

Full Moon

By bermudamoon

Submitted: November 12, 2005

Updated: November 12, 2005

This is an action packed story that tells what happens when Sanosuke meets a strange girl from the west. (sorry, I'm bad at summeries, but please read and review!)

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Chapter 1 - The Girl, the Dog and the Ring	2
Chapter 2 - The Storm of Darkness	13

1 - The Girl, the Dog and the Ring

Full Moon

Part 1: The Girl, the Dog and the Ring

Disclaimer: Many of the characters and their backgrounds in this story come from the TV show Rurouni Kenshin, and are not original characters.

“Whoa!” the shouts of horsemen could be heard across the landscape as a group of seven men made their way down the road. The full moon lit their path as they finally caught sight of Tokyo after days of travel.

They were on the home stretch, but their journey wasn't quite over. Lying in the middle of the road was a large furry animal. It was about six feet long from the tip of its nose, to the end of its tail.

“What do you think it is Ichiro?” the young man looked up at his leader. Dirt smeared his features and his matted hair resembled a bird's nest on top his head. He was tired of traveling and didn't want any more interferences.

Ichiro, the leader of the group, dismounted from his chestnut horse and cautiously approached the animal.

He was a tall man that stood around six feet. He had messy black hair and a gruff appearance. His eyes were cold and uncaring, and a long scar ran the length of his face.

Ichiro didn't like the idea of approaching an animal that was as big as he was. His hand twitched, ready to draw his sword at any moment.

While most of the creature was a brilliant white, fresh blood stained the animal's lower end a bright crimson. Knowing that it was injured, Ichiro regained much of his confidence and quickened his stride.

The creature's right back leg sported a deep gash that ran from the top of its hip to the bottom of its foot. Ichiro knew the wound was fatal, and it seemed fresh. He glanced around cautiously but didn't see anyone. As he looked closer at the creature's face he sighed in relief.

“It's okay guys. It's just a big, *dead* dog. Most likely some sort of a German Shepherd mix,” *It probably got hurt by a burglar and then ran away because it was scared or something. I can't believe we got all worked up over a dead dog.* Ichiro laughed to himself as he returned to his horse, but something caught his eye.

Something small and golden shimmered in the light of the full moon. Ichiro leaned forward for a better look. His eyes widened in surprise and greed as he stared down at a beautiful golden ring. The ring was lined with intricate patterns of onyx. The designs seemed to be in the shape of fearsome dragons. A huge oval diamond was also placed on the band of the ring, increasing its value.

“What ya got there Ichiro?” Ichiro looked up from his treasure to see his followers looking intently at the item between his fingers.

“It's a ring. An *expensive* looking ring. Maybe that stupid dog was a thief that paid for its prize,” the others snickered at their leader's remark. Ichiro smiled and continued his speech. “I bet we could sell this ring for a lot of money. I guess we'll have to thank our canine friend when we're rolling in dough.” As he looked down at the dog Ichiro had a sudden uneasy feeling, but he quickly shook it off. “Come! We shall arrive tonight! Then may all of Tokyo know our names! The Onanwabi!” An explosive cheer erupted from the small group as they road off into the night.

Bright sunlight pierced the room as Sanosuke rubbed the sleep out of his eyes. He sat up in his bed, and blinked sleepily a few times. When he realized what time it was he was instantly awake.

“Oh no! I over slept! Kenshin's making breakfast today, and I'm going to miss it, *again!*” He jumped off his sleeping matt and quickly grabbed his jacket. After hastily tying on his red head band, he scrambled out of his one room house.

It wasn't much, but then, Sanosuke was lucky to even have his own house. He was flat broke. When ever he did get money, he would always blow it gambling instead of paying off his mounting bill at the local restaurant, the Akabeko. But he wasn't worried about money. He always had his friends over at the Kamiya dojo if he ever got sick of the row house.

The Kamiya dojo was run by a seventeen-year-old girl named Kaoru Kamiya. Kaoru is the assistant master of the Kamiya Kasshin style of swordsmanship. This style of swordsmanship was designed to protect the people you care about.

Generally, Kaoru has good intentions, but can't always express herself the way she would've liked. Despite her seemingly aggressive nature, she has a good heart.

Usually, Kaoru wears one of her many kimonos, but when she is teaching, she wears a loose white top and baggy navy blue pants. She always keeps her black hair in a high pony tail tied with a big bow.

Her first apprentice is a ten-year-old boy named Yahiko Myoujin.

Yahiko has spiky black hair and is rather small in stature. He always wears a baggy yellow top with dark green pants.

He is a very spirited boy with a strong ambition to learn the Kamiya Kasshin style. He wants to do every thing he can to protect his friends. And even though he has a tendency to be rude to Kaoru and Sanosuke, he really does respect them. But there is no one that he respects more than Kenshin Himura.

Kenshin, who is about 28 in age, was an old samurai from the Japanese revolution. He was known all over Japan as the legendary Battousai the Manslayer. But when the revolution ended and the Meiji era began in the late 1800s, Kenshin became a wanderer and vowed never to kill again in order to repent for his past mistakes. Now, he only uses a reverse blade sword. That means that the sharp part of the blade is on the opposite side of the sword. This allows him to fight with the blunt side of the blade, and prevents him from killing when he's in battle.

After saving Kaoru from a *fake* Battousai, Kenshin decided to stay at the Kamiya dojo. Everyone at the dojo loves to have Kenshin around. He is a hard worker and never complains. Plus, he's the only one at the dojo that can cook a decent meal. Kaoru tries, but her cooking always turns out awful.

