

FADE IN:

SUPERIMPOSE OVER BLACK SCREEN:

FOUR LINES OF JAPANESE SCRIPT

DISSOLVE TO:

Swift as the wind  
Quiet as the forest  
Fierce as the fire  
Firm as the mountain

EXT. TAKEDA CASTLE - DAY

DRUMS ECHO as tall braziers throw smoke in A SNOWY COURTYARD.

SUPERIMPOSE:

Kai Province  
New Year's Day  
Year of the Monkey

GENERAL TORAMASA, in blood-colored armor, reins his horse as SAMURAI MUSTER, Takeda banners dancing at their backs.

LORD TAKEDA views from a PARAPET, LADY TAKEDA behind him.

TARO TAKEDA (7), bushy eyebrows and ponytail, wears a gold kimono and ritual headband inscribed with Japanese script. As he inches toward the parapet, Lady Takeda tugs on his sleeve.

FOUR FOOTMEN BRING A PALANQUIN, and the family descends.

Taro glances at STEAMING DUNG from the General's horse.

The General bows. HIS DEVIL MASK STARES BACK AT TARO.

GENERAL TORAMASA  
Kin Taro! What a handsome samurai!  
And that's a sharp knitting needle!

Taro reaches for his sword and proudly draws it.

GENERAL TORAMASA (CONT'D)  
Young Master! What did I teach you?

TARO  
Draw a sword when you must use it--

LORD TAKEDA  
Well, at least he looks the part.  
If only he took as much interest in  
training as fairy tales.

Lady Takeda bows her head. Taro keeps his head down.

GENERAL TORAMASA  
Is it wise to travel with so few?

LORD TAKEDA  
It's fine.

GENERAL TORAMASA  
Lord Oda has spies everywhere--

LORD TAKEDA  
It is enough for a day's excursion.

GENERAL TORAMASA  
Very well, my Lord.

Lady Takeda and Taro step into the palanquin and she arranges cushions as a Footman closes the sliding door.

Lord Takeda puts on HIS HELMET WITH WHITE HORSEHAIR AND ANTLERS. Mounting his horse, HE GIVES THE COMMAND.

INT. PALANQUIN - DAY - TRAVELING

THE PROCESSION DEPARTS TO DRUMBEAT, horses CLOPPING the road. Taro peers out the window at FORMIDABLE CASTLE DEFENSES.

The Procession passes the outermost gate and THE DRUMS STOP.

TARO  
How far is it?

Taro watches from his window as THE CASTLE RECEDES.

LADY TAKEDA  
Taro, now don't start.

She opens a bento box to give him a rice ball. He CHOMPS it, wrinkles his nose at a pickled plum inside, wolfs the rest.

TARO  
Is there any more?

LADY TAKEDA  
A wise man's belly is never full.

Taro frowns.

LADY TAKEDA (CONT'D)  
 It's good to be hungry--  
 (beat)  
 For knowledge.

TARO  
 Tell me a story!

LADY TAKEDA  
 Oh, Taro, why don't you nap?

TARO  
 The crab and the monkey!

LORD TAKEDA  
 You've heard it so many times!

TARO  
 Once more!

She offers him water from A BOTTLE GOURD and wets her lips.

BEGIN ANIMATION [LADY TAKEDA NARRATES THE ACTION]:

EXT. TOKAIDO ROAD - DAY

A WOODBLOCK PRINT DEPICTS: A MONKEY AND A CRAB HAGGLING OVER  
 A RICE BALL. Mount Fuji rises in the distance.

LADY TAKEDA (V.O.)  
 Long ago, a crab found a rice ball  
 beside the road. Along came Monkey,  
 chattering away, and tricked her  
 into trading for a persimmon seed.

Crab pinches Monkey.

TARO (V.O.)  
 Ow!

LADY TAKEDA (V.O.)  
 Well, since she could not eat the  
 seed, she planted it, and the tree  
 bore fruit. Then Monkey offered to  
 pick the fruit for her, but he ate  
 it all, which made her very angry.

Crab angrily waves her claws at Monkey up the tree.

LADY TAKEDA (V.O.)  
 She scolded Monkey, who threw hard  
 little persimmons and hit her right  
 between her eyes and killed her--

TARO (V.O.)

Ow!

LADY TAKEDA (V.O.)

But just before she died, she gave birth to four baby crabs.

TARO (V.O.)

Why didn't Monkey kill the babies?

Beat.

LADY TAKEDA (V.O.)

Even monkeys fall from trees!

SOUNDS OF SCUFFLING (O.S.). TARO GIGGLES (O.S.).

TARO (V.O.)

Mama, no, stop tickling me!

LADY TAKEDA (V.O.)

Do you want me to tell the story?

(beat)

Well, the crab babies wanted their revenge, so they went to Monkey's house at night. One put a prickly chestnut under his bed. One left a wasp in his water bucket. One laid a cow dung at the entrance, and one put a heavy hammer above his door.

TARO YAWNS (O.S.).

LADY TAKEDA (V.O.)

