

BEFORE DISHONOR

By

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SUPER OVER BLACK:

"LIFE IS NOT SO IMPORTANT WHEN FORCED TO CHOOSE BETWEEN LIFE AND INTEGRITY." ~ Hagakure: The Book of the Samurai

As the text fades...

PRE-LAP: WOMEN CRYING. MEN YELLING, FIGHTING.

EXT. PEASANT VILLAGE - HUT - DAY

Japan. 1830.

A PEASANT MAN and PEASANT WOMAN (20s) on their knees. Mud and blood soaking their tattered kimonos. The man, so beaten he can barely open his eyes, leans against his wife.

Around them, fires burn, women WAIL. Smoke billows from a hut as a SAMURAI cuts down a defenseless villager with his katana.

The SHOGUN (30s) watches as HIDEKI (early 30s, Samurai) stands in front of Peasant Man with his hand on the hilt of his sword. They're waiting for something. Then...

Another Samurai throws a PEASANT GIRL (5) down next to Peasant Woman -- her mother. The sight of her daughter overwhelms Peasant Woman and she pulls the girl in close.

Propelled by rage, Peasant Man musters all his strength and leaps to his feet, lunging at Shogun.

In a flash, Hideki draws his sword - SHING. He cuts the man down. The Woman and Girl WAIL.

Hideki shifts his gaze to the Woman as she clutches her daughter.

SHOGUN
Execute them.

A twinge of remorse is quickly pushed aside, and with two quick flicks of his sword - SHING - SHING - Hideki cuts the Woman and the Girl down.

SHOGUN (CONT'D)
Search the village. Leave no one.

Shogun walks away and Hideki wipes the blood from his sword with a piece of CLOTH. As he does, he hears a BABY COOING from inside the hut.

He looks -- no one else heard it. On edge, he pockets the cloth and stalks inside.

INT. PEASANT HUT - CONTINUOUS

Hideki searches and finds a BABY sleeping in a basket.

He hesitates, emotions swirling. He glances at the door, then sheathes his sword and hides the basket.

Composing himself, he exits.

EXT. PEASANT VILLAGE - HUT - CONTINUOUS

Hideki steps out as two Samurai approach.

HIDEKI
It's clear. Move on.

The Samurai move on.

Hideki lingers a moment, consternation in his eyes, then he marches off.

INT. HIDEKI'S HOUSE - DUSK

KUMI (early 30s, stately) folds clothes at a table when she hears a BABY CRYING O.S. It gives her pause.

EXT. HIDEKI'S HOUSE - DUSK

Kumi steps out the front door and sees...

Hideki, bloodied after a long day of slaughter, approaches the house cradling the baby on his arm.

Their eyes meet. He stops.

Heavy-hearted, Kumi's eyes drift down and away -- a realization coming to her.

HIDEKI
Kumi. We spoke of this day.

Hideki steps forward and hands the baby to Kumi. She rigidly accepts it as it continues to CRY. Then, she notices...

KUMI
A girl?

HIDEKI

No one will suspect a girl.

Pushing her feelings aside, Kumi dutifully lifts her gaze to Hideki and nods.

INT. HIDEKI'S HOUSE - NIGHT

Hideki observes as Kumi cradles the CRYING baby in her arms. After a moment, the baby calms and Kumi settles in with her, comfortable now.

She gazes at her for moment. Then smiles...

KUMI

Akio.

She looks up at Hideki for approval. He gives it with a nod.

Off baby AKIO as she sleeps in Kumi's arms...

EXT. HIDEKI'S HOUSE - DUSK

Akio (now 4) sits on the steps, eyes closed, chin resting on her hands.

Hideki (now mid 30s, wearing half his Samurai armor) walks his horse up to the house and stops. He dismounts and lands with a HEAVY THUD. Akio's eyes shoot open.

AKIO

Otousan!
(father)

Akio jumps up and rushes to meet Hideki.

Bloody, dirty, and tired from battle, Hideki gently pushes past Akio and trudges toward the house carrying his sword, helmet, and armor pieces.

AKIO (CONT'D)

(re: the sword)
Can I carry that for you?

HIDEKI

No.