Kenshin has long red hair that he keeps in a low pony tail. He wears a baggy pinkish-purple top, and white baggy pants. He has a kind face, and a sweet disposition. His body structure is rather small, despite his incredible skill in battle. But Kenshin's most defining attribute is the cross shaped scar claiming his left cheek.

Even though Kaoru has deep feelings for Kenshin, she unintentionally takes advantage of his mellow personality. But Kenshin is tolerant and polite, even when she is unbearably rude.

Sanosuke, like Kenshin, was also part of the revolution. When he was a young boy he was a member of the Sekihoutai, a group of men fighting for their ideals. They were titled a false army, and later destroyed by the government. After his hero and mentor Taichou Sagara was beheaded in the tragic incident, Sanosuke became bitter. He looked up to Taichou, and even adopted his last name, Sagara.

Sano (short for "Sanosuke") later turned to life as a fighter-for-hire. His nickname was Zanza, and he used a huge sword called the Zanbattou in battle. He was, and still is a very formidable opponent and never turns down a fight.

After losing a fight with Kenshin, Sanosuke was reminded that life wasn't all about revenge on the government, and had decided to hang around the dojo with his new friends.

Sanosuke wears simple white pants and a white jacket that has the Japanese symbol for "bad" on the back. The symbol reminds him of his days with the Sekihoutai. His stomach, feet and right hand (due to a battle wound) are all wrapped in white bandages, while his other wrist is wrapped in red. He always wears a red head band that produces two long streamers when tied in the back. He's almost twice as tall as Yahiko and looks down on many of the people he knows (literally). His hair is a light brown, which he keeps in a rather spiky manner.

Like Kenshin, Sanosuke has also changed from his past. He is now a 19-year-old freeloader. He loves to gamble and never pays for his bills. And since he gets free food at the dojo, he doesn't bother working.

Sanosuke has a rather stubborn personality, especially when he's fighting, but since Kenshin broke his Zanbattou in battle, he only fights with his fists and his feet.

Despite all his faults, Sanosuke is a nice guy, and is very loyal to all his friends.

But as Sano made his way to the dojo, his mind wasn't on *his* past or his *friends'* pasts. His thoughts were more directed toward food.

I really hope they don't eat without me! He quickened his pace. His hope grew dimmer with every step. All he could think about was the food that awaited him at the dojo.

And maybe, if he hadn't been in such a hurry, he might have noticed what a glorious summer day it was.

Not long ago, the sun had made its daily debut. As it reached over the trees, it was so brilliant that it might be mistaken for the radiance of a holy being. The bright light from its golden rays illuminated the land, and the misty gray of twilight was replaced with a striking shade of gold. The distant trees caught the new light of the sun in their branches as they stood tall and proud in their place. Lazy puffs of clouds floated aimlessly across an endless sea of blue sky. This was not the time for the retreating moon, but the oncoming sun. This was *its* time to show its power and might as it marks the beginning and end of each passing day.

The sun is the wake up call of many people, but, as usual, it had failed to wake Sanosuke when he would've liked. Sanosuke grumbled to himself as he hastily turned the corner.

He was in such a hurry that he didn't see the young girl sitting on the ground in front of him, and he ran right into her. "OW!" The sudden impact sent Sano sprawling onto the ground in front of him. "What happened?" He sat up and rubbed his head as he looked around for the culprit.

"I'm sorry. I shouldn't have been sitting there," the girl grimaced in pain as she held her right leg in front of her.

Sanosuke's eyes fell on the girl as he searched for an appropriate answer. "No, *I'm* sorry. I should've been looking where I was going. You aren't hurt are you?" He looked at the girl with concern.

She seemed to be about Sanosuke's age, and was in fact very pretty. But she didn't look like she was from Japan. Her face looked more western to Sanosuke, and her clothes were very strange.

She was wearing an oriental-style sleeveless shirt. It was mostly white, but had images of cheery blossoms printed in the bottom left-hand corner. She was also wearing tight blue pants that Sanosuke had never seen before.

Her hair was light brown in color. She had it parted slightly to the left and it hung just below her shoulders with the front slightly tapered.

Her big brown eyes danced with pain as she sat up and turned to face Sanosuke. "No, you haven't hurt me any more than I was already hurt."

Sanosuke noticed a long rip in her right pant leg and could see a bloody bandage hidden underneath. "What happened to you? Where did you get that wound?" The breakfast that had just consumed his mind was now pushed away as his head was filled with thoughts of the strange western girl.

"It's nothing. I'll be fine," the girl sighed sadly.

Sanosuke examined her more closely and could tell that something was troubling her. "Okay, then why the long face?" he inquired.

The girl glanced at Sanosuke but never made eye contact. She stared at her feet and looked like she was thinking.

"I got this wound in a fight. It's really nothing. What's really bothering me is that I lost my ring," the girl's eyes became deep with sorrow and she lowered her head in remorse.

"Your ring?" Sano looked at her with confusion as she continued to explain.

"You see, I'm new around here. I just came here from America and..."

"Wow! You're from America? I thought you looked western."

The girl smiled and for the first time looked Sano in the eye. She didn't seem bothered by his outburst, but rather amused. "Yah, I'm from America. But anyway, I came to Japan to study Japanese culture, but when I got here, I lost my ring somehow."

"What did it look like?"

