

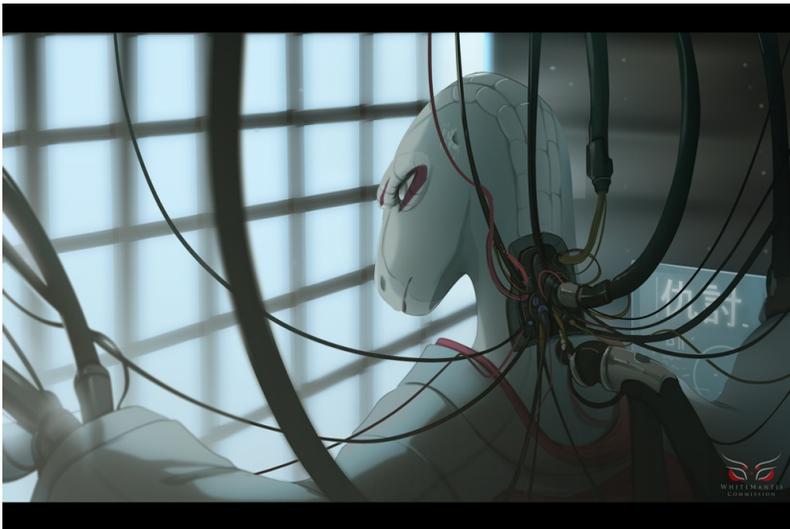
Geiko Eien Ni

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Eternally Geisha

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Revenge was the last thing she wanted. Not, at least, on the people who had caused this to her. Tonight had been one of those nights. One of those which reminded her of what she was.

She lifted up the front of her kimono with her free hand and walked up the ancient wooden steps to the upper floor of the okiya, where she and the other maiko spent their nights. She walked over to the side of the room where a small area was set out which constituted her space, and she

carefully set down her shamisen.

Today had been a day for training her shamisen skills. It was something she had always enjoyed. The gentle sounds of the strings brought an inner calm which commonly failed her. Ayano-san often reminded her that her stance was unbecoming, and she tried her very best to restrain it, to keep it in a sensible state whenever she was out and about, and especially when she was accompanying onee-san in her job. Sometimes, though, it was just too hard, and today she had failed to ensure its stability.

It had been a small thing, really. She had broken a string on her shamisen, but it had thrown her completely. At least she had not thrown the delicate instrument across the room. Not only would that have brought a great deal of unwanted attention, it would have caused unguessed damage to the room itself.

The string had broken because she had failed to control her strength, the same strength which would have allowed the instrument which, though delicate, was still solid enough that travelling at the sort of speeds she would be able to bring it to, would have forced its way through the wooden wall.

So no, revenge was not what she wanted. Those who had caused this to her had tried, it was not fair to wish any such thing on them. Her parents really had tried their very best. She had been born with an early onset motor neuron disease, and the doctors had told them she would not likely live to see her tenth birthday. Nothing, though, is quite as stubborn as parents who had first been told they would never conceive, and who had done so anyway, and then found they would be robbed of the gift of parenthood so soon. They had decided it would not happen.

She had become the first child to be given a full body prosthetic, as they had decided to call it. In reality, it was a

non-bio nohnas body, an adult one because that's the way the cybernetic creatures that non-biological non-human, non-alien sentients were were all built, into which was inserted her mind, copied as far as it was possible from her nine year old body. The process was destructive and irreversible, but then, her body would have given up only weeks later anyway, if what the doctors said was true, and they had been pretty spot on with the previous predictions about her progress through the condition.

Nobody really knew which parts of her mind had not been copied across, but something had been left out. Whatever it was had been an important part of what her parents thought of as their daughter. Perhaps it had been what some people called her ghost. Her centre. That thing which was the difference between something alive and something... else.

Her mother's tears had hurt almost as much as her father's reluctance to meet her eyes when she had woken up from the procedure. She had been able, suddenly, to move again, and she had jumped up in the bed and bounced on it, clapping her hands and laughing, and fell over, unused as she had been to the body, until she saw the two of them standing there.

