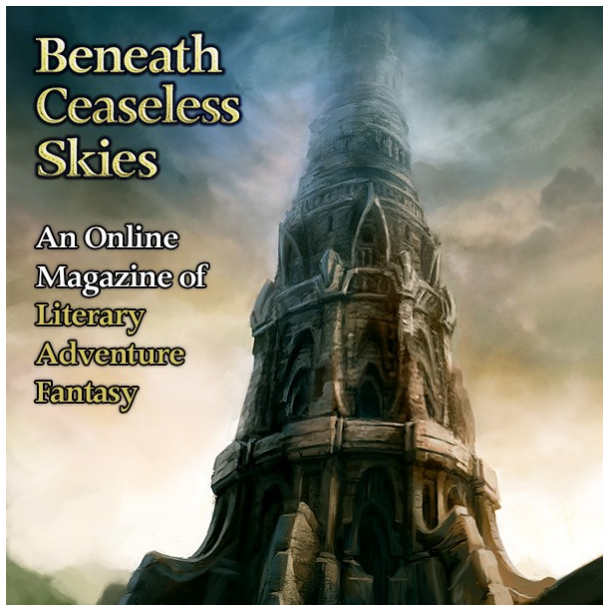


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CALIBRATED ALLIES

by Marissa Lingen

Perhaps if I hadn't been from the colonies, I would have been more willing to see the clockwork guards wasted in the revolution. My home islands are poor in so many ways, but especially in automata. Every machine is tended carefully, and most of them require a great deal more attention in that hot and humid climate if they are not to rust and break down.

No one from the fatherland realized that they could make the automata any differently. Their ways are the right ways, and if the automata break down, it is because the colonies are faulty and decaying and pest-ridden, not to mention full of careless natives like myself.

I knew this, of course, before I came to the fatherland to study automata. That is, before I was sent; no one in my circumstance has a say in where he goes or what he does, although if I could have freely chosen, I would have chosen just this. I was well aware that my skin would bar me from drawing rooms and salons. I still thought it was uncommon kind of my family's owner to free me in order to send me for my training. I

pressed his hand warmly and vowed to him that I would not forget his goodness. I bowed to his wife.

I had no idea that he had done it to please me and buy my loyalty, for the denizens of the fatherland treat persons of my race as slaves whether they are slave or free. I learned that I would have to present student credentials every time I wanted to get into the library, where other students came and went freely as they pleased. I learned that there were some of the student bars that would not take my patronage at all.

And in one of the student bars that would have me, I learned that the fatherland was not nearly as idyllic as we had been told, even for those whose skin was the right color. I sipped my cider—unfamiliar drink for one whose homelands grew neither apples nor pears—and listened with growing shock as the fair-skinned, rosy-cheeked subjects of the emperor complained of his policies in just the terms my darker-complected relatives had used back home.

After a fortnight of this, I grew bold enough to speak to them. “Forgive my intrusion,” I said, and they all regarded me with round, shocked eyes, as though their tankards had made so bold as to speak. “But I have been hearing of your woes. It is much the same with us. I think perhaps we are brothers under the skin.”

One of the men made a rude noise—he did not wish to be the brother of one such as I—but the sturdiest and most sharp-tongued of the women held up her hand. “Is this so?” she said. “Are the beaten-down slaves of our emperor perhaps not so beaten-down after all?”

“I am no slave,” I said, though I had schooled myself to take no offense at the assumption everyone made. “I am a free man and a university student. As I imagine you are.”

“Your imagination does not mislead you,” said the woman. “My name is Belisse.”

“Okori,” I introduced myself. “I am learning the workings of automata. I have been here but a short time, so I do not know your ways well, but—”

“Come over here and sit with us,” she said.

The man who made a rude noise gave her an incredulous look and rose to his feet.

“Is there a problem, Vierre?” she said.

“My family has always treated our slaves kindly,” he said. “That does not extend to socializing with them.”

“Well, *my* family has never been in a position to *have* slaves, gently treated or no,” said Belisse, and several of those around her nodded. “We do not oppose imperial tyranny only to set up tyranny of our own. Sit with us, Okori, and let Vierre choose as he may.”

I did pull up a chair to their fireside enclave, bringing my half-full mug of cider with me. The rude man set his jaw unpleasantly, but he did sit back down.

I said very little for most of the rest of that evening, and I believe the rest of them guarded their words also, for that there was one among them they did not know as well as they knew each other. But I could be wrong; it could be that they were still discovering how far to trust each other also. When you know you are new, everyone else seems like a veteran, a fixture.

But these people had the ring of long-rehashed arguments gathering steam, of a tipping point being reached. When I was ready to go home, I finally spoke.

“I have told you that you are saying many of the same things as my people at home, and this is true,” I said. “The difference is that mine are not using empty rhetoric.”

Belisse froze. “I beg your—”

“You are not slaves.”

“We—”

“You are *not slaves*,” I repeated. “My mother cannot get on a boat and sail to the next island without permission. My father has to ask a man who is not part of his family nor any kind of partner if he may go to the next town. Neither of them can decline to do the work set to them. Neither of them can come to

university to learn another kind of work. Until three months ago, neither could I.

“I see how the emperor treats you shabbily. I see that this is not the life you would ask for. I agree with you. I support you. I am your brother.

“But you have *no idea* what it is to be a slave.”

There was a flat silence, and I wondered if I had ensured that they would never listen to me again, would banish me from their circle before I was even on its periphery. But one of the women who had not spoken before did so then.

“I apologize,” she said. “I should hope we all do.” And to my shock, they did—some of them not bothering to feign sincerity, but it was clear to them that the turn of the tide was against them, and they must pretend I was a person for just a bit, just long enough to satisfy the sensibilities of this quiet woman and some of the others.

I made note of which these were, to be careful of them from then on. Vierre was among their number, but there were others. One does not get sent, an island boy who grew up in slavery, to the glorious fatherland’s glorious university without some awareness of identifying and watching enemies.

Of course they would say I was not to think of them as enemies. Well. They could say what they liked. I valued my life more than their opinions.

I took a circuitous route back to the little house in which I rented a room—I could not yet think of it as home—but there were no footsteps in the alley behind me, no hands finding my collar to pull me around, no voices shouting my name in tones unfamiliar to me. I could bolt my door and relax, a little, in the spare room with its threadbare, chilly bedcovers. No one shared it with me, which I found a blessing that night, for all that it had been cold and hard to get used to. None of the other students would have shared with me, and the other men of my color were slaves.