"Well, it's made out of gold and has a big diamond on it. It's got black dragon designs around it too." The girl turned her face away and her eyes became sullen again. "I worked so hard to get that ring. I can't believe I lost it."

Sanosuke felt bad for the girl, but he had no idea where her ring was. He felt useless as she sat there on the ground talking to a foreigner.

Suddenly, they could hear shouts from around the corner.

"Stop right there you thugs!" the sound of rushed footsteps was added to the shouting as the police blew their whistles.

Sanosuke and the girl looked at each other in confusion. Both were curious of the commotion. Sanosuke jumped to his feet and looked around the corner. He had to quickly withdraw his head as a small group of men nearly ran into his face. As they passed by Sano could see smirks on their faces. He didn't like the looks of them, and apparently neither did the police.

"Stop! Stop Onanwabi scum!" the police weren't far behind the men as they continued their chase down the street and around the next corner.

"Onanwabi? I've never heard of them before. Have you?" Sanosuke turned to face the girl, but she wasn't there. She had disappeared. "Where'd she go?!" He was both startled and confused. "Well she couldn't have gotten far with *that* leg." But after looking for over ten minutes he was beginning to think that he wasn't going to find her. "Where could she have gone?" he wondered out loud.

Sano caught a sudden whiff of food as he realized that he had wondered all the way to the Akabeko. His stomach growled in protest as he noticed how hungry he was. He hesitated, but finally decided to give up his search for the moment. *No point in searching on an empty stomach, right?* He sighed to himself as his head swam with mixed thoughts. *Who's the Onanwabi, and where the heck did that girl go? I didn't even ask what her name was.* With one final glance over his shoulder, he continued on his original quest.

When Sanosuke finally arrived at the dojo he was greatly disappointed to find that not only was he *late* for breakfast, but he had missed it completely.

"Sorry Sanosuke, we were done with breakfast a half hour ago." Kenshin rubbed the back of his head in an embarrassed gesture as he apologized to his friend.

"Aw man! I didn't think I was *that* late! I should've just eaten at the Akabeko while I was standing right next to it." Sano crossed his arms and slouched onto the porch of the dojo.

"You should've. It would've been better than coming over here so you could pout," Kaoru said rather crossly. Yahiko snickered to himself and Sanosuke shot him a poisonous glare.

"What made you so late Sano?" Kenshin asked with interest.

"Well, I over slept, *again*, so I was in a rush to get here. But when I turned the corner, I ran right into this girl that was sitting on the ground."

"Geez Sanosuke, you're even clumsier than I thought!" Yahiko laughed.

"Oh shut up Yahiko!" Sano spat.

"You didn't hurt her did you?" Kenshin asked with concern.

"Well, she said I didn't hurt her, but she had a pretty bad wound on her leg." Sanosuke continued to retell his recent encounter with the girl as his friends listened with interest.

"And then she just disappeared!" As he finished the others looked startled.

"Disappeared? How can someone just *disappear*?" Kaoru asked in bewilderment.

"I don't know. I looked for her for over ten minutes, but didn't see her anywhere."

"Did you say *Onanwabi*? That sounds like a rip off of Oniwaban." Yahiko recalled their many encounters with the notorious band of ninjas. The Oniwaban were their friends, and they had helped them out many times before.

"I don't think the Onanwabi have anything to do with the Oniwaban." Kenshin began. "I've heard rumors about the Onanwabi. People say that they are a group of seven trouble makers from Kyoto that arrived in Tokyo about ten days ago. They've been causing trouble around town by stealing and pushing people

around.” As Kenshin finished, Sano nodded his head in agreement.

“I knew I didn't like the looks of them. But what about the girl? Have you heard any rumors about her?” Sano looked expectantly at Kenshin, but he shook his head in apology.

“Sorry Sano, but *your* story is the only one I've heard about her.”

Disappointed, Sanosuke lifted his head towards the sky and began to think to himself. *I wonder if that girl has anything to do with the Onanwabi...Nah.* Not liking the idea, he decided to think about lunch instead.

That night Sanosuke decided to gamble with some of his friends, but as usual, he lost more than he won. “I thought I'd win for sure that time,” he grumbled to himself as he trudged home.

But Sanosuke's troubled thoughts were soon forgotten when he heard voices coming toward him. Usually he wouldn't have minded, but something told him to hide.

He quickly glanced around and saw a wooden crate on the side of the road. Taking advantage of his luck, he slipped behind the crate and listened to the passing group of people. It didn't take him long to realize that they were the Onanwabi group that he had seen before.

“I can't believe our luck!” one of the men said to the others.

“Yah, if that jeweler is right we can sell this little gem for more money than I could've imagined!” The man that had just spoken was holding a small object in his hand. Sanosuke squinted so he could see more clearly. His eyes grew wide with amazement when he realized that the object was without a doubt the very ring that the girl had told him about.

“So, when are ya gonna sell it Ichiro?” One of the men asked excitedly.

“All in good time men,” Ichiro responded gazing dreamily at the ring for the hundredth time.

“Hey you!”

Ichiro and the others turned to see Sanosuke standing under the moonlight with an angry expression on his face.

“Who are you?!” Ichiro asked rather annoyed.

“My name is Sanosuke Sagara, and I happen to know that you stole that ring from a young girl!”

The members of the Onanwabi looked at each other with confusion and then began to snicker. “I don't know what you're talking about. We found this ring lying beside a dead dog in the middle of the road. We didn't steal anything!” The man that had just spoken was called Ichiro, if Sanosuke remembered correctly.

