



KASAMI & THE KITSUKI METHOD

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HIRAMORI KASAMI KNELT, eyes closed. She could feel the warmth of Lady Sun, as she made her morning ascent. She could hear the city stirring beyond the thick masonry walls that encompassed the manor. The morning breeze stirred the hollowed-out gourds that hung from the branches of the trees that lined the garden. The clattering of the gourds made a solid counterpoint to the twittering of songbirds. Eyes still closed, she selected a nearby pebble and hurled it towards the trees. The twittering ceased.

“A beautiful morning, mistress,” a soft voice offered from behind her.

“Yes, Niko.” Kasami opened her eyes and glanced over her shoulder at the speaker. Niko was the youngest of the household’s three servants. She was also a spy, though not a very good one, possibly due to her relative youth.

If Niko had served anyone other than the Crane, Kasami would have turned her out into the street. But she had been placed to keep watch on their master’s comings and goings, and report his various indiscretions back to the Daidoji Trading Council. As such, her next words came as no surprise to Kasami. “Has – has Master Shin returned?” the young woman asked, hesitantly.

“No,” Kasami replied in as mild a tone as she could manage. Even so, Niko flinched. Though Shin encouraged a certain informality among his household, Kasami did not – and the servants knew it. She wasn’t above boxing an ear or two if she thought due respect was lacking either. Thankfully for all concerned, it rarely was. Serving a man like Daidoji Shin

came with enough headaches as it was. Especially of late. “I would not be out here if he had.”

“Is he... investigating a mystery?” Niko asked.

“It is of no concern to you what he is doing, Niko,” Kasami said. Once, she’d thought the worst thing in the world was acting as the bodyguard for a hedonistic fop. But she hadn’t realized how good she’d had it. Because now, the hedonistic fop had found an interest in solving crimes, thus opening up whole new vistas of difficulty for her.

Not that he was solving crimes today – or last night, rather. No. Instead, he’d snuck out and gone down to the riverside wharfs, to visit an ironmonger, of all things. She knew this because she’d followed him. Why he’d gone, she couldn’t say, despite shadowing him most of the night. Whatever the reason, it didn’t excuse not taking along a bodyguard. They would have words, when he returned.

Niko swallowed nervously, likely trying to think of some excuse to hang around. “Would you like some tea, mistress? While you wait, I mean? Or breakfast?”

“No.” Kasami lifted her sword onto her lap and unsheathed it with a flick of her thumb. Niko took a step back. Kasami frowned, but did not chastise her for her nervousness – or for her over-inquisitiveness. Instead, she retrieved her whetstone and ran it along the blade’s curve in a leisurely fashion. The sword did not require sharpening, but the repetitive motion helped to calm her. “You may attend to your other duties,” she added. “I will let you know when he arrives.”

Niko hesitated, then bowed low and retreated back inside. Kasami turned her attentions back to her sword. She lost herself in the rhythmic scrape of stone against steel, and only looked up when she heard the bells strung above the service entrance behind her ring. "You're back," she called out. An awkward silence ensued.

Impatient to get the confrontation underway, Kasami rose smoothly to her feet before turning to face her master and his companion, sheathing her sword as she did so. "I said – you're back." She studied the pair with a hard eye.

Daidoji Shin's blue robes were stained and stank of something foul. His expression was haggard, as one might expect of someone who'd been out all night when wiser folk were a-bed. He yawned, not bothering to cover his mouth. The other man – his servant, Kitano – was short and stocky, and scratched his unshaven cheek with a prosthetic finger. Like Shin, he looked tired.

Shin cleared his throat and said, "Yes, well... how was your night? Uneventful, I hope."

"No," Kasami said. "You did not wake me when you left." She decided not to mention that she'd followed them. Not yet, at any rate.

"You looked so peaceful. I didn't want to disturb you," Shin replied. He was lean of frame and face, with hair the color of new-fallen snow. He was handsome, even in his disheveled state and worse, knew it. An uglier master would have been easier to protect, she suspected.

"More likely you did not wish me to interfere in whatever foolishness you had planned," she said flatly.

Her gaze fixed on the other man. "You should have woken me, Kitano." The stocky man flinched, much as Niko had done. The former gambler had experienced her displeasure first hand more than once since becoming Shin's manservant.

"I told him not to," Shin said quickly. He stepped between them.

She transferred her gaze back to him. "Why?"

"At the time, it seemed the best course of action." He ventured a smile. She did not return it. Her hand tightened spasmodically on her sword, causing the sheath to creak. Kitano squirmed, trying to avoid her gaze.

"The best course of action," she repeated, her tone deceptively even.

"I thought so at the time."

"You did not think. If you had, you would not have left without me." She poked him in the abdomen with the hilt of her sword, and he took an unsteady step back. "You would not have put yourself in such danger – and for what?"

"Why don't you tell me," Shin replied. Kasami grunted, thrown off-balance by the unexpected question. Kitano made to speak, but Shin cut him off with a gesture. "Kitano, make yourself useful and prepare some tea. Oh, and bring a few strips of willow bark with you when you come back. My head is killing me." Kitano departed gratefully, sidling around Kasami, who ignored him.

When he'd gone, she said, "Explain."

"You heard me." A sly smile spread across his face. Kasami was instantly wary. "You have no doubt drawn your own conclusions as to our whereabouts – erroneous though they almost certainly are." He made an offhand gesture. "Of course, I have no doubt you will swiftly come to the correct answer, given time."

Kasami made to snap at him – to tell him that she knew very well where he'd been, if not why – but paused. He wanted to play a game? Very well. "You wish me to... investigate?" she asked, carefully. Now it was Shin's turn to hesitate. He was clever enough to sense a trap, if not half as clever as he liked to imagine.

