

The Day of Manhood

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The sky was a brilliant shade of orange, a deep shade that Aniki had never seen before. He had begun to wonder if he'd ever even see it again. This was only the beginning of the day that he knew might end with his own death. He had made it a point to catch the sunrise that morning.

All the other boys in his village were still resting up for the big event that night. Aniki didn't much see the purpose in that considering many of them would soon be resting eternally. Perhaps sleep was just their way of coping with anxiety. For him it was simply living life while he still could.

His gaze left the steamy morning sky and focused upon the waterhole a few feet away from him. The sound of a waterfall was enough to put him at complete ease.

He closed his eyes and willed away any thought that had been bothering him. He would've given anything to keep his eyes closed forever but someone else had different plans. Someone shoved him from behind and he stumbled forward losing his balance and fell into the waterhole.

Even underwater he could see the murky faces of his two good friends Mitsuke and Kage who were clearly the culprits. He poked his head through the surface of the water and glared at them. Their smiles faded as they glanced uneasily at each other. They weren't expecting the smile their friend gave them next.

The three of them laughed as Aniki splashed water on them.

"Hey, you're getting me wet!" said Mitsuke backing away from the waterhole.

"Oh, that's nothing compared to what you just did to me!" declared Aniki splashing again.

He hadn't been planning to take a swim that morning, but he had to admit that it felt good to be playing around with his friends on a day of such high tensions.

"What are you doing out here so early?" Kage asked, yawning.

"I could ask you the same question, Aniki replied. "I don't know about you two but I got up to see the sunrise. I've been waiting all my life just to see it. You know, it really is as pretty as the elders say it is." The three of them gazed dreamily at the blazing sky and agreed.

This was the first time any of them had seen sunrise in their lives. They were usually shut away in the dark huts, because in their village it was deemed unnatural for a boy to gaze upon something as spectacular as daybreak until the day they could cross the threshold of manhood. For Aniki, Mitsuke, and Kage today was that day.

As the three of them stared silently at the rising sun there were senses of joy, sadness and fear all bundled into one. For a while none of them seemed prepared to take their eyes off the sun from fear it might set and their lives would suddenly change forever.

Finally Aniki broke out of his trance. While Kage was still transfixed Aniki grabbed hold of his ankle and yanked him over right into the water hole. The boy hit the water with a splash and an abrupt yell. When he realized what had happened he squinted at Aniki in mock anger. Then he grabbed hold of his friend and pulled him underwater.

Feeling left out, Mituske decided to jump in and wrestle with the other two boys. The rest of the morning was spent wrestling playfully in the waterhole and lounging on the boulders beneath the waterfall.

Hours later Aniki's mother appeared at the edge of the waterhole calling for him. He didn't want to leave his friends behind but he knew he had no choice. Before he left, he turned to his two friends with a serious look in his eyes.

"Before I go, we have to make a pact," he told them.

"What kind of pact?" Kage wanted to know.

"A pact of friendship. *True* friendship."

"We are true friends," said Mitsuke, looking confused.

"Of course we are," replied Aniki. "But we all know what tonight is and that things may not stay that way. After tonight..."

"We may lose each other," Kage finished for him.

"Yes."

Suddenly their twelve-year-old hearts were heavy with trepidation. The thought of them losing each other was nearly unbearable.

"Don't say that guys," Mitsuke insisted, trying to lighten the mood.

"But it's true," said Kage. "We really don't know what tonight holds for us. We've heard it time and time before. This truly could be the end for us; the end of our friendship."

"That's why I say we should make a pact," said Aniki sticking his head in the waterfall they were crouched behind. He was hoping he could stay hidden from his mother for at least another couple of minutes. He was also hoping that his buddies couldn't tell that the reason he had stuck his head in the waterfall was to hide the fact that he was crying.

"Ok so what should the pact be?" asked Mitsuke.

"Whatever it is, it has to be strong so that nothing and no one can break it apart." Said Aniki. "Father says that those are the best pacts, the kind that last forever."

"Let's make it simple so that we never forget it," suggested Kage. Aniki nodded.

