



KRISHNA UDAYASANKAR



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The Srivijaya Dynasty



The Seven Seas



From the Sejarah Melayu

(The Malay Annals, trans. John Leyden, 1821)

“Then Sang Nila Utama reached a stone of great height and size, on which he mounted and viewed the opposite shore, with its sands white as cotton; and enquiring what sands were these which he saw, Indra B’hupala informed him they were the sands of the extensive country of Tamasak.

The prince immediately proposed to visit them, and the minister agreeing, they went immediately on shipboard. But as they were passing over, they were caught in a severe storm, and the vessels began to leak, and the crews were unable, after repeated exertions, to throw out the water. They were accordingly compelled to throw overboard the greater part of the baggage in the vessel, which however reached the bay. The water nevertheless continued to gain ground, and every thing was thrown overboard till nothing now remained but the diadem. Then the master addressed the Prince Sang Nila Utama, stating, that the vessel could not support the weight of the diadem; and that if it was not thrown overboard,

the vessel could not be relieved. The prince ordered the diadem to be thrown overboard, when the storm ceased and the vessel rose in the water, and the rowers pulled her ashore, and Sang Nila Utama with his attendants, immediately landed on the sands, and went to amuse themselves on the plain near the mouth of the river Tamasak.

There they saw an animal extremely swift and beautiful, its body of a red colour, its head black and its breast white, extremely agile, and of great strength, and its size a little larger than a he-goat. When it saw a great many people, it went towards the inland and disappeared. Sang Nila Utama enquired what animal was this, but none could tell him, till he enquired of Damang Lebar Dawn, who informed him that in the histories of ancient time, the singha or lion was described in the same manner as this animal appeared.

... and thus Sang Nila Utama settled the country of Tamasak, named it Singhapura, and reigned over it, and was panegyricized by Bat'h, who gave him the name of Sri Tri-buana.”

I

Palembang

1

Beast

I can never forget those eyes, and though the years have taught me the words to describe what I saw then, nothing I can say captures the amber flame, the golden storm of restrained power that drew me close, closer still to the creature, till I saw myself, a boy, reflected in those quickly darkening orbs. He was a beast, a fact that those who had kept him here had known, though I had not. To me his cage was cruel, the fetters on his feet inhuman.

The bars that stood between us had been made with him in mind, not me. I slipped in — because I could. I cannot pretend it was compassion, or even a fool's courage, that commanded me. It was curiosity, most of it misplaced in the darkness around us.

He watched me by the single shaft of sunlight that entered the ship's hold, the rumbling giant of

moments ago now silent with wonderment, perhaps from ill-humour born of his unnatural confinement. I was close enough to feel his hunger and rage, the heat of his pulsing body. Fear flickered through my gut and was swiftly gone, dismissed as futile against the majesty of this being, the unbridled vigour of each limb and the strong strum of his heart. I watched, unblinking, as he began to draw forward, coming closer with step after self-assured step. I saw myself, an image in his eyes, grow larger and larger till it felt as though my reflection was the true me, the only me, and that my existence was just a figment of this beast's imagination or, at the very least, an act of his will.

I named him and, thus, surrendered to him, with a borrowed but insufficient word: 'Beauty'. It is what my father says of my mother, my sister of the evening sky and my brother of his first and, so far, only courtesan. None of them knows what it means, for death is beauty, and those who bring it to us free of its companion, fear, are the most beautiful of Creation. He was such. He made me, in all my inexperience, unafraid to die.

I bowed my head as he came to stand towering

over me, and a noiseless sob rose in my throat at losing sight of all that mattered. His breath, a welcome hot gale, was my only solace as I waited for the end, the only just and logical conclusion to our twin existence, our shared purpose.

He did not move. His blow did not fall. If the instant had lasted longer, I may have spoken, he may have struck. But a shout filled the air before either of us could stir. I do not know exactly what happened next. There were voices, there was noise, there was fear and frenzy. I felt my father's firm grip on my shoulder as he dragged me away, while his men set upon my would-have-been attacker.

Roars thundered into the dark night as my father rushed me off the ship, fingers pressed so deep into my flesh that they would leave a bruise that would take weeks to fade. The mark the beast left on me, the mark of his eyes, never will.

I bear it still, in secret, with pride.

In my dreams I see him again, often and always on a ship. But in my dreams our story ends otherwise. In my dreams I tame the beast.

II

Bintan

1

Brother

My sword is always close by, even in sleep. It is a habit I have acquired from my third brother-in-law, the Majapahit emperor, over the course of the numerous military campaigns on which I have accompanied him. It endures even in his absence, for I continue to live in my brother's household, serving the emperor only when he calls on me to do so.

Together, and for many years now, we — the emperor and I — have weathered the storms of Barus to conquer the untamed eastern shores of Suvarna that Cina had no interest in. We have established Majapahit authority over Sunda; we have slowly, patiently, staked claim over the hundreds of islands that fill the Seven Seas. From the unexpected perils posed by ignoble fish, spike-nosed, poisonous and tentacled, to dangers on land — volcano, ash, mud, and men too — he

and I have more by instinct than by intent cheated death innumerable times, each instance making him and thus me, a little wiser, a lot older and much less impetuous. He has taught me to see conquest not as an end but a means, a way of living, of leaving behind legend and not just legacy. He has also taught me not to sleep too soundly or without a weapon in easy reach, a fact that neither the man standing over me, nor the one who has sent him, is aware of.