AKIO

(re: the helmet)
Can I carry that for you?

HIDEKI

No.

AKIO

(re: the armor pieces)

Can I carry those for you?

Hideki stops with a GRUNT. He looks down at Akio then begrudgingly hands the girl his helmet.

Overjoyed, Akio takes it and hurries into the house. Hideki sighs and follows inside.

INT. HIDEKI'S HOUSE - NIGHT

Hideki kneels at the table reading paper scrolls and signing them with an inked brush as...

Kumi stands in the far corner, watching with delight while Akio maneuvers around the room, hands outstretch with a blindfold over her eyes.

KUMI

(whispers)

Akio.

Akio turns toward the sound. As she goes, her hand grazes Hideki. She stops.

AKIO

Okaasan?

(mother)

Hideki GRUNTS with disapproval. Akio withdraws her hand.

Hideki throws a stern look at Kumi. She shrivels slightly from the silent scolding. Then...

KUMI

Akio.

Akio moves on toward the sound of Kumi's voice. She reaches the corner and stalls for a moment, listening.

Hideki watches with lukewarm interest as...

KUMI (CONT'D)

(softest whisper)

Akio.

Akio turns with a snap and grabs Kumi.

AKIO

Okaasan!

Kumi envelopes Akio with her arms, exuberantly tickling her. Akio rips off the blindfold, laughing. It becomes contagious, infecting Kumi.

Hideki sits stoically, watching his wife and Akio laughing in the corner. As they play, Kumi's laughter becomes...

PRE-LAP: WOMEN CRYING.

EXT. WOODS - DAY

Hideki stands in the rain as Shogun (now mid 30s) paces in front of five BLOODIED WOMEN lined up on their knees. Behind the women, Hideki and three other Samurai stand with hands on sword hilts.

Shogun waves his hand and...

In two sharp moves, each Samurai draws his sword and beheads the woman in front of him. Hideki is a breath slower than the others.

As the bodies fall, Hideki exhales and lowers his eyes with regret.

Shogun approaches the FIFTH WOMAN. She has a streak of white through her black hair. He curiously twirls it with his finger then grabs her chin and lifts her eyes to meet his.

INT. HIDEKI'S HOUSE - DAY

As Hideki cleans dried blood from his sword, Akio reaches for it. Hideki grabs her hand and gives her a stern look.

Kumi rushes over and pulls Akio away, but Hideki still grips her hand.

HIDEKI (V.O.)

If you want a sword...

EXT. MEADOW - DAY

Hideki (now in his mid 40s) carries a pair of wooden training swords.

HIDEKI (V.O.)

You must earn it...

Hideki hands a wooden sword to Akio (now 13).

HIDEKI
By defeating me.

Hideki suddenly swings - CRACKING - Akio on the shoulder. Akio winces and jerks back. Before she can rub out the pain, Hideki swings another attack.

Akio moves to defend herself. The two swords connect with a CLAP and...

EXT. MEADOW - DAY

The wooden swords continue to hit - CLAP - CLAP - CLAP in quick succession as each of Hideki's attacks are deflected. Akio (now 18) defends herself as she retreats, quickly surrendering ground as Hideki (now late 40s) presses hard.

Kumi (late 40s) watches nearby as...

Finally, Akio deflects a blow and makes an offensive thrust...

EXT. MEADOW - DAY

Akio's thrust misses as Hideki (now early 50s with salt-and-pepper hair) side steps and counters. Akio (mid 20s) blocks Hideki's attack and swings hard. Hideki jumps back evading the tip of Akio's sword.

The two fighters reset... Then... re-engage. They are clearly equals now as each attack is blocked and countered. The rhythmical CRACKING of their training swords picks up in tempo as each works to best the other.

Kumi (now early 50s) watches with a glimmer of pride.

Hideki swings. Akio deflects it, spins, and brings her sword to a stop against Hideki's neck.

Hideki gives a slight nod. Akio, in a show of respect, steps back and bows at the waist.

INT. HIDEKI'S HOUSE - NIGHT

Akio and Kumi eat rice at the table when Hideki enters looking stoic.

AKIO
 (off Hideki's look)
 What is it?

HIDEKI
 We need to talk.

