# SAMPLE

## The Guardian's Shadow: Putri Gunong

Ledang The Princess of the Mountain — The Needle That Won a Widow's Freedom, the Bride-Price That Broke an Empire, and the Court That Outlived Malacca

Aiden Nightfall

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The Guardian's Shadow

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# Introduction

There is a mountain in Johor that the old charts called Ophir, and the Malay register calls Gunong Ledang, and both names keep the same tenant: a princess. She is the tradition's most named spirit — named in the Malay Annals, the court chronicle of the Malacca sultanate; named in Skeat's colonial-era record of Malay magic; named in the pawangs' own charms; named on the British admiralty charts as the reason a hill on the Selangor coast was worth marking at all; and named, still, in the modern retellings that carry her to the screen. The being of Volume 21 was a ghost the books never named. The being of Volume 22 is the opposite and the completion: a figure the books could not stop naming, because her name is her address, and her address is a mountain — Tuan Putri Gunong Ledang, the Lady Princess of Mount Ledang, the sovereign of the mountain who refused a sultan.

The register gives her more story than any other being in this series. The Annals send the Sultan of Malacca's embassy up her mountain to ask for her hand: Tun Mamed's ascent past the bamboos that play themselves, the garden whose birds cried like people and whose rose made pantuns, the hall whose walls were of bone and whose roof was of hair. The Princess answers through her messengers with a bride-price meant to be impossible — stairs of gold and silver laid from the capital to the mountain, hearts of gnats and moths measured in platters, a vat of human tears, a vat of young betel juice, and, last of all, two phials of royal blood, the king's own and his son's. The Sultan surveys the bill and stops at the one item he could actually pay: the taking of blood, he says, "is an unpleasant business, and I have no inclination for it at all."

Skeat's record, two centuries later, gives her the rest of her legend: the woman who disposed of a husband by the needle and resolved to live free of the married state; the cat "of fabulous dimensions" who carried her up Jugra Hill on his back; the ghostly court that left Malacca when the Portuguese took it and re-established itself on the Selangor coast; the shrine whose guardian tigers were "formerly the pets of the Princess of Malacca"; and the charm that still addressed her, a generation after the empire fell, as "Putri Rundok de' Gunong Ledang."

This volume reads her whole register. It is the series' richest single-figure record since the Spectre Huntsman, and it completes a trilogy the series has been building since Volume 1: the tradition's three great female motives — the Langsuir's grief, the Kum-Kum's envy, and the Princess's refusal, the one being in the catalogue who wanted nothing, and priced herself accordingly. The chapters follow her from the Annals' embassy to the needle-widow's two

records, from the court that outlived an empire to the cat that carried it uphill, from the mountain's sacred geography to the world's mountain-princesses, and from the colonial record to the modern retellings — and they end where her legend ends, at the reader's own boundary, with the doctrine the whole register teaches: that a refusal can be a foundation, that a price can be a wall, and that the being named by her geography is a being the geography keeps.

The method is the series' standard, stated once for the new reader. The primary sources are read directly and quoted exactly: the Annals in Leyden's 1821 translation, Skeat's Malay Magic (1900) with its Selangor- coast informants, and the pawangs' charm-register preserved in the appendix where the Princess keeps her working address. The comparative canon and the modern retellings are held to the honest ledger — seated where they can be seated, filed as retelling where they cannot — and the volume claims no encounter it cannot document and repeats no detail the sources do not keep. What follows is offered as reading, marked as this book's, not the record's; the record itself, needle, cat, gold stairs and all, belongs to the tradition that built the legend and the mountain that keeps it.

One note on the volume's place in the series, for the reader who keeps the whole shelf. Twenty-one beings have been filed before her — the birth- spirits and their griefs, the familiars and their thefts, the soil's and the forest's officers, the hidden court, the genii's hierarchy, and the crones of the thin register. The Princess completes the catalogue's one unfinished structure: its study of female will. Each of the tradition's great women has now been read whole, and the three readings together are the series' own trilogy — grief that became a haunting, envy that became a hunger, and refusal that became a government. The order of the volumes put the government last, and the introduction's own claim is that the tradition did too.