“What do you mean!? That ring belongs to someone, and it's not you!”

“So hostile! Look, I can understand that you want the ring for yourself, but if you take it from us, it would be stealing. You don't want to get arrested do you?” Ichiro asked with a smirk on his face.

Sanosuke didn't trust him. He remembered how miserable that girl had been, and he wondered if the Onanwabi had given her the wound on her leg. They didn't look like they would be hard to fight. Sano could see that they all had swords and three of them carried long rectangular packages on their backs. Nothing he couldn't handle.

Sano took up a fighting stance and glared at the group of men.

“Oh, what's this?! Look men, he wants to fight us for the ring!” the Onanwabi broke out into hysterics as they looked at the single man that challenged them.

“Fine! We accept your challenge *Sanosuke Sagara*, but I warn you, this will be the last fight you'll ever have!” Ichiro and the others drew their swords. The cold metal reflected the light of the moon making them seem even more menacing.

Ichiro was the first to charge. He ran straight for Sanosuke, but Sano was too fast for him and Ichiro missed completely. Sanosuke delivered a quick kick to the man attacking him from behind, taking him down.

But his victory was short lived, for three more men were coming at him from all sides. Sano jumped high into the air, avoiding their attack, and came down hard on one of them. For the other two, he did a few quick maneuvers and knocked them out with one punch each.

Ichiro was furious by now. His face reddened with rage and he tightened his grip on his sword. He watched as another of his men was felled. “That's it!” he yelled. “Get into the triangle formation. Now!”

The three remaining men were the ones with the strange packages on their backs. They were now putting their swords back in their sheaths and opening the packages. But before Sanosuke could see what secrets the packages held, Ichiro and the other two men had surrounded him. They each held a long rifle that was pointed at Sanosuke.

Oh no. What have I got myself into! Sano's expression went from victorious to utterly defeated. He was surrounded with no hope of escape. Even though he had enough strength to break a gun in half, it didn't matter. If he went for one gun, the others would pick him off. He didn't dare to move, for fear that his movement would pull a trigger.

Sanosuke cursed his rotten luck as he closed his eyes.

“You shall pay for mocking the Onanwabi group! This is the end for you!” Ugly yellow teeth lined Ichiro's lips as he smiled the smile of a killer. His blood-thirsty eyes danced with excitement.

I didn't want to go like this! Sanosuke screamed in his mind. But no amount of screaming could save him

now. He squeezed his eyes tighter and held his breath, waiting for the end.

“NOW!” Ichiro shouted the command.

The sound of gun fire woke much of the neighborhood, but none of them dared to leave the safety of their homes. What ever it was, it wasn't worth the risk.

“Ahhhh!” Sanosuke cried out as he got knocked to the ground. He had been hit, but not by a bullet.

A huge white dog was now standing protectively over him. It flashed its sharp canine teeth at Ichiro. Its hackles were raised and its ears were pressed tightly to its back. Its narrowed eyes gleamed dangerously in the moonlight.

Sanosuke was startled, but not nearly as startled as the remaining Onanwabi. One of the men had been hit by a stray bullet and was now lying dead on the ground. Blood gushed from the open wound in his chest and stained his white shirt bright red.

The other two looked terrified as they stared at the animal in disbelief.

“I-I-I-It can't be!”

“Impossible! You're dead! I'll make sure of it!” Furious Ichiro aimed at the dog he had thought to be dead. But the dog was too fast. With one fluid motion, it sprang at Ichiro. Its jaws snapped shut on the soft flesh of his right hand. Terrified, Ichiro dropped the gun and tried to punch the dog with his free fist.

Amazed that he was still alive, Sanosuke stared at the dog in bewilderment. He didn't notice the other Onanwabi member fearfully aim at the animal that seemed intent on taking his leader's hand.

He pulled the trigger, and the sound of a gun shot once again sliced the remaining silence of the night. His aim was true.

With a loud yelp, the dog's jaws clamped down so hard, they completely severed Ichiro's hand. Ichiro cried out in agonizing pain. He held his bloody arm in front of him. Where his hand used to be was now nothing more than a fleshy stump. He stared at it for a few moments, but it didn't take long for him to come to his senses. After one last look at the dog that now lay motionless on the ground, Ichiro turned and ran. He held the bloody remainder of his arm close to his heart as if protecting it.

Seeing his leader flee, the remaining man also turned to run, but Sano was too fast for him. He quickly knocked him out from the back and proceeded to the now frantic Ichiro. It didn't take much for Sano to finally put the leader of the Onanwabi in his place.

With that taken care of, Sano rushed to dog that had saved his life. The bullet had pierced its side and the wound looked fatal. Desperate, Sano look around and quickly decided to wrap the wound with the shirt of one of the fallen Onanwabi members.

In the distance he could hear approaching foot steps. *I guess someone heard the gun shots after all.* Sano quickly gathered the dog in his arms, but before he ran to get help, something small and

shimmering caught his eye.

Lying on the ground, still fit on Ichiro's dismembered hand, was the ring. Sano carefully picked up the hand and took the ring off the lifeless finger. *All this trouble over a little ring.* Sanosuke sighed and placed the ring in his pocket. Only then did he start to run.

He was just disappearing around the corner when the police finally arrived on the scene.

"What happened here?!" The police looked around in astonishment, at the fallen men. They had been tracking the Onanwabi for days, and now they were all unconscious and at the mercy of the police.