They were all thoughtful for a few moments as they ignored the sound of Aniki's mother's voice calling for him.

"How about we say that no matter what happens, we'll never let anything tear us apart." Said Kage.

"That sounds good," said Aniki.

Mitsuke scratched his chin and smiled.

"Or we could say that no matter what happens to us, we'll always be loyal to one another," he proposed.

The other two boys looked satisfied with his suggestion and all shook hands on it. After all, loyalty was one of the most important things in their village, right behind honor and achievement.

"That's simple enough," said Aniki.

His mother's voice called out to him for the tenth time.

"I'd better go," he said regretfully. "If I keep Mother waiting, she'll have at me even if it *is* The Day of Manhood."

His friends nodded and told him goodbye. Before he could push himself through the waterfall he turned back to his friends with questioning eyes. They answered him with long hugs and then he was off on his way.

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Aniki took his time getting to his Mother and when he finally did, she was not pleased.

“Think you’re a man already, do you? She questioned him.

“No, Mother,” he said. “I couldn’t hear you calling me over the waterfall is all.” She looked at him doubtfully as they began walking towards the village.

“So, what did you think of the sunrise?” She asked him.

“Oh it was beautiful,” he replied. “Just like you said it would be. It was just like all the elders said it would be. I only wish I could’ve seen it a long time ago.”

“I know my son,” she said, taking his hand. “But that simply is not the way here. You can experience things when you can fully appreciate them, and sunrise is something to be deeply appreciated.”

Aniki shrugged.

“I believe I could’ve appreciated that years ago,” he thought.

“Were you a *man* years ago?” she asked.

Aniki knew that any further discussion on the topic would be a waste of breath so he changed the subject.

“Where are we going?” he asked her.

“To see your Father,” she informed him.

“But why? I really wanted to spend some time with my friends today.”

“Of course you do and that’s because you have a child’s mind, but later you will understand. It’s tradition for a boy to spend the day of his awakening with his Father. You may not understand it now, but it’s the best place for you to be right now.”

Naturally Aniki didn’t understand, and he doubted that he ever would. Still he had to admit that it would be nice to spend some time with his father who over the years had become somewhat estranged from his life. In fact, he hadn’t laid eyes on the man in over a month.

He didn’t want to, but his curiosity got the better of him and he asked, “Why don’t we visit Father more often?”

He couldn’t be sure but he thought he saw his mother flinch at the question.

She stopped, her eyes suddenly appearing fatigued.

“Because some things are more important to your Father than honor,” she said flatly.

“Just be thankful that you get to see him as often as you do. Not that it does you any good; he can’t teach you to be a man.”

Aniki didn’t quite understand what she meant, but he knew better that to go on questioning her. Instead he was silent for the rest of the way to his father’s hut.

The way was long and when they finally arrived, it was as if they were in a totally different world. They were miles away from the main part of their village and were now surrounded by dead grass, ragged trees, and multiple swamps. Even the skies were dark with a gray so thick it almost appeared a hazy purple.

This was not one of Aniki's favorite places. It was so distant from the beauty and loveliness of his part of the village.

As he and his mother neared the entrance of his father's hut they heard soft laughter. They looked around seeing nothing but twisted trees swaying in the cold breeze.

"Up here!" a voice called.

They gazed up to see a man sitting on the roof of the hut. He had a thick black beard and very slanted eyes similar to Aniki's.

"Hello Father!" Aniki greeted him.

"What are you doing up there you old fool?" his mother demanded. "Do you believe you're still a child?" Come down from there!"

"Oh have patience my love," the bearded man insisted. "I was simply enjoying the weather. It looks like a rainstorm is on the way."

"And when it arrives you'll be soaked," his wife explained.

He shrugged. "I like to think of it as nature's shower. Who needs a waterhole when you've got rain could?"

Aniki's mother let out a long, heavy sigh.

"Will you never change?" she asked her husband.

"Not until my dying day, my love. I know what you must think of me, but rest assured that even out here in these desolate swamp lands I'm a happy man. I may rarely see the sunrise or bask in its rays, but at least I am not blind as so many are where you're from. At least I see the preciousness of life."

