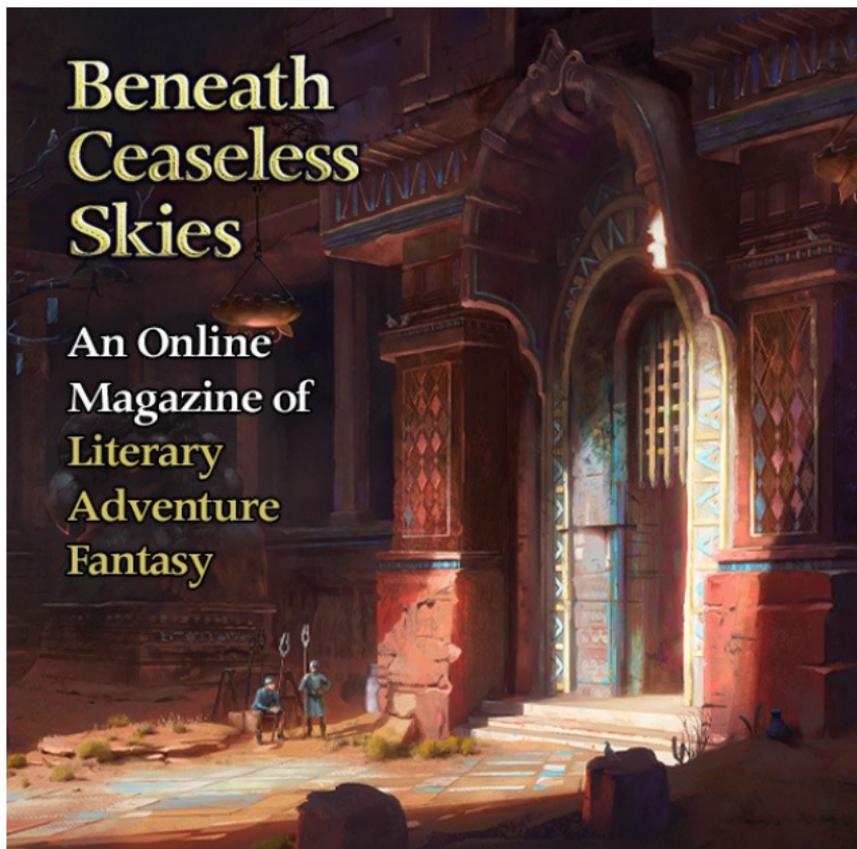


Beneath Ceaseless Skies

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[“Red Bark and Ambergris,” by Kate Marshall](#)

[“No Pearls as Blue as These,” by Benjanun Sriduangkaew](#)

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RED BARK AND AMBERGRIS

by Kate Marshall

After she was taken, Sarai lived two years with a cloth bound over her eyes, learning scent and touch and taste, never once seeing the island that was her prison. When the day came for the blindfold to be removed, she thought at first her eyes must have failed. Home was a world of blue waters and red-bark trees, of jewel fruits and opal-bellied songbirds. Even the sand shone honey-gold and glittered where it clung to creases in the rock, tucked there by a warm south wind. Here on Felas, isle of the essence-eaters, there was only gray. Gray stone and gray water, gray robes and gray faces.

Jarad laughed when she asked what was wrong with her and turned her by her shoulders toward the sea. He stretched out one finger, the tattoo that marked his Mastery stark against his skin. “See that? The crimson at the peak of the ocean’s curve. That is the isle of Verakis, seat of our beloved queen and her court of misers. They hoard gold and joy in equal measure, and do nothing of value with either. That’s where all the color’s gone, little seabird. There’s nothing wrong with you, only with this place.”

She squinted, but her eyes were weak. She couldn't see and couldn't 'sense that far. Still she stared. That far and farther, on and on past Verakis, over a gray sea and then a blue one, far beyond where the eye could reach, there waited red-bark trees and opal-bellied songbirds; there waited her sisters and her brothers, her mother and her father. "I want to go home," she said. "I will go home." Defiant. A fool, but what child wasn't?

A croaked laugh from Jarad brought her chin up. She looked to the structure behind her, the once-fortress, now-prison that dominated the island. Even blind, she had known it was the largest building she had ever encountered. With her sight returned, she could scarcely bear to look at it: half carved from the island's rook-black rock, the rest a lighter stone stacked high enough that not even the narrowest spit of shore on the island escaped its shadow.

"Don't tell me this is my home now. It isn't. I won't stay here."

This only made Jarad shake his head. "This rock is no one's home, girl. But only the best of the poison-tamers can leave it, and only to go to Verakis and live in a prettier cage. The rest of us—scent-makers, stone-tellers, all—we must get used to the gray, for we'll never go home."

“Then I will be a poison-tamer,” she said. She would go south, and then farther south, however she could. Over the gray sea to the blue.

“Verakis is no home either,” he said. “And you are no poison-tamer. It is not your talent. Take this.” He pressed a sachet into her hand, tapped it. “What do you ‘sense?’”

“Vanilla,” she said instantly, scent and ‘sense telling her true. She could feel the faint tug of it below her ribs, almost imperceptible—a gentle essence, not a powerful one. “A Nariguan strain.”

“And what do you smell?”

She lifted the sachet to her nose, inhaled. “Vanilla,” she said again, not understanding the lesson.

“For me it is home. It is the cook-fires in the field at harvest, it is the lines in my father’s face. Take this.” He took the sachet from her, gave her another.

“Red bark,” she said, and lifted it to her nose without prompting. Closed her eyes. She saw her mother’s hands, stained from working the bark. Heard her auntie’s laughter and the rumble of her father’s voice. Felt the slanting sun on her skin as she ran, ran, over the dry earth of the forest toward the beach, toward the shore. “Home,” she whispered.

“The scent has power to you because of your memories,” Jarad said. “Poison strikes us all the same, but scent is

individual. A scent-maker must know the moments of their client's life, must know what scents define them. And then they can summon any emotion, evoke any memory. That is where our power lies."

"Scents are for a rich man's fancy," she said, echoing the scorn she'd heard from the other essence-eaters on the island. "There's no power in them at all."

She held out the sachet. He shook his head.

"Keep it," he said. "Your true training begins tomorrow." He left her on the southern cliff above the colorless, crashing waves, the red-bark sachet clutched in her palm as she tried to pick out a spot of crimson against empty sky. If she could get that far, she could find a way to go farther. To get that far, she would need to be a poison-tamer; she would need to be the best. And so she would.

The wind snatched at the blindfold in her hand. She let it go. The wind flung it back toward the island and crushed it against the rocks.

* * *

The day Sarai was taken, she had left her chores and her scolding father behind and gone to wander the shores. She was careful to go to the south, where the leathery tortoise her mother's mother's mother had ridden on as a child spent his days staring out to sea; the north shore hosted the black-

stained bows of the queen's ships, here to collect what was owed the thrice-slain undying queen, and Sarai had been warned away.

She had little notion of what being a queen meant. No one from Sarai's island had stepped foot on the queen's, nor had the thrice-slain queen ever laid eyes on the shadow-green treetops of Sarai's home. Sarai knew only that her kinfolk gathered abalone and resin and red bark once a year and were given a stamped iron disk in return, which they added to the pile at the center of the village. Twenty-seven iron disks, twenty-seven years under the queen's rule. They did not tell the sailors or the gray-cloaked official that they kept, too, the thirty-four copper ingots stamped with the hatch-mark lettering of the Principalities. The island lay at the lip of the kingdom. No navies defended them, no soldiers rattled lances on their shores. The queen and the Twelve Princes had bloodied blades before just to shift a thin black line a centimeter across a page; they would do it again. Then her kinfolk would bury the iron, they would dig up the copper; all would continue as it had before.

Sarai understood none of this. She understood that the sky was vast and the sea was blue, and her feet were made for wandering. She sang to the old tortoise and turned cartwheels in the sand. She skipped among the shallows and picked up

ruby starfish, prodded the translucent tops of jellyfish with her fat finger. And then she turned toward the *tug*.

