SHOSETSUIN clearly for the first time, clinging like a contended child to her husband's arm.

DOAMI

Yes, sir.

The young guardsman is unused to the company of women. The look of fear in his eyes is so inadvertently comical that one of the ladies-in-waiting begins to giggle.

TERUKATSU

Here, here, don't laugh yet...

SHOSETSUIN

May I speak to him?

TERUKATSU

Ask him anything at all. Yes, that's good, you give him his instructions...

DOAMI crouches before her, looking for all the world like a dog awaiting a signal from his mistress.

SHOSETSUIN

Doami, will you do anything I ask?

DOAMI

Of course, your ladyship. I am overwhelmed. But what shall I do?

SHOSETSUIN

Will you imitate an animal for me?

DOAMI blinks.

DOAMI

Forgive me, your ladyship, but I  
have no such skill...

TERUKATSU

Come, come. You've done imitations  
before, haven't you? Birds,  
insects, people, that sort of  
thing. You can imitate their  
voices, can't you?

DOAMI

Well, I suppose, I...

TERUKATSU

Go on, then. You're a clever  
fellow...

SHOSETSUIN

Imitate a firefly for me!

Her eyes flash mischievously in the lamp light and DOAMI nods slowly, the other attendants urging him on. Getting to his feet, he steadies himself, borrowing a fan from one of the ladies-in-waiting. Then, casting a last despairing look at TERUKATSU, he crosses to the far side of the patch of lawn and begins to chase his shaven head with the fan. Every time the fan comes down with a slap, the guardsman's shining pate seems to glide out from under it at the last moment and escape. His blinking eyes aptly conveying the image of a firefly glowing and fading, glowing and fading. The hand holding the fan, hot in pursuit, seems almost to belong to someone else. Finally the hand succeeds in pinning down DOAMI's head with the fan and he struggles frantically to escape. With the fan flapping after it the head breaks away, only to be caught again.

SHOSETSUIN and her ladies-in-waiting are convulsed with laughter.

SHOSETSUIN (CONT'D)

Oh, it hurts, it hurts. What a  
funny man. I would never be bored  
with him around.

TERUKATSU

If you like him I don't doubt the  
Lord Norishige would be prepared to  
release him into your service. He's  
a valiant guardsman, but, given the  
right grooming, might well be  
better suited to the inner court.

SHOSETSUIN

Oh, yes. I could teach him.

TERUKATSU

And doubtless you would learn a thing or two in the process...

He watches distractedly as DOAMI contrives to clown for the giggling ladies-in-waiting, relaxing into his role as fool for the day.

SHOSETSUIN

Such as?

TERUKATSU

You have an easy life here, but what would you do, for example, if this castle were besieged by an enemy. Women have to help too when there's fighting.

SHOSETSUIN

Of course.

SHOSETSUIN unconsciously sits up a little straighter, thinking she recognizes the look of a commanding warrior in her husband's suddenly serious eyes.

TERUKATSU

Shall I tell you what you ought to know?

SHOSETSUIN

Oh, yes. That is a good idea. Do tell us, please.

TERUKATSU

Women don't have to go out on the battlefield. But during a siege they have their own job to perform...

His wife and four or five ladies in attendance listen eagerly, peering at TERUKATSU as he speaks. Little by little, stimulated by his audience, he begins to warm to the subject.

TERUKATSU (CONT'D)

For instance, there is what's called 'dressing the heads'...

SHOSETSUIN

Dressing the what?

TERUKATSU

The heads. It's a woman's duty to clean and prepare the heads of the fallen warriors for presentation...

SHOSETSUIN

Why? I mean what on earth for?

She draws back, a flicker of disgust in her eyes.

TERUKATSU

I don't know what it's for.  
It's just the way it's done.  
That's all...

TERUKATSU pales. Then he blushes brightly.

TERUKATSU (CONT'D)

But of course you wouldn't  
understand headdressing unless you  
had some practice. And for that  
we'd need a real head...

SHOSETSUIN

A real head? But where would you  
get such a thing?

TERUKATSU

Ha, ha, ha. Aren't you the wife of  
a samurai? There's no hope for you  
if you turn pale at the merest  
mention of a head...

SHOSETSUIN stiffens, sensing an ominous incompatibility  
between her husband's smile and the feverish look in his  
eyes.

SHOSETSUIN

No, no. I am not a coward. Heads do  
not frighten me...

TERUKATSU

Are you sure you have the courage  
to look?

SHOSETSUIN

Of course. If you have one, please  
show it to me.

TERUKATSU

Just one moment my lady...

Emptying his sake sup with one gulp he turns to the young  
guardsman.

TERUKATSU (CONT'D)

Doami...

DOAMI

Sir?

TERUKATSU

On your knees, old friend. My wife  
has need of your head.

The ring of onlookers fall silent as TERUKATSU reaches for his sword.

DOAMI

I'm sorry, my lord?

TERUKATSU

You said you'd do anything she asked. Now, on your knees!