"They're *all* still alive! Well, except this one." one of the officers said looking at the dead man lying at his feet.

"In that case, the rest of these men will be spending a good long time in jail."

"Yah, well, I don't know who did this, but whoever it was, we owe `em one."

As the police gathered the fallen men, Sanosuke ran as fast as his legs would carry him to the best doctor he knew.

2 - The Storm of Darkness

Full Moon

Part 2: The Storm of Darkness

Disclaimer: Many of the characters and their backgrounds in this story come from the TV show Rurouni Kenshin, and are not original characters.

“Megumi! Megumi!”

Megumi sleepily blinked her eyes as she rolled over on her sleeping mat. *Who on Earth could be here at this time of night?* She wondered to herself.

“MEGUMI!”

“Alright, alright I'm coming!” Megumi called back to the unknown voice. She yawned and stretched as she rose to her feet. The life of a doctor wasn't an easy one, and Megumi knew that. She had to be ready to take care of a patient at any moment. *But why do people have to get sick when I'm trying to sleep?*

Megumi sighed deeply and walked to the door to begin the search for her visitor. She didn't have to look far. As soon as she slid the door open she was met by a rather disheveled man. He panted as he tried to catch his breath, and in his arms was a large white dog. The creature's thick coat was matted with blood and it seemed to be unconscious.

“Sanosuke! What happened!?” Megumi could sense that something was very wrong.

“H-h-help it...p-p-please!” Sano managed to gasp between breaths.

Megumi quickly shook off her shock and led Sanosuke into the neighboring room. “Quickly, put it there!” she urged, pointing to a table near the back wall.

The dog was wheezing terribly, and it was important that Megumi began the examination right away. Any fatigue she may have felt was forgotten as her mind filled with questions. But she pushed them aside and focused on the task at hand. She didn't know how much time she had. Sanosuke stared worriedly at the dog. He clenched his fists and his eyes gleamed with anger.

“Dog's aren't exactly my specialty, but I'll do whatever I can.” Megumi said, noticing his distress. Sanosuke nodded in approval, never taking his eyes off the dog.

There was a forest, a mighty forest, with tall trees in every direction. Sano knew this place. It wasn't far from Tokyo. In fact, it was just outside the city. But something was wrong. He could sense it. He looked around nervously, and was blinded by a sudden flash of light.

Fire. It started out as just a flicker, but it began to grow. It consumed the once proud trees and surrounded Sano. It didn't seem like there was any hope of escape. He began to panic. He spun around to find an exit but was disappointed to find a fiery wall everywhere he turned.

Then he saw it. There was a large gap in the fire. He wasted no time. He quickly dashed through opening but was alarmed to find that there was even more fire than before. But there was one difference. A path.

He followed the path, never leaving its trail. And all the while he felt like he was being watched. He could see a dark shape moving in the flames. It began to growl and snap as it swiftly advanced upon Sanosuke.

Sano continued to run. The heat was almost unbearable, and the suspense nearly killed him, but still he ran. Suddenly, a large tree began to fall in the way of the path. Not seeing the danger, Sano ran right under the tree and it collapsed onto him.

He struggled to get free, but it seemed hopeless. And to make matters worse, everything had begun to shake violently. The creature in the fire came closer and Sano could sense that it was right behind him. Fire closed in on all sides till the flames were almost licking his face. Sano shut his eyes and waited for the end.

"Sanosuke...Sanosuke..." A voiced began to call from the distance. Sano wanted to go to the voice. It seemed to welcome him in his current state of despair.

"Sanosuke...Sanosuke..." It seemed familiar, but distant. He had to get to the voice! He just had to! The creature was almost upon him now, and he began to yell in his distress.

"Sanosuke...Sanosuke..."

"SANOSUKE! WAKE UP!"

Sano's eyes snapped open. His body, which was leaning against the wall, shot up and nearly hit Yahiko, who was sitting in front of him. Sano was covered in a cold sweat, and his heart was pounding. "Whoa. What a dream," he muttered as he put his hand to his forehead. It was the middle of the day and the sun was shining brightly. He closed his eyes in protest.

"What the heck were you dreaming about Sanosuke!? You were screaming like a little girl," Yahiko laughed. But Sano didn't think it was funny. He hit Yahiko in the head, leaving a big red lump as punishment.

"If *you* had that dream you wouldn't be laughing *Yahiko*. But don't worry about it. It was just a dream anyway." Sano took a deep breath and leaned back against the wall. *I guess I fell asleep out here after we finished working on the dog.*

"We heard about what happened last night." Sano looked up and noticed that both Kenshin and Kaoru were there as well. "You didn't get hurt did you?" Kenshin asked.

"Nah, but my dog friend did."

"Dog friend? Since when do you have a dog friend Sano?" Kaoru asked putting her hands on her hips.

"Since last night!" Sano answered rather gruffly. "Look, to make a long story short, I was walking home, and then I saw the Onanwabi group. They had that girl's ring I was talking about, so I challenged to a fight to get the ring back. It was really easy at first, but then they surrounded me with guns. I thought I was a goner, but then this big dog saved me and we managed to beat the group. Unfortunately, the dog got shot during the fight," Sanosuke said sadly. "We were trying to save it last night, but Megumi's still not sure if it's going to make it."

"Did you at least get the ring back?" Yahiko asked with interest.