This was not what I had come for. But it was what I had found. My parents always put their back to whatever tasks they find among our people, once the chores of our masters are done; I could do no less than they.

The emperor's palace guard are each a work of art, made of just the right mix of electrum that they will not deform as gold would but will shine forth with all the riches of the emperor's mines. The lenses that make their eyes are polished without flaw; their joints are oiled with the finest pressings of the finest fruit and nut oils, so they smell oddly delicious.

They were not the automata I coveted, when I cast my gaze around the fatherland.

No. I most wished to work with the automata of the emperor's outer court: the footsoldiers, the functionaries, the

recorders of the king's history. For while their joints received ordinary oil and their cases and limbs were of ordinary—though highest quality—brass and iron, it was the gears and switches of their brains I found most appealing. They had to make all sorts of judgments that were difficult if not impossible to predict; they had to be not only capable of functioning on their own but able to do so in the most complex of social environments, lest they freeze up at the wrong moment and prove themselves useless.

Compared to the automata we had in the islands, they were nearly human.

The university would not let me start with automata so complex, of course. They started me on a mere sweeper, a machine I had been able to take apart and rebuild in less than an hour when I was a lad of ten or twelve. When they saw how I handled it, they looked at each other with pondering eyes, and then they gave me a loader. This, too, was familiar, and it was not long before I had the little fellow humming away with beautiful efficiency.

The professors, there at the university, did not expect this. They thought to challenge me. They went on through their machines and finally discovered one whose functioning I did not know and could not guess.

“Their people have clever hands,” one of them said. “I should not be surprised if that’s the extent of it.”

Another, the one who had helped me to find my rooms, snorted derisively. “If Okori was one of our boys, you’d swear he was a genius,” he said. “Young man, have you ever seen an automaton that serves as a courier in a city?”

I shook my head. The villages of my own islands would not be considered a city here in the fatherland, and hardly any mail was sent; the couriers who had arrived at my student lodgings with appointment schedules from the university were a revelation to my eyes.

“I will show you.” He pulled the chest case open and traced for me the cogs that pulled input triggers for the automaton, the tiny compass and orienter for within this city, how it would have to be recalibrated completely for another city. How the arms and legs were induced to move through the city, carefully not stepping on a child’s ball or a kitten’s tail.

I held my breath for the whole time this wondrous machine’s case was open, but I found a broken shaft where the professor did not see it and replaced it quickly, efficiently. He smiled at me and asked me to join him again the next day for fixing this class of automata. The other professor frowned but did not object.

Soon I was a fixture in the kind professor's workshop, finding how to fix things and even create a few of my own. He often said things that were attempting to be sensitive to my plight in a strange land but were instead confusing or patronizing. But he showed me the innards of more kinds of automata than I had ever thought of, and he was able to offer cogent critiques of several of the ones I had conceived when working with my family on our master's lands beside the sea. My ideas for alternative types of metal and oil for a more humid client particularly made him look thoughtful.

Between the professor and the rebellious students, I began to feel— Not exactly at home, never that. But certainly I was finding a place of my own in this large, strange city, and that kept me as content and engaged as I had ever been.

One afternoon I found a young man of my own people hurrying down the paths in the shed behind the building where my classes took place. He looked startled when he saw me coming towards him down the path, my smiling face apparently not his accustomed greeting from strangers.

“Brother, what is your name?” I asked him. “Are you also a student here?”

He laughed incredulously. “A student! As you see, I clean the gardens and the worksheds. You are a student?”

“Yes. My name is Okori, and I study the automata.”

His face lit. “A real student! How wonderful. I have been —” There he stopped and looked around. I wondered what shameful deed he was about to confess. “When I clean. It is easy to listen.”

Then he realized he had been very rude indeed and told me his name, Eluka, and his island, which was several to the east of my own in our archipelago, though he had not been there since he was a very small boy. He had picked up a great deal from listening to and watching the professors of the artifice department. He could make devices of amazing subtlety, but he spent his days cleaning things they did not want to set automata to do: corrosive fluids and tools that were used to shape the automata themselves, or delicate parts of the plants in the garden that were particularly hard to program automata for.

I would have thought he would be trying to design automata to handle his jobs with the plants, but Eluka apparently enjoyed that most of all things he did for the university’s masters, and he would not have ceded the work to a mechanical man for any reward short of his permanent freedom. Instead, he wanted the automata to be able to gauge dangerous materials and use protective gear to handle them, much as a human would do.

By the time we had talked over our work, evening was coming on, and I was hungry. “Now, tell me truly, brother, where is it one can get fried bananas in this city?”

He blinked. “I have no idea.”

“But—” I stared back in astonishment. “Don’t you miss them dreadfully?”

“If the truth is to be told, I barely remember the taste,” he said. “There is a cookshop that does dark greens in the same ramps and spices my auntie swears are the ones from home. But bananas, I could not say.”

In this strange city, even the men of my own kind were not like me. I should have known it when he said he had left the islands so young, and yet it disoriented me. Still, I clapped him on the shoulder with good fellowship, and we went off to find this cookshop, as his terms of servitude for the university did not dictate that he could not allow a friend to buy him a meal from time to time, provided that he told them he was going.

I offered to take him to the tavern with me after, but he protested that they would send someone to look for him if he did not return home. I held out hope for next time, and we parted happily enough.

In the tavern, my student compatriots were not nearly so sanguine. The man who had sneered at me, *Vierre*, had good informants in the imperial court—I suspected him of being

distantly connected to the minor nobility, but he was merchant enough for the rest of the group and so I suppose for me. And the information was too useful to turn down.

Our unrest—the unrest of groups like ours—had not gone unnoticed at the imperial court. The emperor, in short, was nervous. He was also poor—richer than the richest of merchants, of course, but in more debt than they, even if all their ships had sunk on their laden return voyages. There were rumblings of war in the south, and soldiers cost money. That money had to come from somewhere, and the emperor had several ideas.

“He cannot squeeze the peasants any further; they are already bleeding for him,” said Belisse fiercely.

Vierre shrugged elegantly. “He is the emperor. Their blood is his.”

“Vierre—”

“Belisse, my dear,” he said, in a tone that reminded me of the master at home talking to any of my people. “Be at peace. I am not saying what *I* believe, I tell you what *he* believes. And how he will act. We must make our choices based on a realistic assessment of his.”

“‘Realistic’ is one of those words people throw around to silence others,” I said meditatively.

