

**The Bearded Turtle****by Azhari Aiyub**

(translated by Heather Curnow)

**Chapter 1 / The Misty Tower**

**I STRUCK** the bell three times as a warning to the foreign ships to leave the Bay of Lamuri. Then I went down the twenty-three steps of the Misty Tower because I was tired of quarrelling with Kamaria, who accused me of thinking about another woman when we were making love. Although that accusation was far sweeter to the ear than if she knew what was really on my mind at the moment I was mounting her: the murder of Sultan Nurrudin!

On that October morning in the year 1612, I heard the footsteps of a group of men hurrying towards the docks. The darkness and the heavy mist obscured my vision, but from the sound of their footsteps, from the tread of their boots, they were surely foreign sailors. I reached for the torch on the door of the Misty Tower. My suspicions were not wrong. They were French sailors. Jean the Griller and his escort of four guards. They had not left yet. Although the harbour-master had warned these infidels that their safety was outside of the Sultan's control.

The harbour-master had received a report that the conspirators of the Bearded Turtle would create havoc in the harbour. In fact, from the beginning, Jean did not believe this nonsense, he just took it as a polite attempt to kick them out of Lamuri. The English and Turkish traders were not happy for the French to hang around in Lamuri for too much longer. The sound of the bell I had just struck had forced the French sailors to go to the only small boat that was still tied up to the wharf, and this boat would carry them to the middle of the bay, where their flagship, *Lumiere Divine*, had cast anchor one month ago.

Jean stopped when he saw me sitting in the doorway of the Misty Tower. He ordered his four guards to go on ahead of him. He gazed at me with disgust. I returned his gaze with an equal measure of contempt. We continued to stare at one another as though to continue a duel that had long been delayed. Apparently he still hadn't accepted that a few nights ago I had accidentally elbowed one of his sailors in Ibn Batuta, where everyone in the bar was dancing in time to the undulations of a belly dancer. We almost came to blows but the brawl was quickly broken up by some soldiers who were overseeing the bustle in the harbour. Before we were separated, I took my chance and punched the sailor once.

Of course, it wasn't only because of this incident that Jean disliked me. A few weeks before, the harbour-master had ordered me to accompany the French sailors, who had just arrived in Lamuri, to meet Sultan Nurrudin in the palace of Darud Dunya. The leader of this group was Jean, about 70 years old, sour-faced and fussy, who was curious to know everything there was to know about His Majesty. I explained that His Majesty was in some danger, and that this threat came from the accursed conspiracy of the Bearded Turtle, who really wanted him dead, and they were everywhere: in hiding, in disguise, planning their revolution to overthrow the Sultan. They also wanted to disrupt the local trade so that Lamuri would be disabled. I told the Frenchman that this was not a good time to meet the Sultan; he was unstable and fearful, and this had influenced his moods. Not only did Jean find this explanation unsatisfactory, it also made him irritable. He

said that I knew nothing. For almost the entire month that I was his guide, he must have called me a liar twenty times. Of course, I didn't like being called a liar by an infidel.

And it all came to a head in Ibn Batuta, so that after that incident Jean asked the harbour-master to replace me with another guide. He complained to my boss, saying that I had no manners. He asked that I be punished, and indeed, there was an arrangement where a guide could risk his neck if he didn't please one of His Majesty's guests. But the harbour-master calmed Jean down and said, if I was executed because of this fuss about disappointing one of the Sultan's guests, then he would lose the one guide who was fluent in French, as well as the most well-educated, while all the other officials acted like "brush pigs".

Jean didn't understand what a "brush pig" was. He thought that there was only one kind of pig, a lazy, pinkish-white animal, weak and greedy, which up till now was eaten by the Franks or by Christians. I had eaten their meat twice, and it tasted really good. I told him that this pig was different. The "brush pig," I explained, was a strong, brown beast with sharp, spiny hair that could pierce the breast of a woman. It ran as fast as a Greek hero, but could only run straight ahead without turning, so it collided with anything that was in its way. And a pair of tusks grew not inside but outside its mouth and with these tusks a brush pig could finish off three hunting dogs at the same time. At certain times sharp worms came out of its mouth, and if one of these worms was planted in someone's flesh, their skin would become impenetrable.

"Is there really an animal like that?" Jean asked in disbelief. "There is," I said.

"How amazing," he said. "Are the followers of Muhammad forbidden to eat them?"

"Yes, they are forbidden," I said.

"Write it down!" he ordered the scribe who always accompanied him. And from all my information, it was only the "brush pig" that Jean thought worthy of recording in his ship's journal.

