

MEET THE BETRAYERS



The Sound of Crickets

Alexander O. Smith

Cold, the wind-worn leaves
Fall dead; and from autumn fields
The sound of crickets

--From *Leaves of Kamigawa*,
the collected haiku of Snow-fur

He looks down a low wall of gray stone, topped by red tiles washed to a dull brown by the moonlight. Here and there, kudzu creepers from the surrounding forest have caught on the wall, working their way slowly up its face, finding small natural pockmarks in the lava-rock and cracks where the wind and rain have done their work, then winding between and over the feeble defense of the tiles, falling down into the well-kept orchard beyond. He places a *tabi* boot of soft black felt, cleft between the first and second toes, on a vine finding purchase. When he vaults over, he is as quiet as an owl leaving its tree-bower to hunt. A cricket chirps and from a dozen other places down the wall his *deshi* rise and follow, spilling over the wall to pool under the boughs of the plum trees. They are his disciples, he has trained every one of them from a young age and now they move as extensions of his own will. They are moon-shadows, the thin blue of watered milk and no more solid; their movement through the air is the swaying of rushes; their soft footfalls the scampering of mice in the fields.

The villa proper is clearly visible through gnarled, leafless trees. Here is the summer residence of an affluent samurai merchant who once profited from his trading house's location on the road that stretched between the high walls of Eiganjo Castle and the libraries of Minamo. Since the war began, he had been forced to abandon his wares and live here full time, with a small retinue of guards and his sole heir, a young noble by the name of Kio. All this Higure has read in a scroll that he destroyed in last night's campfire. He burned the words, turning their meaning to ash, and tonight, they will kill every man here and finish what he started. In three days time, a harried official will arrive escorted by mothriders from Eiganjo, begging for the noble to release his stores of rice to feed the war effort, and he will find an intricately wrought puzzle of death. With shaking hands on abacus he will subtract the calm expressions of the corpses from the obvious traces of violence and the residue of his calculations will reveal nothing but blue-gray shadows and the glint of steel in the moonlight. Higure checks the ink-dyed cloth covering his short blade, and slips forward, toward the inner wall. A gentle night wind blows up from the road that approaches the villa's front gate, stirring the torch fires on the inner wall and shifting the dim light that trickles through the boughs of the empty orchard.

* * *

The wind was always tricky in the valley where he was born, under the shadow of the lofty Sokenzan mountains. Even on a warm summer day, the clouds could shift high in the peaks, sending a stiff breeze down the Johyo glacier to snap the hanging festival flags to attention and set the gilt-green leaves of the ginkgo trees to shivering in an early anticipation of autumn. Down between the rice-cake stalls and the soot-darkened eaves of the merchant quarter, the boy would crouch and wait for the wind to pass, one hand kept on the yellow shawl that covered the basket of apples he carried for his mother. In the market, the gourd hawker would stop his song and scowl at the whirling street-dust. Standing in a doorway nearby, the tea-seller would pause before pouring another bowl and smile. Cold weather is good for business, and war had made his money-pouch lean of late. Two months later, on a windy autumn evening, the tea-seller would be killed by a bolt of green lightning falling from a clear sky.

It was windy the night that the *kami* came to the boy's village and slaughtered his family and everyone else he had ever known. From under the loose floorboards, he could hear the wind buffeting the broken *shoji* screens that ran between the veranda and the gathering room. In there the thing that ate the light had knocked down the flimsy screens and devoured his sister while his father cursed it and waved a smoldering poker from the firepit where they had just cooked dinner an hour before. The boy saw it-- a roiling mass of black tentacles with one protruding arm, furred, like that of a monkey, and incongruously small. It wielded a long, ebon thorn that it waved, knocking aside the poker, then jabbed deep into his father's shoulder. The thorn must have been very hot, for there was a sizzling sound when it struck and his father's blood steamed out of the wound in a cloud of saffron smoke. The boy had tried to reach for the dropped poker, where it lay singeing the *tatami* mats--but his father had shouted for him to run, to hide, and that is what he did.