They had taken her home, and the next three years they tried, sincerely as far as she had been able to tell, to accept what she had become. To come to grips with what they had done, what they had turned their daughter into.

It had been her wish for as long as she could remember, which given the digital nature of her new body's mind was perfectly and as far back as memories existed at all, to become a geisha. Finally, they had decided that they would fulfill her wish. They had contacted many okiya all over Japan, but none of them would accept her. Most complained at her age, and simply asked they reconsider

and come back later, but some were more straight forward, saying they were a natural establishment and such as she would not be accepted.

She had spent many nights after the first of those messages came back distraught and depressed, even more than she had over the three years before, worrying what might happen to her then, if her parents didn't want her, and then it turned out nobody else did either.

Finally, though, one night, the soft sound of the doorbell had alerted her to a visitor. She had gone to her room, hiding as she generally did, until a tap on the door had told her someone was there.

She had stood up, facing the door, with her blue snout lowered slightly, and her long, tapered tail, with the same glossy scales that covered the rest of her body, curled on the floor behind her in what she had decided was an aesthetically pleasant semi circle, trying her best to wield her slender body in as graceful a manner as possible for something so inhuman.

"Curacao-chan", her father had said, more familiar than he had been most of the time. "There is someone here to see you." He had spoken with a strange wobble to his voice, and she had looked up. Behind her father had stood the image of grace and beauty she had looked up to her entire life. So close to her, dressed in a casual fashion as they were, and without makeup and the like, and their hair in simple fashion suitable for a longer journey, they had seemed to her the two most beautiful creatures she had ever seen

"I..." she had begun, realising a few moments later that she had been staring, and bowed as gracefully as she knew how to, "I'm sorry, how do you do? Please come in."

She had all but given up hope, and here had been what she hadn't even dared hope was what it had seemed that it might be. Two geisha, one much older than the other. In

what spare time she had, she had taken to collecting knowledge and photos of geisha, and she recognised the younger one as geiko Ayano, and she had realised, stunned, that the other had to be her okiya's owner, okā-san Tamagiku herself. They had come here, to their home in Osaka, which while not exactly that far from Kyoto where they lived was similarly not exactly around the corner.

They had both bowed to her father, and he had bowed in return, and glanced at her before retreating back to her mother in the living room, leaving them with her. They had taken up her invitation and entered her room, and Ayano-san had bowed to her, while Tamagiku-san had looked over the room. She had seemed to Curacao to be inspecting it, and Ayano-san had confirmed this as she bowed in return.

"Curacao-san," she had said, the first time in her life anybody had used that honorific with her, "you have been causing quite a stir in the hanamachi. Or, perhaps it is more fair to say your parents have done so on your behalf. A medical miracle, a young girl in a non-bio nohnas body, with or without her ghost intact, who is trying to find an okiya which would accept her into their midst."

She had explained how she had taken it upon herself to look into Curacao's situation, even going so far as to requesting information from her doctors and psychiatrists both before and after the operation, and received it after her father had given permission. She had found, she had said, the mind of someone who could indeed be geiko, and she had presented okā-san with that suggestion, and that they had arrived here tonight to offer her the chance to join their house.

It had taken Curacao several moments to gather herself after that, but her body did not have reflexes, not the way they existed for humans, and she had not shivered, and her voice had not wavered as she bowed and told Ayano-san

how humbled she had been that they would offer her such an honour, failing to stop herself before continuing into an explanation of how terrified she had been that no okiya would accept someone like her.

Okā-san had chuckled at that, and Ayano-san had done the same. A sound which given the situation had been both humbling and a delight. Not a harsh one, but one sweet and inviting, and she remembered having put a smile on her own lips.