Vierre turned on me. “Oh, is that so, islander? Do you feel sure, then, that the emperor will treat us like a kindly father?”

“Not at all,” I said. “I expect he will take whatever he can get from all of his subjects, and then add a surtax to whatever remains. But I try not to condescend to others when I say so.”

Belisse’s eyes went wide, and Vierre’s narrowed. “Vierre condescends to everyone, Okori,” said Belisse. “It is his natural condition.”

“How charming,” I said.

“And you, with the sweat of the islands barely dried on your back and the grease of the machines still under your fingernails, what you know of charm—” Vierre started.

“This is not a charm contest,” said Belisse hurriedly. “This is a discussion of—of our course of action in the coming days.”

The woman who had started the apologies to me—in all this time, I had not yet heard her name—said, “I had not thought it was a matter of our course of action, but of the timing and the practical details.”

The whole group turned to her, I think startled as I was to hear her speak.

“When we have to keep the imperial troops out of our quarter of the city to enact our demands ourselves, how will we do it? That is the question—not whether we will have to.”

And then talk erupted from all quarters of the room, with everyone sure they had the most practical plan—I was amused to hear them avoid “realistic”—for stopping the imperial guard.

Finally I pitched my voice to carry over the babble and said, “And the imperial guards’ automata, how will you stop them when they come against these barricades and these human obstacles?”

Silence fell among them as they realized that I was posing this question, not making a rhetorical point. But if a life of servitude teaches nothing else, it teaches us to recognize futility when it rears its head. Better to bide our time and rise up later than to raise human barricades against the implacable fists of automata.

And yet the tides of the human heart are not easily turned, either. Should the people of the empire bend to this tax, they might bend still more easily to the next, and the moment for revolution might pass. I would think on the problem of the automata. I would set Eluka to it also. I promised the other students earnestly that I would set my shoulder to this task. They did not look relieved.

Once I knew that the city did not rest easy, the signs made themselves clear to me. More mothers pulled their children tight when I walked near; more shopkeepers watched me the whole time I was in their stores. Nor was it mere prejudice that

motivated them: they were also sharper with each other, more willing to find fault, and I worried how a revolution would take them, if the fear of one was making them so high-strung and untrusting of their neighbors.

Though I took the rebellious students seriously over the weeks that followed, I did not let them interfere with the main work for which I had come to the fatherland. While I was sympathetic to their plight, the machines held even more of my sympathy, or perhaps my fascination. With permission from my professor, I began a project of my own, working in semi-secret with Eluca's occasional assistance. I took the courier the professor had first shown me, and I began to change gears around inside its case. When he came in one morning, I said, "I have a surprise for you."

He smiled like a father. "Well, now, what is it, Okori?"

"I have changed this automaton." And I showed him what it would now do: it was a mechanical tour guide for visitors to the university, or to the emperor's portions of the city, all the famous sights. It would explain these wonders of the fatherland in terms I had given it, suitable for a bumpkin who was not aware of the finer points of culture.

The professor followed the automaton and I around the city like a child on an outing, laughing and clapping his hands at each new monument. After the automaton had announced

that our next destination would be the Museum of Imperial Art, he said, as if in jest, “Now, Okori, what if I don’t wish to see the Museum of Imperial Art? What if I am such an uncultured lout that I will not appreciate such a thing?”

I smiled. “Don’t tell me, tell it.”

He leaned towards the automaton and said, “Don’t take me to the Museum of Imperial Art!”

“Very well,” said the automaton. “Our next destination will be Marzipan Street.”

“Okori!” said the professor. “A lout who is not interested in art might well want a pastry.”

“That was my thought.”

“And you transferred it to the automaton without a hitch. Oh, well done!”

I beamed at the praise and accepted his offer to buy me a pastry. The automaton sat with us in the streetside café, watching impassively as powdered sugar and crumbs flaked down our shirts.

The next day it was hard to believe we were living in the same city. I was awakened at dawn by the sounds of shouting—not the merchants of fish and milk and meat trying to get the best prices for their freshest wares, but angry noises, frightened noises.

The revolution was at hand.

Belisse's quiet friend had gotten her way in one thing at least: the people of the city organized swiftly. They began to build their own barricades, most not even knowing what they were trying to gain or prevent. They knew only that the time was now, the day was today, and they must be part of it, whatever *it* might become.

I packed my tools, both of my books and my notes, and the change of clothing I had bought with the master's gifts. It made a very small bundle for my entire life. I found Eluka in his small, bare room, smaller and more bare even than my own. "Come, brother," I said. "We will have a part in all this."

He quirked an eyebrow at me. "I have hopes that that part will not be my head upon the emperor's spike."

"If you help me, it need not be," I said. "And may be far, far better than that, for you and for our people. Isn't that worth some risk?"

"I hope so," he said gravely, but he followed me as I had intended, and on my way I told him my plan. As I had hoped, it met with his approval, but I could see that he shared my trepidation about what we would need to do.

We made our way to the tavern, where my suspicions were confirmed: the heart and soul of the revolt was here. More to the point, the planners were here. Someone had drawn a map of the city streets on cheap paper, and Belisse was gravely

pointing out weak spots to runners who left the room to act as human versions of the automaton I had recalibrated for my own purposes. Poor thing; I feared it would be sitting quiet for many days: only a fool would try to see the sights of the great city now.

“Belisse,” I said, demanding her attention before another runner could ask for it. “Have you thought more of the question of the automata?”

“I have, and I hope you will help me with the plan,” she said. “We must destroy them.”

“What?”

“Foul the gears,” she said brusquely. “Make them grind to a halt.”

I said, “There may be a better way.”

Eluka looked at me in startlement, not yet used to men of our race raising their voice in contradiction of those of the fatherland who were so often our masters. But he could grow to like it, I could see in his face.

I went on boldly: “Why should we abandon the automata when they might be our staunchest allies? If we can have brass and iron as well as flesh and bone on our side, how can the emperor stand against us?”

I heard someone mutter, “Superstitious islanders.”

There is nothing to do at such moments but maintain one's dignity. I said, "It is not a matter of superstition. It is a matter of training. I am myself an automaton mechanic, and I know that their reinforcement of the emperor's policies is not an act of nature but of human programming."

Belisse pursed her lips, giving me a considering look. "And you believe that the same programming could be altered to make them join our side? Would that be better? Wouldn't they just be our slaves instead of his? Oh." She looked stricken that she had just accused an islander of being a slaver, but this was how I had hoped the freedom fighters would be, challenging and considering.