The young guardsman nods, dazedly doing as he's told. TERUKATSU takes a step forward as if to strike the fatal blow, but at the last moment SHOSETSUIN reaches out, clasping her husband's sword arm.

SHOSETSUIN

No! Spare your servant, my lord!  
I beg you.

TERUKATSU tenses as if to sweep her aside. Then he breaks into a roar of laughter.

TERUKATSU

I scared you, didn't I? Of course I wouldn't harm an innocent man, let alone brave Doami here, who has already done so much to prove his devotion...

DOAMI

It is just a game, right?

He looks nervously to TERUKATSU's eyes, finding them utterly devoid of humour.

TERUKATSU

You're a lucky fellow, Doami. But in exchange for sparing your life I want you to play the part of a dead man for me. Then, perhaps it won't be necessary to kill you.

DOAMI

My lord? I...

He starts to rise but TERUKATSU taps him on the shoulder with his blade, making certain he stays put.

TERUKATSU

Uh-uh. You stay on your knees now until I say otherwise. If you speak again or make the slightest move I'll use my sword...

He grins, glancing happily back at the bewildered onlookers.



TERUKATSU (CONT'D)

Show your courage, my ladies! Fetch a comb, a pitcher, a basin and an incense burner so that I can teach your mistress how to comport herself...

Picking out two of the ladies-in-waiting TERUKATSU positions them on either side of SHOSETSUIN, as if to assign them their prospective tasks - washing the head, applying the make-up and attaching the label.

TERUKATSU (CONT'D)

You, sit on my lady's left and, you, on her right. I want you all to practice. If you don't learn now, you'll be useless when the time comes...

DOAMI fixes his chagrined eyes on a single point, trying not to blink as the ladies examine him.

TERUKATSU (CONT'D)

You are to treat it like the head of a dead man. You mustn't think of dear Doami as being alive...

For a moment DOAMI wonders whether he might not have been better off dead after all. Then SHOSETSUIN raps him on the forehead with the back of her comb, focussing his attention as a murmur of polite laughter ripples through the watching attendants.

TERUKATSU (CONT'D)

Who was that? Who laughed!

Silencing the onlookers with a glance he returns his gaze to the young guardsman. Reaching out, he gently caresses DOAMI's trembling features.

TERUKATSU (CONT'D)

Hold on. Just a moment. This head has a nose. It's not realistic enough...

His words fill DOAMI with dread. Then TERUKATSU pinches the end of his nose.

TERUKATSU (CONT'D)

Here, here, bring me that razor. I can't train you properly without a real 'woman-head'...

SHOSETSUIN

A 'woman-what'?

TERUKATSU

A 'woman-head'. Let me show you...

Keeping a firm hold on DOAMI's nose TERUKATSU casts about himself for help.

TERUKATSU (CONT'D)

Might as well get this thing off now. Then we'll have it nice and flat here, nice and smooth, a real 'woman-head', like his master's. I want everything to be authentic tonight...

His eyes light on the most beautiful of his wife's attendants, a girl of sixteen or seventeen named OHISA, who sits immediately to the left of SHOSETSUIN. OHISA shrinks from the sharpness of his gaze, her plump, innocent face bowed as if praying for the terror to pass quickly.

TERUKATSU (CONT'D)

Ohisa...

He stares at the glossy black hair covering the young girl's shoulders and at the delicate white fingers on her lap, a twitching smile creeping to his lips.

TERUKATSU (CONT'D)

Ohisa, bring the razor...

OHISA

Yes, sir.

The silent air trembles in a gentle breeze, the lamp light casting flickering shadows across DOAMI's ashen face.

TERUKATSU

Sit down here...

Hanging her head in shame, OHISA does as she's told, settling herself in front of the terrified guardsman.

TERUKATSU (CONT'D)

You cut. Hold the razor this way. That's right. Then cut the nose here. Keep it flat and neat...

OHISA

Yes, sir.

OHISA's hand trembles as she clutches the razor. She is terrified by TERUKATSU's commands but DOAMI's expression frightens her even more.

TERUKATSU

Go ahead. This is the head of a dead man. There's nothing to be afraid of...

OHISA

Please forgive me, my lord.

She nervously strokes the bridge of DOAMI's nose and her fingers come away cold and damp from his sweat.

TERUKATSU

That's enough! Cut! Cut, I say!

SHOSETSUIN

My lord, I beg you, please spare him.

TERUKATSU

No. There's nothing to cutting off a dead man's nose. Ohisa will never be any use to me if she's frightened by the sight of blood. I want to educate her...

SHOSETSUIN

But think of poor Doami. Just look at him! Aren't you impressed by the way he is obeying your orders? Please, please, consider his devotion and spare him.

Suddenly looking a little self-conscious TERUKATSU gives a weak laugh.

TERUKATSU

All right, all right. If you say so, I'll drop the idea.

SHOSETSUIN

Oh, will you really?

TERUKATSU

Yes. But I have another idea...

DOAMI cringes, wondering what TERUKATSU will come up with next. Then the warlord begins to laugh once again, more cheerfully this time.