She didn't seem to have much to say in response to that. She only sighed again and hugged her son.

"Be obedient to your Father, Aniki" she told him. She glanced up at him lounging on the roof with his legs swinging off the slide. "And for heaven sakes, make sure he's obedient to *you*."

Aniki smiled and nodded and then she left without another word.

"Well, what are you standing there for?" his father called down to him. "Come on up here!"

He tossed down a rope. Aniki looked back at his mother far off in the distance and then at the rope. He shrugged and climbed up.

"You're quite the climber," his father congratulated him when he reached the top.

"I was such a heavy child I could never have climbed anything other than a fruit tree."

He laughed but Aniki only looked away.

"Have a seat," his father said, gesturing next to him. Aniki did as he was told hanging his legs off the side of the hut just like his father.

"So today is a special day for you," said his father stroking his beard. "I can hardly believe it's already The Day of Manhood. I swear it seems like the participants get younger with each generation. I mean how old are you now? 15? 16?"

"14" Aniki corrected him.

"I see," said his father. He looked off into space. "I believe I was 15 or 16 when my Day of Manhood rolled around. I regret that you were born so late in the year or else perhaps you would've had more time to remain a child."

"You mean like *you*?" Aniki said sharply. He hadn't intended it to come out quite so sharp at all.

His father looked pained for a moment but almost immediately regained composure.

“Something tells me your mother has been putting ideas in your head again,” he said perceptively.

Just as he said this it began to rain.

“Come on, let’s go inside,” he said. “We have plenty to talk to you about.”

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By the time the two of them had climbed down off the roof they were already drenched. Aniki was getting a lot more wet that day than he had ever planned to.

Once inside, he and his father had a seat at a lopsided table. The hut was so small it was almost impossible to tell where the kitchen ended and the main room began. The place was furnished with clay masks of all sorts. Some wore gentle grins while others wore threatening sneers. There was something disturbing about each and every one of them.

“Sorry about the table, Aniki” his father apologized. “Is it any wonder that I made it myself?”

At that moment a cup tipped over and rolled off the table. As his father grinned Aniki couldn’t help but smirk.

“That’s the first time I’ve seen you show the least bit of emotion since you arrived,” observed his father. “I think I have an idea why.”

“Why?” Aniki asked.

“You’re worried about tonight. It’s definitely understandable. I was worried about my Day of Manhood too. To be honest you have every reason in the world to be worried. I only wish to the gods that I could protect you from having to go through all of this. But then I suppose you wouldn’t want to live a life of being shunned as I have.”

“You wouldn’t have had to live this kind of life had you been brave, Father,” said Aniki boldly. “Mother says that you ran from your problems and that is why you’ve been shunned.”

“Oh is that what she says?” his father said curiously. “And you believe this?” Aniki suddenly looked uncertain. “I believe what my Mother tells me,” he replied broadly.

His father nodded.

“Besides, it must be true,” said Aniki. “You are still considered a child in the part of the village I’m from. You never crossed the threshold of manhood. Everyone speaks of you at home. You must know how they gossip. They say that you betray the most important thing in all of Japan.”

“And what is that?”

“Honor.”

It came as a shock to Aniki when his father’s fist came down forcefully on the table.

“Tell me what honor there is in slaying my fellow man?” he roared. “What honor is there in taking the innocent lives of my friends? Isn’t that what The Day of Manhood is all about my son? You are trained for years until the day of that bloody event when you finally become a man, if you survive.”

“I became the butt of every joke in the village all because I refused to fight. Now I can barely see my own son because my wife has grown too ashamed to live with me. The only reason she continues to bring you here is because she fears that if she doesn’t I’ll come to get you myself. All because of this so-called *Day of Manhood*.”

Aniki was at a loss for words. He had never seen his father look so serious before.

“It isn’t fair and it isn’t honorable,” his father went on. “I didn’t run away from my problems all those years ago. I just couldn’t bear to participate in such a sordid affair. It was all just too brutal. Watching young boys take each other’s lives in the name of honor is the least honorable thing I can possibly imagine.”