"We are all what we are shaped to be," I said. "Why not give them the chance to be shaped by free and equal intent instead of slavery? I don't know whether the automata can be shaped to have their own will yet. But I do know that for the moment, they have not been, and I cannot stand to see such a powerful tool brushed away and abandoned."

"The savage is right," said Vierre, surprising me. "Far better to recalibrate these tools for our use than to throw them away unnecessarily. I would not know, myself, whether it was necessary, but if our islander friend—friends?"

I bowed. "This is Eluca."

“Quite. If our islander friends are willing to take this risk, I am certainly willing to have them do it.”

Belisse frowned. “Okori, what if you’re caught in this attempt? We may need you to break the automata. If you miss the chance to do so, will anyone else know how it must be done?”

I smiled ruefully. “Have faith in your own ability to smash and be foul, Belisse. It is far easier to destroy than to create, or even to recalibrate. If the time comes, and if Eluka and I fall, you will think of sticky horrors to dump upon the automata from above or corrosive agents to throw upon them. I will write down the name of a professor at the university who has been kind to me. I don’t know that he will help you, but he may.”

With that, she was content, or if not precisely content, willing at least to let us try for the greater victory rather than settling for the lesser. I did not notice what she did not say until her quieter friend, the one whose name I never learned, said it herself: “Be careful of yourselves. Do not take unnecessary risks. We would hate to see you lost even for such a cause.”

“Yes,” Belisse added, surprised. “Take care.”

I smiled at the quiet one and thanked them both. Eluka hurried out ahead of me to find some tools and things that would be useful for us to take along. Vierre caught my shoulder

as I was leaving. "I beg your pardon," I said as mildly as I could. I hoped I would not have to dislodge him physically, and my hopes were realized: he looked startled and let me go.

"I wanted a word of you."

"Words are free," I said cautiously.

He looked at me as though he would like to have me thrashed, but he plunged onward with his intended conversation: "When you have done your task with the automata, what is your plan?"

"Plan? I had not made one."

"I would like to suggest that I might be of assistance to you," he said, and it sounded as though each word hurt him.

"I cannot imagine how that could be."

He had to take several deep breaths to continue. I did not feel I was goading him, but clearly my very presence was an irritant. Which is why, I suppose, I should not have been surprised by what followed. "I had wondered if you might wish to return to your home. Classes at the university are likely to be disrupted for some time, and if things are as you say for your family, you might have hopes of improving their circumstances in the chaos that will follow as we improve our own."

I laughed mirthlessly. "Your own background blinds you, rich man. It was difficult enough for me to get here, and I have no means for getting back."

“My family owns many ships. If there was passage available to you without having to arrange it personally in advance—without having to pay—”

“My people are rather suspicious of free passage in your people’s holds,” I said, and there I knew I *was* goading him.

“A cabin of your own,” he said through gritted teeth. “Strict instructions that you are a free man. I know that by now, Okori. You are helping to free my own people; I cannot stand by and do nothing for yours.”

I considered him curiously. Was he truly so wracked by conscience? Or did he merely hate having a man of my race around, reminding him that he was not free by his own people’s toil alone but required alliance with the hated darker race to get there? I didn’t have to know; either motive would get me home safely. I tried to think whether there was anything he might be hiding, anything that might turn on me.

“Free passage,” I repeated cautiously. “Not to be charged at the other end of the voyage. Not to be seized and made to work it off.”

“I give you my word,” said Vierre. “In writing if you like.”

I put my hand out thoughtfully. He took it without a murmur, and we shook on it. “In writing,” I said. “That I may present it to the ship’s captain, and if I have made a mistake, he

will say, ‘your pardon, this is the wrong ship,’ rather than clapping me in chains.”

Vierre pulled parchment from his jacket and begged a pot of ink from the innkeeper. As he began to write, he said, almost absently, “You are rather focused on being clapped in chains, aren’t you?”

“So would you be,” I replied.

“I may be clapped in chains myself, when we have finished,” he said.

And indeed he might be, but if he could not tell the difference, I could not explain it to him. I accepted his parchment with grave thanks and went about the next task of my evening.

Eluka gave me some of his own old clothes, battered and worn and not fit for a free man. We had to make sure no one considered us threatening, no one considered us worthy of note. We would be two slaves cleaning, little more than automata ourselves. No one would remember our faces, other than their blackness. Our tools would seem those of a menial, if no one looked too closely. We would blend ourselves into the dark background of the risen city.

On the other hand, every man of our race in the city would be at risk if we succeeded and they managed to figure out how we had done it. But so many people came so near to the

emperor's guards—almost near enough, too near in retrospect to be safe. We judged it worth the risk.

Bowing and averting our eyes as we passed through the palace grounds, brushing away minuscule bits of dust and debris, we made our way to the barracks. The soldiers and their kit were as uniform and as tightly packed as a shed of automata. The rank and file soldiers gave us no attention, their minds clearly on more important things than two presumed slaves. One of the sergeants ordered us to the courtyard to clean, and we nodded earnestly and scurried along as though intent on obeying him.

The tool shed where the rows of automata were being calibrated was easy to find by the smells of the metal and machine oil; the debris of the rest of the city's uproar had not yet reached that section of the imperial palace grounds. We were able to shut ourselves in without anybody outside noticing that anything had gone amiss.

The artificer inside was another story. He frowned at us without really seeing us and said, "Come back later; I haven't finished with them."

"I'm afraid you have," Eluka said gently. "We'll take over from here."

"Come now, don't be ridiculous," said the artificer, looking at us anew. "They're not nearly ready to be taken away yet."

“You need to leave now and let us work,” I said, in the same voice I would use to speak to a child or a skittish animal. “We are not your slaves. We are not your servants. We have a task to do here, and you need to let us do it.”

“These are *my* automata, and you—” The artificer trailed off, staring glumly at the machines. “You are going to destroy my machines, aren’t you?”

“No,” I said. He looked at me incredulously. “We will reprogram them. We will do it with care. You need only stand aside.”

“This is ludicrous.”

Eluka made a grim noise in the back of his throat. I sighed deeply.

“We don’t want to hurt you,” said Eluka, gently, so gently. I looked at my gentle friend, and I saw that he meant it.

“Come now,” I said, still using the voice I used with strange dogs and sick children. “There are two of us, and we’ve barricaded you in. Your only choice is how it goes for you, how hard.”