* * *

The inner wall is smooth, kept free of vines over the summer by an overzealous gardener. It stands higher than Higure can easily reach. He places his straight *ninja-to* sword against the base of the wall, blade down, and steps on it like a ladder, catching the top of the wall with one gloved hand. He snares the sword between his feet and relays it to the other hand before pulling himself up and over the wall to crouch on the raised walkway that runs along the other side.



Ten paces down the walk, a sentry in an angled helmet of green bamboo slumps at an odd angle against the outer wall, the tall pennant that he had held now holds him. His eyes are open, looking uselessly out into the night. Blood drips slowly from the long, black-lacquered shaft of an arrow that has gone through his neck, right at the place where the thin tendons of speech lie, his dying breath robbed of sound. Higure's thumb traces the worn leather of the sword handle, polished to a dark blue by use. It is strange not to have to use it now, to cut his way into this ill-guarded place. He knows he is only a sight-seer here, a grim observer of his *deshi's* death-work. This is way it should be. They will handle these distractions. His business is further inside, in the main hall, on the second floor, in the lotus chamber.

* * *

The boy was good at hiding. Always, he was the last to be found when the children played the *oni* in the festival of masks. On days with no errands, he would walk up to the cold river that ran down from the mountains, and creep up unseen behind the men where they fished and steal their bait, leaving a wet leaf in place of the fat worms, so that they would think the *kappa* spirits that live in the water had enchanted their eyes and robbed them. It was a game he never tired of, yet now he almost felt that he should not be crouched here under his house with the *kami* taking a final grim offering from his family above. He shouldn't hide, not from the *kami* who make the rains fall, and the rice grow in the fields.

He remembered how, when he was very young, the people from his village would walk down the path from the fields, into the cedar forest where a little shrine sat hunched beneath the oldest and most sacred of the trees. There, they would leave a rice-cake for the *kitsune* who tended the shrine and a small copper coin with a hole cut in the middle for the *kami*. It was important that the coin be round, so that the *kami* might receive the offering and in return, give wealth in the form of a good harvest. Always in a circle, coming and going. He thought back along the treacherous paths of memory then, wondering if there was a coin he had not given, or a time when he neglected to set out enough rice-cakes. Somehow he knew it was his fault that the *kami* had come. He should go out and meet them. He should offer himself to the terrible gods and they will spare the rest. But he knew it was already too late for that and so, miserable, he crouched and waited.

When the first light of dawn crept through the foundation stones, letting him know that the night of terror was over, he slipped out from his hiding place under the house and did not stop running until he was on the outskirts of town. As he ran, he saw bodies. There were more people lying dead than he had ever known by name. Worse, he found, than the dead were the poor wretches the *kami* left alive. He saw them huddled, whimpering, their clothes shredded, their eyes blank, nightmares clawed into their waking minds. Of the *kami* he saw nothing, save for one time when he came across something like a dog, feeding on corpses that had gathered in small ditch on the edge of town where water ran only during the wet season. Instead of hair, the dog-thing bristled with human skulls. He gasped, and one of the skulls turned, and fixed him with a sightless glare. Then the skull's mouth opened and it spoke in his mother's voice, saying "come, my little sparrow"--for she had always called him this--"I have saved you breakfast. Come, eat." The boy knew then it was time for him to leave. It was many years later, after he had become a man, and well after he had joined the students at the Temple of the Black Scroll, that he first slept through a night without waking in a cold sweat, his heart racing, the dry taste of death in his mouth.

* * *

Higure moves under the twisted branches of the shaped pines in the inner courtyard. For a moment he pauses, considering the tight-wound copper wires and cleverly placed bars of metal that bind the aged tree limbs, torturing them into shapes that at once seemed utterly natural and yet more perfect than anything found in nature. The *ninja*, he thinks, is not all that different from the *bonsai* artist. Both wield sharp blades, shaping life as they see fit. The tree limbs are the *bonsai* artist's disciples. To some he gives support and training, that they might achieve their purest possible form. Others he prunes, ending life where it does not conform to the client's wishes. But to work one tree over so many years--Higure lacks the patience for this, and already he has lingered here too long. A night thrush calls from between the buildings of the villa proper up ahead and he moves swiftly, crossing an ornamental pond on a bridge of stones. The bridge, too, shows the exquisite skill of the gardener. Each of its stones has a different texture beneath his feet, yet they are cut so they link intimately to one another like the verses in a court poem: each unique with its own character, yet its shape subtly suggesting and leading to the next verse.

