

Birthright

Von Gary

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Prolog: Prologue

"General Hanai!"

The armored man turned to watch a servant run towards him, come to a stop and struggle to deliver his message, gasping for air.

"... Excuse me, sir... but the 5th prince wishes for you to join him... in the conference room... at once."

"Did something happen?"

"N...No, sir. Not that I know of. He just told me to come get you immediately."

"I see." His worry nipped in the bud, Hanai allowed himself to relax again and glanced toward the door the servant had come through.

So the prince had already heard about his arrival back at the capital. Not that it surprised him - the prince always seemed to be formidably aware of his surroundings - but he couldn't deny the excitement that sped up his heart at the thought of meeting him again. If the prince called for him the moment he had reached the castle, the general allowed himself to believe, he had to have missed him as well.

"Thank you, I will go see him right away."

Hanai nodded to dismiss the servant who scurried away with impressive speed, then started to head towards the conference room in the west wing. He wondered if he had acted as nervous as the servant, back when *he* had first started working at the castle.

A past memory brought a soft smile to his lips.

'You need a job, right? So how about you start working for me?'

Hanai would never forget the way those amber eyes had stared at him - *into him* - after their owner had asked him that question a long time ago. He had witnessed the same hypnotizing look many times ever since. Never had it failed to make Hanai feel as though it could stop time itself.

'Working for you? What kind of work could a kid like you have to offer?'

A loud, cheerful laugh echoed in the general's memory as he headed up the stairs and down a hallway, the walls festooned with old paintings of the dynasty. A teenager's portrait caught his attention.

On it the 5th prince looked just a little younger than back when they had first met and he had guffawed at his question. He had the same spiky, black hair. The same freckled nose. The same happy yet unreadable eyes.

'You still haven't figured it out? I didn't expect you to be that slow! I'm—'

The prince stopped his impatient pacing up and down the conference room when the door opened to reveal the general, and an expression of utter joy replaced the frown on his face. Hanai's heart leapt in response.

The moment he had closed the door behind him, arms found their way around his

neck and pulled him down into a kiss - eager, impatient and kind, like the prince himself.

It left the general no choice but to melt into it.

"You've been gone for too long!" came the reproach as soon as their embrace had loosened, and judging, amber eyes looked up at Hanai.

The prince was unable to hide the happiness that shone in his eyes though, and so the general smiled regardless.

"I missed you too, Yuu."

The prince sighed and stole another kiss before he released Hanai and moved toward the conference table, where all kinds of notes and papers lay spread.

"Father went to Lorenzia to check on Wataru and left me in charge but the farmers have been complaining about bad crops because of the new reservoir dam, the merchants want new roads, and the lords and ladies keep asking for a party...!"

"Prince Wataru? Is your brother alright?"

"Yeah, I think the visit's mostly for diplomatic reasons anyway."

"Sounds like a lot has been going on while I was away..."

"That's why I keep telling you to stay, you know?" Once again a pouting glance was sent the general's way who had joined the prince at the table.

"I'm just following your father's orders."

"I'll talk to him again when he gets back. You're a great general, but I need you here too!"

The words brought a light blush to Hanai's cheeks and he cleared his throat to distract from it.

"Well, I *am* here now, so let me help you. The farmers' problems first..." Hanai leant over the table to inspect the documents, his mind already at work.

Time passed. A hand slipped into his to intertwine their fingers while he and the prince discussed the issues. A thumb gently ran over the back of the royal's hand as the general offered a solution. A kiss was exchanged when the lovers allowed themselves to take a break. Two hearts beat excitedly in the conference room while the rest of the kingdom went about its regular afternoon business.

"I'm Yuuichirou Tajima! The 5th prince and son of the king of Glora. Nice to meet you!"

Kapitel 1: Chapter 1

"Azusa! For the last time, stop waving that sword around and go help your sisters with the crops! *Please.*"

The tall teenager finished his swing against the makeshift training dummy, then lowered his sword with a defeated sigh. The constant farm duties left him little room to work on his swordsmanship, so he had hoped some more time would pass before his mother would notice his absence from the fields. It seemed like he had underestimated her. *Damn it.*

"Alright, fine, I'm coming", he grumbled and went to store away the old weapon inside the house.