A few days before, when we were discussing the brush pig, Jean still seemed inspired to know about everything. But after that, he seemed listless and without hope. Apart from the brass-tipped cane in his hand, this ambassador of the King of France would have been difficult to tell apart from the other white-skinned sailors, who expected a lot of sympathy from the hawkers to fill their empty stomachs. Jean had already forgotten his sailor's cap. Perhaps the cap had been left behind in the room of a whore in the brothel of Muka Berseri. Since they had arrived in the harbour, I had several times encountered the French sailors spending their nights in that nest of pleasure. Jean no longer cared about the mud that smeared his pointed shoes and stained his velvet trousers that spread like mushrooms. Usually, before he went anywhere, he would pay one of his servants to brush his shoes until they shone, and he also hired an umbrella bearer to protect his head. But now, I no longer saw the umbrella bearer with him. These changes were clearly connected with his failure to win the trust of the Sultan. Two days previously, the Sultan had given permission to the French ships who were eager to trade in the waters that he controlled. However, he could not guarantee the safety of their ships. Even a "brush pig" knows that this would be a difficult and dangerous request because it would anger two of the Sultan's allies – the Turks and the English – who for many years had robbed the French ships.

What I mean is: in mid-ocean everyone robs everyone else. The English robbed the Castilian ships; the Castilians attacked the ships of Zeeland; the sailors from Zeeland plundered the Portuguese ships and sodomized their sailors; the Portuguese seized the ships from Lamuri and infected their sailors with the venereal diseases that they had caught from the sailors of Zeeland when they were sodomized; and then, because the sailors from Lamuri usually amused themselves in the Muka Berseri brothel, everyone in Lamuri caught the clap - and so on it went. Within this vicious circle only those with the most friends would suffer the least damage.

So, because the Sultan considered that he was able to defend himself, he avoided the issue by telling Jean that he had no need to add to his friends because that would decrease the number of friends that he already had, and that he had embraced with great difficulty. It was that statement that had caused Jean to lose hope.

Jean smiled at me. His smile was sincere and conciliatory. But I failed to return it because of my morning weakness. Before my throat had been washed by a flask of *tuak*, I could do nothing. I couldn't smile or quarrel – and this was the reason I was unable to defend myself when Kamaria insulted my 'thing', saying that it was limp that morning. So all I could do was gaze at Jean, at his bald head and the profuse silver hairs that covered his ears. Ignoring my attitude, Jean glanced towards the docks, looking for his guards. Perhaps he regretted sending them on ahead of him? Or did the old bastard think that I was planning to rob him?

"I just overheard in the *tuak* café," he said, to cover up the awkward silence, "that the Sultan has murdered a *sangkilat* named Si Ujud. He was killed in the palace, during a party." The *sangkilat* was a master spy whose task it was to monitor the Sultan's officials. Jean boasted about the murder as though he was inviting me to imagine it, and then he continued, "His corpse has been thrown to the crocodiles in the Kamal Marshes. I was at the palace last night, but it was odd, I didn't see anything, there were no signs of a disturbance."

I shivered in shock. The news had travelled fast. Jean noticed my change of expression right away. Apparently he was satisfied after telling me about the murder, having succeeded in spreading his fear around. After that, he limped off, hurrying towards the wharves, screaming curses at his guards who were walking too fast.

Before Jean informed me about the murder, I had heard the news of the *sangkilat*'s death from Kamaria. At dawn on the day before, she came to meet me in the Misty Tower.

"Oh, God!" Kamaria shrieked, when she saw me playing Tiger Chess by myself. She embraced me. "Thank God it wasn't you!" Then she told me about the murder in the palace.

"Are you accusing me of betraying His Majesty?" I asked.

"That's because I didn't see you in the palace."

"That's because His Majesty didn't invite me."

"His Majesty said that he forgot to invite you. And that alarmed me even more, so I rowed my boat here as quickly as possible."

I let out a sigh, what the devil had made her think that I had betrayed the Sultan. "You are accusing me again..."

"Listen, you fool!" She pinched my cheek. "Don't forget that every one of us can be accused of being a traitor!"

"Did he point out who it was?"

Kamaria shook her head and said, "His Majesty has put out the walking lamps again."

"Of course, after the traitor was killed!"

The 'walking lamps' that she meant were fourteen live turtles, each carrying a torch attached to its shell. The last time I had seen those turtles brought out was maybe two years before.

"I didn't think that he would do it again. If I knew it was about to happen I would lock myself up in the harem, and teach his whores to read."

"You are afraid," I said. "So am I."

"You haven't kissed me yet."

I kissed Kamaria on her lips. I could still taste the rum on the rubbery flesh of her mouth.

"You have been drinking too much!"

“Do you think that a drunk woman could row a boat as fast as I did, from the palace wharf to the estuary?”

I laughed. I kissed her lips once again.

Before we made love with extraordinary crudeness, Kamaria told me that all the guests at the palace were terrified when the Sultan mentioned the alias of that *sangkilat*: Si Ujud, the master spy, the most loyal of the Sultan’s servants, nicknamed the Sultan’s shadow, whether it was bright or dark, while the Sultan was the shadow of Allah upon the face of the earth. Over the years, no one had managed to discover his true identity. People only heard his name. And it was all nonsense. This loyal character never actually existed, because the Sultan himself didn’t believe in the existence of loyalty. Si Ujud was the Sultan’s most perfect fantasy – and last night the Sultan himself had annihilated him.

