SAMPLE

The Guardian's Shadow: Hantu Kum-

Kum The Old Woman of the Borrowed Youth — The Tombstone in the Cradle, the Vampire the Colonial Books Never Named, and the Ghost Kept Alive by

Aiden Nightfall

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The Guardian's Shadow

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Introduction

There is a figure at the edge of the kampung's stories who is carrying a baby — and the baby is a tombstone. The modern record's one codified description of her is brief and exact: the Hantu Kum-Kum, it says, is "a singular entity," and she "looks like a woman carrying a tombstone as if it were a baby." An old woman, in the popular register, who takes the blood of the young to buy back her youth — the vampire of age itself. Death carried as if it were life; the stone cradled the way a mother cradles a child; the crone who wants what the young have and cannot make it, only take it.

This volume does for her what the series has done for twenty beings before her — and then one thing the series has never had to do, because no being before her required it. First the family placement: the Kum-Kum belongs to the Malay vampire complex, the most documented family in the catalogue — the birth-spirits of the childbirth death, the langsuir with the hole in the back of her neck (Vol. 1), the pontianak her stillborn child (Vol. 3), the penanggalan's detached head (Vol. 2). But she is the family's inversion, and the inversion is the book's first finding: the great Malay vampires mourn and mothers' grief made monstrous, the dead of the lying- in room feeding on the newborn. The Kum-Kum feeds on the living young — not a mother mourning a child but a crone envying an age — and the family tree, read whole, has two great branches: the vampire of the lost child, and the vampire of the borrowed youth. The second branch is hers.

And then the thing no volume before this one had to do: report an absence. The Kum-Kum has no entry in Skeat's Malay Magic (1900), the corpus that made this series possible; none could be found in the two volumes of Pagan Races of the Malay Peninsula (1906), though a modern encyclopedia cites her to page 98 of it. The colonial books — which named the langsuir, the pontianak, the penanggalan, the polong, the pelesit, the bajang, the kopek, and dozens more — did not name her. She is not, therefore, an ancient figure the scribes recorded; she is a young figure the grandmothers retold, a ghost whose habitat is the told story rather than the written record — and the absence is the volume's second engine, because the tradition's thin ghosts are its modern ghosts, the ones that live where the kampung's oral register meets the screen's retelling cycle, and a ghost that lives on retelling teaches things a thick-tradition ghost cannot: how a being is born, spreads, and survives with no archive at all.

The ten chapters that follow read her whole register. The definition and the name first — the reduplicative mouth-sound, kum-kum, the suck-kiss register of the nursery turned into a ghost's title. The absence itself next, as a study in

method: what it means when the primary sources are silent, how to source a being honestly that the books never met, and why the honest hedge is a feature of this volume rather than a flaw in it. Then the family tree, placed in Skeat's own words, and the mother-vampires' grammar — the beads in the mouth, the eggs under the arms, the neck- hole, the taming by cut nails and stuffed hair, the dance at the merry- making that undid years of domestication — because the Kum-Kum cannot be understood except against the record that surrounded her silence.

The tombstone in the cradle gets its own chapter: the grief-image and its readings. The stolen youth gets two — the blood-beliefs of the folk- medicine register, and the world's comparative crone-vampires, the lamia and the strix and the rejuvenation-by-consumption motif that runs from the classical world to the modern screen. The granny-files follow: the tradition's double filing of the old woman, the nenek who helps and the crone who takes — and Skeat's own nenek kabayan, the old woman he insisted "does not appear to be a ghost at all," the control-case that keeps the category honest.

And the book ends where the Kum-Kum actually lives: the retelling- doctrine — the science of how thin-tradition ghosts stay alive, the encounter-claim protocol the series offers every witness, and the reader's rights, which survive even a ghost the books never wrote down.

She is the family's late-registered member, the archive's honest absence, and the catalogue's one vampire whose motive is not grief. The kampung's warning to its daughters was real; this volume takes it seriously enough to ask who invented her, when, and why — and finds the answers in the one place she has ever lived: the retelling.

Chapter 1: What Is Hantu Kum-Kum? The Old Woman of the Borrowed Youth

The Hantu Kum-Kum is a vampiric old-woman ghost. The popular register is one sentence long and has stayed stable across every modern retelling: she is an old woman who takes the blood of the young — the youth itself, not merely the life — to become young again. The codified record agrees on the figure and adds the image this book will keep returning to: a "singular entity," a woman "carrying a tombstone as if it were a baby." Two registers, one being: the youth-thief of the retold story, and the stone-carrier of the codified description — the crone who wants the young's age, carrying death the way a mother carries life.

