

# Passing through

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## Kapitel 1: Feverish dreams in a summer-storm

In case someone doesn't know (but that would be very unlikely): I own nothing of Rurouni Kenshin, it is the property of Nobuhiro Watsuki.

please notice: I am not a native english speaker. But I tried my best ;). Please feel free to correct me, I want to improve, therefore I need your reviews! thanks :D

A/N: I know, the setting of a RuroKen-Fic during his wandering years is not really new...But it just popped up in my mind. The idea behind was, simplified, to write twelve stories according to the twelve months of a year, set anytime during Kenshins wanderings. The stories are loosely connected but can stand for themselves. Don't expect some large-scale character-development (like the change Battousai-Rurouni or something)- others have that already written down better than I ever could (for more look at the end of the chapter)

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### Passing through

#### One year – twelve stories

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Illusory sunlight was shining brightly on colour-palette of summer, but neither the full green of the trees nor the red sparkles of flowers along the path obtained the attention of the lonely wanderer. Instead two bright blue eyes lowered at the sky, where scattered clouds were melting quickly into one dark and offensive mass.

-Dark clouds, looking dirty and almost brown of colour...

Worse luck. The young man knew exactly what that meant.

-...Hail! And the day started so sunny.

Alarmingly fast the menacing clouds began to cover the whole sky and a sudden breeze blew dust from the street into the wanderers eyes. A little perplexed, he looked around – he was on top of a mountain path, not far away from the shore, but there were no villages or larger trees for shelter. A sudden bright flash, reminding him to hurry, enlightened the street, which was softly sloping before him.

-It seems, further down the path turns into a narrow pass with some rocks.

Approaching thunder and first raindrops finally brought the wanderer into action and with a resigned shrug of shoulders he ran towards the possible cover.

-Better to encounter this summer's storm between some rocks than enjoying it standing on top of a mountain.

Unfortunately the rocks beside the path turned out to be no shelter at all, because the wind blew right through them. Quickly he cowered against the most shielding of those uncomfortable, massive stones.

-Maybe it is wet, muggy and windy here, but nevertheless none of the pelting down hailstones are joining me.

One corner of the young mans mouth twitched as a gust whipped him a batch of thick raindrops into the face.

-Is it a sigh that I hear, Himura Kenshin? Being a rurouni you should be grateful for even the slightest support.

These rocks are the most pleasant company for some time past, after all.

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## VIII. Feverish dreams in a summer's storm

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Being a Rurouni on an aimless journey, always in the open air and at the elements mercy, the best season for wandering was summer. Even if in spring nature was more appealing and temperature more pleasant, the undeniable advantages of summer were weightier.

First: It was easy to gather food on the fields or in the woods, and such he could feed himself without the help of others for several weeks.

Second: Stickiness, even though unpleasant for most people, was preferable to the chill breeze of spring or autumn. A fire for warming was not a must and therefore could be avoided (as bright flames often tended to invite unwelcome visitors...but this is an other story).

Third: The heat made the streets empty - perfect for a lone traveller, who wanted no company in form of either, idle chitchat or, contrary and just as annoying, suspicious questions.

-And last but not least: If it rains in summer, the rain is most of the time mild, soft and refreshing...

Jittering, Kenshin pulled his legs nearer.

-...depending on where you are. Of course I've picked out the most raw and rainy part of the country.

With a deep sigh he finished his sarcastic thoughts and got up. The hailstorm had ceased and now only thick, large raindrops were dripping down with loud blobs.

-More wet than wet I can't get. Time to search a more comfortable shelter than this rough rock though you've been an uncomplaining and silent listener to my silly thoughts, old friend.

Absent-mindedly he patted the stone.

-But I need to find a place where I can get myself dry near a warm fire before catching a cold.

A few hours ago – in the brightest sunlight – Kenshin had caught two fishes. With an angry grumble his empty stomach now signalled him that it was about time to eat them. Wet to the skin he trudged along the mountain-path, in one hand the bundle with his few belongings and the fishes, in the other his sakabatou. His long hair stuck on his face in wisps of dark-red and the wind did not dry his cloths, sticking on him heavy as lead, but made them clummy. He tried to keep his body-heat with a little spurt.

After running several minutes he felt relieved to spot a little shack not far away from the street, shabby and obviously uninhabited. Without further hesitance, he progressed and rattled at the door. It was locked – not an obstacle, for Kenshin could've easily kicked in that rotten piece of wood. But this hut, as gone to rack it was, might had an owner after all and Kenshin hadn't the intention to destroy personal property. Instead, he walked around the building, searching for a loose plank. Finding one, he pushed it aside until the gap was wide enough to grant him access.

In the half-light he saw, that the inside of the shack, too, seemed to be on skid row and almost unfurnished. Rain, trickling trough the porous roof, made the loamy floor sticky and wind whistled trough large gaps between the planks. At closer look Kenshin found some old blankets and several ceramic-dishes. And, to his surprise, an old bottle of sake – but it smelled rather strangely and therefore wasn't a great temptation.

Finding a pile of firewood in one dry corner of the room Kenshin began to prepare the fireplace with a little smile on his face. Moments later he watched the flames of the fire with contentment. Swiftly, he put off his wet clothes and, hanging them near the fire, hoped that they would dry soon. Naked as he was he wrapped himself in the stale but clean blankets. Done that he sat down beside the fireplace and started to grill his fishes.

-Something to eat and a roof – at least to some extend leak-proof –over the head... What more could a rurouni ask for?

This shack is the most pleasant overnight accommodation for days, after all...

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A few days earlier

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„Stop right now and give us all your money or I’m gonna stab you!”

A large, crude-looking man balked the small street with his accomplices in a blind corner, wielding menacingly a rusty sword through the air.

Kenshin was neither impressed by the hardly usable blade nor the sudden appearance of the bandits out of bushes on the wayside. He had felt their presence already miles away.

“Sessha’s just a rouni. I have nothing of value to give,” he responded softly to the harsh voice, face hidden behind bangs of red hair.

“Nonsense!”, barked the leader of the group. From behind another bandit tugged at his sleeve. “What?”, asked the big man impatiently, halfway turned.