"Child," okā-san had said, removing her hand from her mouth after chuckling, "it is not a question of honour. Others simply worry that there would be no way for them to profit out of taking a nohnas in as maiko. You surely have noticed that nohnas are more commonly employed at spa resorts in the countryside. No, they do not see the opportunity before them. Ayano-san offers to take you as her imouto-san. The house will gain, in you, not just the first proper nohnas geiko, but a nohnas geisha with a human ghost. Ayano-san's reasons are her own, but you should understand the nature of your relationship with the house."

It had been, for a girl who, whatever her adult outward appearance suggested, had been only thirteen years old, something of a rude awakening. She had known well enough that the house was a financial operation as much as it was a sort of adopted family, but here had stood before her someone who offered her everything she had ever wanted in short life, things which she before the operation had thought castles in the air, and in that same instant reminded her that it would be no dance on roses. It had, of course, not stopped her, but it had brought her down to Earth with a fairly heavy thump.

She had told okā-san that she did understand and that she was still honoured, and that she would be proud to

accept Ayano-san's offer, one which given so readily was somewhat uncommon. Normally one did not gain her onee-san until well into the training period. She knew now, of course, why, but it had been something of a surprise at the time that she had been told it so readily and so early. They had left that evening after they discussed the terms, and that should she decide to take them up on the offer, that she should come to the okiya the following week at a certain time.

Curacao had been left buzzing and happier than she had been for a considerable amount of time, something her parents had echoed. They might well not see their daughter in her, but they did see someone they had some connection with. If nothing else, they had after all spent a few years with her in the house after the operation, so they had really known her well enough, and daughter or not, they were happy for her, to have finally found what they had been searching for. There had been no question of it in her mind, and her parents had helped her.

The address had surprised her parents, located as it was within Gion Higashi, one of the remaining and very prestigious hanamachi in Kyoto itself. She had known this already, of course, her surprise had been in discovering who offered herself as her onee-san, and finding it someone she admired greatly. They had put her on the train to Kyoto, and she had found her own way to Gion Higashi, where she had been collected outside the station by two maiko.

They had spotted her a considerable amount of time before she realised they were who would pick her up. She did not know them, only that she would be collected, but they, on the other hand, had recognised her very easily, unsurprising given how few nohnas had been around the station, and in particular those built like her.

The trip back to the okiya had been but a short walk, for

which she was grateful. She did not have muscles to tire, nor did the way her mind was constructed leave her capable of achieving mental fatigue any longer, both of which she remembered thinking that expected okā-san would consider an asset to her business, but even then she had been happy to not have too much information to sort through.

The two maiko, Chika and Shizuko, who had been very interested in her on the short walk and asked about her and her skills and her body, which of course was something of a novelty to them, had later become good friends to her.

Shizuko had, Curacao thought to herself, proved to be very badly misnamed. She always seemed to have great difficulty keeping herself from talking away, and had found herself kept back from her minarai because of this. She was, however, popular with the customers, and commonly received requests, and was rarely without engagements, which given how junior she was in the okiya was quite a thing.

When they had arrived at the okiya, the two of them had insisted that she enter first. She should perhaps have realised earlier, but she had assumed they were simply being polite. As she walked through the door, though, they had snickered, and she realised that something was amiss. She had then found herself faced with what had been something of a stunning sight.

The whole house had been gathered in the grand downstairs room, okā-san at the front, with Ayano-san beside her, the other two geisha on one side, and the five maiko along the other. Everybody had been, as Chika and Shizuko, in their very best. This display was uncommon, and she had realised she had walked directly into her own initiation.

To see the whole house gathered in this fashion, everybody made up together, had stunned her. One thing

her body, however, did not do was convey emotions by instinct. She had to deliberately assign facial expressions, and stunned as she had been, surprise was not going to show on her, apart from her failing to continue her locomotion, leaving her but for a moment truly stunned before she started moving again.

Okā-san had approved of this, not saying as much, but showing it in her manner and expression. Over the next several hours, the entire house had welcomed her, spending the afternoon sharing tea and playing the traditional games, taking turns teaching her ones she did not already know, and through that getting to know each other. She carried it with her as one of her most precious memories. Such stunning beauty and grace had, without question, accepted her as their sister.