I still regret that we did not check to see if we could revive him when we had finished with our programming. It may have been the difference between his life and his death. Or it may not; he may have had no chance at life left. The wrench Eluka hit him with was heavy, and he bled on it. He may have had no

chance at all. But we could have made some effort. He was one of us after all, a man and a maker of automata.

And he had maintained his charges beautifully. Their cases opened smoothly, without creaking, and the smell of fresh oil greeted us as we replaced—carefully, oh so carefully—the cogs and wheels that governed them, set some of the mechanisms to turning at rates they had not been intended to turn. With our wrenches and our gears, we recalibrated the machines to rebel.

We couldn't finish all of them; we were little more than halfway done when there was a hammering at the door, and then the lock we had closed behind us started to turn. We whisked our tools up into our bundles and shut the cases, making sure that the imperial artificer was well hidden behind the crates we climbed to make our way out the window and to freedom.

Eluka beckoned that I should follow him up to a quiet rooftop a few blocks from the main barricade and above. No one noticed us on our way out, either, for we did not skulk or hurry. We moved with the same purpose we had given the automata, and once we gained the roof, no one looked up to find us there.

The automata all marched out of the imperial palace in formation, their brass cases glinting in the sun. I fancied that I could tell which ones we had touched, that their steps were

crisper and more sure than their brethren, their rifles at a more alert angle, but I knew it was only fancy. We could not yet tell whether we had made a purposeful difference or whether we had broken the machines we loved.

In the end, it was some of both.

The citizens of the city, jeering and singing behind their barricade, fell silent as the automata advanced. I thought I could hear a muffled sob behind the barricade, but that was probably as much my fancy as the difference in the automata. The noise of the mechanical men's feet on the street, the commands the imperial sergeant barked at the artificial platoon—those would have drowned out all but the most piercing wail.

The city's people—for the moment, my people—had more pride than to scream their lives out in the implacable face of the automated platoon. They held to that much dignity, at least.

Then the sergeant gave the order to fall upon the barricade. I could feel Eluka holding his breath beside me. But it happened as we had intended, or mostly so. One of the machines we had altered seized up as a man bitten by a poisonous snake. It fell to the cobblestones and made a horrible tearing, groaning sound.

The citizens cheered, and I hissed at them.

It was too late to hear my hissing anyway, too late to hear much of anything after that, for the rest of the automata Eluka and I had altered fell upon their unaltered fellows. Any machine that dared to fire on the barricades was seized by its fellows, its rifle removed and its arms clamped and bent.

The sergeant tried to adjust on the spot, but he was no artificer, and the mechanical men still under his control were not calibrated to tell the differences among their fellows by behavior, as ours were. He could only insist that they advance onwards, onwards, and our automata assisted by placing their fallen brethren up against the barricades as reinforcements.

I could not say whether the day was won. But our part of it had succeeded, within tolerances.

We scrambled down off the roof into the chaos.

Somehow over the din of the rifle shot hitting the plates of metal and planks of hard wood, I managed to make the two nearest automata hear my command to follow me, and we hurried down a safe alley, one controlled by our people. The machines waited impassively while I asked Eluka whether he wanted to stop for his things before we departed.

“No, brother,” said Eluka. “I have not been home to the islands since I was a boy. *This* is my home. I shall stay, I and this machine, and we shall reap what harvest we can.”

I embraced him briefly, rasp of unshaven cheek against cheek, and I gave his automaton a respectful tap on the shoulder. I turned to my own. "The harbor is our destination," I said.

It regarded me wordlessly a moment, then turned to lead the way to the harbor without my directions.

I trusted that Vierre would be good for our passage, for I knew he would rather have me and the machine where he did not have to look at us, where his mind could remain open at a distance.

But Eluka will be there. Eluka will be working as I work. And the triumph will be ours not only in the islands, not only in the fatherland, but everywhere.

I have been refining this machine I bring with me, so that he will know his tasks on the island, and will perform them to perfection.

There is salt air on my face, and the air has grown warm. Soon I will be home.

We will burn the main house.

Only the slave quarters and the tool sheds will be spared.

for Alec.

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Marissa Lingen lives in the Minneapolis area with two large men and one small dog. Her work has appeared in Analog, Baen's Universe, and Nature, among others.

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THE LADY OF THE LAKE

by E. Catherine Tobler

No one knew why I was drawn to the sea, not even me. But when I fell into the waters, strangled by the scarf held by my own mother's hands, and felt my human skin peel away, then I knew. I was a lady of the lake.

I slipped under the still surface of the bay to glide over rock and reef; plunged deeper yet to discover serpent and shell; twisted beneath branching coral and koi choruses. I breathed the sea through my knife-edge mouth, but my transformation was not yet complete.

* * *

Susanoo was to be married and the whole week through, people visited the ancient bamboo stand upon my island to tie their omikuji to branches so that it might be bound to the trees for one of two reasons. One: their fortune was poor and they would rather it be tied to the tree than themselves. Or two: their fortune was filled with excessive blessing and they wished it to possess the strength and endurance of the tree's roots. Some of the omikuji were colored gold, intended for Susanoo himself.

That the trees could do both—accept the burden of bad fortunes and strengthen the good—was but one contradiction among these people. No one seemed to mind, not even me, for it gave me another thing to ponder through the day. Would the trees bend under either burden? Might too many bad fortunes tip them over until the roots were pointing to the sun? Or might too many blessings cause the tree to bury its roots so deep they one day emerged from the ground in a land far distant from here?

In rain and fog and sunlight, the faithful streamed across the wood bridge to make their way to the tree. Among them came—

“Min! Min!”

Whereas the others walked, little Sun Lin ran over the bridge, pressing through the robed elders to make her way not to the trees but to me, where she dipped to one knee and took up the hem of my kimono as to kiss it. Her fingers seemed to gleam.

“Lady—”

“Up with you,” I said, never accustomed to such displays. Most who dared come to this island never sought me directly, for they were too timid, too frightened of what I was with my blue-black skin and milk-white eyes. They might leave me

offerings of sake, which I gratefully devoured, but they did not come close.

And what was I exactly? It was a good question, one even I asked myself, for I could remember a young girl's life, being pledged in marriage and falling in love with one forbidden me. I could remember the swift bite of the scarf against my throat and the look in my mother's eye before she pushed me into the water. Was this how every lady of the lake had been born?

"It is Susanoo," Sun Lin said, pulling herself up with the aid of my kimono. She clung to me and glanced at the bridge, at the gray-green waters below, as though the sea god were on her very heels.