“Look at him,” his fellow said. “Look at those rags. I guess he tells the truth, he’s really a vagabond.”

The leader’s eyes narrowed and he examined the man standing before him in partial shade. His dark-brown hair, so it seemed to him, was dusty and tousled and his dark-blue gi and grey hakama looked indeed worn out, heavily mended and dirty. Kenshin had to force back a smile when he saw the leader’s facial expression turning from grim to disappointed.

-Why do people always judge by outer appearance? At least they didn’t recognize me or else I would read not disappointment but dismay in their faces.

The leader was about to lower his sword when the same fellow tugged again his sleeve from behind. “What now!” He turned angrily.

“His sword,” the bandit suggested with a nod in Kenshin’s direction.

“Your sword,” the leader repeated menacingly towards his victim. “Give it to us!”

Kenshin finally looked up and lifted one red eyebrow. “Why should I give you my sword. You have one yourself. This sword is very dear to me.”

„It will be very dear to us too,” the bandits smiled and approached.

Now Kenshin’s eyes were next to narrow.

„Why do you bother a peaceful wanderer? Isn't there any honest and legal work to do? Maybe in some of the near seaports?"

The men laughed. "Hard work and poorly paid!" someone shouted. "No, thanks. It's easier to get our needs from travellers or peasants."

Kenshin's eyes narrowed some more.

"You also attack farms?"

„That's none of your damn business," the leader grumbled. "Give us the sword and we will spare your life. And don't even think about drawing it, you don't stand a chance against us. Remember, we're five and you are alone."

Again Kenshin had to smile inwardly but thanks to years of practice no sign of emotion was displayed on his face.

-Why do people always judge by physical appearance!

"I will neither draw my sword nor give it to you," he said quietly but the bandits didn't miss the sudden unsettling undertone.

The Leader's rusty sword paused in mid-air as the young man was stepping out of the shadows into the bright sunlight.

His hair was not brown but like fire. And his eyes...

Hesitantly the bandits paused. "I... we..." the leader stammered, obviously rattled. Lost in thoughts he tried to figure out why this strange appearance made the alarm bells in his mind ring so weirdly loud. A sudden tug on his sleeve made him jump. "Damn it, WHAT!"

"His hair... and his face...", came the shattered voice of his fellow from behind.

The leader stared again at the youthful face before him. A soft breeze revealed a scar on his left cheek, hidden until now under red hair. The alarm-bells rang even louder. A cross-shaped scar. The leader froze.

"Hi...Hitokiri Battousai..."

With a clang the rusty sword hit the ground, shortly afterwards joined by the five bandits, voluntarily pressing their face into the dust.

"Please... mercy!" they whimpered sheepishly.

Kenshin sighed. No little fight to keep in practice this time.

His eyes turned to the old sword.

-Though such dilettantish bandits are surely nothing better when it comes to fight.

He softly shook his head about himself.

-You've had enough fights for the rest of your life, Himura.

He stepped forward and simultaneously the bandits backed. "Please, don't kill us!" They exclaimed in different degrees of desperation.

For a short moment Kenshin felt a familiar pain in his heart.

-Why do people always judge by physical appearance... and why does this question seem to be the bane of my life?

Frustrated, he passed the crouched bandits, who would never knew anything about his non-killing-oath. "I won't kill you. But promise, you'll never attack innocent people again. Go to the next city and get yourself a honest work."

Hastily nodding heads raised little clouds of dust.

Leaving them behind, Kenshin hoped, they would consider his advices. They were no evil men at their hearts, he felt that. And the sword – by the way the only real weapon aside from some thick branches – was surely old but not chippy or bloodstained. Kenshin felt certain that this gang was founded out of foolishness in a mere attempt to make a better living, not knowing any better way.

-They are mere humans, trying to live the only way they know. Aren't those your words, Hiko Seijuro? Would you laugh at your baka deshi? Sure you would and why not. I first had to shatter my soul before I could understand the principles you unsuccessfully tried to teach me back then. That really is laughable, that it is...

Entering the next village shortly before dawn the peasants gave him a warm welcome, containing fiercely fidgeting with various field-equipment. "Bugger off!" they yelled. "And tell your fellows that this village is well-defended!"

With a sigh Kenshin followed the insistent request and spent the night alone in the near forest.

After all, he considered while leaning on a trunk, his sword propped against his left shoulder, my appearance might not be fortunate for myself - but at least this village-people don't have to fear danger anymore. As long as I'm around, the bandits won't dare to show their faces in this area again.

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Few days later again  
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Still wrapped in the blankets, Kenshin was breathing deep and steadily. Neither the monotone drops of the raindrops leaking through the roof nor the loud creaking of the wooden shack disturbed him in his sleep. His face, usually tensed to keep its expressionless mask, was now relaxed and soft. But cautiousness was deeply

ingrained, his left hand still clutched the sword.

Nearly bent down, a last loud crack of the fire awoke him. In an instant his right hand reached the hilt of his katana, before he recognized where he was.

A shack, not Kyoto. He tried to calm himself.

-It is more than a year since I've left the Ishin Shishi but still those rare occasions, when I find myself waking up from deep sleep, make me feel vulnerable and careless.

Sleepy he blinked through one of the gaps between the planks. It was already dark outside.

-How long have I slept? I can't even remember a dream... a rare occasion, too.

His clothes were now dry and he quickly put them on. While tying up his hakama he felt a sudden dizziness.

Maybe I should drink some water...

He reached for one of the ceramic bowls, which he had found and put under one of the leaks of the roof earlier. In one gulp he drank it empty and felt the cool rainwater trickling down his throat. Where was the heat he felt coming from? From outside or inside?

He picked up some new firewood and started to reanimate the fire.

-If I've caught a cold, sweating it the best thing to do.

Again he slipped under the blankets near the flames and a little later he felt the first sweatdrops on his forehead. Wiping them off with the back of his hand he felt that his temperature was higher than normal.

-Damn. I got a fever. Nasty summer's storm.

