



VOYAGE TO THE MOON WORLD

Original
Concept by
Nobuhiro
Watsuki

Written by
Kaoru
Shizuka

Translated by
Cindy Yamauchi &
Mark Giambruno



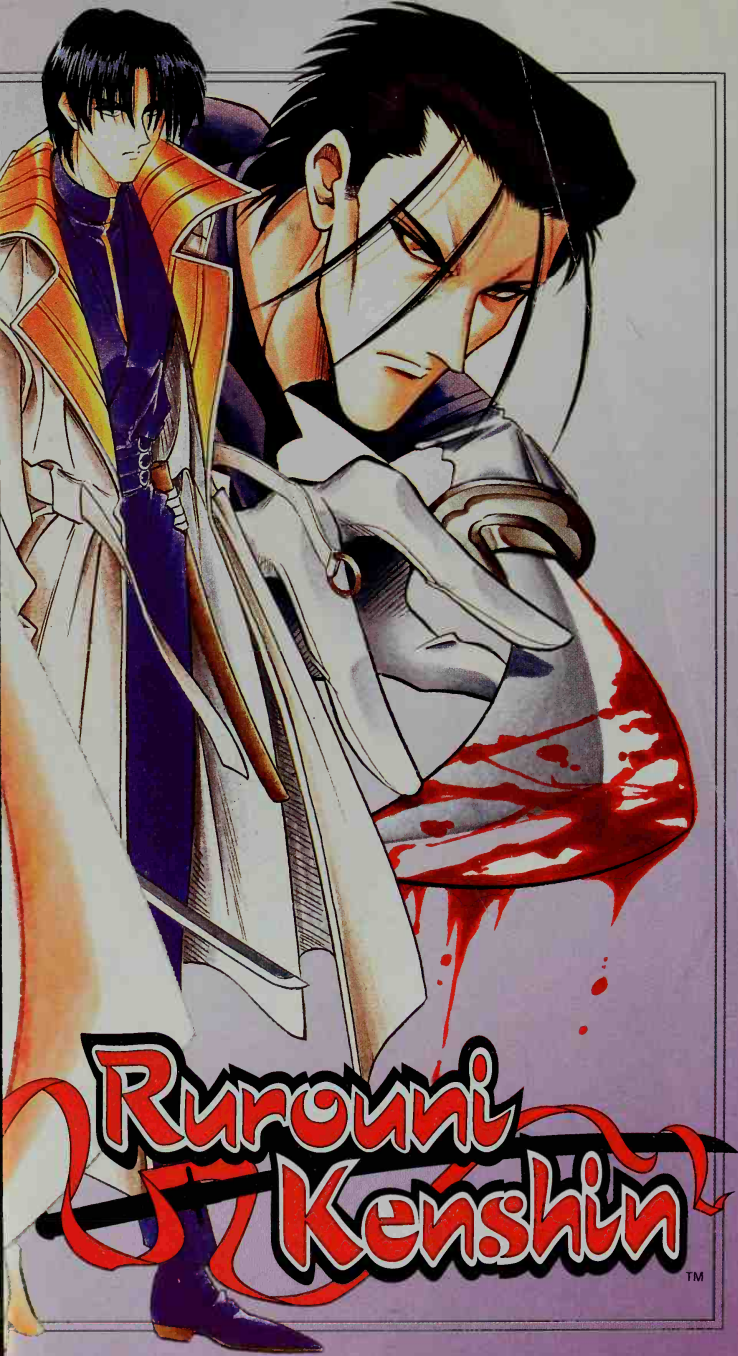
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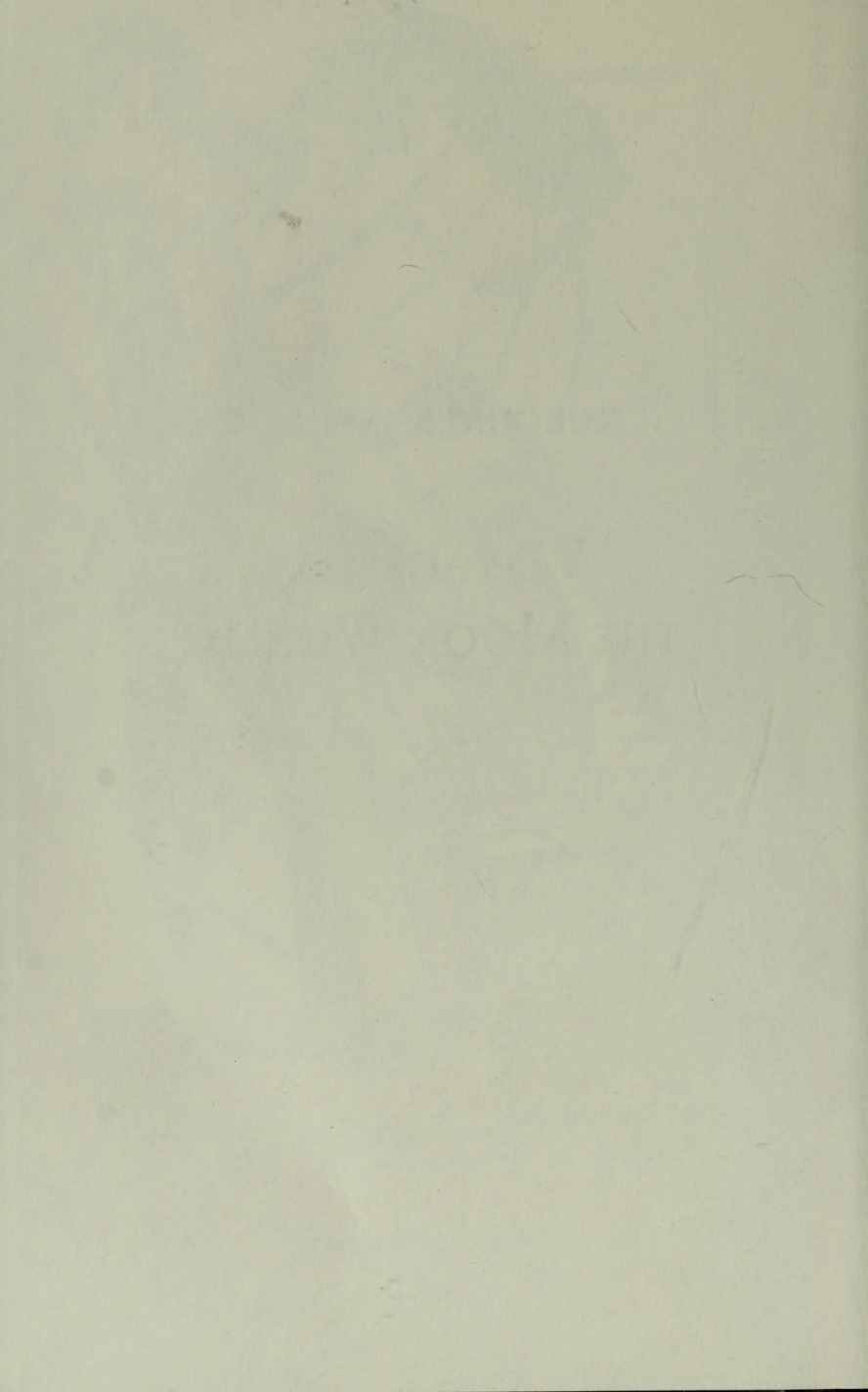




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RUROUNI KENSHIN

VOYAGE TO
THE MOON WORLD





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REGION FREE

VIZ Media
San Francisco

RUROUNI KENSHIN -MEIJI KENKAKU ROMANTAN- MAKI NO ICHI

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CHARACTERS

A patriot of the Meiji Restoration era, he was once feared as the assassin Hitokiri Battôsei. No longer a killer, he now lives his life as a *rurouni*, a wanderer.

HIMURA KENSHIN

Instructor at the Kamiya dojo. A tomboy who is quick with her hands and her words, she is also a woman with a kind heart.

KAMIYA KAORU

Currently the only pupil of the Kamiya dojo. He is a very self-assured and often rude boy.

MYÔJIN YAHIKO

A cadet in the former Sekihô Army. He abandoned his life as a fight merchant and became a comrade of the Kamiya dojo group.

SAGARA SANOSUKE

One of the daughters of the owner of a popular Asakusa beef-pot restaurant called Akabeko. She maintains a close relationship with Kaoru and the others.

SEKIHARA TAE

Although born to a samurai family, this quiet girl works as a waitress at the Akabeko.

SANJÔ TSUBAME

the first of the great American poets
and the first of the great American
poets. He was a poet of the
people and of the people's
poetry.

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Voyage to the Moon World

KATSU KAISHŪ

Excelling as a vassal during the end of the Shogunate era, he was also appointed to an important position in the New Government.

ÔKUMA DAIGORO

A student studying under Kaishū.

KATSU ITSUKO

Kaishū's third daughter.

ÔKUBO TETSUMA

A former student at the Katsu residence, he currently works for the Ministry of Home Affairs.



A Gift as a Lure

Sekihara Tae's arrival was met with sincere welcome by the trio at the Kamiya Kasshin-ryû dojo, and with particular pleasure by the two young men, Himura Kenshin and Myôjin Yahiko. Tae was accompanied by a student in his late teens, who she explained was a regular at Akabeko, the restaurant where she worked. Never one to visit empty-handed, she'd also brought a gift of high-quality beef prepared at her restaurant.

Oh, good...this one is spared from eating Kaoru-dono's dinner, Kenshin thought. Yahiko must have been thinking the same thing, for the two looked at each other and smiled happily.

The beef-pot restaurants—with their hanging signs extolling “Beef for Good Health” brushed boldly in red ink—made their appearance in Tokyo Prefecture in the second year of Meiji (1869). However, there are many

variations on the possible origin of beef-pot restaurants in Japan. Some say it was in Osaka in the fourth year of Ansei (1857), during the final era of the Shogunate government. Yet others say a bar in Yokohama called Ise Kuma started the practice in the second year of Bunkyû (1862). It is also said a restaurant that opened for business near the British Legation in Takanawa in June of the third year of Keio (1867) could have been the first. Whatever the case, back in those days, the Japanese were not as aware as Westerners of the good flavor of beef. Eventually, between the Japanese love of new trends and the New Government's encouragement of meat consumption, the public became familiar with the good taste of beef, and beef-pot restaurants such as Nakagawa-ya of Shibarogetsu-cho, Torikin of Kagurazaka, Nakazome of Kakigara-cho, and Iseshige of Kodenma-cho opened for business one after another.

By the spring of the eleventh year of Meiji, there were more than five hundred beef-pot restaurants in Tokyo Prefecture. When it came to taste, Akabeko was acknowledged to be top-notch. The key product served at beef-pot restaurants—beef-pot—came in two grades: premium and standard. To put it simply, the premium dish was what is known today as *sukiyaki*, and the standard fare was stewed beef. Called *yakinabe*, the beef was stewed in a greased pot with seasonings and large pieces of green onion, and then the boiling-hot contents were eaten with a side dish of beaten raw egg. So delicious...

Seeing Yahiko drooling dreamily before him, Kenshin noticed that his own chin was moist. Kamiya Kaoru, owner and instructor of the dojo, focused her suspicious gaze on the sorry state of the two young men. "Hey, you two. Are you paying close attention to Tae-san's story?"

Kenshin fumbled for a response, but Yahiko, though startled, quickly recovered. "We heard it. Basically, that student over there wants us to search for his lost book," he replied bluntly. Even though the student looked five or six years older, as far as Yahiko was concerned, he in no way looked as strong. The student had a very slight build, his glasses had thick, heavy-looking lenses, and he appeared fragile in every way.

"Yes, that's right. It's considered to be very valuable, and if Ôkuma-san has lost it, he said he would be kicked out of his sensei's house. Right, Ôkuma-san? Isn't that so?"

Urged on by the worry marring Tae's beautiful brow, Daigoro Ôkuma barely managed to mumble "yes" in a feeble voice.

"Hmph. Just because he lost one lousy book, that's no reason to kick someone out. Right, Kaoru?" As usual, Yahiko's addressing her without an honorific got on Kaoru's nerves, but she held back her feelings and asked Tae to continue with her tale.

This sounds like it's going to be a bit complicated, Kenshin thought as he listened to Tae.

Tae's story went something like this: The previous

afternoon, while Daigoro was engrossed in reading, the sensei who provided his housing asked him to run an errand. So, with the partially read book tucked in the front of his kimono, he went to Ueno to take care of business. His destination was the Tendai Buddhist sect at Kan-eiji temple, where he was to deliver a box of *les biscuits* handed to him by his sensei. The Fugetsudo bakery of Ryogoku Wakamatsu-cho had begun selling *les biscuits* in July of the previous year, and they had quickly gained popularity as domestically baked Western-style sweets.

"Please inform your sensei that we have indeed received it." With these formal words of confirmation, the cloth *furoshiki* wrapping was returned to Daigoro, and he headed back home.

If Daigoro had gone straight home, it is likely that nothing would have happened. But at about that time he started to get hungry, and thinking of the rather plain meal waiting for him at home, Daigoro made an unplanned visit to the Akabeko restaurant.

Akabeko was overflowing with customers eating dinner, and Tae and the other servers were busily tending to their work. After a while, space in a corner booth became available, and when the beef-pot was finally served Daigoro enjoyed his meal in bliss. When he was finished eating, Daigoro casually looked around and noticed Tae and the others still bustling about. As a regular customer, he felt that perhaps he should help out a bit. Daigoro removed the

book he'd borrowed from his sensei from inside the front of his kimono, wrapped it in the furoshiki, and placed it next to the seat cushion with extra care.

Thinking it would be good to get a bit of exercise after the meal, he helped carry meat and vegetables for about fifteen minutes, but a big surprise awaited him when he prepared to leave. He returned to his seat after using the restroom, only to find that the book and furoshiki had vanished. The color drained from Daigoro's face as he frantically searched the area. But the book and furoshiki were nowhere to be found.

Disconcerted, Daigoro explained to Tae and the other servers what had happened, and asked everyone to search the restaurant. At the end of the story, neither the valuable book nor the furoshiki cloth were found.

"Hmmm. You must be really bothered by this." Kaoru glanced at the downcast Daigoro, who looked like he was about to cry at any moment, then turned to face Tae.

"Ôkuma-san is a regular at our restaurant, and this incident happened while he was helping us out..." Tae murmured in a low voice, seemingly at a loss.

"Hmph. So, it's all this student's fault for wandering off. He's just suffering the consequences, if you ask me." In Yahiko's eyes, everything was clear-cut, with no allowances for objections or foolishness. "Why don't you just apologize, and if your sensei still says he wants to kick you out, I say

just *leave*. If you don't mind this beat-up ol' dojo, you can stay here with me."

Kaoru, who was seated next to Yahiko, had been trying to be tolerant as she listened to him speak, but when he called her place a "beat-up ol' dojo," she finally snapped. "What did you say, Yahiko? Say it again! What about my dojo?"

"No...uhhh...I mean..." Considering how Kaoru could get when she was angry, even Yahiko couldn't be impudent all the time. After all, Kaoru had total control over the necessities of Yahiko's life.

"You keep your mouth shut, Yahiko!" Kaoru's commanding words ended that conversation.

"If I lose that book, I can't go on living..." For the first time, Daigoro managed something like a full sentence. As might be expected from a man of his slight build, he had a high, weak-sounding voice, very different from the impression one might get from his powerful-sounding name.

"You're Ôkuma-san, right? So, what exactly is that valuable book all about?"

"It's a book written by a Frenchman named Jules Verne, and translated, the title is *From the Earth to the Moon*. Although it's in the form of a novel, it contains legitimate science."

Upon hearing the title *From the Earth to the Moon*, those present all looked at each other. Nothing was said at first, probably because no one knew what kind of question

should be asked.

"Uh, this one would like to know...when you say 'moon,' are you referring to *the* moon?" a bewildered Kenshin finally asked, as if to speak for everyone.

"That is correct. The story is about humans traveling to the moon."

"So, what is *From the Earth to the Moon* about?"

"Well, y-you see..." Daigoro went on, with a twinkle in his eye. "Three humans and two dogs are placed inside a hollow cannonball, and it is shot through a cannon aimed toward the moon. The cannon is called the *Columbiad*, and there are two Americans and one Frenchman inside the cannonball."

"Th-then, how long does it take to reach the moon?"

"Well, according to the calculations of a place called the Cambridge Observatory, if a cannonball could be fired at a speed of 11,000 meters per second, the moon could be reached in 97 hours, 13 minutes, and 20 seconds."

Yahiko, who had been quietly listening to the conversation between Kenshin and Daigoro, suddenly burst out laughing. "Gimme a break. That's just for kids! It's so stupid."

"Behave yourself, Yahiko!" Kaoru glared in disapproval, but this time, Yahiko was not about to retreat.

"But isn't it true? All this talk about living and dying just because he's lost a stupid book full of crap is just way too much. You know, I'd be better off listening to a fairy tale about Moon Princess Kaguya."

"Th-that's so mean... You make it sound so terrible. But tell me, what is so stupid and full of crap about it?" Daigoro glared sharply at Yahiko.

"The moon! We're talking about the moon! Traveling to such a far away place, in 97..."

"Ninety-seven hours, 13 minutes, and 20 seconds. That's a little over 4 days, 1 hour, and 13 minutes."

"Whatever it is, there's no way you could get there in such a short time. C'mon, it takes four or five days to get from Tokyo to Kyoto, even if you hurry. And I've never heard of the moon being closer than Kyoto."

"Oh, no. It's not... What I'm talking about is the latest, most advanced style of barrel, 900 feet long and made of cast iron. This *Columbiad* cannon would use 40,000 pounds of guncotton, so the projectile speed would be brought up to 11,000 meters per second upon firing."

In her mind, Kaoru tried to imagine herself, Kenshin, and Yahiko placed inside a cannonball. But instead of envisioning the cannonball flying up in the air, she could only conjure the image of the trio burning to death. It just didn't seem very realistic.



Sensei Katsu Kaishû

To Kaoru's right, the endless procession of questions and answers between Yahiko and Daigoro continued.

"So tell me, when is this departure to the moon going to happen?"

"December 1st, 10:46 p.m. No, to be exact, 10:46 p.m. and 35 seconds."

"December 1st of what year of Meiji?"

"Um, that's...well... In the beginning of the book, it says the late 1860s..."

"See, I told ya! It's all nonsense. The 1860s passed by a long time ago. This is the 11th year of Meiji, 1878! I've never read anything in the newspapers about someone traveling to the moon in any part of the world. That book's total nonsense..."

Having had the inconsistencies in the story of *From the*

Earth to the Moon pointed out to him, Daigoro had no choice but to fall silent. Looking down, his fragile body sagging, Daigoro was a pitiful sight. But Yahiko's attack was still not over.

"Science, you say? Hmph. The world has no time for that nonsense. Hey, you must've heard about it, too—that rumor about ghostly sightings, right smack in the middle of Tokyo, in broad daylight!"

Daigoro was confused and didn't know how to reply.

"Listen, you stop that now, Yahiko!" Kaoru scolded loudly. But Yahiko, on a roll, refused to stop.

"Shut up, ugly! I bet you're really scared, too!"

"What did you just say? You pointy-eyed shrimp!"

"Say that again!"

As quick with their fists as with their tongues, the pair narrowly avoided getting into a scuffle, thanks to Tae chiming in to say she had also heard that rumor.

"I've heard that it could be the vengeful ghost of a monk who hanged himself during the Revolution," said Tae.

It was true that around this time, there was talk of a strange voice heard at the Homei-in temple of Kanda Myôjinshita. As a matter of fact, there were more than a few people who heard this voice and were uncertain of whether it belonged to a man or a woman. Talking about ghostly voices in this modern era might seem ridiculous, but because of the incident, a soba place near Homei-in called Kagetsu-an was almost driven out of business due to the sudden drop in customer traffic in the area.

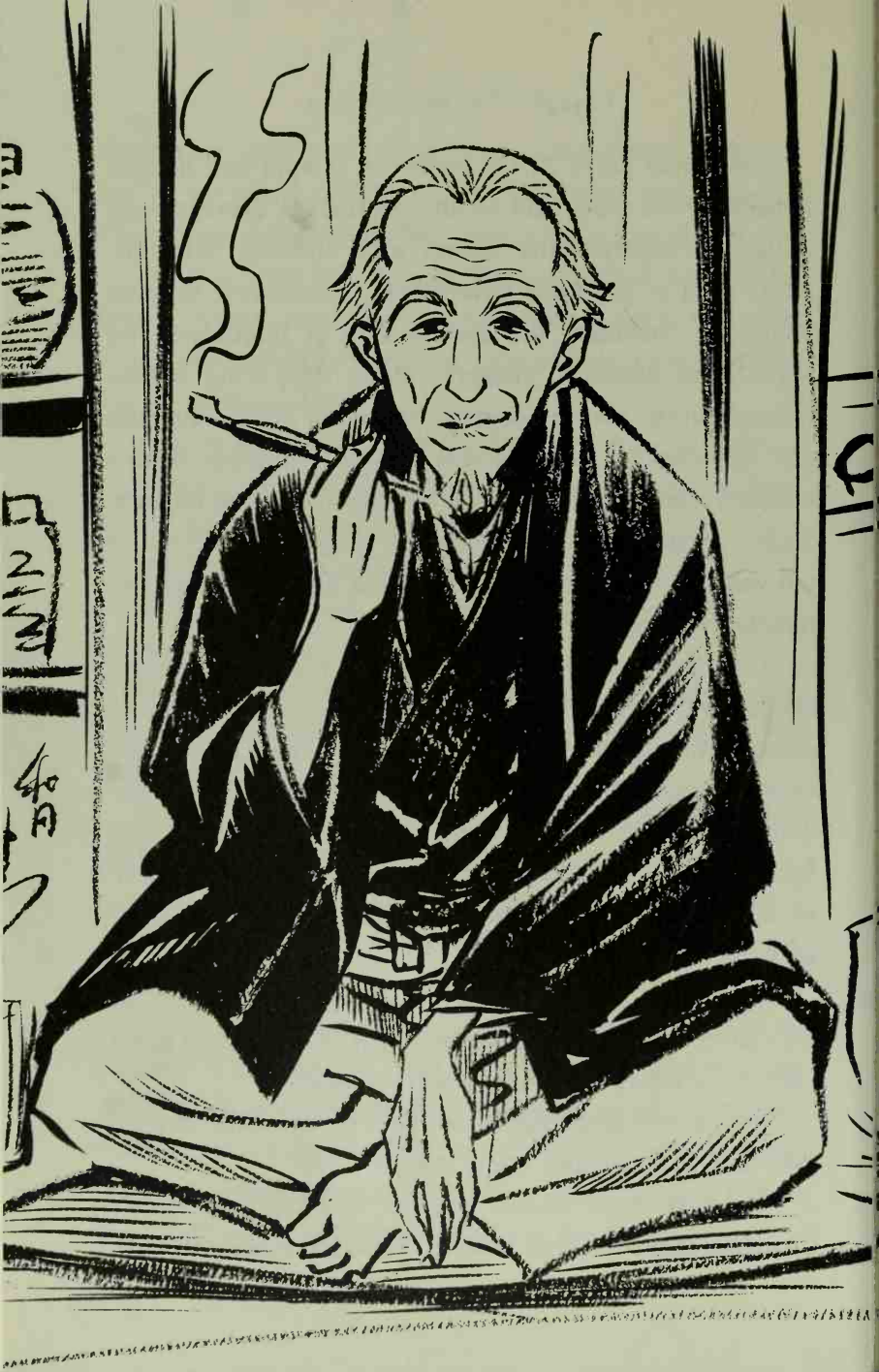
A Buddhist monk at the Homei-in temple had hanged himself in the main hall when government decrees were issued to separate the Shinto and Buddhist religions. As a result of the Meiji government's movement to favor Shintoism, including the abolishment of Buddhism and removal of Buddhist imagery, many despairing monks throughout the country committed suicide due to hardship and oppression. Even ancient temples suffered—Nara's Kofukuji temple had to auction off their five-tiered pagoda. Such tragedies occurred numerous times during the first ten years of Meiji, and many Buddhist altar trappings and temple treasures were sold off.

In contrast to the commotion in his surroundings, Daigoro's depressed state of mind was perhaps akin to the disappointment the monks had felt. Kaoru and Tae wanted to offer something comforting, but not knowing what to say at a time like this, they were silent. Kenshin placed his hand lightly on Daigoro's shoulder and said with a smile, "The moon is far indeed. But Daigoro-dono, wouldn't it be great to go there someday?"

"Yes." With a look of relief, Daigoro nodded firmly. "In the future, I'd like to be a scientist. For that reason, I don't want to be expelled from my sensei's house."

"We haven't asked you about your sensei, have we? So, who is this sensei, and where does he live?"

Daigoro replied in a barely audible voice, "He is the former Councilor and Lord High Admiral, Katsu Yasuyoshi-sama."



His title, Kaishû, was better known than his newly assumed name, Yasuyoshi, which was derived from rearranging the characters of the position he formerly held with the Shogunate government, Protector of Awa Province.

"When you say Katsu, do you mean Katsu Kaishû, who surrendered Edo Castle?" Yahiko spoke the name with mixed emotions. Yahiko's father had been a low-ranking vassal of the Shogunate government who received an annual stipend of 30-koku 2-nin buchi, a small salary equal to that of a police detective of the time. He had been a regimental soldier in the Shogi-tai, who died in combat at their base in the mountains of Ueno, where they were resisting the imperial troops who were following the tide that led to the overthrow of the government.

Wasn't Katsu Kaishû the very man who acted as a representative of the Shogunate government, allowing imperial troops to enter the city without résistance? As far as Yahiko was concerned, the man was a traitor who might well have been the cause of his father's death in battle, which later contributed to his mother's illness and eventual death.

The name weighed heavily on Kenshin as well, for Katsu Kaishû used to aid the Ishin Shishi during the final era of the Shogunate government, when Kenshin was known as Hitokiri Battôsei.

A dark, complex mood settled upon the group, but Tae helped to turn things around. "In the beginning, I thought

about asking Sanosuke-san to help search for the book, since he's behind in paying his tab at the restaurant. However, when I went to visit him at the Gorotsuki row houses on the edge of town, he was out somewhere. So, I decided to ask Kaoru-san, even though I was sure it would be troublesome for her. But then I remembered that she has *two* reliable swordsmen at her place."

Yahiko felt better when he heard Tae say "*two* swordsmen." Recently, he had been getting rather sick of doing frequent chores for Kaoru on top of his *kenjutsu* sword training. Beef-pot was included in the deal, so regardless of the issues, it seemed like a good idea to pitch in and help.

"Hmmm. Katsu Kaishû is your sensei, then." Kenshin crossed his arms over his chest. "So, Daigoro-dono, do you have any idea, any kind of clue as to when the book disappeared within that fifteen minute period?"

"Yes. Right before I went to the restroom, I glanced toward the seat. The furoshiki cloth was there for sure."

Then Daigoro murmured in a low voice, "Most likely, it was while I was taking care of business."

"It was probably stolen, then." Kenshin now looked concerned. "Tae-dono, at the time were there any unfamiliar customers at the restaurant? Was there anyone besides your regulars?"

Tae tried very hard to recall the details. Suddenly, she remembered something. "Now that you mention it, there were two customers I'd never seen before. One of them was

a gentleman in Western-style clothing, fair-skinned, with a moustache. The other man..." She glanced at the sword lying to the right of Kenshin. "Although the law prohibits it, the other man wore a sword on his hip. An unusually long sword, with a red hilt. He was a ruddy-faced man with a large build, almost like a sumo wrestler. The left side of his face was badly pockmarked from his cheek to his chin, and he had mean-looking eyes."