Aniki knew deep down his father was right. Regardless of what he had been taught he realized that the events that took place at the end of The Day of Manhood were wrong. It struck a chord somewhere deep within him each time he thought about it.

The event was unquestionably a bloody one. Young boys from ages 13 through 18 were given steel swords and placed in a ring two at a time. Only one boy was allowed to exit the ring with the title of honor. The other would suffer what was known as a noble death. Hence only one boy out of each pair would become a man. That was the way of the village. That was the way of life.

“I long to protect you from the horrors of so-called manhood, but I cannot,” his father explained. “This is something each generation must go through and each boy must decide for himself whether or not he wants to become a man of the village. I made my long ago and to this day I am proud that I threw down that sword. Now I’ll never have the responsibility of having murdered my friends weighing down my conscience.”

Aniki watched his father. The man was being completely sincere. He had one final question for him.

“Who are you to decide what honor is?” he asked.

His father looked thoughtful for a moment. His eyes narrowed as he scratched his beard. Finally he spoke.

“It is my belief that one cannot have honor without something else.”

“What is that?”

“That is loyalty my son.”

The word seemed to resound in Aniki’s head.

For a moment he was speechless. It wasn’t until he noticed his father peering at him with hopeful eyes that he spoke again.

“Honor before loyalty,” he said brusquely. “You still had no right to abandon your responsibilities. You should have honored yourself and your family as well.”

His father’s hopeful eyes darkened with hopelessness. He knew he could not rescue his son from the dangers of manhood.

They sat there listening to the rain beat down on the little hut. Aniki’s eyes drifted back to the strangely decorated walls where he noticed something he never had before.

“Father, what are those?” he asked pointing.

His father turned to face the wall and sighed.

“Ah, those are very important to me,” he explained.

“They are the masks the boys of my generation wore on our Day of Manhood. We wore them as we fought.”

“Will I wear one tonight?” Aniki wanted to know.

“Yes. All the boys wear them in the battle ring. They symbolize the warrior within.”

A gloomy expression passed over his face.

“They also hide the fearful faces of the young participants,” he finished.

Aniki stood up and went over to have a closer look at the masks. They were most beautiful creations. Even the ones that sneered and snarled had certain allure. It was such a shame that they were used on only one, bittersweet occasion.

“I’m not afraid,” declared Aniki. “I’ve waited for this day for so long that I can no longer fear it.”

“If you have no fear then you are a fool,” stated his father. “You obviously have not yet grasped the concept of the brutality that faces you on this day.”

“This is no game my son. This could very well be your final night here on earth.”

Aniki looked back at his father confidently.

“I have faith that I will see many more nights,” he assured his father.

“And I will bring honor to my community as a man.”

His father nodded and turned his back to him. If Aniki could have seen his face at that moment, he would’ve seen a sadness his father had always hidden before.

“You must promise me something,” he told his son quietly.

“What is it?” Aniki asked, glancing at the masks.

“Promise me that in the end you will make a decision. Promise me that you will decide which is more important to you; honor...or loyalty.”

The word resounded in Aniki’s head all over again.

“I promise,” he said, glancing again at the masks.

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When the rain stopped, father and son went back outside. The skies were still dark with clouds, which was typical at anytime in that part of the village.

“It’s such a beautiful day.” Aniki’s father said, gazing up and spreading his arms welcomingly.

“Are you mad?” Aniki demanded. “You can’t even see the sun.”

“That sounds strange coming from a boy who has never even witnessed sunrise until this very morning,” said his father.

“How old were you when you first saw it?”

“I believe I was around nine or so. I snuck out so that the elders wouldn’t stop me, and to this day I’m amazed that I wasn’t caught. And to this day I don’t understand why children are barred from seeing the sunrise.”

Aniki had wondered the same thing but he would never admit that to his father. Instead he kept his lips pursed tightly until they reached a tree where his father suddenly stopped.

The branches on the poor thing were all so twisted that it hardly resembled a living thing.