He rummaged in his small baggage, hoping to find those temperature-sinking herbs he'd once collected, but doing so he remembered having used them all to help an ill boy last month (but this, of course, is another story).

-I should probably try to collect some new herbs before my fever runs too high...

But the warm blankets were already too tempting and his eyelids felt so heavy, that he barely could keep them open.

Sleep would be the best, much sleep. By tomorrow morning the fever should've gone away. Then he closed his eyes.

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Instantly he sank into confusing dreams. He saw himself sitting in a shack, a fire in front of him, feeling restless until he remembered why: He still had to collect some



herbs for making medicine. But he couldn't move. Something heavy was resting on his shoulder.

It was Tomoes head. She turned to him and slightly smiled. Her face was very pale. Suddenly he saw her lying on the futon – the place, where they had loved each other just the night before – she was not breathing. She was dead. Her pure white kimono was sparkled with drops of her own blood.

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„No,“ he heavily breathed. Feeling a hand on his shoulder he turned around.

Through the fog in front of his eyes he saw the face of a man – Katsura Kogoro.

“You must come to Kyoto,“ he said, a serious expression on his face. His voice sounded strangely unfamiliar.

“No!” Kenshin tried to shake of the hand but again he couldn't move, the blankets seemed like bonds. “Let me here. I don't want to go back to Kyoto. Let me stay in Otsu. Together with her. In Otsu!”

Now the hand was pressing him to the ground. “To Kyoto...,” Katsuras voice whispered. And suddenly an other voice stated: “Hitokiri.”

Kenshin felt new waves of heat surging up inside of him.

Sword. Where is my sword!

He couldn't move. He couldn't speak. Give me my sword! He wanted to scream but no other word than a muffled “ord” left his mouth.

A fearful voice answered. „He's searching for his sword.“ Some footsteps. A Pause. A surprised exclamation. „Sakabatou!“

It was so hot. Near him a fire was burning.

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The fire got bigger and bigger. Their house in Otsu was ablaze. Not turning back he left it, slowly waking back towards Kyoto. With every step he felt the familiar cold creeping nearer. Seeking help, his trembling hand clasped the blue scarf around his neck. He still felt the awful cold taking possession of his body – but it couldn't reach his heart anymore.

„Tomoe,“ he reassured himself.

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Without warning everything in front of his eyes changed. He was in Otsu again,

summer, lying on the floor and it was boiling hot. His forehead burned.

„Water,“ he cawed and like an angel Tomoe descended beside him, putting a cool cloth on his head. He fumbled for her hand and she winced. „Tomoe, don't go away...”

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“He thinks, I'm his wife!” said a bewildered male voice.

“That's not good,” another voice noticed. Is this Katsuras voice?

“That's my line,” the first voice laughed bitterly. “Do I look that girlish?”

“Baka. I meant that his fever still runs too high.”

Kenshin blinked.

-Fever? Where am I? Who are those men? And where is my sword!

He tried to get up but everything around him seemed to spin fast. He felt a sudden nausea. Someone was kneeling beside him.

“You are save,” he heard Katsuras voice and again he fell back into darkness.

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Kenshin saw the katana in his hand. Saw the horrified faces of his victims, blood gushing out of their bodies like streams of a red river.

The smell brought him on the verge of madness.

A voice in his head cried: more!

Another voice pleaded: never more!

Again Katsura was in front of him. “I need your sword. Can you kill for me?”

Perplexed Kenshin showed him his sakabatou. “I am a wanderer now, Katsura-san. A Rurouni. You know, I vowed never to kill again.”

Katsura stared at him, speechless. “Sakabatou?”

Kenshin tried to nod, his head felt very heavy. “Thus I am... trying to repent...”. His tongue felt heavy too. Katsura offered him some water and he drank it greedily.

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His vision was slowly becoming clear again.

-I am not in Otsu. And neither in Kyoto. I am in a shack in the middle of nowhere,

hallucinating because of a fever. But someone's definitely here. Is it really...

"Katsura-san?" he asked with a raw voice. No answer.

-Right. Just like I thought, a hallucination.

"Yes, I am here," suddenly someone answered.

Kenshin didn't dare to look up.

-This voice. It's really Katsura! But how... this is impossible... unless...

Slowly Kenshin relaxed.

-I don't hallucinate. I'm dying.

„Katsura-san... quite fitting, isn't it? You brought me to the hell of Kyoto. Now you'll take me to the real one."

"Hell?" The man beside him knelt a bit closer. Kenshin opened his eyes but everything was blurry. Katsura's face seemed to be surprised.

"Where else..." Kenshin muttered. His mouth broke into a wry smile. "I am dying."

He felt Katsura flinch. "Does this make you happy?"

Kenshin barely managed to nod.

"But... haven't you said something about trying to repent a short while ago?"

Katsura's voice followed Kenshin into the darkness.

Repent. How.

-I cannot repair the losses I've caused.

He turned his head, away from Katsura, to face the flames.

-I should burn in hell.

Suddenly the slender figure of Tomoe appeared beside him. And he heard the promise that he'd given her.

-Once the bloodshed's over, I'll find a way to atone for my crimes. I'll find a way to protect the happiness of people without killing.

He heard her soft voice.

-People can change.

The both had changed so much in Otsu. And she'd died to give him a second chance. She'd died so he could fulfil his ideals.

-If I let myself die here, all would have been in vain.

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When Kenshin regained consciousness, his headache was gone. He still felt a little dizzy when he sat himself up, but at least he saw his surroundings clear. Sunlight was shining through the gaps of the shack.

"How are you?" A sudden voice asked and Kenshin turned around.

Behind him near the wall, two sitting men were watching him curiously.

-Dumb or else I would've noticed you sooner, Kenshin thought but instead he answered: "Better, thanks."

The men nodded with contempt. "The medicine worked." Kenshin saw, that one of the men was holding a sword. His sword. Immediately he tensed and narrowed his eyes.

Somehow the man with his sword seemed to notice Kenshin's glare and he got up and handed Kenshin his katana. Eyes softening, Kenshin examined the man. He somehow looked familiar.

„You two... I assume you have helped me?" he asked. Again the men nodded. Kenshin looked towards the other one, who stepped now out of the shadowy corner.