A little thing, it was. Like a fishhook just under her left rib, minnow-nibbled. Tug-tug-tug, and something else with it, a deep sense, a dark sense. When she focused on it, the world seemed impossibly large, and so did she.

She found it nestled in the sand. A rock, black and yellow, the size of her father's fists closed and pressed together. Ambergris. She'd seen it before; her mother wore a piece of it, the size of a child's finger, on a cord around her neck. Proof that her mother was lucky, for she had found it the day Sarai's father asked for her to be his wife. She'd walked away from him to think, and found it, and smiling walked back. She told him yes and broke the ambergris in half, one piece for her and one for him.

This was tradition, not generosity. Half of what you found, you gave to the first person you met, or else misfortune fell on you. But if you did, you'd have great luck. The best luck. And the sailors and the officials always traded so much for even a small piece—and this piece was not small at all.

This will be my luck, she thought, and ran to share it.

* * *

Felas had no guards; only the sea. Its doors were never locked. There was nowhere to go. This dull-edged, lifeless place

was where every essence-eater lived from discovery to death—if they were allowed to live at all.

Under Jarad's tutelage, Sarai made scents for the other apprentices. There were sixteen of them always, the apprentices; no more and no less. Gem-singers and stone-tellers and steel-weavers. The wind-kenner girl who huddled in the bitter cold to catch the taste of harvests and battles hundreds of miles away. The sea-breaker boy with his feet ruined from standing in the waves and 'sensing storms before they rose, with his master, more broken still, her hand always on the nape of his neck as if she feared the waves would snatch him away from her. The quiet, hungry pair who took up the poison-tamer's path.

Every year, one or two or none of them achieved their Mastery, earned their ink-stain brand, began whittling away the years they had left making trinkets and weapons and wonders for a far-away queen. Every year, one or two or more of them failed.

They did not speak of the dead. One child's fall was another's chance, and there were always more sails on the horizon.

Sarai listened to the other apprentices' stories, choosing dragon's blood or sandalwood, rose or lilac, moss or bryony. It did not always come readily, the work, but she could lose

herself in it, could lose hours and days to the service of a single scent, and when it was done, satisfaction suffused her. The day one of her scents drove a girl, weeping, to confess that she had planned to throw herself from the bluffs, Jarad smiled.

“This is your talent,” he told her.

But scent-making was the province of the unambitious. To serve the senses, to serve pleasure and whimsy. She would not win her way over the ocean with perfume-stained fingertips. She needed power, and for the essence-eaters, power was in poison. None of them were kept from the path to poison-taming, none forced to it; the queen trusted ambition more than coercion.

The best of the essence-eaters served one purpose: to keep the queen alive. There were six always, two and two and two to stand beside her, fingertips touching skin every minute, tasting and testing the essences inside of her. Three essences in particular: tarsnake venom, gillem oil, maddarek. Three times poisoned, not yet dead, because the essence-eaters kept the poison tame and still.

As Sarai would learn to do, and leave this catacomb behind.

Alone, because Jarad would not teach her, Sarai learned the ways these poisons killed, how quickly—six hours, three days, twelve hours. Boils, blackened skin, convulsions,

liquefying lungs. She carried vials of them against her skin, fed pellets to rats and frogs and lambs so she could ‘sense the way they moved in the blood.

She learned to ‘sense new poisons. Hundreds of them. Dozens she ingested herself, to feel the racking shivers, the scorching fevers, the roiling sickness, and to alter them, ease them, draw them out. Some of the poisons, anyone could survive. Some could be endured if the effects were stretched out over days instead of hours, months instead of days. To be one of the six, to be even one of the eighteen who lived in Verakis in case one of the six fell, there were one hundred and sixty-three essences to consume and survive.

Jarad taught her tinctures to heal old friendships, to ignite new ideas. He taught her how to soothe, how to inflame. How to, again and again, bring simple pleasure, hardly noted, for some unseen courtier.

She grew to hate him. It was not talent that held her back, she thought; it was that her teacher dealt in scent and pleasure, not in blood and poison. She attended her lessons with him in his workshop, weathered tables carved with the names of apprentices who’d come before, learning to balance the over-sweet of honeysuckle with the damp earthiness of moss, to turn the rank stink of musk into pure silk. And then she scuttled to listen to the poison-tamers’ lessons, to learn how the beating of

the heart sustains and destroys, keeping the subject alive while pumping poison through them. To learn how to stop the poison without stopping the heart.

The rocks below her room were littered with the fragile corpses of birds, her windowsill scattered with poison-painted seeds. She had survived sixty poisons. She was thirteen years old.

* * *

After Sarai had found the ambergris, she raced up the beach. Her mother would be at the north bay, because she of all of them spoke the queen's tongue the best. Sarai wanted the first piece of ambergris to go to her, so that they would all be doubly lucky, and so she dodged the village, running through the thick trees instead with birds flitting above her, crying out so raucously she could not hear her own panting breath.

She burst from the trees onto sand and thudded to a stop. There, in front of her, was a man. A dust-skinned man, colorless compared to her own complexion, dressed in weather-worn clothes that might have once been blue. He turned to her with an eyebrow raised. His face was crooked, a slash running through it; he had only eight fingers and one of those half-gone. A queen's man, here to collect the queen's taxes, here to spoil her luck.

“Hullo,” he said in a voice like water churning gravel.
“Who’s this?”

She sighed and stamped and split her ambergris in two, and handed him a piece. He turned it in his hands.

“What is it?” he said.

“Whale puke,” she said, because she was feeling petulant, and because she didn’t speak his language well. But it wasn’t right, calling such a marvelous thing by such crude words, so she tried again. “Can you feel?” she asked. “It’s all the way deep and all the way dark. For hours and hours, and then breath again.” She moved her hand like a whale beneath the water.

“What do you mean, feel?” he asked.

“*Feel*,” she insisted, and tapped two fingers to the spot beneath her ribs where the tug always came.

“Come here,” he said. “Follow.” An odd tone to his voice. Sad, maybe. She followed, because he was going down to the shore and there was her mother up ahead anyway, and her mother would be so pleased. So very pleased.

It was the last time she saw her mother at all.

* * *

Jarad knew what she was doing, sighed over her. “It isn’t your talent,” he said when she lay in bed in her gray stone room with her muscles agony-tight, her joints hot as a bellows-fed forge. “You’ll kill yourself like this.” He read to her of distant

places, of the scents that were found there. He told her of methods of distillation. He drilled her on accepted pairings, challenged her to create daring ones.

A new child was brought to the island, blindfolded and weeping. She made him a sachet of cloves and cassia bark, the scents of his mother's palms. He crept into her bed at night and she held him while he dreamed. His skill was slight, the island small. "I want to go home," he said. Three months after he'd arrived, he did; she was called to pack the cavities of his body with funerary herbs for the journey.

She swallowed wine laced with karagal and vomited blood for six days. "You have no talent for this," Jarad said, and set a folded note beside her bed: her next assignment. On the seventh day, when she knew she would survive, she took the note and went to their workshop, where Jarad already sat absorbed in his own task. She was sixteen years old; she had survived one hundred and fifty-nine poisons.

"Four left," she said. Jarad said nothing. She set to work.

The scent was for a woman from the Principalities. Sarai imagined the wrists the woman would dab the oil against, deep brown and delicate. Imagined her long neck, the pulse-points at the curve of her smooth jaw. Imagined her sprinkling oil-scented water on her blue-black hair, so that when her lover leaned close he would catch its scent and think—

Think what? Scent was individual. It sparked emotion, teased out memory. No scent spoke the same language to two people. It would mutter nonsense to one, sing sorrow to the next, laugh joyfully to a third. Sarai saw with satisfaction that Jarad had included in his instructions two tightly-scripted paragraphs—one for the woman, one for her lover. Where they were born, where they had wandered. Where they first kissed, where their hearts had been broken.