Don’t get the wrong idea, if the Sultan announced that he would execute a traitor, he would do it. And to convince people, he didn’t need to display the traitor in person and then spill his blood in front of them. That was not his game. The Sultan’s style was neither as crude as the Khans of Mongolia nor as hypocritical as the Sultans of Turkey, who flattered their enemies and then stabbed them in the back. The Sultan’s strategy was more outrageous than any of these. He would invite a number of guests to witness how he dealt with one or more traitors; of course, if the traitor was important enough. The guests couldn’t see this unfortunate person, because he was locked up in a room the size of a cattle stall. They could only hear his voice.

The Sultan had four rooms like this on the western side of the Darud Dunya palace, and if a lever was lifted, a sound would emanate from those rooms. Three years before that accursed night, a Turkish engineer had managed to raise the volume and clarity of the echoes from within those rooms many times.

The night before, said Kamaria, His Majesty, after shocking the guests by mentioning Si Ujud, had pointed to one of the rooms. “Listen,” he said to them. He raised the lever. And then we heard screams and heart-rending pleas for mercy. Once he was aware that all his pleas were in vain, the unfortunate traitor began to abuse His Majesty. After the sounds from that room began to subside, His Majesty spoke again, “I hope he was not one of your friends!” And then came the part that he enjoyed the most, the moment when he observed the expressions on the faces of the forty guests. Everyone was silent and tense. After that he said that they didn’t need to worry because that traitor was not part of a gang. And perhaps this was the only statement that gave some consolation.

Imagine if the Sultan had said the opposite! If so, certain guests who were weak or lacking in experience would find themselves in a terrifying position; and there was rarely one of them who passed the test. What I mean is, in a situation like this, hearing someone shrieking and begging for mercy, you could imagine that you recognized the voice of a friend or your father, and so could easily fall into the trap. I once witnessed a harbour-master, my former employer who was rather arrogant, falling on his knees in front of the Sultan like a banana tree that has been cut down by a sword, whimpering as he pleaded for mercy, and embracing the Sultan’s feet. Although that harbour-master was in no way connected with the overseer who had been accused of being a spy for the Bearded Turtle. I knew this, because I had disbanded the overseer’s gang. Finally, the harbour-master admitted that he had stolen some sacks of pepper belonging to the Sultan. But there were also those who flew into a rage, defending themselves and disputing whatever was expressed by the sounds of torture coming from those accursed rooms. This usually happened if the traitor dragged your name in as part of his gang.

The Sultan had already played this terrifying game for many years, in an attempt to murder all of those who I suspected had been trained by Ernem Misal from Turkey, who had once been his chief Vizier. And at the same time he succeeded in suppressing a number of his other enemies. But this didn't mean that the Sultan now had no enemies. The secret brotherhood of the Bearded Turtle was one of the most powerful; there were also covert enemies 'under the blanket' such as me; disguised as a master-spy, with the task of investigating the movements of the palace servants who were suspected of harbouring hatred and plotting revenge against His Majesty. For this despicable job, His Majesty had required me to disguise myself as the watchman in the Misty Tower, forcing me to go up and down the twenty-four steps of the spiral staircase every day, where I slept in a small stuffy room with bats -- caged up without any other human contact for years on end.

I glanced towards the harbour. The French sailors had already disappeared. I climbed up again to the Misty Tower and found Kamaria fast asleep. She was no doubt exhausted, after rowing a boat by herself in the dead of night to make sure that I was not the Si Ujud who had been murdered that night. And to do that, she had disobeyed her own oath.

More than a year ago, before Jean, the envoy to the King of France, had arrived in Lamuri, Kamaria had decided to break off our relationship. She swore that she would not meet me again, unless it was on the Sultan's orders. She swore that she would no longer come to the Misty Tower, because it caused us arguments and sadness. She swore that she would never again commit the sin of fornication with me. Kamaria did all of this in the name of the Sultan, after he promoted her as the guardian of his harem. In this new position Kamaria was ordered to set an example for His Majesty's concubines, educating and protecting them, and most important of all, ensuring that they gave birth to the Sultan's children. This was truly a task that would need a miracle, because up till now, the Sultan had not been blessed with even one child. According to the advice of an *ulama*, this blessing could only be achieved with a pure soul, and one requirement was to avoid fornication.

I didn't know whether Kamaria was satisfied with her new role. It was clear, however, that she had accepted the offer of a position that had never existed before in the palace of Darud Dunya, and this implied that she was mending her relationship with the Sultan, a relationship that had been problematic for more or less seven years.

Kamaria had the black skin of a negro, she was slender, with cupid's bow lips, and eyes that were almost without lustre. She was three or four years older than Sultan Nurrudin, who was just celebrating his thirty-eighth birthday. I smiled and covered Kamaria with a length of cloth.