“Why do the trees grow so crookedly here?” Aniki wondered aloud.

“The land here has been spoiled,” replied his father. “It was spoiled with the blood of the innocent.”

“Was this once a place of war?”

“No. This is where boys once fought to become men.”

At first Aniki didn't understand, but when it finally dawned on him all he could say was, “Oh.”

At that moment his father did something bizarre even for him. In a few swift motions he leapt into the tree they were standing by.

“What are you doing?” Aniki asked staring at him open-mouthed. He hadn't known the old man could move so quickly.

“Have you never climbed a tree before?” asked his father.

Aniki looked confused.

“Of course I've climbed trees when I was a boy,” he said.

“You are no longer a boy?”

Aniki looked at his feet thinking of how his father always knew just how to make him speechless.

Without another word he climbed up into the crooked tree next to his father. The branches creaked beneath him as he settled himself. The dead thing seemed ready to collapse at any second.

“Wonderful view from up here, eh?” said his father.

“Not at all,” replied Aniki wobbling a bit.

“All you can see for miles and miles are gray clouds. It looks like it'll rain again soon.”

A beam of light covered the tree. Looking up Aniki could see the sun peeking out from behind the clouds. The sun's rays cascaded down on the swampy earth making it look almost radiant. Then without warning the sun ducked back behind the clouds only to reveal itself again a minute later. It was like watching a constant sunrise.

“You were right, Father,” admitted Aniki.

His father looked at him curiously.

“About what?” he asked.

“This *is* a wonderful view.”

A smile traced his father's lips and Aniki was a bit surprised to find one tracing his own. Their smiles lasted until the day's end.

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Evening arrived all too quickly for Aniki. He had reached home just as the sun was setting. In all honesty he hadn't wanted to leave his father's side. Suddenly boyhood seemed so much better than manhood.

The village seemed dismal compared to the swamp. Without his father's lively spirit things were lifeless.

People bustled about without smiles or frowns. Their faces were expressionless painting and they seemed less alive than the masks on the wall of his father's hut.

Aniki decided to pay one more visit to the waterhole before the night's big event was to commence.

When he arrived there he was disappointed to find the smiling faces of his two best friends nowhere in sight. The only sounds that could be heard were of the nightlife and the relentless falling water.

Those should've been beautiful, comforting sounds, but Aniki found that sadly they sounded just as empty as he felt. Slowly he headed home. In his hut he found his mother sitting in her favorite rocking chair. There was a fire going in the fireplace a few feet from her, but she still looked cold. She seemed to be somewhere off in her own world.

"Hello, Mother," he greeted her. She spun around as if startled.

"Oh, Aniki you're home," she said squinting.

Aniki detected a hint of distress in her voice.

"I've been given word that the ceremony is to begin in less than an hour," she said. Her voice dropped to a whisper. "You're right on time."

Aniki nodded.

"Father is doing well," he told her.

She smiled. "That's nice to hear."

When her smile faded it was replaced with a look of worry.

"What's wrong, Mother," asked Aniki, though he already had an idea.

She stared at him wistfully for a few moments before replying, "Oh, nothing."

She gave him a false smile that he could easily see through, but he said nothing.

He wasn't quite certain what to think when his usually unaffectionate mother came over and hugged him tightly. She seemed to be depending on the embrace to set things right inside her.

Aniki knew she wanted the same thing he had been wanting all day: comfort. He hugged her back just as tightly.

"I'll be fine," he said reassuringly, though he didn't sound nearly as sure as he would've liked to.

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The cover of night blanketed the village less than an hour later. No sooner than the sun had vanished there was a banging at the door of Aniki's hut.

He looked at his mother who was already looking at him with undisguised dread. Seconds later there was a crash and several large, burly men bombarded the hut. Two of them grabbed Aniki by the arms and dragged him out of his home.

Once they were outside they blindfolded him and led him away for what seemed like miles.

When they finally stopped he was shoved off his feet onto the cold ground. A man removed the blindfold and yet Aniki still found himself in a world of darkness.

He would've never admitted it to anyone, but right then his heart was racing.

