

# The Notebook of my Favourite Skin-Trees

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## BANANA

The best part of these are the fruits, growing on their fat stem, dangling down the person's back or from their arm. I always bow and smile, asking, "Can I taste one of your fruits? Bananas from a skin-tree are so sweet."

So sweet and so small, a single mouthful.

I also enjoy the place where banana tree meets flesh, roots curving over and into the person's limb – pressing my lips there, my tongue – and the small shade cast by the leaves.



Kim Cuc saw advertisements everywhere she looked in the walking street market, but only on the leaves of the skin-trees: names of shops and cafés and restaurants spelled out, Thai or English or other languages, in the bright white veins. Aside from the occasional cry from stall owners or vendors – "I have the finest grilled bananas in Chiang Mai! Come and taste!" – no other form of promotion cluttered the senses.

That had always been the intent of the skin-trees' engineers and earliest supporters. Kim Cuc smiled often, seeing the remains of once-garishly lit billboards, or walls that several years earlier would have been covered in paper.

No smiles on this night.

She stopped every person with a skin-tree in the walking street market, to ask if they'd noticed strange discolourations on their leaves. "There is a sickness," she said, putting urgency into the phrase she now knew in many languages, not just her native Vietnamese and second tongue English, "and it's important to collect samples and data." Into one of the notebooks carried under her arm, she noted the age and ethnicity of the person, the age and species of their tree, the company its leaves advertised – this for those whose trees remained healthy. In a second notebook, with frowning lizards on the spine, she noted the same information for those whose trees were not. There she added information about the duration of the discolourations, their colour and spread. Samples went into a third notebook, with little clips to fasten two pages together, and special paper to protect and preserve the leaves.

The lizard-spined notebook was not as full as the first, yet.

Late in the night, when vendors began packing away their wares, Kim Cuc followed the shoppers returning to their homes. She drank from the large bottle of nutrient-

full water she always carried around. The durian tree growing on her left shoulder needed it.

She passed a stall selling Buddha-shaped lanterns, a popular tourist item. Some still glowed, yellowly and redly, and in their light she glanced at her durian. A brown circle, no greater in circumference than a joss stick, lay on the edge of one leaf.

“No!” she cried out.

The bright screen of her wrist-computer did not contradict the Buddha lights.

## BANYAN

The banyan’s thick roots suggest a secret fluidity, like wax, uncommon to plants: frozen over Pitsamai’s shoulder, beginning where bone used to jut from her thin flesh, sliding down her shoulder blades, curling around her upper arm (carefully trained not to restrict movement), stretching across her collarbone and down her breastbone, down the neat lines of her ribs. They frame her right breast. I always think they will flow when Pitsamai is alone, even though she tells me this isn’t the case.

The thick leaves advertise Chiang Mai University. Veins curl in the letters in Thai and English, artificially white against dark green. Pitsamai loves her university.

The tangled trunks rise from her shoulder, as tall as her forehead. Aerial roots dangle from its branches, always reminding me of hair (sometimes tangling with Pitsamai’s hair), and they are my favourite part. I always tilt my head when I kiss Pitsamai’s lips, so the aerial roots brush my cheek. When I kiss the base of the tree, that special place where root is fixed to flesh, the aerial roots tangle in my hair.

I considered, years ago when no skin-tree grew on me, acquiring a banyan. Perhaps it’s retained its allure because I have to be with Pitsamai or another of my girlfriends to enjoy it: a double pleasure, like spicy meat inside a rice ball.



“I am worried,” Pitsamai, biological engineer at Chiang Mai University, said in English.

“Oh, don’t say that!”

The previous night, Kim Cuc had torn off the infected leaf and fastened it in her third notebook. She’d written in the lizard-spined one, summarising this latest infection. By the light of glowing Buddhas, she’d wiped the tears from her cheeks and pretended the sickness was only a small thing, a two-hour stomach upset among the skin-trees.

The look on Pitsamai's face when she took the leaf from Kim Cuc's notebook ended that flimsy lie.