I must say that Time is the most skilled of traitors as well as the most difficult to fathom. Kamaria, the Sultan's former sweetheart, lay on my bed, and she had not yet been satisfied.

I climbed up one more step, reached for the telescope and adjusted it, and pointed it towards the bay, trying to locate the position of *Lumiere Divine*. The harbour-master had explained to Jean that the deadline for the ship to leave was only half a day away. If the French sailors didn't pay attention to this, the ships of Lamuri would drive them out. My efforts were useless; the mist that blanketed the bay was still too dense. It was the monsoon season, when the mist in Lamuri came down at three in the morning, and would only disperse after nine o'clock. I went down the stairs to the twenty-second step, one step below where I lived, and began to sort out the belongings of the man who had been executed the previous night in the palace of Darud Dunya. I emptied the chest that had been used by that man for many years, gathering up his clothing and other possessions. Later that day I would burn them. In one bundle I found a flask of wine, perhaps a

gift from his Majesty to the traitor. I opened the stopper of the flask and swallowed the wine. It was damned delicious. Now my thoughts were not only warm, but bubbling over.

*Now I am ready to face the world!* The wine made me smile, even if I had been invited to quarrel with one hundred people it wouldn't have bothered me. I also found several gold and silver coins. Enough to buy an elephant. I would give it to His Majesty; he was always complaining that he had no money, especially since he was preparing his fleet to seize the Portuguese fort in Malacca.

And here was what I was looking for! Several rolls of paper that had held me hostage in the Misty Tower for years. I put them in the pocket of my robe. I would read them after Kamaria left the Misty Tower.

**ABOUT** the Sultan; I met him five years before that day. He came to meet me in the Misty Tower early one morning, towards dawn. That year, the elephants in quarantine were screaming non-stop. There were dozens of them, and if one of them was angry, all the others followed. I was very sleepy that night, but the trumpeting of the elephants was keeping the whole port awake. Suddenly, I saw a light in the distance, flying like a fiery spirit. I quickly flashed a reply from my lamp. The distant light went out; a request for me to open the door of the Misty Tower. I hurried down the stairs. The light had come from the north. While trying to stay awake, I waited for the shadow to emerge from the darkness and come closer. It's the brush pig, I said to myself, for sure after a quarrel with his wife.

After four months working as the watchman in the Misty Tower, I was becoming familiar with the habits of my boss, Mr. Itam, one of Lamuri's four harbour-masters. He was sometimes forced to sleep in the Misty Tower after his wife had kicked him out, maybe because he had spent too much time in the bars, or because she had sniffed the scent of another woman in his mouth.

But it turned out that the shadow emerging from the darkness was none other than Sultan Nurrudin!

He came by himself. I had a sudden urge to attack and murder him! But a glance from him made me bow my head. I fell to my knees.

"Get up," he said in the Malay language. I noticed a scar from an old wound on his left temple, that at the time I thought he had received in a duel. But later I found out that his forehead had been wounded as a young child when he fell from a window.

"You weren't asleep?"

"No, Your Highness."

"Those elephants never stop screaming."

"Their screams are very loud."

"It will take a few months for them to calm down. But it will need even more time before they are really tame. Can you row?"

"Yes, Your Highness."

"Good," he said.

He said there was a rowboat tied up to the wharf. He wanted me to take him to the middle of the bay. My boss, Si Itam, had warned me never to leave the Misty Tower after midnight, because from time to time the Sultan would come to check for himself which ships were moored one or two miles from the shore.

"You are clearly not from here," he said, when we were already in the boat.

This unexpected meeting, however, had made me nervous. Although for many years I had prepared myself for such a situation. In case at some time I would meet Sultan Nurrudin, the Bastard of Lamuri, my life's greatest enemy.

"Your servant comes from Tumasik." The boat was rocked by a wave.

"Si Itam said that you come from Johor," he said, after a long pause.

"Your Highness has conquered only Johor. Not Tumasik."

"So, you think I must take over all those pirate villages before I can be said to have conquered all of Johor?"

"There is still a river that separates them," I said.

The Sultan laughed. Before our rowboat had passed through the waves, I had already succeeded in making that bastard happy. Before that night, on the three occasions that I had seen the Sultan from a distance, he had been surrounded by a dozen hit-men. My friends in the Misty Tower had remarked that anything connected with his success in controlling territories in the Straits would make the Bastard happy. I also heard from them that there was a distinct possibility that the Sultan would attack Malacca again, to redress his failure to seize that city several years ago, but no one knew when. To achieve this plan, he published a regulation that obliged his servants to work for two days a week. They were conscripted to build ships, hunt elephants, cast metal cannons, and anything else that was connected with this plan. This conscription meant that there was a shortage of workers in the port of Lamuri; and many foreign workers arrived to replace them. Of course, in very menial jobs.

"Steer the boat over there", said Anak Haram. 'Over there' was darkness, or perhaps Hell.

"I want you to hear my story about a circus," he said, after the boat had reached the place he wanted, "put out the torch."