"Where are we?" a boy's voice asked with a slight quiver.

"Do not ask questions!" a man's voice fired back. "Do not even speak so much as a single word."

The boy obeyed.

After long minutes of darkness, the sound of approaching footsteps was heard, followed by the hiss of fire.

Then everything was suddenly lit up as flames were born in a circle all around.

For the first time Aniki could observe his surroundings. He found himself in a shadowy cavern surrounded by what must've been at least a hundred other boys. The cavern was packed to the brim.

A tall man came forth from the darkness with his hands behind his back.

"This is it," he said, his voice echoing throughout the cavern.

"This is the night that many of you will cross the threshold of boyhood to manhood.

"Although you try to hide it with stony faces, I know that inside each and every one of you there lurks a paralyzing fear. Don't allow that fear to escape. You must only allow rage that freedom."

As he spoke he made his way through the crowd of boys who stared up at him with unblinking eyes.

"It's ok for even a man to feel fear," he went on. "But a man must learn to control that fear. Otherwise it will consume him and he will remain a child forever."

Aniki wasn't sure who this man was, but judging by the self-important manner in which he spoke he was obviously a very prominent figure in their society.

"I am Rigi," he said as if reading Aniki's mind. "That is all you need to know of me. Anything else is insignificant." He cleared his throat.

Another man came up behind him with two steel swords. Rigi took hold of them and tossed them to two boys on either side of the cavern.

The boys gazed at the long pieces of steel in marvel.

"And so it begins," said Rigi. And so it did.

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It all happened slowly as the number of boys within the cavern dwindled down. Two boys would leave and only one would return. The one who did, always came back with tattered clothes and a cold, distant expression on his face. They had changed. They had become men.

It was late into the night when Aniki's time finally came. Rigi wiped blood off a sword and tossed it to him. Aniki stared at the weapon in the same marvel the others boys before him had. It was almost unbearable to imagine how many lives had been taken by the blade. He gulped, took a deep breath, and got up on his feet.

That was when he noticed the boy holding the other sword across from him. Although the cavern was dimly lit, the familiarity of his face was unmistakable. Aniki's heart dropped to his stomach. He could tell by the pained expression on Kage's face that his had done the same.

"Come, now!" demanded Rigi.

Aniki and Kage both knew that they dare not disobey. They followed him out of the cavern into the warm night air, which to Aniki somehow smelled of death. It made him tremble.

He glanced at Kage who was already looking at him. Although Kage was older, he seemed much more worried than him. Aniki wondered if it was because he was less of a fool.

Kage dragged his sword as if it weighed a ton. Its weight was nothing compared to the heaviness of heart.

They were led through a gate and into a small, fire encircled arena. As they entered they could see hundreds of pairs of eyes watching their every move.

Aniki was placed at one end of the arena, while Kage was taken to the other. The Rigi positioned himself in the center of the arena.

It didn't take long for Aniki to notice the splotches of blood all over the ground. He quickly darted his eyes away from the ghastly scene.

He looked up into the night sky and said a silent prayer, even though he didn't believe the gods would be of much help to him. After all, it was either his life that would end in that ring, or his best friend Kage's.

With that harsh realization Aniki felt something crumble within him. For years he had kept that something erect and strong, but as he glimpsed the face of his fifteen-year old friend-turned-opponent he knew he couldn't hold up it any longer.

Losing all the strength in his arms he dropped his sword and it landed with a loud clank.

Rigi spun around to face him like a chief ready to inspect his troops.

"What are you doing, boy?" he demanded sternly. "Pick that up!"

Aniki shook his head as tears welled up in his eyes. He was glad it was fairly dark so no one would notice his palpable weakness.

"No, I will not pick it up," he said. "I cannot do this despicable thing. It is dishonorable."

He gazed at Kage as he spoke these words. He couldn't make out the expression on his friend's face.

"Do not be a fool," Rigi said rather astutely. The man seemed to think more highly of himself than he was actually worthy of. That kind of arrogance should have been unforgivable in a boy or a man.