"Did those two come to the restaurant before or after Daigoro-dono?"

"It was after. Their seats were far apart, though."

Daigoro must have been followed, Kenshin thought. *So, their target was the book in Daigoro's possession?* While he turned these thoughts over in his mind, a revelation struck Kenshin, but he chose not to mention it. In a quiet voice, he said, "In any case, first and foremost, we should pay a visit to Katsu-sensei."

"Then, you're saying you'll help us out?"

Kenshin watched as a look of joy swept across Tae's face. Next, he glanced at Daigoro sitting beside her, who still seemed to be depressed. Kenshin asked the question that had been bothering him. "Katsu-san...er, Katsu-sensei has already been notified of this, yes?"

"Yes."

"And what did sensei tell you?"

"At first, he yelled, 'You stupid fool!' quite vehemently. After that, when I mentioned the name Akabeko, it turned

out that he knew the place and said that restaurant's beef-pot was delicious, and it looked to me as if his anger had subsided a bit. Then he said 'Ôkuma, go find it, even if it kills you. Otherwise, I won't let you back in the house, and I will drag you down to the police if need be...'"

"Anything more than that?"

"Yes, he said to settle the matter by the day after tomorrow, and that he can't wait any longer than that."

"Is that so..." Kenshin now felt like helping Daigoro out. It wasn't because he had found out that Daigoro's sensei was Katsu Kaishû. Leading the life of a rurouni, Kenshin saw some of himself in Daigoro, who dreamed of the moon.

Daigoro-dono must be wandering the endless trail to the moon. The thought moved Kenshin's heart. "All right, then," said Kenshin as he stood up.

Kaoru quickly asked where he was going, and Kenshin smiled. He was not rushing off—he'd felt his hunger become unbearable as he'd listened to Tae and Daigoro's story, and was ready to alleviate the problem. "This one will have to eat first, which is fortunate, since this one would like a taste of that beef while Tae-san is still here."

Once he decided to help Daigoro, Kenshin quickly sprang into action. His mouth stuffed with beef, he instructed Daigoro, Kaoru, and Yahiko to make the rounds of used booksellers, bookstores, newspaper agencies, and publishers.

According to Daigoro, the science adventure novel by

Jules Verne had been printed in the French newspaper *Journal des Débats* as a series entitled, "De la Terre à la Lune," and was compiled as a book later that year. The year was 1865, the first year of Keio, in the final era of the Shogunate government.

Jules Verne spent the next five years expanding on the story in *From the Earth to the Moon*, and finally published the sequel *Around the Moon*, which detailed the moon journey itself. That was in 1870, the third year of Meiji, and of course the story hadn't been translated into Japanese yet, so there were very few people who knew about Verne's work.

Katsu Kaishû said that his eldest son, Koroku—who was studying abroad at the Annapolis Naval Academy in the United States—had brought the book home with him last December as a gift. Katsu liked its unconventional content, and had treasured it ever since.

"All because I insisted on borrowing a treasured book that sensei received from the young master..." Daigoro said in a troubled manner, as the thick lenses of his glasses fogged up, obscuring the slightly droopy eyes in his long, tanned, almost horse-like face. Because he felt so remorseful, he hardly touched Tae's beef-pot at all.

Not wanting to see Daigoro in such a state, Kenshin replied, "Daigoro-dono, it's not good for you to go hungry. It has been a while since this one has enjoyed such a delicious dinner and it mustn't go to waste."

Kaoru, who was seated beside him, caught his slip of the tongue with her sharp ears. "Kenshin, what do you mean, you haven't had such a delicious dinner in a while? Are you saying the dinner I cook for you every night doesn't taste good?"

Cornered, Kenshin nervously replied, "N-no, of course that isn't the case. But, because a professional charges money, it naturally has to taste better, you see..." Despite his weak excuse, Kaoru appeared calm, but Kenshin knew her anger was bubbling just below the surface. Had Tae not been there, Kaoru might have thrown everything she could lay her hands on at Kenshin. Although gentle affection shone in the dark depths of Kaoru's eyes and her every movement was exquisite, she was quick with her hands and words, and her strong-minded attitude was not to be underestimated.

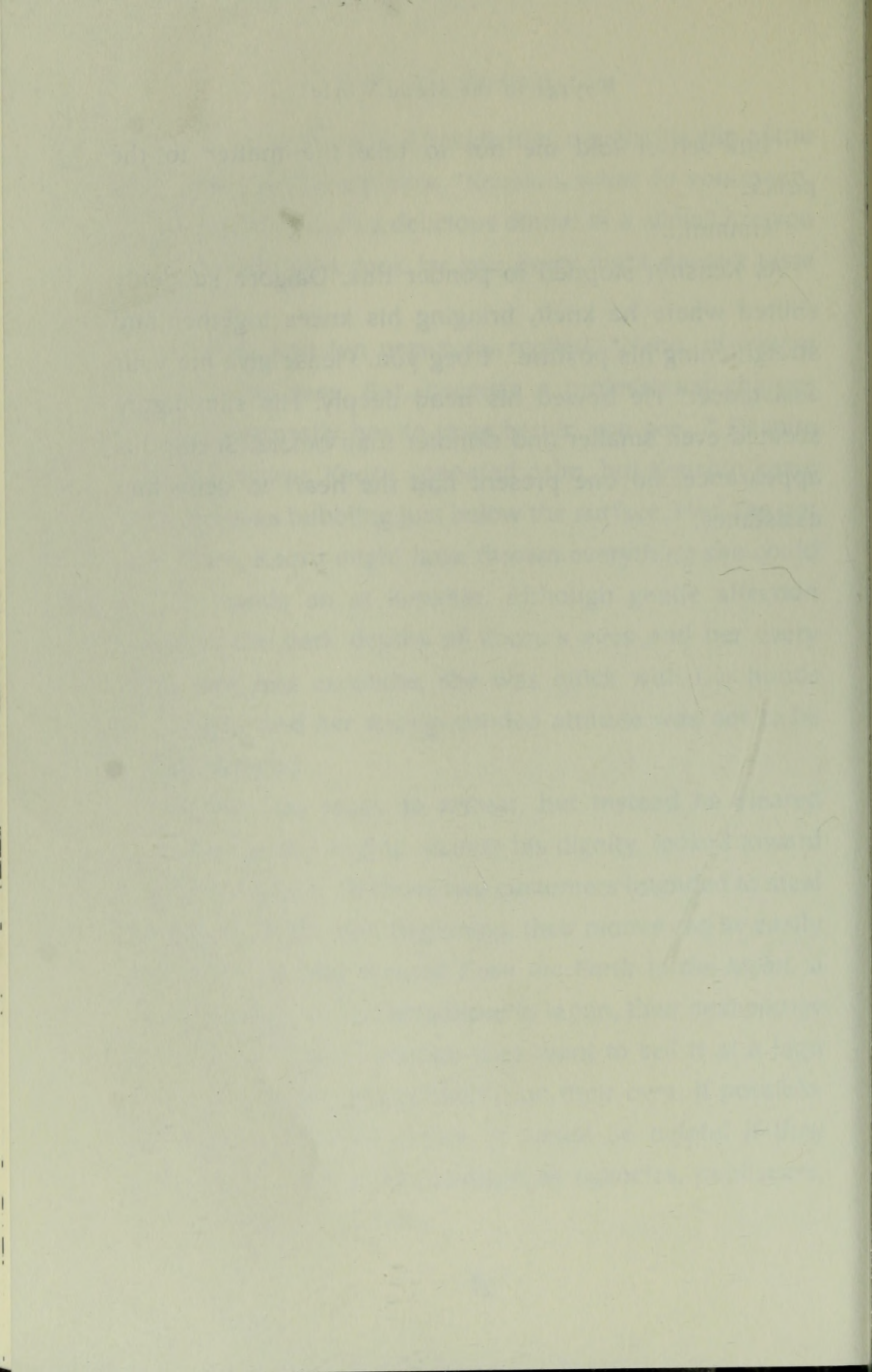
Kenshin was ready to retreat, but instead he cleared his throat loudly as if to recover his dignity, looked toward Daigoro and said, "If those two customers intended to steal the book from the very beginning, their motive can be easily pinpointed. If they wanted *From the Earth to the Moon*, a precious book not yet introduced in Japan, their next course of action is limited, whether they want to sell it at a high price or translate and publish it on their own. If possible, we should notify the police. It would be helpful if they would check with all the newspaper agencies, publishers, and bookstores in the city."

Voyage to the Moon World

"But sensei told me not to take the matter to the police."

"Hmmm..."

As Kenshin stopped to ponder this, Daigoro suddenly shifted where he knelt, bringing his knees together and straightening his posture. "I beg you. Please give me your assistance." He bowed his head deeply. His slim figure seemed even smaller and skinnier than before. Seeing his appearance, no one present had the heart to deny him assistance.





For and Against the Moon Voyage

The time was a little past eight o'clock. The night was lit by light leaking from the houses lining the street. Kenshin hurried as he followed the map Daigoro had drawn for him. As if to race him, two rickshaws passed Kenshin and disappeared.

We will make inquiries at the publishers and bookstores tomorrow, but there is something this one needs to be certain of tonight, Kenshin thought.

The sudden visit from the peculiar guest and his unusual story had aroused Kenshin's curiosity somewhat, but there was something about the story that felt strange, like the awkward feeling of the rarely-worn *haori* jacket on his shoulders, and he just couldn't get it off his mind. Was it

because of that outrageous tale of the moon voyage?

He hadn't wanted to wear the haori jacket at all. But he was going to visit the former Councilor and Lord High Admiral Katsu Kaishû, and Kaoru insisted that going in his casual wear would be impolite, so she lent him her late father's kimono. The awkward feeling that came from his unfamiliar wardrobe couldn't be helped. Kenshin smiled with a touch of bitterness, but it didn't take long for the smile to disappear from his face.

He felt a presence after he'd walked about two *cho* from the Kamiya dojo. He casually looked over his shoulder, but there was no indication of anyone approaching.

Kenshin picked up his pace and pushed on for another three *cho* or so, then ran swiftly to hide in an alley. He pressed his left thumb against the guard of his *sakabatô*, releasing it from the sheath. The blade on his sword was reversed, making a cutting or killing blow impossible in a typical swordfight. Kenshin was aware of this, but nevertheless he was on guard, meaning the presence he felt behind him posed a threat.

He probably followed this one all the way from the dojo. It takes an extraordinary ability to go unnoticed for more than two cho. Kenshin held his breath and waited for movement behind him. He no longer felt the presence, and relaxed his guard, but moments later the dark silhouette of a large man slowly crossed the entrance to the alley and walked on. Kenshin could clearly make out the man's two swords

in the darkness, and one of them was long, with a red hilt. Kenshin held his breath again. Suddenly, the man returned, and once again slowly passed in front of the mouth of the alley. Kenshin emerged into the main street and slid his sword silently from the sheath.

Kenshin's attack seemed to slash through the air at the very moment that the man began to turn around, but the blow was deflected with a heavy thud. The enormous shadowed figure ran off without a sound, crossed the nearby bridge, and disappeared into the darkness on the opposite shore. Despite his bulk, the opponent's agility was formidable. Kenshin's wrists and palms were still numb from his blow being deflected. Kenshin sheathed his sakabatô, and the numbness lingered as he massaged his hand.

This is indeed interesting... The prowler must have been a member of the gang that stole the furoshiki-wrapped book from Daigoro, and must have followed Daigoro to the dojo earlier. Kenshin knew that the prowler was probably trying to find out who Kenshin was—this new player who had left Daigoro behind after nightfall—and where he was going. And the prowler wouldn't forget that this new enemy possessed formidable skill with a sword. Kenshin started walking slowly down the dark street. He felt that he was now involved in a baffling struggle, whether he liked it or not.

It was getting foggy and the night air was warm and damp. The lights hanging from the eaves of the merchants'

houses looked blurred in the fog.

One hour later, Kenshin arrived at Katsu Kaishû's residence in Akasaka, Hikawa-cho Yon-banchi. When he announced his name and the purpose of his visit before the main entrance, a woman came through a small, low side gate. She was a beauty—petite with a slender waist, twinkling eyes and slightly stern features. Combined, they displayed the typical charm of a young woman, making her all the more attractive in the eyes of men. The elegance of her fine upbringing could be seen in her dress and deportment.

About the same age as Tae-san, perhaps? Kenshin's guess was a good one, but as she briskly led him forward, he did make the mistake of assuming she was a maid in Katsu's household. He would later discover that the woman was Katsu's third daughter, Itsuko.

She guided Kenshin through a long, dimly lit hall, turning first left, then right, then through a *tatami* mat-lined hallway before finally ushering him into a room far in the back. On the way, they passed a small man who appeared to be a servant. The man, in his fifties and wearing shabby clothes, bowed his already lowered head as he passed Kenshin.

In the eight *tatami*-mat room, a lamp burned brightly, prepared to welcome a guest. A freestanding armrest was positioned a short distance from the lamp. The master of the house must sit there. An imported clock on a stand

had been placed in the alcove. But the room looked quite dreary otherwise, with disorderly piles of books stacked everywhere.

"Please wait here for a moment," Kenshin's guide Itsuko said in a brisk tone, then politely closed the sliding *fusuma* door and left.

The fusuma door facing the hallway opened and Itsuko returned, this time carrying a tea set. Itsuko politely offered some tea to Kenshin, then placed the set by the master's seat and quietly left the room.

Silence fell over the room; a silence that was absolute. Surely, *Daigoro's studies would progress very well in this kind of environment*, Kenshin thought, nodding to himself. Suddenly, breaking the silence, the loud laughter of a man echoed throughout the house. The laughter was distant, but it sounded youthful and candid. It was followed by a dignified cough, and it appeared that the source of the laughter was approaching.

Hmmm...could it be...?

The fusuma door on the opposite side of the hallway opened, and the source of the laughter and cough made his appearance. He wasn't a very tall man, but looked dignified in his haori jacket decorated with a family crest. He probably stood less than five *shaku*, one *sun*, about 4 feet 11 inches. The man was in his mid-fifties, and the beard on his chin looked rather sparse.

As this one expected! Kenshin, while on his knees in a deep

bow, saw with his keen eyes that the man they had passed earlier—the one who looked like a servant—was indeed the master of the house, Katsu Kaishû.

"I am Katsu Yasuyoshi. I am told this midnight visit concerns Ôkuma Daigoro, but what could this be about?" In a crisp Edo dialect, Kaishû urged Kenshin on as he took hold of the cup in front of him and sipped some tea. His tone was breezy, but the eyes underneath their aging lids had a fierce glow, and were piercingly sharp as he gazed at Kenshin.

Kenshin maintained his silence, and Kaishû spoke again.

"Oh, don't be so darn serious. Himura Kenshin-san, is it?"

"Yes," Kenshin replied, still in the same position.

"Himura-san, I've heard that our Ôkuma is in your care. So, what's going on at this hour...?"

"Katsu-sensei, it is this one that needs to ask a question. What is the purpose of luring this one to meet with you?" Kenshin said in a quiet but somewhat accusatory tone.

Kaishû stirred his small body to shift his knees toward Kenshin. Then suddenly, he laughed out loud. "Ha, ha, ha, just as I expected...I have to say, I'm still a pretty good judge of people."

Kenshin waited silently for Kaishû to continue.

"Yes indeed, you guessed right. I just knew from the very beginning that you were going to visit me tonight." Kaishû

offered some tea to Kenshin as he continued. "You know, that beef-pot restaurant Akabeko has been my favorite place for some time. That fool Ôkuma may not remember, but I was the one who took him there the first time. You saw right through it, but I often go there alone, incognito, to eat the 'standard fare.' Some time ago, I spotted you and your comrades by chance, while you were there for a meal. I've heard you're a regular at the place. You see, while I may look like this now, I used to be a swordsman. I was a pupil of Shimada Toranosuke-sensei of Jiki Shinkage-ryû before the Revolution. I even have the certificate of proficiency. Used to earn my living that way, too. But even so, when I took one look at you, a shiver ran up my spine. You look like him—the man who used to personally guard me in the days at the end of the Shogunate era. Okada Izô was his name—a good man—but everyone used to fear him, and called him Hitokiri Izô." Kaishû smiled as he said this, and leaned on the nearby armrest.

Kenshin's eyebrow twitched slightly at the word hitokiri, but he otherwise remained expressionless as he listened to Kaishû.

"Say, I reckon you're pretty good at this," Kaishû said, patting his right arm lightly with his left palm, a gesture that suggested Kenshin was a skilled swordsman. "You're good, but you kind of smell like Izô. Well, to tell you the truth, I was wondering until a moment ago whether I should ask you or not. But Itsuko, who greeted you—by the way she's

my third daughter—that girl said you looked like a good-natured person. When she told me that out in the hallway, I couldn't help laughing out loud. But I think I'll trust the intuition of Ôkuma, who relies on you, and my daughter, who says you're good. Himura-san, would you please help me?"

Kenshin was taken aback to see Kaishû bow his head meekly. *How should this one reply? And if this one is given details about the kind of help needed, involvement may become unavoidable.* Such were the concerns in the back of his mind. "Katsu-sensei, this one only meant to lend a helping hand to Ôkuma-dono, to look for his lost book. As for the other matter, uh..."

"I heard, Himura-san. My request may seem irrelevant, but in the end, it's not entirely unrelated to what Ôkuma lost." Kaishû smiled bitterly.

"Is that book called *From the Earth to the Moon* so very important to you, sensei?"

"Hmm... It is indeed a very interesting book, but I don't believe in the content at all. Did Ôkuma tell you what's in that book?"

"Yes, just the outline."

"It would probably fool a woman or a child, but those who have studied science even a little bit can easily tell right off that it's bogus. You see, Himura-san..."



Kaishû was talkative. He went on for some time, attacking Jules Verne's *From the Earth to the Moon*. "Placing three people in a cannonball and firing it from a cannon with a big bang... Realistically, this is impossible in the first place. Nine times out of ten, chances are the people inside wouldn't survive the shock of the discharge. Besides, a cannon powerful enough to reach the moon doesn't exist," Kaishû said. "You're probably too young to remember, but there was the Armstrong cannon that demonstrated its power during the Revolution at the end of Shogunate era. Yeah, it's the cannon that's fired to signal the noon hour on the Imperial Palace grounds. It's the most powerful cannon in the world, but its range is at best four to five thousand meters. At the time, the twenty-four pound cannon in Japan said to have the longest range was limited to 2,800 meters. Just look at what's described in that book: 86,410 *lieue*! That's 86,410 ri, close to 340,000 kilometers! If you could even reach that neutral point where the earth's gravity and the moon's gravity are evenly balanced... If you could make it to that point—which, if I'm not mistaken, is 9/10 of the distance between the two—the cannonball will become weightless and fall to the surface due only to the moon's pull. It's an outrageous story to begin with."

Oro...

"Let's just say there were a fantastic cannon that could shoot cannonballs far, far away. Don't tell me there's a metal that can withstand the kind of shock produced when

fired." Here, Kaishû cited an old Chinese proverb about self-contradiction, in which a merchant hypes his "unstoppable spears" and "impenetrable shields" until someone asks what would happen if they were used against each other. This was unsurprising from a man who spent his youth during the end of the Shogunate era as a swordsman, aspired to learn the Dutch language, studied in the Nagasaki Naval Academy, and then became one of the first Japanese to travel to the United States. His theory was flawless, as expected from a crafty old badger.

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The Hidden Secret

“Then, why is Katsu-sensei so obsessed with that book?”
Kenshin’s doubts were understandable.

Kaishû frowned as if he were being put on the spot. “What I’ve learned through study is limited to steamships and steam locomotives. I can’t imagine anything beyond that. However, that fool Ôkuma has the nerve to say that in the near future, people will fly through the sky like birds. He believes from the bottom of his heart that someday, people will be able to go to the moon, so far away. Himura-san, if possible, I’d like to have him live that dream for the rest of his life.”

Kenshin felt that he had glimpsed the true Katsu Kaishû, a man who made clever use of praise and criticism. However, those words had barely left Kaishû’s mouth when he nonchalantly contradicted his previous remarks.

"Anyway, *From the Earth to the Moon* really doesn't matter at all."

Kaishû's next words surprised Kenshin even more.

"What I'm asking for and expecting from your skills isn't about the book, it's about the furoshiki cloth that was stolen along with it."

"F-furoshiki cloth, you say?"

"Yes, indeed. That furoshiki isn't any old furoshiki. There's a little secret to that fabric. If that secret is revealed, my head will be lopped off." Having said so much in a single breath, Kaishû moistened his throat with some tea and continued. "Right now, the government suspects me of furnishing war funds to Saigô's army during the Seinan War. As a result, I'm being interrogated almost every week."

"To Saigô's army?" Kenshin held his breath in response and glanced at Kaishû.

Kaishû shook his head quietly and said, "I wished I could've helped Saigô. But the time wasn't right for that." As he said this, he slowly closed his eyes. He looked as though he were reminiscing about the events of a year ago. "Many dissatisfied former samurai joined Saigô's army during the Seinan War. But, Himura-san, have you ever heard a rumor that former Shogunate *bakushin* retainers participated as well?"

Once again, Kenshin looked at Kaishû's face in surprise. Seeing that, Kaishû "The Badger" nodded slowly.

"The Tokugawa is still undecided concerning the

punishment of the 15th Shogun, Lord Yoshinobu. That gentleman is not a court noble, a samurai, or a commoner. He has been left without any social status at all. I want the 15th Shogun, who saved the citizens of Edo from war, to make peace with the government as soon as possible. During the Revolution, I sacrificed many people. To make amends for that... This is the only work I haven't finished in the era of Meiji. Himura-san, for me, the Revolution isn't over yet."

Listening to Kaishû's story, Kenshin was finally seeing the real heart of the situation. When the Meiji era began, Kaishû managed to help former *hatamoto* and *bakushin* Shogunate retainers seek employment, and raised money for their living expenses to prevent them from rioting, all the while planning to restore the rights of Tokugawa Yoshinobu. The flow of the Tokugawa clan's hidden funds was about to be exposed to the public eye.

"The enemy is probably Beni Aôï, a group of degenerate former *hatamoto* who hate me. Right about now, I'm sure they're going to the trouble of picking apart *From the Earth to the Moon*, looking for coded messages and signs to Saigô's army."

According to Kaishû, the associates that made up Beni Aoi consisted of discontented former *hatamoto* whose lives were ruined by the Revolution. While their motto was "Revive the Tokugawa Government," they lurked in the darkness and used their money to hire thugs to dig up

scandals, while secretly conspiring to overthrow powerful government officials.

"Their information network should not be taken lightly. As a matter of fact, they have their eyes on my—the Tokugawa's—hidden money. Moreover, I've heard that blood-thirsty assassins are among those they've hired with their lavishly spent funds."

Kenshin remained silent.

Kaishû glanced away a moment, but turned his eyes back to Kenshin, his gaze noticeably sharper. "How about it, Himura-san?" Kaishû asked Kenshin again. "Will you help me? I'm not asking you because I want to save my life. If the Tokugawa's hidden money is found and confiscated by the government, then surely some former bakushin will plan a rebellion to show their discontent. If that happens, it'll be impossible to bring the 15th Shogun back into society."

Kenshin was hesitant to make a decision. He understood Kaishû's concerns very well, and the fine fellow of small stature before him had explained almost too thoroughly why his help was needed. That said, he was hesitant because it seemed as though the true nature of the enemy he would have to fight, the Beni Aoi, was totally unknown, indistinct, and shrouded in dark mystery. They had a gloomy air about them that was almost eerie. A mere rurouni meddling with such affairs couldn't make much difference. He couldn't help but feel that Kaishû, perhaps driven by urgency, was giving him too much credit.

Kenshin's personal feelings also caused him to hesitate. Once Kenshin had abandoned his past as the assassin Hitokiri Battô sai, he had wandered the city streets as a private citizen, and though he felt a hint of loneliness, he also felt the relief of being free from any weight on his shoulders. Any direction the wind blew, wherever fancy took him, the easy day-to-day life of a rurouni was carefree, except for a small desire to at least protect those who crossed his path. But he was now a guest at the Kamiya dojo, and he had ties to people like Kaoru, Myôjin Yahiko, and Sagara Sanosuke. There was joy, but in some corner of his mind, he could not deny that at times he felt it as a burden.

Furthermore, if he became further involved in Kaishû's scheme, he could end up bearing a heavier burden. Responding to Kaishû's request would mean that very soon he'd be drawn into the vortex of a bloody conflict, man-to-man and power-to-power. It already had the smell of blood about it. Depending on the circumstances, it meant the possibility of reviving Hitokiri Battô sai, which he'd desperately tried to keep trapped within himself. But Kenshin, without mentioning a word of what was going through his mind, simply stated his concerns about Kaishû's request. "Katsu-sensei, this one regrets to say that this one is not fit to handle such an important duty. In the first place, this one doubts sensei knows anything about this rurouni."

"Yes, that's certainly true." Kaishû's attitude was soft in every way, gently but deliberately persuasive. "But,

Himura-san, that's really not the point here. We all have a thing or two in our pasts that we don't want to talk about. I've got them, too. What about you? Isn't that why you're a rurouni?"

Kenshin kept silent.

"I've seen you, and now we've met and talked. That's good enough for me."

In the end, Kenshin gave his consent. It could be said that Kenshin gave into the man's persistence, but he was dealing with the awe-inspiring Katsu Kaishû. The man's persuasive bearing was surely a factor.

Kenshin replied that he intended to serve diligently, but politely requested that Kaishû not expect too much.

Kaishû appeared relieved at last, but he was a man of tough character and continued to press Kenshin. "You know, I'm going to be interrogated by the police again the day after tomorrow. It's like that saying, poke a bush, and a snake comes out—the police don't know anything at all about the Tokugawa's hidden money, but with those suspicious guys hanging around me, I can't say they won't find out about it by chance. It's a secret route that's taken eleven years to establish, but depending on the situation, everything would have to be concealed. It's too bad, but if that happens, I'll have to dismiss Ôkuma. That guy doesn't know anything, but the fact remains that he was used as a connection." This practically amounted to setting a deadline of the day after tomorrow. Kaishû clapped his hands and called for a

family member. Again, it was Itsuko who appeared.

"Himura-san, I'm awfully tired tonight. I'm going to excuse myself to get some rest. Please, feel free to stay awhile." As Kaishû said this, he blinked his eyes and massaged his brows gently with his fingertips. The piteous signs of weakness were prominent on his stern face. The weekly police interrogations were probably becoming a huge psychological burden.

Eventually, Kaishû stood up and was about to leave the room when he turned and spoke to Itsuko, who was properly seated in the corner of the tatami mat-lined room. "Hey, Himura-san is single and isn't promised to any woman." Kaishû's words were unexpected, and Kenshin's dumbfounded eyes met those of Itsuko.

"Oh, Father..." Itsuko's cheeks immediately began to blush crimson. For a moment, her slender body seemed to glow with dazzling femininity.

Kenshin may or may not have noticed it as he said to Itsuko, "Then, this one will also take leave."

It appeared that Itsuko had been preparing a late-night meal, but Kenshin declined apologetically and left Katsu's residence.



The First Assassin

By the time Kenshin was on his way home, it was already past nine thirty. A thin, hazy moon had risen into the sky. For a time, the silhouettes of people carrying paper lanterns moved about, but by ten, the pedestrian traffic had ceased entirely. Kenshin took a different route from the one he had used when heading to Katsu's residence.

