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Opening extract from

Ghosts of the Forest

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Published by

Orion Children's Books

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First published in Great Britain in 2013
by Orion Children's Books
a division of the Orion Publishing Group Ltd
Orion House
5 Upper St Martin's Lane
London WC2H 9EA
An Hachette UK Company

1 3 5 7 9 10 8 6 4 2

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A catalogue record for this book is available from the British Library

ISBN 978 1 4440 0439 7

Printed in Great Britain by Clays Ltd, St Ives plc

www.orionbooks.co.uk

PROLOGUE



The fat man adjusted his belt, opening it one more notch. Any further, and he would have to cut down on the noodles. Either that or buy a new belt. He breathed a little more easily, placed his coffee on the desk, adjusted his 500-dollar silk tie and twisted around on his green leather swivel chair. Before him, the vast window of his office stared out onto a sumptuous lagoon, its pontoons lined with super-yachts. The lagoon was man-made; just five years ago the area had been twisted mangroves, full of birds, crocodiles and monkeys. Sharks and other sea beasts made their nurseries among the tangled roots of the submerged mangrove trees. Now it was a marina bustling with the elite of modern Borneo. The swanky office block was the centrepiece of the development, and Amir's office was the penthouse. The building housed both the Malaysian environmental agency, and their logging headquarters. Amir was the president of both. Despite the

outrage of conservation organisations, the man whose job it was to protect the rainforests of Southeast Asia also gained the most from cutting them down.

Amir didn't have a problem with that. To him it was all about making the most of Malaysia's resources. Places like Britain and Australia had cut down all their forests; who were they to say Malaysia should not do the same? Of course, if he got very, very rich from it, then that would be even better.

It had been a very good week for Amir's bank accounts. Several logging companies were bidding for the right to cut down big chunks of forest. They were going to turn them into palm oil and acacia plantations. Each contract contained a kickback for Amir, and he'd already bought a luxurious house in America and another on the harbour in Sydney. His wasn't the biggest yacht in the marina in front of him, but he was working on that.

Life was pretty good, but it was not perfect. He'd been hit by a flour bomb at the Malaysian parliament a few weeks ago. It had been thrown by some greenie lunatic. He'd also had death threats from crazed environmental groups, none of which he took seriously. He'd made front-page news in the *Straits Times* talking about the "enviro-mentals" or "bunny huggers", and about how Malaysia would be a global superpower within a decade, by exploiting the "living gold" of the forests of Borneo.

Today however, something had happened that made his skin clammy with fear.

Amir had come to work that morning as he did every day, greeted his secretary, walked into his plush office and dropped his briefcase. Then in his regular ritual, he went to get himself a coffee, which he placed on his leather-clad desk. He set to reading his mail, perfectly arranged on his desk with crisply ironed copies of the *Financial Times* and the *Wall Street Journal*. However, something on top of the mail caught his attention. It was a carving about the size of his thumb, made from a piece of fine rainforest wood. He knew instantly from the weight, the espresso coffee colour and swirly grain that this was a rare tropical ironwood. A whole tree could be worth 20,000 dollars, more than everyone combined in a native village might earn in a year. He picked it up, admiring the beautiful grain and the smoothness of the unvarnished carving. Someone had spent hours making this, and taken great care over it. But why would anyone send him a wooden bullet?

Amir reached across to the intercom on his desk; "Ibu, come in here please." Within seconds, his secretary was in the office, pad poised.

"Ibu, who sent me this?" he demanded, proffering the bullet between finger and thumb.

"I have no idea, Bapak," she responded. "Was it among your letters?"

"No, you know it wasn't; it was here on top of my newspapers!" Amir laughed; surely it was part of some game by one of his colleagues. His secretary shook her head.

"No, Bapak, I put those papers there just a minute ago, and there was nothing else here." Something told him she was telling the truth.

Amir paused, then ushered her out. Alone, he wondered what this could mean. The building had a high-tech surveillance system, armed police, and security cameras everywhere. No one could stroll in, place a wooden bullet on his desk and then just walk out again. How could this have happened? As he pondered, he looked at his newspaper. On top lay a piece of paper with a message. It read:

> *Your actions are destroying the forests the whole planet depends on. We are watching and do not forgive. We are going to take from you everything you value.*

It was signed, *The Ghosts of the Forest*. At first he snorted with derisive laughter. But something about it troubled him. Whoever had walked right into his well-guarded office and placed a bullet on his desk could as easily have placed a real bullet in his skull. It was a well-chosen warning. He pursed his lips, and his brow furrowed. He turned the carved wooden trinket in his fingers. On the underside, where the firing cap would be in a real bullet, was a symbol. Burned into the wood like a brand was the simple outline of a bird of prey. The brooding head of a Saker falcon.