Anak Haram and I sat facing each other. He was at one end of the boat and I was at the other, above the deck. Under cover of darkness, I looked around us. The most distant lights came from three ocean-going ships, each about half a mile from our boat. I knew the distances because during the last month I had organized the positions of these ships using mirror signals from the Misty Tower. Meanwhile, I estimated the distance between our boat and the wharf was about one mile.

*Was this the time?* The time I had waited for, for many years. If I wanted to, I could throw him overboard, and then disappear with the boat I was in.

"Have you ever seen a circus?"

"Only the circus of the medicine hawker, Your Highness."

"You should have seen that circus. Unfortunately, it doesn't exist anymore."

"Your servant will wait until they come again."

"Maybe another circus; they are already in the next world now. All this happened more or less two years ago, before you arrived here."

I knew that a tiger would never reveal how he had killed his prey. I mean, there was no need to go into the middle of the ocean like this. And whatever he said had to be very important, if he didn't intend to lure me into a trap. I waited to find out what kind of trap he had prepared for me.

"One day, this circus group disembarked from a ship from Siam. Not long after that, I heard from my servants that that for the last month they and their wives had been amused by the six clowns who were the main attraction of that circus. If those clowns could make women laugh, for sure they could make a sultan laugh too. I was curious, but I didn't have the time to meet them. One day, after they had been performing in Lamuri for three months, the circus

created some anxiety among my people. In front of an audience of hundreds, one of the clowns explained where the wound on my forehead had come from.”

“How very impolite,” I said. “Did he really say where it had come from?”

The Sultan laughed. “He said that I had got it while I was fighting with a dog. Then the clown brought out a dog, a small, lame, blind and scabby dog. He said that this poor dog had two brothers, whose fate had been much better. One was in the country of the Franks, and was an advisor to the Pope. The other was now a guard dog in the harem of the Ottoman Caliphate. And their mother managed a brothel.”

“Were you angry, Your Majesty?”

“Believe me, I have never in my life arrested a clown because I was offended by what they said. I have several clowns in my palace who are much more offensive than the clowns in that circus. But they had clearly succeeded in attracting my attention. I was curious to know whether that clown would have the courage to say those things in front of me. As it happened, I had actually set aside a convenient time to meet them; but a few days later the clowns were betrayed by one of their own crew.

“Rama Sami, that was the name of the circus boy, found out that all the clowns had evil intentions towards me. He said that they were actually not clowns, but assassins. They had been sent to Lamuri to kill me. To facilitate their plan, they formed a circus troupe and hid themselves within it. They prepared this disguise for two years, and during that time they trained a porcupine to dance; trained a pair of apes to row a boat; searched for a long-tailed monkey and taught it to jump ropes; trained a baby tiger to sneeze on command; and trained a pair of rats to release hundreds of ants from their mouths.”

“Good heavens, Your Highness,” I interrupted his story. “In the humble opinion of this fool, it’s possible to force an ape to row a boat. But it’s impossible for a pair of rats to hold out, if they didn’t train the hundreds of ants not to destroy the rats’ mouths.”

The Sultan laughed until it rocked the boat. “Good thinking,” he responded. “Of course, I didn’t believe straight away the mouth of a circus lad who maybe just heard this rumour from someone else and then meant to sell it to me. Don’t worry, I had already slapped Rama Sami for some of his stories that were somewhat exaggerated and didn’t make sense. Meanwhile, my people whipped his back for another matter, but not until it wounded his flesh. I wanted to test his power of resistance. I wanted to find out his reasons for telling me all this. To measure how far he believed his own words. He was someone with strong convictions. He didn’t even retract his words about the pair of rats that swallowed hundreds of ants. His power of resistance was extraordinary. I began to value what he said. And at that moment, I said to myself, this bastard must have been very poor, and have had such a miserable life that he was eager to escape as quickly as possible from the terrible misfortune that had befallen him. Then I lifted him up and gave him a slap. I asked him how old he was and where he came from. He replied that he didn’t remember. But I guessed that he was about eighteen years old. When he was still a very small child, his village in Arakan, Bengal, was robbed and burned by pirates. His parents had been killed, and he and his younger sister were sold to Siam. Perhaps because he was so stubborn, he was re-sold several times by his masters, until one day he fell into the hands of some clowns who needed dozens of slaves to become circus crew. As you will be aware, they had chosen the wrong person. His task in the circus camp was to throw away the feces of all the clowns and some of the animals. He hated one of the apes more than anything. Every time he saw him, the



ape defecated and then ordered Rama Sami to throw away his shit. So one day, he smashed the skull of the ape and ran away from the circus camp. That was his story.

"I asked a healer to take care of Rama Sami. At the same time, I ordered my people to investigate his background, to confirm that he had run away because he had killed an ape, and, most important of all, to confirm how Kura-Kura Berjanggut felt about the loss of one of their crew."

"My people told me that since that circus had arrived in Lamuri, five of their slaves had already deserted them, for various reasons. Why Rama Sami was so terrified and had sought my protection was that the ape that he had killed was the favourite of one of the clowns."