Azusa placed it on the small, wooden table in his bedroom and gingerly ran his fingers over the flat side of the blade. He inspected it closely. There was no denying that it was a terrible sword, dented, chipped and in dire need of sharpening, but it was the only one he had and the teenager's most precious belonging. Not that there were a lot of other belongings to compete with. It didn't matter.

In times when the kingdom wasn't at war and the soldiers needed, Azusa's father would come home and teach him about sword fighting. They would use the soldier's own, sharp blade to train, then. An international conflict with the Northern Kingdoms had started about a year ago though and all adult soldiers had been called into service.

The teenager had been forced to practice on his own with his battered sword ever since. He sighed, wondering when his father would finally return again.

"Azusa!" The voice snapped him out of his thoughts.

"I'm coming! Geez!"

Leaving his weapon behind, the teenager reluctantly turned to join his sisters on the fields.

...

"You know, I'd rather not have you practice with that sword, Azusa. People might mistake you for a soldier and call you into service."

The teenager looked up from his plate to send his mother an annoyed look.

"I wouldn't mind. I can fight! Father told me I'm better than some of the other soldiers he fought with."

Besides, everything was better than farm work.

"I know, dear, and that's great. But we really need you on the farm. It's hard enough as it is, and Asuka, Haruka and I wouldn't be able to get the work done without you."

She had a point and Azusa knew it. The mouth he had opened to retort something fell shut and he directed his attention back to his dinner. Vegetable soup and bread. *Again*. Was it so hard to understand that he was practicing his swordsmanship *for them*? To protect them and to, one day, work something that

could pay for a meal that was more than just... *that*?

He wasn't blind. He could see how frail his mother and sisters looked despite how hard they worked every day. *They deserved better than vegetable soup and bread.*

"I'm going to work harder, mother. But please let me keep on practicing."

"Azusa-..."

" *Please* ."

His mother answered with a sigh.

"You are just like your father. ... *Alright* . But only after you are done with your tasks, understood?"

Knowing the daily amount of work, the teenager was aware that it meant training at dusk, for as long as the last traces of daylight allowed him to see before they were chased away by darkness. But if it was a deal his mother wouldn't be able to object to his late training sessions anymore. That was *something* , at least.

"Understood."

"Azusa?" The teenager turned to look at Haruka, his younger sister's hazel eyes watching him questioningly. "Why do you practice fighting so much?"

To protect you and use it to make more money one day. There was no was Azusa could answer that. He didn't want them to worry anything could possibly happen to them, but it was a dog-eat-dog world and living in a small, far-off village was no guarantee for safety, especially with the kingdom at war.

"I just like it", was the answer he gave instead and shoved a spoonful of the stale soup into his mouth, fighting back the heat that was rising to his ears. He was a terrible liar.

"You two like telling each other stories, right? It's no different."

"It isn't?" Haruka looked at her sister who shrugged in response. "I guess it's not. I never would've compared hitting a dummy with making up stories for each other, though."

"Maybe you should make today's story about a dummy who comes to life, then!" Asuka suggested excitedly. "And he'll fall in love with a farmer's beautiful daughter!"

"No way! It has to be something more exciting, like a princess or something! You can talk about beautiful farmer daughters when it's your turn tomorrow!"

Highly motivated, the brunette twins began planning the story Haruka would tell that evening, when they would sit together in the living room and finally relax after a long day of work.

Despite the often ludicrous topics of their stories, the sisters always managed to tell them with such suspense and skill that even Azusa found himself invested in them. He enjoyed them a lot.

His priorities lay elsewhere though, and so that evening marked the first of many in which he found himself training outside instead.

Had he known that their cozy storytimes would soon come to an end, he might have reconsidered his choice.

But of course he hadn't.

...

"Hey, Azusa, look! What's that?"