1



Saker started, his heart pounding, his senses on high alert. A demonic screech cut the air, like the scream of a child in terrible pain. Nearby, an explosion of feathers from the frantic wing beats of fruit doves panicked from their slumber. Every one of Saker's muscles tightened, preparing to leap into flight, yet the faces close to him in the shadows didn't flinch. He forced himself to relax; the noise must surely have been the call of some forest bird, one of the thousands he had yet to learn. Telling himself to chill out, he closed his eyes and drew in a deep, calming breath. The air was so thick with moisture he could taste it. Scents of distant fruiting fig and tamarind were sticky in his nostrils. Above, a full moon was occasionally visible through the tangled tendrils of the jungle canopy. Shafts of white moonlight penetrated the heavy air. It was so bright that it was as if someone had dropped a car out of the sky, and it had found its final

resting place up in the treetops, its headlights glaring down on the forest floor. The hunters beneath, perhaps ten of them, stepped around the pools of light, hugging tight to the shadows.

Saker was dressed in the same way as his silent companions; a loincloth around his waist, twisted leather and palm bracelets circling his upper arm and ankles. Dark smears of plant dye across his cheeks and chest served to break up his outline like the nebulous stripes and spots of a clouded leopard, helping him to become one with the night. Around his throat was a wooden amulet carved in the shape of a crocodile. All moved barefoot, toes gently feeling for brittle twigs and dry leaves that might betray a careless step with a crackle or rustle. Each man carried in his hand a three metre long blowpipe called a *keleput*, cut from a single length of wood and hollowed out with a bone drill. Using this, they could propel a poisoned dart perhaps twenty metres with lethal accuracy. The darts were little more than flimsy toothpicks, carved from the stems of palm fronds, but coated in toxins gathered from the sticky latex of the *tajem* tree. They could kill a monkey in seconds, or stop a man's heart in minutes.

Another odd sound. This time not so blood-curdling. The men in the shadows stiffened, their senses keen. The sound came again: it was the chirrup of a bush cricket's wings rubbing together. Saker knew it was a signal made by the practised lips of the tribe's front tracker, telling them, "Stop, listen, there is danger ahead." Saker squinted,

trying to make sense of the darkness. His eyes were already accustomed to the night, but it seemed the tribesmen around him were much more capable, their nocturnal vision like a forest cat's. They could clearly see something he couldn't. After a few seconds' concentration, what he thought were distant fireflies became weak electric lights; it was a camp. Civilisation! His fingers brushed the wooden handle of the long *tueh* knife at his hip. His companions had been quiet before, but now they became ghosts of the forest, no more than a memory as they stole through the night.

Abruptly the caverns of the forest came to an end, and before them lay a smouldering field. It was peppered by the sad stumps of ancient ironwood trees; deep furrows showed where clunking yellow machines had dragged away trees that had been growing for centuries. The timber was bound for Malaysian logging mills to make wood chips to line suburban flower borders and rabbit hutches. The logging camp in the centre of the wasteland had been built to last no more than a few weeks. That was all it would take to totally eradicate this patch of forest that had been here for tens of thousands of years.

The camp was centred around two cabins and a ragtag collection of flapping blue tarpaulins. Campfires crackled, and mangy-looking dogs, chickens and a few flea-bitten pigs picked around piles of rubbish in search of scraps. A scratchy stereo blasted out a whining voice, a crude copy of a Western pop song. Saker winced; it sounded as if the

singer had been sucking on a helium balloon, and the backing track seemed to have been played on a ten-dollar synthesiser. It couldn't have been more out of place against the glorious cicada, frog and cricket orchestra that was the natural soundtrack of the Bornean jungle night.