Kenshin had good night vision, and in addition, he carried a paper lantern given to him by Itsuko in his right hand. He certainly wouldn't be making any wrong turns, but Kenshin looked as though he preferred to walk in deserted areas. Before long, he was far from the houses that dotted the area. He came to a gently sloping street lying between fields that stretched out on both sides. There was silence in every direction, and save for the hazy moon in the sky, darkness dominated. About two cho ahead, in

the downtown area, the street intersected another street lined with rows of merchants.

The unfamiliar call of a bird greeted Kenshin after he'd walked less than one cho at a rather slow pace. There was a long call, *hew-ee, hew-roo-roo, hew-roo-roo*. Then, as if to respond to it, two short calls, *kwi-kwi*, echoed across the dark landscape. Kenshin quietly released his sword from its sheath. He felt someone move swiftly behind him. Then, another movement. "Surrounded, it seems," Kenshin murmured to himself as he blew out the flame inside the paper lantern. At some point, the birdcalls had stopped.

There was an aura of death drifting over the silent, colorless earth. Some woods were faintly visible in the darkness ahead, about a half cho away. As Kenshin eyed the distance, he pushed his slightly drawn sword a little below his waist, then bent over forward and started running at full speed. Just then, *shuriken* came flying out of the darkness. With what could only be described as animal intuition and instinct, Kenshin dodged the shuriken that assailed him as he continued to head for the woods.

When he had almost reached the trees, Kenshin saw before him what appeared to be darkness overlapping the darkness. He instantly dropped to one knee in a defensive crouch, only to discover the dark silhouette of a man as enormous as a cliff waiting for him. The man had drawn a long sword—almost the size of a short spear—and taken up a ready position, with his sword angled toward Kenshin.

With deadly precision he slid the point of his sword down until it was clearly aimed at Kenshin's neck. A beast's fierceness emanated from the man, and Kenshin felt it press in on him.

"I was only testing you earlier. However, I won't go easy on you this time. His High Excellency has granted me permission. If you wish to live, let's hear what you discussed in your secret meeting with Katsu Kaishû, and the secret of that book. Otherwise—" In the darkness, the giant bared his teeth and smiled.

"Do you belong to Beni Aoi?"

In response to Kenshin's question, the man showed his teeth a little, as if he were trying to smile, but the words that left his mouth were curt and dry. "Indeed, we are a group of loyal samurai who have risen to overthrow the corrupt New Government and restore the Tokugawa Shogunate."

Kenshin kept a careful eye in all four directions as he continued to speak to the giant before him. "Challenging the New Government's troops won't bring you victory, for they were not defeated even when Saigô Takamori was involved."

"Stop your ranting! If we have the war funds, we can assemble soldiers and weapons. If they cannot be arranged for domestically, we can bring them from overseas. In order to do that, we need the Tokugawa's hidden funds—the funds that Katsu must possess. You! What do you know of them?" The giant of a man raised his voice for an instant.

But Kenshin didn't say a word. The man allowed his battle *chi* to flow into the long sword he held ready.

Such formidable chi. Kenshin clenched his teeth and tried to counter the giant's overwhelming chi, but for some reason changed his mind and stopped, then appeared to relax his muscles, letting his eyes close halfway and his mouth open slightly.

An obscure, elusive color began to wrap around Kenshin's face, spreading to his entire body. It appeared that he was neither blocking the enemy's chi nor absorbing it, but instead turning himself into a kind of nothingness, increasing his transparency in an attempt to let the enemy's chi pass through him.

"Hmm, you've dodged my battle chi..." said the gloomy voice of the gigantic man in the darkness. With that, a tremendous amount of menacing energy radiated from the point of the sword he held poised in a low, ready position. "To find such a skilled swordsman in the Meiji era..." The dark, gigantic man muttered toward Kenshin, who stayed hidden in the darkness. The giant casually filled his long sword with silent fighting energy.

Astonishment ran through Kenshin's body like an electric shock. The surge of chi from his giant opponent's sword increased. It certainly resembled the mastery of *musô-ken*, a secret technique mentioned in every book about sword-fighting techniques.

Kenshin did his best to maintain his state of nothingness

and emptiness. He was unable to think of a way to counter this intense chi at the moment, except to hide human emotions deep inside his heart. Kenshin kept his sword slightly drawn, and from a low-profile position that bordered on crawling on the ground, he peered into the darkness to observe his opponent.

There are two ways to emit chi. Inner chi is generated within the body and stored to release all at once, while outer chi is absorbed into the body, circulated, and then released. Kenshin tried to figure out which of the two types of chi his opponent possessed. Creating a void in his heart and maintaining a state of nothingness wouldn't exhaust Kenshin's energy, but he hoped his opponent's enormous energy would eventually wane and require replenishment. *That's the case with inner chi, at least...*

The use of outer chi was the technique spreading through the country of China on the neighboring continent, which in many cases was about mastering the absorption of outer chi, and those who perfected it were able to use chi almost continuously.

In the darkness, the huge man continued to emit his chi.

This can't be good.

Just as Kenshin was pondering whether he should bring his chi back into his body in order to emit a sudden burst of power and use the distraction to move forward and attack, it happened.

The eyes of the gigantic man, which glowed abnormally in the dark, seemed to dim. The opponent's chi must have been the inner kind. Perhaps his energy was becoming depleted.

Kenshin enacted a quick series of controlled rolls, ending each roll with his right knee solidly placed on the ground in his ready position, and approached the enemy head on from the left, slashing the gigantic man's shoulder in a single stroke with his sakabatô. For a second, the opponent's enormous body sagged. But the movement was deceptive, and the sharp point of the giant's sword flashed through the air, aiming for Kenshin with a blow from above. Kenshin didn't jump back, but instead parried the opponent's sword point with the guard of his blade, as if challenging him to close combat. Kenshin then returned the blows twice, then three times in a continuous attack.

The giant opponent endured the persistent assaults, but seemed bewildered by Kenshin's attack. Kenshin seemed to be acting with total disregard for his own defense as he launched furious counter-attacks. But moving forward to attack leaves a spot unguarded. If an opponent takes advantage of that spot, there is no doubt that any swordsman will be endangered.

Kenshin stared cautiously into his opponent's eyes. The giant's half-open eyes glowed in the dark with a tinge of evil, waiting to take advantage of a chance to attack. While staring at each other, the power of the man's chi seemed

to put pressure on Kenshin's chest. Moving in small steps from left to right, Kenshin attacked with a blinding speed.

The two swords made a metallic sound, and sparks flew as they clashed in midair. The pair passed by each other, came to a stop, then turned around and locked their swords again. The gigantic man was clearly a formidable enemy. He persistently challenged and counterattacked. However, Kenshin had not yet used his special *Hiten Mitsurugi-ryû* moves. That could mean he was still ahead in the game. As a matter of fact, Kenshin was gradually gaining ground.

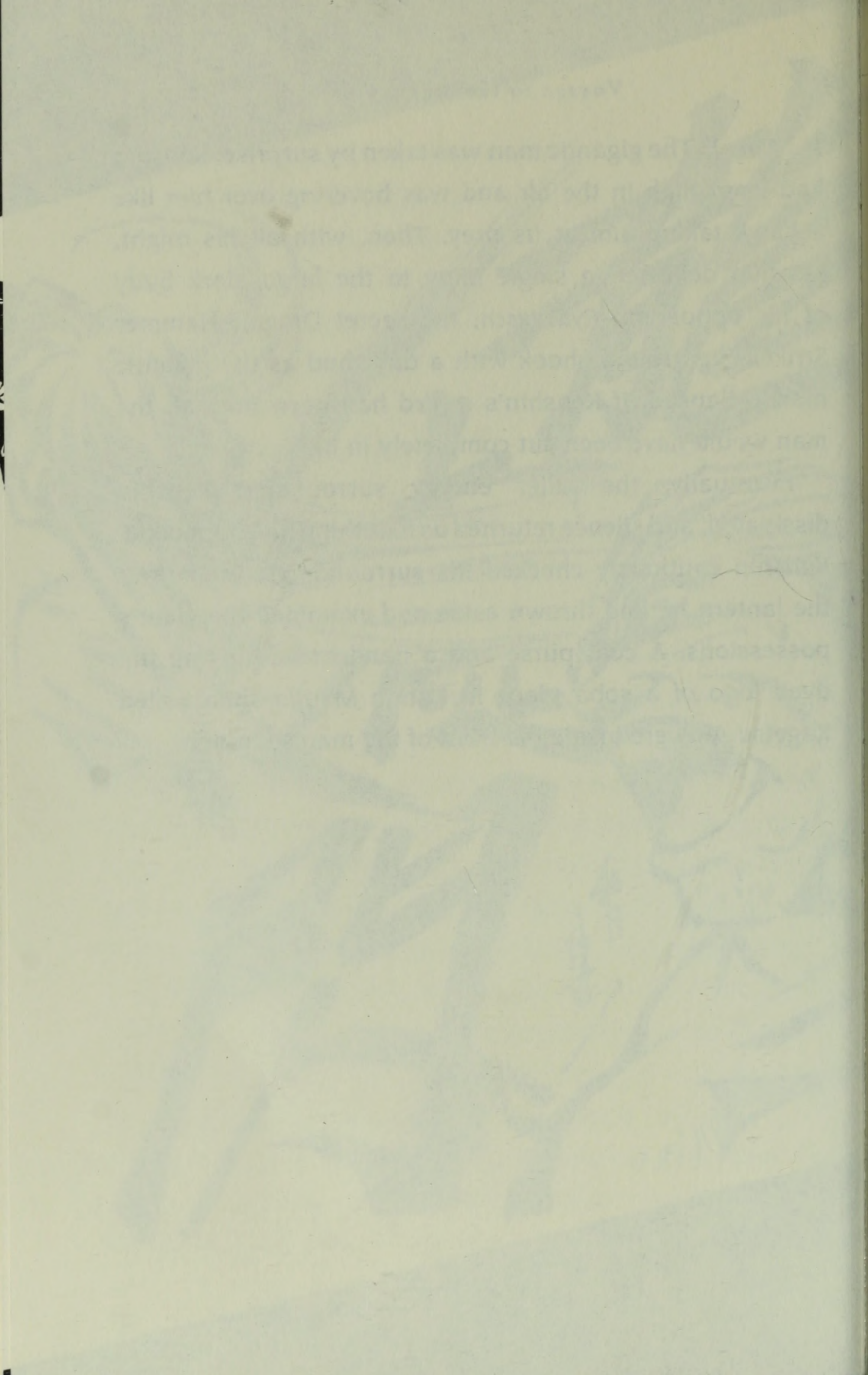
Kenshin's single downward stroke from an overhead position, delivered as he stepped forward, was quicker than the giant's interception with his long sword. Like a shooting star, Kenshin's sword point drew a circle in the dark and precisely struck the shoulder of the gigantic man. For the first time, the giant leapt backward of his own volition. His body still facing Kenshin, he quietly retreated until two ken stretched between them. One had to admit the giant's moves showed amazing skill. The large, dark body entered the ready position again, but a hint of desperation tainted the chi at the point of his sword.

Let this next stroke determine the winner, Kenshin thought as he paused to adjust his timing. Having made up his mind, he felt ready to display his *Hiten Mitsurugi-ryû* move. From a lower overhead position, Kenshin tipped the point of his sword to the side and leapt sharply upwards.



"Ah...!" The gigantic man was taken by surprise. Kenshin had leapt high in the air and was hovering over him like a hawk taking aim at its prey. Then, with all his might, Kenshin delivered a single blow to the large, dark body of his opponent—*Ryûtsuisen*, the secret Dragon Hammer Strike. The ground shook with a dull thud as the gigantic man collapsed. If Kenshin's sword had been normal, the man would have been cut completely in half.

Eventually, the killer energy surrounding Kenshin dissipated, and silence returned as if nothing had happened. Kenshin cautiously checked his surroundings, then re-lit the lantern he had thrown aside and examined the giant's possessions. A coin purse and a hand towel bearing the dyed logo of a soba place in Kanda Myojin-shita called *Kagetsu An* were inside the front of the man's kimono.





Unexpected Visitors

"Kenshin, how long are you going to sleep?"

Kenshin threw off the bedding in surprise when Kaoru's voice from above awoke him. He instantly remembered that after defeating the assassin, he had returned around dawn and had gone to sleep right there in the dojo, using his arms as a pillow. Kaoru was probably the one who had placed the bed covers over him; the fact that her eyes were a bit red seemed proof of that. No doubt this stouthearted girl hadn't slept a wink while she waited for Kenshin's return.

"Much appreciated," Kenshin thanked her as he scratched his head.

"Breakfast is ready. Although it's already noon." Kaoru did her best to act distant, but every move of her body was filled with kindness toward Kenshin.

Kenshin stepped out to the yard, and as he washed

his face and rinsed his mouth, his hunger after spending a long night out caught up with him. Kenshin headed for breakfast.

He nodded slightly in greeting and after announcing he was ready to eat, Kenshin happily wolfed down the breakfast Kaoru had prepared—the same cooking that Yahiko so severely criticized. “By the way, where are Ôkuma-dono and Yahiko?” Kenshin asked as he lifted a portion from a side dish to his mouth.

“They went out together a while ago. They’re going to visit all the newspaper agencies, publishers, and used bookstores. I’d better get going, too.”

“Is that so...” Kenshin seemed to be lost in thought for a moment, but quickly said, “Kaoru-dono,” and looked at her quietly.

“Seconds?”

“No...um...uhhh...”

“Oh, please...what is it then?”

Kenshin told Kaoru the details of his discussion with Katsu Kaishû, and a summary of the incident that occurred on the way back.

“So, that’s what happened.” Kaoru stared at Kenshin, her pale chin buried in her collar, giving her a look of innocence. Then Kaoru frowned and said, “So it really wasn’t *From the Earth to the Moon*, but the furoshiki cloth that Katsu-sensei wanted. Then, it’s a waste for Ôkuma-san and Yahiko to visit the publishers and such.”

"No, that may not be the case."

"Huh?"

"The Beni Aoi is probably keeping an eye on this dojo. The gang is most likely following Ôkuma-dono and Yahiko as we speak. The enemy is spying on us to try to discover where the hidden money is located. They believe *From the Earth to the Moon* is the key to cracking the code. It may be safer for Yahiko and Ôkuma-dono to continue their rounds of the bookstores. In the meantime, this one will—"

"What should I do?"

"Please, stay here."

"No way! That's not..." Kaoru's beautiful face pouted. "I want to go with you to find the hideout of the Beni Aoi group, or whatever it's called."

"But...there are skilled assassins among them..."

"I'll be all right, I'm an instructor of Kamiya Kasshin-ryû. I won't be a hindrance."

"Well, that is surely the case, but..." Kenshin fumbled as he tried to convince Kaoru to change her mind, but he was losing to Kaoru's eagerness. To Kenshin, Kaoru was by far a more challenging opponent than the gigantic man the previous night. While Kenshin looked helplessly about and Kaoru prepared to leave, a voice outside announced that a visitor had arrived. Kenshin had heard that voice last night. There was no mistake—it belonged to Katsu Itsuko. A cold shiver ran down his spine.

"Just a moment!" Kaoru hurried to the entrance hallway,

then stood transfixed for a moment when she encountered an unfamiliar couple in Western clothes. The man was in his thirties and had a lean, handsome face. His hair was cropped short and slicked back fashionably. His tall physique looked fine in a suit, and the Inverness cape worn over his clothes looked quite modern. The way he had his left hand inside his pants pocket and held a cigar between the fingers of his right hand looked a bit affected to Kaoru, but even so he was attractive and had an air of keen intelligence. Kaoru's attention, however, was more focused on the woman in Western clothes standing next to him. She wore her semi-formal dress in a very stylish way, and had a crimson ribbon tied in her hair, which was braided and looped in the Margaret style. Kaoru had never met or spoken to them before, but being a person of determination and intelligence, Kaoru's intuition was strong. "Um, excuse me, but are you Itsuko-sama, from Katsu-sensei's place?"

The woman smiled in response to Kaoru's question. If Kaoru were asked to describe a young lady raised in a privileged environment, Katsu Itsuko was certainly the type that would come to mind, even though Kaoru was unfamiliar with such women. Kaoru wanted to ask why they'd taken the trouble to visit a place like this, but as if reading her mind, the tall man spoke.

"Ôjo-sama has come to see a swordsman named Himura Kenshin, who visited her residence last night. My name is Ôkubo Tetsuma, the Katsu family's former pupil, now

working for the Ministry of Home Affairs. I am accompanying ojô-sama as her guide, and also as her bodyguard. You'd do well to remember me."

There was more than a hint of arrogance in the man's tone. That said, if people knew who Tetsuma was, they probably would've thought it understandable, given that he was the head of the Ôkubo family. The family had been the Shogunate's hatamoto retainers until the end of the Shogunate era, rating an annual salary in the range of 3000 *koku*, almost a hundred times that of a low-ranking vassal like Yahiko's father. Ôkubo had managed to avoid the turmoil of the Revolution and become a high official in the Ministry of Home Affairs, which enjoyed the highest authority and privileges within the New Government.

The man's tone got on Kaoru's nerves, however.

"Well, thank you for your introduction." As she pondered what to say next, Kenshin showed up wearing a happy smile on his face. He appeared to be in a good mood, his stomach full after the late breakfast.

"Well, hello there, Itsuko-dono. Apologies for visiting so late last night."

Itsuko smiled and gave a small curtsy at Kenshin's carefree words. Tetsuma, standing beside her, felt as though he'd glimpsed Itsuko's absolute trust in Kenshin, and inwardly he wasn't very happy about it. Kaoru's inner heart wasn't exactly calm either.

"Let's not stand around the entrance hall. Please, come

inside. Right, Kaoru-dono?" Urged on by Kenshin, Kaoru had no choice but to guide the two guests inside. Kaoru nodded her head and led the way, inviting the couple into the receiving room.

The four sat around the low table. Itsuko and Tetsuma were seated in places of honor, with Kenshin and Kaoru facing them. They exchanged greetings once again, and Kaoru left her seat to prepare tea and sweets. As if she had been waiting for that, Itsuko spoke to Kenshin in a reserved manner. "That lovely lady...is she Himura-sama's wife? Or perhaps your fiancée?" She spoke in a low voice, but it still reached Kaoru as she stepped into the hallway.

"No, that is not the case. This one is a mere rurouni. Kaoru-dono is the owner of this dojo, and this one is but an idle guest." When Kenshin's voice reached the departing Kaoru's ears, she let out a small sigh of disappointment and continued walking to the kitchen.

"Is that so?" Itsuko said with a twinkle in her eye, which caused a shadow to flit across Tetsuma's face as he sat beside her.

"Red hair with a large cross-shaped scar on his left cheek—I imagined how amazing such a swordsman might appear, but with such a short and thin build, your physique looks unexpectedly delicate," Tetsuma muttered, with a suspicious look at Kenshin.

Itsuko was quick to apologize. "Ôkubo-san, what a thing to say. Himura-san, I'm sorry..."

"Ah, this one doesn't mind. Really, there's nothing to apologize for."

Last night, when Kenshin saw Itsuko for the first time, he thought she strongly resembled Kaoru. But now that they were face to face and he was able to see her and talk to her again, he realized she was very different from Kaoru in both features and temperament. Kaoru could not stand being alone, and her personality was lively by nature. This girl's body seemed filled with determination, but Itsuko was much like her beautiful, balanced appearance—she seemed to have a quiet, introverted personality.

"You took the trouble to come to us about Ôkuma, so I told my father that even though the book may be precious, which is more important: a single book, or Ôkuma's future? As you may know, my father is an eccentric person, and he just kept smiling..." When Itsuko had realized the conversation with her father wasn't going anywhere, she had decided to bring Ôkuma back on her own.

Judging from the way Itsuko is talking, she must be unaware of the facts regarding last night's incident, Kenshin thought.

"But ojô-sama," said Tetsuma, "for you to go about on your own is out of the question. A suspicious gang is following sensei around. It is fortunate that I happened to run into you, but for a young lady of the Katsu family to come to a place like this..."

Right at that moment, Kaoru entered the receiving room, carrying tea and sweets. *Sorry for having a "place like this!"*

Kaoru barely swallowed the words before they came out of her mouth.

A moment later, Kenshin asked, "Ôkubo-dono, is the suspicious gang you mentioned truly Beni Aoi, or members of the police force, acting under the orders of the Ministry of Home Affairs?" One side of Tetsuma's face twitched as he glared at Kenshin, who had asked the question with a firm look on his face. Tetsuma's expression revealed that he knew of the existence of the Beni Aoi.

"Himura-san, what is this Beni Aoi?" A strong shadow of suspicion fell over Itsuko's eyes.

Kenshin simply replied that it was thought to be an association of aggressive former Shogunate retainers. Then, as if to ask for confirmation, Kenshin said, "Isn't that so, Ôkubo-dono?"

A thin smile appeared on Tetsuma's face. "Quite so. Those foolish men...in this era of culture and progress, they seriously believe in their dream of reviving the Tokugawa family. I've heard their leader is referred to as the High Excellency. Katsu-sensei has been blamed as a villain who sold out the Tokugawa. That probably makes it easier for him to be the target of such unenlightened people. Well, as long as I'm with the police force of the Ministry of Home Affairs, I'll definitely get on their tails and round up the whole gang." Tetsuma imagined the defeated Beni Aoi before him, and cast a cruel, scornful eye upon the lot.



Fencing Match: Japan vs. the Western World

“By the way Himura-kun, I’ve been training in Western-style fencing since my teens. I’ve earned the masters certificate, too. How about it? It’s been a long time, and I feel like having a match against Japanese swordplay. Could you give me a lesson on the moves?” Tetsuma urged Kenshin, his face pale and expressionless. His narrow, almond-shaped eyes pierced Kenshin’s own. But Kenshin was not one to fall for such an obvious challenge.

“This one is just a guest here. Teaching sword skills wouldn’t be appropriate.”

“I see you still wear your sword, even though the law prohibits carrying them. Apparently, you are very attached to it. Surely, you must have fine skills. And I would like to have the honor of seeing them.”

"No, this one's sword skills are not worth showing to others...ha, ha, haha..."

"Are you trying to laugh this off?" Tetsuma appeared to be losing his patience. His complexion grew livid, his gaze sharper, and a hint of sarcasm entered his tone.

A cold shiver ran through Kaoru's spine as she sat beside Kenshin. Despite that, she firmly stated, "Our dojo's style is Kamiya Kasshin-ryû. I lack experience, but as the instructor, I will take on this match, if you wish."

Tetsuma, who appeared to be thinking about withdrawing from a bout against a woman, replied, "Oh, that's interesting. Let us have a match then." Tetsuma removed his jacket and pulled an odd-looking sword from the leather case he had brought with him.

"You should stop, Ôkubo-san." Surprised by the way things were unfolding, Itsuko tried to stop Tetsuma, but he was not one to withdraw easily.

Looks like I have no choice but to fight, Kaoru decided. She glanced quickly at Kenshin, but he was reaching for some sweets on the table, seemingly unaware of the situation.

Kenshin, you fool! Kaoru shouted in her mind as she went to another room to change into her training gear. Upon returning, she led everyone to the dojo.

Inside the dojo, the light from the sun rising high in the sky poured through the vertical bars of the *musha-mado* windows. Tetsuma's sword sparkled in the sunlight. For

those unfamiliar with it, it must have been a strange sight. It was a saber-style fencing sword.

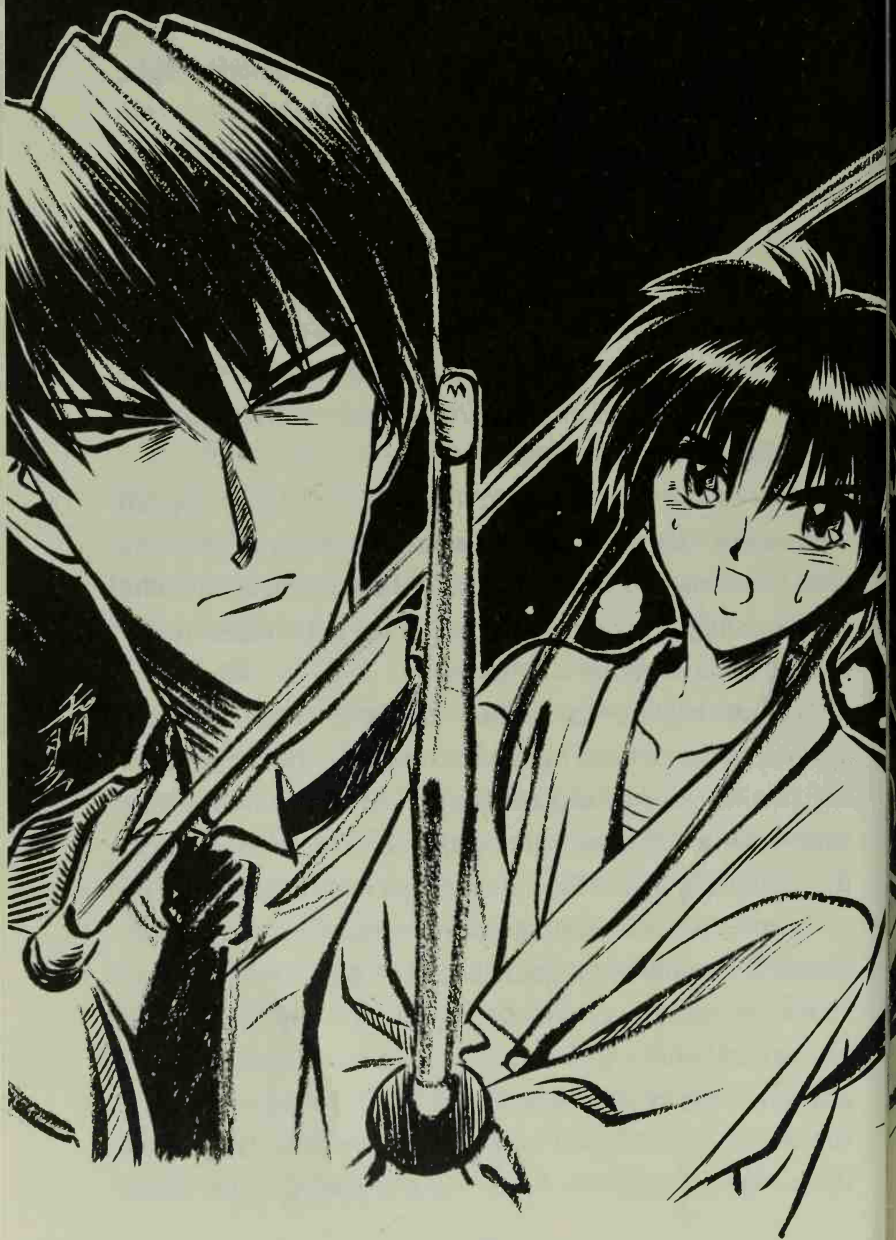
Kaoru was so amazed by the sword, it left her momentarily speechless.

Such a beautiful girl, Tetsuma had time to think as they stood face to face. Of course, he'd thought so from the moment he saw her in the entrance hall. Even in her unfeminine training outfit, her balanced features, lean and slender appearance, and dark, clear eyes were especially captivating. Tetsuma swallowed.

"This is used for training. The sword point is capped with rubber, but serious injury is possible if it hits the wrong spot." As Tetsuma spoke, he glanced toward Kenshin, who was standing over to the right side of the dojo. Kenshin was having a conversation with Itsuko.