The boy was on the fields with Haruka when she suddenly pointed out the thin line of smoke that was climbing skywards in the distance. *That's weird*, he thought. As far as he knew none of the other farmers had been planning to burn their fields this season anymore, and there was too much smoke for it to be coming out of a chimney.

"I don't know... I'll go check."

"Alright, but hurry. I don't want to do all the work by myself again!" She tried to sound annoyed but Azusa could see the glint of concern in her eyes and nodded.

"I'll be right back."

So Haruka felt like something was off as well... A frown settled on his forehead as the teenager jogged towards the village. He came up with theories what could have caused the fire and what could be burning. Perhaps the blacksmith had been careless or somebody's baking had gone wrong. He certainly hoped the damage wouldn't be too significant. He'd be back on the field soon enough not to have his sister nag at him.

It was when he reached the main road that he first heard the screams. Distant first, they approached rapidly as armed strangers scattered in the village and chased the villagers down the road and into their houses. Bloodied swords were swung around, people struck down like prey. Panicked civilians ran past Azusa, trying to flee from the murderous raiders into the forest. The boy himself stood frozen, unable to move, eyes staring at the scene that was unfolding before his eyes in shocked disbelief.

The rogue soldiers were still too far to reach him but close enough to be seen. Azusa couldn't avert his eyes when one of the pillagers had caught up to the merchant's son, barely younger than his sisters, struck him down with his sword and...

A hand grabbed his left shoulder.

"Son, you need to get out of here! Run!"

Azusa slowly turned his head and stared at the familiar face of the village's shepherd as though he didn't understand. Takeo's voice seemed distant, muffled by the sound of his own blood rushing through his head. What was he even saying?

"Boy!" His shoulder was given a firm shake. "Snap out of it! You need to leave! Now!"

A strong pull at his shirt sent him stumbling back towards the woods. With no time to lose, Takeo had resorted to dragging the dazed teenager along to save him. Azusa followed blindly until his gaze fell upon the fields they were leaving behind.

The fields. Haruka. ... His family.

"NO!"

With a jerk Azusa wrested himself out of the shepherd's grip and dashed back to the fields. The shepherd's panicked voice, calling him back, soon faded into the background noise of the burning village.

"Azusa!!" Haruka came running towards him as soon as she spotted him, hazel eyes widened in fear. "Azusa, what's going on!?"

"Where are mother and Asuka!?"

"I-I don't know! They went to the village, didn't they? They haven't come back yet-"

"No..." Azusa's face paled in terror.

"Azusa, what's going on!?" Her brother's reaction frightened the girl. "What are those screams?"

No. No. No. No. No. No. His family was fine. They weren't going to end like the merchant's son. They couldn't. He wouldn't let that happen.

"Haruka. I need you to--"

"AZUSA!!" He followed Haruka's terrified gaze to a bloodied stranger who came running at them, a blood-stained sword in his hand and murderous grin on his face.

The teenager felt fear rise in him. Out in the open they were as good as dead. A glance towards the forest confirmed that it was too far away to reach safely before the man could get to them. Their best option was--...

"TO THE HOUSE! NOW!"

Grabbing his sister's wrist, Azusa pulled her towards their home, away from the pillager who was catching up to them concerningly fast.

"Help me barricade the door!" He ordered once they were inside, knowing by his sister's shocked face that she wasn't in any state to make decisions for herself. He couldn't blame her - he had been the same a few minutes ago.

They propped the heavy dinner table against the door, then closed the windows' wooden blinds. A loud thud let them know that their pursuer had begun throwing himself against the door to open it. If he kept it up long enough, he would succeed. The teenagers needed to find an escape route.

...Escape... That was their only option, right?

"Haruka." He firmly placed his hands on his sister's shoulders and mustered up all the courage he had to look and sound calm. "Remember how we used to play hide and seek when we were little? You always found the best hiding spots."

The girl nodded, eyes still widened in fear and confusion. "Y-Yes..."

"I want you to go hide again, the best you can, and not come out no matter what, okay?"

"B-But Azusa-..."

"Don't worry, I'll make sure he won't find you."