My eyes were suddenly dazzled by a cluster of lights, that without my noticing them, were shining only ten metres from our boat. There were four boats, laden with fully-armed soldiers.

Anak Haram stood up. He sent the boats away. He said that it was against orders for them to approach us without first being summoned.

"I hate the light," he said.

Meanwhile, the four boats were slowly retreating into the distance. Anak Haram continued his story.

"All those clowns worked shoulder to shoulder to entertain the people of Lamuri, six days a week. They took Fridays off to entertain themselves. When they reached the bars, they went their separate ways. For example, a pair of clowns were happiest dancing at Ibn Batuta. Have you ever been there?"

"Never, Your Highness."

"You have never been to even one liquor kiosk?"

"No, Your Highness."

"I don't believe you," he said.

He paused for a moment, perhaps thinking about something. I was sure that my boss, Mr. Itam had given him the wrong impression of me. Probably he had said that I was often drunk and liked dancing in the bars.

"Forget it," he said. "Those two clowns were husband and wife. They were both still young. While two older men, aged over fifty, preferred to party in Muka Berseri's brothel, which offered various kinds of women. But there was one person who never went out anywhere, and always spent his time in the tent with an ape. There would have been two apes, if one of them hadn't had its skull crushed by Rama Sami. The man's name was Musolama. He always wore silk clothes and stained his lips red with henna. And darkened his eyelids with shadow. A stylish man! According to information from my people, Musolama's clowning was polite compared to his friends who relied on obscenities. However, he was the sharpest in ripping apart hypocrisy. This was the clown who Rama Sami was so afraid of. He was the clown who made me split my sides laughing at his story about the Three Dog Brothers. There was also Mardhatillah, the most interesting clown, who went every Thursday afternoon to the Seven Crossroads, quite a long way from the port, and stopped off at a bar that sometimes took advantage of my employees' leisure time by hiring out child prostitutes. He always stayed overnight there."

"I was curious to know whether they also performed in the brothels. I ordered Kamaria to check out those three places."

"Is she a woman?"

“Yes, a woman. I had twelve commanders to subdue the Straits. But what could they do with all those clowns who were enjoying themselves in the brothels?”

After all this talking, it was only now that Anak Haram mentioned an actual name, after previously referring to all his spies with the term ‘my people’. I had the impression that Kamaria’s name was not just a slip of the tongue.

“In every brothel, both legal and undercover, Kamaria usually had one or two friends who owed her a favour from the past. So it was now time for those favours to be repaid.” I really wanted to know whether the woman named Kamaria was a whore or a procuress, but of course, that night was not the right time to ask.

“About two weeks later, when Rama Sami’s wounds had healed, I sent him back to the circus.”

“But why?” I asked. “Wasn’t that very dangerous? Wouldn’t Musolama kill Rama Sami?”

“I know. At the time Rama Sami wept and said that it would be better if he died by my hand. But I was very curious to know who was behind the Bearded Turtle’s conspiracy. Who had the crafty plan to send all those killers here.”

*I am also very curious to know, you bastard.* And I will kneel at the feet of whoever created a plan as cunning as this.

“I coaxed Rama Sami. Telling him that I would never allow a foreigner to murder another foreigner in my realm, even if he was a slave. To convince him, I sent some of my soldiers to guard the circus encampment. And slowly, Rama Sami’s terror subsided.

“Musolama tormented Rama Sami constantly because of the death of his favourite ape. I hoped the boy could stand it. His suffering made me impatient. I delegated one of my viziers to go to the circus camp, a few days earlier than I had planned. The vizier conveyed the message that I wanted to invite the Bearded Turtle to perform in the palace. This offer made them extremely happy, but at the same time somewhat confused. Finally, they took the chance. This invitation caused Musolama to relax a little and he stopped tormenting Rama Sami, who returned to his usual task, throwing away the shit from the clowns’ tents.

“Meanwhile, based on scraps of information collected from the three bars, Kamaria and her people had confirmed that those six people were indeed clowns who came from Takua Pa. The most convincing information came from the bar that Mardhatillah frequented. When he was at that bar, he wasn’t at all funny. His talent as a clown was submerged by his terrifying lust. Before having sex with the children in that bar, Mardhatillah frightened them with stories about ghosts and murders. The more afraid they were, the more passionate he became. There was one little child who was rather plump and had a soul as pure as an angel. And Mardhatillah confessed to this child that he had murdered a concubine of the King of Siam and four step-sisters of the Prince of Kedah.

“In Muka Berseri brothel, the two older clowns had openly admitted to the whores who accompanied them while they were drinking, that they wanted to murder me. A joke was clearly the perfect cover-up for such an intention. Of course, the whores didn’t believe that those two men who were groping them wanted to kill their Sultan. And so they only giggled.