"Let us begin." The formal words to begin a match spoken, Kaoru pointed her bamboo *shinai* at her opponent's left shoulder, then fixed her eye on Tetsuma's moves. She suppressed her intense fighting spirit and her anxiety about the mysterious sword by maintaining a state of nothingness.

Tetsuma's ready position looked strange to Kaoru, who was only familiar with Japanese sword fighting. The sword in his left hand was thrust forward, and the other hand was raised behind his back, with the elbow slightly bent. It appeared that he maintained his physical balance that way. His stance was different as well. His rear foot was arched up so that only the very tips of his toes rested on the floor.



The pair stood still for a minute or two. Suddenly, Tetsuma's whole body spread out like a bird, and the next moment, his body slid across the dojo floor. His posture resembled a leopard stalking its prey. His ready position wasn't the only thing odd about his movements. The point of his thin, sharp sword quivered in an up-and-down motion, much like the tail feathers of a wagtail. Even though the point of his sword was moving, Tetsuma's oblique stance, with the sword in one hand, was not off-balance at all. He drew closer in a straight, magnificent run, as fast as the wind.

With her eyes wide open, Kaoru waited. As Tetsuma rushed in with his uniquely long, thin sword, Kaoru shortened the distance between them by half a step and engaged him. The dull sound of the bamboo sword and the Western sword colliding echoed through the dojo. The silence was broken, and now the two swords clashed together in midair without pause. At times they rubbed and struck against each other with intense vigor, and the sounds of shinai and saber colliding continued.

Once the pair was engaged in the swordfight, it was obvious that Tetsuma was much taller than Kaoru. It was almost puzzling, trying to figure out where in his tall, slender body all that strength could be stored. Tetsuma's movements were light, and although the point of his sword precisely struck Kaoru's arms and shoulders, it was capped with a rubber tip, and did not puncture her skin. That said,

each stroke hit with a substantial force, and when the same spot was repeatedly struck, Kaoru's skin turned from red to blue, and the pain became quite intense. Moreover, Kaoru's shinai was in danger of being knocked away by Tetsuma's Western sword.

"Ta-ha!" Tetsuma let out a strange cry and pressed forward with force. Tetsuma seemed to have decided that Kaoru's defenses were nearly at their limit. Kaoru retreated back with an agile move. The distance between the pair increased slightly. Tetsuma decided to put an end to the match.

He's coming!

At the moment Kaoru predicted this, Kenshin's voice rang out sharply. "Kaoru-dono, move forward!"

As if in time with the voice, Tetsuma made his move. Instead of shuffling his feet forward, he made a diving move to thrust his sword at Kaoru's abdomen. But instead of turning away, Kaoru moved forward as Kenshin's voice had instructed. It was a snap decision; if it weren't for her unwavering trust in Kenshin, she couldn't have done it. Kaoru narrowly dodged Tetsuma's killer stroke, then swung her shinai down onto Tetsuma's left shoulder. The dry sound of the bamboo striking echoed through the dojo, and Tetsuma dropped his strange-looking sword.

Kaoru drew in a deep breath, and Itsuko flashed a smile. But Kenshin again called out to her in a stern voice. "Kaoru-dono, *zanshin!* Don't drop your guard!"

Then it happened. His weapon dropped due to the painful blow, Tetsuma quickly seized the sword with his right hand while still kneeling, then delivered a fast, keen stroke. The killer sword almost delivered a painful blow to Kaoru's thigh, but by maintaining her position through zanshin, she leapt out of the way and shifted position for her next strike.

"Ei!" With a piercing cry, her shinai struck a direct blow to Tetsuma's forehead. Tetsuma fell to the dojo floor with a ground-shaking thud.

Kaoru had treated the match like an extreme life-or-death struggle. While she was catching her breath, Kenshin broke into a smile and applauded to celebrate her victory. "My, you have improved your skills, Kaoru-dono."

"Fool..." Kaoru whispered back to him. She bowed in front of the shrine, then retreated to another room to change. If Itsuko weren't there, she could've jumped into Kenshin's arms and cried. It would have been a great ending to her victorious match, but when it came to Kenshin, the timing never seemed right.

Kenshin quietly picked up the sword that Tetsuma had dropped. He removed the rubber cap from the sword tip and appeared to examine something, then replaced the cap again and discreetly placed the sword inside the leather case.

Meanwhile, Ôkuma Daigoro and Yahiko were roaming

around downtown on tired legs. Yahiko happened to spot a diner with "liquor and meals" written large on a rusty red paper lantern. For some time, Yahiko had been feeling faint from hunger, so he nodded his head toward the paper lantern.

"Even if we return to the dojo now, all that's waiting for us is Kaoru's crummy dinner. Why don't we stay out, eat something a little better here, and then move on to Ginza?" Without waiting for Daigoro to reply, Yahiko entered the restaurant and ordered bowls of rice and a few other side dishes, one after another. Finally, he started to relax.

Daigoro wore a navy *kasuri* kimono with striped *hakama* pants made with fabric from the Kokura region. While he had the appearance of a fine student, his presence was barely noticed, as usual.

"C'mon, cheer up." Yahiko could be rude, but he was actually a kindhearted boy by nature. He tried in vain to comfort Daigoro—who was feeling disheartened because there had been no sign of the lost book—but his efforts only depressed Daigoro further. "Hang in there, try to be a man."

"I'm not from a samurai family like you, Myôjin-kun."

"Stupid fool, this is the era of culture and progress, and coming from a samurai family doesn't have anything to do with being a man. You can't expect to make your moon trip like that." Yahiko mentioned the moon voyage without giving it much thought, but Daigoro seemed to become even

more nervous. Yahiko's sharp eyes noted the change, and decided that this would be a good chance to ask for more details about *From the Earth to the Moon*, which he had been curious about since yesterday.

"Inside the cannonball, there are machines named 'Reiset' and 'Regnault,' with two months worth of chlorate of potash stored inside. These machines maintain a temperature of over four hundred degrees Celsius, and by converting eighteen pounds of chlorate of potash into chlorine of potassium, the seven pounds of oxygen necessary for three people to survive for one day are produced. Along with that, the carbonic acid produced by breathing is absorbed by a supply of caustic potash." Such was the explanation to Yahiko's question about how people would breathe inside the cannonball.

While they were talking, the bowls of rice and side dishes they had ordered arrived. When Daigoro saw this, he said with a twinkle in his eye, "Myôjin-kun, a meal in space begins with three pieces of bouillon."

"B-bouillon?"

Daigoro eagerly tried to explain to Yahiko, but his expression showed that Yahiko had no idea what Daigoro was talking about. "Bouillon is a tablet made from beef extract. When you pour hot water on it, the tablet dissolves, softens, and spreads."

"I-is that supposed to be good?"

"I don't know, but it sure sounded good the way it was

described in that book.”

In addition, Daigoro discussed how the observatory first calculated the speed of the *Columbiad* cannon by showing Yahiko this algebraic expression:

$$1/2 (v^2(v\text{-square}) - v_0^2)(v\text{-zero-square}) = \\ gr [r/x - 1 + m/m_1 (r/d - x - r/d - r)]$$

“...and so, it’s calculated by taking into account the distance from the center of the earth to the center of the moon, the earth’s radius and mass, and the moon’s mass as well. It’s called integral calculus, and this...”

Yahiko stared with blank eyes, and was dumbfounded by the difficult vocabulary and numbers he was hearing. Finally, he found it unbearable. “W-wait! I understand...no, I don’t understand the details, but now I think I understand a little of the dream you’re after,” Yahiko said, thrusting his chopsticks with his right hand to interrupt Daigoro. “I want to be strong, like Kenshin. I want to be the number one swordsman in Japan! In the world! Ôkuma, you become the number one scientist in Japan, in the world! Then, you take me to the moon.” As he said this, Yahiko reached across the dinner table and seized Daigoro’s shoulders. His body was small, but he had strength, and Daigoro’s eyes filled with tears from having his shoulders gripped so firmly.

“H-hey, did that hurt?”

Daigoro shook his head in response to the worried-

looking Yahiko, and simply replied that he was happy, then slowly ate his bowl of rice.

"Hmph, you fool. Don't worry me like that." Nervously, Yahiko wolfed down his bowl of rice as well.

The Second Assassin

looking further and more upon the psychological side of the problem. The author's main object is to show that the psychological side of the problem is the more important one, and that the psychological side of the problem is the more important one.

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The Second Assassin

Even after the match, Itsuko engaged in small talk as an excuse to linger at the Kamiya dojo. As a topic of conversation, she offered the news that the imported *chocolat* she brought as a gift would be manufactured domestically by the end of the year.

Kenshin whispered something into Kaoru's ear and asked her to leave quietly via the backdoor. Then, along with a sour-looking Tetsuma, wholeheartedly took on the role of listener and laughed merrily at Itsuko's observations about modern culture and progress. Meanwhile, Kaoru hurried to Akabeko to fetch Tae.

Is Ôkubo Tetsuma one of the men who stole Ôkuma Daigoro's book? Kenshin speculated.

When Kaoru returned, out of breath, she had Tae sneak a look at Tetsuma from the adjoining room. Unfortunately,

Tae took one look and said, "He's not the one." She was sure he was not the man she had seen earlier. Besides, he had no moustache.

"Oh...?" Kaoru replied in disappointment, but Tae continued observing the occupants of the adjoining room.

"But later that day, I think he was the one who sat where Ôkuma-san had been earlier."

"Really?" Kaoru gasped as she looked at Tae. Tae said nothing, but the sparkle in her eyes was confirmation enough.

"Pardon me, but I need to speak to Kenshin for a moment." Kenshin excused himself and followed Kaoru to the kitchen, where she told him about Tae's testimony.

"Is that so...?" Kenshin was lost in thought, and didn't appear ready to take any action.

After a while, Tetsuma got up from his seat, hoping to urge Itsuko to leave. It was already past three o'clock, but as luck would have it, there was a two-seat rickshaw waiting for customers out on the street. The back of the rickshaw was decorated with a lacquered image of Ushiwaka-maru and Benkei fighting in the snow, a modern display of poetic charm.

"We must excuse ourselves now. Uh, Himura-san, please tell Ôkuma that he may return to the residence at any time." With Tetsuma and a reluctant Itsuko on board, the rickshaw left the Kamiya dojo behind. The noise of the rickshaw's

iron wheels echoed in the street and lingered in the ears of Kenshin, Kaoru, and Tae as they saw the pair off.

A little past seven that same day, Nakajima Torazô, one of Katsu's senior students, burst into the Kamiya dojo, his face pale.

"Itsuko ojô-sama is in serious t-trouble!" He must have run the whole way, for Torazô fell to his knees in the entrance hall and gasped for breath, air whistling through his parched throat. Once his breathing calmed down a bit, Torazô explained that around six o'clock, just as they were getting anxious about Itsuko's late return, a neighbor's child delivered a letter from an unknown sender. "Here is the letter. As soon as sensei reads it, he said to take it to Himura-san."

Anger surged through Kenshin's entire body as he read the letter. The note demanded that Katsu reveal every secret of the Tokugawa's hidden money before reporting to the police questioning regarding the Seinan War, at 10 a.m. tomorrow. It ordered the recipient to come to the Ueno Toshogu temple precinct at 8 a.m. "Do as we say, or we will kill Itsuko." The letter was signed "Aoi" in deep red. Kenshin's face grew pale, as did Kaoru's, Yahiko's, and Daigoro's.

"Nakajima-dono, didn't Ôkubo Tetsuma accompany Itsuko-san?"

Torazô seemed bewildered by Kenshin's sudden

question.

"He said that he got out of the vehicle first, near the house."

"Nakajima-san, I..." Daigoro didn't know the whole story behind the incident, and already seemed distracted. But this was no time for passive pondering.

"Kaoru-dono, this one happens to know where to look. If this one does not return in about an hour, please tell Katsusensei to send the police to Homei-in of Kanda Myojinshita. Homei-in is that haunted temple near Kagetsu-an." With those words, Kenshin left the dojo, his sakabatô at his waist.

The Beni Aoi's leader, called the High Excellency, was probably Ôkubo Tetsuma. Kenshin had been fully aware of it, but allowed Itsuko to leave with him, assuming that Tetsuma wouldn't do anything foolish to reveal his identity. But Kenshin had failed to realize how urgent the situation really was.

After Kenshin had defeated his mysterious attacker, he had visited Kagetsu-an—the name of the soba place dyed on the man's hand towel—but hadn't spotted anything unusual there. Kenshin had briefly inspected the area and was about to go back when he noticed that Kagetsu-an was near Homei-in Temple, the place that Yahiko had mentioned earlier. It was the same place where ghostly voices were rumored to be heard.

The stories said that a head monk hanged himself in the

temple during the upheaval of the anti-Buddhist movement, and that his vengeful ghost lingered as a curse on Homei-in. No one, not even the people in the neighborhood, came near the abandoned temple anymore. But in the pre-dawn light, Kenshin had seen the shadow of someone inside the temple.

The Beni Aoi has taken Itsuko-dono hostage to get the Tokugawa family's hidden money before the police do. Not only that, Kenshin thought, but Ôkubo Tetsuma was once a pupil at Katsu's house, so he must have run errands for Katsu-sensei, just like Daigoro. Unlike Daigoro, Tetsuma is ambitious as well as clever, and likely became suspicious about those errands.

Sakabatô secure at his side, Kenshin ran like the wind through the dark streets, arriving quickly at Homei-in temple. As if on cue, rain began to drizzle down. The layout of the temple was still fresh in Kenshin's mind, and he quietly proceeded to the back entrance and slipped onto the grounds through a gap in the slanted, rotting gate. No trace of light disturbed the temple office or the monks' living quarters, and the main wing was dark and devoid of any human presence. But the slightest trace of what appeared to be lamplight leaked from the corner of the crumbling main wing.

This is indeed the place.

Kenshin approached the main wing. There was no doubt the Beni Aoi were there, swords at the ready, holding their breaths and waiting like hungry wolves. Suddenly, he felt a

cold shiver on his skin. *This is a place of death*, he thought. But Kenshin had no reason to hesitate.

He approached, paying close attention to his surroundings. But the darkness was absolute in the narrow corridor of the temple grounds that stretched along both sides of the main wing, and Kenshin could feel no hidden presence.

Heh, so they're permitting this one to pass through unharmed. Trying not to laugh, Kenshin proceeded down the connecting corridor. But again, he found no one. There were a few small rooms next to each other, and Kenshin examined each and every one cautiously until he noticed a faint, flickering light in front of what seemed to be a main room. *Is the enemy near the light source, waiting with Itsuko?*

Before Kenshin could take a step forward, the large fusuma door in front of him slid open unexpectedly, and two shadows leapt toward him. They were about to cry out, but in one fast and continuous motion, Kenshin twisted his body, drew his sakabatô, and struck them down in a single blow. Kenshin caught the two before they could fall to the floor and make a noise, and slowly laid them down on the floor. Such a display of skill was to be expected from the ancient kenjutsu Hiten Mitsurugi-ryû, which originated in the Sengoku era and focused on sword battles against multiple opponents. He glanced around again before entering the room the pair had emerged from. Kenshin noticed a flicker of light leaking out of the gap between the

fusuma doors that connected this room to the next, and quietly crept toward it.

The hall visible through a tear in the paper panel of the fusuma door was in utter disorder, and Itsuko was laying on top of a straw mat spread haphazardly in the corner, bound hand and foot, her mouth gagged. About ten men were sitting in a circle in front of the alcove, picking at snacks and taking turns drinking from a single bottle of saké. The men wore lewd smiles on their sweaty cheeks and whispered to each other. But Ôkubo Tetsuma was not among them.

Silently, Kenshin moistened the hilt of his sakabatô with spit, then placed his hand on the fusuma door to open it. Just then, a man crashed through the ceiling above him and came swooping down. "As to be expected from Himura Kenshin—no, Hitokiri Battôsei, the strongest Ishin Shishi at the end of Shogunate era. How did you find this place?" The man glared at Kenshin with a bold smile. He appeared close to forty, his tanned features were lightly carved with wrinkles, and a neatly groomed moustache adorned his face. An extraordinary physical power seemed to lurk under his black clothing.

"And you are...?"

"Ha, ha, ha, ha! I'm the one they call the High Excellency, the leader of the Beni Aoi. How could you men be so careless?" The man calling himself High Excellency clucked his tongue and began to whirl the pilgrim's staff in his hand

like a windmill. "Die, Battô sai!"

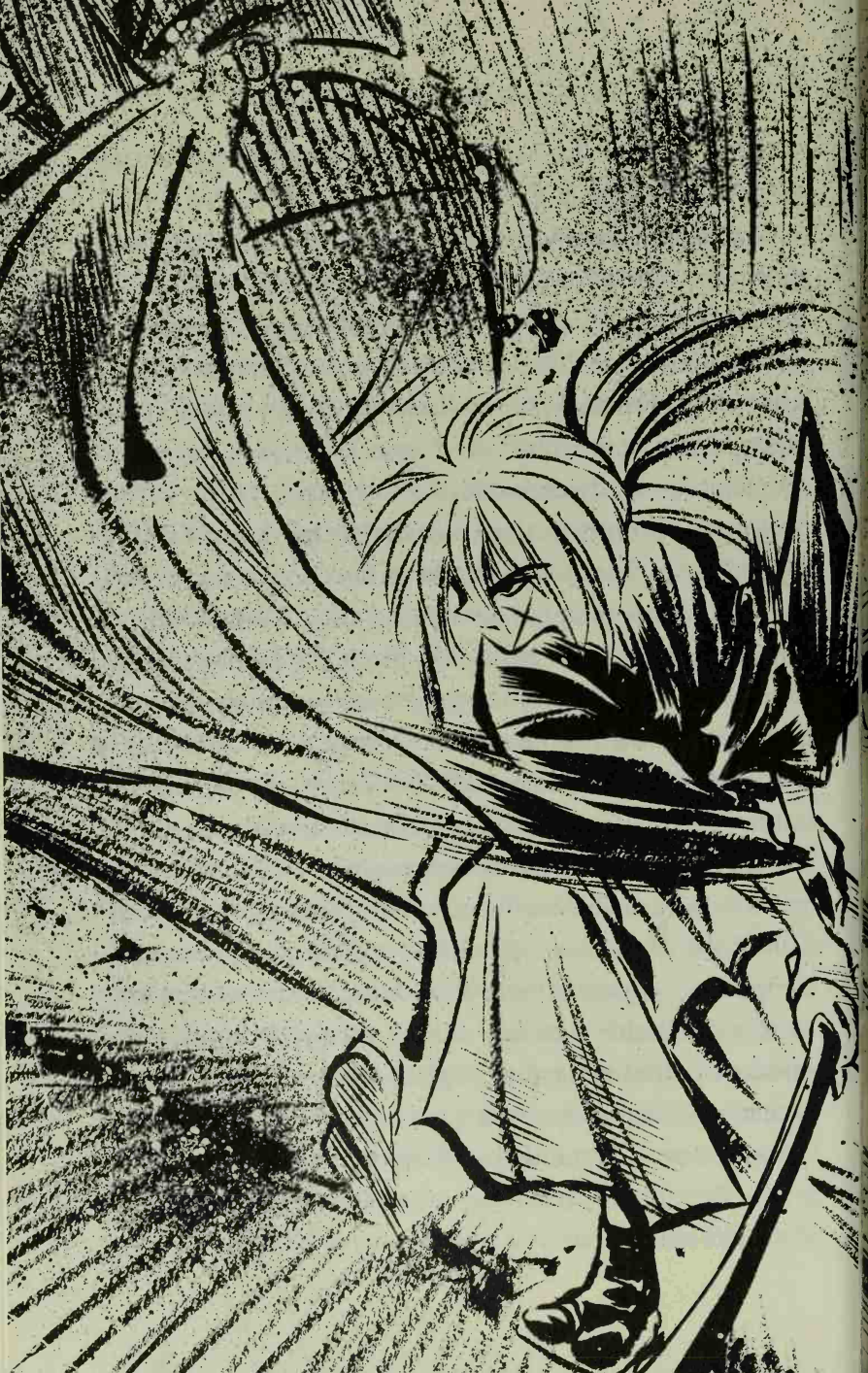
The men inside the hall panicked at their leader's cry, forming a ring with Itsuko as their shield. With enemies to the front and rear, Kenshin was indeed in a "place of death." He slowly shifted his feet forward. His left thumb pushed against the guard to unsheathe the sword a little, then he held the sword close to his waist. His right hand hung down, slightly away from his side. Again, Kenshin shifted his feet slowly toward the leader.

The man calling himself the High Excellency held his staff above his head, but wavered as he retreated a bit. Kenshin stepped forward, and without warning the man swung the staff down on Kenshin's shoulder. With blinding speed, the man withdrew the staff and switched to a backhand grip before thrusting the staff toward the pit of Kenshin's stomach. Kenshin's right hand seemed to casually deflect the High Excellency's extended staff, but in a skillful stroke of his sheathed sword, he parried the blow too quickly for the eye to see. Starting with more distance between them this time, the High Excellency pretended to edge forward, then struck head-on. Kenshin didn't try to dodge. He stepped forward and raised his hands. The High Excellency's staff changed course at lightning speed, aiming for Kenshin's throat. Kenshin's body spun like a top and drew close to the High Excellency, forcefully deflecting the pilgrim's staff. Although Kenshin's sheathed sword struck his shoulder, the High Excellency managed to leap backward. The High

Excellency drew his staff into an overhead defense as Kenshin drew near.

Although normally gentle—and even silly at times—Kenshin seemed like a different person at that moment. There was a fierce expression on his face, as if he had transformed into a sword-wielding demon. It was unthinkable that anyone could emerge the victor against a man with such an expression, a man whose very appearance proclaimed the countless life-or-death battles he had won.

His mind sharply focused, Kenshin let his right arm hang slightly away from his side, like a bird preparing to take flight. His entire body looked relaxed, but his left hand was still poised by the hilt of his sakabatô. The hidden change within him was difficult to gauge but his strange posture overwhelmed the High Excellency. His attack was blocked, and before he knew it, the High Excellency was cornered in front of a small room. Without a sound, Kenshin closed in. For the first time, his right hand moved—a fast, sweeping motion. His sakabatô glinted twice, three times as if to deliver the final blow. The High Excellency desperately shifted his staff into a vertical position, but he was unable to block Kenshin's secret sword move, *Ryûsôsen*. The sakabatô roared as it cut through the air, knocking the High Excellency completely to the ground, staff and all. Kenshin twirled around. There was nothing the Beni Aoi could do in the face of the terrifying intimidation radiating from Kenshin's entire body.





The Final Assassin

The Beni Aoi began trembling, and none of them were able to look Kenshin in the eye. Their overwhelming fear sapped their fighting spirit, and made them feel they had been forced into a life-or-death situation. This swordsman had defeated the High Excellency, as well as the gigantic man who came before him. He was no one to mess with; he was the one known as Hitokiri Battô sai, the strongest of the Ishin Shishi at the end of Shogunate era.

We'll all be killed. The members of Beni Aoi didn't know that Kenshin had forbidden his sakabatô to take human lives. The men's bodies were slick with sweat from the tension, and just like a mouse cornered by a cat, they recklessly challenged Kenshin.

We have Kaishû's daughter.

"D-don't move, Hitokiri Battô sai!" one of the men yelled

out, the blade of his *wakizashi* short sword pressed against Itsuko's neck. Itsuko, with her hands and feet tied and her mouth firmly gagged, had passed out from terror some time earlier. The nine remaining Beni Aoi formed a semicircle with Itsuko in the center, and surrounded Kenshin. "Don't try anything, or we'll kill this girl."

One of the men told him to hand over his sword. Retreating half a step, Kenshin sheathed his *sakabatô* and removed it from his waist, sheath and all, acting as though he were going to hand it over to the man in front of him. Grasping the end of the sheath, Kenshin held out his arm, presenting it hilt-first to the man. There was a look of relief on the man's face. The distance between them widened slightly, and the man grabbed for the hilt. Kenshin threw himself to one side, diving to the ground in a break-fall position. While on his back, he used his hand to knock the man off his feet. With the sound of a rotting tree falling, the man collapsed onto the wooden floor, the *sakabatô* still in hand.

Kenshin retrieved his *sakabatô* with remarkable swiftness while the men surrounding him remained stunned by what had just happened. Kenshin rolled forward once and struck a single, quick blow against the man who was holding the *wakizashi* to Itsuko's throat, then rose to his feet. The silence of Kenshin's movements made the action even more terrifying. Every man stood still in shock, and a chill ran down their spines. Kenshin straightened his *sakabatô*. Itsuko was lying unconscious behind him, with a wall behind her,

so there was no need to take precautions against enemies appearing from that direction.

"Are you still going to fight?" In response to Kenshin's words, two men came forward. Both swung their wakizashi overhead and attacked without a moment's hesitation.

It is not always advantageous to fight with a long sword when battling indoors. It can lead to unpredictable mistakes, depending on where one is during an attack. The pair from Beni Aoi knew that. Their method of attack, continuous waves from the front and back, left and right, gave the impression that they were used to doing this.

Kenshin remained unfazed by the pair's alternating sword attacks as he ducked and slipped between them, accurately deflecting their swords. These enemies had swift movements that required caution. By the time Kenshin turned around after checking up on the few men in front of him, the pair was already on him again. A wakizashi slid toward his shoulders, then another came roaring from an overhead angle.

Kenshin barely deflected the attack of the first wakizashi. The point of his sakabatô made it up in time to engage with the second wakizashi, and he had enough time to dodge them and shift his weight onto his waist in order to swing his sword down in a single diagonal stroke.

The first man let out a terrible cry as he tried to ram Kenshin. Kenshin dodged gracefully, which made the man

lose his balance and pitch forward until he collided headfirst into the body of the High Excellency, lying on the floor.

"You enemy of the Tokugawa...Hitokiri Battôsei, go to hell!" The man with the second wakizashi spewed a curse as he rushed forward to attack. His attack was reckless, but because he was cornered, the sharpness of his skills could not be dismissed.

Confined by the indoor setting, Kenshin faced the man with extra caution. When an opportunity arose, Kenshin stepped forward, attempting to deliver a single stroke of his sakabatô to his opponent's torso. The man barely dodged Kenshin's sword.

The man's eyes were as narrow as a piece of thread, and they glowed maliciously. His swordplay was comparable to the High Excellency and the giant from the previous night. He was probably one of the key swordsmen in Beni Aoi.

Kenshin relentlessly deflected the opponent's attacks, then unexpectedly withdrew his sword. Drawn in by the feint, the opponent swung his short sword overhead and brought it down with killing force. It was an intense blow, but at the last moment Kenshin ducked and delivered a stroke that ripped into the man's side at an angle. The Beni Aoi fell silently sideways onto the wooden floor.

As Kenshin straightened, another enemy stepped in from the side and attacked. The sword he had in his hand was a typical *katana*, but like the pair before him, he was a violent opponent. Completely ignoring Kenshin's ready position,

the man brandished his sword overhead and recklessly attacked. Kenshin dodged left and right as he waited for the right moment, then sent his opponent's sword reeling away. Kenshin's sakabatô flashed toward the man's right arm as he tried to hurriedly retrieve his sword. The man shrieked loudly, grabbed his damaged arm, and retreated backwards, then fell to his knees with a thud and collapsed in a sitting position.

Like the others, the fourth man's identity was unknown, but his swordplay was keen. Moreover, he was rather large, although not as gigantic as the man from the previous night. Kenshin's opponent controlled his sword with ease, and displayed an agility not commonly seen in such a large man. The sword came roaring down toward Kenshin's head. Kenshin stretched out and deflected the sword. Next, he took a wide step forward with his right foot and struck a forceful blow to the man's right side. But the man did not retreat. He shrugged off the blow and came charging forward.