Kumi takes her cue. She gets up to collect the rice bowls.

AKIO
 Thank you, Mother.

Kumi pauses and gives Akio a tight-lipped smile then finishes gathering the rice bowls and exits, flashing Hideki a concerned look on her way out.

Hideki hands Akio a blood-stained piece of cloth (same one from the opening scene). Akio looks at it, slightly confused.

HIDEKI
 Kumi is not your mother. I am not
 your father.

AKIO
 What do you mean?

HIDEKI
 Your mother, father, and sister are
 dead. I killed them.
 (re: the cloth)
 That is their blood.

Akio shakes her head as she tries to process this.

HIDEKI (CONT'D)
 I found you in a basket, only
 months old. We took you in and
 raised you as our own.

Akio studies the cloth for a moment, then discards it across the table.

AKIO
 That means nothing to me.
 (then)
 You are my father. That is what I
 know, and I know that whatever you
 did was done in honor and in the
 service of our lord the shogu--

HIDEKI
 -- No.

Hideki grabs the bloodstained cloth and holds it up to Akio's face.

HIDEKI (CONT'D)

There is no honor here.

(beat)

These people loved you. There only crime was their loyalty to a conquered lord. They were untrained, defenseless... And I slaughtered them.

AKIO

I have no memory of them, only of you... and Kumi.

(then)

Why are you telling me this?

Hideki takes a moment to consider his next words.

HIDEKI

I have trained you for a reason.

(beat)

Kill the shogun.

AKIO

You want me to help you kill your lord?

HIDEKI

No. I am bound by bushido. I cannot betray my lord, but his shame is my shame... He must be stopped.

AKIO

But if he dies under your protection, you are further dishonored.

HIDEKI

Not if I die defending him.

Akio, realizing what Hideki is asking, shakes her head.

HIDEKI (CONT'D)

It is the only way.

AKIO

No.

HIDEKI

Akio--

AKIO

-- But you are my father.

Hideki slams the bloodstained cloth down on the table in front of Akio.

HIDEKI

I am not.

Hideki strides out. Akio notices Kumi standing in the doorway. As Akio's eyes find her, Kumi turns and leaves.

Akio takes the cloth and studies it, conflicted.

INT. HIDEKI'S HOUSE - ARMOR ROOM - NIGHT

Hideki's armor hangs in pieces on rods and shelves. Two swords hang on the wall.

Hideki glides his fingers over a leather gauntlet.

AKIO (O.S.)

Sir.

Hideki turns and sees Akio standing behind him. Akio searches her soul for a moment, then...

AKIO (CONT'D)

I'll do it. I'll kill the shogun
for you.

Hideki GRUNTS his satisfaction, then he turns and removes a sword from the wall... holds it out for Akio.

As Akio takes the sword, Hideki steps back and respectfully bows at the waist.

EXT. HIDEKI'S HOUSE - DAY

Akio polishes her sword as she watches Kumi pulling clothes from a drying line.

As she carries the clothes into the house, Hideki - looking stern - stops her at the door. The two exchange words, then... Kumi cracks a smile followed by Hideki who then nuzzles his head against hers as she brushes past him into the house.

Hideki then shifts his gaze to Akio. She looks away, almost ashamed.

INT. HIDEKI'S HOUSE - DAY

Hideki and Akio kneel at the table and eat lunch in silence. Kumi then enters with more rice and adds it to Akio's portion.

AKIO
Thank you, Mother.

Kumi smiles. Then, feeling Hideki's scowl, she walks back out.

INT. HIDEKI'S HOUSE - ARMOR ROOM - DAY

Akio stands at a table as Hideki rolls out a rudimentary map of the shogun's palace.

HIDEKI
(insistent)
She is not your mother.

Akio gives Hideki a defiant look - a challenge. Hideki meets her gaze... holds on it for a moment, then yields and turns his attention to the map.

HIDEKI (CONT'D)
Pay attention. There will be six sentries on patrol and one samurai at the door to the main chamber... That will be me.

Hideki glances at Akio, checking to see if she's still on board. Akio gives a slight nod. Hideki nods in acknowledgment.

AKIO
You must enter here and make your way to the reception hall.