They stood on the edge of Pitsamai's lab, where the Asian skin-trees had been created. Behind them were rows of tables, glass equipment, remote-controlled machines that tended to the cultures and plants in secure and biohazard cabinets. One of Pitsamai's colleagues sat at a table, inputting data to a computer. Graphs arced across its screen.

Several specimens in the cabinets — skin-trees grafted to synthetic limbs — bore the dark marks of the disease.

"It's beginning to spread very quickly," Pitsamai said, "and in many parts of the world. Örn is seeing them in Iceland now. Neroly in Venice has begun a clinic, and noticed a dramatic rise two days ago — partly due to people only just hearing about the clinic, only just getting concerned, but many were new. This afternoon I v-chatted with one of the first cases in Australia. Half the leaves on his tree are brown and shrivelling. I think the skin-trees will die from this."

Skin-trees were not meant to do that before the person's death.

Kim Cuc played with the amulet at her throat, hating the nausea that wriggled in her belly like a troublesome naga. "What more can I do to help?"

"Keep collecting samples for me. Talk to some of the older cases in your notebook." Pitsamai tangled her fingers into Kim Cuc's. "I know it will be hard, seeing their trees so ill, but I need to know if any of them have managed to slow down the illness' progression. Or if any of them have got healthier. I'm still trying various treatments."

Inside the synthetic limbs flowed blood from infected people. Pitsamai and the others had already learned that they battled a virus that passed fluidly from person to person, by sweat and other excretions, flowing into the tree through its thin, nutrient-drinking roots. It was not like a fungus, where removing the affected areas might save the rest of the plant. So far it hadn't reacted to general or specific antivirals. Containment didn't work on something so eager to transfer in such a small quantity of liquid.

"Do you want to take some of my blood?" Kim Cuc asked, looking away from the ailing specimens. "Maybe you'll find a cure with it."

Such outright selfishness made her guilty, but she couldn't bear the thought of her durian withering. Maybe, just maybe, Pitsamai would find a cure from one of the injections into her blood. And another sample always helped.

Pitsamai smiled. "Of course I'll take some."

After Kim Cuc's blood filled a small container and Pitsamai found some sugary biscuits, they kissed. Banyan aerial roots brushed Kim Cuc's ear, drawing a small sigh from her mouth. The banyan's leaves, speckled brown, rustled against her hair.

“Work hard and well, as always,” Kim Cuc murmured.

“I hope you find something useful, love.”

### DRAGON FRUIT

You have to be careful when kissing a dragon fruit skin-tree. There are spiky parts and they scratch, like a lover’s nails. The fruits are small and bright and, because of Pitsamai’s engineering, don’t need their shells removed. My brief lover, Busarakham, let me run my fingers along the smooth part of the leaves, let me kiss them, before tugging my attention to her flesh. I never told her that I preferred the tree to her breasts.



Five names from Kim Cuc’s lizard-spined notebook. Five conversations, by virtual-chat or in the city. None of them offered optimism like a red-enveloped birthday gift.

And, in a neat row along the side of a tourist-full songtaew on Ratchamanka Street, she saw stickers for one of the newest skin-whitening products. That, even more than the consistent reports of worsening, browning skin-trees, made her want to cry.

### DURIAN

Ho Chi Minh City, six years ago:

The miniature durian tree grew from my left shoulder, its trunk straight and many-branched, roots curling over and, thinly, into me. The fruits, blunted so they didn’t cause injury, fell into my bra. Its leaves, dark green, long and wide as one finger joint of a child, advertised Thanh Clothes, a growing chain of eco-friendly outfits.

I walked back and forth in front of the billboards, the posters pinned on the sides of the road, on the sides of motorbikes, the little stickers that piled onto the posts as thickly as the electricity cables above. I bared my shoulder, wearing clothes Thanh made to fasten easily. I bared my tree. I made a tally: who stared at bright posters with cheerful smiling faces and big letters, Vietnamese and English, and who stared at my durian.