"Yah, I got it." Sano pulled the ring out of his pocket. Strangely, there wasn't a drop of blood on it. *Weird, you would think there would be blood on it after being on a severed hand.* Sano pondered on this for a moment but his thoughts were interrupted. Megumi walked out of the house to greet her visitors. She seemed to be just as tired as Sanosuke, and her dreams had been just as fitful. She had dreamed about the days when she worked for an evil man that made her make opium so he could sell it for money. Those were miserable times for Megumi, but she was later rescued by Kenshin and the others.

"Well, is the dog going to be okay?" Kaoru asked with concern.

Megumi flicked back her long black hair and sighed deeply. "Well, at first I didn't think there was any chance of it making it through the night, but I was proven wrong. I'm not positive, but I actually think it's going to pull through." Megumi announced cheerfully. Sanosuke and the others smiled broadly at this news.

"Thank you Megumi," Sanosuke yawned. He stretched his arms and slumped back against the wall again. *So tired.*

"Don't mention it. Now if you'll excuse me, I have other patients to attend to." Megumi nodded slightly and returned to her work.

"So, what happened to the Onanwabi?" Kenshin asked as his gaze fixed on Sanosuke. Sano, who was dozing off, shook himself awake and managed to stammer out an answer.

"The police took em'. They'll be in jail for a good long time." Sanosuke smiled, but his expression went from amused to concerned as he remembered something the Onanwabi had said. "There's something weird about what they told me. They said that they found the ring by a dead dog, and later, they claimed

that the dog that saved me was the same dog they found the ring by.”

Yahiko looked dumfounded. “How can that be the same dog if they said it was dead? That doesn't make any sense!”

Kenshin furrowed his brow in concentration. “You're right, it doesn't make any sense. Sano, maybe you should go to the police station and ask the Onanwabi a few questions, that you should.”

“I will. Tomorrow though,” Sano replied sleepily. Forgetting all his troubles, he closed his eyes and drifted into a dreamless sleep.

It wasn't until the next morning that Sanosuke finally awoke. The day was just as beautiful as it had been for the past two days. The sky was a pale blue and there wasn't a cloud in sight. The sun rose slowly over the horizon as birds chirped cheerfully in the distance.

Sano blinked a few times and rose to his feet. He stretched and yawned in an attempt to better wake himself up. *How long was I asleep?* he wondered.

“Sanosuke, I have great news!”

Startled, Sanosuke spun around to see Megumi smiling at him. “What? What is it?” he asked hopefully.

“I don't know how, but your dog friend is going to be okay! It's still sleeping right now, but it should wake up eventually.”

Sanosuke was thrilled at this news. “That's great!” A broad smile spread across his face.

“But what's really strange is that the bullet wound isn't the only injury it has. There's also a deep gash on its leg that's not completely healed yet.” Megumi looked pensive.

A gash on its leg? Why does that seem so familiar? Sanosuke thought about it, but couldn't quite figure it out. “Well, anyway, I have to go. Thanks for everything Megumi.”

She nodded and walked back into the clinic. Sano watched her go and then turned to go to the police station. It was about ten o'clock by the time Sanosuke reached the station. *I really hope they can answer some of my questions.* After entering the building he saw a man sitting at a desk about twenty feet away. Sanosuke approached the man and cleared his throat. The man, who had been studying some papers, looked up from his work to see Sanosuke waiting impatiently.

“Hello. How can I help you?” The officer smiled warmly at Sano. His teeth gleamed in the light of the sun and his long black hair blew in the breeze from the open window.

“Can I talk to the Onanwabi? I have some questions for them.” Sano folded his arms and examined the officer. There was something strange about his overly friendly behavior. Sano didn't like it.

“The Onanwabi? I'm sorry, but they're all dead.”

“Dead?! What do you mean *dead*?!” Sano was stunned. *I know that one of the men was killed, but the rest of them should be alive!*

“You mean you haven't heard? They were being transported here the other night, but their carriage was attacked. They and the officers were all found dead the next morning.” The officer smiled and began to study his papers again.

Sano couldn't believe what he was hearing. *No! I needed to talk to them! How can they all be dead! This can't just be a coincident.*

Disappointed, Sano took one last look at the officer and turned to leave. The officer looked up from his work to watch Sano go. He smiled and laughed softly to himself. *Fool.*

I can't believe my luck! Sano had been walking for almost ten minutes and all he could think about was his conversation with the strange officer. Frustrated, he stuffed his hands into his pockets. His fingers hit something cold and hard. *The ring!* He pulled it out and remembered when he had run into the girl before. “I hope she's okay. The wound on her leg looked pretty bad.” Sano stopped and thought about what he just said. *Wound on her leg? The dog! That's why it seemed so familiar! But...that's impossible. There's no way that girl could be the dog!* Sano chuckled at such a crazy idea. Still, *it is kinda' strange...*

Three days passed uneventfully. The dog was still asleep and the girl was nowhere to be found. With nothing to do, Sano spent his days thinking about all the possibilities of what was going on. He had come up with some strange ones, but none came close to the truth.

Sano was walking home after dinner on the third day something caught his eye. He couldn't believe what he saw. Trotting around the corner was the dog. It didn't seem to notice Sanosuke, so he ran to catch up. Poking his head around the wall, Sano could see the dog continue on its way through the streets. *Now things are getting interesting.* He had already made up his mind to follow the dog. As quietly as he could, he crept along behind it.