EXT. SHOGUN'S PALACE - COURTYARD - DAY

Shogun (early 50s) drags the Fifth Woman from the palace and throws her to the dirt in front of Hideki.

SHOGUN
I'm done with her.

Hideki looks down at the woman whimpering at his feet - the white streak in her hair.

Shogun turns to walk back into the palace. He then pauses and turns around, glaring at Hideki.

SHOGUN (CONT'D)

Hideki.

Clinching his jaw - anger seething deep inside - Hideki pulls his sword and channels his anger into the blade giving the woman a quick, painless death.

Satisfied, Shogun makes his way back into the palace.

Hideki looks down at his feet as the woman's blood puddles around them, soaking into his sandals.

EXT. HIDEKI'S HOUSE - DAY

Akio watches as Kumi soaks a cloth in a water bucket then washes blood from Hideki's feet. There's a sense that they are both burdened by the lives he has taken.

Hideki lifts his head to look at Akio, but he can't hold the gaze long as the guilt pulls his eyes back down.

INT. HIDEKI'S HOUSE - AKIO'S ROOM - DAY

Akio kneels with her sword across her lap. Her eyes are fixed on the blade, but her mind drifts until...

Kumi enters with several folded kimonos.

KUMI
(re: kimonos)
May I?

Akio barely acknowledges her with a nod. Kumi crosses the room and slips the kimonos onto a shelf.

AKIO
Do you love me?

KUMI
Of course I do.

AKIO
Like a daughter?

KUMI
Have you ever felt otherwise?

Akio shakes her head a little, still not looking at Kumi.

AKIO
And Hideki? You love him.

KUMI

Yes.

(curious)

Akio, what's wrong?

AKIO

Hideki wants me to kill him, then
the shogun.

Kumi takes a breath and nods.

KUMI

I know.

Akio now looks at her, bemused.

KUMI (CONT'D)

And I will be grateful to you if
you can release him from his burden
and allow him to retain his honor.

Akio catches on something...

AKIO

If?

KUMI

When you face Hideki, he will not
yield. Bushido says he must fight
to his death... or yours.

The realization lands heavy on Akio's shoulders.

KUMI (CONT'D)

He has trained you to be his equal.
(comforting)
You can defeat him.

AKIO

I can't. I won't... I... I won't
dishonor myself by betraying my
mother's love and killing my
father.

Kumi's shoulders settle with a slight disappointment.
Composing herself, she then takes Akio's chin in her hand and
looks her in the eye.

KUMI

I am not your mother.

With that, Kumi walks out, leaving Akio with her sword.

INT. HIDEKI'S HOUSE - MOMENTS LATER

Kumi steps out of Akio's room. She pauses and pushes down the tears welling in her eyes.

A BEAT. Then, she straightens up and walks away.

INT. HIDEKI'S HOUSE - AKIO'S ROOM - MOMENTS LATER

Akio turns to the shelf and pulls out a black kimono.

INT. SHOGUN'S PALACE - CORRIDOR - NIGHT

A pair of sentries walk past on patrol.

Akio, wearing the black kimono, stands unseen in the shadows. Eyes closed, she listens for a moment as the sentries' foot steps fade away.

Then, she creeps from the darkness and turns a corner.

INT. SHOGUN'S PALACE - RECEPTION HALL - NIGHT

Wood beams support the ceiling. Vibrant tapestries cover the walls. Torches light the room.

Akio pads along the wall, pausing at a door to allow two sentries to pass by.

As Akio reaches the far side of the room, she finds a GUARD standing with his back to the door.

Akio quietly stabs the length of her blade through the guard's back and gently lowers his body to the floor.

Turning, Akio discovers a PALACE BOY (8) standing outside the door. She raises a finger to her lips and SHUSHES the boy.

The boy remains frozen for a moment, then creeps back a step and shakes his head. Akio raises her sword, ready to kill... but honor stops her.

She reconsiders. Lowering her sword, she glances at the far door. The boy sprints away out of sight.

PALACE BOY (O.S.)
Help! Help!

Akio dashes toward a side door but stops when she hears FOOTSTEPS RUNNING up behind her.

Striding back into the center of the room, Akio readies herself as TWO SENTRIES sprint in.

