

Your Collar

by Elizabeth Bear

When they brought you from your labyrinth they promised you feasts, willing women. They promised you books and musicians and travel. They gilded your broad horns. They oiled your broad shoulders.

They made good on every vow.

They collared you in gold. The yoke lay soft and weighty across your shoulders, padded in red leather wherever it touched the polished alabaster of your skin. Three strong men could not have lifted it, but you bore the inconvenience with disdain. They shod your feet in boots with golden soles, which rang like horse-shoes, like cymbals on the fingers of a dancing girl.

When they led you before the queen, they clad you in a chiton like a Greek, white as the white bull your father, white as your own white hide. To cover your shame, one said, though you did not understand what you had to be ashamed of. They brought you through the street hung with golden chains. You thought it funny.

Gold is soft.

If you had shied like the carriage-horses or hurled filth like the street-urchins, if you had charged after and abducted the fainting, face-shielding women whose scent tickled your nostrils, their chains would have meant less than nothing. What held you was your word of honor.

And it would have been enough. But before they brought you from the ship—the clanking, cantankerous steamer that lay as far outside your experience as everything in this modern, foreign city—they had pierced your tender nostrils, and the ring they twisted through the wound was steel. When you bellowed, one of them—the narrow sharp-pressed man whom you remembered was the lawyer—read the relevant sections of your contract aloud, because your eyesight is poor and because they had by then discovered you were illiterate in their language.

"This is permitted," the lawyer said, leaning close and underlining a section of text with one manicured finger, "*Under clause 32, use of the indentured's person.* Do you see? Royal Society privileges, sovereign's privileges, provision for regional safety." He tapped the parchment heavily, tilting his head far back to make sure he looks you in the eye.

You hadn't the human words, of course. Not with your thick cud-chewer's tongue, your beveled teeth, the length of your snout. You couldn't speak them, though you could be eloquent enough in your head.

It got me out of the labyrinth, you thought.

You nodded acquiescence, and held still while they shielded your eyes and soldered the ring.

#

The queen was beyond the blush of maidenhood, but dressed in maidenly green like the first hesitant uncurling feathery buds of April. The bright sunlight framing her throne made your eyes blink heavily. They were already itchy with the golden pollen your handlers dusted along the ridges of your neck to make the hide glisten. You could smell almost nothing through the musk of civet and lavender they had fogged you in.

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The queen stood up from her chair, shattering the light behind her. “Is it safe to approach?”

The narrow man hunched from the shoulders. You imagined someone pulling his drawstring. “It can never be said to be truly safe to approach a beast,” he temporized, transformed from the martinet of the grooming chamber. You realized, this queen wielded power over him. You began to consider the next

step in your plan.

“Nevertheless—” she said, her voice another tug on his drawstring.

“The risks might be acceptable to her majesty,” he admitted.

She tossed her hair back and descended the steps, and when she came before you, you saw that she was delicately beautiful. The beauty of a mature woman, not the unformed features of a girl. You breathed envy across her face, imagining you could see it roll from you like a mist. You were not beautiful. You wished you were beautiful.

When you breathed in, the scent of her

came with your air, cutting through the fog of cologne. When she extended her hand, flat, a sugar cube lay upon the palm. She giggled when your whiskers brushed her skin and winced as the swipe of thick tongue greased the sugar away. While your head was bent, she brushed fingers across the velvet-fuzzed rim of your ear, where the cold golden rings collected from sailors dangled. You drew your wet muzzle across the offered palm again, wincing when the ring in your nose dragged on skin. You hoped for another lump of sugar, but all you got was the clink of your golden chains.

“Chain him to the floor,” she said.

“Your majesty—”

“We wish,” she said, an imperious drawl, “to speak with him privately.”

The narrow man stared at you. You lifted your chin, the way the queen had, and wondered. If the narrow man was willing to trust your sworn word, your legal contract—why did he feel the need to conceal that from his queen?

Another thing to think on.

“Yes, your majesty,” the narrow man said, and gestured to the footmen. You were not surprised to find that the flipped-back carpets revealed steel rings inset in the floor, nor that the footmen

came equipped with locks, to link your chains to those rings. The locks, like the rings, were steel. But the chains were still gold, and still-soft.