His eyes widened with recognition. It was one of the bandits he encountered a few days ago!

-Knowing that I am Hitokiri Battousai this guys took care of me? And they give me my sword back voluntarily? Puzzled he slowly took his sword out of the still outstretched hand.

After a while the other man, who had – Kenshin now recognized - a strangely resemblance to Katsura Kogoro, spoke again. "You've been very lucky. We were just passing through. Just searching shelter for the night. Though we came through the door – this hut belongs to my friend here."

Apologizing, Kenshin bowed. "I didn't meant to break in."

"Never mind," the bandit spoke. "I've abandoned this shack months ago, when I joined them..." He paused and looked down. "I've burden of debts to the villagers."

"We wanted to take you to the next village," the Katsura-similar man continued. "But you're fever was getting worse and we couldn't move you to Kyo."

Surprised, Kenshin asked: "Kyo?"

"Yes, that's the villages' name. Well, as I said, we couldn't move you. And this morning we thought you were a goner. Actually you really wanted to be one.

But now you're fine again. You've slept deep until afternoon."

The two men prepared for leaving. "We've got to go now," the bandit explained. "We just stayed to be sure everything's alright until you awake.

We still have a long march before us. My old friend here offered me a Job in one of the seaports. I can work there until I can repay my debts to the villagers. Maybe I can even repair my old house..."

The ex-bandit smiled and followed his friend to the door. "You can stay here until you feel well enough to travel again. It's not very comfortable, I know, but better than nothing." He turned.

"Wait," Kenshin called, still sitting on the ground like a statue wrapped with blankets. "Why... why did you help me?"

The two men looked at each other. Finally the former bandit answered. "A few days ago, when we tried to rob you... It was then when it became clear to me that I had to start a new life. In return it was the minimum to make sure you'll get the same chance."

He smiled. „We really need to go now. My name is Mutoshi, and my friends' name is Keigo."

Keigo bowed formally.

"And you are...?" Mutoshi asked.

Kenshin looked even more puzzled, if this was possible. "Who I am?" he repeated barely audible.

"Yes!" Mutoshi now laughed. „It would be rude not to introduce yourself to your saviours, ne?"

Kenshin felt a sudden warmth that had nothing to do with his fever. Slowly, he answered.

"Himura. My name is Himura Kenshin."

One last time the men nodded and then they left.

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A little way away from the shack Mutoshi tugged the sleeve of his friend.

"What?" Keigo turned.

"I never thought, than... he ...would be like ... this."

Keigo raised an eyebrow. "Of course, like me you just knew the stories, Mutoshi."

His friend frowned. "I think that we know more about him like the majority of people."

„This could be true," Keigo agreed. "If you hadn't insisted on helping him, we might be as unknowable like them."

"When I entered the shack and saw him there lying in feverish dreams...judging by his appearance and infamous name, I was almost convinced that it would be no shame to let him die. But hearing him mutter all those things...The sakabatou, his wish for redemption... I suddenly knew that it would have been wrong not to help him."

Keigo walked on. "You know," he said over his shoulder, "that no one, except me of course, would agree with you on that subject. Never tell anyone that you saved the Hitokiri Battousai. Someone might actually kill you for that."

„Himura, not Battousai," Mutoshi corrected. Then he scowled. "Doesn't everyone deserve a second chance?"

Keigo shrugged.

„Don't you think, that's somehow... unfair?" Mutoshi asked with bitterness in his voice. "People are unfair," Keigo philosophised. "They just see what they want to see and..."

„That's not, what I mean," he was cut off by the sulking Mutoshi. "Why did he mistake me for his girlfriend! Couldn't I have been the famous Katsura Kogoro? There's no resemblance between him and you at all!"

Keigo laughed. „Guess you make a better lady-love, my friend."

Mutoshi fumed. "Cut it out! I don't look half as girlish as the redhead in the shack!"

"Don't let him hear that, though it's true!"

Chuckling both, they walked on.

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Fortunately Kenshin hadn't overheard their conversation. He was still sitting in the shack, staring at the expired flames. For over a year he's been a rurouni and he had still a long path to go. And though the fire was out and the men gone he could still feel a pleasant warmth within. Slowly he stood up, placed his sakabatou to his side and left the shack the same way he'd entered.

Once outside a breathtaking sunset welcomed him.

The lone wanderer simply stood and contemplated the play of colours. A soft smile played around the corners of his mouth.

-Maybe the last few days weren't this bad, after all.

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Done! This is the second story I tried to write in a language that is not my own. Please tell me if it was worth the effort of translating (it took me hours) and if it's worth writing on.

I liked the Idea of somehow connected oneshots. Every storie is inspired by my personal feelings about a month. For a start I picked out the month number VIII, August. The season is summer. I connect that with: being outside, heat, heavy summer-storms and fever. A cold in the middle of summer is much more severe and dangerous than normal. And I forgot: Hallucination (ever lay too long in the sun?). Of course this is simplified :D There's much more between the words, a general "mood", and I lied, writing that I won't show any character-development... maybe you noticed, that the kenshin I begin with is very cynical and still very much caught in the past... There will be little changes in every chapter. Beware! I'm not posting them in cronological order! Also, the months are not situated in one particual year. (In this story you can guess it though ;))

I feel a little intimidated by all those outstanding wandering-years-stories. I can't recommend all stories here that influenced me (I have faved most of them though) but for this story my main-inspiration-sources was "Fear no Evil" by sueb262 (I love the whole concept as well as her writing-style).

Thanks a lot for reading and reviewing!

## Kapitel 2: Snow in April or: a child's name

### Passing through

#### IV. Snow in April or...

Many travellers were on the road, crunching gravel beneath their feet, comparable to the whispering sounds of waves caressing the shore – but not half as monotone and calming.

Striking and wide steps of impressive men mixed with those pattered in womanly grace and the agile trampling of short children-legs. The kids mostly rushed ahead, playing and laughing, just to get shortly afterwards amassed by their protective mothers out of fear of losing them somewhere along the busy road.