The sentries quickly draw their swords and attack. Their blades CLANG rapidly as Akio deflects alternating swings.

Retreating while the sentries advance, Akio draws them toward a wood column. Using the column, Akio ducks and weaves around it, evading their swings and thrusts as they miss her and hack at the wood.

Akio dodges and darts, blocking and punching, swords and fists impacting on wood and leather.

The sentries pick up the pace - CLANG - CLANG - CLANG. Finally, Sentry 2 knocks Akio off balance. Sentry 1 lands a punch, further staggering Akio, but she's able to catch herself and spin away creating a breath of separation.

In that moment, she sees Hideki step into the room. Hideki grabs his sword's hilt, but waits as...

The sentries re-engage. Akio retreats, working them into position until...

SHING - SHING - SHING - Akio takes out both sentries in the blink of an eye.

As the sentries slump to the floor, Akio pauses for a moment to catch her breath. Then, she turns to face Hideki.

Hideki draws his sword, and the two stare each other down for a moment before...

Akio charges and swings hard. Hideki deflects the blow and cuts Akio's thigh, sending her staggering back.

Akio resets, anger building. Hideki, stone-faced, meets Akio's gaze.

Akio charges again. This time she gets two attacks in before Hideki sends her reeling with another cut.

Anger seething, Akio glares at Hideki. Hideki takes a deep breath and readies himself again as...

Akio charges once more, focusing every ounce of angst into her attack. The sheer force of her blows cause Hideki to retreat.

The two fighters move almost imperceptibly fast. Their swords little more than flashes of polished steel. They parry, joust, attack, defend, it's Yin and Yang - anger and calm going round and round.

Suddenly, Shogun slices in, blitzing Akio with a dual-sword attack. Akio, now battling three swords to her one, is quickly overwhelmed. Another cut slices her cheek. She jumps back, retreating.

Shogun and Hideki continue to press. CLANG - CLANG - CLANG - Akio's sword only seems to bounce back and forth as it blocks their attacks.

Finally, Akio lands a front kick to Hideki's chest. At the same time - CLING - CLANG - SHING - Shogun cuts Akio's shoulder.

Akio counters with a kick to Shogun's ribs, but Shogun's second blade thrusts into Akio's abdomen.

Akio lurches back and collapses to the floor. As she struggles to collect herself...

HIDEKI
(whispers to himself)
Akio...

Shogun circles around, assessing Akio...

HIDEKI (CONT'D)
(to himself)
Get up.

Shogun settles, raises his blades and lunges in for the killing blow.

HIDEKI (CONT'D)
Get up, my girl!

Hideki's call causes Akio to look up just in time to roll away from Shogun's attack and spring to her feet.

Shogun, eyes full of vile hatred, spins around to face Hideki. A realization coming to him, Shogun glances at Akio then back to Hideki.

Shogun steps back, swords akimbo, one pointed at Akio, the other at Hideki.

Akio lunges at Shogun, but Hideki cuts her off. Father and daughter only have a second to battle each other before Shogun starts swinging at both of them.

The three fighters swirl around the floor, a cyclone of silver lightning flashes. It's two-on-one in every direction.

Akio lands a blow against Shogun causing him to lose a sword. It SKITTERS across the floor, but the fighting doesn't skip a beat.

In fact, it's building in speed and ferocity. Swords, fists, feet, and elbows, everything is a weapon now and being used with bloody results. Then...

Akio grabs Shogun's fallen sword and uses it to halt Hideki's attack while simultaneously using her own sword to catch the Shogun's.

With a spin and a twist, suddenly all four blades are locked in a steel star burst with an edge against each combatant's neck - Akio with a sword held against Hideki and Shogun - Shogun and Hideki with swords at Akio's neck.

As the trio holds locked in a standoff, five SENTRIES storm into the room, surrounding them.

Akio glances at the gathering guards then turns to Hideki. With a look and a nod, something unspoken passes between father and daughter, a resignation and an agreement.

Then, Akio takes a deep breath and...

CUT TO BLACK:

SFX: SHING - SHING - SHING...

TITLE CARD: BEFORE DISHONOR

FADE OUT.