Because you gave your word of honor, you did not strain against them when the footmen left the chamber. The narrow man paused reluctantly at the door, and for a moment you thought he would argue. But he squared his shoulders, collected his dignity, and continued on without so much as a gesture of his head.

The door shut softly behind the narrow man. The queen had turned to watch him go. You lowered your head and whuffed against her hair. Now, with her so close, the rich scent of woman cut through the

musty, acrid oil of lavender.

“I am an oracle,” she said. She stepped away. Momentarily insensible of the chains, you followed, click of your boots echoing the click of her heels. But the third step brought you to the limit of your tethers, the yoke slanting into your collarbone, and you lowed frustration. Like the narrow man, the queen did not turn. Unlike him, she spoke to you softly: “Why do you not burst your chains?”

You thought, *because I have given my word. Because my word is my duty.* But you could not answer. *If you are an oracle, do you not know that already?*

“Gold is soft,” she said. “And you are

hard.”

Then, she faced you again. Her eyes were pale brown under dark golden lashes. She looked up at you through them, and one corner of her mouth dragged itself up, as if unwillingly. “A beast,” she said. “I see.”

You wanted to ask her *what do you want from me? What is my responsibility to you?* You think, unlike the narrow man, she might understand obligation. But in all the world, there had never been anyone for you to speak to. The humans—you may have known all their words, each of their words, every *one* of their words.

They still did not understand yours. And cattle—do not use language.

“Do you have a name?”

You did. You have not heard it since the woman who gave it to you died, on Crete more than four thousand years before. You could not pronounce it.

But yes. You did have one.

“You are very strong.” She placed a hand upon your collar. At the full extension of her arm, she could reach you comfortably. At the full extension of yours, you could have clutched her, dragged her close. You permitted your arms to dangle. You lowered your head

and stretched your muzzle towards her. She stroked your mucus-sticky nose, rubbed the crumbs from the corners of your eyes with her own regal fingers. “So very strong,” she said.

You angled your head so she could reach to scratch around the base of your horns, and she laughed. “I suppose, strong as you are, you don’t need to be cruel to make people fear you. You can afford to be gentle, and no one will ever forget you are dangerous.”

In answer, you rattled the chains, tilted the yoke so it would catch the light. The queen drew her hand back, her face perfectly impassive. Already, you were beginning to understand that when she

made her face smooth like that, she was registering emotion. Surprise, or anger, or determination. Queens did not betray themselves through melodrama.

“You understand me,” she said.

You ducked your head and lowed.

This time, you saw the movement of her jaw, the brief resulting flex of lower lip against upper. Her eyes were the color of toast, and you wished you could tell her so. You went to your knees, bending your neck, and pushed your muzzle heavily into the midsection of her gown. The green glass beads and the embroidery prickled your nose. Rings clicking, she wrapped her hands around

your horns, as if to remind you to be careful of them. You did not need the reminder. You spent your youth as the pet of a king, the child of a king's wife who named you Asterion. You were a queen's son, but you would never be a prince. And when you grew in size and stature and the king came to fear you, he imprisoned you in the labyrinth, where you killed because it was your burden, your duty. If Poseidon had made you to claim his tithe, then claim it you would. You were strong; you were deathless; you could with ease shoulder that encumbrance. You were a monster. But to be a monster did not mean to be uncultured. You have known many monsters. Many of them have been

civilized. Most have been human. One such civilized monster sought you, but could not kill you. He could not even find you, in the bowels of your labyrinth, though he could kill the white bull your father and claim the head was your own. Your father was a gentle creature, though no great conversationalist, and you mourned him. You even mourned the kings who imprisoned you, when others came to burn them from their palaces. That was millennia ago, and knowing the turnings within the labyrinth is not the same as being able to leave it, for there were always those who would have killed you if they could. But a bull needs little more than grass and sun and pure water, and those things you had in