"Yes," he said, cautiously. "That is exactly what I wish. Think of it as a chance to use your eyes and your brain, rather than your sword. I've taught you my methods – a derivation

of the Kitsuki way, granted, but with my own additions." He gestured to himself. "Well, here is your first mystery. Not an exciting one, I admit, but as I said, I have every confidence in you. I eagerly await your conclusions."

"Very well." She made a show of considering the disreputable state of his robes. She wrinkled her nose. "Firstly, you reek of fish."

Shin grimaced. "And what does that tell you?"

"Nothing. This whole city stinks of fish."

Shin sighed. "You're not trying very hard, I must say."

"Must you?" Kasami growled, wondering if now was the time to reveal that she'd followed them. She gestured sharply, cutting off his reply. "Fine. You were close to the river – probably at one of the gambling houses near the wharfs," she said, accusingly. His eyes widened slightly and she felt a flicker of satisfaction.

"And how do you figure that?"

She gestured. "The mud on your robes. It is black, like that found on the riverbanks."

Shin blinked and looked down at himself. "Ah. Yes. Very observant." He recovered quickly. "A gambling house is indeed a possibility. But there are many other businesses on the wharfs. Sake houses. Onsen. Ironmongers. But let us say it was a gambling house – if so, where are my winnings?"

"You might have lost."

Shin frowned. "Easily verified, if so."

Kasami stared at him for a moment, then held out her hand. "Your coin pouch," she demanded. He reached into his kimono, producing a small cloth pouch. Shin carried little coin on him; mostly he used it to appease beggars. The pouch rattled as he tossed it to her. She undid the draw string and peered inside.

"If I'd lost, it would be empty," Shin said.

She decided to prod him a bit. "Maybe you only lost a little..."

"When have you ever known me to only lose a little?" he asked, in an offended tone. "Either I lose it all, or I lose nothing. And since that pouch isn't bulging with coin, we can make a safe assumption that I didn't do the latter. Which means..."

"You probably weren't at a gambling house," Kasami said.

"Indeed. So where was I?"

"You tell me."

"Again, I feel you have not grasped the point of the exercise." He plucked at his robes. "Observe. Think. What do you see?"

"A fool who went out without his bodyguard."

"Besides that," he said testily. "I obviously wasn't at an onsen, given the state of my robes. Where else might I have gone, that late at night? Perhaps I was out drinking, eh?"

"No."

"And how can you tell?"

"You do not stink of rice-wine." Kasami allowed herself a smile. She caught sight of Kitano emerging from the house, bearing a tray.

"Then how did I come to be in this state?" Shin asked. He was smiling now as well. He thought he'd stumped her. "Surely you must have some answer to the conundrum."

"I do." She fixed Kitano with a steady glare. He froze, tray clattering. "Kitano – why did you go to an ironmonger in the middle of the night?"

"What – I – wait..." he said, looking at Shin.

Shin frowned. "This is hardly in the spirit of the game." He paused. "Also, how did you know we'd been to an ironmonger?"

Kasami ignored him. She took another step towards Kitano. "What happened? Tell me, or I will cut off another of your fingers."

Kitano blanched. "He tripped," he blurted.

Kasami nodded, for she'd seen as much, before deciding to return home. "Not that; the ironmonger."

Shin's eyes narrowed as the import of her words hit home. "You followed us?"

"I would be a poor bodyguard if I hadn't," Kasami said, meeting his glare. "You tripped on a loose board coming out of the ironmonger's and fell into a culvert, after which Kitano took an embarrassingly long time to fish you out."

Shin frowned. "You might have lent a hand, since you were there."

"You weren't in danger," she shot back. "What I do not know is why you chose to do something so foolish without me, and in the middle of the night besides."

"It was a special commission," Shin protested.

"And what was so special about it, that it necessitated going in secret – without a bodyguard?" she demanded.

Shin sighed. "Because it was supposed to be a surprise – a gift, to mark the anniversary of the day you became my *vojimbo*."

Kasami paused, startled. She tried to recall if he was correct. She'd never bothered with such things, believing them unimportant. Shin obviously felt differently about the matter. He reached into his kimono and extracted a narrow wooden box. "I know that this duty has not been an easy one, Kasami. Nor was it one you chose. But you have performed it with far more diligence than one could expect. I wished to make clear my gratitude."

Kasami stared at him, and then at the box, utterly at a loss. Shin slid the box open, revealing the slim shape of an *aiguchi* – a long knife, lacking a hilt guard. This one had words etched into the blade. "*The spear waits not for its master*," she said, softly, fingering the blue cloth that wrapped the weapon's hilt.

"*But rushes forth to guard the way*," Shin finished. "The motto of the Daidoji. Never have I met anyone who better exemplifies those words than yourself."

Kasami could not tear her gaze from the knife. "I– I do not know what to say."

"No thanks necessary, I assure you."

She held the knife close to her chest. "You're an idiot."

Shin blinked.

She tapped his chest with the point of the knife. "An absolute fool. I am your bodyguard. I go where you go. Always. The best gift you could give me is to not make my duties any more difficult than they already are." She looked at the knife again, then thrust it through her sash. "But the blade is an adequate apology. Now go take a bath. You reek of fish and bad choices."

Shin smiled and bowed his head. "Of course. Happy anniversary, Hiramori Kasami."

Kasami turned away as he started for the house. When she was certain he could no longer see her, she allowed herself a brief smile of her own.

"And a happy anniversary to you, Daidoji Shin," she murmured.

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