TERUKATSU (CONT'D)

Don't worry, Doami. In consideration of your good attitude, I'll let you keep your nose, but I'm going to paint it red. How's that? Are you grateful? If you're grateful, say so.

The young guardsman's head remains as silent as a rock.

TERUKATSU (CONT'D)

Answer me! You have my permission to speak.

DOAMI

Yes, sir.

TERUKATSU

Are you uncomfortable?

DOAMI

Yes, sir.

TERUKATSU

But being uncomfortable is better than being cut, isn't it?

DOAMI

Yes, sir.

TERUKATSU

Ah, ha, ha, ha. He's funny. Fetch me some rouge. And a brush...

One of the attendants replaces the razor with a brush and OHISA helps him paint DOAMI's nose bright red. Forgetting their fright of a moment before, the young courtiers begin to giggle as their master turns away, starting silently across the lawn towards the lighted verandah, his rage spent. Unable to believe his luck, DOAMI starts to get to his feet but then SHOSETSUIN raps him sharply on the head with her fan.

SHOSETSUIN

Hey! You're supposed to be dead...

The other girls crowd around him, pulling his hair and pinching his ears and cheeks. Relieved that their master was merely playing a cruel trick all along, they happily make him their plaything and DOAMI, for his part, does not resist.

OHISA

If you move, we'll tell his lordship and have you killed...

CUT TO:

INT. DAY. OJIKI CASTLE/INNER COURT

DOAMI, SGT. JIMBEI and a group of other guardsmen still loyal to the Tsukuma cause wait patiently outside the doors to the throne room. From time to time, the disembodied voices of the lord of the castle and his retainers can be heard from within. NORISHIGE's voice is so distorted it is barely distinguishable from the baying of an animal. While scarcely confidence inducing, it is enough to reassure them that their lord and master is at least still alive.

TERUKATSU (V.O.)

In the Tenth Month of 1555 - the year in which Norishige had been visited by one calamity after another - the era name was changed from Temmon to Koji.

(MORE)

TERUKATSU (V.O.) (CONT'D)

Then the New Year came and all the samurai to offer their greetings, but still the young lord refused to show his face...

The door opens a crack and OHARU appears on the threshold, shaking her head.

OHARU

I'm sorry, but the master is not receiving callers...

DOAMI

But I have news. News which concerns him directly...

Craning his neck, DOAMI catches a fleeting glimpse of the back of his lordship's bandaged head through the half-open doorway. NORISHIGE seems to be deep in conversation with his dwarf, oblivious to anything beyond the immediate confines of his shadowy throne room.

NORISHIGE

Leaf me alone! If you wanna haf a farhy, ho aheah an' haf a farhy!

ONI

I thought it would be an opportunity to boost morale, my lord. A chance to show your noble countenance to all assembled and nip this ugly gossip in the bud...

NORISHIGE

Hon' hell me wha' 'oo hoo!

OHARU

I'm sorry.

Smiling sadly, the nurse closes the door in DOAMI's face.

SGT. JIMBEI

Waste of breath. Like I said.

CUT TO:

INT. DAY. OJIKA CASTLE/INNER SANCTUM

The LADY KIKYO sits hunched in the verandah doorway, staring listlessly out over the wintry garden, her pale face streaked with tears.

NORISHIGE

Wha' is i' now? Why are 'ou crying?

But the lady is inconsolable. Bowing her head, she avoids her husband's eyes.

NORISHIGE (CONT'D)

Has the whole 'ouse gone mad?

LADY KIKYO

The House of my father and my ancestors has been overthrown by a traitorous vassal. Now I grieve because I am about to lose my husband to this same traitor, only you are too blind to see it!

NORISHIGE

Wha' are 'ou 'alking abou'? Oni...

The young lord turns to his dwarf for reassurance as his distraught wife thrusts a tear dappled letter in his direction.

NORISHIGE (CONT'D)

Wha' is 'his?

He passes the missive to ONI, who squints at the closely written text, holding it up to the light to examine an all but invisible watermark hidden in one corner of the parchment.

ONI

It would appear to be a secret message written by a member of the castle staff and addressed to Kombu Sukezaemon himself at the Higaki temple. What amounts to a clear invitation to invade our domain. How did you obtain this?

LADY KIKYO

A former Yakushiji retainer, my nurse's son, Matoba Shinzaburo, chanced upon this message and passed it on to his mother.

NORISHIGE turns in a semi-circle, his exasperation making him even less coherent than unusual.

NORISHIGE

I 'new it! Hihn't I hell 'ou?

ONI

The Higaki adherents have for many years been particularly cordial and have served both your houses with unparalleled devotion for generations. It doesn't make sense that they should choose to side with this nameless traitor and draw their bows against us now...

NORISHIGE

So 'ho is resfonsible for 'is? We haf to funish someone?

ONI

This letter should not be believed uncritically, my lord. Nor should a campaign be launched without due deliberation...

NORISHIGE

Do 'ou doubt my wife?

ONI glances uneasily at the LADY KIKYO. He is about to open his mouth, but then decides against this course of action. Taking advantage of his silence, the good lady presses home her point.