“The pair of clowns who went dancing in Ibn Batuta were more restrained; they were calm and self-controlled, even when drunk. One night, when a sailor pinched the bum of the woman clown, the male clown didn’t beat him up. He reported the sailor to the hit-man in charge of security in Ibn Batuta, and it was the hit-man who then threw the sailor out. However, there was one thing that they couldn’t avoid, and that was the scrutiny of others.

“One evening, a trader who had just landed in Lamuri unexpectedly encountered the pair of clowns in Ibn Batuta’s bar. The trader made a hasty exit, looking as though he had just seen the devil, and hurried back to the inn where he was staying. For five days he remained shut up in his room. And when he wanted to leave the port in a great hurry, on the ship that had brought him there several days ago, my people detained him, and dragged him to the Misty Tower. After he was pressured, the dirty story came out.

“According to that trader, three years before, his former employers, a Chinese family from Malacca, had been murdered by the two clowns he had seen in Ibn Batuta six nights previously. He had witnessed that slaughter in broad daylight. Then he showed them two scars on his back, that he got from the woman clown’s sword when he leapt to protect his employer’s daughter.

“All these assassins are cruel. But who is paying them? I remember some names. I knew them, because all of them had at some time sent hired killers to murder me. But only one of them had the resources to do it; the merchant company of Ikan Pari Hitam.”

“The merchant company of Ikan Pari Hitam? They have a great number of ships and spice warehouses. They once burned down a village in Tumasik because a robber had hidden his plunder from one of their ships in that village,” I said.

“And that is why,” Anak Haram said with sudden annoyance, “the laws in Lamuri required that every grain of pepper must be sold to them. No matter how cheap the price. And if anyone carried a single peppercorn out of Lamuri, even if he owned it himself, the sultan would impale the smuggler’s ass with a stake. Ikan Pari Hitam controlled the world pepper trade for decades with those laws. When I came to power, I stood up and pissed on the laws written by their ancestors last century. I drove them out of Lamuri, as well as from all the ports that I controlled later.”

“But I still see their ships wandering around the Straits!”

“Even after they went out of business, that merchant company is still capable of hiring a hit-man to kill a sultan. So you can imagine how rich, powerful and influential they were before.”

“The leader of that company is Mir Hasan, right?”

“Good! You know a lot, it seems,” Anak Haram laughed.

“Everyone in the Straits knows him,” I said.

“After I kicked him out of Lamuri, he and the rest of his organization hid themselves beneath the armpit of the Portuguese in Melaka.”

“So, was it he who sent the circus of the Bearded Turtle and its clowns?”

“At first I thought so, because no-one else could send as many assassins as that merchant house. But my suspicions were mistaken. As I found out later, he had left the Straits long before, returning to his home in Jazirah Selatan, leaving the management of Ikan Pari Itam in the hands of one of his nephews. It was his nephew who sent the circus and its clowns to murder me. A trial effort from his Viceroy. And this marked an enormous change in the structure of the merchant company. Those who had been there for a long time left, and new players entered the game. At first I didn’t know who these new people were. But you will never hear about them now.

“Those clowns had never crossed the straits. Their territory was between Semenanjung and Siam. The murder of the Chinese family in Malacca not only caused an uproar in the city and left the Portuguese with dirty backsides, but led Mir Hasan’s nephew to find what he was

looking for: hit-men who could alternate between cruelty and comedy. He knew I was crazy about comedy and jokes. The opposite was also true; Mir Hasan's nephew was fond of jokes." Anak Haram fell silent for a while. I felt the current getting stronger; pulling the boat further out. "If you don't turn around," he said in an annoyed voice, "this boat will fall to pieces. There's a reef up ahead. We are already more than a mile from the docks. It's better that we go back."

This pig, I said to myself, can not only see in the dark, but he knows this bay like the back of his hand. I pulled up the anchor, reached for the steering oar in the rowlock, and the boat began to go against the current.

"Are you weary?"

"No, Your Highness."

"If you are tired I can take over."

"That would really upset your humble servant."

*What I mean is, that would really screw things up!*

"Something that rather shocked and offended me," he said a little later, "happened in the camp of the Bearded Turtle. It was a totally unexpected development. Rama Sami saw some of my palace officials gathering together in Mardhatillah's tent".

"The clown who frequented that place with child prostitutes?"

"Good! You are following my story!"

"Several among them held important positions in the palace of Darud Dunya. I knew three of them very well. I had met their wives and children, I knew their boatmen, even their household pets. I never expected anything else from them, I never demanded their loyalty; experience had taught me otherwise. If they were not happy with me, they could leave whenever they liked, the door was always open. But they were not allowed to betray me. There was no room in my heart for traitors."

The tone of the Sultans voice changed again. It sounded melancholy, like a floating nautical alarm.

It's a bad night, I said to myself. I began to understand that he had gone with me to the middle of the ocean for a purpose. But what his reason was, I didn't yet know.

"Isn't that natural?"

"Do you mean that it's natural that they screw me over?"