There were times he was certain he'd given himself away, but the dog never seemed to notice. Eventually, the dog left the city. Following the road, it began to move toward the forest. Sanosuke suddenly remembered his dream. A chill ran down his spine, but he quickly shook it off and continued on his quest.

As the dog led Sano further and further away from the city, it began to move faster. Sano was finding it hard to keep up and be stealthy at the same time. Suddenly, the dog began to run. It sprinted off the road and darted into the woods. Startled, Sano ran after it. He no longer cared if it saw him. Branches and twigs brushed against his skin and got caught on his clothes, but he didn't notice.

The dog seemed to become more and more distant. Soon, Sano couldn't see it at all, and by that time he was deep in the woods. Desperate, he ran harder, hoping to find the dog again, but everywhere he looked there were just more trees. *Stupid dog! Where did you go?*

Sano wasn't paying attention to where he was going and was suddenly sent sprawling forward after hitting something in his way. He gritted his teeth and crawled into a sitting position. *Well, that hurt.*

"You really need to stop running into people."

Sano recognized that voice. He quickly turned and was both surprised and delighted to see the western girl. "It's you!" He gasped.

"That's okay I forgive you for running into me for a second time." The girl smiled playfully and rose to her feet.

"Oh, I'm sorry!" Sano stammered. He began to rub the back of his head in embarrassment. "It's just that, I'm a little surprised to see you way out here in the middle of a forest."

"I could say the same for you."

Remembering the dog, Sano began to look around, but finally accepted that he wasn't going to find it. He walked over to the nearest tree and sat under its towering branches. "Well, this may sound crazy, but I was following a big white dog. You didn't happen to see it did you?" Sano looked hopefully at the girl, but she shook her head.

"Sorry, I haven't seen any big white dogs running around the forest." She walked over and sat under the tree next to Sanosuke's. "I only came out here so I could take a walk by myself. I wasn't expecting to see anyone else."

"But why would you go on a walk so late? The sun has almost completely set, and there's no moon tonight."

"True, but I like the dark." She smiled again and lifted her face towards the sky.

But Sanosuke's suspicion was replaced with excitement when he remembered the ring. He quickly stood up and fished it out of his pocket. "Here! I have your ring," he said as he held it out to the girl. She jumped to her feet and grabbed it out of his hand.

"I can't believe it! Where did you find it!?"

"The Onanwabi group had it, but I got it back for you." Sanosuke smiled proudly at his accomplishment.

"Thank you so much, uh...What did you say your name was?"

"It's Sanosuke. Sanosuke Sagara. What's your name?"

"My name is Laura. You don't mind if I call you Sano for short do you?" Laura asked.

"Not at all." Sano answered. *Laura hu. That's a strange name. But she is from America after all.*

There were so many questions that he was dying to ask. He was glad that Laura had her ring back, but he had to know the truth. "I have a question. Do you remember where you lost the ring? The Onanwabi claimed they didn't steal it. They said they found it next to a dead dog, the same dog I was chasing before."

Laura looked like she was about to say something, but stopped. "It's a long story."

"A long story indeed."

Laura and Sanosuke both spun around at the sound of a deep voice from the bushes. "Who's there?!" Sanosuke demanded.

"Just an old friend." To Sano's surprise, a large animal stepped into the clearing. It looked very similar to the dog he had been chasing, but its coat was pitch black, and its eyes looked cold and cruel. "And please, don't mistake me for a *dog* like you have my friend here. It's insulting. I would much rather you call us by our proper name, *canus lupis*, or the wolf." The animal's lips curled back into a malicious smile. He seemed very amused.

"Wait! What are you talking about?! Laura, what is he saying?" Sano desperately turned to Laura who was staring at the wolf with great distaste.

"So you followed me all the way here hu Ryo? Well, you got what you wanted, so why don't you just go and leave me alone?!" Laura looked furious. Her bright eyes blazed with anger, and her hands were clenched into tight fists.

"So hostile. Don't you even want to say goodbye?" Ryo's smile broadened and his long fangs flashed dangerously in the remaining sunlight.

"NO! I just want you to go! I've had enough of you!"

Sano was genuinely confused. If he had questions before, he had three times as many now. *How can a wolf be talking!? And what did he mean when he said I mistook Laura for a dog? Maybe she was that dog...er...wolf I was chasing!*

"Very well. If that's the way you're going to be then I guess I'll just have to leave. But before I go, here's a little parting gift." And then something astonishing happened. Ryo stood on his back legs and transformed into a man.

Sanosuke was speechless. *It's the man from the Police Station! But...how?!*

"You probably have many questions Sanosuke. And I'm sure Laura would be more than happy to explain them all to you, but there is one thing neither of you know. It's true that the Onanwabi are dead, and it's also true that *I'm* the one that killed them. But I kept one alive."

"Ichiro," Laura muttered under her breath. As if on cue, another man stepped out of the bushes. He had messy black hair and his right hand was completely severed.

"It *is* Ichiro!" Sano stared in disbelief at the man he had believed to be dead. *That's impossible!*

Ichiro glared coldly at Sano. He opened his mouth to say something, but was silenced by Ryo.

"Please Ichiro, why don't you give our friends the gift I promised them." Ryo smiled calmly down at the former leader of the Onanwabi. Ichiro smiled back, but his smile was much more sinister.

"I hope you like it," Ichiro sneered. He then pulled out a small whistle and put it to his lips. The note he produced was loud and shrill as it pierced through the tranquil forest. Startled birds burst out of the trees and a family of foxes ran into their den.