LADY KIKYO

Even if you are unsure about this letter, the Higaki people and their comrades in the Ikko sect are certainly your enemies. Even now they are plotting with Sergeant Jimbei, his cohort Doami and other renegade elements of the staff. Please do not wait any longer to defend your honour and have these traitors put to death.

NORISHIGE

'imbei..? It's imfossible...

NORISHIGE shakes his head trying to come to terms with this latest betrayal.

ONI

I beg you to consider your options carefully, my master. It would seem to me a gathering of the clan is in order, a chance to clear the air and get to the bottom of these vile rumours...

NORISHIGE

And then?

The LADY KIKYO allows ONI to take the floor, knowing her husband trusts the painted halfling above all others, silently contemplating the thousand and one deaths that lie in store for the little man once she finally has the chance to do and say as she pleases.

ONI

When we can be sure all the  
relevant parties are in one place,  
we act. Decisively...

CUT TO:

INT. DAY. OJIKA CASTLE/INNER COURT

The Tsukuma dynasty's countless vassals and retainers file slowly into the chamber, taking their places like chess pieces on either side of the room as ONI and OHARU eagerly oversee the seating arrangements.

TERUKATSU (V.O.)

They chose the Iris Festival to assemble the samurai in the company of the Lord Norishige and the Lady Kikyo for a poetry party. The noble company were to compete in writing poems about the cuckoo, a topic chosen by the lady and announced far in advance so that anyone with a taste for the muse might have ample time to compose their verses and muster their wits to vie for prizes and the prospect of advancement...

Immaculately groomed, TERUKATSU pauses on the threshold, noting the unusually tight security. Catching his breath, he searches for some sign of his beloved amongst the courtiers only to discover that a reed blind has been placed about the dais at the centre of the room, hiding NORISHIGE and his wife from the direct view of their subjects.

TERUKATSU (V.O.)

Because of the heightened surveillance, there was little hope of stealing any closer to her or exchanging any direct message. But soon, I knew, I would be able to see her whenever I wished...

Seating himself before one of the writing boxes, he focusses on the shadow of NORISHIGE's mutilated profile, watching enraptured, as the LADY KIKYO's outline glides across the blind beside him, the brush dancing in her hand.

LADY KIKYO

Reminded of the past by the scent of orange blossoms...



Inspired, TERUKATSU reaches for the parchment and begins to write, only vaguely aware of the old man who observes him silently from the far side of the room, one eyebrow twitching as he minutely reads the young Lord of Musashi's body language. The dreaded KOMBU SUKEZAEMON has scarcely aged a day since we last saw him and right now he has TERUKATSU locked dead bang in his stony gaze.

LADY KIKYO (CONT'D)  
Come, O cuckoo to the village of  
falling blossoms...

CUT TO:

EXT. NIGHT. OJIKA CASTLE/GARDEN

A phalanx of armed guards silently takes up position along the battlements overlooking the inner palace and the leafless, wintry garden where the guests are allowed to mingle between bouts of versifying.

TERUKATSU (V.O.)  
No-one ever calls at my weathered  
dwelling...

DOAMI edges forward, one hand going to his sword as TERUKATSU appears in the lighted doorway below. Turning his eyes towards the waxing moon that hangs above the silvery crest of Mount Ojika, the young warlord tries to imagine the garden that spring when this cycle of events was first set in motion.

TERUKATSU (V.O.)  
The orange blossoms near the eaves  
have drawn you here...

Glancing back, TERUKATSU notices KOMBU SUKEZAEMON has followed him from the hall. He slows his pace, allowing the old man to catch up.

SUKEZAEMON  
It's high time we had a word, my  
lord...

TERUKATSU smiles.

TERUKATSU  
High time indeed...

DOAMI works his way closer, listening from the far side of the ornamental pond as TERUKATSU and SUKEZAEMON confer in low, respectful tones. What little he does manage to overhear confirms his darkest suspicions.

SUKEZAEMON

Frankly, Terukatsu, I'm surprised!  
In all the years of alliance  
neither myself nor the Ikko sect  
has ever harboured treacherous  
designs against the Tsukuma lords.  
It is most disturbing to hear these  
rumours that a punitive action  
might now, for no reason, be sent  
against my brothers at the Higaki  
temple...

TERUKATSU

Better to launch your own attack  
first and prove your courage rather  
than wait idly to be destroyed.

DOAMI turns, motioning for his companions to close in and arrest the conspirators. But the other guardsmen are already upon him, their blades at the ready. He is too surprised to make more than a token effort at resistance.

SUKEZAEMON

My thoughts exactly.

SUKEZAEMON and the young Lord of Musashi watch serenely as the guardians of the inner court force DOAMI to his knees, driving the sword from his hand. Then one of them drags a rough burlap sack over his head and he hears and sees no more.

CUT TO:

EXT. NIGHT. OJIKA CASTLE/COURTYARD

There is a rattle of chains as the portcullis rises and the Tsukuma attack force prepares to ride out on their clandestine mission.