She had arrived wearing an informal kimono, simply because it was what she tended to wear anyway, because whatever she had been outward, she had been a thirteen year old girl inside, and wanted to mirror the traditional values her heroes in the geisha community upheld.

The world around them had a very different style of fashion, some very subdued and business like, others truly outrageous in many ways, if one considered the fashion found in other countries, but all of them more than a little different to the traditional outfits worn by those in the geisha community.

Since its inception, the geisha culture had been a strange mix of rigid traditional values mixed with changing fashions. One thing which had been constant, however, was the sanctity, so to speak, of the okiya. It was not that they were actually sacred, no more than any other home. They were, however, where geisha were able to be off duty, to remove that figurative mask of grace and strength they wore at all times when out amongst others, whether or not they

were actually in their task as geisha.

She had also, in choosing to wear an informal kimono the way she had, arrived with the expectation of starting her shikomi period. With her parents both working hard to pay off the debt accrued through their daughter's illness, she had done her best to be the best daughter she could to them, even if she had spent her time at home, much as she had after her illness had become bad enough that she could no longer leave the house, before she had had to move to the hospital full time during her final, rapid decline.

She had spent the time making sure the house was kept in order, and more than seldom cleaning up after herself when she failed to judge her movements, or failed to control her tail, that unruly part of her body which she had not had before, and constantly failed to take into consideration while moving about.

That, more than anything, had been a constant reminder she was no longer who she had been. The memories of her deteriorated body were as vivid as any other, but they had never felt like her body. She remembered well her life before the illness became that bad, how she had been able to play and be a child as children were. Her new body was biped, and even if it were blue, her feet only had two toes each, her hands only three fingers each, with a claw on each of them, and her face a long, slender lizard's snout, that had all just been slight changes.

None of that brought home to her that she was very drastically different than she had been the same way that her tail did. An entirely new limb, a part of her body which not only had not been there before, but which she constantly forgot, and was reminded of as she slammed it into things or caught it in a door.

But even with that tickling at the edge of her thoughts, as she had cleaned the house and kept it in order, she made

sure to keep the traditional style her parents had always kept, the slightly cluttered but pleasant, calm surroundings of most of the house, and the strict serenity of the tatami room. She had hoped, being the child she still was inside the adult sized body, that she was preparing for her time before she would become maiko in the okiya which would accept her. That time during which she attend the formal training, bringing her skills past that which the normal schooling taught children, the skills which were art and craft, the ones which were not trained by tape the way mathematics and literacy were.

A time during which she would, of course, also do a great deal of the chores which made the house work. Such as cleaning up after the tea they had shared that day she had arrived. She had started her shikomi period as she had expected, that day, and Shizuko had taken it upon herself to show her around the house, first by helping her clean up after the tea, showing her the way to the kitchen as the geiko and some of the other maiko left to attend to their various engagements that evening.

She had shown her the training rooms and the bedrooms, the bathroom, a space with a slight taint of the overly modern in the ancient house, but water shortages being as they paradoxically, given the rising sea levels, had been meant the traditional style of cleaning was not a sensible option, and the recycling cleaning cubicles originally built for nohnas had become much more common, and finally required by law, even in the historical hanamachi.

Finally she had shown her the garden. Curacao had followed Shizuko back to the grand room, unsuspecting, and knew her face would have shown no emotion to the maiko, who had studied her intently as she pulled aside the blinds which shielded the view into it. She had mapped out the space missing from the house in her mind and she had

known it would be a fairly large space for a town, two six mat spaces, around 12 by 19 shaku, were missing from the base of the house, and she now knew where they had gone.

Many okiya of course had one, but in a small town house such as the one this one essentially was, old though it might be it was still subject to the limited space available in the tightly populated Kyoto, which had become no less populated while the land mass which made up Japan had become smaller over the years. In a place like that, such a space was given up to the calm beauty of a tsuboniwa.