Sarai had set foot on two shores, the golden and the gray, but her workshop was a scent-map of the world, and she had memorized it all. Wintergreen from the frost-glazed north, pebbles of balsam resin from the west, cinnamon and sandalwood, cloves and bergamot, amber and rose. She knew which flowers grew in the spring on sun-drenched hills, which clung to shadows; which towns made garlands of poppies and which of forget-me-nots during the festivals and feasts of marriage, and which woods they would burn for the bonfire when they danced.

They had met in the winter, this woman and her lover, and kissed in the spring. They had fought once beneath the boughs of an oud-wood tree, and even though such wood was the most precious in the workshop, she twined its scent through, subtly, so they would not know the scent but would feel it—the fight, and the forgiveness afterward.

And in among the notes that sang of his life and hers, she hid the scent of red-bark trees, which grew only on the golden shores. A scent they would not know; a scent to make them reach for unfamiliar things, so they would not be caught up forever in the past.

When she was done she touched it to her skin. It would tell her little; everyone's skin was different, and the scent was not for her. But it bloomed like a promise, if only a promise for another, and she nodded in tight-curved satisfaction.

Jarad caught her wrist in his bony fingers and inhaled. "This is your talent," he told her. "And this is what you love."

"Four left," she repeated, and staggered on weak legs to bed.

* * *

Sarai would have stayed below decks the morning after she was taken, crying into the rough blankets of her new narrow bunk, but the scarred sailor who'd recognized her for what she was came to collect her.

"You'll want to watch," he said. "You'll want to see your home. Memorize it. You won't see it again, and you'll start to forget." He spoke like he knew, and so she went with him back up to the deck. The wind had caught their sails already; the island was slipping away fast, so fast. She leaned against the

rope that ringed the deck, trying to see every detail one last time.

Was her mother there? Was she watching? There were figures on the rocks, the cliffs that ringed the entrance to the bay. Figures in white, the color of mourning. A dozen of them, three dozen—the whole village it seemed, climbing, standing, lifting something in their arms—baskets.

They lifted the lids of the baskets, and birds flew out. Not the opal-bellied singers of the forest but the delicate white birds of the shore. Dozens. Hundreds. Flying up, stretching wingtips toward the free open air, calling out in raucous condemnation. Flooding the sky. They wheeled and wailed, and the whole village called to her from the cliffs.

Come home to us, they called. Come home.

“They never even watched me go,” the sailor said, but it was too old a wound for sorrow.

She watched until the island vanished; watched until the last bird vanished, too, and the sea turned dull and gray.

* * *

She was in bed again, recovering, in the small room above Jarad’s workshop where she lived. They roomed alone, ate alone, wandered the gray halls alone; they were too uncertain of their fates for friendships.

The seizures this time had been short but brutal. She had very nearly not survived. Two left.

“What is my next assignment?” she asked, voice raw as reef-dragged flesh.

“No more assignments but one,” Jarad said. “You’ve finished your training. You need only make your Mastery.”

She scowled. How could she have thrown herself so thoroughly into the poison-tamer’s arts, so thoroughly neglected her scent-maker’s studies, and still reached Mastery in the latter before she survived her final poison?

“It’s your talent,” Jarad said, as if he knew what question she wanted to ask.

“It’s useless,” she said. “If I become a Master scent-maker, I’ll be stuck here forever. I will never see the court.”

“You don’t want to see the court,” Jarad said. “It’s more comfortable but far more restricted. You would not go poling down the waterways or wander the museums. You would not attend the dances, except to prowl the edge and ‘sense the drinks of fops, the soups of debauched heiresses. You would never leave your room except to ‘sense. You would be poisoned a hundred times.”

“I have already been poisoned a hundred times.”

“You would never see your golden shores,” Jarad said. “Never.”

“What does it matter?” Sarai demanded. “Why do you care which cage I lock myself in?”

“Because I cannot abide loneliness,” Jarad said, and rose. “Or the waste of true talent.” He left her to her weakness.

Sarai did not ask for her Mastery. She did not even think of the task, or what Jarad might choose for her. She focused on poisons. She had two left, only two, but these were the worst of all. She would not be asked to consume tarsnake venom, gillem oil, or maddarek—even the very best poison-tamer could not survive their ravages, only delay them, and a tamer would be no use to the queen if they were too busy keeping themselves alive to see to her.

Still, the poisons were deadly enough. Varash powder killed slowly; the key was to burn through it quickly, three days and nights of horror instead of the three months it took for the poison to unweave the body. It was one thing to survive by lengthening and lessening the body’s suffering; another to intensify it so extremely and yet maintain the focused will necessary to continue for three full days.

Bellman’s Sigh was the nearest to the deadly three that could be ingested and still purged from the body. Only hours to kill, sometimes minutes if the heart or lungs were weak. It could not be survived alone, and in this the poison-tamer proved they could work in tandem with a partner, trading off

seamlessly when they must rest, when they must sleep. A single second of failure would cause irreparable damage, such that even with the poison purged, the body would fail within the year.

It was customary for one's teacher to be the poison-tamer's partner, but Jarad would not do it for her, even if he had the skill. And so Sarai went to the 'tamers on the island one by one, accepting their refusals with bowed head and no argument.

There was one more. Nissa, who had stood at the queen's shoulder for twenty years before an assassin ended her career—not by poison but with a blade, slid toward the queen's spine and only Nissa close enough to stop it. She had seized it, turned it, sheathed it in her own thin frame. She lived, in pain. Spasms that came on without warning. Not often; quite rarely, in fact, but even an instant's inattention could cost the queen her life, and so she had sent Nissa away.

Nissa had been young the day the snake reared up and bit the girl who would be called the thrice-dead queen; on that day she began her work, but now she was old, and older still for grief. She was not like the rest of them, seized from fields and villages and distant cities. The court had been her home.

Sarai found her as she often did at the southern bluffs, wrapped head to toe in gray silk seven times as fine as any the others wore.

“I know why you’re here,” Nissa said. “Jarad told me you’d come. He told the others, too, and told them not to help you, but I will, if you wish it. If you’ll risk it.”

“It takes only two days,” Sarai said. “You’ve lasted months without the spasms, before.”

“And sometimes only hours,” Nissa said.

“I’ll risk it, happily,” Sarai assured her.

“Did you see the ship that came yesterday?” Nissa asked.

Sarai hesitated, not because she didn’t know how to answer but because she didn’t know why the question had been asked. Ships came, ships left. They brought supplies, brought food since Felas grew none of its own; they took away the goods the essence-eaters crafted, scents and gems and weapons. Sometimes they took a student away, one who’d achieved the poison-tamer’s Mastery. Or one who’d failed, who like the boy she’d comforted in the night would be sent home at last, with only Sarai’s herbs to keep the scent of rot at bay.

“I saw it,” she said at last.

“It brought news,” Nissa said. “The Principalities are displeased with the queen’s trade agreements. They tire of sending holds stuffed with gold and goods for a few small crates of red-bark and oud wood, abalone and ambergris. Not when they have so recently owned the source of such goods.”

She was talking about Sarai's home. Sarai had never really thought about how valuable it was, that little island. The only place the red-bark grew. Host to stands of oud-wood trees. The home of the largest abalone with their prized shells. The island called by some Whale-Caller, since they came so often and left their ambergris upon the shore.

"What will they do?" I asked.

"They might war," Nissa said. "But it is more complex than that. They give the names of goods, but what they mean is—as long as only one of us can own it, one of us will be angry." She smiled thinly. "The queen means to burn it. When all is ashes, there's no need for war. Though it's more for spite than peace she wants it done, I'd guess."

"What?" As dull and startled as a seabird's cry.

"There are other sources for oud-wood and abalone and ambergris," Nissa said with a shrug. "Not as good, of course. And the red-bark would be lost, but what good is it for anything but rich ladies' perfumes?"

Sarai couldn't answer, couldn't think. Gone the golden sands, the red-bark trees, the opal-bellied birds. Gray instead—ash-gray, ash over everything, choking the lungs and coating the skin.

"I need to begin," Sarai said. "The poison, I need— It needs to be today, now."

“There’s still the Varash,” Nissa said. “And you will need to recover from that before the Bellman’s Sigh.”