"What about you!?"

"I'll be fine. I practised fighting, remember?"

Sound confident. Sound strong. Do it for her.

He knew he would die for her, if that's how he could save her. But he needed to save her first.

The door made an aching sound, warning them that it wasn't going to be able to hold against the intruder much longer.

Azusa's grip on Haruka's shoulders tightened before he pulled her into a brief, squeezing hug.

"I'll be fine. Now go!"

He shoved his sister away towards the other rooms and watched her disappear before he rushed to his own room to get his sword. One glance at it and he knew it was going to be useless in combat against someone wielding a weapon that was actually functional.

Shit.

The boy cursed under his breath but grabbed it anyway before he ran back into the

living room.

Having no idea where Haruka was going to hide, he had to keep the intruder from getting too far into the house. He managed to disappear behind the cupboard just in time before the loud sound of bursting wood shot through the room. The door was down. Heavy footsteps entered the house and moved over the creaking floor. The teenager felt his stomach turn, his heart hammering inside his chest, as his back pressed against the wooden surface behind him. His heart beat wasn't loud enough for the intruder to hear, was it? Or his breath?

His trembling hands held tightly onto his sword's handle when a small thud coming from the twins' room made him freeze him in terror. He prayed that the intruder hadn't heard it. The changing direction of the footsteps let Azusa know that he had and was now moving straight towards the sisters' room.

He had to do something, *anything*. But what-...

"NO!! LET GO OF ME!! AZUSA!!!"

Haruka's scream broke his paralysis and sent him dashing towards the bedroom. Adrenaline clouded his mind.

When Azusa came to his senses, his sword was pierced through the back of the pillager's neck and his hands were covered in blood. His trembling sister covered on the floor, crying into her hands. The boy let go of the sword. The dead body dropped to the ground, drawing another shriek from the girl.

"Haruka..."

Her eyes shot up, teary, frightened and full of relief.

"Azusa!" She jumped up and wrapped her arms around her brother, shaking and seeking comfort and shelter in the teenager's embrace. "Azusa...!"

He held her tightly against himself, ignoring the red stickiness on his hands.

Haruka's racing heart beat was as fast as his own. The teenager tried to focus on calming his sister and not the fact that he had just killed a man. Who was still lying on the floor in the same room behind them. And hadn't come alone.

He hadn't come alone. They were far from being safe.

"We have to leave." Questioning eyes moved up to meet his, and he gathered all the confidence he could find within himself to be strong for the both of them. He had to, if he wanted them to survive. "It's not safe here. If they notice one of their men is dead, they might turn this place upside down to check for survivors. ... Can you walk?" His concerned look was answered with a faint nod.

"Good. Then let's go-..."

His gaze returned to the corpse, then to the weapon the intruder had been carrying. It certainly was in better condition than the teenager's and he needed something other than a chipped and battered sword if he wanted to protect his sister.

"Come on." He wiped his bloodied skin on his shirt the best he could before taking his sister's hand into his. The pillager's sword lay in the other. "We need to hide."

...

They found shelter in the old hay barn on their neighbor Komori's land.

The owner's corpse next to the building gave away that it had already been searched

by the rogue soldiers and Azusa hoped that it was safe to assume they wouldn't return to check it twice. Shielding Haruka's eyes from the sickening sight, he guided her past the body and into the barn where they hid behind one of the larger stacks of hay.

At first the teenager had thought about leaving his sister there to return to the village and search for the rest of his family. He refused to believe any other possibility than the one that they had managed to escape the raiders and were now hiding somewhere, just like he and Haruka were.

But he knew he had merely caught a glimpse of the terror back in the village. Going back now, where he was outnumbered by armed men, to look for people he had no idea where to find was a suicide mission. One he might have gone on, if another one's life wasn't depending on him as well.

When the agonized screams grew louder, he took his sister into his arms and covered her ears as well as he could. They kept their own eyes pressed shut. Nevertheless Azusa couldn't escape the noise or the intense smell of smoke. It was sickening but he had to stay strong.