Over another bridge, he runs faster now, ducking through an open gateway with an intricately carved wooden archpiece. He knows the design, sensing its meaning without actually seeing it. It is a landscape: long grain rice growing under a chrysanthemum sun, the symbol of the merchant house of Nitta--longtime allies of the Konda clan, and now their main supporter in the war against the *kami*. Odd that one of them should be marked for death--but his training kills the question in his mind before it forms. Words on a scroll float in his memory. There is no motive, no client, no self. There is only what must be done.

* * *

"This," Master Kagero said, stroking a long grey whisker as he stepped away to give his students a view of a single black *kanji* character drawn on the scroll, "is *nin*. It is *shinobi*, the one who walks at night. It is *ninja*, the one who endures." He pointed to the top of the *kanji*. "See here the blade that strikes downward...to here." His hand traced down the stylized drawing of a blade complete with fleck of blood that formed the top half of the *kanji* to the strangely curved line and three dots at the bottom that symbolized a heart.



The boy sat with three others in the tea-hall they used as a lecture room for calligraphy lessons. The other boys were older than him, and, for the most part, they preferred the other sort of lesson--where they would run through the high reeds of the plains like gazelles, dance over lily pads like the water-strider, and throw *shuriken* at dragonflies to practice their aim. Master Kagero stood, brush dripping with black *sumi* ink in his gnarled hand, and stared at them. Outside, a lazy cicada droned loudly in the summer haze. *Sh-sh-sh-shhhh...* The master paused, then smiled. "Next lesson!"

"What does it mean, master?" The words were out before the boy could stop himself. "Why does the blade cut the heart? Who must endure, and what? Is it our enemies who must endure the pain of death by sword, or is it us who must endure the harshness of our training..." He faltered. Master Kagero threw his brush toward the side of the room where it stuck, buried halfway into the wattled straw and clay of the wall, and walked out. The three others looked at the boy, stunned that he had actually *asked a question*, but before any could speak, the master returned, brandishing a long stick. It was the pole the younger disciples used to knock away the dung piles left in the road outside the temple by the swale-oxen that came bringing food from the village. He jammed the grimy end of the stick into the boy's ribs. The boy grunted, stifling a cry of pain. "What is this?" cried Master Kagero.

"A dung-stick, master?" the boy gasped.

"Tell me then, what does this dung-stick mean?"

All was still. The cicada called again from its leafy perch. *SH-sh-sh-shhhh...* The sound trailed off and the master stood glaring, as though he were waiting for the little insect to finish. Then he grunted, and tossed the dung-stick out the window. "Dismissed." He walked toward the open doorway, then stopped and turned to look back at where his students sat quivering. "The meaning," said their master, a deep sadness in his voice, "is yours alone to find."

It was three years later that the boy, now a young man, learned the first part of what Master Kagero hinted at that summer day. He was walking down a mossy path in the forested hill-lands north of the road to Eiganjo in the guise of a traveling paper-seller. He wore a small green cloth upon his head, and carried a heavy satchel of oiled rice paper, cutting tools, and mesh for making more paper should he actually sell his stock. The purpose of his guise was twofold. One, he was to gather information on how the merchant houses were supporting or failing to support Konda's war against the *kami*, and perhaps more importantly, he was to practice *being* a paper-seller. "A fool can walk down the road wearing the raiment of an emperor, yet the blind mendicant will still know him for the fool," Master Kagero had said. "When you can stand before me, *ninja-to* sword in hand, clothed in your *gi*, and still walk as though you carry these rolls of paper on your back, then you may return." And so he was to sell paper, and then, perhaps, he would be a blacksmith, or a samurai, or a weaving woman, as met his master's fancy.

He continued down the path, his feet sinking in mud and leaves sodden with water from a nearby stream that must have overflowed in the recent rains. He could hear the cheery burble of the stream waft up through the trees and it took his mind off the heavy and ill-weighted pack that dug into his back. The path passed between two tall, moss-grown boulders and down to a small wooden bridge that crossed the stream. He stepped out onto its wet planks and was halfway across it when he noticed her.