Itsuko was lying on the floor a few steps behind them. If Kenshin were pushed back any farther, she might be trampled. Kenshin slid his feet to the side. Following Kenshin's movement, his opponent moved swiftly to the side as well. Their swords did not part, their bodies were in contact, and the battle had turned into dangerous close combat. The man pushed with his long sword, transmitting a persistent strength that seemed to grip Kenshin's sakabatô. Short and

slender, Kenshin was pushed a half step back by the bigger man's strength. His opponent seemed two or three times larger than Kenshin as their bodies moved closer. If Kenshin were to disengage his sword and counterattack, he risked Itsuko getting hurt. Kenshin did his best to keep the tension off his arms, and endured it by concentrating his strength in his abdomen.

Swordplay isn't about strength.

Just as Kenshin clucked his tongue, the man doubled the force of his attack. An enormous weight, like a huge boulder, bore down on Kenshin, and he countered it with all his might. Although not enough to push the man back, Kenshin's efforts momentarily held the force of their strengths in balance. At that moment, Kenshin leapt to the side. The man swung his sword down as he stepped forward, and the naked blade grazed Kenshin's shoulder. But as Kenshin leapt past, his sakabatô struck the man's midsection, landing a crushing blow to his opponent's ribs.

Two more to go.

"I'll take Itsuko-dono back now." Ôkubo Tetsuma's familiar voice called out from the darkness behind Kenshin, adding that he had seen the Hiten Mitsurugi-ryû techniques. Kenshin's terrifying glare had been fixed on the last two standing Beni Aoi, but now he turned toward the voice. The surrounding shadows obscured all but the dark outline of the other man.

"I had a bad feeling. So I came running, and just look what we have here." Even in the darkness, Kenshin could sense Tetsuma's smile. Kenshin tried to respond, but Tetsuma's sudden yell cut off any words he might have spoken.

"Beni Aoi, you are under arrest! Surrender, or I will punish you with my own hands!" Tetsuma slipped past Kenshin as the echoes of his words died, brandishing his Western-style sword as he strode into the main room. There was a flash of blade and the sound of a sword ripping through the air, and the remaining Beni Aoi collapsed like broken dolls.

"S-spare me!" the last man screamed.

But Tetsuma's sword did not stop there. He turned mercilessly on the rest of the Beni Aoi, who lay scattered across the floor, defeated by Kenshin's sakabatô. But as Tetsuma's sword arched down, Kenshin stepped in to block the blow, and stood before his fallen enemies, protecting them.

"Ôkubo-dono, people will die from even the lightest prick from the point of that sword. That blade of yours should be pointed at this one, not at your comrades." An indescribable rage filled Kenshin, and for an instant the eyes that glared at Ôkuba Tetsuma were the eyes of the killer, Hitokiri Battôsai.

"So you knew about the deadly poison on the point of my sword, and my true identity..."

"Why, Ôkubo-dono? Katsu-sensei was your teacher..." Kenshin resisted the urge to slice Ôkuba in two and rid the

world of such foul vermin. Instead, he concentrated on calmly drawing out answers from Tetsuma, allowing his anger to cool off by focusing on his task.

"Many sacrifices were necessary to accomplish the Revolution. But this is still not a world where everyone can live happily. Until it is, the Revolution is incomplete. I want to bring about a second Revolution, but to do that I need money and power."

"So the restoration of eighty thousand Shogunate retainers was all a lie?"

"Slogans are better when they are clearly defined. Ha, ha, ha! I don't care about the Tokugawa family."

Kenshin said nothing, and his silence encouraged Tetsuma to continue.

"How about it, Himura-kun? Why don't we join forces? With your sword skills and my wits, we could conquer the world."

Kenshin remained silent, his cold stare locked on Tetsuma.

"Fine. If that's not possible, then..." His mind made up, Tetsuma slowly raised his Western sword. Kenshin followed suit, bringing up his guard. But he was surprised by Tetsuma's stance. Across the room, Tetsuma was coldly balanced with his sword in his right hand, the opposite of the time when he had a match with Kamiya Kaoru. His left hand was raised behind him, elbow slightly bent.

"You see, I'm not left handed." Tetsuma smiled, the point

of his sword slightly raised. In this unique stance, with his Western sword thrust forward from his side, Tetsuma appeared divided by the faint glow of the narrow blade. His smile quietly disappeared.

He must be gathering his battle chi. An eerie pressure, like the thin blade of a sword, closed in on Kenshin. Tetsuma's sword point was dipped in poison. A mere scratch would be lethal. Kenshin shrugged off the pressure and edged a half-step forward, then another half step. Tetsuma moved his feet lightly to the left and right, retreating backwards. Although Tetsuma's retreat seemed casual, his sword never wavered from its shoulder-high position. A chill spread through Kenshin, as if he had been splashed with cold water. Once again, he was reminded that this opponent was no average swordsman.

Ôkuba must be defeated without his sword touching this one.

Kenshin's hands gripped his sword and tried to close the distance between them. But he could make no headway and the gap seemed to be getting wider. This Western style of body movement seemed to allow the length of Tetsuma's stride to vary widely, and Kenshin, who had no experience with this type of combat, found it difficult to gauge the distance between them.

The Western sword thrust forward in the dim light from the paper lantern. Kenshin slowly edged his toes toward the sharply glowing sword point. He must avoid impatience. The slightest touch could mean his life. Kenshin loosened

his grip slightly, then moved his feet forward. Tetsuma, who Kenshin thought would retreat again, did not move. When the distance between them shrank to approximately two ken, Tetsuma pointed the tip of his sword down, leaving him slightly open on his right side.

Hmmm!

Kenshin forced himself to ignore the bait. Tetsuma was obviously trying to lure Kenshin into attacking first. If he were to fall for it...

Kenshin concentrated his strength in his toes, then kicked off the floor. As he ran, Kenshin raised his sakabatô over his head. Kenshin struck out with his sword, not at Tetsuma, but against the Western sword pointing eerily toward the ground. Instantly, the Western sword sprang upward like a whip. The two swords met in midair and bright sparks flew. Tetsuma's sword slid upward, then tried to reel away from Kenshin's sakabatô. The force of Kenshin's downward blow prevented that, but his sakabatô still came close to being torn from his grasp. Kenshin could not allow the tip of the Western sword entangled with his to touch him. The two men leapt past each other. Kenshin recovered quickly and readied himself for another exchange.

Tetsuma held his ground as well, returning to his unique ready position.

Maintaining his pose, he nimbly moved his feet to shorten the distance between them. Impressively, his upper body did not sway despite the quick movement of his feet.

Tetsuma's graceful advance came to a dead stop, but it was just a brief pause before Tetsuma rushed into combat range. He thrust his sword forward, then changed course to try to sideswipe Kenshin's leg. All it would take to finish this battle was a single wound, even on a hand or foot.

Tetsuma's sword swung toward Kenshin with a terrifying sound like rushing wind. Kenshin narrowly dodged the blow by leaping up, then swinging his sword toward his opponent's angled shoulder. After parrying, Kenshin plunged down low enough to scrape the ground as the two opponents passed each other, then struck out from his reversed position, aiming at Tetsuma's torso. The tip of his sword nearly reached Tetsuma's abdomen.

Tetsuma shifted back into his sideways ready position as if the attack had never happened. But suddenly, his knees buckled and his body slowly began to tip over. He fell to the dark ground with a thud. Kenshin straightened his legs and stared at Tetsuma's body.

"So, this is it..." Tetsuma's trembling voice faded into a whisper, and he slid the length of his Western sword across his neck.

"Ôkubo-dono, the book and furoshiki cloth..." Tetsuma pointed at his inner pocket.

He's not an evil man.

When Tetsuma issued his challenge at the Kamiya dojo, the tip of his Western sword had already been dipped in poison. But the tip that would bring certain death in a

single strike had been covered with a rubber cap, and never once had Tetsuma removed it. To Kenshin, the choice was similar to his own use of the sakabatô, but they had taken different paths to get to their decisions.

Kenshin's lone figure emerged from the temple, leaving the rest to the police officers who would soon come running. The rain had ceased, and a thin, blurry moon shone softly in the night sky.

A trip to the moon... Although many feelings have been left unresolved, at least Daigoro's dreams have been protected, Kenshin thought. Moreover, Itsuko was still unconscious and hadn't had to witness Kenshin's terrifying battles and expressions.

But most importantly, Ôkubo Tetsuma's participation proved that the suspicion pointed at Katsu Kaishû was a result of Tetsuma's conspiracy. Katsu's innocence was very welcome news to those planning to aid the eighty thousand former Shogunate retainers.

The leader of the Beni Aoi, who called himself the High Excellency, turned out to be a disgruntled high-level official in the Meiji Government, and the entire incident was covered up.

Ôkuma Daigoro happily returned to his position as a student in Katsu's home. There was a rumor that he later traveled overseas, but what happened to him after that is not known for certain. One theory states that Inoue Tsutomu,

the translator of the Japanese edition of *From the Earth to the Moon*, published in September of the 19th year of Meiji (1886), was in fact Ôkuma Daigoro. But although some people hold to these outrageous claims, the truth remains unknown.

Sanosuke and
the Nishikiro

Sanosuke and the Nishiki-e

TSUKIOKA TSUNAN

A former cadet in the Sekihô Army. Currently a popular *nishiki-e* (color woodblock print) artist.

POLICE CHIEF

In charge of the Tokyo Prefecture police force, and one of the few who knows about Kenshin's past.

UJIKI

A former assistant inspector with the Police Sword Corps. A master of Satsuma *Jigen-ryû*.



Early Afternoon

The afternoon sunlight poured into the alley of the Gorotuski row house, where Sagara Sanosuke was lost in thought as he rested in the doorway. The wife of a clumsy carpenter living in the far side of the row house called out to him as she walked by.

“What’s the matter with you, young fellow? Basking in the sun so early in the day? Hmph. How can you afford such luxury?”

“Wh-what?” replied Sanosuke, standing up out of reflex.

This sharp-tongued woman’s husband was a very hard worker. He left the house early in the morning and worked until sundown to earn his money. While the husband seemed to be always covered in sawdust, his wife couldn’t be called much of a hard worker. Even in this impoverished

back-alley tenement, there were wives who worked hard, and wives who didn't. After they sent their husbands off to work, some wives worked at home after quickly tidying up, and others lounged around all day next to the well. When they tired of that, they would visit other people's homes and chat over tea until the sun went down. Chatting wasn't necessarily a bad thing, but even viewed in a favorable light, the clumsy carpenter's wife belonged to the latter group—those who didn't work. She was well equipped with thick lips that wouldn't wear out from all the talking, healthy jaws, and large eyes and ears that displayed her love for gossiping.

Although Sanosuke had been dozing earlier using his arm as a pillow, the high-pitched laughter of the wives standing beside the well and the endless crying of babies had interrupted his short nap.

Darn it, don't lump me together with you lot.

He wanted a word with her, but the wife had turned her stout back to him and was striding energetically into her own house. Soon the wife's loud, high-pitched voice was heard scolding her child, who had probably made some careless mistake.

With an inward sigh, Sanosuke's thoughts shifted. Maybe he did deserve sarcasm from a row house wife. Back when he was a fight merchant in West Tokyo's underground society, he used to make a living picking fights and scuffling in the public streets. Charging a fee to fight was part of his

daily life, and people called him Kenka-ya Zanza because of the way he brandished his powerful *zanbatô*, a huge sword designed to cut a horse out from under its rider. When he was fighting, Sanosuke was able to forget everything. His body and soul were free to concentrate on the battle in front of him. But when the fight was over, he was overcome by melancholy and helplessness.

Captured by strange, inexplicable thoughts, Sanosuke was overtaken by loneliness, accompanied by a sorrowful lethargy that was a bleak contrast to his gallant appearance.

I know I gotta do something about it. Although he thought about it, he had drifted day after day, accomplishing nothing. *Hmph. Gotta say, the whole process of thinking is a real drag.*

The rurouni, Himura Kenshin, had turned the fighter around—a fighter who had lost his way, and couldn't escape the strange place in which he found himself. The strength of Hitokiri Battôsei, that legendary man of unparalleled skills who had sided with the Ishin Shishi at the end of the Shogunate era, was extraordinary. Sanosuke had picked a fight with him and had been critically injured. His prized *zanbatô* was broken in two, and the sturdy body he was so proud of was bruised all over. He lost a lot of blood, and ultimately he ended up in a hospital for three months. It was the first time he had ever been defeated in a fight, but

BORN FIRST
SON OF A
FARMER IN
SHINSHŪ ON
THE FIRST
YEAR OF
MANEN.

RUNS AWAY FROM HOME
TO JOIN THE "SEKIHO ARMY"
AT AGE 9. REVERES SAGARA
SŌZŌ AS A MASTER, BUT
SŌZŌ IS EXECUTED AFTER
BEING UNJUSTLY ACCUSED
OF LEADING AN ILLEGITIMATE
REVOLUTIONARY ARMY. THE
SEKIHO ARMY CRUMBLES.

SAGARA
SANOSUKE
(19)

AFTER THAT,
HE BECOMES A
"FIGHT MERCHANT"
UNDER THE NAME
ZANZA, PASSING HIS
DAYS IN MEANINGLESS
COMBAT. HAVING
LOST TO HIMURA
KENSIN IN HEATED
BATTLE...

...SANOSUKE
BEGINS
FREQUENTING
THE KAMIYA
DOJO. CURRENTLY
LIVING A
CAREER-FREE
LIFE AT HIS
OWN PACE.

NISHIKI
PAINTINGS...?



being totally crushed left him feeling strangely refreshed. After that, he gave up being a fight merchant and became Sagara Sanosuke, a guy who just liked to fight. However, now he had too much time to himself and felt somehow out of place.

Oh, well. Maybe I'll go to Akabeko.

Out of habit, he glanced at the wicket gate, but no one came to hire him to fight anymore. Sanosuke kicked the sagging door and began to walk.

It was already past lunch, but Akabeko was bustling as usual.

"Welcome!" The server's cheerful and lively voice greeted his arrival, and the conversations of satisfied customers mingled with the tempting smell of beef-pot as he proceeded to the back of the spacious restaurant. Sanosuke climbed into one of the booths and sat down, then requested one order of standard beef-pot from Sekihara Tae, whose head was wrapped in a hand towel.

It seemed as though a long time passed between when he ordered his food and when he finished his meal, but it was actually less than thirty minutes. In the meantime, the late lunch crowd had dispersed and the restaurant was gradually shifting to dinner preparations. Tae came out of the back and poured him another cup of tea, then placed a small teapot on the table.

"Um, Sanosuke-san, I have a favor to ask," Tae said as

she looked restlessly around the restaurant, apparently a bit nervous. A suspicious look crossed Sanosuke's face as she continued in a low voice, "If you don't mind, could you please buy a nishiki-e for me?"

"A nishiki-e?"

Nishiki-e are colored *ukiyo-e* woodblock prints, also known as Edo-e. Portraits of actors and landscapes were popular themes back in the Edo era, but by the Meiji era, various subjects were being painted, and before long nishiki-e were established as one of Tokyo's specialties. Around the time of the eleventh year of Meiji, artwork of heroes, warriors, and handsome swordsmen from the end of the Shogunate era and the Seinan War were selling like hotcakes. According to the newspapers at the time, Taiso Yoshitoshi, Utagawa Kunisada, Kunitaru, Hiroshige III, Yoshimori, Shosai Ikkei, and such were counted as "Modern Painting Experts."

"Yes, there will be a new arrival today at the picture book shop, but it's by a popular artist and will sell out right away. I'd like to go buy one, but I really can't sneak away from work."

"So, you want me to go buy it for you. "

"Yes, if you don't mind." Tae gazed at Sanosuke intently. Her eyes were indescribably fetching, and for a moment Sanosuke got nervous. Being relied on wasn't a bad feeling, but running errands?

I must really look idle, Sanosuke thought to himself.

"Why don't you ask Yahiko or someone else, instead?" Sanosuke suddenly recalled that Myôjin Yahiko worked as a day laborer at Akabeko, performing miscellaneous chores. It was bad timing.

"Hey, I'm working too, stupid!"

Yahiko appeared unexpectedly, holding a broom and a dustpan, his kimono sleeves pulled up out of his way with a cord. Yahiko grumbled under his breath and walked off toward the back. Sanosuke watched him exit, then rubbed the side of his face with his hand and resigned himself to accept the errand.

"Fine. So what exactly do you want?"

"*Swordsman Iba Hachirô* by Tsukioka Tsunan."

Although the artist's name was unfamiliar, even Sanosuke had heard of Iba Hachirô from the Shogunate's commando unit, known to be the most handsome swordsman of the end of the Shogunate era.

According to the Iba family biography, Hachirô was the alias of Hidesato, who had been blessed with a fair and handsome appearance. The biography went on to exclaim that Hachirô had been an avid reader and author, and that his poetry should be committed to memory.

Hachirô was born in the first year of Koka (1844) as a legitimate son of Iba Gunbei (Hidenari), a gokenin Shogunate vassal receiving a stipend of 100-pyo. Hachirô's father was the eighth master instructor of the *Shingyoto-ryû* dojo in Shitaya Izumibashi Dori, and he was trained in kenjutsu

from a very young age. Eventually, he was promoted to the kenjutsu department of Kobusho Martial Arts School for the Shogunate retainers, operated by the Shogunate government. He once guarded the 14th Shogun, Tokugawa Iemochi, on a journey to the capital city, Kyoto.

He was promoted from an Edo Castle guard to the position of okuzume, essentially a personal bodyguard for the Shogun. Hachirô was placed in a commando unit after the military reform and reorganization, and fought bravely in the Battle of Toba and Fushimi. His performance made Nozu Shichizaemon (Shizuo), from the opposing Satsuma clan, sigh in praise, "Iba Hachirô, as might be expected from a Shogunate army." But those who fought for the Shogunate were at a disadvantage, and the defeated Shogunate army made the decision to retreat to Edo. Hachirô opposed this while shedding tears of anger, and it was said he moved the entire assembly. Although he did return once to Edo, Hachirô protested in favor of total defiance and clashed with the imperial army over the Hakone Gateway. On the afternoon of May 26th, in the fourth year of Keio (the first year of Meiji, 1868), he was critically injured near Yumoto Sanmai-bashi when his left arm was partially severed during the battle of Hakone Yamazaki. Even then, Hachirô's fighting spirit did not waver, and swearing by his honor and pride as a member of the Shogunate's direct retainers, he continued with total defiance by crossing to Ezo (Hokkaido). According to historical records, on May 12th in the second

year of Meiji, he is said to have died from an illness as a result of his wounds. He was twenty-six years old.

Sanosuke was once a cadet soldier in the Sekihô Army, and though he was on the opposing side, he did not dislike the way Iba Hachirô had lived his life. Probably because of this, he teased Tae freely. "Pretty shallow tastes for someone like you."

Sanjô Tsubame called out to Sanosuke as he was leaving the restaurant. She obviously wanted to ask something, but the quiet girl could not bring herself to say it. Her slightly tense, pale face was trying to convey something to Sanosuke, and at last he realized that Tsubame must want a nishiki-e of Iba Hachirô as well.

"Okay, so I need to get two prints of Tsukioka Tsunan's *Iba Hachirô*, right?" said Sanosuke as he left the Akabeko beef-pot restaurant.



Reunion of Two Men

As Sanosuke stood at the storefront, looking at the display of nishiki-e, someone called from behind. "Sano?" When Sanosuke turned around, he saw Kenshin and Kaoru standing there.

"Oh, you guys..."

Sanosuke greeted Kenshin and Kaoru with a broad smile, but their faces held suspicion. It was understandable. To them, he was out of place, like a drunkard in front of a candy shop. But they were also brimming with curiosity. They tried persistently to find out what he was buying at the bookstore, as well as why and for whom. But once the situation was explained, it wasn't really interesting after all. Sanosuke purchased two nishiki-e of Tsukioka Tsunan's *Iba Hachirô* as he heard Kenshin and Kaoru sigh in disappointment behind him.

SEKIHŌ ARMY,
FIRST UNIT
SAGARA SŌZŌ.

赤報隊一番隊
相楽総三

月岡
津南

TSUKIOKA
TSUNAN

..CAPTAIN
SAGARA!



"You're lucky, sir. Those are the last two." The owner of the picture book shop spoke proudly about how good business was, thanks to the popularity of Tsukioka Tsunan's artwork. But to Sanosuke, the lecture was not as important as the price that he was being asked to pay. "That will be ten sen total."

Sanosuke was totally broke, without a single sen in his pocket. He never paid his bill at Akabeko and took that kind of lifestyle for granted. "Oh, I don't have any money." Sanosuke took advantage of Kaoru's presence and had her pay the ten sen. His business done, Sanosuke casually browsed the pictures in the store with Kenshin and Kaoru until his eyes stopped on one particular piece of artwork.

"Is this...?" There was no mistake. It was labeled *Sekihô Army First Unit, Sagara Sôzô*. There he was, Captain Sagara, the man Sanosuke would never stop respecting, and would never dream of forgetting. In the picture, Sagara Sôzô was holding an unsheathed sword in his hand, and behind him were two young boys. Kenshin frowned sternly, and Kaoru's beautiful face was suddenly marked by tension.

This isn't good.

They knew all too well the story of how Sanosuke became a fight merchant.

Four years older than Iba Hachirô, Sagara Sôzô was born in the eleventh year of Tenpô (1840) and originally went by

the name Kojima Shirô. He excelled in Japanese literature and military science, and established a private school before becoming actively involved in the stormy state of affairs at the end of the Shogunate era.

After many twists and turns of fate, Sôzô befriended Saigô Takamori of the Satsuma clan, and was put in charge of creating public disorder in Edo, a strategy employed by the imperialists seeking to overthrow the Tokugawa government. After the Battle of Toba and Fushimi, he organized the Sekihô Army as a vanguard for the imperial army's Eastern Expedition Troops and became Captain of the First Unit.

On his departure to the war front, Sôzô was authorized to promise the reduction of the land taxes by half as a measure to secure his troops' safety in rural areas. In other words, wherever the army advanced, they won over the locals with his guarantee and got them to side with the imperial army, at the same time procuring funds and acquiring weapons and food. Later, the New Government abandoned the ideals of the Revolution due to financial difficulties, and withdrew the earlier commitment to reduce land taxes. In desperation, they declared the Sekihô Army—which had already produced excellent results in attracting popular sentiment—to be a "false army." When they refused orders to return to the capital, the government arrested every regimental soldier of the First Unit at Shinano no Kuni Shimo Suwa. Eight officers were beheaded, including Sôzô, and the rest were exiled. Sôzô was said to be twenty-nine

years old when he was lead to his execution.

“The days when the weak are oppressed and must meekly accept their misfortunes are over, and there will come an era where there is no upper or lower, and there will be equality among the four social classes.” As a young cadet soldier, Sagara Sanosuke had heard Sôzô say repeatedly, “We, the Sekihô Army, are the pioneers, and the arrival of a new era depends on our performance. Whether it happens in a year, or ten years, is up to us.”

Sanosuke was enthralled by Sôzô, so much so that he asked if he could take the captain’s last name for his own when the time came for all social classes to stand equal. But Sagara Sôzô and the Sekihô Army were obliterated, all for the convenience of the New Government.

The sight of the execution grounds where the eight heads, including Sôzô’s, were displayed broke Sanosuke’s heart. In remembrance of what had been done, Sanosuke channeled all his dark emotions into the symbol he now wore on his back—*aku*, the kanji character for evil. It is not an exaggeration to say those feelings and strong will determined the direction of Sanosuke’s life thereafter.

On behalf of the captain, there’s something I need to say.

The New Government built the Meiji era on the sacrifices of the Sekihô Army. If nothing else, I will remind them of that.

Certainly, the Sekihô Army could be accused of being aggressive. There were times when they committed outrageous acts for the sake of causing a disturbance in

Edo city. But unlike the Satsuma and Chôshû clans, they were forced to accept unpleasant roles because they had neither the support of the clans nor the social background to create that support.

Their drive to give their best was fueled by a burning desire to build a new Japan, and could not be written off as a half-hearted attempt by a false imperial army. But the people did not care to notice such facts.

Even a one-inch insect has half an inch of soul. It doesn't matter if people are going to forget the Sekihô Army. But I can't throw away my half-inch of life. This had been Sanosuke's philosophy until today. The people around him had advised him many times to stop thinking about revenge. Every time he heard that, his desire for vengeance grew stronger.

"Where is he?" Sanosuke asked the store owner as he looked up from the nishiki-e.

"Huh?"

The response of the shop owner, who had no idea what was going on, filled Sanosuke with an emotion so intense it could not be described, but most closely resembled pure fury.

"Where is this Tsunan guy? Tell me!" he bellowed, hurling his words at the man.

"Th-the row house slum in the next city! But he doesn't like people. Even if you go there, I doubt you'll be able to see him," the owner replied with a pale face.

As the owner stammered out his answer, Sanosuke gasped

for air. An overwhelming, unfamiliar emotion flooded his body. Sanosuke gave into the dizziness, entrusting himself to his disconnected mind. Eventually, he calmed down, and slowly began to walk.

"Of course he'll see me. There's no reason for him not to."

"Sano..." Kenshin gazed imploringly at Sanosuke's back. Sanosuke did not respond. His jaw was locked tight in the effort to suppress the violent emotions that threatened to erupt from the depths of his heart. About an hour later, Sanosuke stood under the overhanging roof of the row house and announced his arrival.

"Tsukioka-san... Tsukioka-san, are you there? Tsukioka-san..." Sanosuke carefully controlled himself and was very patient as he called out, but there was no response from inside. He felt the blood rush to his head the moment he realized he should've just pounded on the door sooner.

"I know you're in there, Tsukioka Katsuhiko—former Sekihô Army cadet!" He used his fist, a fighter's specialty, as well as his voice to batter the door. The door finally opened in response to the terrible sound, and a man appeared. He had a cloth tied around his forehead, perhaps to keep back his overgrown hair. He had a noble, high-bridged nose, thin, firm lips, deep eye sockets and chiseled cheeks, as if his flesh had been carved. His skin was an earthen, wasted color, as though he spent many long years without exposure to the sunlight.

"Just as I thought," Sanosuke said, as if to make sure. Sagara Sôzô's nishiki-e was still clutched in his hand. "So, it was you who drew this."

"Sanosuke, how did you...?" Tsunan stared into space for a moment, then looked at Sanosuke. Something wasn't quite right. The shock of seeing something so unexpected seemed to be storming his mind.

"I could tell right away, for I can see you and me as we were long ago, standing beside the captain."

"I see... Yes, you're right." Tsunan's face broke into a smile. Indescribable emotions were exchanged across the doorway.

They disappeared into the back. Watching over this scene, Kenshin and Kaoru gave a sigh of relief as they finally understood what was going on. Tsukioka Tsunan was a survivor of the Sekihô Army just like Sanosuke.

Kenshin urged Kaoru, "Let's go home, Kaoru-dono."

"He's Sanosuke's old friend. Aren't you going to introduce yourself?"

"Sanosuke was followed because he didn't seem to be his usual self, but there was nothing to it. Moreover..." Kenshin smiled at Kaoru as he paused. "Moreover, as can be seen from what aku means to him, the Sekihô Army is a special memory for Sano. Outsiders are unnecessary in a place of memories." As he said this, Kenshin turned in the bright afternoon light, and Kaoru thought she felt something that could only be understood by the minds of men.