"Pick it up now," he ordered.

Aniki shook his head, standing his ground. Still, he could already feel himself faltering.

"I will not," he persisted. "I cannot."

Rigi walked over to him.

"What is your name?" he asked a little too gently.

"Aniki Mizaki."

The man's face lit up with recognition. "The son of Ty Mizaki?" he asked.

Aniki nodded slowly.

"Hm, suddenly it's no wonder that you refuse to fight," said Rigi. "It truly is no wonder that the son of a coward suffers from the crippling epidemic of cowardice himself."

"He ran off on the night he was to become a man, and I suppose you'd like to do the same, yes?"

Aniki didn't respond. Rigi bent over so that he was face to face with the sullen boy.

"Well now that I know you are the son of Ty Mizaki I will not give you the opportunity to run," he said. He unsheathed a small, but very lethal-looking dagger.

"I will not allow you to flee as your father once did. You will either fight to the death like a man, or perish by my own dagger as the cowardly boy you are. It is your decision."

Aniki stared at the dagger and then looked at the sword resting by his feet. Neither of them seemed like a good alternative. He glanced at Rigi who waited impatiently for his decision.

Wiping the tears from his face, he knelt down and took the sword. It gleamed intensely in the light of the fire.

“Wise decision,” mumbled Rigi.

Then he handed something small and heavy and returned to his place in the center of the ring. Before Aniki even looked down he knew he was holding a clay mask.

“This is the night that one of you will become a man and other will die a most honorable death,” Rigi proclaimed.

“Either way the both of you shall bring honor upon this community, and for that we are proud.” He bowed. “But only one of you will have the privilege of bringing forth honor as a *man*.”

He nodded to Aniki and then to Kage. Then he made his way over to Kage and handed him a clay mask. He bowed once more.

“Begin!” he shouted waving his arms as if he were parting the Red Sea. Then he ran from the arena, as if suddenly stricken by the epidemic of cowardice himself. Then, even though neither of them wanted to, they charged at each other head-on.

Their swords clashed in a burst of heat and energy. Aniki felt the piece of steel tremble in his hands as he swung low and clashed again with Kage’s sword. Kage attempted the same low attack, but Aniki bounded backwards and he missed by a long shot. He nearly lost his balance and brought his sword up just in time to block another of Kage’s attacks. His friend was more skilled than he had expected. Kage was thinking the very same thing.

Kage twirled his sword around masterfully and suddenly sliced through the air, catching Aniki off guard. Kage landed a sharp blow on Aniki’s arm, which caused him to spin around in pain.

He regained composure just in time to dive away from Kage’s next full fledged swinging attack. Before he had time to contemplate his next move Kage was on him again, his blade shredding through the air like a lightning bolt.

Aniki was able to block each attack, but just barely. Even with the fires burning all around them it was difficult for him to keep track of his opponent. Kage didn’t seem to be having any trouble as he continued to twirl his sword, showcasing his impressive handle on it.

With his mask on Kage seemed like a completely different person. That was the purpose of the mask: to conceal their true identities so that the inevitable kill would be easier. Nevertheless, Aniki knew the kill wouldn’t be easy no matter how many masks they wore.

Aniki’s mind had been so focused on the masks that he hadn’t been prepared for the sudden force that Kage exerted when he caused his blade to rip through the air in a circle. The attack had such a wide range that the edge of his blade nicked Aniki’s mask, causing it to crack in half. It fell to the ground and shattered into dust.

Before Aniki knew what had happened he felt their swords clash yet again and this time his was knocked from his hand.

He saw Kage’s sword coming for him with another low attack and with agility he didn’t know he possessed he leapt clear over it.

He ran to retrieve his sword as Kage followed closely behind, whirling his weapon around along the way. Aniki was just barely able to wrap his fingers around his own weapon before he heard the unmistakable sound of Kage's sword ripping through the space just inches from him.

Sword in hand, Aniki ran forward unsure of what his next move would be. He noticed the wall at the far end of the arena and he made his mind up quickly. He dashed to the wall and quickly climbed onto it.

