Kunoichi

A Short Story

By Maryanne Peters

In Japan, warriors who serve a master cannot be bought and sold, but if in the service of their master they are directed to serve another, then their oath requires that they do so. To explain the strength of obligations created by the code of *Bushido Shoshishu* may be too difficult to explain to somebody who is not Japanese. To be *bushi* is to live by a code. Your life, and your body, mean nothing. Duty means everything.

Or it may be that all along he was one of those men who wish to be women. Such people exist in Japan – the *niuhafu*, or newhalf. But warriors will prefer to think that he gave his flesh because it was in the service of his master, who required it of him. As some masters may ask that a little finger be surrendered as proof of fealty, so in this case, he gave a bigger appendage, and not a finger. It reflects well on all warriors. The oath of service is real, not just a noise on the lips.

This person can be called she, even before the change that she brought upon herself. But she was in the service of a master who was a significant investor in technology in America. One particular investment was CalibaTech, a company in the control of Darren Mallet, a young man of very special talent. He was not only in charge of the business but the source of its ideas - present and future. In short, The life of Darren Mallet was beyond measurable value to the man investing such a considerable sum.

When our investor told Darren that it would be a condition of investment that a bodyguard sworn to loyalty would be assigned to him, Darren simply replied: “No, thank you. I will not have a man following me around. I am in need of an assistant, but I would prefer a young lady. Perhaps one of your people could assist me and at the same time act as your observer?”

Woman warriors are not unknown in Japanese history, but they are a thing of the distant past. There were only a few suitable for the job in consideration and they were all men. But our investor also needed somebody who could speak English – and now somebody who could do that dressed as a woman.

There was only one. The name of the man is irrelevant. The name given to the woman was Haia. It has the meaning to be nimble or quick. It is a good name. He was not large or of heavy build, and in the fashion of some young men who are not salarymen, he wore his hair long and tied back. Still, there was work to be done to render him ready to cross the ocean to America and to cross the wider gulf to a new sex.

The physical transformation was easy enough – there is surgery and there are hormones that can model the body to an extraordinary degree, but there was much to learn of how to behave and how to live. Haia understood the process would be a continuing one. At least she (for that is the proper pronoun now) understood the nature of movement better than a common man. She would now be *kunoichi*, and the skill of invisibility is learned early in training. If hiding in bamboo in a breeze, you must sway.

Learning to speak was also something that required practice, but in a foreign country and in a foreign country, often silence is best, perhaps with a smile and a tiny wave, to indicate that finding the words, not the voice, might be the problem. But she was a person of highly honed skills, and the voice of a woman proved easy in comparison to all the other talents she possessed.

It may be asked who would make these sacrifices to serve their master? The answer is simple – somebody who values their oath. It is considered so routine to call for a little finger, or perhaps even two, that seeing a man without a digit is understood. In this case the surgery was not designed to be permanent but just to conceal the true sex and allow Haia to function as the adopted one. It was no more than a shaved head, and less permanent than a full tattoo over the back.

So Haia arrived at the offices of CalibaTech with a letter addressed to Darren. The letter read simply:

“This letter is to introduce you to Haia. Please accommodate her in your office and your home, keep her close to you at all times, and understand that her role in to protect your life. In other respects she will be you assistant as she is able”.

“I hope that you understand that I am not in need of a bodyguard,” said Darren. Haia just bowed. “But the support of your employer is essential to the business, so you will take a desk outside my office, and live in my home. I have a room for you.” Haia bowed again. “You do speak English, don’t you?”

“I speak English and I can read and write it,” she said. Then she felt that a smile might be appropriate, so she summoned one as she looked up, but it came in a rush. She looked directly into the face of her assigned master and his eyes seemed to sparkle as he returned her smile.

Should *kunoichi* feel affection for those they are assigned to protect? Some *bushi* might say to have respect for your assigned master might assist you, but that there is no room for affection, let alone the whatever these feelings were within Haia. Emotions cloud judgement.

Darren showed her to her desk. She would have preferred to sit within his office where she could become like the furniture, but to sit at the only entrance would suffice. She drove home with him and he showed her a nice room, but she preferred the smaller one across the corridor from his.

“I do not seek special treatment,” she said.

“Even if you are paid in Japan, if you work in my office then CalibaTech will pay you,” he said.

She smiled again in acceptance. She realized that with this man smiles came more easily to her face.

That night she explored the house in the darkness, inside and out. Darren had a couple living in as his staff, but neither of them noticed the black shape in the darkness. Invisibility is the mark of *kunoichi*. It needs to be practised constantly.

She rose early and as she had been invited, she ate something from the refrigerator. But she preferred something that left no trace and decided that she would need to arrange things better.

Darren looked for her when it was time to head into the office. She could travel with him, but he could not find her. He called out her name and then she was there. That is the art of *kunoichi*.

At the office Darren had a morning meeting and she entered with him wearing a grey dress chosen for its cut and color. Early in the meeting he introduced her – “This is Haia who has been sent by our Japanese shareholder to assist me.” People around the table were surprised that they had not noticed the stranger in the room, but she was not surprised. It was her intention. She smiled slightly and bowed her head.