I presented my figures to many companies.

I said, “Your flashing electronic billboards soak up energy and no one wants them there, no one likes them, but over a hundred people an hour — busy shoppers, vendors, schoolchildren, businessmen and -women — stop to ask ‘What is Thanh Clothes?’ Thanh asks his customers why they come to his shop, and most say ‘Because that girl wears a strange tree on her shoulder.’ I don’t have to be reprinted, lit up. I don’t obstruct the beautiful parts of this city. All I must do is drink a lot of water, eat more food than usual, with the right nutrients, but really the plant is

cleverer than a real one and can survive more difficulties. I can distribute seeds, if more people want to advertise Thanh Clothes.”

Not many companies liked the thought of advertising spread by the consumer’s wants. Advertising beyond their control, after the original tree or two.

Later, I bared my tree in vast protests across Southeast Asia. In Ho Chi Minh City and Hanoi, in Angkor Wat, in Vientiane, in Bangkok and Chiang Mai, in Shanghai and Hong Kong and Singapore and Manila. How did I afford all this, a fisherman’s daughter with half an education? Thanh made a lot of money because of me, because of the other women and men who took a tree onto their flesh and walked around my city with his name on their leaves. He believed in our advertising. The original investment in the technology – our nearest source: Chiang Mai, Pitsamai’s experimental work, who I later came to love in more ways than appreciating her vision – paid off more times than I can count. Our protests accused advertising of spreading too widely and wastefully.

Soon after my twenty-fifth birthday, the skin-trees replaced light and paper in many countries around the world – if not through a government’s law, then through public opinion and voting with their wallets.

And then the sickness, two years later, rippling across skin-trees of all types.



And advertisements returning. The stickers on the songtaew would be the first of many, vanguard to what Kim Cuc and many others had campaigned against.

“I hate it,” she told Pitsamai, over a quick dinner of seafood tom yam. “The stickers were so ugly.”

“I know. But smile, a little, because Neroly has made a compound that slows the progression of the illness. I’m going to replicate it on the Asian trees, just in case it doesn’t work on them, and see if I can make it work even better.”

Kim Cuc clapped her hands and, while Pitsamai pretended to bow for an audience, stole a big piece of squid from her bowl.

It seemed likely that a big corporation had developed the sickness, wanting a return to advertising that it controlled. Pitsamai and her colleagues agreed on this, after examining the virus and finding it so very distinct. But no one had determined which one. Probably not the skin-whitening company with the songtaew stickers. Who used those kinds of products in Canada, where one of the first cases appeared? From what Pitsamai had said, the virus appeared simultaneously in several locations around the world. A company with global interests, then. There were too many of those to bother tracking them down, when the skin-trees needed a cure quicker than an explanation. Unless several companies were behind it, which widened the list of suspects because then they could be more local. “Some businesses are suffering

because they won't change their ways," Neroly had said in v-chat. "I can imagine someone thinking 'Oh, let's just kill the skin-trees', as if this is the kind of backward step we need and want." Governments were beginning to acknowledge the illness and, in certain countries, direct funding to the various universities.

At the end of the meal, Kim Cuc noticed three new brown spots on her durian's leaves. She left the leaves in place, not wanting to deprive the tree of the rest of those leaves' functionality, though she winced at glimpses of them.

She knew that living with Pitsamai and talking to many infected people had made catching the disease inevitable. Part of her had hoped for luck. Part of her considered it worth the risk. Still, it hurt.

A week passed.

Leaves darkened, Pitsamai's work left her stressed and tired, Kim Cuc's questions in the streets left her unhappy and the lizard-spined book full of notes. Six days after the first brown spot on Kim Cuc's durian, skin-trees were announced dead in Canada and Bangkok: all the leaves shrivelled and fallen off. Regardless of species, skin-trees were evergreen. And these dead trees no longer took in nutrients. That same day, Kim Cuc saw ten more songtaew with stickers on their sides. She almost cried in the street, among vendors setting up their stalls for the night market – lanterns, wooden carvings, amulets, t-shirts, fresh fruit in bright piles – and tuk-tuk drivers who called out for custom. "It will not fall apart," she whispered in Vietnamese, strange sounds to all the passersby. "Pitsamai and the others will find a cure. It will not fall apart."