Ichiro seemed very pleased with himself. He put the whistle back in his pocket and looked to Ryo for further instruction. "Very good Ichiro," Ryo said with pleasure. "As for you two," He turned to face Sanosuke and Laura. "Enjoy."

The sun had just passed from view and darkness was beginning to overtake the light. Seeing this, Ryo pulled a silver medallion out from his black cloak. It had a star shaped symbol on it and was about the size of a coaster. He held it high above his head and began to laugh maniacally as the medallion started to glow. Its radiance completely surrounded both Ryo and Ichiro.

Sanosuke was forced to shield his eyes as a bright flash of light illuminated the remaining darkness. When he could finally see again, he was surprised to see that Ryo and Ichiro were gone.

"What the heck is going on!?" Sanosuke turned to Laura and prayed she'd have an answer.

"We'll talk later. Right now we have to run!"

"Run? Why?"

But before Laura could answer, a deafening roar erupted into the night. Startled, Sanosuke looked around for the culprit.

"Come on! We have to run, NOW!" Laura pleaded. But it was too late. A monstrous creature stepped into the clearing. It stood about six feet tall from the ground up and it seemed to be a combination of a tiger and wolf. It had glowing red eyes that gleamed with desire, and its long white fangs extended well beyond its bottom jaw. Its black coat made it almost invisible in the darkness, which made the creature appear even more ominous.

Sanosuke instantly recognized it, and he backed away in fear. "That's the thing from my dream!" he shouted.

"*That* was in your dream?" Laura asked. But Sano never got a chance to answer. The creature had begun to glow and eerie red. A deep growl rumbled in its throat and the light from its eyes intensified.

"What's it doing?" Sano asked fearfully.

"I was just about to ask the same question." Laura said backing away.

Suddenly, the creature let out a roar even louder than the first. The red light that had formed around its body was thrust into the sky. Like a giant firework, it exploded and spread out in every direction. Dark clouds formed everywhere the light touched, and thunder could be heard echoing in the distance. The creature took a step closer, its hackles raised.

“Run...” Laura spoke in almost a whisper and Sano had to strain to hear her.

“RUN!” She grabbed Sano by the arm and took off in the opposite direction of the creature. Sano stumbled along for a moment but found his footing and managed to catch up. The wind had quickened drastically and lightning lit the moonless sky. Sano could feel the creature catching up with them and he began to panic. Since they were in a clearing, it was much easier for him to run. He sprinted ahead of Laura who seemed to be having some troubles.

Suddenly, lightning struck a nearby tree and fire lit its branches. But, this wasn't the only tree that got hit. Dozens of other trees were also on fire and the blaze was spreading quickly. Soon they were almost completely surrounded by hungry flames. The creature used this to its advantage and dove into the flames.

“Great, now it's fire proof!” Sano screamed. Laura had fallen behind and was limping pretty badly. She clutched her side and grimaced in pain. “Are you okay?!” Sano yelled over his shoulder.

“I'm fine!” Laura called back. But as soon as she said it, she tripped over a tree root and fell to the ground. Sano didn't notice and continued to run.

Seeing that one of its victims had fallen, the creature jumped out of the fire and landed on top of Laura. Warm saliva drip onto her face as the creature's fangs drew closer to her throat.

Sanosuke finally realized that Laura wasn't following him anymore. He stopped running and turned to look for her. His eyes widened in fear when he saw the position she was in. “LAURA!”

“I...won't die...not here! Not now!” With one swift motion, Laura slashed at the creature with hidden claws. It reared up in pain and Laura managed to squeeze out from under it. Sanosuke ran up to her and helped her to her feet.

Where did that attack come from? Sanosuke wondered. But this was no time to ask questions. The creature had refocused and was burning with rage. It began to chase them again, but this time it was serious.

There was nowhere to hide. Sanosuke desperately searched for a way out, but they were completely surrounded. “Quick, follow me!” Laura grabbed Sano's wrist and pulled him directly into the flames. Sanosuke expected to be burned alive, but was pleased to see that they were both protected by a red barrier.

“Amazing,” he breathed. The fire helped to shield them from the creature's fangs but they couldn't run forever. Laura was still limping and her breathing was getting worse.

Then, it happened. They were so desperate that they didn't notice the tree as it fell. Though Laura's barrier could protect them from the fire, it was too weak to reflect the burning tree. It hit hard, completely shattering the barrier and landing on top of Sanosuke. He yelled out in pain from the impact. The creature heard his scream and was almost upon them. The fire began to close in around Sanosuke and he started to cough from the smoke.

The fire didn't seem to bother Laura at all, but she knew Sanosuke was in trouble, and she wasn't sure if she had enough strength to lift the tree. *I have to try.* She took a deep breath and bent over to grasp the tree. She gritted her teeth with effort, but managed to lift the tree enough off the ground to let Sano escape.

But the creature got there first. Its claw caught on Sano's pant leg and dragged him out from under the tree. Laura dropped the tree and stared in horror as the creature lifted Sano closer to its jaws. *I have to do something!* She began to back up but hit something behind her. *It's a rock wall! We've ran all the way to the mountain!* Thinking fast, she kicked the wall as hard as she could. The earth began to shake as rocks fell from the mountain.

The creature dropped Sanosuke in terror as huge boulders crashed all around it. Sano hit the ground and was showered with rocks. *Is this the end?* A few larger rocks managed to hit him in the head and his vision began to blur. He could feel something grab him as the rest of his sight left him and everything became dark.