Shizuko had, however, still recognised surprise in her body language. While she did not show it on her face, she had stopped cold, half way through a step, and Shizuko had giggled, in that friendly fashion she had about her.

This would be her final chore, it had turned out. Cleaning and cooking had been her primary tasks as shikomi, outside of the many classes she had attended, but she had also kept the garden, raking the sand, covering the trees for winter and so on. This task had been one she had had no experience of at all, and it had been Chika who had helped show her what to do, as she was the youngest and only had become minarai so recently.

In the complex her parents' apartment had been in there had been a tsuboniwa, tended by the grounds keeper, who kept it in immaculate condition. She had never really thought of that, just kind of taken it for granted, and had realised through being told this would be part of her chores that there were going to be many, many more things like that which she would be surprised by during her future life. In that moment she had realised how young and inexperienced she had been, and how far away her dream still was.

Training had not been easy. It was not that her schooling had been difficult, really, not as such; she retained

knowledge well. While her memories and personality was, as far as she knew, human, the container for it was a mechanical device, and she could simply not forget.

Even the beautiful, flowery nature of the Kyoto dialect had been straight forward enough to achieve - reprogramming was not exactly the term, but she could access, consciously, the parts which made up her Self, and those which made up her voice, and she could modify it at will. It took effort, certainly, but a conscious effort she could expend, not something haphazard that developed randomly, leaving you with those small telltales that many retained.

No, the difficulty had been in other things, much more down to earth things, really. Her body, being artificial the way it was, had no reflexes. No involuntary movements. All her joints had to be controlled at least semi-consciously, the way she had to actively will her legs to make movements to walk, and to make the choice to smile and laugh when she found something pleasant or amusing.

In some ways this was a good thing. The traditional dances were strict routines, of course, and she mastered them easily, and had rapidly become popular for her portrayals.

In other ways, however... The entire existence of geiko was dedicated to ensuring that others could relax and enjoy themselves. To do that, one had to be a complete person, as much in tune with one's spirit as with one's body.

That was at the root of her problem, she realised. She was good with her shamisen, Umeraku-san told her as much. But there was something about her as she played it which was, she had also said, mildly disconcerting. Something which was, perhaps, too precise. The little imperfections which might be called style in others were not there, and she had to learn them. And her face, of course, was a mask

she had to remind herself to keep in motion. Her performance with the shamisen was not only with the instrument.

As with her dance, she had to control every motion. Umeraku-san was incredible on her own shamisen, but she, Curacao thought, did not have to remind her eyes to blink, or her neck to swivel slightly or her chest to expand and contract ever so slightly to retain the illusion of a living creature as she played. Every motion, all of those, and her fingers along with it.

This afternoon it had been strumming it, forgetting to angle the bachi correctly, and she caught the string on the return and pulled it too far, and it had snapped. Umeraku-san had said to not worry, and that the string had been old, and Curacao knew very well this was the case. It did not change the fact she had failed, yet again, to sufficiently control her body.

Unbecoming, yes, it was that. It was not a lack of control of herself in the traditional sense of that term, in which one might have movements which were uncontrolled in some way, clumsiness or the like. She perfectly controlled each and every movement of her body, whether she wanted to or not. She had no involuntary movements. What was unbecoming was the way she seemed to be not alive, unless she made the effort to look it.

She had begun to realise that this was what her mother had been so terrified of, where her tears had broken out. Her daughter, the soft but broken body utterly wrecked with illness, had still been alive in a way the one her mind had been transplanted into was not, and never would be.

When she had awoken and jumped in the bed, happy and laughing, her face had been a mask, unmoving and still, her tail had been static and uncontrolled behind her. She had not realised it, but she had seen the vids later on. She knew

now what it had looked like, and how terrifying it seemed. She had not realised how much she looked like some kind of doll, unnervingly animated in a way decidedly inconsistent with things which were alive.