How could she, only an assistant and lover to Pitsamai, a Vietnamese girl in a foreign country, keep that promise?

She tried to spread optimism: telling other skin-tree wearers that the biological engineers worked hard across the world, that progress was already being made, berating songtaew drivers for giving in to greedy opportunistic companies, though she understood why they let the companies give them money to bear ads, and pulling down the posters appearing on poles and walls.

To cheer herself, to refill her strength, she spent a lot of time at her favourite temple in Thailand – Wat Doi Suthep, with its golden chedi, golden roof, golden bells dangling from the roof's edge, and the smell of joss sticks, of lotus petals beneath her nose, and the calm golden gaze of Buddha – and she visited one of her other girlfriends.

## JASMINE

Oh, the smell! It curls around Mekhalaa's legs, rooted in her right foot, tendrils brushing her hips. She works with wood, she built a wooden frame for her chair, so when she rolls along the street with jasmine against exquisitely carved teak – kinnara, garuda, ghilen, kochasri and myriad other creatures – she looks like the flowering Himmaman forest.

She paints her nails gold, like an offering, and she wears no perfume except the scent of her flowers. When I kiss her, lips to the immobile arch of her foot, her ankles, her calves and thighs and the place in-between where she retains sensation, I am full of jasmine. It crowds my nose. Forgetting myself, kissing with my eyes closed, I swallow petals. I lick her foot, that special place where the plant passes through flesh, that thin line of scar tissue like an inlaid pearl border on a shutter, I open my eyes and look up through jasmine to her smiling face. "Kim Cuc, Kim Cuc, you are the only person I know who loves the skin-trees so much," she often says, either in her faulty English or, slowly for me, in Thai.

"I got a skin-tree because I believe in them," I tell her, "but their sexiness was a good side-bonus." I laugh too, with joy. Even touching my durian is fun, sometimes, though another woman is better. Especially someone as beautiful as Mekhalaa (or Pitsamai, who is opposite in every way to Mekhalaa, small and slim with a face as delicately shaped as my statues of the Trung sisters, where Mekhalaa is large and soft with short hair that tickles her ears), especially someone patient and attentive and skilled.

Lying together on her bed, on yellow sheets with the carved headboard of a fish-tailed woman, we indulge in one another. I move where she asks me. I press my lips to her jasmine's base, tracing the line of roots under her skin, under her sole — no inconvenience for a woman who never walks — while she flicks her fingers inside me. One hand following the stem of the jasmine up her thighs, I return the touch, affection for affection.

I close my eyes against the brown stains on the leaves, inhaling jasmine and getting lost in Mekhalaa's touch, the jasmine's bark under my lips, the smell, oh that wonderful sweet smell of petals crushed between our skin.



More trees died. More leaves developed brown spots on Kim Cuc's durian, and on a hot, cloudy morning she woke to find one fallen, utterly brown and lifeless, on her pillow. Her tears splashed on it. Outside the window, two men pasted a big poster — billboard-big — to a bare wall. Already many people thought the skin-trees a failed experiment in alternative advertising. Enforcers of the new law in Thailand cared less about old forms. Real billboards, illuminated and animated, would follow.

"Go away," Kim Cuc shouted through the mosquito netting. Over the honk of tuk-tuk horns — not replaceable, like the engines, with a silent electric version — and the voice of an exuberant banana and pineapple seller, the men had no chance of hearing her. At least she'd used their language.

She mailed some of her friends in Chiang Mai, the ones who'd introduced her to Pitsamai a couple of years earlier, and arranged a meeting: seven of them, mixed in age and gender, planning over spring rolls and chilli rice and bamboo prawn soup. First after the ordering of food, Kim Cuc updated them on Pitsamai's progress. Still

no cure. The compound that slowed the virus' work helped them all, but couldn't be developed further, couldn't stop the skin-trees' deaths.