When Monkey woke, the prickly chestnut stuck his foot. When he tried to wash his wound, the wasp stung him. He ran out of the house but slipped on the cow dung, and just then, the heavy hammer fell and killed him, and the baby crabs waved their claws triumphantly.

Beat.

END ANIMATION.

INT. PALANQUIN - DAY - TRAVELING

Seeing Taro fast asleep, Lady Takeda caresses his head, then rests hers, staring out the window at the snowy landscape.

EXT. FUJI SHRINE - DAY

SOUNDS OF A RUSHING RIVER AND DISTANT WATERFALL as the Takeda Procession hikes through snowy forest beneath MOUNT FUJI.

LADY TAKEDA (O.S.)  
 Listen Taro, do you hear the river?  
 This is where Hachiman no Kami rode  
 two giant snakes on his pilgrimage.

They cross a VERMILLION BRIDGE and ascend a forest path.

They pass under A TALL ARCHED GATE INTO A SUNLIT FORECOURT.  
 Stone steps lead to richly carved and gilt SHRINE BUILDINGS.

A Footman opens the palanquin. Taro steps into his sandals.

LADY TAKEDA (CONT'D)  
 Careful, it may be slippery.

Stone lanterns march around the forecourt in snowy SILENCE.  
 Beat. A WATER HAMMER PLUNKS in the distance.

Beside the forecourt, A PRISTINE PARK WITH BARE CHERRY TREES.  
 OPPOSITE, A SACRED RESERVOIR. As they wash their hands, Taro  
 fixes on AN IRON DRAGON SPEWING WATER.

AT THE TWILIGHT GATE, STATUES OF THE WIND AND THUNDER GODS  
 leer at Taro.

LADY TAKEDA (CONT'D)  
 Cover your belly button.

Taro checks himself as the family steps into THE SHRINE.

Taro studies A RACK OF YEAR OF THE MONKEY PRAYER PLAQUES,  
 then wanders toward THE ORATORY. He CLAPS HANDS in prayer.  
 Lady Takeda smiles. THE WATER HAMMER PLUNKS.

GENERAL TORAMASA  
 Strange--

LORD TAKEDA  
 Where are the priests?

THE AIR HISSES AS ARROWS STRIKE SAMURAI BODYGUARDS DEAD.

GENERAL TORAMASA  
 My Lord! Ambush!

Lady Takeda runs to Taro. MORE ARROWS WHISTLE.

LORD TAKEDA  
 Defend my Lady!

SOUNDS OF STEEL CLASHING AND DEATH-CRIES IN THE FORECOURT.

Lord Takeda sees SAMURAI ASSASSINS ATTACK, led by LORD MONKEY in a devil mask and HELMET ADORNED WITH A FAN OF SPIKES.

LORD TAKEDA (CONT'D)

Monkey!

General Toramasa GASPS as an arrow strikes his neck.

LORD TAKEDA (CONT'D)

(to Lady Takeda)

Run! Hide!

Lady Takeda drags Taro to the oratory as Lord Takeda faces the Assassins. He parries and kills one, then two more, but an arrow strikes behind his knee. He GROANS and buckles.

LORD MONKEY

Hold!

Assassins hold in ready stances, as Lord Monkey mounts the stairs, his spiked helmet and devil mask rising into view.

LORD TAKEDA

Monkey!

The devil mask GRUNTS defiantly. Light snow begins to fall. As the Assassins stalk Lord Takeda, THE WATER HAMMER PLUNKS.

Lord Takeda leaps to make a last stand, but Lord Monkey stabs his back. Lord Takeda GROANS and buckles. Lady Takeda CRIES.

LORD MONKEY

Find his wife and son! Kill them!

Lord Monkey pulls out his sword. Lord Takeda GASPS, looks to the oratory. Beat. Lord Monkey separates his head from neck.

The headless body falls, spilling blood on snow. Lord Monkey holds up TAKEDA'S HEAD by its topknot. His Samurai CHEER.

INT. FUJI SHRINE - DAY

Lady Takeda drags Taro through a MAZE OF CORRIDORS.

TARO

Mother?--

LADY TAKEDA

Taro, we must hide!

She scoops up her heavy boy, and the world whirls around him.

EXT. FUJI SHRINE - DAY

She exits and climbs a snowy slope into the wood but trips and CRIES as she takes the brunt of the fall to save Taro.

Taro shakes her. She MOANS, opens her eyes. SHOUTS spur her.

Carrying Taro, she runs toward A RUSHING RIVER. THE WATER HAMMER PLUNKS. Taro is too heavy. She collapses, SOBBING.

TARO  
Don't cry, mother.

His words shake her. He looks so small and frail.

LADY TAKEDA  
Run, Taro! Hide!

When he does not move, she panics, scoops him up again to run to the river, not caring for the snow or scratching branches.

She stumbles on a washing area by THE RUSHING RIVER where priestly robes hang to dry. She sets Taro down and looks around for any escape, then spies A LARGE WOODEN WASHTUB.

LADY TAKEDA (CONT'D)  
Taro! Come here!

Taro, dazed. She grabs him, flips the tub and rolls it to the river, pulling him with her. The washtub topples to a stop.

LADY TAKEDA (CONT'D)  
Get in--

TARO  
Why?

