

# Thunder Demons

## Prologue

When his cellphone rang at two in the morning, Colonel S. picked up the phone, and still blurry from sleep, he thought *Stupid bitch, she's finally done it*. The person on the other end of the line had spoken slowly, and when he had understood what he was being told, he swung his legs over the side of the bed and got into the car, heading for the abandoned construction site in Shah Alam. A band of fear had briefly tightened around his heart as he saw the figures in the darkness -- *this was it then!* -- but the figures seemed diminished by the tall lalangs waving in the slight breeze, and he could feel the moist night, satiny with humidity, cloaking him in its susurrations. It was a cloudy night which completely hid the moon.

He could see the Princeling, soon to be the next Prime Minister, flanked by a junior Minister. The Princeling was tall, but looked even more stooped in the moonlight as he struggled to light his cigarette. His wife stood ramrod straight next to him, her hennaed red hair a blurry fuzz under the scarf covering her head.

Colonel S. allowed himself a smile. So this was going to be a circus, with a prime-time audience. The Princeling may have the political clout in Malaysia -- the royal blood flowing in his wife's veins didn't hurt -- but he could be so easily manipulated by "friends" like the young Minister who was now standing by his side.

The two bodyguards flanking the Princeling swiveled their heads simultaneously; there was the sound of a car approaching. As the Princeling's nervous fingers dropped the lit cigarette, the young Minister ground it into the wet soil deliberately, both of them turning away from the headlights. The Princeling's wife drew her scarf tightly around her face. The red Proton Saga slowed to a bumpy stop,

killing the headlights, and the tyres squelched into the mud.

A woman opened the back door as the Princeling's bodyguards stood guard. There was a slight scuffle, then another woman was dragged out from the back seat; she was blindfolded, and Colonel S. could see the blood glistening on her forehead even in the dim light. The woman whimpered softly, a plaintive cry in the silence of that deserted stretch of land. Even the night owls seemed to have hushed so that she could be heard. Colonel S. felt the humidity soak into his shirt as they all stood waiting in the moist stillness.

Then the Princeling tilted his head in a nod and it was as if the noise of the tropical night started as a simmer of twitters and chirps and flutters and squeaks, breaking the spell. Colonel S. jerked his head towards the pole and the two bodyguards dragged the woman -- she struggled against the soft ground which refused to yield to her splayed toes -- leaving an anguished trail. Her blindfold slipped off and the wispy black material crouched into the ground like wounded batwings in the night.

As he watched the woman being tied up and her hands and feet secured with ropes, the clouds parted and Colonel S. could see her face. He had known that she would be beautiful, but he had not expected this degree of loveliness, or her youth. This woman had been loved by many, he already knew that, but at this moment, as the moonbeams shone on her face, he understood why she had driven the young Minister and the Princeling to such impropriety. He looked at the Princeling's wife -- a woman well past her youth, heavy in jowl and body, narrow in mind -- her eyes glinted feline in the gloom.

He felt a moment of doubt, then reasoned that he had no cause to be squeamish. Colonel S. -- no one ever called him by his name, for his surname declared that his ancestors had once walked with the Prophet (Peace Be Upon Him!), and that, coupled with his dizzy rise to the top of the military hierarchy *after* earning a doctorate in Materials Science from the United States -- all these things had made him into a *Malaysia Boleh* Hero. *Yes We Can!* Thanks to the diverse appetites of the Princeling and his cronies, he had the country by its balls, and buoyed by their grandiose

plans of *the Malaysian Vision*, he had become one of the main executors of the national destiny.

Except that tonight he had been entrusted with a real execution, of this young woman. It would not, of course, be his first execution, but she was a mother of two. He had seen women being stoned to death for sleeping with many men -- not here in Malaysia, of course, but he had seen it happen -- and as he clasped the C4 explosives around her sweaty neck, he allowed his fingers to linger a little longer than was necessary. She was a whore, he reminded himself, and one Who Knew Too Much.

She had been there, in Paris and Madrid when the cronies of the government had netted € 114 million in a non-competitive tender for that submarine deal. Then onto Sweden where party loyalties had been fed and bought for another of their fatcat projects. The Princeling would swear on the Koran that he had never seen this woman let alone touched her, but his wife knew better; it was the wife, calmly watching Colonel S. circle this woman's body with explosives, who had proven more dangerous to this beauty than the secrets whispered during any pillow-talk by the young Minister or the Princeling.

The woman stirred, murmuring softly. Colonel S. found himself pausing, straining to hear her last words. She was from Mongolia but spoke seven languages fluently and had come to Malaysia as a government translator. She had been very good at her job, too good for her own good, until her competence and beauty got her noticed by the highest bidders in the government. She had lived in a fancy condo in Kenny Hills, flown first-class to the bright lights of big cities...and now this ignominious end in a deserted field in Shah Alam. He refused to feel sorry for her; she had lived too well. She could be saying anything in one of those seven languages, but he didn't have to listen. He suddenly felt tired.

Colonel S. straightened her head, which had dropped to one side, and felt a line of drool on his fingers. His work was done. He tightened the last explosive around her right wrist and stood back.

One of the body guards stepped forward. He had a small revolver in his hand.

"There is no need," Colonel S. began.

"Just making sure, lah." The bodyguard aimed the revolver in line with her chest.

"You'll set off the explosives..."

"Don't worry Boss. I watch already, where you put everything. Sure shot, this one."

Before Colonel S, could protest any further, two shots rang out in quick succession. He turned his head instinctively away from the girl and watched the young bodyguard's face in its malice. *That idiot had aimed for her two breasts!* He shoved the man backwards savagely, signaling for everyone to stand further back.

His ears, adjusting to the silence after the gunshots, waited for the warbling to begin again. The clicks and rattles, castanets and chirrups; the song of the night seemed reluctant to sing.

But no matter. He straightened his back consciously; he was ready. He put his finger on the detonator and the field lit up with a burst of thunder, spraying gristle and bone as a human being burst into hundreds of pieces, the blood splurging out of a punctured heart. Then there was the smell of singed flesh and burning hair as tiny tongues of fire licked the ground.