She had not known until she began as shikomi what had been so strange about it, but she had been given help by the others in the house, who reminded her every time they spoke with her to be alive if she did not look it. They did this on okā-san's instruction, and at her own encouragement on the topic. She would never wish for her future clients to be unnerved by her. It went against everything geiko stood for. One put ones charges at ease, made them relax, enjoy themselves and forget the stresses of the outside world, helped them forget that there was such a thing as modern life, anything which was not joy. To simply exist in that moment with them.

So no, she would not have thrown her instrument in a fit of rage. She would have done it willfully, deliberately, destroying part of the ancient and priceless building in the process, and damaging her own position immeasurably, pushing her erikae further away again. It was not near as it was, she knew that well enough, but it would have certainly not helped.

There had been a period during which training had become shorter. Traditionally geiko received training from others, various schooling in a great variety of skills, artistic and otherwise, and over the years this training had become different in nature. It had moved from being something taught by a master to a student until the student was fluent in the subject, to being something taught in more modern ways, whatever modern meant at the time.

This had, however, changed when modern learning had started taking on a more direct application method. It had stopped being something where a teacher taught a student,

and started becoming something where a mind was considered a vessel. Tape study was the term, even though the storage system was a cube of crystal, which had as much to do with a tape as it did with an optical disc or the organic storage systems used in the previous century, before viruses had wiped out masses of information and people had become scared of them.

The method was to to lower the acceptance threshold of the student's mind, to make it accept learning more readily, through drugs or meditation, and for humans and the biological versions of herself, nohnas, used a headset with video screens and headphones were used, whereas for those with bodies like her own there was a more direct way of achieving the same result, the plugs at the nape of her neck, hidden by the panel which she knew was accentuated by the uncovered areas in the white makeup otherwise covering her head and neck where her kimono did not cover.

As the geiko population, as well as geisha in general, had dwindled, however, over the years, slowly but surely reaching desperate levels, from a peak of hundreds of geiko, to how it was now a mere twentytwo, the insistence on tradition had become more and more serious, and this also meant training to become geisha had become more traditional in nature. There was no tape study here, and where in the past electronic tuning tools had been used for the music instruments, power tools and the like for other things, the only other thing thing as modern as the shower cubicle in the okiya was herself and her recharging station. No data pads anywhere, except when someone had a novel to read or music to listen to when researching a client, and no infonet access for any of the family, apart from the one terminal in the office. Clients generally did not understand, and expected to be able to message the okiya, and so they had to accept that. The sign hanging outside the door with

the resident geisha's names was, of course, also smart, and had their schedules and other information, but that had been decided so long ago by the hanamachi that it had itself become tradition.

"We are the guardians of tradition, of our nation's cultural heritage," Ayano-san had said to her, "and you are as much a part of it as those with human bodies. Now, more than ever, we must ensure the survival of who and what we are. What we are is not, by rule, human. What we are is the embodiment of subtle grace and strength, the closest it is possible to come to a perfect person. Perfection is not an attainable goal in a single lifetime, but it is a worthy goal to strive for."

She had thought that night that it was a reminder that she had to be careful and ensure she was all of that. That she had to pay attention to her training to be able to become geiko, to be able to be that embodiment.

It had only been the start of such reminders. She had, confused and honoured in equal amounts, found out that Ayano-san was not only her onee-san, but even the attori of Tamagiku-san, the heir to the okiya, and Ayano-san would become okā-san when Tamagiku-san finally departed this world. Confused because this was normally common knowledge, and honoured because she was told this, and at the same time discovered that not the whole family knew this. It was a matter of record, but while the records were publicly available, they were not generally studied by the residents of the hanamachi, who knew each other more intimately and more personally, rather than through the wide weave of acquaintances perpetuated primarily through the infonet which made up what passed for friendships in the world outside.

The laws had changed, and one particular tradition would no longer be possible. Tradition said that the training of an

attori would begin on the sixth day of the sixth month of the sixth year of their life, but as much as the hanamachi was a world of its own, it was not above the laws of Japan. It had been judged that training of that sort was not acceptable and that the child had to be at least of legal age before it could be given such a prospect.