Most people were in a high spirits. In time of the joyfully expected Hanami, many families were on their way to visit their relatives in the country. The adults gossiped merrily, joking and enjoying the awakening nature around them.

But from time to time people passed, who were not that cheerful. The families their kept distance from those vagabonds. Some of them radiated a kind of furious energy, a warning not the get between them and their destination. Others were walking very slowly, having no destination at all, tumbling, like they carried a heavy burden on their shoulders.

-Quite likely I'm more compatible with the last-mentioned, thought the red-haired wanderer, who sat at the roadside, watching the passers-by. With a little sigh he got up, brushed the dust from his hakama and left the concealing shadows of the trees. Back on the road he tried to blend in with the other travellers – which, of course, went wrong most of the time because his hair, shimmering bright in the sun, attracted attention like a red flashing warning light. From time to time first curious eyes narrowed when he passed, resting a few seconds with piercing or fearful glances on his sword and scarred face.

Himura Kenshin didn't look up to return those familiar glances – he looked down to the gravel at his feet, pretending to find an eager interest in the different shapes of the little stones dodging around his tabi, his face hidden behind bangs of dusty hair.

-Kyoto comes closer and closer – I could've guessed that the road might be that busy. I could've walked through the forest, away from the main street.

With every suspicious glare and every word whispered a nuance too loud at his back, the overwhelming desire to vanish between the trees grew stronger. He was used to existing like a shadow in the company of his fellow Ishin Shishi until two years ago, barely noticed by others and if ever, then ignored out of fear and aversion. He was used to the curious looks at his hair since the day of his birth, but those glares, piercing his heart like little knives, particularly when he was recognized – he would



never get used to them. They were a constant reminder that, though he abandoned his lethal swords, the haunting memories would not abandon him, let alone stop haunting him at night.

-And again... do people really believe I'm unaware of their bold stares?

Kenshin peered from under his red curtain to the left, looking for the impertinent person staring at him non-stop for almost five minutes now, determined to return the stare with as much unkindness as possible for a change. But to his surprise the source of his annoyance was just a little boy, walking near his left side a few steps behind, mouth open and eyes glued on his sword. Noticing Kenshin's glare he flinched and hastily looked away, his face getting a pink shade.

-Oh, have I scared him?

Wistful, Kenshin nipped a reassuring smile for the kid in the bud immediately.

-The last kid, who offered me friendship got a slap in the face from his parents afterwards...

But the black-haired boy was undeterred by his straight face. A minute later he tried cautiously to make eye-contact again. The kid was walking alone – his parents were already about fifty meters ahead and caught in a lively discussion with some merchants. Curiosity finally triumphed over shyness and the little boy directed his steps steadily nearer and nearer towards Kenshin. The swordsman examined him from above and this time the kid didn't look away – he admiringly gazed at Kenshin through black wisps of hair. Now Kenshin couldn't back a little smile creeping into his face. Instantly the kid, obviously waiting for this sign of reassurance, hopped alongside Kenshin, like he'd be travelling with him for weeks and not just for minutes.

"You have a sword!" the little boy stated. He could not be older than eight years.

Kenshin nodded, walking on.

"And red hair!"

Inwardly rolling with his eyes, Kenshin nodded again.

"Are you on the run?"

Surprised, Kenshin asked, „What makes you think that sessha is?"

The boy shrugged. "Well, you have a sword, so you are a fighter. And you have scars in your face, that means, you've actually fought. And you look like you've slept in coppice for months..."

Kenshin looked down at his rugged clothes, and smirked. "You are a good observer, that you are..."

Proud, the boy announced, "My name is Shinta!"

### **...a child's name**

At the sound of this unexceptional name the smile in Kenshin's face froze and he imperceptibly winced. He forced a repelling "Shinta-san, it was nice to meet you" quickly out of his mouth, then looked pointedly to the gravel again, hoping, his dismissive behaviour might scare off the little boy from further attempts to make friends with him. Also, the pronunciation of the so well-known name had released a sudden anxiety in his chest.

-Shinta ...a long time since I've dared to think about the times this name is connected with. The little boy here is around the same age I was when...I received a name more suited for a swordsman.

Kenshin's face darkened while detaching his glances back from the gravel to examine the family of the boy further ahead. The parents, both laden with baggage, were still chattering with some merchants. Next to the mother walked an older girl, holding hands with her sister, a little child, about four years maybe.

-When I was Shinta, I also had a family similar to this... When was the last time I've allowed myself to think of them?

Blurry pictures, long locked up inside, returned grudgingly and started to float into Kenshin's consciousness – when suddenly a little elbow prodded into his left side. Kenshin flinched a little at this unexpected contact. Walking in the broad daylight on a busy mainroad, not that far away from Kyoto made him jumpy. He almost expected some revenge-seekers to ambush him – it would not be the first time since his two years of wandering. Especially in the south, where most people knew of him. Feeling ignored, the spiky elbow stabbed into his ribs again, with more force this time.

"You're dreaming?" Kenshin looked down into a pair of curious, black eyes with not the slightest sign of shyness anymore. "And? Are you on the run or what? Are you a bandit?"

-This boy does not mince matters. A curious, brave nature...

Kenshin shook his head no. "Sessha's just a wanderer, a Rurouni." He intentionally avoided addressing the boy with his name again. In fact he preferred to pretend that he hadn't heard or spoken the name at all.

"Why are you a Rurouni? How long are you wandering? And where to, Rurouni-san?"

"Hm," was Kenshin's muffled answer, overwhelmed by all those questions.

"Have you fought in the revolution before? Is that why you are a rurouni now?"

Surprised, Kenshin lifted an eyebrow.

-Sharp-witted this boy, that he is... I'm sure he bombards everyone with his questions.

"And you were on the side of the defeated." Not a question this time. A statement.

Reluctantly and feeling unused on his lips, an "oro?" slipped out of Kenshin's mouth. "What makes you so sure about that?"

The boy casually shrugged again. "It's your gloomy face... you don't look happy. And winners usually do look happy, don't they? Besides, my father looked the same, back then when he returned from Kyoto. It's just a month since he started to smile again. He was on the loser-side, like you. He was a samurai, you know!" Kenshin heard the proud tone in the kid's voice. His mind was already somewhere else though.

