

BUSHI'S BRIDE

by Phillis Gershator

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YONAMINE was big and strong. She took after the other big, strong members of her family who were famous for their skill as fighters, especially when it came to wielding the *bo*, a six-foot-long oak staff. She lifted weights, too, including the heavy barrels and baskets her father couldn't lift by himself. But Yonamine would rather wrestle than use a staff or lift weights. She preferred arm wrestling or wrestling sumo style with her feet planted firmly on the ground.

Yonamine's father, a merchant, loved his daughter dearly, but he feared for her future. He asked himself the question: Was there a man in Okinawa who would choose a woman bigger and stronger than himself as a bride, a bride who would rather arm wrestle than serve tea? He didn't think so.

So he offered a hefty dowry to encourage suitors for Yonamine's hand. Yonamine didn't object to her father's plans, on one condition. "The man I marry," she told him, "has to defeat me in a fair fight." The challenge of a contest, plus the generous dowry awaiting Yonamine's future husband, attracted more than a few fighting men who were willing to try their luck.

The first fellow to step up was Kojo. He was stronger than Yonamine. His hands were the size of shovels, his legs as thick as tree trunks, and he regularly beat up anyone willing (or unwilling) to engage him in a fight.

"You want a tough guy?" Kojo said. "That's me, so I'll go first. Why waste time?"

Yonamine sized him up coolly. He's a boastful bully, she thought.

Before they had even bowed to each other, the customary sign of respect in sporting combat, Kojo threw a punch. The punch landed with brick-splitting force.

Yonamine swayed, but she stood her ground. She caught Kojo's punching arm in a wrenching twist, drawing it so close and tight beneath her own arm, his fingers turned

blue. She released him at last, bracing herself for his next move, but he stepped back, turned, and stumbled away.

Kojo's defeat instantly thinned the ranks of suitors. Yonamine quickly dispatched three more. One was too slow, another too hot-headed, a third too cautious. . .

Among the king's warriors, Bushi Matsumura's friends prodded him to compete. "You're not married yet," they said. "Why wait? Yonamine is big, but you're bigger."

It was true. Bushi was tall, but he was also thin. Still, his speed made up for his slender frame. He was confident he could best Yonamine in a fight, but did he want to? Wouldn't he prefer a delicate little wife who served him tea to a big, strong arm wrestler?

Then he saw for himself that Yonamine was as plump and sturdy as he was lean and wiry, as firm and steady on her feet as he was light and speedy. He also took note of her long, lustrous hair and rosy lips and the way she looked out at the world with a bright, clear gaze. Yes, he decided, I will try to win her.

Yonamine took her time, looking him up and down, and up again. It wasn't often she could look up at her challenger. This fellow is tall, she thought, and he must be a fine warrior. After all, he is one of King Sho Ko's own men.

Looking into Bushi's eyes, she remembered a story she'd heard about him: he had stared at one of his opponents so piercingly with his dark, deep-set eyes, the frightened man never even dared to fight Bushi. He ran away instead! But Yonamine wasn't frightened. And she wasn't about to run away. Not at all.

So the contest began. They bowed to one another. Then they grappled, kicked, twisted. She was strong. He was fast. It was a tie. Nobody won, nobody lost...

No, it wasn't a tie after all! Bushi fainted, Yonamine paused, and that moment of hesitation was all it took. With the quickness of a heron spearing a fish, Bushi brought her down.

A marriage took place, to everyone's joy, and all went well—happily ever after, as the storytellers say, until the day Yonamine told Bushi she was going to visit her parents. And they had their first quarrel.

"I'll leave this evening," she said, "then return tomorrow in time for dinner."

Bushi scowled. "Traveling at night? I won't let you. It's much too dangerous."

"Why?"

"Bandits."

"Don't worry. I can take care of bandits." She laughed. "I'll show them a thing or two about fighting."

Bushi wasn't so sure. "I've had close encounters with those desperate fellows from the north. You shouldn't underestimate them."

"My dear husband, you shouldn't underestimate me."

"My dear wife, bandits don't fight fair. Ours was a fair fight, and didn't I trip you up?"

Yonamine lowered her eyes. "Yes, you did," she said, "but I promise you, no *bandits* will trip me up."

"Flat on the ground you were, helpless and covered with dust..."

Yonamine simply smiled at the memory.

While Yonamine prepared for her departure, Bushi paced back and forth, thinking, Why doesn't she listen to me? A wife should obey her husband! I'm going to have to teach her a lesson—for her own good, of course.

Disguising himself as a bandit, wearing shabby clothes and a scarf to hide his face, he raced ahead to a fork in the road. He crouched behind the bushes and waited. Yonamine came along at last, walking briskly, heading toward the turnoff to her parents' house. As she passed his hiding place, Bushi jumped out and grabbed her.

Yonamine whipped around. With a snap kick and an open handed punch, she knocked her assailant on the head with so much force he crumpled to the ground in a heap. She carried the unconscious "bandit" to the side of the road, propped him up, and tied him fast to the trunk of a tree with his own belt. Brushing the dust off her hands and readjusting the packages on her back, Yonamine continued on her way.

The following afternoon, as she headed home, her bandit was still there, trussed up tight.

"Do I untie you or not?" she asked him.

"Untie me," he said. "And forgive me. I'm sorry."

"Bushi! It's you! Oh no, I'm sorry!" She fussed over him. "Are you hurt?"

"Not badly," he said, feeling the bump on his head. "Just ashamed. I *did* underestimate you." He rubbed his aching wrists. "And you taught me a lesson I won't forget. Don't underestimate *anybody*."

"Especially a woman," she added.

"True," he agreed, and with his hand over his heart, he announced: "Yonamine, you are truly my warrior bride, as fast as a bird, as powerful as a tiger. And that kick-punch! What an excellent move!"

"Yes, I think so, too. An excellent move when you're carrying heavy packages...or a baby."

He glanced at her hopefully, and she nodded.

Back home, while Bushi rested with a damp, ginger soaked cloth on his swollen forehead, thinking happy thoughts about the kicking, punching baby soon to join their family, Yonamine tidied up the house. As she swept, she moved a sack of rice on the floor, picking it up with one hand while she continued to sweep with the other.

Bushi looked on, astounded. She had just picked up a one hundred and thirty pound bag of rice as if it were featherlight. She can easily pick up and throw a grown man, he realized. Come to think of it, she picked me up when she tied me to a tree.

He sat up and pulled the cool cloth from his forehead. How exactly had he won their first "fair" fight? he began to wonder. He had caught Yonamine off guard when she faltered for a fraction of a second. Did she hesitate on purpose? Could she have let me win?

Yes, Bushi mused, she *might* have tricked me. He chuckled as he lay his head back down. And I'm glad she did!