When the last scream had faded, he was still running his hand through his sister's auburn hair.

I'm sure they're okay. They have to be okay. I'm sure they're okay. They have to be...

"Azusa... Do you think mother and Asuka-..."

For a long time neither of the siblings had last said anything, so the whispered words felt out of place in the darkness that surrounded them.

"I'm sure they're okay", Azusa repeated his thoughts aloud. "I'll go look for them at dawn."

If most of the raiders had left, he should be fine. And if they hadn't, they would probably still be asleep by then.

A trembling hand grabbed his shirt and Haruka pressed her face against his shoulder.

"I'm scared..."

"I know."

"... I want them to be okay."

"I know. Me too."

"...Azusa..."

"...Yes?"

"Don't leave me, too..." The words made the boy's chest feel tight and heavy, and he hugged his sister close to hide the tears that formed in his eyes.

"I won't. I promise. I won't leave you. ... I'll bring mother and Asuka back and then we'll leave to find father. He'll be able to help us. Everything's going to be okay, alright? Everything's going to be okay."

He felt her nod and squeezed her tighter, struggling to keep himself from sobbing.

Everything's going to be okay, he tried to convince himself.

If only he could believe it.

...

All night Azusa fought to stay awake to guard his sleeping sister, wary of every sound that broke the silence of the night, until the first rays of sun announced the dawn of a new day.

The darkness had barely begun to fade when the teenager sat up, ready to follow

through with his plan.

"Haruka..." He gently shook the girl's shoulder to wake her. "It's morning. I'll go look for mother and Asuka now. Stay put in the meantime, alright?"

The girl drowsily opened her eyes and sat up as the words sank in, before she nodded slowly.

"Please come back soon..."

"I will, so don't move."

Azusa hesitated. He had never been particularly touchy-feely and yet he couldn't shake the urge to hug his sister again, as if she would disappear the moment he turned to leave. He didn't want to worry her even more by acting out of habit though... Much to his relief, she was the one who reached out and hugged him instead.

When they parted her teary eyes were full of worry again. The boy swallowed the lump in his throat and snuck out into the open to sound out the situation.

The moment Azusa reached the village, he wished he hadn't. Plumes of smoke were still rising up into the pink sky from where houses had once stood, their small village reduced to rubble and debris. Human shapes lay motionlessly on the ground. But the strangest thing was the absolute silence that lay on the village like a thick, muffling blanket. Not even birds could be heard. It seemed like all life been sucked out of the once animated place.

Everything was gone.

Everyone was gone. Killed, taken by the pillagers or consumed by the flames they had left behind. *Nothing* was left.

The teenager walked forward in disbelief. *This can't be.* He was positive that he was still dreaming. This *couldn't* be anything other than a nightmare of the worst kind... *could it?*

His head felt fuzzy as he moved through the remains of what had once been his village, trying his best to keep his eyes off the specks of red that were scattered everywhere.

Was there any chance that his family could have survived this? Was there any place left to hide?

Wandering in shock, Azusa couldn't even take in his surroundings until he stumbled over something and made the mistake to look back and check what it was.

The sight shot through him like lightning and punched all air out of his lungs. The scream that had formed in his throat, suffocated. Panic rang in his ears. He stumbled back. His heels met resistance. He turned.

Before his eyes had time to adjust to the image behind him, he dropped his sword and started to run.

Home. Home. Home. Home. Home. Home. Home.

His eyes were locked on his feet until he reached the path that led to his house. He followed it until he arrived. Then, finally he dared to look up. After he had his knees met the ground.

Their house. Their fields. Nothing had been spared by the flames.

The world around him began to spin, darkness narrowing his vision. He couldn't breathe. *There was nowhere left to go.* He gasped for air, in vain. His heart hammered in his chest. *Everything was gone.* He was hyperventilating. *Asuka. His mother.* The sight of the burnt corpse shot back into his mind. *What if they...* Azusa dropped forward and purged, his stomach no longer able to hold the weight of the situation.

For a long time he couldn't move, crying until he had run dry.