On the other side of the clearing several vehicles were rusting in the mud – huge, battered Toyota Land Cruisers with tyres as tall as a man. There was an industrial digger, and trucks loaded with felled trees as grand in scale and size as the columns on the Parthenon. Each tree was daubed with paint showing where it was felled and where it would be sent. The trunks were four metres in diameter. Saker glanced at one of his companions waiting for the next signal. In the white moonlight, he noticed the trickle of a tear running down the man's cheek. The man looked back at Saker, aware of his gaze. The tribesman made a series of gestures, pointing to the clearing with his thumb, looking up at the sky. Then, taking the amulet around his neck, he rubbed it, and closed his eyes. This place was sacred. It had been a grove where his ancestors had been buried over the centuries. It was one of the last places the treasured ironwood trees had been preserved from the loggers' chainsaws. His forefathers' spirits were one with the living wood. Those trees were now stacked on a truck and bound for the sawmill.

His people, the Penan, kept no photographs or mementos. They believed that the dead would always live in the forest, watching over their descendants like guardian

angels. This was more than a vandalised graveyard. It was as if the outsiders had murdered his family.

Saker felt his muscles tensing again. Without him realising it, his teeth clenched and adrenalin started to leak into his blood, quickening his heart rate. The Clan, who had been Saker's family, called this sensation "the rush", the moment of excitement before a kill, when wolves yip and whine with bloodlust, and an assassin's fingertips tingle. They were taught that when they felt the rush, they should breathe deep to quell the adrenalin. Those who didn't might unleash a spear too early, or make rash decisions. The Penan as hunters knew the rush just as well, and doubtless had their own name for it. They had to be cautious. They'd been doing whatever they could to sabotage this plunder of their lands for over a decade now, and the loggers would be ready. They'd be armed with shotguns and possibly even automatic rifles. Anyone who was captured would be shot. Now was not the time to stampede in with a wasted war cry.

They split, moving around the outskirts of the clearing, heading for the monstrous vehicles. Their bare feet squelched in the orange mud – all that remained now that the fragile jungle top soils had been exposed. A tall man had stepped out of the cabin and into the pool of light beneath an occasionally flickering naked lightbulb. He was no more than three steps from Saker. Saker pursed his lips, making the bush cricket chirp that meant, "stop, pay attention". The logger's features were briefly illuminated,

and Saker smelled the acidic phosphorous from a struck match. The man had pockmarked swarthy cheeks – scarring from teenage acne – and a wispy moustache. As he breathed out a cloud of perfumed smoke from his *kretek* cigarette, Saker's nostrils registered the sweet smell of cloves. He could have reached over and plunged his knife up to the hilt in the man's chest, but this was against the ways of the peaceful Penan. Saker knew that if he did anything violent, he would wake up alone in the forest tomorrow. His companions would have gone, leaving not so much as a footprint to prove they had ever existed.

Saker merged into the background, swaying imperceptibly in the gentle wind like a praying mantis, to mimic the slight movement of the trees. Saker's eyes were already adjusted to the darkness, pupils wide to absorb as much light as possible, while the man had just stepped out of the artificial light, leaving him with no night vision. Saker was as good as invisible to him. The logger sucked the last of his cigarette and dropped the stub, crushing it under the heel of his cowboy boot. He turned, and walked back inside.

With the threat gone, the Penan glided through the camp, intent on quiet destruction. Petrol caps were untwisted, and sugar poured into the fuel tanks. Tyres were slashed and fan belts sliced. The chainsaws that bit so cruelly into the flesh of the sacred trees had their chain-links sprung and starting cords cut. The larger machines that could deal out the most deadly terror on the forest

received special attention. The Penan had seen their first motor vehicles less than a decade before, but had quickly learned how best to paralyse them.

No matter how satisfying it was to see hydraulic fluid spilling into the mud, or to pull out electric wires, the Penan knew their actions were ultimately useless. The loggers had the Malaysian government behind them. They might stop the diggers rolling for a few days, but parts would soon be shipped, and the chainsaws would rage again. All it would take would be one satellite phone call . . . Saker's attention was caught by a long aerial sticking up out of one of the cabins. It was a radio antenna. Almost all of these logging camps had portable satellite dishes that enabled them to keep in touch with the outside world, but the dense ceiling of forest often cut out the signal. This camp was relying on old-fashioned radio technology! If Saker could sabotage that system, the loggers would have to walk to the nearest town, and that might take two or three days. It would certainly slow their recovery. Saker crept across the mud towards the light. There was an urgent snort from behind him, the alarm call of a proboscis monkey made by one of the Penan, trying to catch his attention. Saker knew the message behind the sound: "You're straying from the plan! Don't do anything stupid!" He didn't even glance back.