I couldn't help but look too, for it was possible. The waters remained still however, as if lulled by the layer of fog which blanketed them. "I do not see—"

"He will come," the little girl said, and wrapped an arm tight around me, trying to pull me away from the water. "He is coming for the sword."

I looked from the still waters to Sun Lin and felt only dread course through me. My fingers sought the memory of a scarf around my throat, then slid down to Sun Lin's thin shoulder.

"There is no sword in this lake," I said. Sun Lin knew this as well as I did. I had given the sword to the then-future king,

when he parted these lake waters and crossed toward me on bare feet. Sun Lin trembled.

There came a terrible wind to sweep the clinging fog from the lake's surface. The wind howled beneath the bridge's gentle arc, lifting the fog high into the tree branches as Susanoo foamed up from the lake. The vehemence of him was startling to me even now, and he arrived with extra fury, for he disliked me. Me who commanded the water in some small measure. Though he was god of the sea and its storms, he longed to conquer every droplet.

“Min!”

My name in his mouth was like thunder. I stepped backward, shaking much as the bamboo around us did. Lake water flooded the bank when he came ashore, and the people on the bridge looked but did not see what caused such a surge. *Susanoo*, someone whispered, and others fled.

“Tatehaya Susanoo-no-Mikoto,” I said and bowed deeply, making certain my kimono spread around me in a flattering manner. I was dead, but I didn't have to appear as such. My black-blue bare toes peeked out from the pale hem, muddy.

Susanoo stepped ashore, water and mud squelching beneath his feet, feet which glimmered with a hint of silver and blue scale. Though I would never tell him, I had taken to watching him frolic his afternoons away as a fish in the deep

waters off the island. He was beautiful when he thought no one was watching, when he let his arrogance fall away. Fish cascaded from his kimono now, flopping backward into the disturbed waters where they vanished.

“I am to be married,” he said. He pulled his long black hair over his shoulder and pressed the water from it. Sea stars and shells tumbled to the island ground. Sun Lin hid further behind my kimono.

“Are you, then?” I asked. “It was unclear, based on the continual celebration.” I gestured to the trees which bore his golden fortunes, to the crimson lanterns which swayed in the distance. The low rumble of music could be heard, if one listened carefully enough.

He stared at me as if he might like to push me under the waters; alas, I would breathe on and he knew it. And then his broad face broke into a smile and a laugh, the latter of which sent the bamboo shivering again.

“I do not like you, Min,” he said. “Your name is too short and you command waters that should be mine, and yet, you are not afraid to speak your mind. It is why I have come to you.”

Not afraid? I was relieved I conveyed such an impression, for my legs trembled beneath my kimono. Sun Lin’s hands curled tighter into the fabric.

“Indeed?”

He inclined his head and a violently blue lobster emerged from behind his left ear. The creature peered at me, then crawled back into the wet tangle of Susanoo's hair. Susanoo lifted his hair once more, pulling it into a knot which he secured with a gleaming, flowered comb. The lobster, robbed of its shelter, perched awkwardly on his shoulder.

“Before my bride can appear, there is a task I must complete, but this task may not be achieved without your great and generous assistance.”

This plainly made him uncomfortable, for he shifted and a tumble of orange-splattered koi fell out of his kimono. He nudged them into the water with his toes.

“My great and generous assistance,” I repeated. “And if I declined to provide such things?”

Susanoo's eyes flashed, as though he had not considered me capable of refusing him. As he now did, it displeased him. He opened his mouth to speak but remained silent. I lifted a hand to keep him silent, feeling strangely emboldened. I was dead, but he could find ways of tormenting me; what was I thinking?

“Great Tatehaya Susanoo-no-Mikoto,” I said, “ever since I first came to this island, you have disliked me, going so far as to trample the bamboo and steal all of the golden koi.” He almost looked ashamed of himself, for these were the tantrums

of a child, not a god. “And now you would ask my assistance in a task that you cannot fulfill on your own? I would ask how such a thing is possible; how can the mighty ruler of Yomi be so powerless that he needs *my* help?”

Was it a blush that colored his cheeks or had the temperature dropped?

“Izanagi is a trickster, is he not?” Susanoo asked. He spread his hands before him, broad palms dripping with lake water. Had Susanoo’s own father set him to this task? “Perhaps he has a wish for us to bury our grievances with one another, to come to an understanding—”

“*Our* grievances?” I shook my head. “I have none with you—save what mischief you have wrought upon my island.” *My island*. He flinched at those words. “Perhaps this is but a way for you to lay claim to something you otherwise cannot.”

Susanoo bent to one knee upon the damp ground, looking up at me. Did he make himself smaller then, to seem inconsequential? The lobster took the opportunity to leap from his shoulder, back into the depths of the lake.

“Gracious Lady of the Lake,” he said, “I am humbled before you today. I ask your forgiveness so that I might— So that *we* might complete this task set to us.”

This task had not been set to us but to him. How long might one live if they denied a god? Susanoo could not drown

me in these waters, nor could a blade pierce my heart, but he commanded all of Yomi, and what tortures he might devise there I did not wish to know. Sun Lin shook like a branch behind me, and I rested a hand upon her shoulder to calm her.

“Tell me of this task,” I said.

Susanoo smiled at me. “We are to reclaim Ama-no-Murakumo-no-Tsurugi,” he said..

Indeed he had come for a sword, but not just any sword. He wanted the sword in the dragon’s tail.

* * *

Yamata no Orochi was no ordinary dragon, of course. It was said to be a hideous beast possessing eight heads and eight tails. It was claimed to devour princesses upon sight, spitting out their skeletons whole as keepsakes for their shattered families. It was said to plumb the ocean’s darkest depths without stirring any water, just as it soared the heavens without disrupting any cloud.

Some said the Orochi was eight valleys long, spreading so far and wide that cypress and fir anchored themselves upon its back; said that its winter-cherry eyes could root a man to the ground much as these trees had taken hold. It was said to be the color of moss, the color of night, and that one might step upon its back and never know until one of the eight monstrous heads lifted and swallowed the person whole.

Some of this was truth; some of this was tale. I had never spit out a skeleton whole, though indeed I had once tried, and surely I was not eight valleys long. One valley, perhaps, when I stretched as far as I might.

“If the sword is within the dragon’s tail,” Sun Lin said, “then how might Susanoo claim it?”

She danced around me as I walked away from the shore. Susanoo had gone his way and I was to go mine, but I paused a moment, letting my toes sink into the cool mud near the island’s well.