abundance within the palace-maze your mother's husband built for you. So there you dwelled among mossy stones and crumbling columns through Mycenaean occupation, and Greek, and Roman, and Turkish. In the end someone came, and you were liberated to travel by steamer across the Mediterranean, by carriage and by train across Europe and finally to a new and foreign island. You have walked in chains through the streets of this ancient city, amidst its smog and smoke and the soot caked upon its walls. In four thousand, one hundred, and thirteen years, you have neither gored nor trampled a soul you did not mean to. You were not about to begin with your rescuer's queen. You placed your hand

over hers, on your horn. You had to angle your arm strangely to work it around the shoulderpiece of your yoke. Even her pampered skin was not so pale as your own. You were gentle with her, as gentle as you would have been with a kitten. She did not seem as if she were significantly stronger than a kitten—physically. Everything about her gave evidence of the strength of her will.

But she was beautiful.

“Barrister wants to display you, Minotaur,” the queen said. “You are a spoil of empire. You are the proof of his power, his foreign-affairs successes. What a concession, what a coup, to have obtained not merely the loan but the

actual possession of the world's only Cretan minotaur!"

Was the lawyer's name really Barrister? Did these people refer to one another by position rather than name? Cook, cabbie, teacher, governess. You wanted to tell her that Minotaur—*bull of Minos*—was not your name, that your name was Asterion. *Star*. You wanted to tell her she was beautiful. She said, "You will spend your days chained in the Museum with the marbles, and folk will come and stare."

The tone of her voice was neither sympathetic nor gloating, but bitterly sarcastic. The tendons across the back of

her hand tightened under your roughened fingers, and her face was serene as carven alabaster. You might have seen her in a ruin.

She knew all about being a frightening thing in a museum.

“It’s so *heavy*.” She touched your yoke, one last time, as you knelt before her. What is the difference between a collar and a crown? “You’re so *strong*.”

#

An hour passed before she summoned the barrister—or Barrister—to return. He arrived swiftly enough that you knew he was waiting, lurking, just within hearing.

He eyed you suspiciously as the footman brought him through the door, but you were only sitting cross-legged on a cushion at the center of your chains. The queen had brought down her chess set. Though you could not speak, you could play, and it turned out you were matched.

You were well-amused by the manner in which Barrister eyed you as he entered. There were stories, after all, about queens and bulls. And there were stories about the appetites of the minotaur. But no matter how he rolled his eyes at you—like one of the nervous carriage-horses—you only turned the white queen between your blunt-nailed thumb and forefinger,

and moved her around the board like a knight while you waited for what they would say. Two squares forward and one to the left or to the right.

“We are pleased with the minotaur,” the queen commented. “You will bring him before us again in three day’s time.”

The narrow man blanched, but stayed so silent he might have been as voiceless as you. In lieu of speaking, he turned to summon the footmen to come unlock your chains.

“Wait,” said the queen. She came to you as you rose, something shining in her hand. A silver-colored disk on a chain. You felt it tick between your fingers as

she placed it in your grasp. She leaned over, her hair falling across your wrist, and showed you how to depress the stem twice, so the front and back sprang open like the shell covers on a beetle's wings.

A pocket watch. Steel, not silver or gold. Sturdy, with a crystal on either side to let the light shine through the jewels and gears of the mechanism as it worked. The case was worked in a delicate scale pattern, except for a mirror-bright, scroll-edged plaque—utterly blank. You stroked your thumb across it, leaving a blur of oil, but that wasn't enough to prevent you glimpsing your pale, pink-nosed reflection.

“Hard to have it engraved with your

initials,” the queen said. She looked up, her face gone still again. When she smiled, it was for Barrister, not for you. “Queens reward their favorites,” she said.

#

That night, you learned that if you slept with the watch under your pillow, you felt it tick like a heart against your palm.

#

The museum was as the queen promised: cold and white. They led you in chains along the white marble floors past white marble walls, through white marble galleries. This was, it seemed, a kind of

labyrinth. You should be at home in it, but it was a labyrinth without moss, without softness. Without silence or crumbling stones or the trickle of water from the spring. You recognized the white marble statues when you were brought among them: if not the specific ones, then the styles. They were distinctive enough that despite blurring myopia, you could have named many of the artists. If anyone had thought to ask. Honed by memorizing poetry and history and language, by remembering the turnings of mazes, your memory had always been excellent. As they chained you on a dais, surrounded by velvet ropes, it served you well.