SGT. JIMBEI

Take this message to Lord  
Terukatsu. Tell him it is the  
master Norishige's will that he  
muster his forces and join us at  
the Higaki temple.

The ORDERLY salutes as SGT. JIMBEI reaches for his helmet and mounts up to lead the sortie.

ORDERLY

Yes, sir. At once, sir...

CUT TO:

INT. NIGHT. OJIKA CASTLE/INNER COURT

The ORDERLY hurries through the winding corridors, past NORISHIGE's bodyguards, who have joined forces to form a ring of steel about the inner sanctum where the poetry reading is still in progress.

LADY KIKYO (O.S.)  
Held back by the winter wind by the  
clinging willow branches...

The ORDERLY is forced to wait at the doorway while the note he carries is passed forward to one of the attendants, who in turn passes it on to OHARU.

OHARU  
I'm afraid the Lord Musashi has  
already repaired to his quarters.

ONI  
It's not like him to retire so  
early.

The halfling cranes his neck, standing on tiptoe to get a better look at the note in the nurse's hand.

OHARU  
I think he felt he was written out,  
my lord.

ONI glances nervously back at his master's silhouette as NORISHIGE watches his wife complete another verse, blissfully unaware that his best laid plans are about to go dangerously pear shaped.

LADY KIKYO (O.S.)  
Still my heart lights up, if for a  
moment only at the moon that steals  
through my window...

CUT TO:

INT. NIGHT. OJIKA CASTLE/TERUKATSU'S QUARTERS/BEDCHAMBER

The sack is yanked from DOAMI's face and he opens his eyes to find himself securely bound and gagged, his hog-tied body secreted in a narrow compartment beneath the floor of the chamber. A hole approximately two feet in diameter has been cut in the boards, allowing only his head to protrude, his trembling chin flush with the reed mat at the centre of the chamber. A folding screen has been placed behind him and a lamp set on either side of his head so that he can be clearly viewed by the figure who reclines on the dais before him.

SHOSETSUIN  
Is that what a real woman-head  
looks like, my lord?

The Lady SHOSETSUIN giggles, fondling a glinting razor as she speaks. She's not normally a heavy drinker, but when intoxicated finds everything amusing.

TERUKATSU

No, not at all. On a real woman-head there's a dark cavity instead of a red nose. Much more gruesome...

TERUKATSU daubs DOAMI's head with a little rouge. Then, taking his place beside SHOSETSUIN, he refills her cup.

TERUKATSU (CONT'D)

Now that we're alone, doesn't that head frighten you a little?

SHOSETSUIN

Not a bit.

TERUKATSU

And who was it that turned pale when I called for the razor?

SHOSETSUIN

That's a fib, a fib. How could you say such a thing!

TERUKATSU

But it's true. You were even whiter than Ohisa.

SHOSETSUIN

Do you really think I'm such a coward?

She starts forward, reaching out to caress DOAMI's squirming face.

SHOSETSUIN (CONT'D)

I am much stronger than Ohisa. I wish you'd think of something more frightening than this. Something a little more challenging...

DOAMI cringes as she takes hold of his nose.

SHOSETSUIN (CONT'D)

By the way, where do you attach the label to a bald head like this?

TERUKATSU

You make a hole in his ear and tie the label there.

SHOSETSUIN

A hole in the ear!

She collapses into laughter, relinquishing her hold for a moment.

SHOSETSUIN (CONT'D)

But I guess there's no other way,  
is there?

TERUKATSU

How about it?

SHOSETSUIN

What should I make the hole with?

She turns to consult the gleaming array of implements laid out on the crimson cloth spread beside the dais.

TERUKATSU

An awl would do, or the tip of a  
knife. Just a little jab...

SHOSETSUIN

Yes, well, it's a bit cruel, but I  
think I'll try it.

TERUKATSU

Go ahead, go ahead.

Laughter.

TERUKATSU (CONT'D)

Don't try to get out of it by  
laughing.

SHOSETSUIN

I'm not trying to get out of it.  
The more I look at his expression,  
the more I want to do it.

TERUKATSU

He seems to be saying, 'please do  
it, please do it'.

Taking the lobe of DOAMI's right ear in her snowy hand, SHOSETSUIN examines his head for a moment. Then she gives a low, nasal laugh.

SHOSETSUIN

Are you sure it's all right?

TERUKATSU

Yes, of course. Are you frightened?

SHOSETSUIN

Why should I be frightened?

Taking up one of the knives, she jabs at DOAMI's ear. A trickle of blood stains her linen white hand.

SHOSETSUIN (CONT'D)

There...

TERUKATSU stiffens, interrupted in this most intimate of moments by the sound of someone rapping on door of the outer chamber.

TERUKATSU

Now, you go ahead and make a proper label while I take care of this...

SHOSETSUIN reaches for paper and a writing box as her husband starts towards the door, one hand reaching for his sword.

CUT TO:

INT. NIGHT. OJIKA CASTLE/TERUKATSU'S QUARTERS/ANTECHAMBER

TERUKATSU keeps one eye on the nervous orderly while he reads the proffered dispatch. He does not seem particularly surprised by its contents.