To be invisible in a forest, you can become a tree, but to move about you must be the wolf who walks the forest at night and fall in with the pack. Haia understood that she must become one of the office team to stay invisible. That was her skill. She watched and she imitated, and she responded with smiles, but otherwise stayed silent. If you do not engage, then it should be that you will not be noticed.

But Belle, one of the marketing executives, seemed intent on finding Haia and trying to be her friend. To rebuff and approach would lead to dislike, so Haia was careful to be pleasant. The “friendship” was also useful as Bella had access to Darren’s diary.

This allowed Haia to protect her assigned master by looking for events that might place him at risk. Appearances in public did not seem to pose a threat as long as he was among known people, or on a stage with distance to an unvetted audience, but she was concerned to see that the times when he was alone and could be confronted by a stranger, were limited.

She was developing a pattern, which is good, but can never be allowed to give a sense of comfort and complacency.

And she was exploring his contacts and becoming useful in her knowledge of who was who.

So when Belle asked - “Will you be attending the dinner with our key representatives tonight?” she said that she would.

“It occurs to me that you may need help with an outfit, given what you are wearing,” said Belle. Her intentions were good, and Haia realized that.

“Thank you,” she said. “I am unfamiliar with Western social activities. Something black perhaps.”

“And a new hairstyle, perhaps?”

Haia’s hair was worn in the style known in Japanese as “centre falling curtain”. It assisted in creating anonymity. Even if the body might be seen, the face was largely concealed. But it seemed that Haia needed to understand the color of the background before choosing camouflage.

“Thank you for your offer of assistance. For now I must join Mr. Mallet but please let us get ready together.” Haia bowed as was the habit that endeared her to the few people at Calibatech who noticed her.

She slipped back into her seat undetected by those even close to her and ran through details of the meeting available on her computer screen. She saw the function and the venue and searched for information as to its location and layout.

Darren called her in to help with something that had arrived from Japan.

“There is a dinner tonight and I understand that I will be attending?” she asked when the occasion allowed.

“Of course,” said Darren. “If you need something to wear let me arrange that for you.”

“Belle from marketing has offered to help,” said Haia. “But I am not used to social functions. I will stay in the background. You will not even notice that I am there.”

“I was hoping that you might go as my date,” he grinned. “I have nobody else at the moment and it is customary to have a female partner.”

Haia was suddenly concerned. This was not the role that she understood she would have, but it would be disrespectful to contradict him. It would also be disrespectful not to present herself appropriately. In accepting she knew that she would have to blend in at this function in a different way. She accepted Belle’s offer of help and presented herself at the salon that afternoon.

She submitted herself to all the treatment that Belle recommended. One of the virtues of *kunoichi* is the ability to endure in silence, even when subjected to chatter. But if she was unfeeling throughout, she found herself strangely affected by the outcome.

Her hair was put up in what was called a “French roll” and her face was made up in an evening style. It made her beautiful, that was clear, but she was usually unaffected by beautiful things. A person who must live by their wits cannot be distracted by a sunset sky or the perfume of a flower. So why did this person in the mirror hold his gaze to the exclusion of everything else?

He could have told himself that this was a disguise. It was the face of a porcelain doll and could be shattered like that. But it did not seem like a disguise. It was as if every other face could be broken – every other face but this. This was not artifice but the face of truth, at least in the eyes.

“We need to get you dressed,” said Belle. “We are running out of time. You look stunning, Haia, but we need to get moving. We need to get to the function”

She was reluctant to leave the mirror – confused and uncertain for the first time in her life, but she followed as she had to. She felt as if the person that she was had ceased to exist and that she was somebody else. She wanted to remind herself of the code, and her upbringing and training. But that all seemed to belong to somebody else.

She saw herself in the mirror again as she entered the conference center. It was her, now confirmed.

She saw Darren looking at her. She was not a fool without understanding of human emotion. She could see the look in his eyes. It made her smile. Even across the room it was as if electricity was arcing between them.

“You look fantastic,” he said to her.

“I hope it has not been too expensive for you,” she said, trying to show the humility of a Japanese woman.

“It is worth every cent,” he said.

He introduced her as his assistant – somebody from Japan to assist him in liaison with his new partner from there. She was polite and demure, but she could see that not only Darren was affected by her new glamorous appearance. It was pleasing. It gave her a sense of pride that should have been shameful – pride should be reserved for great achievements, not for self. But she put such thoughts aside.

Her English was excellent. It seemed even better that night. In conversation those careful clipped sentences were gone. She spoke in a relaxed way, even oblivious to minor errors which could be excused with a sly giggle – a manicured hand over her painted lips.

“You are a revelation, Haia,” Darren whispered. She could feel his hot breath against her exposed pretty ear. It excited her. Between her legs she was restrained, and she had been told that the hormone treatment would deaden all sexual reaction, but this was disruption down there and in her soft belly as well. For the first time in her life she felt a little faint.

She sat beside him as he made his address. She looked up at him. She should not be attracted to him the way that she was, but it was clear that she desired him, in every way.

Others must have noticed. Darren turned to smile down at her. He noticed. She adored him.