“Three days. One to recover,” Sarai said.

“You need more than that,” Nissa said.

“I don’t,” Sarai insisted.

Nissa stared at her levelly. “And to what end? When you are Master, you will be presented to the queen. Do you mean to poison her, with her ‘tamers at her side? Or put a knife in her? Have you ever used a knife to cut into a living thing?”

“Yes,” Sarai said, thinking of the rats and birds and toads she’d vivisected, to watch the way they died as poison rotted them inside out or tightened their veins to threads.

“One that could resist you?” Nissa asked, and Sarai’s mouth closed. “Have you ever concealed a weapon? Have you ever looked a man in the eye before you killed him? Hm. No, child, not a knife. But perhaps you’ll find a way.”

“If I can only meet her,” Sarai said. The rest, she would fill in.

Nissa nodded. “I’ll help you, I already told you that. But if you do intend to use the access you win to kill the queen, perhaps you could refrain from telling me. She is my sister, after all.”

* * *

Sarai left Nissa on the bluffs. Nissa was only so casual because she did not believe Sarai could harm the queen. But no one had believed Sarai could come this far. She was not the best, but she was the most determined, and she would do what she must.

She returned to her chamber, where Jarad waited. “Nissa has agreed to help,” she said.

“How fortunate for you,” he said without expression, and indicated a slip of paper on the table at her bedside. “Should you change your mind about killing yourself, your Mastery awaits.” He left. Sarai tossed the slip of paper onto the floor. She went to her shelf, where she had already placed the Varash pill. There was no point, on an island full of essence-eaters, in trying to kill one another with poison, and anyone careless enough to ingest it by accident was better off dead; she need only ask, and she had been supplied with it.

She swallowed it dry and sat to wait for the pain to begin.

She was aware, from time to time, of a cool cloth on her brow and a dry, soft voice, but when she woke on the third day, Jarad was gone. She was dressed in clean clothes, her skin was washed with citrus-scented water, and her hair had been brushed and braided. There was a vial on the table beside her bed, and a slip of paper. She took one in each hand. The left:

the poison. The court. Perhaps a chance to save her home; perhaps a chance to return to it.

Perhaps a certain death.

This is not your talent, Jarad's voice whispered, but she shut her heart to it. She crumpled the paper in her palm, made to toss it away.

Then stopped. She would look, at least, and then she could say her choice was made eyes open.

The name at the top stilled her heartbeat for half a second. The queen. A scent for the thrice-slain queen. If she liked it, Sarai would have her Mastery; if she did not—well, scent-makers were not killed by their failures, or for them, so readily as the rest. She would have another chance, in a year, that was all. It was the safe path. The coward's path.

This is your talent.

She would not fail the scent-maker's test, she knew that. She had fierce hope and belief when it came to the poison, but she was not fool enough to call it certainty. But what good was certainty, when it was toward such a useless end? To craft luxuries, amusements? Scents to spice a kiss or a dance, to cover up the stench of wounds, to give stale air the illusion of fresh breezes.

To summon memory. To conjure distant places. To stir passion.

She had once made a girl burst into tears, suddenly wrenched back home by a single jasmine-muddled breath. She had started a love affair, and ended one. She knew the people here from days and years of trading stories like scraps of cloth, grown more faded and made more precious by every pair of hands that touched them. She could distill in a single scent the long thread of their lives or a single instant.

The righthand path: to make life brighter, but not for her. For her, always the gray.

The lefthand path: to chance death for freedom. Perhaps, to save her home.

She shut her eyes. Opened them.

Come home to us, her mother said, and she went to find Nissa.

“You’ll still need a way to kill her, even if you survive,” Nissa said, when Sarai told her what she’d chosen. “There are ways to kill at a touch. Poisons that seep through the skin.”

“The poison-tamers would ‘sense any poison,” Sarai said. Every poison had its distinct essence; she could feel them buzzing in the supply room down the hall, where they were kept, their malice clear. Just as she had felt the ambergris, just as she felt the wind-salt-earth of the red-bark she kept in a sachet above her bed. No harmful substance would be allowed within fifty steps of the queen.

“We are only speaking hypothetically, of course,” Nissa said. “But theoretically, you have learned a great deal of poison, but you have also learned a great deal else. How to mask a scent, how to alter it. How to disguise one thing as another, how to balance something noxious into blandness, how to make the unremarkable exotic.”

“You’re speaking of scents, not poisons.”

“I’m speaking of essence,” Nissa said. “Have you never noticed how your scents alter the essence as well as the physical perception of a substance?”

Sarai stared at the waves. “Why would you tell me this? She is your sister.”

“Sweet can be transformed into bitter. Love can be transformed into hate,” Nissa said. “I had a home once, too. My sister turned it to ash.”

“Was she always the way she is now?” Sarai asked. She had trouble imagining the queen as a real person. Sitting next to the queen’s sister, seeing the lines of her face, she had to acknowledge it.

“Of course not. But one can only live stewing in the fear of death deferred for so long before one starts to rot,” Nissa said.

“What was it like with her, before?” Sarai asked.

“Is that what you want to hear?”

Sarai considered. “No,” she said at last. “Not exactly.”

“Then what do you need to know?”

“Everything,” Sarai said.

When Nissa was done, long after the sun set and stole the barest hint of color from the rock, she clicked her tongue against her teeth. “There’s one more thing you need to know,” she said. “You need to know if you can truly do it. Kill someone. Be killed in turn. They’ll know it was you. You might be able to conceal the poison long enough for it to do its harm, but even if the queen dies they’ll guess the source, and they’ll kill you.”

“At least I’ll get to see the court,” Sarai said. She imagined she could see the spot of crimson at the edge of the horizon. It was too dark, of course, but she had stared at it so many times it appeared like an after-image in her vision.

Nissa spat. “You will at that.”

At dawn they would begin. Sarai could not sleep. She would suffer, she would survive. She would create the poison that could kill the queen, and when Sarai touched the queen’s skin to prove herself by ‘taming the poison in the queen’s veins, she’d pass along a new poison. A masked poison. She thought she knew how to do it. Which poison to use, which essences to blend with it to make it ‘sense harmless.

The queen would die, and Sarai would die.

But first, she had to live.

She stared at the vial. Bellman's Sigh. One 'tamer in twenty earned Mastery. Most gave up before it, accepted lesser tasks on the island, other Masteries. Or died.

A knock on the door signaled Jarad's entry.

"Come to argue me out of it?" she said.

He sighed. "No. I came to sit with you. One way or another, I lose you in a few days. I'd like a little time with you while I can have it."

She looked up at him, surprised. She was hardly his first student. Not even the first he'd lost.

"But you are my favorite," he said, as if he knew what she was thinking. "And you are the best."

"Not at poison-taming," she said.

"No," he agreed.

"You think I'll die."

"Yes."

"It would be worth it."

"It would help no one. Least of all your kin," he said, and when he said it she thought he hid himself within the echo of that last word. "Please, Sarai. It is not your talent," he said, and said no more.

It is not your talent.

She set her jaw. It was true; she could not let it be true.

She held the red-bark sachet to her nose. She saw golden sand, heard her mother calling her home. Saw ash and smelled charred wood.

You'll never go home.

She let the halves of her hope fall away from one another. Jarad was right. It was not her talent. She would fail. She could not go home.

She took up the slip of paper, on which was written the queen's name.

This is your talent.

She could not go home. But perhaps she could save it.

* * *

The day the someday queen had felt the tarsnake's bite, she was walking with her sister along a disused path, the scent of lemongrass twining around them. They did not see the man by the river until they were quite close, did not think he could be anything but a laborer until they were steps away. And the young girl who would someday be queen did not think, until the man turned and flung the snake, that anyone might fail to love her.

The someday queen's sister, ten minutes younger but already less loved, killed the snake with a rock. The palace guards killed the man. The queen's sister clutched her close and quelled the poison, and the soldiers carried her home.