TERUKATSU

My clan has been indebted to the Lord Tsukuma since the early years of my father, Terukuni's rule. It is only natural that in the present situation I want to do everything I can to help...

He genuflects towards the Buddhist shrine that has been set up in one corner of the suite in a gesture of mock respect.

TERUKATSU (CONT'D)

Unfortunately, we have been devout converts to the Ikko sect since the time of my great-grandfather, and we have a special relationship with the Higaki people...

CUT TO:

INT. NIGHT. OJIKA CASTLE/TERUKATSU'S QUARTERS/BEDCHAMBER

SHOSETSUIN listens to the sound of her husband's voice through the half open door as she ties the label into place.

TERUKATSU (O.S.)

Our association with the House of Tsukuma, then, is of two generations' duration, and that with the Ikko sect, four generations...

Placing one finger to her lips, she draws aside the mat, reaching for the knife to cut DOAMI's bonds.

TERUKATSU (O.S.) (CONT'D)  
 Accordingly, if I had to ally  
 myself with one side or the other,  
 I would be obliged to choose the  
 Higaki...

CUT TO:

INT. NIGHT. OJIKA CASTLE/TERUKATSU'S QUARTERS/ANTECHAMBER

The ORDERLY backs away, already reaching for his blade as if  
 expecting to be struck down at any moment.

TERUKATSU  
 But, as that is not my true  
 desire...

TERUKATSU pauses, sensing movement in the room behind him.  
 Then he smiles.

TERUKATSU (CONT'D)  
 I beg to be allowed to remain  
 neutral, thereby satisfying my  
 obligations to both sides...

Advancing on the terrified ORDERLY, he reaches out, idly  
 petting him as he speaks.

TERUKATSU (CONT'D)  
 Now be a good dog and go tell your  
 master exactly what I said.

CUT TO:

INT. NIGHT. OJIKA CASTLE/TERUKATSU'S QUARTERS

Drawing aside an ancient tapestry, the Lady SHOSETSUIN ushers  
 DOAMI towards the mouth of one of the secret passageways -  
 the very same that TERUKATSU once took as a child.

DOAMI  
 What about Sergeant Jimbei and the  
 others?

SHOSETSUIN  
 It's too late for them. Save  
 yourself, it's all you can do  
 now...

She glances nervously over her shoulder as DOAMI clammers  
 through the narrow portal, knowing they only have seconds to  
 spare.

DOAMI

I'll never forget what you have done, my lady, not in this life or the next...

SHOSETSUIN

I drank more tonight than a woman ought to...

As he crawls past her into the waiting blackness her trailing fingers briefly brush against his own.

DOAMI

Nor that you touched me with your own hands...

He turns, catching a last glimpse of SHOSETSUIN's despairing, tear-streaked face as her husband looms into view behind her.

SHOSETSUIN

Please forgive me.

Then, she slides the stone slab hurriedly into place and the darkness is complete.

CUT TO:

EXT. NIGHT. THE HIGAKI TEMPLE

A passing horseman strikes a glancing blow to the face of a watchful Buddha, shattering its nose. A second blow removes the statue's head entirely.

TERUKATSU (V.O.)

So it was, then, that in the First Month of 1556 a Tsukuma strike force launched an unprovoked assault on the Higaki temple, apparently acting under orders from Lord Norishige himself to put the building to the torch...

SGT. JIMBEI brings his horse about, reluctantly preparing to carry out his master's orders. Then an arrow catches him directly between the eyes and he flies backwards, taking leave of his saddle, the blazing brand still clenched in his stiffening fingers, face frozen in a death rictus.

TERUKATSU (V.O.)

The Higaki adherents, however, had been forewarned. They incited the local peasants to rise up in revolt, and engaged the attacking army on the boundary between the Tsukuma and Higaki domains...



The Tsukuma cavalry are thrown into confusion as they realize they have been led into an ambush, a host of figures pouring from the undergrowth and from behind seemingly every shrine, statue and ornamental railing. Directed by the monks, the peasants close in on the panicking horsemen, dragging them from their illustrious steeds and beating them to the ground with scythes, clubs and hoes.

TERUKATSU (V.O.)

In a furious battle, the Tsukuma force, though twice as numerous as the enemy, was utterly destroyed...

CUT TO:

INT. NIGHT. OJIKA CASTLE/SECRET PASSAGEWAY

DOAMI climbs through the shadows and climbs again as TERUKATSU climbed before him. Working his way from one handhold to the next he climbs towards the light.

TERUKATSU (V.O.)

Until then, out of gratitude to Ikkansai, I had declined the entreaties of the Higaki people, but I had lost all patience with the treachery and incompetence of the Tsukuma leadership...

Reaching blindly upwards, DOAMI's fingertips find the tiny, raised pictoglyphs that mark the hidden trap. A ring of sigils resembling the phases of the waxing moon. He pushes hard and the trap begins to give, a shard of flickering, crimson light falling across his straining, upturned face.

TERUKATSU (V.O.)

I could no longer bear to stand aside and idly watch the spectacle...