"But we need to tell people that there'll be a cure, sometime soon, and they shouldn't give up," she told the group.

Nods like obedient elephants in a tourist show.

"Not many people want to get a skin-tree now," one said. "They see us with these dying things, so they settle for an animated tattoo or those glow-in-the-dark temporary ridges."

"In the shape of temples on their white farang skin!" one said, giggling.

"Well, we need to point out that the virus isn't harming people," Kim Cuc said. The word 'yet' remained on her tongue, un-used. No one knew if the virus would mutate. But the people whose skin-trees died were completely healthy, except for useless dead wood on a limb or shoulder. "Maybe we can try to convince some friends. Or students! Some of them must be interested by death."

Laughter. Remarks that not everyone owned a strange preference like Kim Cuc. She shrugged and said that no one would hurt from trying to persuade people.

They talked of removing posters, refusing to ride in a songtaew or tuk-tuk with those adverts – though some of them hesitated at depriving such low-income people of custom. The grandfather in the group suggested that, if people didn't want a skin-tree right now, they could ink a tree and a favourite company's name onto their arms. Only temporary. Henna, or pen by those who still used that implement. The katoey Sunatda, man-tall in glittery sandals and a pretty dress, offered to decorate the leaves in her plant shop with various good business' names.

Kim Cuc left the meeting with a smile, with ideas filling her like Mekhalaa's jasmine.

Collecting more information from people in the city lowered her mood. Skin-trees creeping closer to death, angry regrets at getting such a difficult-to-remove piece of body art, distress, fear. Too many falling leaves. Spreading hope felt fake and impossible, but Kim Cuc tried. "Don't give up quite yet," she told a young man, who waited for coffee in a new, locally run branch. "The biological engineers were clever enough to develop the skin-trees. They can fix them." To a woman she suggested patience, as the skin-tree on her upper arm only bore several discolourations.

Later, she waited for Pitsamai at a little metal table in the night market, morose, thinking of the durian's darkening leaves, imagining it dead and bare. "Still no breakthrough," Pitsamai said, collapsing into the chair with a sigh. "Immune systems still don't recognise the virus as an enemy, our anti-viral compounds aren't doing enough."

In unison, they sipped from cups of ice drink, kiwi and watermelon.

“Can you make the virus different?” Kim Cuc said. “So the immune system goes, ‘Hey there, I kill you now!’”

Pitsamai stared at her through the translucent base of her cup.

“We haven’t tried that,” she said, putting it down. “It’s a pretty complicated virus, but... well, we haven’t tried, so we don’t know.” She grabbed Kim Cuc’s hands, kissed them fiercely. “Fisherman’s daughter saves the world. Or, well, the skin-trees. Maybe. I want to go back to work!”

“You can go, if you want.” Emotions tangled in Kim Cuc: excitement, hope, desire for a cure, desire for Pitsamai at her side, strolling by stalls, in bed.

“No, no, I’ve had a long day. I won’t be able to work.” She laughed. “I’m not a student anymore!”

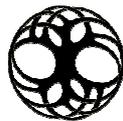
“You’ll be thinking of it all evening,” Kim Cuc fake-whined, “instead of me.”

“I can think of both, you know.”

When they leaned upright against the cushions on their specially designed bed, legs locked and a two-way dildo inside them both, gasping into each other’s trees, Kim Cuc’s thoughts were equally shared between pleasure and possibility.

## RAMBUTAN

This tree’s trunk grows clear of branches, at least when carefully groomed like Sunatda’s, and then for its upper half is a great bush of leaves, thin branches, and the hairy little fruits, red when ripe. I love those fruits. So funny-looking in a market. So funny when the little skin-tree ones, as small as the ‘O’ on the Dong coins I still have from home, tangle in my hair after sex with Sunatda. I kiss the bare trunk and she flicks the branches, laughing as the fruits fall.