“He would cut it out,” I said, and crouched beside Sun Lin. “Have you seen Orochi?”

She shook her head, hair whispering about her cheeks which seemed to glow. “No, and do not wish to. If there are eight tails, how might he know which tail holds the sword?” Her eyes were wide and dark like cups of sake, clearly afraid by the idea even as she sought to sort it out.

“He might have to cut them all open,” I said. Susanoo would relish that, would he not? I wondered if he knew, knew that I was the beast who harbored the sword.

“They say—” Sun Lin had to take a gulping breath, and thunder rolled through the clouded sky. “They say the monster can turn itself inside out, becoming an old woman. They say it eats little girls and spits their bones out. They say—”

“Nonsense,” I said. “The bones would be fun to crunch, wouldn’t they?” Incidentally, they were.

Sun Lin’s eyes widened more than I thought possible. “Maybe I— Maybe I would see this monster,” she said. She drew herself up as tall as she might, lifting a broken bamboo branch as a sword. “Should it come to this place, I would defend us.”

One day, it would be her place to do just that, but not today.

“Will you go with him?” she asked.

I crossed to the well to draw up a bucket of water, with which I washed my feet clean. “I can do nothing else,” I said, realizing then who Susanoo was taking as his bride.

Inada was the princess-daughter of two earthly elders. She was the last of eight, the other seven having been given to me in tribute. The elders did not see it as tribute so much as losing their precious children.

Every year, I had taken a daughter from them, out of gravest need as I tried to sustain myself through the long winter. I did not enjoy this thing; in the girlhood I could remember, there was warm rice and cold tuna. These were the things I longed to eat, but the taste of them now was like ash upon my tongue. But the flesh of young women— What god

could be so cruel as to make me desire such a thing? Only sake obliterated that desire.

I crossed the lawn to the small house upon the island. Sun Lin followed, asking no more questions as I kneeled before my calligraphy table and spread out a fresh page. My brushes were clean, my inks fresh, and I wrote a long and winding prayer upon the page, letting the ink run like a black river into every pore of the paper. When I had finished, I set the brush aside and folded the page into a hundred tiny creases before at last taking up a length of twine.

Even a monster might make a prayer.

* * *

I woke naked on the shore of the deep bay the following morning, sand crusted to the side of my face. I stretched in the morning sun and looked to the brightening sky above; larks spread through the thin clouds, singing before they took to the trees. Fish slipped past my toes with a murmur and then were gone. Something else inside me stretched, too, reaching.

My head ached and I longed to slip back under the waters. I longed to shed the confines of this human form but could not chance Susanoo discovering me here as Orochi. He would strike and my blood would foul this sacred place. Instead, I pulled myself up and walked slowly to the house, where I bathed and dressed in a fresh kimono.

By the time Susanoo returned, pulling a yellow sea star free from his cheek, I had eaten a simple meal of mussels and clams. I felt as though I should pack something for our journey, but I had no idea what I might take. When I came to this place, I brought nothing, and as I prepared to leave, I could think of nothing I should take. I penned Sun Lin's name on a fresh sheet of paper and tied it with a bright red ribbon. I placed it on the house steps.

I did not know if I would return to this place; I presumed not, but as Susanoo had said, Izanagi was a trickster. Could it be he had brought me all this way to simply end my life now, for the surrendering of a sword? I bowed to Susanoo when he approached, and he shook his head at me.

"We are side by side in this matter," he said. His own kimono was bright today, white with great patches of golden-orange. His hair was knotted atop his head, and that same comb gleamed amid the darkness. "You have granted me this great thing, and so if you bow to me, I must bow to you."

He did bow to me then, and I wondered how much such a thing shamed him. He was a great god, above nearly everyone; to bow to a lady of the lake could not have pleased him.

"Do you know where we shall find this orochi?" I asked him as our path led us from the familiar shoreline and deeper into the trees. Morning's fog still clung in the greenery,

masking everything, though I could still see Sun Lin's waving hand as we departed.

"It will come for the daughter," Susanoo said, and gestured down the long trail before us, "at the home of the earth elders. Their weeping shall no doubt guide us; I can smell the salt of their tears now."

In a way, this was true, for I walked with Susanoo toward the house of the earth elders and longed for the eighth daughter. The others had been sweet, the second one terribly so.

"And how will you claim Ama-no-Murakumo-no-Tsurugi?" I looked sideways at Susanoo, at the sword strapped to his back. They called it the Slash of Heavenly Wings, and I could almost feel its caress. Susanoo returned my gaze, level and even as we continued through the forest.

"It is certainly a difficult beast," he said, "for with eight heads, the gods have given it sixteen eyes. How may one avoid such attention? Fearsome, for it has devoured seven elder daughters. And yet..."

He paused and we walked in silence until I prodded him. "And yet?"

"Would you find me guilty of flooding a farmer's fields if I did it to smother a fire?"

I made no reply to this, understanding the weight of the look Susanoo gave me. It did not ease my mind. The deeper into the forest we went, birdsong and the wind's sigh became our companions. I did not need Susanoo to guide me along this path, for I knew it as surely as he did; I had traveled this path seven times before. This would be the last.

“Do you love this woman you will marry?” My question seemed disrespectful, but I asked it anyway, knowing it did not matter when Susanoo struck me down now. If my blood were to flood this forest, perhaps the trees would grow stronger for it.

“I know the orochi better than I know she who is to be my bride,” he said. “This brings me sorrow and steals my sleep. How does one end the life of a noble creature?”

I looked at Susanoo in the lingering fog and was bewildered enough to stop walking. He took three more steps, realized I was not at his side, and turned to look at me. His face looked guilty, and a golden koi slipped out of his kimono sleeve to flop on the ground between us.

Susanoo lifted the fish and pulled it back into the relative safety of his wet kimono. He cleared his throat.

“This woman I am to wed,” he continued, lifting fingers to touch the comb in the knot of his hair, “has known one life, a life I mean to take her from. How will it be, becoming bride to

the mighty Tatehaya Susanoo-no-Mikoto? I will have ended the only life she knows.”

I fell into step beside him once more. “All noble creatures know when their time is come,” I said. “When one life is to end and another to begin.”

“Mmph.”

Silence again, and then it began to rain. The rain pattered upon the bamboo and the fog around us grew thicker. The rain soaked us as we walked on and as my kimono grew wetter, my flesh reacted to the water. I felt the first pricklings of the change and looked at Susanoo, god of storms and sea, who was watching me.