Kage's sword made a harsh, piercing sound as it struck the stone wall just missing Aniki's feet.

Aniki jumped off the wall and over Kage, who spun around a moment too late to dodge his opponent's next attack. Aniki's sword struck its first blow on Kage's leg. Slightly dazed, Kage stumbled back. Aniki used this as an opportunity to advance on him. He charged blade-first with a battle-cry.

Kage just barely got his blade up in time to stop him from delivering a devastating blow. Their swords clashed again and again, the sound of steel striking steel echoing viciously throughout the arena.

In a fit of rage Kage attacked fiercely, his sword spinning from side to side, angle to angle. Aniki was quickly losing ground.

Suddenly Kage threw his sword directly at his face. Aniki blocked the flying weapon with his own and it landed somewhere behind him. He glanced back and when he looked in front of him again he realized Kage had somehow moved behind him and was already grabbing his sword.

Aniki spun around and the edge of his sword struck Kage in the chest. It was enough to send him stumbling backwards until he collapsed. The battle was over.

Aniki walked over and pinned his opponent down with his foot. Kage was still very much alive, his chest heaving in and out rapidly. For a few moments Aniki just stood there peering at the crude clay mask. There was a kind of savageness in the mask; one that he had no idea was reflected in his own face.

Feeling blood trickle down his arm Aniki gritted his teeth with primal fury. He raised his sword, preparing to deliver the final blow through Kage's chest. Kage's head tilted back in expectation and his mask slipped off.

Catching sight of his friends' face for the first time since they had begun their brawl, Aniki stopped his sword in midair.

In the light of the fires he could see the wetness in Kage's eyes. He no longer looked so much like an opponent as he did a scared young boy. As he stared into his young face a single word resounded in his mind: *Loyalty*.

He gazed at his sword and another word came to mind: *Honor*. Then he thought of the words spoken by his father: *Promise me that in the end you will make a decision. Promise me that you will decide which is more important to you; Honor...or loyalty.*

Tears formed in his eyes as he looked again from his sword to Kage's pained face. What was more important to him? Was it the honor of becoming a man, or the loyalty of friendship?

He thought of the pact he had made with Kage and Mitsuke at the beginning of that day. Although he couldn't protect Mitsuke from his fate, he *could* keep Kage from harm. In the end he could be loyal to him at least.

Aniki watched his friend's eyes close tighter and tighter as he awaited his fate. It was then that Aniki made his decision. It was a blessed thing that it was so dark so that he would not have to watch himself perform the dirty deed he was about to do. Perhaps the men surrounding the arena wouldn't be able to see him either. No eyes needed to see such a terrible thing.

Aniki took a deep breath, knelt down and whispered a short prayer and stood back up. Then he took the sword and in one swift motion, delivered the final blow. A lone gasp was heard in the night. Then, just as quickly as it had all begun, it was over.

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When the night faded, those who had left home boys returned as men. Mitsuke stood watching the sunrise for the second time in his life. Now that he was a man he could enjoy its beauty any time he pleased.

He was thinking of jumping into the waterhole in front of him when he heard footsteps. He turned around to see Kage walking slowly towards him.

He had a worn look about him, the same look Mitsuke knew he too must have had. Kage stood next to him and they both watched the skies in silence for a while.

Finally Mitsuke broke the ice.

"We're men now," he said.

Kage nodded. "We are," he agreed.

Mitsuke glanced at his friend and could no longer hold back his burning questions.

"How did it happen?" he asked.

"He used my sword," replied Kage simply. "Aniki was loyal until the very end. He died a noble death even if it was by his own hand. That is something I will never forget, no matter how long I live. He is the only one to bring both honor and loyalty to our community. In my eyes he lived a boy and died a man."

Mitsuke nodded and patted his friend on the shoulder comfortingly.

"Do you believe he is with the ancestors now?" asked Mitsuke.

"I don't know," replied Kage. "But there is something that I am *sure* of."

"What's that?"

Kage gazed back up into the blazing orange sky, still astonished by its beauty.

"Wherever he is he can watch the sunrise any time he wants to."