They wrapped her in linen cloth, and her sister lay beside her, hugging her long, bare arms around her body. The queen's sister smelled of spices and the loamy earth by the river. The not-yet queen's physicians packed her wound with compresses, sharp and medicinal, full of herbs the poisoned girl could not name. The queen's sister whispered stories to her, reminding her of the salt-tang scent of their summer home, of the flowers that grew on the hillsides there. Of every place she had felt safe.

The queen's sister did not sleep for days. That day and for twenty years after, she kept her sister alive with her craft and her devotion. And when the assassin's blade robbed her of her usefulness, the queen kissed her brow once and sent her away.

Other moments, other stories—the death of an advisor, the lilies in the blood-choked water of her first war. Nissa told Sarai them all; she had been at her sister's side every day, nearly every hour, keeping her alive and watching her wither. Sarai picked among them. Salt-tang, honeysuckle: the scents of bliss. The day that destroyed it: lemongrass and loam, linen and spice. The scent of the husband she loved and who betrayed her: bergamot and amber.

She built up joy, shattered it; brewed a tincture of love and the loss of it, of security turned to rank fear. And she made it beautiful.

She went to Jarad with the vial in hand three hours past dawn. She had not slept; neither had he. He looked at the vial pinched between his fingertips, looked at her. "What is this?" he asked.

"My Mastery," she said. "There is a ship down at the dock. Send it with them." She walked away, and pretended she had not seen that he began to weep with the violence of relief.

Sarai returned the Bellman's Sigh to the supply room and went to her room to wait.

A week later, she had her Mastery, a dark tattoo on the back of her hand, indelible. "The queen is pleased," Jarad said, a strange tone in his voice. "The queen is, by all accounts, entranced." He gave her a look that was fear as much as satisfaction. She smiled to try to ease his worry, but he only shook his head and left her.

It was another two weeks before Nissa came. "She isn't dead," she said without preamble.

"She was not meant to die," Sarai said. "It isn't my talent."

"She won't leave her room. She won't speak. She's fallen into a melancholy mood," Nissa said, voice almost sweet. "She mutters of deceit and death and shoves even the poison-tamers' hands away. Not that they let her, of course. They've plied her with poppy to make her sleep, and our brother sits the throne in her place. For now, they say, until she's well."

“A great misfortune,” Sarai said, nodding.

“They suspected you,” Nissa said, and Sarai tasted something bitter in the back of her throat. “But when they gave the scent to others, it did nothing. It smells lovely, that’s all. Some don’t care for it at all. One man said it reminded him of his brother.”

Sarai smiled. “There was nothing of poison in that scent,” she said. “Only memory.” Distilled and woven to lift the spirit, to shatter it.

“You will never leave this place, now,” Nissa said, but even then she was wrong. When Nissa left, Sarai took down the sachet from her wall and pressed it to her nose. Red-bark and ambergris, salt-tang and oud-wood. Memories leapt and sparked and danced. She was on the golden sands again, the red-gold cliffs. In among the green-shadow trees, bare feet flying.

Come home to us, her mother called, and, eyes shut to the endless gray, she did.

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NO PEARLS AS BLUE AS THESE

by Benjanun Sriduangkaew

When she comes we scatter coins before her, every disc polished, some so new they are still warm from the making. She walks bare-footed but does not seem hurt or troubled by this gleaming path. I catch her smiling from the corner of her mouth as she treads on these symbols of wealth, the luster and hard glint of Tarangkaya's prosperity.

She is robed tightly, cerise brocade and propolis sash. Her scalp, shaven in the fashion of her country, is painted in red ink with the calligraphy—again her country's—signaling luck, fertility, a hundred children.

I am similarly patterned, from the back of my head to my brow, my bare shoulders and my arms, as my skin makes for good canvas. In retrospect perhaps I should not have been there, a foreign and startling sight to the foreign and startling bride. But the household's bulwark must preside, like a pillar or statue. I even gleam like one, mostly celadon and the odd tracery in umber and old ivory, the shades of my skin back when I was still mostly skin.

The bride glances at me once before she curtsies to my house-lord, proper and correct: she dips just so, the brilliant sash unfurling on the ground like abacus beads, and kisses the hand of Samonten Tarangkaya. They enter each other's arms and hand in hand go into the house.

* * *

I hear that on the western continent, those like me are created en masse, roughly and madly. Their mothers die screaming in the act of childbirth, cut open and the weapon-child carved out like the pit of a nectarine. The infant comes out with flesh of rough stone or clay, brittle and uncomely. The result is inferior—they are the infantry of their nations, prone to short and brutal lives, someone else's currency to spend.

In the bride's country, there are no children created like me at all.

I'm watching the kitchen, where they cut fruits and tremulous pastries with a razor thread as though everything is a throat in urgent need of being garroted. I taste one dish, and another, confectionery and savory in no particular order. Nothing tastes like anything—peaches and oranges distinguished by texture rather than tartness, smoked pork in honey and jasmine rice differing in size and shape rather than piquancy. I could still taste, and enjoy, just five years ago. But

as I come into my power, the inessential functions slough off. My sense of smell is fine. Taste is gone entirely.

What I retain is a palate for poisons and toxins, small malaises that can be baked—soil and fertilizer—into the growing of pepper flowers or chili fruits. These are the only things which make impression on my tongue. Sour, hot, sweet, even gingery; the world of poisons is possessed of infinite variety. I once asked the chef to make me a meal entirely of toxic things, cursed bean sprouts and vividly green poison-frogs, but the idea distressed him, and in any case his pride forbade him to cook something he couldn't taste. In the end I came to an agreement with Samonten's chemist, who concocts the most interesting cocktails and condiments.

On a tray of sanded wood and bronze lips, I put the plates I have tasted and verified, and I bring them to the dining hall. This is not proper precisely, but the household's bulwark does what she wants. Unlike the servants, I cover the hall in steady strides, the weight of tray and plates light in hand. They did have to teach me how to balance it right, especially the tiered stand where each layer of bowls brim with condiment and shark-fin soup.

Samonten's guests, especially innumerable today, watch as I pass their tables by. There is a competition among them to get me to serve them too, this being their one line of contact with

the Tarangkaya bulwark. Some are artless, sending gifts. Others more guileful, positioning themselves where I walk or requesting certain drinks they believe I exclusively handle. I serve only Samonten and today also her bride, at the table they have to themselves.

Up close I see that the angle of the bride's eyes has been sharpened by a line of ink; a lavender blush radiates on her cheekbones and her lips are rouged white, save for the midpoint where it is crimson as coins. Her name is Yut, which in her language means *moon*.

When I set out her food and Samonten's, Yut vacates her seat and gets to her knees in obeisance. The lord and I share a look, her amused, me embarrassed. What has Yut heard about the thorn, when she has been sent to wed the rose? Samonten puts one hand on her bride's shoulder. "Yut, my love, get back up. We'll introduce you later. Not now."

The bride makes mortified apologies under her breath. Around us the guests and relatives lean forward, avid. It is no secret that Samonten's retainers and trade partners would rather she had accepted one of their own, if not as first wife then second or even third, and here a foreign girl comes along to claim the prize.

I take my place by their side, sipping tea that tastes like nothing, not even rain. Taste is a visceral thing, a breed of

information the human mind does not easily retain the way it retains numbers or names, or even the syntax of foreign tongues. I understand in the abstract when others say tea is bitter. But I no longer recall what type of bitter precisely—the bitterness of arsenic, or charred wood, or quicksilver? So it goes with all the others.

Once or twice I catch Yut studying me, hypnotized in the way of a mouse before a leopard. I finish my tea.

* * *

A proper introduction then, in the library where past house-lords and bulwarks gaze down on us, an assembly of portraits and busts. Oil and anglerfish ink, jade and ivory, at least a hundred different materials to commemorate much more than a hundred years of history. We sit like so: the newlyweds on one side, myself on the other, separated by a sliver of table.

Yut keeps her gaze down. I am not the first bulwark she has seen. Two or three escorted her from the port, but they were in their prime, fully arrived at their endpoint—immense, like mountains in motion. I am still human in scale if not much else.