When the queen arrived, veiled and hatted, wearing the clothing of a modest bourgeoise, you recognized her by her way of moving. That, and the faint trace of her aroma that rose over the smell of the crowd and the concealing scent of your fougère. She stood at the back of the crowd, and did not stay long. But she made sure you noticed.

#

When they brought you to the queen the next time, they swathed you in a silken robe and rubbed oil into your horns to make them shine from boot-black tip to milk-white base. Again, she asked the footmen to chain you, and dismissed everyone. Again, she brought her chess

set down. The men were jet and alabaster, and she gave you white to play.

The first game was played in silence, and you beat her. The second, she rallied, but ten moves in paused with her hand over the board. "They want me to marry," she said. But then she paused, considered, and restated. "*Barrister* wants me to marry. I should never have made him my secretary of state. I should never have allowed him to go to Greece—"

Her face had gone still, unchanging. She moved a pawn. You answered. She said, "Shall I prophesy for you?"

You knew what became of oracles. An old story, unchanging. If they were true oracles, their prophecies only doom them. The gods will what they will.

You nodded your head anyway, because it seemed to help her to speak of it. And it was not as if you could betray her confidence.

“If I marry whom Barrister suggests, within five years he will have gathered all power in the Empire.” She gestured to you, to herself, to the rooks and bishops in between. “If I do not marry, I may hold him off for ten. But my single state is a liability. I have no heirs.”

And if you marry of your own

choosing? you would ask, but of course you remained speechless. You touched the back of her hand. She moved a knight. You tipped over the black king.

#

In your chains, in the museum, you overheard a great many things. Barrister, you came to understand, was popular. And the queen was at the mercy of her advisors, of the parliament, of her constituents. Only men held suffrage. She was a woman alone, leading men who thought they knew better than she. Who saw themselves as lumbered with a weak woman, ineffectual, on the throne. And she had not the courage to do what she would do, and damn their

expectations. You understood; you had dwelt in your own labyrinth long enough, killing because it was expected. You watched from the dais, and thought of honey-brown hair, of eyes the color of brandy, of toast. With a hand in your pocket, you felt the watch tick on its chain, though you only brought it out to let the light shine through it when you were certain you were alone.

#

The women in your quarters liked you, maybe. They competed to interest you, anyway. One baked desserts. One went about naked and smelling of roses, an aroma that served chiefly to make you

hungry. One came to tell you she was pregnant, which was true. You had smelled it on her breath, in her hair, before she knew it herself. You wondered if it would look like your father, yourself. Or like the mother. Your heart beat like the tick of the pocket watch when she told you. A child.

#

The third time they brought you to the queen, you realized that her palace was a labyrinth as well. Barrister did not accompany you this time. You wondered if you were meant to understand that he did not approve. Instead you walked surrounded by servants, their onus, the center of a cross of chains. They bound

you as before, before the queen descended from her chair, and filed out in silence. She came down the steps and you bowed low before her.

“Stay there,” she said. She laid a cool hand on your neck, steadying you in your awkward position. With her other hand, she one by one unlocked the clasps that held the gold chains to your yoke. Unattached, they were too heavy for her to hold one-handed, and each by each they rang to the floor. When the fourth one fell, she nudged you upright. “There,” she said, as you rose up over her. “Now we can sit in chairs to play.”

You doubted she would have a chair that

would bear your weight. Mostly the chairs and benches here were fussy, padded things with spindly, curved scrollwork legs and eagle claws clutching the balls at their feet. But this one surprised you: it was an oaken bench, and she must have ordered it made for you especially.

You sat, and took up a pair of mismatched pawns. She chose the black, and you returned them to the board. You opened with the King's Gambit.

“I want children,” she said. “And I am no longer a young girl. I must decide, and soon, if I want a kingdom or a son, Asterion.”