Every part of the definition earns its place. Hantu is the catalogue's own word for ghost or spirit — the head of the great enumeration Skeat transcribed, in which an unnamed Malay informant "merely enumerated the varieties, such as hantu, sheitan, polong, pontianak, penanggalan, jin, pelisit..." down through the whole census of the unseen. Kum-kum is her name's body, and the name is a sound: reduplicated, mouth-made, the suck-and-kiss register — the noise of the nursing infant and the smacking kiss, the nursery's own acoustics promoted into a ghost's title. The Malay sound-lore runs on reduplication, the doubled syllable that names by echo: the birik-birik night-bird of the Huntsman's train (Vol. 20), the ngilai shriek of the langsuir's flight. The Kum-Kum's name does what the region's sound-words always do — it sounds like the thing — and the thing it sounds like is a mouth.

The sort from her neighbours runs clean along every seam the catalogue keeps. She is not a birth-spirit. The birth-spirits are the dead of the childbirth tragedy — the mother who died in childbed and became the langsuir, the stillborn who became the pontianak, the penitent who became the penanggalan — and their entire grammar is grief: they haunt the lying-in room because the lying-in room killed them. The Kum-Kum's grammar is appetite. She is not the langsuir's orphan or the pontianak's sister; she has no origin story in the record at all — no "once upon a time" that the colonial corpus transcribed, no etiological tale of the woman who died and became her.

She is not the toyol (Vol. 4) or the bajang (Vol. 8), the familiars kept and fed in households: no one keeps a Kum-Kum; she is not keepable. She is not the polong (Vol. 6), the vengeance-spirit sent against an enemy: she is not sent; she comes for herself. And she is not the hantu kopek (Vol. 19), the pressing crone of the paralysed night — though the two are the catalogue's only old-woman terrors, and their differences will fill a chapter: the kopek presses the

sleeper by the body's own machinery; the Kum-Kum takes from the waking young by the tradition's oldest mechanism, the mouth that sucks.

The codified record's most interesting word is "singular." The encyclopedia entry does not say "the Kum-Kum" or "kum-kums"; it files her as a singular entity — one being, not a species. The catalogue's grammar mostly runs the other way: a woman who dies in childbed becomes a langsuir, which is to say one more member of a class; every murdered man's ghost is a hantu mati di-bunoh. The Kum-Kum's retellings treat her as the one — the old woman, appearing here and there across a whole region of stories, the same figure at every edge of the clearing.

Whether the singularity is archaic (one old woman, as the world's hag-traditions often keep one hag) or an artefact of the thin register (the retellings standardising a figure the sources never multiplied) is a question the tradition cannot settle — and this book will say so plainly, because the honest hedge is the thin-tradition volume's signature: the thick-tradition books get certainties; the Kum-Kum's readers get the tradition as it actually is, which is a story told a thousand times and written down by almost no one.

What the warning was for is not in doubt. The retold register is a cautionary one: the Kum-Kum belongs to the lore that follows young girls — the edges of the kampung after dark, the lonely paths, the errands that run late — the tradition's whole apparatus of the young woman's first freedoms, policed by the telling. Chapter 9 reads the apparatus comparatively, because the world is full of old-woman terrors attached to the young's coming of age, and the Kum-Kum's particular fusion — age envy, blood, the youth restored by theft — is the register's most modern feeling wearing its most ancient clothes. The kampung that told her did not tell her to document a demon; it told her to keep a daughter home before dark, and the daughter stayed, and the ghost worked — which is the retelling's whole genius, and the reason a being with no archive at all has never once been forgotten.

The definition, then, is complete enough to open the book: a vampiric old-woman ghost, singular, named for the mouth's own sound, of the vampire family but not of its birth — feeding on the living young for the borrowing of youth, carrying death as if it were a baby, warned-of by grandmothers, missed by the record-keepers. The volume's question is the question every definition raises and only this being makes urgent: where did she come from? Not in the mythic sense — in the documentary one. The next chapter opens the files and finds them empty, and the empty file is the most instructive document this series has ever handled.

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