The man raises his dagger, a dull gleam in the dark. I move swiftly, the slither of metal against metal the only warning that I have drawn my sword before it slits his throat. He falls to the ground without a struggle. I consider his prone form for a short while as I weigh my options. Finally, I leave him as he is and step out of the room.

An attendant stands by the doorway, his eyes closed in well-habituated upright sleep. I shake him, not gently. He wakes up with a start. Before he can mutter apologies or excuses, I tell him, 'Go, find my grandfather. Bring him here at once.' The attendant scurries off. I return to my room and light a single wick lamp. By its glow I see blood pooling out from

under the dead man. Though I identify him as one of our own, it bothers me no more than when I have killed an enemy soldier.

‘What...?’ My grandfather exclaims as he comes in. To my surprise, my father is with him. They look at the dead man and then at each other.

Ever since the night my father and I spoke about the Majapahit emperor’s proposal and Chandra’s intended refusal, he has not addressed a direct word to me, neither by day nor under the cover of night. He does not make an exception now, and tells my grandfather, ‘I suppose it was to be expected. We have long outstayed our welcome.’

My grandfather shakes his head; he seems far from convinced. ‘I don’t agree. Mutthaiah knows he has nothing to fear or resent...’

‘Mutthaiah chose certainty over challenge. A man who does so will always be ruled by fear. Besides, Nila has grown more popular amongst our men since he serves as a soldier. And he has become the Majapahit emperor’s close companion... I think Mutthaiah will find it difficult to make peace with that fact.’

Their discussion churns my stomach. ‘Mutthaiah

is my brother!' I declare, vehement.

The two men look at me. Their eyes hold indulgence and disappointment. 'Yes, Nila,' my grandfather explains. 'He is your brother. He is also the king of Tanjongpura. What rank do you hold?'

I have no answer to offer. He continues, 'You are nothing, my boy, not yet. You are his brother, and your life would be less at peril if that was all you were. But you are also the Majapahit emperor's brother-in-law, one of his ablest commanders, and a favourite with our soldiers and sailors. All those are stellar qualities in a man with a realm, but dangerous in a man without one.'

'I have a realm,' I declare, with a passion that I did not know simmered inside me. 'I have Srivijaya. I *am* its prince, am I not?' The last words I address to my father, my pain at his long reticence finding its way into them. I then add what I want to believe in, but cannot, for I finally concede that I do not fully comprehend them: 'We have the seas. The seas are what matter.'

My father still does not speak to me or look at me, but his face seems less drawn, less taut. He

tells my grandfather, ‘Get rid of the body. Keep this quiet. In the morning, declare that we plan to set sail in six weeks — all of us.’ He turns to exit, but pauses at the doorway. ‘Be careful, Nila. You’re not out of danger just yet.’ He leaves without waiting for me to respond.

The next morning, Mutthaiah receives our decision with majestic acceptance and polite, but not persuasive, protests. He is satisfied that the nocturnal attack has achieved its end, one way or another.

If anyone seems at all saddened to see us leave, it is my brother-in-law, the Majapahit emperor. He tells me, as he visits us on the eve of our departure, ‘I knew it would come to this.’

‘Oh?’

He smiles, well aware that I have learned to turn what he mockingly refers to as my garrulousness into pointed diplomacy. ‘You’re a man with a question in your heart, Nila. You won’t rest till you find your answer.’

‘And what question is that?’

‘Why, don’t you remember? The very question

you posed at our first meeting. I don't think I've told you how many times I've reflected on the answer, my answer, since. But...'

'Hmm?'

'My answer is not your answer, Nila. You must find out for yourself what it means to be a king. Only then will you be at peace with yourself. Your brother, your father... Why, even I... We have challenged neither the fact of our entitlement, nor the reason behind it. We were born to rule, and so we have ruled. You, on the other hand...'

'Was not born to rule?' I ask. My intent is innocent mischief and my brother-in-law knows it.

He punches me playfully, then wraps his arm around my shoulder. 'You were born for more. I do not say that as prophecy, it is just the affectionate conviction of one who thinks of you as his brother. You were born for more.'

The notion is too far-fetched to be worthy of protest, and I remain silent. The emperor understands and does not push the matter. He gives my shoulder a final squeeze. 'Farewell, Nila.' And then he is gone, his departure abrupt and lacking ceremony, as it always is.

A HERO SETS SAIL.
AN ISLAND IS FOUND.
A NATION IS BORN.

Early thirteenth century CE. The Srivijaya Empire, considered to be one of the world's greatest maritime forces, has been abruptly left powerless in a swift political exchange.

With nothing but a meaningless crown, a once-lauded navy and the will to keep alive the name of Srivijaya against the endless onslaughts of old enemies and ambitious neighbours, Emperor Prabhu Dharmasena and his kin leave behind their island realm to traverse the seas, desperate and homeless.

Among those who sail with him is the Emperor's youngest son, Nila Utama, for whom loyalty and honour have ceased to have meaning since he saw his father forsake their beloved land.

Now, all that is left to do is survive . . .

. . . or so Nila thinks, till a voyage across turbulent seas brings him to a fishing village, where the headstrong prince, so far insistent on keeping to the shadows, is forced to step up to his responsibility, face his old demons and discover what it truly means to be a king.

Based on the founding legend of the island of Singapore, also known as Singapura or the Lion City, *3* is an engrossing tale – told in an exquisitely rich voice – of love, self-realization and adventure on the high seas.

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