It was not, really, because of the geisha that this law had been made, it was a consequence of certain practices in the world of business and trade, where families who owned companies would adopt the person who would be the next leader of the company. This had turned from a common practice done with adults who had shown good business sense, and almost turned into a commodity trade in its own right. Children had been traded between these corporate families, and finally the courts had decided it was enough and had put a legal limit on the age of such a trade, meaning they now had to be at least eighteen. Of course the trade continued, now simply less public, but the law remained, and an okā-san could no longer adopt a child if this child was to become attori. A child could join the okiya, they could join the extended family that lived in the house, but legally they would be the child of the parents they had before joining the okiya, the way of most of those who joined the community. Until they reached that age, and were given, with the consent of their parents, the knowledge they were now the child of the okiya.

Not unlike what had happened to herself. She had been stunned, and had failed, utterly, to control her face in a way so as to convey her shock at this revelation. She knew she was being held to a standard as high as anybody ever was, but she had not realised how high until the night of her eighteenth birthday, when she had been brought along to a tea house.

It had been some way into her time as minarai, and while

she generally tended to one tea house, as tradition said, she did accompany the geiko to others, as she was a curiosity, and many found that an interesting thing in its own right and requested her presence. An apprentice of the Kyoto traditions, without the body normally associated with that. So, it had not been any real surprise that she had been asked to accompany Ayano-san that night.

Birthdays were of course a celebration, joyous occasions that they were, but there was no relenting in training, and if one had an assignment one did not skip out on it. One simply tended to one's tasks. The clients of that evening, however, had been a very different matter.

She had exchanged the odd message with her parents, but while it had been courteous and pleasant enough, it had been subdued as the relationship had been before she had left for Kyoto those five years earlier. The nervous smiles on her parents faces had not been what she expected as she entered the private tea room that night.

Alongside them had been two others, a man she had not known, and more strangely, she had thought at the time, a familiar face from the registry office, a retire geisha by the name of Masami. All dressed as though it were a night of revelry and joy, but while tradition suggested geiko were superstitious, she did not believe in coincidences, and this hardly seemed likely to be one.

She had bowed respectfully, and kept her tongue, of course. A minarai does not speak until addressed, and it took a few moments before her father and mother had risen from their places and approached her, followed by the others seated beside them.

"An uncommon situation has occurred, maiko Curacao," Masami-san had said, in that way she had, gentle but with a distinct sense of presence. "As you have no doubt guessed, the occasion of this night is not simply that your presence

was requested by a client, but rather that it was required given your own nature as a legal entity in your own right."

"We," her father had begun, and faltered a moment before gathering himself up again. "Your letters have shown us that you are in the right place, and we are grateful that you have found the place you belong."

She had looked from her father to her mother, who was smiling in a way which she had learned to read as an expression worn by someone who was profoundly sad but tried to hide it. A smile which was not entirely genuine, but supposed to instill calm in others. The smile had fallen from her face, and she stepped forward, and put her arms around what she had never truly accepted as her daughter, and it had taken Curacao a few moments to wrap her own arms around her and hug her back. She had been reminded again of just how different her body was to her parents' - not just mechanical and shaped like a bipedal lizard, but also much taller. Her mother's face had been pressed against her chest, and she whispered the word daughter into the kimono's collar.

"Mother," she had said, "Father. It is most decidedly a delight to see you both, but as Masami-san said, were it only yourselves here, it would no doubt have been a celebration of my birth, but given their presence, surely that is not all."

Her mother had slowly released the hug, and an expression stood on her face that she had not seen before on that face, but which she had seen on Ayano-san's face before. An expression she knew well enough was one of pride, hidden but sincere, in someone else than one self. Her, of course. She had thought it were simply that she was proud that her child, however changed from the human girl she had brought into the world, was doing as well as she was. She had turned to Ayano-san, and saw, to her surprise,

the same expression on her face.