-A samurai, from Kyoto of all things. And on the Bakufu's side, too. Great. Why haven't I noticed his presence before?

Kenshin's eyes narrowed as he took a closer look on the guy a good distance in front of him. Hidden under the mass of luggage, the trained body of a former swordsman was plain to see at second glance, even from this range. But his Ki? It was harmless, no trace of a warrior spirit – no trace of a desire to fight at all. And he didn't wear his daisho either.

-Maybe he's abandoned the sword, now living a peaceful life. However, I was lucky to make my own Ki just as inoffensive as the Ki of a rabbit. Or else I'm sure he would've sensed me already. And if he recognized me – I doubt that he'd still be that peaceful, especially if he sees his son near my sword...

"May I take a look at your Katana?" Startled, Kenshin looked down to his new appendage again. This question was really unexpected out of the mouth of an eight-year-old. "I've never touched a real katana. My father has sealed his sword away since he returned, with a peace-knot. I'm not allowed to touch it. So may I look at your sword instead? I want to learn Kenjutsu, so I need to know how to hold a real sword, though my father says I'm still too young and... May I?"

Being dumfounded, Kenshin stared in eyes glittering with excitement. "A-ano... I don't know, I think your parents won't agree... You should ask them for –"

"I'll do that!" the boy enthusiastically screamed and stormed ahead.

"- a visit in a dojo..." Kenshin sheepishly finished his sentence, horrified watching the boy, who ran towards his parents, shouting "Okaa-chan! Otou-chan!" Seconds later the addressed turned.

"What is it, Shinta-chan?" the mother demanded short-tempered. "Otou-san and I are in the middle of a conversation with those merchants!"

„May I look at the katana of the Rurouni-san?" Shinta asked breathlessly and pointed

with his arm down the road behind him. The family stopped.

"Sword?" With a serious expression, the eyes of his father followed his son's outstretched arm. "Rurouni? Where? The next travellers are almost a mile behind us."

"Are you blind?" Shinta laughed and turned. His arm pointed at an empty space, filled with the slender body of the rurouni only seconds ago.

"Obviously you are the blind one, Ototo-chan," Shinta's big sister smirked and the little girl at her hand giggled in assistance.

But Shinta's father was still unsmiling, when he bent the knee to look his son straight into the eye. "A lonely Rurouni with a sword, and you spoke to him?" he asked and Shinta nodded. "He was really there! I asked him about his katana..."

"Shinta!" The father looked angry now. "You can't ask strangers to show their weapons to you!" With an angry snort the mother agreed from behind him.

"But he looked like a samurai!"

"That's not the point. Many former samurais are wandering now but not all of them have good intentions! Many have still a grudge against the new government. They would not hesitate to hurt a child that bothers them with bold questions!"

Shinta's eyes grew even bigger. The father sighed. "I know you admire the samurai. You are one, after all. If you want to hold a real sword so badly, if you can't wait any longer, if you have to ask strangers on the street – then I guess I have no choice to allow you to visit a dojo, when we're back in Kyoto."

"Really?" Shinta gasped. His father nodded and patted his shoulder while rising to his feet.

"But only this one time! Swords will be inappropriate in this new era. You know, Shinta, even back in the old times samurai-kids like you trained not with the katana but with shinai until their genpukku."

"And what's with the stranger now?" Shinta's mother interrupted. "Have you made him up, trying to convince your father to let you train kenjutsu?"

"No!" Shinta shouted. "He was really there! He was nice! He called me a good observer!"

"So?" A soft smile crept into the fathers' face.

"Yes! Because I've said he looked like he had slept in the coppice for months!"

"What?!" The parents exchanged amused looks about their pert son. „And he praised you for that?" the father softly laughed. "Must have been a funny person, this Rurouni..."

"Yes," giggled Shinta. "He was funny. He had red hair, you know! And a scar on the cheek, like a X. I'm sure he was a fighter in the...ouch!"

Shinta looked into the suddenly ashen face of his father, who grabbed his shoulder like a vice.

"What..." The mother stammered from behind. The kids felt the sudden change in their parents and it unsettled them. Shinta's little sister burst into tears.

"What's wrong? I.. I'm sorry!" Shinta was scared by his parent's strange behaviour. "I'll never talk to a stranger again, I'll promise. Please, don't be mad at me!" He began to sob. His father completely ignored him. Instead, the warily looked up and down the street.

"Anata, let's go, let's catch up with the merchants," his wife pressed. "Let's hurry to the next village."

"Do you think, that's an obstacle for him?" her husband hissed, voice harsh with unfamiliar hatred. "Do you think he can't appear and vanish like a ghost out of nothing, just because he's not in Kyoto but in a small village?!"

"Please," his wife pleaded, "don't scare the children. Let's hurry." With a firm grip on Shinta's and his older sisters' hands she began to walk ahead. Gloomy, her husband followed, constantly glancing backwards and into the forest next to the road. His right hand instinctively remained near where the hilts of his two swords would have been.

"Does Otou-chan know this Rurouni I met?" Shinta fearfully whispered to his mother.

The woman strengthened her grip. "Yes, Shinta-chan, he knows him. Or, at least, about him."

"Have they met?"

The mother winced. "Not personally, thanks to the kami."

"Where?"

"Back then in Kyoto. In the Revolution. But stop asking, you don't need to know more, it's unimportant. Forget about it!" Her voice softened a bit. "Don't worry, Shinta-chan. It has nothing to do with you. It's just... Otou-chan tried so hard to left those times behind and now he is angry, that this rurouni reminded him... It's not your fault. Just never talk about him again, will you?!"

After a short pause, Shinta did, though. "Is he... dangerous?"

Receiving no answer, he looked up into the normally soft face of his mother. Her eyes looked straight forward and her lips weren't but a thin line.

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Noiselessly Kenshin stepped out of the brushwood into a little clearing.

-Just in time...

The redhead leaned against a tree and paused for a breath.

-Imagine, Himura, what would've happened if this shogunat-loyal ex-samurai had seen you... He'd recognized you in a second. And then...