The Grenades

Kenshin walked a few steps, then stopped in his tracks. He felt someone, somewhere was watching them. There were a few people in the alley by the row house, but none of them were the watcher. Kenshin slowly turned around, as though talking to Kaoru, and casually looked over the surroundings. He noticed a man standing alone under the eaves of the row house, dressed in fashionable Western-style clothes. *Hmm, has this one met him...?* Kenshin's memory wasn't clear.

The man looked about thirty years old and had a thin face. Something about his eyes and the way he was standing made Kenshin shiver. The man stared without blinking at Kenshin with no hint of emotion. His legs were set comfortably apart and his left hand was hidden, probably concealing a weapon. It could have been a sword or a staff,

or even a pistol. His stance signaled that he was prepared to use any one of those weapons at a moment's notice.

Is he keeping an eye on Tsukioka Tsunan? Instinctively, Kenshin knew that was the case. Kenshin casually placed a hand on Kaoru's shoulder while discreetly resting his other hand on the hilt of his sakabatô. Kenshin tried to shift Kaoru to the opposite side of his body to shield her, but Kaoru didn't quite understand his intentions. She was already panicking about his hand on her shoulder.

"K-Kenshin, what are you doing?" She whispered nervously, but Kenshin had no time for explanations. The man might have had a pistol, and if he pulled it, Kenshin would have to counter by drawing his sakabatô.

The man looked familiar, but Kenshin still couldn't remember who he was. Regardless, the man was watching Tsunan, and although Kenshin didn't know much about Tsunan, his instincts told him that the watcher was dangerous. At the very least, this man wasn't someone Kenshin wanted to have around.

The man smirked at Kenshin, then turned and walked briskly away. Soon, he was far in the distance, and all that remained were Kaoru's confused emotions.

"Kenshin..." Kaoru said, gazing intently at him.

"Oro...?!"

After inviting Sanosuke inside, Tsunan closed and locked the shoji door then lit the paper lamp with a flint. Even though

imported kerosene lamps were slowly gaining popularity in Tokyo Prefecture, not everyone welcomed them. In one amusing incident, dim paper lamps were suddenly replaced with kerosene ones in a school dormitory, but instead of welcoming the improvement, the students complained that they were too bright! But kerosene lamps were convenient tools, and their eventual popularity was inevitable.

Kaika Shinsaku Dodoitsu (A Song of Progress and Invention) even celebrated the development with the lyrics "Gaslamps outdoors, lamps indoors / People on wheels in Misujimachi."

Ordinary citizens were establishing a modern lifestyle, but Tsunan seemed to have rejected these new conveniences, choosing to live as if it were still the Edo period.

"It's been a long time," Tsunan finally said. A cold bottle of saké had quickly dissolved the distance between them.

"An artist. Thinking back, you were always skilled with your hands, and you mixed gunpowder and handled complicated cannons with no problem at all," Sanosuke happily reminisced. But Tsunan had no interest in talking about old times. He looked worried and depressed as he sipped his saké.

"What do you do now?" Tsunan asked curtly.

"Nothing much." Sanosuke lowered the saké cup from his lips. His eyes were already growing red. "Well, I'm having a good time, in my own way."

"Is that so?" Tsunan replied. "So, you've been having a

good time, huh? Not one good thing has happened for me in the past ten years. Until I saw you, I can't remember smiling, not even once."

Not knowing what to say, Sanosuke took another drink.

"I've spent ten years cursing the men who dishonored Captain Sagara and the Sekihô Army."

"Tsunan..." Sanosuke raised his hand, interrupting. Gloom filled the room, and a chill ran down Sanosuke's spine. Tsunan was not one to lie or exaggerate. For most people, the Sekihô Army was just some incident that had happened back at the end of the Shogunate era. But for the man caught by Sanosuke's gaze, it had been a heavy cross to bear.

Although there was no way to know how Tsunan had spent the past ten years, Sanosuke couldn't help but feel an obligation to his former comrade.

"I feel the same pain you do," Sanosuke replied in a low whisper. He brought the saké cup to his mouth and tossed back a drink. Tsunan watched Sanosuke intently, his jaw clenched. Tsunan's almond-shaped eyes were angled slightly upward, and the bright pupils and firm lips, both expressive of his strong will, gave him something of an evil look. Tsunan hesitated for some time, but at last seemed to make up his mind to speak.

"To tell you the truth..." Tsunan said in a low, depressed voice. "Ha, ha, ha! What a day this day has been." Tsunan changed the subject with a subtle grin. He apparently

needed some time to prepare himself before continuing.

Sanosuke allowed the silence to stretch until Tsunan spoke again.

"But, to be reunited with you on the very day that all the arrangements have been made... Perhaps this meeting was guided by the captain, up in heaven."

"Katsu...?" A slip of the tongue caused Sanosuke to call Tsunan by his original name, and his friend's expression turned stern. Sanosuke felt a chill run down his back. *It can't be*, he thought. But Tsunan seemed unconcerned and continued as if to clear the air.

"Sanosuke, why don't we organize the Sekihô Army again?"

"What?" Sanosuke's expression stiffened. As he gulped down the cold saké, he felt uneasiness rise in his throat.

"Let's crush the Revolutionary Government that destroyed the Sekihô Army, and create the new era that Captain Sagara strived for."

"Katsu, what on earth are you planning to do?" Sanosuke's tone was subdued and accusatory, but Tsunan didn't seem to mind.

"You ask what I've planned, but there's only one goal for the Sekihô Army—crush the Meiji Government that stands in our way and establish a new era of true equality between—"

"Don't tell me you were too busy drawing pictures to hear about the Seinan War. Even Saigô Takamori—the

Revolution's greatest hero—and the strong Hayato men of Satsuma who followed him didn't last more than six months," Sanosuke replied bitterly with a glance at Tsunan. Anger stirred inside of him, but Tsunan wasn't riled.

"Saigô took up arms in Kagoshima, on the edge of Japan. It's too far away to stage a march on Tokyo, so in the end, it was all in vain. My target is the center of Japan. An attack here, in Tokyo Prefecture." In a calm, almost brazen manner, Tsunan continued. "First, we attack the Ministry of Home Affairs, where domestic matters are controlled. We'll bring operations to a complete standstill. If I could, I'd crush the Ministries of the Army and the Navy, and the Ministry of Finance at the same time, but I can't handle everything *alone*."

"Alone?" Sanosuke's confusion was evident on his face. He thought the idea was absurd. Tsunan could well be a megalomaniac—in fact, it seemed quite evident that he was. "What can one man do?" Sanosuke scoffed. The plan to overthrow the government didn't surprise him, but he was dumbfounded that this great *coup d'état* was supposed to be executed by just one person. It was insanely reckless.

"Yes, I'm alone. Except for those who may follow in my footsteps, anyway. There's no way I can trust anyone, so I've been moving ahead with this plan on my own." Suddenly, Tsunan stood up and calmly walked toward the closet. "But even if I'm alone, I have these..." he said as he opened the fusuma door. The paper lantern's soft light illuminated the

darkness of the closet's interior.

There inside were the results of the knowledge that Tsunan had cultivated while in the Sekihô Army—shelves filled with handmade grenades.

**THEY'RE
GRENADES.**

**I LEARNED
ENOUGH
ABOUT
EXPLOSIVES
WITH SEKIHI
TO MAKE
THESE.**



Strange Sanosuke

“These are my creations. I’ve taken extra precautions for the past ten years so as to avoid detection. What do you think? Surely no one would ever imagine that a mere artist was creating such things.” Sanosuke stared in awe as Tsunan continued. “With these, I’ll blow up the ministries, one after another, and weaken the country’s centralized power. Naturally, disgruntled former samurai families and peasants will take advantage of the situation and begin to riot throughout the country. Weak and exhausted by the Seinan War, the current government will be helpless. All we’ll need to do then is wait for it to tumble down like an avalanche.”

Tsunan’s ten years of isolation had had been spent in service to the plans that obsessed him. He had accomplished all this with no one to consult with or criticize his plan,

and was convinced that his lonely uprising could overturn society. Tsunan continued to speak like a man possessed—most likely, he had carried on conversations with himself almost every day while single-handedly preparing this outrageous plan. He believed without a doubt that after the period of mass turmoil was over, an era of true equality among the four social classes would arise, and the honor of the Captain and the Sekihô Army would be restored. Sanosuke didn't interrupt Tsunan, and for the most part played the listener.

"I've already obtained a hand-drawn map showing the interior layout of the Ministry of Home Affairs. The plan will be carried out tomorrow—there will be a new moon and it's a Sunday night, so very few people will be around." Tsunan avoided looking at Sanosuke, focusing on the saké cup in his hand. Almost as an afterthought, his mouth finally formed the words that he really wanted to say. "Sano, since you're having a good time these days, I don't want to force anything on you. As a former Sekihô Army soldier, I will carry out this plan, even if I have to do it alone. But, could you think about it until sundown tomorrow, and let me know your answer?"

A short time later, Sanosuke was on his way home.

It's impossible, he thought to himself. No matter how Sanosuke looked at it, it was unlikely that bombing the ministry offices and sporadic riots could cause the Meiji Government to fall. Even if the plan were carried out, it was

glaringly obvious that it would suffer the same failure as the Shinpuren, Hagi, and Akizuki uprisings in the past.

He's blind to the present after spending ten long, lonely years thinking only of avenging the captain and the Sekihô Army. But, still...ten years... Sanosuke envisioned a long, straight path before him. But once tread upon, it was one that would never allow him to turn back...

Sanosuke looked up at the night sky as he walked, trying to pretend that nothing was wrong, even as a dizzy, violent feeling was welling up in the depths of his heart. He couldn't decide if it was rage or sadness. "It's already spring, so why is this cold wind blowing?" Although he spoke of the wind, it might have been his own fate he was lamenting.

Sanosuke felt a fire beginning to blaze inside him. If he left things as they were, he'd not only end up being unable to avenge Captain Sagara, he would lose his former war buddy forever. These feelings urged Sanosuke to make a decision. Of course, there was no way for anyone else to guess what was going on in his mind.

At the Kamiya dojo, Kaoru and Yahiko faced each other, their shinai training swords in the ready position. They both had on their training kimono and hakama, but neither wore masks or hand protectors. Almost an hour had passed since they'd started, and there were no signs that their training would end any time soon.

The morning sun poured in from the high windows designed to bring in the light, making the sweat pouring off their foreheads sparkle. It was just before seven, and the sunlight was growing gradually brighter.

Kenshin observed the training from the raised instructor's seat to the side, arms folded. Actually, he was pretending to observe, but in fact he was dozing off. Just as Kenshin's head started to nod and his body sway, Kaoru's sharp battle cry electrified the atmosphere inside the dojo.

Yahiko responded with a battle cry of his own. Their bodies maneuvered rapidly, and the sound of their swords striking each other rang out. Kaoru's battle cry echoed again throughout the dojo. Yahiko's small body flew backwards, landing hard.

"What happened, Yahiko? Are you giving up already?" Kaoru's voice was only slightly winded, and a frustrated Yahiko tightened the grip on his bamboo shinai and positioned himself once again.

"Hmph! I let the ugly girl who can't get up in the morning beat me on purpose," Yahiko replied, breathing hard. He rushed in to attack a hole in Kaoru's defense that she had purposely left open. As Kenshin had pointed out when praising him for his improvement, Yahiko was very quick with his shinai. But Kaoru moved even faster, sliding her feet lightly and deflecting Yahiko's blow, then striking him on the shoulder as she passed. By the time Yahiko turned around, she had already stepped within striking range of

his head. Kaoru silently unleashed her chi as she swung her shinai down, striking Yahiko's head. She did her best to go easy on direct blows, but Yahiko was shorter than Kaoru. Instead of striking his forehead, the single blow landed directly on top of his head. Yahiko blinked a few times at the stars that appeared before him, then collapsed onto his back with a thud.

Kenshin and Kaoru came running, surprised by the loud sound his body made when it hit the floor. Yahiko had passed out with a happy expression on his face, but failed to regain consciousness even after Kaoru slapped his cheeks several times. Concerned, Kenshin grabbed a bucket of water used for cleaning and mercilessly splashed the contents onto Yahiko's face.

"Yahhh!" Yahiko came to right away. To Kenshin and Kaoru's surprise, Yahiko immediately assumed the ready position as he stood up.

"I'm not going down yet." Before them stood the gallant figure of a youthful samurai devoted to the sword.

Yahiko... Kenshin and Kaoru swallowed their words in silent agreement.

Breakfast followed shortly after the training session. After the meal, Sanosuke dropped by while the three were having a lively conversation. He watched their faces as he talked about the harmless aspects of the previous evening's reunion with Tsunan.

"Huh?!" Kaoru suddenly blurted in exaggerated surprise. To back up Kaoru, Kenshin overreacted as well.

"So, Tsukioka Tsunan is Sanosuke's old friend?!"

"Hey, what's with the awkward surprise?" Sanosuke felt there was something strange about the pair's reaction, but he didn't let petty things bother him. "Well, whatever. I want to celebrate our reunion with a party. You think I can use the dojo tonight?"

Kenshin seemed to be deep in thought while he listened to Sanosuke explain his plan, but Kaoru and Yahiko both harbored the same concerns.

"You can use the dojo," Kaoru replied. Then she looked directly at Sanosuke and said, "You say you want to have a party, but where's the money for it going to come from?" Before he could answer, she drew her own conclusions and her expression changed. "So you're planning to sponge off us? Oh no, you don't! Absolutely not!"

Sanosuke hesitated, taken aback by Kaoru's intensity. Finally he replied with a smile, "Don't worry, I'll take care of the money." That said, he got up to leave.

The three stared dumbfounded at Sanosuke's back as he walked away. At that moment, Kenshin was struck by a realization.

"Sano." As if released from a spell, Kenshin called out to stop his friend. "Uhhh...so just how is Tsukioka-dono doing...?"

Sanosuke stopped in his tracks, then turned around and

replied, "He said he was going to complete an unfinished nishiki-e, then deliver it to his publisher Iroha-Ya in the afternoon. He should be here by six this evening."

Sanosuke took half a dozen steps, then remembered something. "Oh yeah. Invite Tae and that young girl, too. They'll probably be happy about it." Sanosuke then left the dojo at a brisk pace, not looking back. He just didn't seem to be himself.

"Strange. He's acting strange, very strange! I wonder if Sanosuke is ill. Is he?!" Call it women's intuition, but Kaoru seemed very suspicious of Sanosuke's unusually commendable behavior.

"P-please relax," Kenshin managed to say as Kaoru pressed against him, grabbed his collar, and shook him.

"It's probably just because it's spring..." Yahiko muttered to himself as though he understood everything. He was unconcerned about Kenshin and Kaoru's worries.

Thirty minutes later, Kenshin disappeared from the Kamiya dojo.



An Unexpected Visit

A small door beside the main gate opened, and the student Kenshin had arranged the meeting through appeared and asked Kenshin to enter before guiding him into the police chief's house. The student led Kenshin to a guest room that looked out onto a spacious garden. After a while, a different student brought tea and sweets. Kenshin felt thirsty when he saw the offerings, and reached for the cup, savoring the hot, aromatic tea.

There was a wooden brazier in the room, but no lit coals inside. The shoji doors that partitioned the room and the yard beyond the open veranda had been left open, but during daytime, the early spring weather didn't feel that cold. Glancing at the garden, Kenshin saw red and white plum blossoms blooming here and there.

"Himura-san, thank you for waiting." The police chief

wore black-rimmed glasses and had clear-cut features and a healthy complexion. He was somewhat nervous as he announced his arrival. He had taken the trouble to change into his uniform, even though it was his day off. The chief had his reasons to be concerned. When Kenshin had first arrived on this surprise visit, he had faced the student gatekeeper and requested a meeting.

"This one has come to visit the police chief at his residence, knowing it may be inconvenient for him because it is his day off. But if this visit were delayed until tomorrow morning at the police station, it could be too late."

The police chief had then appeared, wondering what this could be about. Kenshin made it clear that this was a serious, confidential matter. After a brief introduction, Kenshin sat up straight and broached the subject right away.

"There is something this one would like to know," Kenshin said. "Chief, this one would like to ask candidly, have you heard of any large-scale matters, such as a conspiracy to overthrow the government, for example?"

The chief eyed Kenshin with suspicion through his round, black-rimmed glasses. His classic features had taken on a stern edge. "Well, nothing like that..." The chief minced words, unsure of how to reply.

The chief knew that the Himura Kenshin before him was a legendary swordsman also known by the alias Hitokiri Battôsei, and was a former Ishin Shishi patriot who

had sided with the Chôshû. He also knew that after the Revolution, Kenshin refused any government position, and had wandered the country as a rûrouni. Not only that, but several times in the past, the police had requested Kenshin's assistance in solving difficult cases. Moreover, Yamagata Aritomo, Minister of the Army and the chief's superior, had told him repeatedly about Kenshin's personality. There was no doubt that the two men were already acquainted, but still, this visit from Kenshin was very sudden, and one couldn't help but feel that his question was just as abrupt.

"What do you mean by that? Himura-san, have you heard something?"

"No, not exactly." As Kenshin said this, a maid working in the residence brought fresh cups of tea and some different sweets. The conversation ground to a halt. To kill time, the chief offered Kenshin the new batch of sweets.

"Would you care for some, Himura-san? These are alphabet sweets. They were first sold around the Motoshiba area in the fifth year of Meiji, and became rather popular at one point. In addition to the twenty-six letters of the English alphabet, some have phrases pressed on them, such as 'Culture and Progress.' I'm hesitant about having everything reflect Western European ways, but I believe 'Culture and Progress' is meaningful to the Japanese people."

Kenshin took the sweets, and glanced at the pond in the garden. The harsh sunlight of the day reflected on the surface of the water, creating small, sparkling circles. After

making sure the maid had left, Kenshin spoke once again.

"Chief, although the Seinan War has ended, society is still as turbulent as ever. If this one were the sort of man who harbored growing discontent and dissatisfaction toward the current government, now would probably be the time to do something about it."

Beads of sweat formed on the chief's brow as he listened, head bowed. Although there was no conclusive evidence, this was Hitokiri Battô sai, the lone sword who had devoted himself to overthrowing the Tokugawa government. And his finely honed intuition, backed by experience, had latched onto something. This was not a matter to be laughed off.

Kenshin spoke with unusual eloquence. "One of the people precious to a rurouni like this one has been acting somewhat strangely since last night. This man is not one to be easily shaken by ordinary matters, but the way he acted this morning was not normal. There is something that he cannot confide in this one, his friend. It appears he has become involved in something. Chief, this one is no longer an Ishin Shishi. But if at all possible, this one wants to protect those whose paths cross this one's. This one has no desire to inconvenience the police. However, anything would help. This one needs information, some kind of clue. Otherwise, when something does happen, this one will be at a loss."

"Himura-san..." The chief's downcast face was troubled, and his forehead was now sweating profusely. The chief

pulled a handkerchief from his pocket and wiped the perspiration from his brow. His lean, clear-cut features had lost some of their vitality. He took a sip of tea to moisten his throat, then said in a decisive tone, "What I'm going to tell you must be kept a secret from everyone—may I ask that of you?"

"Yes, of course. Now then, is there something you know?"

"No, there's nothing conclusive," the chief said with a sigh, then paused awhile before continuing.

"It's just as you have surmised. The Seinan War has ended, but in this city and all over the country, confusion still plagues our society. The police fight every day to protect the current government and the nation. We fight to realize the still incomplete ideals of the Meiji, which are to improve the lives of the common people a little at a time, making life better than it was under the last government.

"The Seinan War brought anti-government resistance from opposing groups under control. On the other hand, there has been a disturbing movement inside the government that used to be insignificant, but has recently shown rapid expansion. For example, in the Ministry of the Army, a small group of men who are discontent with their rewards from the previous war have secretly begun to meet. We're currently investigating this, but according to unconfirmed information, these men are planning an armed uprising."

Kenshin listened quietly, suppressing his shock. He

could begin to see the world the man before him lived in. The police were the ones being slandered by many people as “agents of national authority.” The chief was surrounded by enemies both internal and external, and was battling them every day. That was this man’s livelihood.

“It’s not that we don’t understand their point. During the Seinan War, the rebel army frequently bemoaned, ‘If the red hats and cannon hadn’t been there...’ Frankly, it’s true that the imperial army relied on the Imperial Guards with their red hats, as well as the power of their ammunition.

“Assistant Inspector Ujiki and many of the other swordsmen who have troubled you were former sword commandos during the Seinan War. That war is over now, and to balance the national budget the number of temporarily employed imperial officers and soldiers had to be cut back. Select elites remained in the military, and skilled men who were discharged were recruited as police officers.

“But this year, the government disclosed its plan to slash the annual budget for the Ministry of the Army. Although this was unavoidable, many of those discharged—officers and soldiers alike—must be angered by the government’s actions.”

Kenshin remained silent as he listened to the chief. His shadow of doubt had slowly taken on a well-defined shape.

“Now, then... Narrowing it down to those who present

the most immediate threat of overthrowing the government, I would say there are perhaps two other groups." The chief named a group of thieves and smugglers—formerly from samurai families—who ran their operations out of their own Hisago Inn, located in Asakusa Tajima-cho. He also spoke of a group whose hideout was the Yôzen-in temple in Senju Kita-gumi, where the gekken-kai government-sanctioned kenjutsu tournament was held.

Neither of these triggered a response in the back of Kenshin's mind. Since Tsukioka Tsunan made his living as an artist, there could be a link between him and the group at the thieves' inn. But the other man he'd seen yesterday evening didn't look at all like a thug to him, yet was the type of person who openly displayed his murderous intentions.

He's not the type to fit in with the gekken-kai, thieves, or smugglers. Kenshin's chest tightened with anxiety, wondering what the watcher really did for a living.



A New Suspicion

He may be a police officer, either active or retired... At that moment, a scene flashed unexpectedly into Kenshin's mind. How long ago was it? When he first wandered into the downtown area, he remembered having a run-in with the Police Sword Corps unit, an elite force consisting of higher-ranking officers authorized to carry swords. Kenshin had been questioned by police officers about his violation of the sword prohibition. Just as he was about to surrender peacefully, the crazed Police Sword Corps, led by Assistant Inspector Ujiki, forced him to draw his sword, then used that as an excuse to attempt to legally kill him under the pretext of self-defense. At the time, Kenshin had been justifiably concerned that the Corps would involve the people of the city as well as his companion, Kamiya Kaoru. For their protection, Kenshin had reluctantly drawn his



sakabatô to accept the challenge. He then beat them down until they were unable to stand. Not much time had passed since then, but for a man like Kenshin, who was involved in many incidents, it was already long forgotten.

Was it that man? Kenshin finally placed the face as that of Ujiki, a coldhearted, merciless revolutionary patriot from Satsuma. He must have received some kind of punishment since their previous encounter, and surely his dissatisfaction and discontent had grown. In a way, the connection made sense. But the core issue was still unknown.

“Chief, I have a favor to ask of you. Could you quickly investigate the nishiki-e publisher Iroha-ya by this afternoon? This one would like to know what kind of person the owner is, and if he has any connection to the three groups of dissidents you have mentioned just now. Yes, by four o’clock if possible...”

Kenshin didn’t mention that Iroha-ya was the publisher that sold Tsukioka Tsunan’s nishiki-e artwork. To begin with, Kenshin had no idea that Tsunan had something outrageous planned. He thought if Tsunan were discovered to be a former Sekihô Army cadet, he could be viewed with prejudice, just like the time Kenshin was almost arrested for impersonating Hitokiri Battôsei.

Tsukioka-dono’s name won’t be mentioned, but still... The instincts of a former hitokiri were telling him that something was about to happen, but where? The thought that Sanosuke

might be involved made the tea in his mouth taste bitter.

"I have no idea what this means, but since this urgent request comes from none other than Himura-san, I have no choice," the chief stated in a definite tone. Despite that, there were only a few hours left.

"Sorry to trouble you with this."

Seeing Kenshin bow his head in a truly apologetic manner, the chief's face immediately broke into a smile. As a man who rendered distinguished service during the Revolution, Kenshin could have assumed any government position. Instead, this man declared that he "did not wish for honorary or governmental positions," and lived a stoic life as a rurouni. The man before him was somewhat pitiable, yet endearing—qualities that could make one feel like reaching out with both arms to embrace him. A feeling of trust and affection filled the chief's heart.

"Um, about the ones you mentioned earlier, Assistant Inspector Ujiki and his men..." Kenshin asked about what happened to them after the incident.

"Oh, the Police Sword Corps. I may have told you this before, but the Corps was dissolved, and now they're scattered all over our Tokyo Prefecture jurisdiction. That said, we stationed half of the Police Sword Corps in the Takebashi area to guard the Imperial Palace alongside the Imperial Guard Regiment. The intention was to have the two groups keep an eye on each other. Instead, it brought dissatisfaction from both sides." At this point, the chief

paused to moisten his mouth with tea before continuing. "On a day off like this, men like Ujiki should be spending their day at that billiard place near Takebashi called New York. It's the latest trend nowadays." The chief's words carried an obvious note of disapproval, but it wasn't clear whether it was from anger or grief. "Himura-san, is something about to happen here in Tokyo Prefecture?"

"Well..." Kenshin paused to consider his reply, then said, "Perhaps tonight, or at least within a day or two, a major incident that might spark the overthrow of the government could disrupt the city. Yes, if possible, it might be wise to choose two or three hundred reliable men and have them stand by—secretly—at the station."

Although based on guesswork, Kenshin was seized by his own words. Perhaps the former Sekihô Army's Tsukioka Tsunan was also a member of a rebel militia, and had recruited Sanosuke to join them. If that were the case, then it was difficult to imagine that they could have formed an alliance with the malcontents inside the government. After all, such a militia would contain remnants of the Sekihô Army, which suffered the dishonor of being branded a false imperial army by the same government.

Kenshin's doubts and suspicions boiled up and expanded, one after another. There was no end to it.

"Yes Chief, that would be best," Kenshin repeated. "This one has had a premonition that within three days—but most likely at midnight tonight—a major incident may well

occur. Of course, if nothing happens, then so much the better."

"Himura-san." The two men smiled at each other. It was a silent understanding between men.

"This one is planning to go visit some of the places that come to mind. Apologies for the selfishness, but this one would like to call upon you once again around four o'clock." Kenshin straightened up and bowed, then grasped the sakabatô beside his knees with his right hand and stood up straight.

Thinking he probably hadn't had lunch yet, the chief invited Kenshin to at least have a tempura *chazuke*, a bowl of rice topped with tea and tempura, before leaving. But Kenshin politely declined and left the chief's home, heading once again toward the run-down row house.

If what Sanosuke said is correct, Tsunan should be out delivering his work to Iroha-Ya about now. Moreover, if he were truly the subject of the suspicious-looking man's surveillance, then that man probably won't be at the row house. These were Kenshin's thoughts as he hurried to the row house, but counter to his assumptions, a different man was casually watching Tsunan's residence. This man was dressed in a police officer's uniform, and Kenshin took cover to observe him.

Of course, with that uniform on, no one will grow suspicious of him wandering around the area. He looks as though he's been sword trained. Kenshin surmised that the man was most

likely a former member of the Police Sword Corps. *Perhaps he was one of the men present at that incident.* Although it was a possibility, it was a risk Kenshin was willing to take. He assumed a slow, natural pace as he walked toward the officer. Luckily, the officer didn't seem to recognize him.