A woman bathed below the bridge, where the stream widened into a still pool before exiting to rush down a rocky gorge beyond. She had not seen him. Half fearing she was some kind of river *kami* come to lure him to his death, the young man quickly hopped back to the bank and behind the shadow of one of the large boulders.

From his new vantage point he could see her profile, and his heart leapt in his chest. He had never seen someone as beautiful. Her limbs were pale and slender. She had the high, painted eyebrows of the nobility, and lips stained with indigo dye. Her eyes were clearer than the blue glacier ice of the Sokenzan mountains, her cheeks the color of plum blossoms, blushing in the first sun of spring. If indeed she was no *kami* then, he thought, she must be a well-born daughter of some merchant who lived in a longhouse along the main road in town, and came up here to bathe. Then she swam, her every motion a dance of beauty in the young man's eyes, and he watched her for what seemed like an eternity before he reluctantly came to his senses. Hefting his pack once more, he quietly made his way out of the river vale. It was in the following weeks, when his every waking and sleeping moment was consumed with thoughts of her, that he realized the meaning of the character "*nin*"--to endure. His was the heart that must endure separation from his own kind. He would never take a wife or have a family. Nor would he ever know a community other than the Temple. More than this, he could never have her--and the knowledge cut his heart like a blade.

* * *

The blade of a night-guard's spear flashes to his left as Higure vaults over the railing of the main hall's veranda. The hall retinue is alert now--the missing sentries have been noticed. Body flat against the wall,

he fishes in his pocket for a small sphere. He pulls it out, twists the small cap on one end. Flint and saltpeter grind and the sphere coughs black smoke. He tosses it towards where the guard has emerged into the courtyard. There is a soundless flash, and smoke fills the air, a patch of true night where the moonlight cannot penetrate. More blades shine as his *deshi* seem to slip out of the air itself and bear down on the blinded sentry. Three pairs of hands catch the body before the armor clangs on the fine gravel path. All happens before the sentry can even cry out. Higure turns and pushes a veranda screen to the side, and disappears into the hall.



* * *

The young man was now grown. He had taken thirty-two other lives. Some were human like himself, some foxes, some the graceful *soratami*. All fall to his blade, and with each successful mission he received another *deshi* to follow him and learn. He had his own enclave, a satellite to the Temple but growing stronger with every new pupil who joined him. Already he taught more students than Master Kagero had. As a matter of practicality, he dealt directly with his own clients, so it was with some surprise that he received the summons, inked in the familiar hand of his master. Setting his affairs in order and canceling the remainder of the day's lessons, he set out for the temple at once.

The day was waning when he finally arrived at the temple gardens. The pond where he first learned to walk on the lily pads so many years ago was a steel mirror, reflecting the ruddy light of the setting sun. The grounds seemed deserted, a twice-abandoned temple to faithless gods. From up ahead a gong sounded softly in the falling dusk, the only sound in the still twilight. The man approached, stepping through the doorless gate, and around the trees that smelled of fragrant cedar and the sweet pawlonia wood that is slow to rot and favored when building temples, and the sacred catalpa wood, once used to draw the *kami* down from the heavens, now as a ward to keep their mischief at bay. The man stopped, smelling the air. Then he began what seemed to be a sort of strange, solitary dance, swaying to blend his movements into the sounds of the dusk, and the wind blowing through leaves. The very rhythm of his heart slowed to echo the gentle drumming of the gong. He became one not just with the gong-hammer, but with the hand that held it, the man inside the Temple hall. After moments of sidestepping and prancing forward he reached the door to the hall, keeping every motion in careful harmony with the world around him. He rushed forward with a surge of the wind, then when he felt the wind begin to stop he too held...and a lingering beam of sunlight broke through the trees on the hillside to the west, stirring up a twilight breeze.

Hastily, he flung open the door. The golden gong hung in the middle of the hall, gently swaying on its stand, the beat of the soft hammer still shimmering in the air. But as for the one who wielded the hammer, nothing could be seen. The man's face twisted in chagrin at the wind's treachery and his failure.