CUT TO:

EXT. NIGHT. OJIKA CASTLE.

DOAMI claws his way from the earth to find himself on the far side of the moat, the label, inscribed with Shosetsuin's elegant, wilting characters still fluttering from one ear.

TERUKATSU (V.O.)

The times were ripe for a new hero to emerge from the battlefield...

DOAMI sways, gasping for breath, as he takes in his surroundings.

Nothing the young guardsman has seen or experienced this far comes anywhere close to preparing him for the apocalyptic vista that unfolds before his mutely staring eyes.

TERUKATSU (V.O.)

A true man of the people...

The massed ranks of the Musashi clan under the command of TERUKATSU's loyal first lieutenant, the one-eyed AOKI SHUZEN, and the Higaki foot soldiers led by KOMBU SUKEZAEMON have taken the second and third citadels by surprise, joining forces with the rampaging peasants to encircle the keep.

TERUKATSU (V.O.)

Accordingly, I decided to come to the aid of the Higaki people and rescue the peasants from the misgovernment and turmoil that had blighted their lives...

Suddenly a wild light spreads like a crimson stain across the faces of the baying mob. For a moment it is as if the whole world is bathed in blood and the terrified guardsman turns to see from whence a glow so unusual might have issued, for the vast house and the shadows that have encompassed his life since birth are alone behind him.

TERUKATSU (V.O.)

Power and love were before my eyes, waiting for me to seize them...

Laughing and crying all at once DOAMI realizes that the radiance is that of the full, setting and blood red moon that shines vividly through the churning column of smoke rising from the inner courtyard. Then, as he watches, a tongue of incandescent orange flame leaps hungrily skyward.

CUT TO:

INT. NIGHT. OJIKA CASTLE/INNER SANCTUM

NORISHIGE sits cross-legged on the dais, calmly sipping a cup of sake as a spume of wind-borne ash rises outside the windows of his crumbling domain. ONI hovers beside him, stoically refilling his cup.

TERUKATSU (V.O.)

When told that the enemy had entered the keep Norishige ordered the inner palace to be set ablaze before retiring to his chambers to compose a death verse and stab his beloved wife...

The LADY KIKYO waits demurely for her husband in the bedroom doorway as the halfling fetches a jet black pillow bearing a silver dagger.

Meeting NORISHIGE's eyes she offers him a dreamy smile, happy to at least have this opportunity to make amends.

TERUKATSU (V.O.)

Despite a thorough search of the charred ruins no trace of the couple's remains was ever found...

CUT TO:

EXT. NIGHT. OJIKA CASTLE/GARDEN

Seeing the pillar of smoke rising from the inner palace, TERUKATSU draws his sword and breaks into a run, making his way as swiftly as possible towards the source of the flames.

TERUKATSU (V.O.)

The hour of my vengeance was finally at hand. Fame and glory within my grasp...

Scattering the foot soldiers that descend upon him, he hurries to the love tunnel at the base of the great stone wall.

TERUKATSU (V.O.)

My name would live in history...

Shedding his armor outside the narrow opening the young Lord of Musashi compels himself forward into the smoke-filled tunnel beyond.

TERUKATSU (V.O.)

And my spirit dwell in the house of my ancestors for ever...

CUT TO:

INT. NIGHT. OJIKA CASTLE/INNER SANCTUM

Choking in the swirling ash, TERUKATSU races through the airless corridors to Norishige's chambers. The dagger-wielding dwarf tries to block his path, but TERUKATSU sweeps him aside as if he were little more than a poisonous insect.

TERUKATSU

Excuse me.

Stepping lightly over ONI's body TERUKATSU genuflects before kicking in the shoji. NORISHIGE is about to stab his wife in the breast, but then TERUKATSU violently seizes his arm.

NORISHIGE

Let ho! Let ho, I hay!

TERUKATSU

Don't be rash, my lord!

Freeing the lady's collar from her husband's grip, he forces his way between them.

NORISHIGE

It's Heruhatsu!

Thoroughly embarrassed, NORISHIGE blinks as though he had been slapped in the face. TERUKATSU, seeing his chance, strikes the blade from the young lord's hand. Then, making every effort not to look at NORISHIGE's mutilated face, he moves back to a respectful distance and bows deeply. Utterly bewildered by this, NORISHIGE stares at him in outright confusion, trying in vain to put the pieces together.

NORISHIGE (CONT'D)

He-He-Heruhatsu!

TERUKATSU

Yes, sir.

He bows even lower than before.

NORISHIGE

I affeal hoo your hymhahy as a hamurai. Hiv hah my hword! An hone hey my heh!

TERUKATSU

I'm sorry, my lord?

NORISHIGE

My heh! Hone hey my heh!

TERUKATSU

It is my sympathy as a samurai that compels me to stop you, my lord. I am sorry to say this, but soon the attackers will force their way in here. If you kill yourself, someone will surely find your head even if I do not take it. Think of the disgrace to generations past and future.

NORISHIGE nods slowly, taking this on board.

NORISHIGE

He-He-Heruhatsu?

TERUKATSU

Yes, sir.