# Chapter 1: What Is Putri Gunong Ledang? The Princess Who Is Her Address

The definition must begin with the name, because the name is the definition. Tuan Putri Gunong Ledang: Tuan Putri, the honorific a Malay court gave its highest lady; Gunong Ledang, the mountain in Johor that the European charts called Mount Ophir. The two halves fuse into one address, and the address is the being — she is not a spirit who happens to live on a mountain, like the jembalang who is installed in the ground he haunts; she is a princess whose title and whose geography are the same words. The register's other beings are defined by what they do: the Polong by its feeding, the Toyol by its theft, the Huntsman by his omen-passage.

The Princess is defined by where she reigns, and the reign is the identity. When Skeat's record introduces her, it introduces her the same way — "a certain legendary Princess known as Tuan Putri Gunong Ledang" — the name doing all the work a description would do for any other figure, because the description is in the name.

And the register treats her as what she is: a sovereign. This is the volume's first structural finding, and it separates her from every other being the series has filed. The Toyol is kept; the Polong is sent; the Bajang is caught and owned; the jembalang is appointed to the earth like a low official to a district. The Princess has a court — "her ghostly court," Skeat's phrase, with everything the word court carries: retainers, residence, protocol, and a seat of government. Her mountain has an administration. The Annals' embassy is received the way embassies are received by rulers: the messengers are met at the border of her authority (the middle of the mountain, where the ordinary climbers can proceed no farther), interrogated ("Whence do you come, and whither are you going?"), routed through a chamberlain (Dang Raya Rani, "the head person here of the Princess Gunung Ledang"), and answered at last not by the sovereign directly but by a formal messenger delivering terms. The mountain runs on court protocol, and the protocol is itself evidence: the tradition filed her not among its demons but among its rulers.

The name-as-address does one more thing, and it is the doctrine this volume will carry to the reader's own life. A being named by her geography is a being the geography protects. The Polong must be fed or it turns; the Kum-Kum must take or she fades; the princess tied to no place can be displaced. But the Putri Gunong Ledang cannot be evicted, because her title is a deed: Mount Ledang is hers the way the mountain's own stone is the mountain's. This is why her legend can absorb history — the fall of Malacca in the colonial record does not

end her; it merely moves the court, from one named hill to another — and it is why, five centuries after the sultanate, the mountain is still hers and she is still the mountain's.

The series' volumes have taught, one by one, what each being guards: the Langsuir guards the child she lost, the jembalang guards the soil he was born under, the Huntsman guards the forest's lease. The Princess guards the most durable thing in the whole catalogue: a boundary written into a name, so that the boundary and the being are one fact, and the fact outlasts empires.

The honest file must also keep what the record withholds. No source in this volume's dossier gives her a personal name before the mountain — no birth, no lineage, no era. The Annals call her the Princess and let the mountain supply the rest; Skeat's informants call her the Princess of Malacca and let the history supply the rest. The tradition was never interested in her biography, because her biography is not what she is for. She is for being the sovereign who cannot be bought, and everything the register keeps — the court, the price-list, the needle, the cat — serves that one office. The reader who wants her soul should look not behind the name but at it: a lady, a princess, a mountain, in that order, and nothing beneath, because there is nothing beneath.

The register's names for her deserve one more file, because the honorifics are a stratigraphy of the whole tradition. "Tuan Putri" is court language — the honorific a Malay audience gave royalty, carried unchanged into the ghost-register and the charm-register alike, so that the pawang invoking her and the chronicler presenting her used the same courtesy. "The Princess of Malacca" is the political name, the coast's phrase for her, and it carries the legend's whole historical claim in three words: she belonged to Malacca, the strait's fallen capital, and the coast that received her court knew her by the capital she lost.

"Putri Rundok de' Gunong Ledang" is the charm-register's own form — the professionals' compression, her title and her mountain folded into an invocation's rhythm. And the modern spellings — Puteri for Putri, Gunung for Gunong — are not errors but the register's own drift, the same being re-addressed as the language standardized. Four strata, four names, one tenant: the lady, the princess, the mountain, and whatever the pawang's rhyme needed her to be that night. The being who is her address keeps collecting addresses, and every one of them is hers.

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