“Go on,” Samonten is saying to her bride. “Ask. Bidaten will not bite. She has been my companion since we were very young.”

“I don’t—” Yut begins, quickly stops.

To Samonten I say, “Perhaps discussing my nature in front of you seems inappropriate to her. Perhaps she’s not that curious, my lord.”

“She is very interested in bulwarks. When we met back at the Coral Garden that was all she’d talk about. Why, if your hand were available, Bidaten. Can you take her to the wall tomorrow?”

“Of course,” I say over the bride’s protests—*I wanted you, my lord; as for the wall I don’t want to impose*—and arrange a time. Once a week I visit the wall; it may as well be tomorrow. We agree, or at least I say and she doesn’t disagree, on two hours past noon. She’ll need the morning to get familiar with the household, with Samonten.

Theirs was an unexpected courtship. There is advantage in it, but that was more serendipity than calculation. There were more convenient picks at home, with greater prestige and dowries; Yut’s foreignness is an unnecessary hindrance. But Samonten wanted, and was wanted in turn. I never thought she would be drawn to someone like Yut, nearly ten years younger and timid, built like a stage mannequin. Slender limbs and narrow waist when Samonten usually prefers women broader, more solid. A first for everything.

Most of the night I spend patrolling the estate. I still need sleep but less and less of it. The labyrinth that cups the Tarangkaya land in its palm extends on, seemingly without end to the naked eye. It curves back upon itself; a visitor crosses a bridge into the fourth gate only to find themselves back at the entrance. They might enter a pavilion of basalt teeth and chalcedony chairs and find themselves exiting a pagoda of bronze banners and silver tiles. Without guidance from the house-lord, bulwark, or (sometimes) the designated heir, navigating the land is a futile matter.

I check each defense post, passing my hand over the bells and the beetles to ensure they are awake and alert. I climb up the roof, breathing in the smell of autumn, damp and floral and coppery. The roofs are turning blue and the canopies of eyes and ears have extended their branches, preparing to blossom and fruit for the winter. Few animals inhabit our land; most fall prey to the needlebirds with their taste for fresh meat, their tendency to attack in flocks.

More than Samonten's, the labyrinth has been my domain since I could walk and comprehend, and she cedes it to me as such. It will remain mine until I leave, though that may or may not be in her lifetime. The stages of a bulwark's life resist exact forecasts. Samonten and I are peers in age, but in growth

physical and intellectual I've been developing much faster since I was three.

Yut's retinue stays elsewhere in the city, will remain here a week before they depart for their island home. Her family, I think, chooses to linger in case she quarrels with my lord early and the matter proves irreconcilable. After that, Yut will be on her own. In a way, I'm glad I could never have been sent abroad. Samonten is the only one of our house I genuinely love, but I wouldn't want to adapt to another household, one in which I'd be always the lesser, the stranger.

Come noon I perform my routine at lunch preparation. One of the noodle dishes tastes sweet-sour, radiant to my palate. The chef and I isolate the poison down to the oyster sauce. I ask for the whole bottle; he is offended but accedes and goes off to chase down the supplier. And then to scorch, if not discard, every last utensil that came into contact with the sauce. His labor is demanding, and Samonten treats him better than most of her cousins.

Yut is pink-cheeked when I see her again, animated. When she says my lord's name it is in a whisper, a change of pitch, a certain heft. As she climbs onto the elephant, she asks whether I've ever fallen in love, perhaps an inquiry as to the psychology of bulwarks. Adjusting her buckles and securing her to the seat, I say, "Not exactly."

“Not exactly! Surely the answer must be absolute.”

“I’ve had my share of lovers. The first made a mark, for a while.” A magistrate who seduced me for novelty, curious what sleeping with a bulwark would feel like. Dead since, of a natural cause: assassination. “But I wouldn’t say I have ever given my heart to anyone. And to be sure, they do say we don’t have hearts. Not the sentimental organ, at any rate, merely the cardiac one.”

We pass the temple where Samonten and Yut will visit in several days to make their nuptial offerings. Like most of our city it is a composite of plant, fabric, glass; wooden boughs and chiffon leaves, delicately blown shells. A flock of needlebirds and two bulwarks for defense. I know neither intimately. Bulwarks are never raised together unless they are adopted into the same household, or in this case, the same house of worship. Like me they are human-sized and, perhaps from familial proximity, they look very alike: verdant skin striated in silver, deep-set eyes fringed with petal lashes. Yut gives them the same glance she gave me on arrival, albeit briefer. Losing interest, or—hopefully—more interested in Samonten now.

We disembark from the elephant. She keeps pace with me as we scale the wall, up its sheer white steps. She does get winded halfway, but I’ll be fair: it is a great deal of height and the stairs are steep. There are no lifts or pulleys to bring us to

the top, a matter of security. Laborer or magistrate, we all climb.

At the summit, unsheltered from autumn sun, she looks down on the bulwarks who range our city wall. Her breath hitches, audibly. Below us, my future: the bulwarks from the city's foremost houses and temples, commanders of our matchless army. Bipedal or pronograde according to their inclination, earthbound or airborne. Our mature shapes are deeply individual, smelted from long lifetimes. Beasts that exist and beasts that never will, conjoined to human elegance.

"A friend of mine," I say, gesturing to a six-limbed bulwark: humanoid from the waist up, leonine from the waist down, plated flesh and snakeskin mane. The other gate-guard is tower-tall, acute angles all over, four prismatic eyes and six glass hearts arrayed along her collarbones. Decorative; at that stage our heart disappears entirely and our brain becomes our sole vital organ. I catch their gazes and bow to them. They acknowledge with seismic nods.

Yut exhales. "They are so beautiful. Not that you aren't."

Normally I'm indifferent to flattery—bulwarks are beautiful by definition—but she is earnest and artless. I half-smile; she colors brighter, though that's mostly exertion. "I'm a long way from what they are. There's no comparison."

“Oh, but you’re already so...” She stops herself. “What will you look like, when the time comes?”

“I’m not sure yet. Some of us develop it over years, sketching, sculpting. Watercolor or charcoal or nielloware. Tattoos.” An understandable preoccupation. One wants to be one’s best self at the final stage.

“Not you.”

“Not really.”

She glances at me sidelong. “What if you wanted to dedicate yourself to some other pursuit? Making beautiful pots and cups. Building stunning houses. Priesthood and the glory of prayer.”

Desertion is a solemn sin. I would be executed and my house dishonored. “I don’t see the appeal, not particularly.” Most bulwarks don’t think much of prayer, even though—or because—our grown forms inspire comparison to apotheosis.

“You say that a lot,” Yut murmurs. “Do you have to be so ambivalent?”

Toward her specifically, or in general. I suppose I’m prone to evasion, not that anyone else but Samonten would say it to my face. On the way down Yut is quiet, thoughtful. Her sweat has the scent of fresh baking, a hint of pepper.

* * *

An entire week passes before someone tries to kill Yut.

She is on her way to a cloister where icons from her native land are housed, the gods of braided rice and dried roses, deities who hold sway over fishing and pearl-diving. The lane toward it is narrow, lined with vendors who drape their stalls in variegated tarp and chittering, darting lizards. She insists I must try the plum pastry and the toasted tortoise. Able to taste or not I still have to eat, so I oblige. The textures are interesting, if nothing else, the aromas quite pleasant. As an aside, I let her know these are safe for her consumption. It is around then that the first shot comes, ricocheting precisely toward Yut's head, a phalanx of comet arrowheads veering exactly for her heart.

I deflect them without much effort and look for their source. A balcony, high up. Yut has exhaled a conjuration of shadows, inky blots that unfold tattered and owlsh; that surprises me—she is not panicking, not even distraught.

The shadows come with me as I give chase, flitting where I point, tangling in the assassin's limbs. They cut the way razor threads cut fruit or tender meat. Straight through fat, muscle, bone.

When I've dispatched the assassin (human necks are easy to wring), I check for marks that'd reveal their allegiance and credentials; finding none, I behead them. Samonten will be able to dissect the brain and skull and get answers.