The aerial was on top of one of the makeshift buildings. Saker climbed up using the windowsills as footholds, and slid over the roof. He moved with great caution, aware

that the plastic ceiling was taut as a drum, and footfalls would sound like a boom to the people inside. The aerial was attached to a large black box, to keep the workings safe from jungle rain. Saker used the tip of his knife to unscrew one side of the box and pull it away. Inside was a morass of wires he didn't know how to operate, but did know how to sabotage. He reached inside, grabbed a handful, and pulled.

It was as if he had grabbed hold of an electric cow fence with both hands. The shock threw him bodily backwards onto the roof with an involuntary shriek. He rolled straight to his feet, prepared to leap off the roof and run. Instantly a commotion started inside, and within seconds he found himself staring down into blinding torchlight. This time the tables were turned; it was the logger who had light on his side. The man shouted at him in a language Saker didn't understand. Behind the glare of the torch, Saker could just make out the sheen of a gun-barrel. He slid down and dropped to the mud.

The whole mission had been compromised because of him. The Penan would have melted into the forest by now, and he might never find them again.

The pockmarked man gesticulated with the rifle, barking questions Saker couldn't understand. Saker's mind screamed, searching for a way out. He certainly couldn't count on mercy. These were lawless, hard men. Unless Saker found a way out, they would kill him and dump his body where it would never be found.

The loggers couldn't comprehend why anyone would want to live in the forest. For them it was hot, wet, humid, thick with biting bugs, a miserable hell that made all their equipment and clothing rust and rot. But they hadn't seen the wonders that Saker had: hidden waterfalls hung with hundred-year-old pepper vines, the haunting songs of gibbons echoing over a misty valley as the sun began to rise. And most of all, they knew nothing of the orang utan, the old man of the forest. To Saker and the Penan, it was a totem animal. Our own image, clothed in umber fur, tranquilly munching fruit in the treetops. The forests had to remain, or the orang utan would fade away, and take with it a big part of our souls. It was the orangs that had drawn Saker to Borneo. He hoped that he might be able to do something to help the forests, to help the apes. But the loggers were city folk, hated the forest, and cared nothing for the orang utan. Furthermore, as they were getting paid per tree they cut down, the efforts of the saboteurs took money from their pockets.

As his mind raced, his eye was caught by the glimmer of naked metal behind the shoulder of his adversary. It was one of the Penan – he'd come back! It was Leysin, the man he had seen shedding a tear earlier. His long *tueh* knife was drawn, and it was clear he intended to plunge it into the back of the logger. Saker couldn't let that happen. Penan culture had no truck with killers; Leysin would be made an outcast. Saker raised his hands in the universal gesture of surrender, then stepped towards his captor.

The pockmarked man raised the rifle from his hip to his shoulder, clearly telling Saker to stay exactly where he was. The boy nodded, and spoke in a placating voice, "I'm really sorry man, I just have friends who live here, that's all." It didn't matter what he said; he was just buying time. "Come on, you don't want to waste bullets on me!"

Leysin crept forward, knife held high. Saker had to act. He snapped his hand out and grabbed the tip of the rifle barrel, pulling it towards himself, then rolling his whole body in a balletic move down the length of the gun towards the Malaysian. When his back lay flat against the gun, Saker jacked his elbow into the throat of his captor, who doubled up, gasping for breath. Saker then took his legs from under him with a leg sweep, like a farmer reaping corn with a scythe. The rifle and its owner dropped unceremoniously into the mud. Saker and Leysin ran for the shadows.

As they scampered over the exposed roots and tree stumps, shouting rang out, and then several cracks, and the whiz of bullets about their ears. It was panic fire; the loggers couldn't see them in the darkness and were shooting blindly. Almost at the trees, Saker ducked as another round fizzed overhead. Then the welcoming arms of the jungle cloaked him in its dark blanket. But he was alone. Where was Leysin? Squinting back towards the bedlam of the camp, Saker made out a shadowy figure struggling to get up from the dirt. Saker turned and ran back towards him. Torch beams sliced the darkness, but the loggers were

scared to venture into the jungle at night. Saker grabbed the Penan, who lay breathing heavily, and dragged him towards safety, as more shots rang out and angry voices screamed vengeance. Leysin could still keep himself upright, but only just. Saker propelled him forwards, taking one arm over his shoulder and putting his hand round Leysin's waist. He could feel warm sticky blood around Leysin's midriff; at least one of the bullets had found its mark. They stumbled off, the Penan hunter groaning with every step.