“You will forgive me this thing,” he said.

I wondered at his insistence. “If you forgive me *this* thing.”

In the pouring rain, I surrendered to the creature inside of me. My human flesh gave way to dragon scale, which gleamed gold-green in the storm. No fir, no cypress, only immense power coiled within this gods-crafted body, splitting into eight snarling heads and eight whipping tails. Even Susanoo cried out at the sight of it—of me. I dug claws into the muddy ground and leapt not for him but deeper into the forest, toward the home of the elders and their sweet, eighth daughter.

It was an instinct I could no longer deny. Yamata no Orochi demanded tribute, feeding, and when I burst through

the bamboo, the elders shrieked and screamed for Susanoo, Susanoo who was close on my heels, The Slash of Heavenly Wings slicing through the air. He came from the bamboo tops, flying like a graceful egret. His kimono whipped in the storm, bright and sharp like his sword. I lunged for the house and saw no sign of the eighth daughter. She was not awaiting me; the elders had not offered her up.

I rounded the house with a bellow, snapping my tails into the trees. The bamboo leaned as though the entire world had been thrown off balance. And then I saw her, her eye's gleam in the ornate comb that Susanoo wore in his ebon hair. The comb's teeth curled as her very own smile, flower hands free to bloom under the warmth of his protection.

Trickster! I snarled and leapt for him as he came, twisting one head toward the earth elders as seven others went for Susanoo. He laughed as we clashed, looking happier than I had ever seen him.

The bite of his sword was sharp, yet there was some part of me that longed to be cut apart. It was this part of me that was awakening, stretching on the shore, trying to escape. When I leaned into the thrust of the sword, Susanoo withdrew, crying out his surprise.

Then I smelled it, the sweet lure of sake. It was sheltered from Susanoo's storm, eight beautiful and gleaming *masu*

brimming with fresh sake. Each sat through its own gate, as if in offering, and I could not help but turn toward them.

Even as I bent each of my heads, I knew this was a trap. Eight gates for eight heads with eight thirsty mouths that could never resist the varied flavors of the rice wine. The flavors deepened or mellowed depending on the rice; this sake had come from rice fields strewn with cherry blossoms and this from rice allowed to dry under an autumn sun. I plunged forked tongues into the sake, over and over, knowing that this was the moment; when the sake began to soak me the way the rain did, releasing another piece of me.

This was the moment, but it was not Susanoo's voice which said again "you will forgive me this thing." I lifted my heads, maws dripping with sake, and stared at the strange brilliance of little Sun Lin there. She smelled like sake but glowed with the radiance of a thousand heavens, eternal sun.

Amaterasu—a trickster's daughter, I thought, a second before I knew the bite of Susanoo's fierce sword.

He made seven cuts, sure and swift the way he brought a storm. He lingered over the last cut, though, and I whipped away from Sun Lin to swallow Susanoo whole. He wriggled down my throat like a caught fish, until deep inside me he swung and severed the eighth head from the inside out. I fell into the *masu* of sake, and the thing inside me was freed.

This part of me, gleaming like the moon, stretched toward the bamboo tops then fell through the whispering green, human form reassembling itself from memory, so that when I landed it was on hands and feet made cold from the storm, hands and feet the color of palest jade. Water flooded my skin, running from my hair that was the gray-green of the lake.

“Min!”

Susanoo thundered my name yet again, though this time, it was a sorrowful thing—and not wholly my name, for this part of me was no longer a lady. *Tsukuyomi*, I thought. My eyes moved to Sun Lin, who crouched in the mud and spilled sake.

“Sister?” I asked of her.

She glowed like the sun and I like the moon, and together our eyes sought stormy Susanoo. He stood over my dead dragon body, The Slash of Heavenly Wings poised to cut through the tail which held the sword he sought.

Susanoo’s eyes met my own. Was he surprised or was it pleasure that made his lips lift in an unsteady smile? He said nothing, only turned his sword within his hands and offered it to me. The Slash of Heavenly Wings felt like fire in my hands, and I drew the blade down the dragon’s tail, to reveal the gleam of another sword within.

We each jumped for it. Smaller than Susanoo, I moved more swiftly—like a dragon yet!—sliding beneath him as I

abandoned his sword. But I could not curl my hands around the slick hilt before Amaterasu did. She pulled the Sword of the Gathering Clouds of Heaven from the dragon's tail. Hard rain washed the blood clean and she laughed, the coming of sunrise after a long winter.

“Day and night forever divided,” she whispered, taking a backward step from Susanoo as he reclaimed The Slash of Heavenly Wings. “Izanagi willed it so.”

Something inside me died at that; Sun Lin no longer at the temple, no longer pattering small feet across my bridge. I shook my head, advancing on her. “There are times when moon and sun occupy the same sky,” I said.

Amaterasu snarled and lunged. Susanoo's sword saved me, his storm obliterating her sunlight. The swords together were like thunder and lightning twined, strong and bright and the ground shook beneath us.

“You will forgive me this,” Susanoo said, and The Slash of Heavenly Wings rang once more against the Sword of the Gathering Clouds of Heaven. Susanoo beat Amaterasu backward until I cried him off. He stared at me, fish slipping from his kimono as Amaterasu fled into the bamboo.

Everywhere she went there trailed a golden light, and I watched until I could see it no more. Only then did I look at Susanoo, picking myself up from the sake-drenched mud.

“The sun has its course,” I whispered, “and so too the moon, but the storms go where they will.”

I fled through the bamboo, opposite the sun. Susanoo, with his gleaming comb and bride, flooded the land, sending the elders fleeing for the hills as my blood washed deep into the roots of the bamboo, of the fir. I still do not carry these things upon my back. The moon is cold and empty.

I walked back to the small house upon the island and there, kneeled again before my calligraphy table. I spread out a fresh page with these strange new hands and stroked my brushes slow over the paper. I drew a single name there, a prayer in its own way: *Amaterasu*.

When I had finished, I set the brush aside and folded the page into a hundred tiny creases before at last taking up a length of twine and walking to the ancient bamboo.

Even this moon might make a prayer.

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COVER ART

“Tower of Babel,” by Zack Fowler



Zack Fowler is an environment artist who has worked for computer gaming studios as a Lead Environment Artist and a Level Designer. His main focus is in 3D environment art, but he also works on environment concept art, high-poly 3D modeling, texturing, materials lighting, and event scripting. See more of his work at <http://www.zackfowler.com/>.

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