



Shadowscent: The Darkest Bloom

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Editorial Choice:

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Media type:

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Each of the five provinces of the Empire of Aramtesh has its own ruler, culture, resources and language. Each provides the Emperor with a wife and together the women form the powerful Council of Five. Religious practices remain an influence in daily life; different deities are worshipped or forgotten. There is a medieval feel to life in the cities; in the countryside, travellers use horses, camels or maybe river boats and barges. By contrast, the military, who maintain law and order, echo Rome in their discipline, mobility and modes of combat; though women serve on equal terms with men. This otherworld of P.M. Freestone's debut novel has that depth of credibility and consistency necessary for us to believe that this is a land crowded with untold stories. The unique difference between Aramtesh and our world - or any fictional world we have previously visited - lies in the paramount importance of smells; from the allure of a fragrance to the stench of the sewer. A discerning sense of smell is invaluable in everything from intimate relationships to the realms of scholarship, medicine, religion or politics and power.

Seventeen year old Rakel has a particularly acute nose; she has already made use of her gift in refining her skills as a healer in her rural village. She needs to turn her talent into cash, for her father, an army commander, has been forced into retirement having contracted the progressive Affliction (the 'Rot?'). She works hard to afford the best medicines and even hopes her own researches might lead to a cure.

Rakel narrates alternate chapters throughout the adventure. The other storyteller is Ash, the 'Shield' or personal bodyguard to Nisai, heir to the ailing Emperor of Aramtesh. Ash was taken into the royal household as a child after he had saved Nisai in a violent incident in the slums of the capital, Ekasya. There's a mystery about what happened - neither ever talks about it. Since that time, Ash has been rigorously trained to kill in defence of his Prince. Both storytellers use the dramatic present, sustaining immediacy throughout the tale. Before long, during an official visit to the province of Aphana, Nisai falls into an unconscious state; circumstances suggest assassination rather than accident - poison may well have been involved, but the Prince's condition defeats diagnosis. Rakel and Ash become suspects. Drawn together by a common goal, the pair set out, with Rakel's irascible mare, Lil, on a search for rare ingredients which might enable Rakel to devise an antidote to the poison. Their quest demands they wrestle with ancient languages for clues hidden in curious corners of every province in the Empire - a plot strategy which allows Freestone to offer a fascinating and varied series of adventures, thus avoiding the one-similar-challenge-after-another structure of too many quest fantasies. There is a race against time, and against the pursuing Imperial Rangers. One of the clues is solved

among the manuscripts of the Library of the Lost ? hewn from the rock of a remote desert. Here a staff of assiduous Archivists and Chroniclers are absorbed by their scholarly work, untroubled by any interest at all in potential users of the Library. Even the entrances are deliberately concealed to discourage visitors.

Both Rakel and Ash hide secrets about their own origins and powers, which they themselves only half understand. Their search takes them not only into unfamiliar provinces, but into new territories within themselves; increasingly, they learn from each other. The narrative demands attentive reading; miss half a hint, and you could lose the plot. Quest fantasies risk ending in anticlimax, but here tension builds towards a finale where mortal courage is fused with supernatural violence, managed by Freestone with remarkable graphic intensity. She also seems to leave two or three doors deliberately ajar, suggesting a sequel which is already mentioned by the author on the web.

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