Kim Cuc lay on the floor of the apartment, watching a protest in London on her wrist computer’s projected screen. Many of the men and women in the small crowd bore skin-trees, and none of them were healthy. Their signs and shouts demanded more funding for Imperial College and Edinburgh University’s biological engineering departments. “We have this fantastic way of advertising, that’s utterly driven by consumer choice, and the government says they support us!” said the leader into his microphone. A row of tiny holly trees, only two centimetres high, grew on his left cheekbone, obscuring a useless eye. The other, bright blue, flitted constantly as he made eye contact across the crowd. “We need that support now!” Cheers and more shouts. The waving of banners.

Chiang Mai University had good funding from a series of Asian companies, so Pitsamai needed no one in the streets of Chiang Mai or Bangkok to help her.

Assistance came from a colleague who specialised in virology, her pair of doctoral students and other graduates, eager to contribute, and from Kim Cuc who collected samples and information in Chiang Mai and several people in Bangkok doing the same.

"We think we can re-engineer the virus to be recognised," Pitsamai said one evening, when Kim Cuc waited by the square canal with two dead durian leaves in her hands. "It's slow work, though."

Pitsamai's banyan looked even worse.

"How slow?" Kim Cuc said quietly. "Are you going to do it before our trees die?"

"Yours? Probably. I'll give you a cure as soon as it's ready, before we mass-produce. Mine?" Pitsamai shrugged. The gesture made four leaves fall and the aerial roots wave. "I will not be as sad as you, but removing one as established as this will be difficult." Then she sighed. "You remember how Örn and I were developing ways to make them much more easy to remove, so people aren't put off by their permanence like old tattoos? I wish we were doing that again. It was fun."

Kim Cuc held her hand, tugging her along the canal-side. Once, a wall had stood there around the old Chiang Mai. "You must be enjoying the challenge of this."

"Yes, of course, but it's stressful too."

"Mmm."

They reached the south-east corner, where a bit of re-constructed wall stood: a reminder of the past in dark brick. Further along, they passed a spirit house nestled in a full-size banyan. The little house, bright as a temple, was covered in garlands and offerings. Pitsamai laughed, pointing to bright pink carved animals on the spirit house's verandah. "I like this spirit's taste!"

At a roadside vendor they bought grilled meatballs and ambled away from the canal.

"It also makes me angry," Pitsamai said, "that someone decided they hated the skin-trees so much, they had to kill them all. But I suppose I shouldn't be shocked that plenty of people still don't care about killing plants."

"You should be upset, though. Caring is good." Kim Cuc looked up at the nearby buildings: a lot of ugly concrete, but covered in balcony-gardens, green roofs, vines on recycled metal trellises. Along the street, bins were clearly labelled for glass bottles, fibre-bag juice containers, paper waste, food waste. Vendors had recently started selling some of their meals in banana leaf instead of less natural packaging. Tourists liked the novelty and locals appreciated the reduction in waste. "People are protesting in London," she said. "About skin-trees. Not a vast urban greening project, not re-forestation or renewable energy, but our skin-trees that provide better advertising. Be angry, but also be happy." She tugged a garish massage-salon poster from a wall and dumped it in the paper bin. "So hurry up and cure the virus. Show people they can't just get rid of good things."

"I'm working on it!"

Arms linked, smiling, they walked on.

## PHOENIX TAIL

The only man I ever wanted to take back to my apartment had a phoenix tail tree growing from his forearm, its flowers as vibrantly red as the ones growing near my school. I never got to ask why he put it in such an inconvenient place. In a temple in Ho Chi Minh City I saw him, holding up his arm as if the tree was a lit candle, and when he walked past I realised that the curving roots and trunk formed a tiny basin, full of rainwater. I wanted to drink from it.