"Pardon me, Your Highness," I said. "Your officials were gathering together in the circus tent. Your Majesty has said that they were delighted with that circus. Unless they were actually planning a conspiracy."

"The clowns used a very cunning trick to invite my people, quite frankly, I have to admit it was very astute. The tickets they sold on certain days were very expensive, clearly out of the reach of low-ranking officials, let alone servants. They were sold specifically for a play entitled The Bearded Turtle, a story about an old turtle who thought he was the wisest and cleverest of creatures, but was tricked by a wandering camel that had been cursed by the Prophet Solomon. Because the tickets for that performance were so expensive, the audience was usually no more than twenty people. Before the performance began, Rama Sami noticed that the viewers were those people who later visited Mardhatillah's tent. The audience was always the same. So this was how the circus held secret meetings with my palace officials. Rama Sami attended them in the tent, serving them food and drinks. He said that they spoke a mixture of languages; Malay, Portuguese and Siamese."

"And Your Majesty's people didn't recognize Rama Sami?"

"Do you doubt my story? You cast doubts on my story all the time!"

"I am sorry, Your Majesty," I recoiled on my seat. His story was totally godforsaken, to the point that I forgot that it was a sultan who was telling it. After that, the Sultan didn't go on with his story. Maybe my questions had disturbed him. We arrived at the wharf about half an hour later.

A lamp glowed faintly from a pole on the wharf; the oil was almost finished. Maybe someone had forgotten to put it out. The Sultan leapt to the wharf, as agile as a squirrel. Then he stretched out his hand to pull me to the top. When my hand touched his hand, the hand that had murdered both my parents, I felt a sharp pain in my stomach, as though I had been kicked; an affliction that had long since been cured, but from time to time still responded to my feelings.

Anak Haram helped me to tie up the boat and asked me to take the lamp. And then we walked towards the Misty Tower. I was only half a metre behind him. Looking at his back, I imagined how deeply a knife would be embedded if it were jabbed into that sturdy back. Just imagining it gave me a sense of relief. But this pleasing fantasy only lasted a moment, before I quickly put it out of my mind.

We arrived at the Misty Tower. We could still hear the shrieks of the elephants, but they were not as shrill as some hours ago.

"Do you smoke opium?"

"Only now and then, Your Highness."

"What writing can you read?"

"A little Arabic, a little Latin, Your Highness."

"Good! Very good!" He gazed at me. His eye shadow had faded, and did not conceal the prominent pouches under his eyes.

"I haven't finished my story yet. Two days before I opened the door of my palace to the Bearded Turtle, I sent all my ships and soldiers to Johor. My orders were clear; do not return until you have suppressed the rebellion that resulted in my viceroy being murdered one year ago. All the clowns came into my palace, and, based on the information that they had bought from my people, they knew that I was protected by only fifty soldiers. And on that same night, the Bearded Turtle put on a fantastic performance. They succeeded in making me double up with laughter, disguising their cruelty behind their clever, obscene and deadly jokes. They repeatedly insulted me; saying that my mother was a whore, and my father was the son of that whore, and that I was born from their incestuous relationship. And that later, a daughter born from my relationship with my mother, was paired off with my father, and so on and so forth... when they failed to offend me, they gave up on their jokes. And then they attacked me."

"Bring the lamp closer!" he ordered me, angry and arrogant. He pulled up the sleeve of his robe. I saw a deep scar on his left arm. "This," he said, "I got from fighting with them. From the sword of that woman clown."

He pulled down his sleeve again. Then he gulped.

"It's already morning," he said, smiling and grasping my shoulder. "You have followed my story, listened attentively, and cast doubt on various points that didn't make sense. And maybe that's because I am not such a clever story-teller."

"Your servant, Your Majesty."

"This morning I am appointing you as my *sangkilat*. I hope that you are prepared."

*Sangkilat!* A master-spy to spy on other spies!

I was shaken by this totally unexpected turn of events. Since I had arrived back in Lamuri several months previously, I had not even had a chance to think how I could approach Anak Haram.

Sultan Nurrudin saw at a glance the change in me, as though he was calculating the price of a sheep.

“You may refuse; this job is very dangerous. Dangerous from two sides. First, you are not permitted to betray me,” he smiled. “Secondly, you will be targeted by my enemies. Just like Rama Sami who was murdered several months after the incident I have just mentioned.”

“And if your servant refuses?”

“Because you have already heard too much,” he smiled again, “you must leave Lamuri first thing tomorrow morning. And with the pain of a broken heart.”

I knelt before him. How could I possibly refuse any chance for deceit such as the one he had just offered me?

He placed his hands on my head. A blessing that would be desired by anyone, from a servant to a vizier, but there were not many who received it.

“Get up,” he said. “Your name is now Si Ujud. Very soon, someone will come here to attend to all your needs. I must go.”

I gave the lamp to the Sultan.

I watched him go. He disappeared through the mist, just as he had arrived. Turning to the east, towards the docks of the Kamal River, the only road leading to the Darud Dunya palace.