You were so absorbed in interpreting the speaking serenity of her expression that for a moment, you did not realize it was your name that she had spoken. Your ears swiveled. When you swung your head up, the weight of the steel ring tugged painfully in your nose.

With her own hands, she poured you red wine in a glass delicate as a soap-bubble—a glass you would not have trusted in your own enormous hands. She pushed a china sugar bowl across the table, so you could snack.

“The name is recorded,” she said. “It *is* Asterion?”

It’s just as well she could not have

understood the gabblings of your thick cow's tongue, because at the moment you could not have spoken. You swallowed, the yoke tightening against your throat until the ripple passed, and nodded.

She smiled then, and met your white pawn with her black one. "Drink your wine," she said, and waited until you had sipped and set the glass down to continue, "You play chess. Do you write, Asterion?"

Not English. You shook your head.

"Greek?"

Your head grew heavy. Your heart began

to flutter, ticking like the watch. For a moment, you wondered if the wine was poisoned. Wouldn't that be ironic?

You nodded, and the queen—her face unreadable again—produced paper and a fountain pen. In Greek, she wrote, painstakingly, the letters awkward as a child's— *what do you want, Asterion?*

Your own hands trembled as you took the pen. *To speak*, you wrote, at first so lightly that the pen made no mark on the paper. You turned it in your grasp and tried again. If you pressed too hard, the nib would break, and who would give you another? *To speak. To be beautiful.*

“*You are beautiful,*” she answered,

startled.

You underlined the word with a single black stroke, careful not to make the gesture too broad. Everything at the table was so fragile: the paper, the wine glass, the china. The queen.

“But you are,” she insisted. “You are so strong, so white. Your eyes are soft and brown. If I were as strong as you—”

She sighed, and looked away. While she was blinking, heavily, you brought up your second pawn. She must have seen from her peripheral vision, because she turned back to the board. She gulped and swallowed, accepted the gambit, did not flinch when you brought up the knight.

She said, “I need to be strong like you.”

You reached inside your robe and found the pocket watch, drew it forth and laid it on the table. You opened its wings and set it upright on them so the light shone through it, and you could both see the click and whir of the perfect, tiny mechanism. The pad of your thumb could obscure the entire face. You wrote, *You are strong.*

She shook her head. “Not strong enough.”

You wrote, *I can make you stronger. I can give you children.* You pointed to her, to you. To her again.

And the queen's pale face went still. She licked her lips, and touched the collar of your yoke. "This is impossible. How do you lift it?"

You gestured about you, at the palace, the labyrinth. The careless pen spattered ink upon the tablecloth, your hide. You wrote, *How do you lift this?*

"I lift it because I must," she answered. "But you lift that because it is easy."

You could have told her about the centuries alone, about the mossy stones. About how a yoke is a small thing to bear for company, for willing women, for a game of chess. You could have told her that you were a queen's son, who

would never be a prince. But it would have taken too long to scribble down, and so you shrugged under your yoke and wrote, *We all have burdens. It is easier to bear the ones we choose, Your Majesty.*

Her hand slipped down from your yoke. She said, “If I said yes, would you still come and visit me?”

If you had a human mouth, you would have smiled. *And play,* you wrote. She nodded.

You leaned forward over the table and kissed her mouth with your beast’s mouth, sharing the flavor of sugar and wine. And when you sat back, you

straightened her dress over your shoulders, and reached out to tip over the black queen. “Let’s do something else today,” you said. “Let’s go for a walk in the gardens.”

Across from you, Asterion nodded. He capped the pen carefully and held it up, asking permission.

“Keep it,” you said. “You shall need it to sign the papers when we break your indenture.”

White eyebrows rose on his bone-white head. Pollen and gold dust glistened on the wrinkled skin of his brow. You had never appreciated how expressive his face could be.

“Well, of course,” you said. “Somebody is going to have to translate written English for me. And I *know* I need better advisors.”

He uncapped the pen and in awkward letters wrote, *What will become of me? What will become of you?*

“You are of royal blood. Your mother was a queen,” you said. “Would you consent—in friendship—to marry another?”

Bulls don't smile. But as you rose and pushed your chair back, across the table, he stood up under your collar.