"Curacao-chan," her mother had said, then, stunning her in using a way of addressing her that she had not used while she had had her new body. She remembered to show the surprise, however, and her mother smiled again, just a twitch, as though she saw in her something she had thought utterly lost. "We have been discussing some things with the mother of your okiya, and with Ayano-san, and with Masami-san. Now that you have passed your eighteenth year, the time has come to offer you the choice."

"Okā-san said," Ayano-san had said, picking up the thread in the silence left by her mother, "when we visited you at your parents that my reasons for becoming your onee-san were my own. Tonight a part of that reason might become clear. Understand that this is an offer, Curacao-san, but I do not expect you would decline it. Your mother and father have agreed in principle, but the nature of it is such that it cannot be made legal before tonight, and while it has never been stated as such, your training has been leading towards this."

She had never thought before then that such a thing were possible, that it were even remotely so. Ayano-san were offering her, the first non-biological, non-human, non-alien sentient to study to become geiko, to become her attori.

"When we visited you that evening," she had continued, "it was some time after you contacted us, and I know how distraught you were at having been rejected by so many, but we had to consider ourselves very carefully. All that okā-san said was true. It did, and still does, make sense to accept you into the okiya, for a great variety of reasons. One reason, however, we neglected to mention was that of the future."

"Okā-san believes, as do I, that you may well be that future. Understand when I say this, that it is your person

which is this, and not simply your body and your nature, so to speak. We believe, that in your mind lies that which we require in what might ensure the future of Gion Higashi. Everywhere around us is museums and submerged land, so much history has been lost and we cannot bear it continues. Knowledge exists in the data banks of the infonet, but it is only knowledge, it is not alive. We are the guardians of tradition, and in you, that future could be eternal. Your body and mind could last a thousand years or more. Your memory would be no simple data bank, not simply storage, not just a container. True knowledge, true skill."

"I," she had begun, not stuttering because her voice box were not equipped with that facility, but faltering because her mind failed to complete any sentence.

"Thank you very much," she finally managed to say, as formal as she knew how to, bowing as gracefully as she knew how to.

The rest of that evening had been one of the most surreal of her life. The silent man she did not know had turned out to be a lawyer with the Kyoto government offices, and had completed the forms together with them then and there, and she was officially, in the eyes of the legal system as well as the traditional systems of the hanamachi, the daughter of Ayano-san. After that, the evening had proceeded as did many evenings in which she accompanied one of the geiko to a client, and they performed two dances, one each, with the other playing, and performed the tea ceremony, her for her former parents, and Ayano-san for the others. They had even played games. Her former mother asked which she enjoyed most, and asked if she would teach them, and so they had played konpira fune fune, and they had laughed together and enjoyed themselves by the skills of a geiko and a minarai. So, very much like any other evening entertaining clients, except entirely unlike any other

evening entertaining clients.

She remembered it, as she did everything, in perfect detail. Replaying it before her mind's eye, however, it still seemed entirely surreal. A simple girl like her who had to remind herself to blink and make small movements when playing the shamisen or the shakuhachi, and even to not keep precise time when playing the drums, surely could not be the one to save everybody from the decay of memories.

She knew that tonight she was going to need the tape. No, there was no tape learning, no skill tapes, all the learning was done in the traditional fashion, as everything was. Nothing like that. The only tape she had, the only tape she wanted, was the one which reinforced her desire to be what Ayano-san had asked of her.

So no, it was not revenge. Not against her parents, who had tried their very best to save their daughter, and tried to reconcile themselves with what happened to her. Not against Ayano-san, who was graceful and honest and who she was both proud and honoured to call onee-san, and who she knew she would be just as proud to call okā-san when that day eventually came, eternal though Tamagiku-san had seemed that night ten years ago. Not against the clients, who were the people who apart from themselves most wanted them to keep existing, and of whom there were a great number.

No, the only revenge on her mind was the burden of her future, the legacy which was hers to protect. She could not, however, forget that the kanji kept showing up prominently in the log when she unhooked herself from the charging station in the morning. She did not understand. She worried she might not understand.