NORISHIGE

My last rehash! He my hehond! Hury my heh ho ho one will hee it!

TERUKATSU

What? What did you say?

He leans closer, cupping one hand to his ear as he tries in vain to make out NORISHIGE's words. By now the fire has taken hold of the building and the wind moaning through cracks all around them throws up terrible sheets and tendrils of writhing flame.

NORISHIGE

My last rehash...my last rehash...

Exasperated, he stretches his neck, making a cutting motion with his hand.

NORISHIGE (CONT'D)

My heh! My heh!

The LADY KIKYO cries out, burying her face in TERUKATSU's chest as the floor trembles beneath their feet. The Lord of Musashi tightens his grip on his sword feeling the skin cracking on his knuckles. Just then, when all seems lost, AOKI SHUZEN and five or six pages who have followed their master through the underground passageway burst into the room.

AOKI

This way, young master.  
Follow me...

TERUKATSU smiles.

TERUKATSU

Leave everything to me, my lord...

He offers NORISHIGE a friendly wink and on this signal SHUZEN's soldiers surround the lord of the castle, seizing him by the arms and legs and carrying him from his throne room.

TERUKATSU (CONT'D)

If you'll follow me, my lady...

Taking the LADY KIKYO by the arm, he steers her into the billowing smoke.

CUT TO:

EXT. NIGHT. OJIKA CASTLE.

There is a sound like a thousand angry, tumultuous voices. DOAMI falls to his knees at the edge of the moat as the walls of the keep fall in on themselves and burst asunder.

TERUKATSU (V.O.)

Joined by some strange, ill-fated bond, the Lady Kikyo, Norishige and myself, might well have been happier had we been swallowed up in that vortex. Norishige, at least, must have desired it and taking her noseless, harelipped, one-eared husband with her to hell would surely have been the best possible present for the Lady Kikyo's father...

Kneeling in the icy slush the young guardsman watches as a funnel of sparks rises heavenward as if borne aloft by the fierce breath of the whirlwind, climbing higher and higher into the freezing outer darkness, into the night, into nothing.

TERUKATSU (V.O.)

I, alone among them, had the will and ardour to resist the fire...

CUT TO:

EXT. DAY. THIRD VALLEY PALACE/GARDEN - SPRING 1560

A ring of white-capped mountains guard a fertile, hidden valley. At the heart of the valley lies a modest summer palace surrounded by patchwork farmsteads, a perfect picture of rustic tranquility.

TERUKATSU (V.O.)

Norishige and the lady were secretly transferred to the castle on Mount Tamon and installed in a refurbished mansion deep in a place known as Third Valley...

It is a clear, bright day and NORISHIGE has elected to take his tea on the verandah. He sits motionless as a lizard for a moment, cross-legged in a patch of sunshine as he gazes out over the familiar boundaries of his world. Then, signalling OHARU to bring paper and a writing box he embarks on a fresh composition.

TERUKATSU (V.O.)

It might be thought exceedingly fainthearted of Norishige to have gone on living under these circumstances, ignominiously taken prisoner and passing the gloomy months and years in his enemy's castle, but the fact is that he was closely watched day and night and all means of suicide had been removed...

There is a soft tinkle of happy laughter and NORISHIGE glances up to see a young woman in peasant style garb starting along the bank of one of the irrigation canals towards the house, a girl of not much older than four running, jibing at her heels.

TERUKATSU (V.O.)

Domestically, however, they were probably the happiest years of his life...

Even at a distance it is obvious that the LADY KIKYO has changed considerably since last we saw her. She has gained a little weight, albeit not to ill effect and for the first time since anyone can recall seems to have actually gotten some colour into her cheeks.

TERUKATSU (V.O.)

Having avenged her father the Lady Kikyo experienced a change of heart. She must have shuddered at the monstrous sins she had committed and, feeling real pity and sympathy for her husband's ugliness, to which she had contributed, strove as a faithful wife and loving mother to redeem her former indiscretions...

A brace of yapping Shiba Inus run past NORISHIGE and, setting aside his writing box, he follows them, stepping out into the bright sunlight to embrace his wife.

TERUKATSU (V.O.)

For the first time a complete love developed between them and, living with an emotional fulfilment such as he had never experienced before, Norishige came, in time, to write his best poetry...

A solitary horseman watches from a ridge overlooking the valley. TERUKATSU frames the happy couple in the lens of an antique telescope. He is older now, a little more like his father, a little wiser, a little sadder.

TERUKATSU (V.O.)

Since realizing that she lacked the heart to renew our liaison, I have sought out new women, one after another, but never again have I met my match or known true happiness. Nor will I forget her...

He gazes longingly at the grounds of the summer palace.

TERUKATSU (V.O.) (CONT'D)  
It is enough to simply be what I  
am...

Folding up his telescope he bows his head for a moment as if  
in meditation.

TERUKATSU (V.O.) (CONT'D)  
I, Terukatsu, son of Terukuni,  
Seventh Lord of Musashi...

Then turning his horse, he rides away.

Fade to white.

Roll end credits.