Kenshin knew, what then. Two choices. A stupid fight or a panicked escape. And no chance to show up in the next two or three villages. Angry, Kenshin plucked a little twig from the tree behind him.

-From the start I should've wandered off the road, especially in the Kinki-region. I'm still too far south to show myself so openly on main roads...In this area, many people have already heard the tales about the Battousai from Choshuu spreading out from the old capital city, including a mostly exaggerated but never the less rather fitting description of my appreance.

Kenshin snorted in disgust. He just remembered, what the little, witty boy has said to him.

-And you were on the side of the defeated.

With his bloody sword he'd destroyed the unjust bakufu. His name was spoken with both, fear and reverential admiration. Hitokiri Battousai helped to win the war and some said, that without him the revolution would've failed. He was not just (in)famous – after his disappearance he had become a man of legend.

-And the appearance of this legendary assassin looks defeated in the truth-seeing eyes of a child, that it does. Defeated by the era of peace he had so longed for.

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Since those two years of wandering through all of Japan, Kenshin had overheard enough conversations about the frightful Choshuu-assassin. His mysterious vanishing into thin air after the battle of Toba Fushimi was just oil into the fire of the already brightly burning rumours. Most people believed he was finally killed in on the battlefield. Preferably a slow and horrible death. At least they hoped. "It would be the most agreeable imagination," he had overheard a conversation some time ago. "A hitokiri like him...the hitokiri... still alive in this time of peace? Impossible." And another one had answered, "You're right. Someone of this calibre... I mean, he lived for killing. He would only cause trouble in times of peace. Maybe he was killed of by his own people. Or did the job himself."

-Not that I haven't thought about executing this "job"...

Kenshin looked down at his hands. One was still holding the little twig. Little, innocent

leaves already tried to make their way out of the bugs.

-People are right. I hadn't thought about how to live once the new era has come. I never imagined myself alive at the end of the bakumatsu... well, I kept the promise I made to Tomoe. I'm still living.

Sighing, Kenshin contemplated the now rather cloudy sky through the still bare branches. Around him the birds were chirping their lungs out to attract an agreeable lover. It became spring. Animals and nature were in a euphoric mood. But Kenshin did not care about those signs of reawakening. He still felt frozen inside, a winter within not yet touched by the reviving radiance of sunlight.

-It's so hard, Tomoe... I try to live for you. But with every day passing by, it becomes more and more clear to me, that I will never fit this new Meiji-time. I pretend to blend in but the truth is, that I am still a dangerous man, forged by war. I know no other way than the sword – I still carry one, you see and even if the blade is backwards, it's still a tool of war. Like Shaku-dono said to me, when I left Kyoto two years ago: I'm a swordsman. I should live and die by the sword.

Quickly, Kenshin suppressed the bitter feelings of loneliness now afflicting his mind. Self-pity was humiliating and wouldn't change anything. But still... he was overwhelmed by the thoughts about what could have been.

-You could have showed me how to live... Like you did in Otsu. But back then, it was just the start. Just a bud, barely open. We were just at the beginning when everything ended. Not even a spring was granted us together. Everything stopped in the winter. Snow falling, like you. If my hands...hadn't killed you...

Kenshin dropped down, back against the tree, dark and abysmal feelings bearing down on him like drowning waves. He allowed them to wash him away, to wash him out – until he was empty and calm, like the sea after a storm. He dwelled in the emptiness of himself until time caught up with him, the sinking sun bringing him back to the world of living. Finally he found the strength to get up and walk on. Only now he realised that it had become awfully cold and his body was half frozen. He hurried to leave the forest, the little twig, still in his hands, unconsciously stowed in the sleeve of his gi. Shortly after he'd climbed through the nasty underwoods little white flakes of snow got caught by his hair.

-Snow? I believed it was already spring. But I'm heading north and the April-weather is incalculable anyway. I guess I have to search for a roof over my head for the night.

Shivering, Kenshin hurried in the direction of the nearest village. He still had some money left from his winter-work in the south, so he decided to stay in a Ryokan. But when he entered the village shortly before dawn, every Inn was occupied because weather forced all travellers to stay indoors for the night. One Innkeeper offered him a sleeping-place in a large common-room, together with other travellers, but Kenshin declined with a rueful smile. He would not sleep a second in a room full of men who were travelling to or coming from Kyoto. And even if nobody would recognize him and he would fall asleep – what would be both very unlikely – he still could have one

of those common nightmares and scare everyone with his screams. Rather than that he'd prefer to sleep on spiky roots with snow as a blanket.

His last hope was therefore a little house, gone to rack, near the border of the village. Not until five minutes of knocking and calling have passed, finally an old, tattered hag opened the wooden door, examining him through narrowed eyes and after an eternity of consideration, finally let him in. She gave him the last free room in her ramshackle Ryokan, asking him to pay in advance. After Kenshin entered his place for the night, he knew why: the small chamber looked like it had never seen any cleaning and, as a bonus, smelled like rotten fish. Nevertheless he thanked the old woman, who pointed out, that he was lucky to get such a comfortable accommodation despite his shabby looks (Kenshin's eyebrow twitched) and continued that he couldn't expect to have breakfast in the morning (Kenshin's empty stomach growled in protest) because the Inn was hopelessly understaffed.

Ignoring his stomach and the fishy smell Kenshin began to prepare for the night. Outside everything was already getting snowed in, so he was really glad to have a roof over the head after all. With a barely noticeable smile he began to defrost his toes, holding them near the embers of a little coal-basin.

Suddenly his eyes snapped open.

-Nani? I dozed off...

He rubbed the sleep out of his eyes. Broad laughter, coming through the thin walls, had awakened him. Obviously the customers in the next room were having a little party. From time to time the men started to sing and the smell of sake made its way through the rice paper-walls. Kenshin deeply inhaled the sweet alcoholic scent, thankful, that it drowned out the morbid reek of fish, already settled in his clothes.