"It is an easy thing to be invisible, like the *kami*" said a familiar voice. "They walk the veil between worlds. Step to the other side, the *kakuriyo* and to a mortal, you are gone. Step to our side, the *utsushiyo* and you are one of us." Laughing, Master Kagero dropped down from the hall rafters with the eerie grace of a spirit *kumo*. "Did you know, Higure, that some among the *kitsune* have trained themselves to smell the *kami*? Yes, even the gods have weaknesses. Let the *kami* have their veils of invisibility, it is a far harder thing to remain in this world yet be unseen."

It was a lesson the man had heard many times, yet one thing his master said gave him pause. "Higure?"

"Yes, Higure...*twilight*...that is your name now, for you come to me in the evening when the sun's light fades and fails us."

"But only a master *ninja* may..." Suddenly, the answer to his question was plain to him before he could speak the words.

"You are a master now." Master Kagero straightened, taking a formal stance. "Higure, I name you, but also I name you 'the Still Wind' because you were the still wind at my door, even while the twilight breeze blew around you. It is to your good fortune that I am no enemy to you. Never forget that you are mortal, Higure."

Master Kagero's shoulders dropped, and for a moment it seemed as though the wearying burden of age he had stealthily evaded all his life had finally caught up to him. "We have a new client," he said, shuffling back to his desk against the wall, drawing out a scroll trimmed with exquisite gilt brocade. From over his master's bent back, Higure could see the silvery flow of moonfolk calligraphy. He wondered who one of the *soratami* would want dead, and why, but he was much older now than the boy who had so foolishly asked his master a question in the learning hut with the walls of wattle and clay. Master Kagero swiftly rolled up the scroll and turned to face him. "You will be going back to the hill-lands."

* * *

Higure moves silently up the tightly wound mahogany stair, coming to the hallway that runs alongside the lotus chamber of the villa, where the noble folk would reside when not greeting visitors in the reception hall below. A screen slides open. He presses against the wall and listens to a voice from down the hall.

"No, Kio, I told you it is safe here, and here you shall remain." A pause, then the voice continues, softer. "I am your father and you will obey me." He moves three screens down to see the man where he stands talking to someone in the inner chamber. "Do not worry," the man says, hands fumbling to fasten the leather strap of his heavy iron helm, "they're probably just gambling in the orchard again. I will see what has happened and be right back."

The painted screen slides shut and the man walks down the hall, passing not more than a hand's-width away from where Higure stands. The samurai merchant Nitta is heavy-set and walks down the mahogany stairs with a slight sway, as though he was favoring his right leg--an old injury, perhaps. Out from his hiding place, Higure pads to the screen, throwing it open.

He enters the room walking heavily, the limp in his right leg barely noticeable but there all the same. A charcoal brazier in the corner suffuses the room in smoky light, but dark enough for Higure's deception to work, and the nobleman's son looks up from where he sits, bedecked in resplendent purple robes. No, not his son--his *daughter*. The pale and slender limbs, the high, painted eyebrows, lips stained with indigo dye, eyes clearer than glacier ice and cheeks the color of plum blossoms--all are exactly as he remembers the woman who bathed in the river by the bridge those many years ago. It is her.

Higure's mind boils. He hears voices--a boy, a young man, a man inside him clamoring to be heard. Then, another voice, the voice of wisdom giving a lesson on a hot summer day. "The meaning is yours to find." Suddenly he knows what it means. The sword that Master Kagero drew on that scroll a lifetime ago was the *ninja-to* he now carries, and the heart was his own.

The lady Kio rises, protesting her confinement, only realizing something is amiss when she sees the charcoal-light shine on naked steel. "You are not my father," she whispers, her voice as cold as the mountain stream in which she once bathed. "My father was a warrior who fought on the field of battle--a true man. You are no man."

"No," Higure replies, "I am *ninja*."

A scream echoes in the wood-paneled halls. In the light of charcoal embers spilled from a kicked-over brazier, a crimson stain spreads over indigo and onto the *tatami* mat floor of the lotus chamber. Outside the night is still, the moon hangs heavily in the sky. The only sound is the chirping of crickets. Then they, too, fall silent.

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