“You’re very calm about this.” Back in the carriage—temple trip aborted—I wrap the head in a bag. Sopping the blood up is a logistical problem and I don’t want any of it on the upholstery.

Yut blinks, undisturbed by the arterial reek. “When I was very young I ventured outside our walls, thinking to dive for wild pearls. The ones we cultivate are white, the wild ones blue, and I fancied the latter terribly.” She holds up her hands. There are silver lines there, old lacerations. “My family had me schooled after for self-defense. Besides, I used to be sickly, and learning the shadow steadied my health.”

“You don’t have bulwarks. What defends your wall, shadows like yours?” The seas are less infested than the land, but they have their share. The world itself is made of monsters, everywhere. Ocean or prairie, barren waste or bounteous earth. Walls alone keep us safe. Walls and soldiers, in whatever form they take.

“Not precisely.” Her mouth pulls into that half-smile, the one I saw when she first arrived, and her tone mimics mine. Noncommittal. “It’s something of a state secret.”

Once more I’ve misjudged my lord’s bride. Over and over I’ve allowed her surface to distract me. Whether what is underneath is a danger to Samonten remains to be seen.

When I bring it up, my lord knows that Yut is not defenseless. Yes, the island families train their scions in conjuring. No, Yut is not dangerous to her; Samonten trusts my judgment but she has never thought Yut an artless ingénue, for what interest would she have in such a creature? Yes, I can shadow Yut if I wish, am I not already doing that in any case? I escort them to plays and flower-viewing, to markets and museums. No further incident occurs. Poisoned items in the kitchen become no more or less frequent. The chef is as harried as ever.

When Yut gives me gifts from her trousseau, I have them checked by our chemist, then priests. But they are clean, just jewelry. Strings of pearls threaded loosely, filigreed in steel. Earrings, also pearled. Each bead is perfectly round and deeply blue. Out of courtesy I put them on and they look as though they were grown for me, matched to my celadon coloring. It delights Yut inordinately to see me decorated. When I ask whether she fetched those pearls herself from the deep, she laughs. “Perhaps.”

On we continue this way, me quietly cautious, the two of them perfectly harmonious. Perhaps I have been paranoid. One month pupates into three, the way months tend to in their promiscuity. My time to range beyond the wall comes.

I thought Yut would be glad to see me gone, a respite from my vigilance. Instead she fusses over my departure and sends along one of her owls to see me off. The shadow bird is surprisingly soft, weightless on my shoulder and affectionate, nudging my chin with its burred head. It dissipates before we reach the gate, the limit of Yut's sending.

There are a dozen of us, bulwarks drawn from households and magistrates' courts, at the same stage of life as I am. We know each other in passing. We know our duty much better. On foot we leave. No beast of burden is fleeter or more enduring than we are, and most would spook at the sight and smell of the parasites. The alloyed gate lifts quickly, drops behind us just as quick. No one wants it to stand open longer than necessary. Twice a month our scouting party ventures forth to check whether parasites have come to nest in proximity to our gates and, if we can, dispatch them early.

The land spreads green and sunlit: a room without a roof. Some primal part of me always wants to roll in the brilliant grass and get dirt under my nails, to have flowers bleed onto my scalp and stain it gold. The sky is very clear, as if it weren't an interplay of light and water and air but an immeasurable pane of glass. Even the quality of the air is different from within the walls, pure and varnished by the distant sea. As a

child I wanted to run out here, not on a patrol-path but a course of my own forging. Children's fantasies are so simple.

We do a circuit around the city, pacing ourselves at first, conserving stamina. None of us speaks, saving our breath for reconnaissance. Our path widens little by little. Parasite nests can be easy to miss, even for us. They begin life so small. Become so hard to defeat.

Half a day's run from the wall, we locate the corpse of a full-grown parasite.

Like any of them, it used to be one of us, the size of a house. A nielloware head and a short, sturdy neck; in parasitic corruption the skin has grown brittle with minerals, drawn up from the earth perhaps, and from the eye sockets loll a string of tongues. The shoulders are cantilevered with blades.

The court bulwark beside me recoils, his brushstroke-skin blanching gray; he knew this one in life. The rest of us set to work, hacking the forearms and thighs apart, puncturing every knot of flesh and fat, every writhing tumor until we find the parasite. It has a hound's shape, blind and bloated from months inside the bulwark, muscles in frayed atrophy.

We build a vast, hot fire and feed it the host, the parasite, the young it spawned within the bulwark's belly. A revolting syncretism, a ghastly consummation. Some of the young

scramble to escape, tiny tumors with legs. I gather them up to throw them back into the flames.

I watch the grass brown and wilt. Hosted parasites eat humans but not non-mature bulwarks. Young parasites in search of a host infest mature bulwarks but not us. We are an exact balance between, and this our perfect task, to hunt and butcher and burn. I hear that, for a time after infestation, the bulwark remains aware. Conscious of what's happening to them, cognizant of who they used to be. It doesn't last. They become a vehicle, a puppet. There is no cure, no reversal.

Inevitably the parasites come, drawn by the scent of their own dead, their footfalls like earthquakes. Some of them move too fast, scampering on all four or six. Others crawl too slow, on shuffling disobedient feet. By unspoken agreement we stay to make a count. They move in packs, or not. There is no exact order to their behavior save in their habits of consumption and infestation.

Three this time, loping toward us on hands and feet, talons and tails converted to another set of limbs. One I recognize as a former commander, our city's best in her generation. Limbs like spears, a gaze that knows no fear. Not then and not now. This is how we all end if we fall in combat, and more of us fall in combat than not. Until then, we keep our lords and our city

safe as long as we can. Our ultimate future, our inexorable destiny.

There is no room for sentiment or even personal honor. It would be brave to stand our ground and fight and then fall, but our first duty is to report. We turn back to the safety of the walls.

* * *

On Yut's insistence, Samonten holds a small feast to celebrate my return. Patently ridiculous; I join the scouting contingent every few months, the matter as routine as the chef ordering grocery.

It also appears that Yut has had a long, persuasive talk with the chef. Instead of tea, I'm served a full course. Steamed dumplings, noodles, deep-fried radish cakes—all full of poison lethal to humans. It's experimental. The dumplings taste saccharine; the ginger and spring onions make an eccentric admixture of salty and corrosive sourness. But it's an effort.

"I'm so glad you are back," Yut tells me as she brings the dessert, evidently having received a lesson in balancing trays and plates too. "I worried far more than is sensible."

At her seat, Samonten drinks plain, cool water. For the feast—a private affair, just the three of us—she and Yut eat nothing, to make sure what's cooked for them is not contaminated by what has been prepared for me. My lord gives

me a look and the slightest nod: *Do as you wish*. A weight settles in my stomach, inevitability rather than dread, and I wonder what I will choose.

I skip patrolling. In my room I run a bath and spend a frivolous amount of time soaking, even more time choosing the soap. Which too strong, which too sweet, which might offend. I stall, even though the act of grooming already forecasts my decision. My body does not produce much odor, but old habits—from when I was chiefly fluid humors and soft viscera—make me self-conscious, and so I put on a scent. Oodh, chamomile. A loose robe and her pearls at my ear, around my wrist. There are bulwarks who relish in drawing human lovers to us like filings to lodestone, but I've never been one of those. Nor do I understand attraction readily. What tips me, slowly, toward saying yes to Yut? Is it her seeming naivety, is it her looks, is it simply the familiarity fostered over months?

I'm still ruminating, no closer to the answer, when she knocks.

Her feet are bare and, though she's not wearing her wedding garb—that'd have been an insult to Samonten—she is in an opalescent dress, pinned at shoulders and cinched at waist, the Tarangkaya symbol placed exactly over her heart: this is who she is, this is who she belongs to, the same as I. She enters on tiptoes, clinking red coins.

“The lord has given you permission,” I say, a matter of course.

“Yes. We’ve been discussing it. I feel very foolish. At home this would’ve been unthinkable. There everyone’s monogamous.”