LADY TAKEDA  
Taro, do as I say!

She tries to speak, then claps her hand to her mouth in fear and sadness. THE WATER HAMMER PLUNKS.

LADY TAKEDA (CONT'D)  
Courage, Taro!

She forces him in the washtub and shoves to free it from the riverbank but CRIES as A GAUNTLETED HAND SEIZES HER WRIST.

LORD MONKEY  
Don't run away, little bird!

LADY TAKEDA  
Hashiba!

Lord Monkey has removed his spiked helmet and devil mask.

LORD MONKEY

Lady Takeda.

She reaches for a dagger but drops it when he STRIKES her.

He looms over her but CRIES as Taro slashes with his sword.

Taro stands over Lord Monkey clutching his bloody cheek, but hesitates, and Lord Monkey knocks him off his feet. He drops his sword and grabs for it, but LORD MONKEY LOOMS OVER HIM.

Lady Takeda throws herself between them, pushing Taro into the washtub and giving it a shove with all her might.

LORD MONKEY (CONT'D)

No!

Lord Monkey lunges for Taro's leg hanging over the washtub, but Taro pulls himself inside and the River carries him away.

Lady Takeda attacks Lord Monkey with a hairpin, stabbing his neck above his armor. He YELLS and they SPLASH in the river.

TARO

Mother!

Taro stares back, holding his sword but powerless to use it.

Lord Monkey GRUNTS, turns on Lady Takeda, who smiles coldly.

LADY TAKEDA

Hashiba, the gods will punish you--

Lord Monkey's sword cuts short her curse.

LORD MONKEY

So the priests said.

Lord Monkey wipes his bloody cheek and plunges into the wood.

Taro's washtub rushes under the Vermillion Bridge toward the THUNDERING WATERFALL. He panics when he sees the river's end, sheathes his sword, paddles desperately, but too late.

Taro GASPS as THE WASHTUB PLUMMETS, ICY WATER BUFFETING HIM as he hits THE POOL BELOW with a SPLASH and loses his sword.

LORD MONKEY (CONT'D)

(peers over waterfall)

Damn!

(grunts)

Well, the cold will kill the brat!



EXT. MOUNT FUJI - DAY

The washtub carries Taro downriver, rocking over rapids until it comes to rest in a secluded part of the forest. A frosty fog swirls overhead, weaving through the cryptomeria trees.

Taro SPLUTTERS FROSTY BREATHS and COUGHS up water. He blinks in disbelief as YAMA UBA, tall and pale with long black hair and a white kimono, glides almost invisibly across the snow.

TARO

Mother?

He reaches toward her, then swoons.

YAMA UBA

A child!

(grins, smacks her lips)

Ah, but he will need to fatten up!

Grasping Taro's ponytail, she holds him aloft, floating back across the snow and through the fog, leaving no footprints.

INT. YAMA UBA'S CAVE - DAY

Taro starts awake, hanging by his ponytail, floating through darkness into a blue glacial cavern. Yama Uba drops him, and Taro hits the cavern floor with a GROAN that dismays her.

YAMA UBA

There, there, boy.

TARO

(weakly)

Taro. My name is Taro.

YAMA UBA

You must be hungry, Taro!

She cradles him, opening her kimono to bare her withered breast, pushing her cold teat in his mouth. Taro recoils.

YAMA UBA (CONT'D)

Now, now, I will take care of you.

TARO

Mother?

YAMA UBA

Yes, I am here. Drink your fill!

Taro reels, then SUCKLES greedily, his limbs swelling from Yama Uba's magic milk. He swoons, and the world goes black.

EXT. MOUNT FUJI - NIGHT

WIND GUSTS across an ENCAMPMENT on a highland plateau.

OIL TORCHES cast shadows across RIPPLING TENTS. Lord Monkey struts past with Takeda's Sword, followed by his SQUIRE.

SENTRIES salute outside a tent. Lord Monkey makes a face.

INT. CAMPAIGN TENT - NIGHT

Lord Monkey enters, kneels and bows, offers up the sword.

LORD MONKEY

It is done.

LORD ODA

Ah, Little Monkey! At last!

Lord Oda's squire MORI RANMARU gives Takeda's Sword to rakish LORD ODA who sits on a campaign stool, his sword and HELMET WITH PHEASANT FEATHERS on a rack at his side.

Opposite is LORD TOKUGAWA with a face like a hunting hound.

LORD ODA (CONT'D)

(sees Lord Monkey's cheek)

Are you much hurt?

LORD MONKEY

It is but a scratch.

Lord Monkey GRUNTS at his squire who presents TAKEDA'S HEAD.

LORD ODA

So, this is the end of my worthy rival, the Tiger of Kai? How time changes allegiances. He deserved to die by his own hand. A warrior's ode, as is the warrior's code.

Lord Tokugawa smiles politely, but Lord Monkey takes insult.

LORD ODA (CONT'D)

While you were sparring with Takeda Lord Tokugawa sacked his castle and burned it to the ground. The Takeda clan is ashes. Not a soul survives.

Lord Oda smiles coldly, but Lord Monkey blanches.