Once the panic inside his mind had been replayed with emptiness he finally heaved himself back onto his feet.

Food. He had to find some for Haruka.

Barely aware of what his body was doing, Azusa moved back to his burnt-down house to check if the pillagers had left anything behind.

They hadn't. Every single one of their pots and crates had been emptied, smashed or burnt.

It made him feel tired. Hopelessness was tiring.

Azusa sighed and turned to leave when he heard a noise behind him.

Terror shooting up his spine again, he spun around, cursing himself for having lost his only weapon. His gaze shot through the room in search of who or what had caused the sound when he noticed a head peeking out from behind the remains of what once used to be his bedroom wall. Their eyes met. Azusa forgot how to breathe.

The person sat frozen for moment as well, then dashed towards the teenager and almost tackled him down as she wrapped her arms around him and broke into a loud sob. Too overwhelmed speak, Azusa could do nothing but return Asuka's suffocatingly tight embrace.

"H...How?" was all he managed to say after the girl in his arms had calmed her sobbing. "M-Mother-..."

"Mother!? Where is sh—..." Asuka turned her puffed face up to face her brother, looking as though she was about to break into tears once again and he felt the grip on his heart tighten again.

"S-She hid me... a-and when they c-came to look... t-they almost f... found me b-but she distracted t-them a... and—... T-They thought no one e... else was h-hiding there anymore a-after s-she—..."

"It's okay. ... I understand." Azusa stopped her struggled explanation and hugged her closer against himself. His sister was trembling. When he lifted his hand to run it over her hair to calm her, he noticed that so was he.

So their mother had sacrificed herself for her family. Of course she had. Despite his complaints about her constant nagging and lack of understanding for his sword fighting, Azusa had never once doubted her unconditional love for her children. Now he wished he had told her.

The siblings held each other in silence for a while until Asuka began to whisper.

"W... What are we going to do now, Azusa? M-Mother and Haruka-..."

A sudden realization hit the boy and he released his sister to grab her by the

shoulders instead. That's right, she didn't know yet!

"Haruka is fine! She's hiding in the old hay barn!" His voice almost cracked and the new hope that rose in his sister's eyes mirrored the one in his own.

"Haruka's alive??" A relieved smile rose on her lips, new tears rolling down her excited face. "I'm s-so glad...!"

"She'll be, too, when she hears you're okay!"

It was amazing how overwhelming every little glimmer of hope felt after having thought that one had lost everything.

The teenager made a note to hold onto that feeling. He was going to keep this hope alive, for his sisters' sake, so that they would never have to feel such despair again.

"Let's go see her."

He took his sister's hand into his and led her towards the door.

...

The siblings' reunion was filled with choked laughter and relieved tears, but the loss of their mother, their home and their village hung somberly over them. They had nothing left but themselves and suddenly the future had become a scary thought.

"Azusa, what are we going to do now?"

"We'll look for father", answered the boy without hesitation.

Ever since he had found Asuka in the ruins of their house, he had gone through all the possible options for their future. He had come to the conclusion that, even though they didn't know his whereabouts, their father was now their biggest hope.

"We'll travel to Glora and ask about him there. There are plenty of soldiers in the capital so *someone* should know where we can find him."

The twins obviously had no other suggestions, looked at each other and nodded carefully.

All three knew that the trip to Glora was a long and unsafe one, but with their home gone, their choices were limited.

"We'll have to find food and water on the way..."

"Oh!" Asuka suddenly interrupted him. "I know where there's some food! Some our food didn't get stolen or burnt, so I put it in a bag in case you two were-... ah..."

She trailed off and lowered her eyes, not wanting to finish the thought. So that was why Azusa hadn't found anything back at home when he had checked their supplies - Asuka had gone through them first.

"That's great! Where is it?"

"A-Ah! I was so surprised to see you that I forgot it at home... I'm sorry!"

The teenager shook his head. He couldn't blame her. Over the excitement of having found Asuka, he had completely forgotten to bring Haruka something to eat, too. It was unusual that she hadn't complained about it yet.