Posters covered the city like the disease on the skin-trees' leaves, multiplying and ruining. Kim Cuc woke several mornings with dead leaves on her arm. On another afternoon with her friends, ice drinks along the side of the Ping river, she realised that the lychee on Sunatda's brother was dead. She tried not to stare. She tried not to cry, especially later when she and Sunatda embraced and their leaves fluttered brown and dry around them. Sometimes she saw new skin-trees on students' bodies and barely restrained herself from dancing across the street to them, sometimes she saw people removing advertisements from walls; then she turned, glimpsed her own dying durian or another person's brown, wilting leaves, and the joy left her like a balloon floating into the sky.

Afraid of skin-trees disappearing from the city, from her memory, she had bought a notebook with bright yellow flowers on its cover and for several weeks had been writing lists and descriptions of her favourite skin-trees.

So when Pitsamai finally mailed her with the precious words 'I think I've got something, come to the lab', Kim Cuc almost ran out of a meeting with a Thanh Clothes manager, who finally had some hours to give her in the Chiang Mai branch. She hailed a tuk-tuk, not caring that it had stickers for Google's new wrist computer on its front, and willed it to go faster, faster through the traffic to the university. She ran through the building to the biological engineering department, waving her pass at the scanners, until she more calmly entered Pitsamai's lab.

Three students worked at the cabinets, manipulating injections into synthetic limbs or Petri dishes, and another worked at the computer. Coffee cans were piled in a chedi-shape. Pitsamai greeted Kim Cuc with a weary hug, and more leaves fell around them. "Look, follow me," she said, taking Kim Cuc's hand and leading her to one of the cabinets, where a man with purple hair sat. "These synthetic limbs are free of infection, totally free, and look at the trees, they hasn't got worse in three days. That's long enough to convince me. We need to do more tests, I've got this lot putting my re-engineered virus into samples, soon we'll know for sure. But you can have it now, if you want."

Kim Cuc stared at the little mango with brown-speckled leaves, knowing that gradually the tree would replace them with new, healthy ones.

“Yes, now.”

The needle barely hurt. As she held a small tissue over her arm, she imagined the chemicals running through her body, changing the virus, making her immune system notice an intruder, attack, kill.

“You’ve taken it too, haven’t you?”

“Yes, of course.” Pitsamai’s tree looked nearly dead. “But, you have to remember that the trees are hurt by all the leaves getting sick, some of them might not recover. Yours should. There’s a lot of green left. Mine... I don’t know.”

“I hope yours is strong enough,” Kim Cuc said, hugging her again. “And thank you, thank you.”

After leaving the university, she started a new notebook: fish-spined and bright blue. She wrote her name, the day of her injection, the duration of the illness beforehand. Pitsamai messaged other friends, asking if they wanted to surreptitiously take the drug, before its proper approval, and Kim Cuc wrote their names and information too. Several days later, official test subjects were brought in. Pitsamai recorded their data. When the first batches of the formal drug were circulated in Chiang Mai and other parts of northern Thailand, Kim Cuc wrote in the notebook: A hundred more doses shipped out today. Another hundred to Chiang Rai. Fifty to surrounding towns.

Skin-trees continued to die, if the drug didn’t reach the person in time, but many survived. Slowly, demand for new skin-trees grew. Paper advertisements peeled from walls in the rain or from determined fingers. No billboards marred Chiang Mai again. Sometimes Kim Cuc thought: How much of this is because I didn’t let people dismiss the skin-trees too quickly? No answer could be taken from the following months, but she was pleased by her determination, by her contribution however small.

Kim Cuc burned all her notebooks except the fish-spined one in an offering of thanks, after Pitsamai copied the data.

## VANDA COERULEA ORCHID

This is the new skin-tree (skin-plant, really) on Pitsamai’s shoulder. Its roots curl around the stump of her banyan. Its broad, smooth, curving leaves cast a shade on the old banyan roots, that still lie on Pitsamai’s skin like frozen wax. I miss the aerial roots. I miss a whole tree to press my lips against. But I adore the curly roots, I adore the thin stem that I must be gentle with, I adore the famous blue flowers. Wrapping my tongue around the roots and feeling the gentle brush of petals against my hair, I learn new ways to love Pitsamai’s shoulder.