Samonten has never asked exclusive commitment of her partners, though not all house-lords are so generous. A house-lord may have multiple spouses, but each is meant to be faithful to the lord alone. “Are you here because I’m a bulwark and you have been curious all your life?”

Yut knits her fingers together. “No. Yes. A little. But it’s mostly that you have been so kind. The way you smile. And I wanted to work it out—or not—before you leave for another scouting shift. Where I am from, we used to reconnoiter by ship. A lot of our scouts didn’t come back.”

Her voice catches. Despite myself I take her hand, lacing my fingers into hers. Small and, like all humans, fragile. A softness to her that I’ve left behind long ago.

She touches the pearl at my ear. “You were right. I did dive for these personally. Underwater, even monsters can look beautiful. Some of them take on the guise of anemones, coral reefs. In the air they are birds—most of our scouts fly now, and I think that’s what drew me to Samonten. She brought needlebirds to the Coral Garden.” Her hand moves down to the

plumage-patterns on my clavicles. “If you’d been there with her, I might have courted you too.”

“Bulwarks can’t marry.” I unravel the threads that hold her dress together, wondering even now. Moonlight and shadow make her contours infinite, her body a labyrinth where there is no end to the hollows, the shrouded corners. Forever there is something hidden, forever there is something that would not reveal. She kisses my wrist, her mouth very hot, and it tugs—desire doesn’t arise in me as quickly as in most, but here, *now*. I bend to her breast, scraping lightly with my teeth; one of her hands in my robe, seeking between my thighs. Humans like to ask whether we still possess nerve-ends, whether we retain the wherewithal for carnal pleasure. Yut doesn’t ask, seems to know, from previous experience or else intuition. However far we drift from humanity we’ll always be animal.

Orgasm is abrupt, nearly unbearable. She strokes the blue-green pinions down my flanks as my heart and breathing slacken, slipping down from their seizure peak. When she kisses me, she tastes of a memory—I try to locate it: mango or jackfruit? Alarm goes through me like a knife. I pull upright at once. She tries to hold me down, saying, “No—it’s not what you think. Let me show you.”

In an instant I can end her. I push her off me. “You have a moment.”

She passes her hand over her belly, and then I see. A body of secrets after all. Her skin goes from flesh to translucent quartz, and her breasts are the palest brass. Her pupils have brightened to pewter, narrow as a cat's. "When I was a child and came home wounded, close to death, my family chose this for me. Learning the shadow wasn't enough, wouldn't save me in time."

From her neck up, and from below her hips, she looks much the same as before. I have never seen anything like this. Bulwarks are marked from the start; no part of the infant could be mistaken for human. "Bulwarks can't be made," I say slowly, "not after conception." The process begins within the womb, through drugs and rituals and injections.

"In my country, they can." Her smile is pinched. "There it is, our awful secret. We turn perfectly normal children from the poorest families, as needed. Most are made into—not like you, but into flying beasts. Mindless and tame, for our soldiers to ride into combat. When my condition was discovered, my family resisted handing me over. They were exiled, and me with them. Our entire line. Outside the walls we lost children to parasites, and one by one we made each other into this half-thing so we could survive. A family of bulwarks, from root to stem."

I look her up, down. Her entire retinue. Yut has stayed looking mostly human, and her conjuring has hidden the rest, made her as chameleon to her environment as the parasites. “You can’t stay here.”

“I don’t mean to. What I wanted... I wanted to meet with other bulwarks, to let them know there is a way other than being used by their own people. Their own people, who think them less than human. Even ones as honored as you are bound to this relentless vocation. Once you reach maturity you will lose all this—your household, your lovers, your own lord. Duty is all you will be. You’ll fight, die, become a host and your successors will slay you, as you have the ones before.”

My robe is crumpled under us, damp with sweat. Mine scentless, hers fragrant. I stand; she doesn’t try to draw me back onto the bed. “Samonten will have to know. A house-lord may not have as lawful spouse a bulwark.”

“Because bulwarks are tools,” Yut says softly. “Infertile yes, but what are second and third spouses for. If you consider it closely there is no reason at all bulwarks cannot wed.”

“It would be unnatural. You might preach your ideal, but how would you make existence—roving as a bulwark-band? Build your own walls?” I shake my head. “Go. My first fealty is to my lord, whose heart you’ve broken and whose dignity

you've trampled on like a savage. But I'll give you a head start, if you can navigate the labyrinth."

Yut starts to reach for me but lets her hand fall, recognizing perhaps that there is no point. She can no more sway me than she can sway the sun. Still she tries: "We can make something of our own. Together we can survive—there is no deadweight among us, everyone protects each other equally. I will go to other cities, and seek, and speak. One day we'll build something better." Yut puts her clothes to order, breathes out the shadows that give her the seeming of a fully human person. Eyes black once more, skin fair again. "I will wait by the western gate. As long as I can."

For what. In case I change my mind.

* * *

I imagine telling Samonten what has transpired, and consider the optimal result. Should I go to her with Yut's head in hand? I know my lord, but this situation has no precedent. Nothing will restore Samonten's honor and consequently Tarangkaya's, not in the short term. Perhaps we can spread the rumor that Yut was a foreign spy—not far from the truth—and by containing her... Only no. It has been too long, three entire months. My lord would look a fool, and I a failure.

In the labyrinth, I find nothing save the needlebirds, not even a corpse. Yut is gone.

* * *

I love Samonten fully and deeply. This is not merely duty—it is shared childhood, shared lifetime, the understanding that she deals with me fairly and considers me as good as a sister. But I will outlive her. Have I ever loved Tarangkaya itself? Do I love the city?

Weighed on a scale, what species of love is truer and greater? Does one supersede for having been there the longer? What can Yut begin to offer—an empty, inchoate promise?

There is a small possibility that, if I go to her, my lord will shut her eyes and say only, *Do as you wish*. She will forgive, and she'll arrange her own fiction. Perhaps if I am gone it will be easier, a tale of an ungrateful bulwark and a ghastly wife united in treachery. Or perhaps Yut owes us blood.

I've dressed myself, and armed myself. Nothing at all will stay or impede me, not conjured shadows or sentiment. I may not know this creature Yut fully, but I know that she is not tried. In combat I can best her, nascent bulwark that she is. The shadows are not as fast as I am, not by half. I'm a weapon. Yut is a child's imitation.

Pre-dawn as I leave the estate. The sky still gray as I reach the western gate.

She has put on a foreign mask with owl feathers, loitering there like some far-traveled entertainer, but I recognize her

posture, her body. I have come wearing her pearls. To keep her pacified, to symbolize. One or another. She glances at me and stiffens but does not run. Does she see the pearls first, or the weapons? Does she expect me to, overnight, have come to accept her strange vision?

Love, I hear, is blinding. A brilliance like looking up at the sun in zenith. That is a common belief.

I go to her side. We exchange no words; she does not plead, though she holds my hand. Simply we wait in quiet for the gate to open, as it does every three days.

She turns to me. Beneath her mask, perhaps she's smiling. I look at the widening gap between within and without, the gate gaping just enough for departing travelers to pass under. Then it'll drop shut. It will be fast. The moment of decision.

"Yut," I begin, and my hand strays. I think it touches the pearls at my ear first, then the weapons, or perhaps the other way around. That sequence functions in lieu of my tongue, and it says everything.

The gate lifts a little more. Beyond its alloy mouth, a glimpse of the rolling green land reveals itself, slowly turning white with frost and cyclamens. It is a room without a roof; it is a body without limit, transcendent and immaculate. The shoulders stained gold, the arms immense as eternity.

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Benjanun Sriduangkaew writes love letters to strange cities, beautiful bugs, and the future. Her work has appeared on Tor.com, in Beneath Ceaseless Skies, Clarkesworld, and year's best collections. She has been shortlisted for the Campbell Award for Best New Writer, and her debut novella Scale-Bright has been nominated for the British SF Association Award. Her epic fantasy novella Winterglass is forthcoming from Apex Publications.

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COVER ART

“Bird House,” by Jordan Grimmer



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