"Don't worry, I'll go get it. I... should go gather some things before we leave anyway."

"You're going back to the village!?" Asuka's eyes widened in shock.

Haruka's glance shifted between her sister and Azusa hesitantly.

While she had been attacked by one of the pillagers, she hadn't seen a fraction of the atrocity that had occurred in the village and had troubles comprehending the full extent of its horror. Her twin's reaction made her uneasy, though.

"I won't be long, so wait here until I get back."

Azusa dreaded the thought of returning to the village as well but he knew that, with their current equipment, their chances of survival were virtually nonexistent. He needed to get a weapon and some provisions, at least.

...

The sight hadn't gotten any less horrible the second time Azusa walked into the village, but at least this time he knew what to expect.

Trying to keep his eyes off the the bodies on the ground and holding his breath whenever the stench of burnt flesh got strong enough to make his stomach turn, he roamed the ruins for anything usable or edible the pillagers had left behind.

He had managed to gather some provisions and clothes inside a blanket, as well as a sword, sheath and dagger, when he saw her lying on the floor of what had once been the blacksmith's workshop.

He almost dropped everything.

"Mother..."

Placing the blanket on the ground, he hesitantly moved towards her and knelt down next to the woman's body, then carefully ran the back of his fingers over her pale cheek. He paused, taking in the expression on her face. The skin was cold but she looked so peaceful - it drew a choked chuckle from the boy's lungs.

"You look as if you're sleeping, mother." He ran his trembling hand over her black hair, smoothening it down the way she had used to, then drew a deep breath.

"There are so many things I want to tell you... and I don't know if my words can reach you wherever you are now, but... I want you to know that... I'm sorry." A tear dropped onto the fabric of the woman's grey dress. "I'm sorry I wasn't able to protect you. And I'm sorry for all the times I snapped at you and got angry because you told me to do chores. I know you always wanted the best for us, and I'm sorry for having made things hard for you because I was so stubborn..." He closed his eyes for a moment, recollecting his thoughts before he spoke up again. "... Asuka told me you sacrificed yourself so that the pillagers wouldn't find her... You know... Haruka and I hid in

Komori's old hay barn during the attack... and it's the only building that wasn't burnt down by them... What are the odds, right?... Heh... Was that you protecting us, too...? ... Even after your death..."

Azusa let out a small, shaky laugh and wiped his face with his sleeve.

"Don't worry, mother. I'll protect them from now on. ... So you can rest in peace and don't have to worry about us, okay? I'll make sure Haruka and Asuka will be alright. I promise." He lowered his gaze again. "Thank you... for everything..."

For a brief moment Azusa could almost feel his mother's gentle touch on his cheeks before a gust of wind blew away the sensation. He swallowed hard and straightened up.

He knew he couldn't leave his mother like that and decided to lift her body off the ground, when he heard something hit the floor. Her ring. She must have hidden it if the pillagers hadn't found it. Careful not to drop her, Azusa picked it up and inspected the golden object it closely.

It probably was the most precious item his mother had owned. So precious that she had never worn it openly but always carried on her person, only to secretly hold onto it whenever she had felt lonely and thought her children weren't watching. The boy still couldn't explain how his father had ever managed to come into possession of such a valuable object but he knew that, between him and his mother, it had been a token of their unconditional love.

He pocketed it. No stranger deserved to come into the possession of something that carried such strong meaning. From now on he was going to keep it safe.

Longing to leave the village again, Azusa turned to carry his mother and blanketed findings back to the ruins of their house before he returned to the old barn.

He informed his sisters about his intent to bury their mother and, despite his advice for them not to join him, they insisted.

Together they dug her grave. Together they closed it. Azusa plunged his old sword into the ground to mark the head of the tomb.

Then the siblings gathered the items he had collected and headed towards the forest. Azusa sent a glance back to their old home for the last time, trying to save in his mind the sweet memories he had made there in the past fifteen years. The bitterness of their loss they had experienced. The promise he had made to his mother.

All three siblings paused for a long moment to bid farewell to their old home.

Then they turned and left,
never to return again.