The First Stopover



The First Stopover

“Just how far are we going?” the officer asked the man beside him, unable to contain his growing uneasiness. In the officer’s eyes, the man who had hailed him had a gentle, almost feminine appearance, despite the large cross-shaped scar on his left cheek. His manner of speaking was also very polite.

“There is something this one would like you to hear. If you would be so kind...?” The officer had followed the man for some distance at his behest, but now the sword at the man’s side began to worry him. Soon, the two men arrived at a canal, far from the back-alley row house.

“This place should do.” Kenshin stopped in his tracks and looked around. The canal by their feet was brimming with water, brightly reflecting the spring sunlight. Riverboats weren’t so common now that the new railways had been

constructed, but the Tokyo waterways, which flowed in every direction, were still a very important part of life for the people of the city. Then again, today was Sunday. Pedestrian and cart traffic was sparse in this neighborhood, which normally bustled during weekdays. It was a clear, cloudless day.

"This concerns Tsukioka Tsunan-dono," Kenshin said, a statement that seemed out of place in the environment. He turned around to face the officer, and their eyes became locked in a fierce stare. "That should explain the reason you were lured here."



"Wh-what is this all about?" the officer sputtered, still gazing intently at Kenshin. "I have no idea what this is all about..."

"It's useless to play innocent," Kenshin replied coldly. He began to voice his speculation in an impassive tone. "You were spying on Tsukioka-dono's residence. There must be something inside that you need."

"Hmph. I was wondering what you were going to say, but that's absurd. You'll get yourself arrested for insulting a police officer with such nonsense," the man sneered, baring his white teeth. His attitude was cool and composed.

"No nonsense about it. All the evidence is inside that house." Kenshin watched the police officer's behavior with unblinking eyes. There were obvious signs of restlessness, but as if to cover it up, the officer spoke as though he were about to leave.

"So be it, then. Is that all you wanted to talk about?" the police officer said, turning away.

"Stop right there!" Kenshin shouted in a low, commanding tone. The police officer's face distorted into a hideous display of bare hatred. He drew the saber on his hip with surprising speed, slashing it toward Kenshin as he turned around. The strike harbored an intensity that could not be taken lightly. Kenshin warded off the blow with a light-footed retreat. The police officer didn't pause before striking out with his second attack. Kenshin leapt lightly to the right and then to the left as he deflected the blow. The officer

repeated the same attack a third time.

It happened on the fourth blow, when Kenshin tried to dodge—his foot got caught in some underbrush and he landed on his right hand, momentarily disoriented.

“Oh, you’re mine now...!” The police officer rushed forward, trying to seize the opportunity, but his foot became entangled in the brush as well. He staggered and tried to regain his balance. Meanwhile, Kenshin rolled over and extended his sword from his hip. The police officer, recovered from his stumble, held his saber in a unique overhead position.

Jigen-ryû. Just like Assistant Inspector Ujiki. Kenshin placed his left hand on the sakabatô at his hip, and waited for his opponent’s next move.

“*Ches-to!*” The police officer let out a Jigen-ryû battle cry and moved forward with a broad step just as Kenshin leapt from his kneeling position. The two passed by each other, and at the moment they crossed paths, their bodies appeared to come into contact. “Ngh!” The officer’s saber sparkled twice as it danced in the air. Then the police officer fell, shoulder first, toward the ground.

Kenshin had met the Jigen-ryû death blow from below, using the iai-nuki combat form. Normally, the iai move consists of drawing the sword in a flash, striking a killing blow, and then returning the blade to its sheath in one continuous motion. In this case, Kenshin had left the blade sheathed. Stepping closer to his opponent as he twisted his

body in a half-turn, he had then struck the police officer's abdomen with the sheathed sakabatô. Of course, Kenshin's lightning skill was such that the sword was invisible to the naked eye until the sakabatô was resting once again at his hip. Kenshin glanced around once, then quickly left the bank of the canal.

Ten minutes later, the sound of thunder echoed through the clear skies, a sound not commonly heard in the spring. It woke the fallen police officer, and he managed to stand, using his saber as a crutch. The officer acted as if in a trance at first, but hearing the spring thunder a second time snapped him out of it. His body began to shake, and the expression on his face slowly changed. His eyes were consumed by fear.

"I-I remember now. That large cross-shaped scar...that man was the legendary Hitokiri Battô sai. He's strong, much too strong..." The police officer had forgotten all about the pain in his side, and simply trembled in fear for a while. His body looked shrunken and his face twitched as it turned red, then paled.

"I-I can't just stand here..." The officer muttered in a voice so low that it was almost a groan. He began to run, clutching his injured side. He crossed the bridge over the canal, passed several rows of houses, and emerged onto the main street in Ginza, lined with elegant Western-style homes. Soon, he turned onto a small street. Shops and residences were

sparsely scattered along both sides of the narrow street. Soon, a storefront came into view, displaying a boldly lettered Billiards sign. The name of the hall was London.

The sun was still high above his head, and pale clouds floated across the otherwise clear blue sky, but the police officer had no time for noticing such things. He pushed open the Western-style door and entered the London, but never came out.

"So, the enemy is here, not at the New York in Takebashi," Kenshin muttered to himself as he looked up at the billiards sign.

A raid perhaps...? No, best to observe the situation for a little while. Kenshin cautiously checked his surroundings, paying close attention to the buildings within a few doors of the billiard hall. Just as he made up his mind to proceed, his stomach growled unexpectedly. *Oh, no, it probably would've been a good idea to have that tempura chazuke...* He regretted his decision, but it was too late now.

Kenshin stood beneath the eaves of the billiard hall. He could hear voices coming from inside. It was probably people in the middle of playing the game, for sometimes cheers were heard interspersed with the sound of billiard balls striking each other.

Kenshin placed his hand on the door and slowly pushed it open, then entered the shop and casually glanced around.

There were a total of twelve pool tables. Near each table were men in Western-style clothes, many of whom looked

like government officials from some ministry or another. There were also young girls and wives from good families dressed in kimonos, and all seemed amused by this game imported from the Western world.

In spite of being repeatedly banned by the government, billiards popularity grew as government officials themselves took the initiative and started to bet on and compete in games. Because those who were to supposed to control the game had been influenced early on, it was gradually legalized by the ninth year of Meiji (1876). At this time, however, billiards was still illegal in this part of the country.

It goes without saying that Kenshin wasn't interested in the game. But it seemed rather strange that the games had continued after a police officer in uniform had barged in. There had been no signs of confusion, and nary a scream from the ladies. In other words, these people were familiar with the police officers who were regulars, and whose presence was not meant to control the situation.

Kenshin tried his best to walk at a casual, leisurely pace as he proceeded to the back of the hall. The eyes of a few people were focused on the sword at Kenshin's hip, but most of the men and women had no interest in this intruder. Soon, Kenshin reached the end of the first floor of the large hall, and noticed the stairs in the corner that led to the second floor.

Up there, most likely... Kenshin bent forward and climbed the stairs.



Deadly Combat

As he approached the opening at the top of the stairs, Kenshin peered up into the second floor to check his surroundings. A guard stood a short distance away near the corner of a hallway. The other hallway to the left of the top of the stairs was empty. The guard wore Western-style clothes, but he had a Japanese sword in his hand. The man appeared to be very alert, and had the same feel about him as Assistant Inspector Ujiki and the police officer Kenshin had followed into this place a moment ago.

So, how many steps to reach him...? Kenshin thought to himself, measuring the distance with his eyes.

“You stupid fool!”

The loud yell erupted from the room at the far end of the hallway, creating an unexpected opening. The guard turned toward the room and Kenshin slipped swiftly into

the hallway on the left, out of sight. After pausing a moment to prepare himself, Kenshin leapt out and rushed the guard, delivering a powerful blow to the man's body. The guard's mouth gaped open, but he made no sound as he fell toward Kenshin's shoulder, his right hand barely touching the hilt of his sword. Cautiously, Kenshin dragged the man into the other hallway and out of sight, then strained his ears to hear what was going on inside the room.

"I'm sorry, I was careless," came a voice from inside the room. It sounded like the police officer from earlier. "That man is without a doubt Hitokiri Battô sai..."

Then a different, but still familiar, voice spoke. "All right, don't forget that we have important matters to deal with. The Ministry of Home Affairs will be attacked tonight, and there will be mass confusion. Presumably, the police will rush over, and then each cell will take action along with their comrades in the imperial guards. We'll take control of the imperial court and force the government to reconsider rewards for services rendered during the Seinan War...." The voice paused, followed by a brief, sharp order for silence. A moment later, with a thundering battle cry, the door was sliced diagonally in two, just as if someone was using it to test the sharpness of his blade. If Kenshin hadn't sensed the murderous aura coming from the room and thus stayed far from the door, he would have faced the same fate.

"Who's there?!"

"It's probably Hitokiri Battosai! He must have followed

Nakajima!" another voice shouted. The air crackled with tension, sending the second floor into an uproar. Two men sprang from the room, kicking down the door that had been mercilessly attacked a moment before. One carried a saber, the other a Japanese sword. Both moved with quick agility.

Kenshin's sword was already drawn. Goose bumps prickled across his entire body as he held his sakabatô ready. The two men attacking him were not ordinary street punks, but warriors who had spent years training. They took silent aim to cut Kenshin from the left and the right, and their cruelty and swiftness reminded him of wolves.

The ceiling was low, so the man with the saber adapted his technique from slashing to thrusting. His saber flashed as it moved horizontally, then thrust forward. Kenshin spread his arms to dodge the attack, then crouched down and sharply swung his sakabatô. The man dropped his saber and cradled his arm against his chest, then fell sideways onto the wooden floor. Kenshin turned swiftly and used the point of his sakabatô to force the man with the Japanese sword up against the wall.

Footsteps were soon heard from both the first floor and the room at the back of the hall. Encouraged by this sign of reinforcement, the man with the Japanese sword recklessly brought his blade down with all his might.

One of the men who had run up from the first floor wielded his sword relentlessly, clearly a veteran of many bloody battles. He kept a steady eye on Kenshin's movements,

deftly exchanging blows and reversing their positions until Kenshin's escape route was blocked. The man moved with the lethal grace of a leopard, but still Kenshin managed to reel off his opponent's long sword and strike the man's shoulder as he passed. The man staggered and tumbled down the stairs to land with a thud that shook the floor. The women, who had until then been enjoying billiards, screamed in unison and began to scatter.

The man named Nakajima made no move to attack, though his sword was drawn. He appeared to have frozen when he found out his opponent was Hitokiri Battôsei.

Ujiki was the only enemy left, and he and Kenshin faced each other. Ujiki raised his naked blade into the *tombo* overhead position unique to Jigen-ryû, and watched for an opening. Ujiki had once been painfully and publicly defeated by Kenshin's Hiten Mitsurugi-ryû. Jigen-ryû, as a strike-to-kill technique, required no defense, but it was still unwise to attack recklessly. Just then, a tall man clad in Western-style clothing came up from the first floor and quickly pulled a pistol out of an inside jacket pocket.

"Ha ha. Ujiki, looks like you're having a tough battle. Allow me to back you up." The man wore a faint smile on his face. Judging from his obvious Satsuma dialect, he was an active or retired army officer from the same province as Ujiki, probably discontent with the reward for his services during the Seinan War. His thin lips looked profoundly cruel, and he gazed down on Kenshin as though he were a

trapped bird or beast.

"I don't need any backup from you. I'll defeat this man myself." Ujiki, once the leader of the Police Sword Corps, still had his pride as a swordsman. Kenshin listened to their exchange carefully.

"Stop this armed uprising nonsense. Such recklessness will only cause the deaths of innocent people," Kenshin said, but the two men showed no emotion.

"What we do is none of your business," the man with the pistol replied. Kenshin slowly returned the sakabatô to its sheath at his waist.

"What do you think you're doing, Battô sai?! Your sword! Take up your sword!" Ujiki shouted.

The man with the pistol looked back and forth between Kenshin and Ujiki, the muzzle of his pistol pointed directly at Kenshin's chest. It was obvious he was willing to pull the trigger without a second thought at the first sign of any suspicious movement from Kenshin.

"I'll cut you up if you don't draw!" Ujiki exclaimed. But Ujiki, sword still held in the tombo position, seemed hesitant about closing the distance between them. Kenshin slowly moved forward a few steps, arms relaxed at his sides. He sensed someone moving downstairs.

Ujiki held his sword slightly flatter than the usual tombo position, likely due to the low ceiling. He was indeed a master, as expected from the previous head of the Police Sword Corps. He moved his body fluidly, controlling his

breath and storming into his attack.

Kenshin stood still as he emotionlessly confronted Ujiki's sword. The muzzle of the pistol was still pointed at him from a short distance behind. The moment before Ujiki's lethal long sword touched him, Kenshin ducked down at blinding speed. The man with the pistol thought he heard the sound of the blade ripping through the air, and a sensation of a short, sharp swish. But he must have been mistaken, for Kenshin was still in the same position, arms at his sides. Somehow, Ujiki's sword had been knocked from his hand and into the air, where it had then incredibly passed through the arm of the man holding the pistol. Ujiki's shoulders slumped and he dropped to his knees. He stared up at Kenshin blankly.

"Assistant Inspector Ujiki, this one will withdraw for now. There is one more place that must be visited. However, you should heed this advice: Stop this meaningless riot. The people who have finally started to regain their peaceful lives could be exposed to the turmoil of the Revolution once again. If you insist on being unreasonable, then next time this one will not hesitate to kill you!"

Ujiki seemed to be at loss for words, and the man with the sword through his arm replied instead.

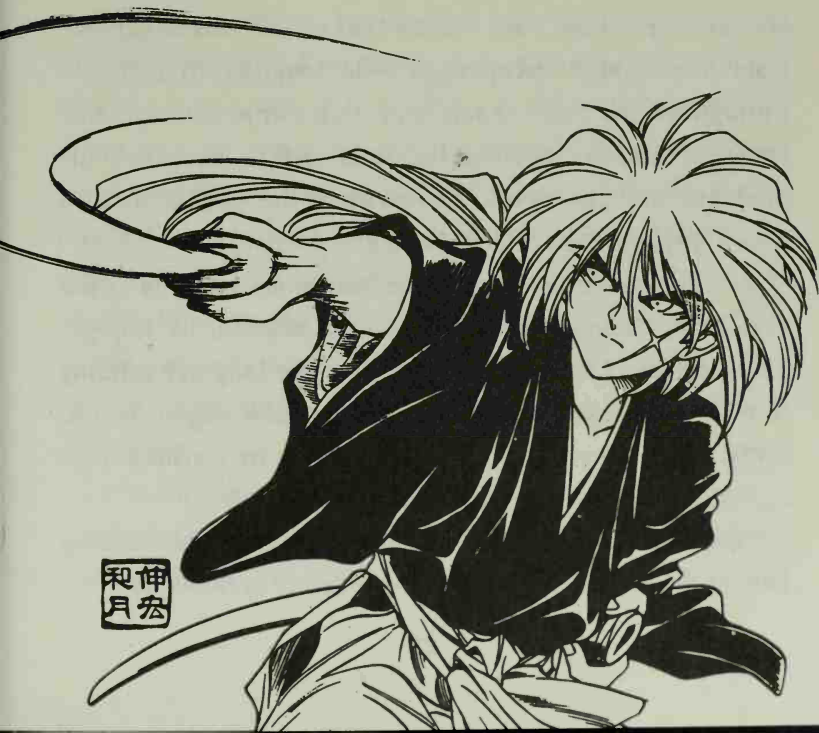
"Hmph. Try to stop us. The ones who are attacking the Ministry of Home Affairs aren't our comrades. It's hopeless to try to find them now. There are thirteen different hideouts in this city, and we won't give up their locations no matter how we're tortured. It would be impossible to gain control of all

of them. By this time tomorrow, this city will be transformed into a hell of burning flames." The man laughed despite the pain that distorted his lips, his bravado unfazed.

Kenshin had been ready to leave, but those words awoke something dangerous deep inside of him—the madness of his hitokiri days.

Unforgivable.

Kenshin's mind was flooded with the images of chaos and destruction that he had participated in at the end of the Shogunate era. A path to the God of Death lay in those ruins. It was the lone path of the beast. A path for one who believed in living by the sword until his last breath, even if death in some gutter was the inevitable outcome.



Deep inside Kenshin's heart, his anger grew into a boiling rage and then transformed into a cold, chilling smile. The smile seemed to come from the joy of returning to his former hitokiri self. Or perhaps he was ridiculing his own worthlessness. Kenshin was confused by his unexpected smile, and tried to suppress it as he hung his head. The fact that such conflicting emotions even entered his mind made him resentful. Then the smile spread, expanding inside Kenshin. His shoulders quivered as he tried to contain the strong impulses buried deep in his heart. To a stranger's eyes, he may have looked as though he were crying.

Taking his eyes off the shattered men in the hallway, Kenshin descended the stairs with gentle steps. At times he was unable to hold back the chi that threatened to explode from him, and it escaped as wild laughter that spread throughout his body. Each time this happened, Kenshin smacked his fist against his forehead to suppress the madness, and one by one he visualized the faces of Kamiya Kaoru, Myôjin Yahiko, and Sagara Sanosuke.

Kenshin, please don't go back to being a hitokiri. Don't wield your killing sword... From somewhere beyond, he thought he heard Kaoru's sad, weeping voice. The laughter echoing from the depths of his dark soul gradually began to drift away, like a receding tide. Slowly, his heart warmed once again, and a sense of reality returned.

Ujiki's comrades disappeared quietly and in unison, leaving behind the "heart" of a rurouni, wandering in the wind.



Two-Man Army

“Okay, let’s get started,” Sanosuke said as he stood up. Kenshin, Yahiko, Kaoru, Tsubame, Tae, Sanosuke, and Tsunan were seated on cushions in a circle surrounding a spread of fancy sushi and bottles of saké. The party was being held on a wooden floor in the middle of a dojo, so some shabbiness was unavoidable. But luckily those who had gathered were all interesting and unique individuals. Although she had no objections to the location, Kaoru was already in the mood to vent at Sanosuke.

“So, this was what you meant when you said you’ll take care of the money? In other words, this was about sponging off Tsunan-san. I can’t believe it!”

“It’s all right. See, as the saying goes...” Sanosuke continued after a pause, “What’s mine is mine, and what’s yours is mine...”



Kenshin looked appalled as he started to say something, but tonight Sanosuke was particularly full of vigor. As if to prevent Kenshin from talking, he proclaimed, "Don't sweat the small stuff. Let's drink and have fun until we pass out!" And so, the party to celebrate Sanosuke and Tsunan's reunion had begun.

In the beginning, the presence of popular artist Tsukioka Tsunan made the usual crowd nervous, but their mood changed as they sipped saké from their bowls and the bottle made the rounds. Even those who were usually quiet became talkative and surprised themselves with their own clever jokes. Their wit grew sharper, and they began to discuss their new insights into daily matters that normally went unnoticed.

Everyone chatted pleasantly about their high ideals, their hearts cheerful and open. There were no problems in this world. They couldn't help but laugh out loud. Kenshin and Kaoru both laughed a lot. Sanosuke cracked an unusual number of jokes as he happily held his bowl of saké.

Spirits high with some help from the alcohol, Tae and Tsubame grew bold enough to ask Tsunan, the artist they adored, to draw their portraits. Tae gazed in fascination at her own image. Her cheeks blushed cherry red in bliss, her radiance apparent to everyone. It was a happy moment, and no one could resist laughing—except Yahiko and Tsunan.

Yahiko had drunk too much too quickly. He had reached

his limit soon after the party began, and he was suddenly overwhelmed by some emotion that was either anger or sadness. Heaven and hell, comedy and tragedy. These feelings suddenly appeared to rock his existence, and Yahiko didn't understand why, or even where they came from. To everyone else, it simply looked as though Yahiko had suddenly fallen ill.

There was no way for Yahiko to know what happened after that. Not only did drowsiness overtake him, but the hangover demon ran rampant after he lost consciousness. In the morning, he wouldn't remember a thing, and all that would remain of the night would be a dull, heavy pain in his head. It was unclear if alcohol would be Yahiko's friend or foe in the future.

On the other hand, whether it was due to his personality or because of the important matters awaiting him, Tsunan did not show any signs of drunkenness no matter how many cups of saké he consumed. Even when pestered into drawing portraits of Tae and Tsubame, it was impressive to see that not a drop of ink went astray.

How much time had passed? The night winds blowing past the exterior of the Kamiya dojo could be heard faintly inside. Before anyone knew it, the noisy party had come to an end. Tae and Tsubame were cuddled up under a futon cover by the wall, Kaoru was lying on the floor using a *zabuton* cushion as a pillow, and Yahiko was sprawled out

in a corner of the dojo, his whole body shivering. Kenshin leaned against the wooden wall in the corner of the dojo, sakabatô in his arms, fast asleep.

"All right, then..." Sanosuke whispered, his voice low so that only Tsunan could hear. He stood up suddenly, followed by Tsunan. "Well, shall we go now?"

"That was our final supper. Did you thoroughly enjoy yourself?" Tsunan asked.

"Not really. That wasn't why I planned this party. The Akabeko girls feed me quite often. It was the least I could do for them." Tsunan remained silent. "So, how was it for you? It must've been ten years since you've been to a rowdy party. Were you able to enjoy yourself a little?"

"Hmph. Not one bit."

"Tch. You're a cynic, through and through." The two men jokingly whispered, but their eyes met unexpectedly.

"Are you really okay with this, Sanosuke?" Because of the party, Tsunan had come to understand what Sanosuke had told him the previous night. "*Well, I'm having a good time in my own way.*"

As former Sekihô Army cadets, the two men had witnessed the tragic death of Sagara Sôzô. But Sanosuke had also lived as Zanza, and through his encounter with Kenshin, had been able to escape the darkness of his past. On the other hand, Tsunan had blindly continued down the dark, damp path of revenge. He felt envious of the light he'd seen from the darkness, the glow he saw as Sanosuke

mingled and laughed with Kenshin and the others.

Maybe it's wrong to involve my old friend in this outrageous plan to overthrow the government, Tsunan thought once again. As if Sanosuke had sensed those thoughts, he countered Tsunan's hesitation.

"You fool. It's not like me to be that sentimental."

"I see. I thank you from the bottom of my heart for choosing the Sekihô Army over the life you have now." Tsunan bowed his head slightly and cast off his concerns.

"Let's hurry. If we waste too much time, it'll be sunrise by the time we haul the grenades over to the Ministry of Home Affairs." Tsunan quietly opened the door to the dojo and led the way out.

As he followed, Sanosuke murmured softly, "Sorry, you guys. I'm not asking you to understand. But after all, the Sekihô Army is very special to me." He glanced at Kenshin slouched in the corner and whispered, "Kenshin, if I ever see you again, it'll be after I've become a felon. If you smack me down with your sakabatô, I won't hold it against you." Sanosuke left the dojo and closed the door gently behind him. No one was able to prevent the two men from leaving—they were all in an alcohol-assisted sleep. After Sanosuke and Tsunan's departure, the memory of the party still lingered gently in the dojo and the minds of those who rested, all unaware of the major event that was about to occur.

Kenshin slowly opened his eyes. Everyone else was still

asleep. He stood up briskly, sakabatô firmly in hand. *What a man that Sano is*, he thought. Soon, Kenshin too disappeared from the dojo, moving off into the starry night.

Approximately three hours later, under the halo of the new moon, the two men steadily made their way toward the main gate of the Ministry of Home Affairs. Surrounded by darkness, the two former Sekihô Army cadets had finally begun their own terrible uprising.

Although it was already spring, the night breeze was cold. Sanosuke and Tsunan had no time to notice, as they compared the hand-drawn map to the positions of the security guards guarding the main gate. They then placed grenades by the gate in several locations.



It was impossible for just the two of them to penetrate the main gate and enter the building by force, since it was protected by a number of police officers. Therefore, Tsunan had planned a diversionary tactic early on. The idea was to create time-delay explosives by adjusting the lengths of the fuses, then position them in previously scouted places, setting them to detonate one after another. Naturally, the police officers would gather where the explosions had occurred, moving about in confusion. The two men would seize that opportunity and slip inside the building.

The grenades went off in sequence with tremendous force. The network of guards was severed as many of the police officers rushed to the front of the main gate in a panic, just the way Tsunan had expected.

After gauging the situation, the two men ran to the wall near the towering Ministry of Home Affairs building. Tsunan folded his arms in front of his chest to form a foothold for Sanosuke, who used it as a springboard to launch himself onto the top of the wall. From his perch atop the wall, Sanosuke reached down to pull Tsunan up. The two men worked in perfect sync. But despite his decisive actions, Sanosuke still felt some mental hesitation.

Come to think of it, before the captain organized the Sekihô Army, he was manipulated into committing arson and robbery in order to stir up trouble for the Tokugawa government... To shake off his hesitation, Sanosuke looked at Tsunan, whom he had just pulled up to the top of the wall, but his normally

resolute friend looked shocked.

"What's wrong? What are you standing around for?" he asked, eyeing Tsunan suspiciously. Sanosuke turned his gaze in the direction Tsunan was looking. Waiting there on the grounds of the Ministry of Home Affairs was Kenshin, sakabatô at his waist, ready to be drawn at a moment's notice.

The True Heart of the Sekihô Army



The True Heart of the Sekihô Army

“Kenshin...” Tsunan’s surprised voice was drowned out by the sound of explosions. “Don’t tell me he entered the Ministry of Home Affairs before us. What kind of man is he?”

“Himura Battôsai, the legendary hitokiri,” Sanosuke replied to the distressed Tsunan.

“I see. So he’s the famous Hitokiri Battôsai...”

Without hesitation, Tsunan jumped down off the wall. The distance between them was seven or eight ken, but Kenshin refused to move. “Have you come to take Sanosuke back with you?” Tsunan asked as he landed.

“No,” Kenshin replied curtly, then slowly drew his sakabatô. “This is a course of action Sanosuke has chosen

as a man. It is not for this one to decide otherwise. Instead, this one has come to bring a halt to the violence that both of you are creating."

Tsunan was enraged by Kenshin's words. Ten years of resentment spilled out of him in a low voice. "An Ishin Shishi standing in the Sekihô Army's path once again. But I'm not going to lose this time!" Tsunan cried as he pulled grenades from his sleeves with both hands, lit them instantly with the spark-producing bands he wore on his fingers, and threw them without hesitation. "Take this!"

Kenshin refused to move. He gazed intently as the two grenades flew toward him, then casually flashed his sakabatô, as if in a practice swing. The grenades fell to the ground and rolled near Kenshin's feet, but they did not detonate. Kenshin had skillfully cut the fuses off in midair.

"Argh! You Ishin Shishi!" Instead of being intimidated by Kenshin's sword skills, Tsunan's fighting spirit had been heightened even more.

Adding fuel to the flames, Kenshin exclaimed, "As a former Ishin Shishi, this one is even less inclined to allow your 'Sekihô Army' to take such foolish actions."

Sanosuke, who had jumped down and was now at Tsunan's side, felt as though he had been pierced through the heart by Kenshin's words, and was even more enraged than his partner. "What makes you think you can talk to us like that, you lowly hitokiri?!"

Perhaps Tsunan was getting desperate as he took out

every grenade tucked inside his kimono, ignited them one by one, and threw them toward Kenshin.

One, two, three, four, five, six...none of the grenades that flew toward Kenshin detonated. Every fuse was cut off by Kenshin's sakabatô. Naturally, such a miracle was possible due to Kenshin's keen powers of observation and the swiftness of his Hiten Mitsurugi-ryû. To Kenshin, who could see a bullet shot from a pistol, severing the fuses of the much larger, slower grenades was not a difficult feat. In spite of the ease of the feat, Kenshin was actually being cautious—if more explosions were to echo in the night sky, it might trigger an uprising among the malcontent members of the government and military.