For he could neither sleep nor avoid overhearing the shrill conversation, Kenshin knew after several minutes of listening, that the men next door were merchants, coming from Kyoto and heading to Okayama. Kenshin's way was the opposite direction. He had spent most of the winter working in a small town in Shikoku and now he wanted to travel into the north of Honshu. Unfortunately, he had to pass Kyoto and some of the big streets leading to it in doing so.

Thinking of Kyoto and the merchants, Kenshin's mind drifted back to the afternoon, where he had made the acquaintance of the little, witty boy called Shinta. Now, sitting alone in a dark room, the feelings and memories this name conjured, returned.

-Shinta...

The name itself was not unusual, actually quite common throughout all of Japan, but it wasn't the name that unsettled Kenshin. It was the child – for a short moment it had been like a mirror and Kenshin had seen himself in that little boy: openhearted, shy and bold at the same time, and, the most important – innocent, like only children can be. Kenshin could still remember that he, even a long time ago and long forgotten, had been the same.



"Shinta..."

Barely audible, Kenshin whispered the name into the sombre room, but instead of his own voice he heard the faraway voice of his mother. That was one of the last few, untouched memories from the happy time of his childhood: The bright and soft voice of his mother, carried to him by winds over the field, softly calling his name.

-Why does it make me so sad, to hear her calling that name? Is it her voice or the name itself? It's just a child's name anyway. A name doesn't define a person... or does it?

Nothing had been ever a better allegory of his innocence than the unstained name his mother had given to him. Hearing her pronouncing it in his childhood felt like little sunrays on his heart.

-It's sad...I can remember so little. Even the faces of my own family are just blurry pictures.

No wonder. After his childhood was shattered in a storm containing famine and cholera-pandemic, he was forced to seal all his happy memories deep inside his heart, out of reach from the harsh hands of the slave-traders, away from their blows and humiliations.

-In this dark time I lost my name... War did not need a name. I was a nobody. An unimportant and weak child. A boy who couldn't even protect the lives of three girls who had cared for him like they were his sisters. Who had died for him...But in this fateful night everything changed.

He saw himself standing there like it was yesterday, surrounded by wooden crosses, gleaming red in the dying sunlight. Next to him the large figure of an impressive and frightening man.

"What's your name?"

"Shinta."

"A child's name. Too soft for a swordsman. From this day forth you will be called Kenshin."

"Ken...shin."

-Shishou gave me a new name... and a new life.

Shinta was not forgotten. Shinta was the force that drove him forward, made him stronger – because it was the child, who reminded the loss of the girls, who'd died trying to protect him, and the weight of their bodies in his arms.

Kenshin grew stronger and learned the way of the sword. It even became part of his own body. But still it had been the voice of Shinta, who spoke out of him during his

last dispute with his shishou, forcing him to leave the mountains to follow his own ideals – protecting people.

Both, Kenshin and Shinta, crumbled down in the bloodshed of the Bakumatsu. The innocence and idealism of Shinta was used to turn Kenshin into a manageable weapon of dead.

-And the result culminated in my third and most hated name. A name that will hunt me forever...

Battousai.

This was the opposite of Shinta, his inversion: The personification of his ruined innocence and his abused idealism. This was the dark half of Kenshin, only the first kanji of his name – a blank blade: merciless, destroying, mechanical – without its second kanji, the heart.

Since he had abandoned his killing swords two years ago, he had locked away that half of him, that was capable of manslaughter without even blinking, thus giving unstained feelings and memories the possibility to return. His heart - forsaken and almost lost, repaired and softened by the scent of white plums, then broken again - was still beating and it healed. Even though very, very slowly. With every month of wandering more happy memories, thought forgotten, returned. Above all Kenshin finally began to understand all those teachings, which had been so cryptic to him when his Shishou had tried to thumb them into his brain all those years ago.

-Maybe I can take up to the Kenshin I was back then. Like Hiko taught me, being a free sword, protecting the weak and innocent from the hardship of the times, but without killing. My intentions never had changed. But I follow them now as a nameless person, a Rurouni on his journey.

Even though a part of Shinta had survived the bloodshed of the bakumatsu deep within him, he could never be like the child he was again – innocent. He couldn't wash the guilt from his hands. And never he would forgive himself for sacrificing the pure soul of this little boy.

-Once tainted, innocence is forever lost. My mother will never again call me by my child's name and if, I would not be able to answer. My Shishou will never take me back as an apprentice, and if, I would not be the deshi he used to know. My sword will never reduce human life into garbage of bloody flesh. No if.

I can't bear a child's name and I can't bear a murderer's name either. I still feel too stained to wear the warrior's name but... Maybe some day I can be the Kenshin my master had wanted me to be.

Kenshin's finger reached out to touch the cool bark of the twig still in his sleeves. He put it out. The green of the maiden leaves smiled reassuringly to him, even through the darkness of night.

"My name is Shinta!"

-It's a good name. Not only a child's name but a name full of hope and dreams. A future. If I could only protect the pureness of one shinta out there I would willingly sacrifice the shinta in me again.

"Are you on the run?"

-I was, but just running from myself. I wanted to leave behind all those bitter names and their embodiments. But I began to understand, that I cannot deny all of my past.

"Sessha's just a wanderer, a Rurouni."

-The wanderer contains everything I was in the past. Shinta, Kenshin, Battousai... but all those names do not show me, who I am or who I was. They show my ideal, how I can be and how I never want to be again. They are parts that define my still incomplete self. I'll be the rurouni until I know, who I really am.

"How long are you wandering? And where to, Rurouni-san?"

-Wherever I can be of help and as long as my feet can go on forward. For little Shintas like you, with open eyes and a sunny heart. To enable you to bombard strangers with curious questions. For a childhood without fear and hardship.

The laughter in the next room slowly turned into likewise loud snores. Kenshin, too, felt the tiredness of the long day. His eyelids went heavy and finally closed but his dreams this night were not made out of blood but out of falling snow, little by little changing into falling sakura blossoms. And somewhere in the distance of his memories or his future he saw the blurry figure of a woman, awaiting him with outstretched arms and the whispers of a soft voice was carried to him together with white petals.

"Welcome home, Shinta."

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Thanks for leaving a comment ^\_^