She stood beside him all the while, until he was ready to go home. Then he had the car bought around to take them home.

“I want you to spend the night with me,” he said as they were driven away.

“I cannot,” she stammered, because she wanted it, but knew that it was impossible.

“I am not going to force myself on you, Haia,” he said. “I am also aware that I should not be taking advantage of you given my position and yours. It is just that some things are more powerful than reason.”

She should have spoken of the power of duty. You cannot reason putting your life before your obligations of service to your master and to the code of *bushi*. Such things are … but his lips were against hers and all thoughts disappeared like smoke in the wind.

His hands groped her breasts and she let him. They were real and not large, but they were sensitive. It made her gasp with joy.

His hands reached up her dress to her panties. The work that had been done by the surgeons was clever. Everything was concealed. There was just no opening. But he seemed happy to feel the womanhood through the underwear.

They were in an embrace when the limo came to a halt outside the door of his home. The driver got out and opened the door, but they barely noticed. The driver cleared his throat, more than once.

He led her by the hand. He never noticed that the alarm had been tampered with. He led her to his room. He kissed her again. A tendril of her perfect hair had come loose and he pushed it aside, to better admire her in the dim light.

“Darren, there is something that you should know,” said Haia. “I cannot have sex as a normal woman.” The words were hard to say because in that moment she so wanted to be a complete woman. She wanted to be beneath him with him inside her, more than anything she had ever wanted her entire life. It was a life that seemed to have been wasted to that point, and now there was nothing.

And then the light came on. There was a stranger in the room.

“Mr Mallett, I am sorry to disturb your love making.” There was a man in his bedroom holding a gun. He wore black, as a professional assassin working at night would. Haia could see that the gun was special – perhaps custom made, with a large suppressor – very bulky but designed to be effective.

“Who are you?” said Darren. Then, with more thought – “Who sent you?”

Haia fell from the arms of Darren and backed away. She decided that she should whimper a little, but now she was thinking. Step away. Create two targets. Then she can draw his fire by lunging and Darren has a chance. Or, she can find a shadow. That is where she lives. That is where she can change everything.

“Don’t move any further, Sweetheart,” said the man. “I am afraid that you will have to go too, along with your boyfriend here. You masters in Japan have decided that they want it all. But I am sure that you understand. You are expendable – right?”

It was true. But what was also true was that Haia was fast, and *kunoichi* should be, according to their training, but Haia was even faster than that.

There on the table near to her was a *shuriken* – she recognized it although it was polished and mounted as if it was a piece of art, a gift from Japan. But she knew what it was. She just need to move faster that this assassin’s brain could function. She needed to take it and throw it, and roll into the darkness.

Darren did not see it either. The first he saw was the man who threatened him clutching his throat, and then he heard the partly silenced shots, still louder than TV would have you believe, fired in the direction of Haia. But she was gone. Disappeared.

She reappeared behind the assailant, as if transported by magic. She ignored the gun. She took the piece of steel lodged in the man’s neck between his fingers and twisted it. Blood poured out. The man’s knees buckled. The pistol fell from his open hand. He dropped to the floor.

Her arm was covered in blood. She looked across at Darren with eyes that showed sheer power. It was not something that Darren had ever seen before. It was the look of the kill.

“What just happened?” he said.

“We have been betrayed,” she said. According to the code of *Bushido Shoshishu* that is a master’s right. As the man said, all persons in the service of their master are expendable. It is not for you to ask why. You simply die, if that is your lot.

But she wanted to live. She wanted to live with Darren. What she should have done was deal with the body and wash her own. But instead she rushed across the room and fell into his open arms. That was where she wanted to be.

“What did you mean when you said that you cannot have sex as a normal woman?” he said. There was a dead man in his bedroom who had tried to kill him, but he was thinking of her. She squeezed him.

“I have much to explain,” she said. “But I am frightened to tell you. I think that you will hate me. I was sent here to protect you in the service of your investor. I have done that, but now we find that your investor is your enemy. I think that I no longer have a master, so because of that I should end my life, right here and now, beside this man.”

“You have to be kidding,” said Darren. “I cannot let that happen. I love you, Haia. I don’t care why you came here. I don’t care I you are some kind of ninja. I have fallen in love with you. I will not let you die.”

“What you see is a disguise,” said Haia. “You will hate what is beneath it.”

“What did you mean when you said that you cannot have sex as a normal woman?” he repeated.

“I am not a woman,” she said, still cling to him.

“I have felt you all over,” he said. “I don’t believe you. You are a woman. I know it.”

“I think that I have become a woman,” she said. “In your arms I feel like a woman.”

“If you need more surgery, we can arrange that,” he said. He pulled her head off his chest and looked at her pretty face. “Everything is going to be fine.”

He did love her, and she loved him.

“But first I think that we need to call the police,” she said. “And we need to tell them who is behind this. And if necessary, I need to go back to Japan and deal with the murderous partner myself.”

“Sweet girl, let’s leave that to the police,” he said, kissing her.

But she was already considering how she might best serve her new master, exercising the skills that she had developed over her life.

The End

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Rio Takahashi, Japanese transwoman