Every eventuality that came to mind has been taken care of, but there's always the slight chance that something could go wrong. And Kenshin was fighting against time as well.

"Rrraaaagh!" Instead of giving up, Tsunan was even more fired up, and prepared to throw more grenades. It was Sanosuke who stopped him.

"That's enough, Tsunan."

"Sanosuke!"

"You can't beat him that way. We've wasted too much time. The police will arrive soon." Suddenly, Sanosuke delivered a single blow to Tsunan's stomach. No match for Sanosuke, Tsunan started to pass out.

"Sa...no?"

"Don't misunderstand this," Sanosuke said to Tsunan,

and then turned toward Kenshin. "Sorry for the trouble. Hey, if I had continued to take his side, would you have pounded me down?"

"Yes," Kenshin replied decisively. "There is no room for half-hearted relationships. No mercy would have been given."

As a man, Sanosuke was pleased by Kenshin's words. "Thanks," Sanosuke said as he effortlessly lifted Tsunan's unconscious body and once again climbed the walls surrounding the Ministry of Home Affairs, this time to make his exit. It wasn't long before the police force arrived.

No other uprisings occurred anywhere in the city that night because after Kenshin left the billiard hall London, he had paid a visit to Minister of the Army Yamagata Aritomo's residence and requested that all army officers immediately return to their stations, to guard against their participating in the insurgency. Then, he returned to the police chief's residence at the agreed time.

"Himura-san, I've been waiting for you," the police chief said in greeting. "The publisher who owns Iroha-Ya was a former civilian patriot, and seems to have been an acquaintance of Sagara Sôzô's. However, after Meiji he proved to be an irresponsible man who used his political ties for business purposes." The chief paused for a moment before continuing. "I was surprised to discover that he has expanded his business holdings to include thirteen billiard

halls in the city."

Kenshin guessed that the publisher had provided the gunpowder and other raw materials Tsunan had used to create the grenades. The publisher had tricked Tsunan into becoming the fuse to ignite the coup d'état. The thirteen billiard halls, which included New York and London, matched up with the number of secret hideouts. Kenshin had requested that the police chief assign some of the recalled police officers to guard each of the thirteen locations. Having made these preparations, Kenshin had then attended Sanosuke and Tsunan's reunion party. But of course, the two men had no idea what he had been up to.

It was past three in the morning and Kenshin was standing before the gate of a large house in Koji-machi, owned by Army Major General Someya Shûzô, whose glamorous achievements during the Seinan War had elevated him to celebrity status. According to the police chief, this man was the mastermind behind the armed uprising.

This one will have a word with him.

Kenshin felt his anger stir toward Someya. The officers had risked their lives during the war, so it was not difficult to understand that they might harbor resentment about the repayment for their services. But just because the army's budget had been cut to help rebuild the nation's finances was no excuse to resort to an armed uprising. Moreover, this plot had involved Sanosuke and Tsukioka Tsunan. Kenshin was

infuriated, his feelings boiling over. To make matters worse, the mastermind was hiding in the background, keeping his hands clean. In midst of a blinding rage, Kenshin decided he and Someya should have a discussion.

"I'm sure you know this, but please refrain from acting rashly and irresponsibly," the police chief had warned Kenshin after telling him about the existence of the mastermind. But Kenshin was no longer able to contain the emotions churning in his heart.

Naturally, he didn't assume that the Someya residence would be open and defenseless that evening. He might very well have to clash with guards, but Kenshin was determined to break through the security and force his way in. He had come here driven by a fury akin to that of a wounded beast. As expected, the front gate of the Someya residence was closed, and armed soldiers and officers camped by a fire beside it. The glow from the fire illuminated the street in the distance.

Kenshin observed the situation from afar for a short time, then partially drew his sakabatô and walked closer to the side gate. There were about fifty soldiers near the bonfire, all with a nervous look on their faces. Their mood implied that they already knew that the thirteen billiard halls were under surveillance by police officers. Two of the men were seated on folding stools, most likely the men's superior officers. At first, the two men appeared indifferent to Kenshin when they spotted him. It was clear that Kenshin

was alone, and there were many armed men on guard, so it was natural for them to be at ease. But when they noticed the sword at Kenshin's waist, they grew agitated.

"You there, for what purpose have you come here?"

"This one needs to speak to Major General Someya."

"Wh-what?!" The voice carried an obvious tone of confusion and resentment. When Kenshin turned around, the shocked voice of one of the soldiers cried out.

"H-hey, could he be the one that appeared at the London?" The soldiers drew their weapons, but Kenshin raised his hand to calm them.

"Please be quiet. This one does not wish to hurt anyone—no grudge is held against any of you." But the soldiers started to slowly close in on Kenshin. "This one wishes only to speak to the major general. There is no intention of resorting to violence. Please allow this one to pass."

Kenshin's words only made the soldiers more tense. Eventually, one soldier ran behind Kenshin, attempting to block his escape route. When Kenshin turned to prevent this, the soldier suddenly curled his finger around the trigger of his gun. Kenshin immediately drew his sakabatô, flipped the blade so the sharp side faced forward, and slashed the gun in two with a single stroke.

A moment later, every gun barrel that had been pointed at Kenshin was cut off.

"Do you understand now?" Kenshin glared at the men surrounding him as he sheathed his sakabatô. The soldiers

stiffened in fear, remaining rigidly in place, in a state of shock at the blinding speed of Kenshin's swordplay. No one tried to follow Kenshin as he turned his back and entered the side gate.

When Kenshin reached the entrance hall, a thuggish man who looked like a bodyguard stopped him in his tracks. The man had probably already heard every detail of the incident at the gate, for he spread his arms wide on the steps to the entrance hall, blocking the way.

"You are not allowed to pass."

Kenshin continued to silently advance.

"Do you know what time it is? His Excellency will not meet with you at such an absurd hour."

As Kenshin climbed the steps to the entrance hall in silence, the man rushed forward, trying to tackle him. Kenshin delivered a blow to the man's stomach, then caught him as he collapsed and laid him quietly on the floor, before heading inside the house. With no other people to interrupt him, Kenshin was able to make his way to Someya's living room. On the way, he heard the voices of young men talking nearby.

Kenshin opened the fusuma door to find Someya sitting at a Western-style desk. The man looked up at Kenshin suspiciously. There might have been complications if others had been in the room, but fortunately Someya was alone. Kenshin silently closed the fusuma door and stood about one ken away from the desk. Still, Someya did not utter a

sound, holding back his shock as best as he could.

"You have failed," Kenshin said.

Someya remained silent. News of the evening's failure must already have reached the man, but there were no apparent signs of disappointment or discouragement. Perhaps he was confident of his safety as the mastermind of all this.

"Many people could have died needlessly," Kenshin continued in a low whisper. "This one's friend was involved as well."

"Wh-who are you?" Someya finally said.

"You should remain *silent*," Kenshin said in a low, sharp tone. Kenshin felt a murderous rage growing inside him. "The Revolution was built upon the bodies of many people. The New Government is not perfect, but that is why those who survived should not be obsessed with their own greed, and instead pray for the happiness of the survivors. Otherwise, all those deaths will have been for nothing. The hearts of those who perished before they could realize their dreams must be kept in mind." Kenshin slowly drew closer to Someya.

Someya pushed back his chair and stood halfway up, practically leaning backwards. Kenshin placed his hand on the hilt of his sword, his movement a fleeting flash of white light to Someya's eyes.

"Soon, you too will end up like this," Kenshin said as he sheathed his sword.

Someya thought he'd been cut. Although he didn't make a panicked attempt to escape, the color drained from his face.

"Beg your pardon." Kenshin bowed slightly and left without looking back. As he closed the fusuma doors behind him, the Western-style desk in front of Someya split in half and crashed onto the carpeted floor.

Kenshin looked up on his way home at the sky packed with stars. They looked as though they would fall if touched, but they shined brightly, boldly. A faint smell of flowers drifted in from a distance. "It's all over now," Kenshin said to himself, and felt the fierceness in his blood fade.

When Tsunan came to, he was in his own room. He hurriedly opened the closet and looked inside. Not a single device remained.

"If you're looking for the grenades, Kenshin took them all," Sanosuke said nonchalantly. "He said he'd bury them somewhere no one will notice."

"Damned government spy!"

Tsunan's anger was not surprising, but since he didn't know much about Kenshin, Sanosuke took it upon himself to clear up the misunderstanding.

"That's not it at all. He's just like us, unhappy with the current government. No, perhaps even more unhappy than us because he's one of the people who helped to establish it."

"Don't give me that nonsense. How can a lowly hitokiri understand us?!" Tsunan yelled, cutting him off. But Sanosuke didn't flinch.

"Sure he does, because he was a hitokiri thoroughly involved in a lot of dirty business, including all those assassinations he committed behind the scenes of the Meiji Revolution. As a result, he couldn't allow himself to see us—the Sekihô Army—behave immorally." Sanosuke slowly looked over at Tsunan and continued, "Hey, Katsu. They say the captain did some immoral things, but there's no way he wanted to. The Sekihô Army lived for the ideal of equality for the four classes. After all that, we can't act dishonorably."

"What's wrong with you? All this business about being clean or dirty has nothing to do with it! We need to do whatever it takes to accomplish our goals!" Tsunan was adamant. Sanosuke, not knowing what to do, put down his teacup and stood up.

"All right. Then that means the Sekihô Army will truly end up being a 'false army.'" Sanosuke turned his back and started to leave, but paused to offer his final words to Tsunan, who was still trying to grasp what Sanosuke was getting at. "Just because the government is playing dirty doesn't mean we have to be like them. I don't care if it takes a slow, deliberate effort—I'm going to do this in a way that will make the captain smile from his place in the afterlife." It was that kind of understanding that Sanosuke had gained



...SIGH...
AND HE WAS
SUCH A
POPULAR
ARTIST,
TOO.



AH,
WELL...

SORRY
'BOUT THAT
TOO, OLD
MAN.

津月
南岡



TAE-
SAN...

THIS
ONE, YOU
CAN'T
HAVE.

TSUNAN'S
LAST
WORK?
GIVE
IT!

I
WANT
IT,
TOO...!

by meeting Kenshin.

"Captain..." Tsunan whispered to himself, but it was unclear if Sanosuke heard him.

A few days passed. While taking a walk in the city, Kenshin asked Sanosuke, "So, how is Tsukioka-dono these days?"

"Not sure. We parted ways during a disagreement, so it feels too awkward to go see him," Sanosuke replied with a sour look on his face. Then a voice called out to him—it was the owner of the picture book shop, the man who Sanosuke had shaken down for information some time ago. Kenshin and Sanosuke hadn't noticed that they had walked past the man's storefront.

"Oh, sorry about what happened before. What's up?" Sanosuke said bluntly.

The shop owner fumbled around for something as he replied, "Ah, there's something I was asked to give you, from Tsunan-san." The shopkeeper told them it was the final nishiki-e by Tsukioka Tsunan as he handed over a piece of artwork. "I don't know what's gotten into him, but he suddenly told me that he's starting up something called an 'illustrated newspaper,' to challenge governmental injustices. I told him not to do it, because they're strictly regulated. Oh well, what a shame to lose such a popular artist..." The owner sighed with disappointment.

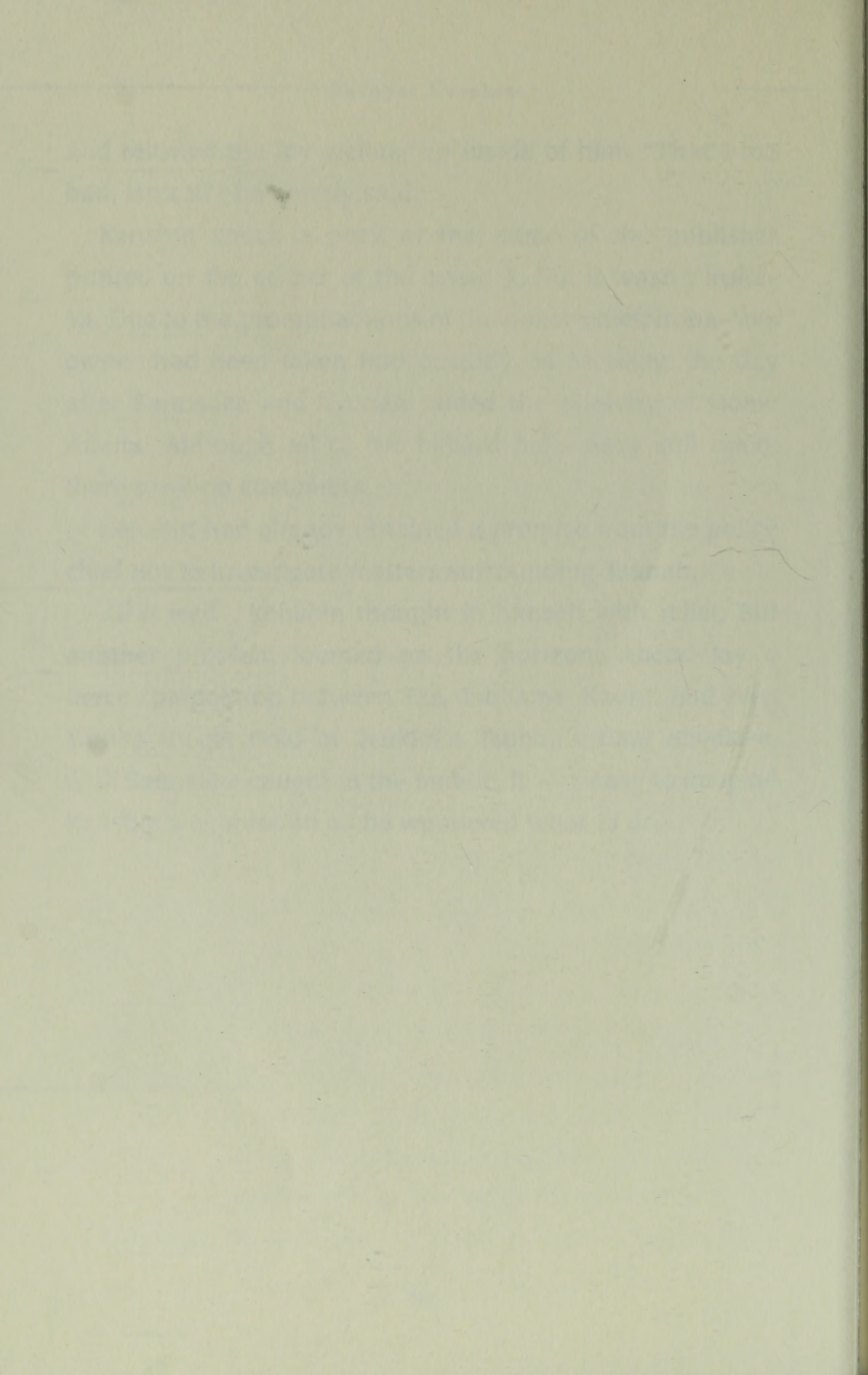
Sanosuke looked at the final nishiki-e of Sagara Sôzô

and relished the joy welling up inside of him. "That's too bad, isn't it?" he quietly said.

Kenshin snuck a peek at the name of the publisher printed on the corner of the artwork, but it wasn't Iroha-Ya. Due to the prompt actions of the police chief, Iroha-Ya's owner had been taken into custody on Monday, the day after Sanosuke and Tsunan raided the Ministry of Home Affairs. Although all of the billiard halls were still open, there were no customers.

Kenshin had already obtained a promise from the police chief not to investigate matters surrounding Tsunan.

All is well... Kenshin thought to himself with relief. But another problem loomed on the horizon. Ahead lay a fierce competition between Tae, Tsubame, Kaoru, and even Yahiko to get hold of Tsukioka Tsunan's final nishiki-e, with Sanosuke caught in the middle. It was easy to imagine Kenshin's expression as he wondered what to do.



Katsu Kaishû, forty-five...Ôkubo Toshimichi, thirty-eight...Saigô Takamori, forty-one...Katsura Kogorô, thirty-five...these were their ages in the first year of Meiji. Sakamoto Ryôma, thirty-three, and Nakaoka Shintarô, thirty, were slain by assassins and didn't live to see the end of the Revolution. Takasugi Shinsaku died at the young age of twenty-nine. During Meiji, Kondô Isami was executed at the age of thirty-five, and Hijikata Toshizô was thirty-four when he was killed in action. When reading the history of the end of the Shogunate era and the Revolution, we are surprised to see that so many young people were involved in the action. The Meiji Revolution was indeed a revolution accomplished by the young. Surely, that must be the main reason why that era still captivates us, even in this modern Heisei age.

It's been three years since I began drawing Rurouni Kenshin, and while it is based on historical fact, I aspired to draw freely, unrestricted by convention, in order for the characters to be just as attractive as the real-life heroes. In this novelization, Shizuka-sensei introduced Katsu Kaishû, and I feel the world of Rurouni has expanded once again. My only regret is that I was unable to draw as many illustrations as I had hoped, due to the problems associated with the weekly series schedule. I would like to use this page to offer my sincere apologies.

To those who have read this novel after reading the manga or watching the anime, or those who met Kenshin and the others for the first time through this novelized version, please continue to support them.

Finally, I would like to offer my gratitude to Shizuka Kaoru-sensei, who has done a magnificent job of novelization.

Watsuki Nobuhiro

POSTSCRIPT

GLOSSARY

The name means "Red Cow," an appropriate appellation for a beef-pot restaurant.

A Samurai protest, 1876.

The final, chaotic days of the Tokugawa regime.

Direct Shogunate retainers of samurai rank.

Fought in 1868 in the Kyoto suburb of Fushimi between the joint forces of the Satsuma, Chôshû, and Tosa and the Bakufu (Shogunate) forces.

Literally means "red hollyhock." The hollyhock was the symbol of the Tokugawa.

Saito Musashibo Benkei was a Buddhist warrior monk who served Minamoto no Yoshitsune and is legendary for his loyalty and prowess. He joined Yoshitsune's retinue when the warlord defeated him at Gojo Bridge.

Buddhism came to Japan from China and Korea between the sixth and eighth centuries AD, and shares many themes with Shintoism. In fact, Shintoists viewed Buddha as another kami while Buddhists viewed kami as manifestations of the Buddhas and Bodhisattvas.

The historic term for carbon dioxide.

The historic term for potassium hydroxide, also known as lye.

AKABEKO

AKIZUKI UPRISING

BAKUMATSU

BAKUSHIN

**BATTLE OF TOBA
AND FUSHIMI**

BENI AOI

BENKEI

BUDDHISM

CARBONIC ACID

CAUSTIC POTASH

**CHLORATE OF
POTASH**

The historic term for potassium chlorate, a compound of potassium, chlorine, and oxygen used in explosives and fireworks.

**CHLORINE OF
POTASSIUM**

The historic term for chlorine of potassium, a compound of potassium and chlorine used in medicine, food processing, and lethal injection.

CHO

A Japanese measure of distance. One cho equals approximately 109 meters or 358 feet.

DOJO

Martial arts training hall.

-DONO

Honorific. Even more respectful than -san; the effect in modern-day Japanese conversation would be along the lines of "Milord So-and-So." As used by Kenshin, it indicates both respect and humility.

EDO

Capital city of the Tokugawa government. Renamed Tokyo ("Eastern Capital") after the Meiji Restoration.

**FROM THE EARTH TO
THE MOON**

The original French title is *De la Terre à la Lune*, and the English title is a direct translation. The Japanese title is *Gessekai Ryoko*, or *Lunar Travel*.

FUROSHIKI

This literally means "cloth for the bath," and the cloths were initially used to carry things to and from the bath houses. Later, furoshiki were used to wrap and carry all manner of items.

Sliding doors used to separate rooms constructed of lightweight wood and opaque decorative paper. The doors are set into tracks on the top and bottom, but can be easily removed.

FUSUMA

Lowest-ranking direct Shogunate vassals. In the late Edo period, some gokenin effectively sold their rank by adopting the sons of wealthy commoners for a fee.

GOKENIN

Also called nitrocellulose, trinitrocellulose, or cellulose nitrate. It is a mild explosive used in rockets, printing ink bases, and celluloid, which was the original material used to manufacture billiard balls. Guncotton is made by treating ordinary cotton with concentrated nitric and sulfuric acid. Guncotton can be stored underwater, where it will keep indefinitely.

GUNCOTTON

A Samurai protest, 1876. Sword bearing was prohibited when this rebellion was defeated.

HAGI UPRISING

Traditional Japanese clothes that resemble long, pleated skirts. Hakama were originally worn by samurai to protect their clothing during horseback riding, much like Western chaps. Hakama are worn over kimono and are tied at the waist.

HAKAMA

The tenth of fifty-three checkpoints along the Tokaido highway between Edo and Kyoto during the Edo period, it was considered the gateway to the Kanto region. Government passes were required to pass each checkpoint, similar to modern passports.

HAKONE GATEWAY

HAORI JACKET

Worn over a kimono for warmth or for formal occasions. Haori can be made of anything from cotton to brocade, and are secured with two ties at the front rather than a belt.

HATAMOTO

Elite Shogunate retainers. The hatamoto made up the official Shogunate guard and the armies under direct Shogunate command.

**HITEN MITSURUGI-
RYŪ**

Kenshin's sword technique, used more for defense than offense. An "ancient style that pits one against many," it requires exceptional speed and agility to master.

HITOKIRI

An assassin, literally "person slayer." A term given to four different samurai during the Bakumatsu. The hitokiri were also referred to as "The Four Butchers" and "Heaven's Revenge Against the Enemies of Imperial Restoration." Kenshin is loosely based on the hitokiri Kawakami Gensai.

HITOKIRI IZO

Okada Izo, one of the four real hitokiri who fought as assassins against the Tokugawa shogunate in the Bakumatsu.

ISHIN SHISHI

Loyalist or pro-Imperialist patriots who fought to restore the emperor to his ancient seat of power.

JIKISHINKAGE-RYŪ

Also known as Kashima Shinden Jikishinkage-ryū. A style of sword fighting founded by Matsumoto Bizen-no-Kami Naokatsu in the late Muromachi or early Sengoku era, around 1570. Jikishinkage means "from the shadow of the heart."

Sword-arts or kenjutsu school established by Kaoru's father, who rejected the ethics of *Satsujin-ken* (swords that give death) for *Katsujin-ken* (swords that give life).

**KAMIYA KASSHIN-
RYŪ**

Fabric that is woven from threads that are specially pre-dyed to create the final pattern. This technique has fallen out of style in Japan, but is still practiced as *ikat* in India.

KASURI

Japanese long swords with slightly curved, single-edged blades, traditionally worn by samurai. The combination of the katana and wakizashi is called daisho, and represents the honor of the samurai.

KATANA

Prior to the Meiji, most common people did not have a family name. Katsu, although of low rank, is from a samurai family and therefore has two names. After the Revolution, many ex-samurai like Katsu changed their first names to reflect the change in times or to resemble noble names. Yasuyoshi is formed by rearranging the kanji for Awa, the province where Katsu once held office.

KATSU YASUYOSHI

Japanese unit of measurement for distances. One ken equals approximately two meters or six feet.

KEN

The art of swordsmanship.

KENJUTSU

A way of measuring salary based on rice.

KOKU

-KUN

Honorific. Used in the modern day among male students, or those who grew up together. The historic form is "superior-to-inferior," intended as a way to emphasize a difference in status or rank, as well as to indicate familiarity or affection.

KYOTO

Home of the Emperor and imperial court from 794 AD until shortly after the Meiji Restoration in 1868.

LIEUE

An old French unit of measurement, equal to approximately 2.5 miles.

**MARGARET
HAIRSTYLE**

A popular women's hairstyle of the time, the Margaret was a long center braid at the back of the head looped under and secured with a ribbon just above the nape of the neck.

MEIJI RESTORATION

1853-1868. Culminated in the collapse of the Tokugawa Bakufu and the restoration of imperial rule. Named after Emperor Meiji, whose chosen name was written with the characters for "culture and enlightenment."

**MOON PRINCESS
KAGUYA**

A character from the Japanese fairy tale *The Tale of the Bamboo Cutter* or *The Tale of Moon Princess Kaguya*. The story is about a poor bamboo cutter who finds a baby girl in a stalk of bamboo who is actually a princess from the moon, and must one day return home.

OJÔ-SAMA

A term used to address a young woman from a good family; a more polite version of "young lady."

This slight student has a powerful sounding name. Okuma means "Big Bear" and Dai means "Great." Goro is a common Japanese boy's name.

ÔKUMA DAIGORO

A unit of measurement. One pyo equals one bale of rice.

PYO

Translation of Go-Isshin, or the coming of a new age after the Bakumatsu.

REVOLUTION

Wanderer, vagabond.

RUROUNI

Reversed-edge sword (the dull edge on the side the sharp should be, and vice-versa); carried by Kenshin as a symbol of his resolution never to kill again.

SAKABATÔ

Honorific. Carries the meaning of "Mr.," "Ms.," "Miss," etc., but used more extensively in Japanese than its English equivalent. Even an enemy may be addressed as -san.

-SAN

A monetary unit. One hundred sen equals one yen.

SEN

A title used for teachers, martial arts instructors, or professionals like doctors, lawyers, politicians, or other authority figures. It is also used to show respect to a person who has gained mastery of a certain skill or art.

-SENSEI

A bamboo practice sword. Shinai are constructed from four bamboo slats held together with leather strips, and while they can cause injury they have no cutting blade.

SHINAI

SHINPUREN UPRISING	A samurai protest, 1876.
SHINTOISM	An ancient Japanese religion that started around 500 BC. Shintoism is a shamanistic religion that includes nature and ancestor worship and includes many gods, or kami.
SHURIKEN	Throwing knives. Shuriken range from the single-pointed variety to the multi-pointed versions commonly called throwing stars in the West.
SUKIYAKI	A popular one-pot meal in Japan. High-quality beef is sautéed in a hot skillet with special sauce, vegetables, and other ingredients. The dish is usually cooked directly at the table and shared with a group.
TATAMI MAT	A standard way to measure room size in Japan. The size of a single square of tatami differ by region. In the Tokyo region, the traditional size is 90 cm x 180 cm x 5 cm, approximately 35 in x 71 in x 2 in.
USHIWAKAMARU	Later became known as Minamoto no Yoshitsune. A general in the Heian and early Kamakura eras.
WAKIZASHI	Japanese short swords, between twelve to twenty-four inches long and worn blade up. Samurai wore them in conjunction with the katana. Merchants, forbidden the longer katana, also used wakizashi.
ZANSHIN	Remaining completely wary even when your opponent has fallen.



VOYAGE TO THE MOON WORLD

Once, Himura Kenshin was the feared assassin, or *hitokiri*, known as Battōsai. Now he is a *rurouni*, a wanderer who traded his killing blade for a reverse-edged sakabatō and has vowed to protect all those within his sight.

Kenshin's new life brings him to Tokyo, where he joins the Kamiya Kasshin-ryū dojo to learn the art of "swords that give life." The dojo is peaceful but never boring as Kenshin and his fellow apprentice Yahiko train under the demanding auspices of their kind-hearted instructor, Kamiya Kaoru. But all that changes one afternoon when Tae from the Akabeko restaurant arrives with a pot of beef stew and a plea for help. One of the regulars at the restaurant lost his master's precious book, and he'll be kicked out in the street if he can't recover it. The simple case of a missing book soon becomes a dangerous mystery as Kenshin and his friends are tangled in deep secrets and dark plots!

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