

Abah suddenly lights up, points, and Awang swings the boat around and heads directly towards a thick wall of green on the bank, very fast. I'm sure we're going to crash, so I brace myself for the impact and squeal. But then Awang slows the boat right down, and Jibrail stands up tall on the front of the boat, perfectly balanced, brandish-ing a parang, and begins to hack at the green wall, which is made up of long vines and tangled branches. Quickly he opens up a big hole, and soon we can see through to the other side, where there seems to be another much smaller river, completely hidden from view.

Our boat pushes through, and we duck down to avoid being caught on branches. When we look up, we're in a totally different world.

We're now truly surrounded by forest. Trees are so tall on either side that they meet in the middle, like a massive archway or cathedral, like the type we saw in Rome, but this one is green and brown, rust-red and grey. High up, we see monkeys climbing across a bridge of branches.

And it's not silent like a cathedral either – it's like we've been plunged into an ocean of noise, saturated in sound, swimming in a musical roar, the trilling of trillions of unseen frogs and crickets and monkeys, and leaves and branches and ghosts, chuckling and sobbing and gossiping and fighting to the death, singing out woop woop woop and ningningningningning as we cut through in our little boat.

—Mashallah, says Jibrail. You were right, Tuan. I didn't know any-thing like this still existed.

Awang slows down, and we see a tiny, rickety-looking wooden platform ahead. We tie up and unload our gear. Awang zooms off in his speedboat, saying he'll be back to pick us up, and suddenly we're sitting there alone on the tiny platform, which barely fits all of us and our gear.

Just us, the River and the jungle.

The next thing I notice is how cool it has become in the soft light of the jungle. It's a relief to be hidden by canopy from the burning sun, which immediately feels like a distant memory. The forest rises around us – real, not a game, not an anime – trees a hundred metres tall, pale grey and grey-brown and black, spotted with white patches, camouflaged and carpeted with green moss, some with enormous buttress roots that sound like a drum when I knock on them with my fist, some with massive vines hanging down in giant corkscrewed braids, with big ferns growing in the crook of the trees' arms, high up. Plants on top of plants on top of plants. Every sense is overwhelmed – take a step, smell the rich stink of mud and rot and fungus, take another and it's mist and riverwater, another and it's a drift of smoke from Abah's cigarette.

As I walk, I turn my face slightly to the side and isolate a sound: a frog, I think, or an owl. I tilt my head upwards and it's the whoosh of flapping wings my ears zoom in on. A wreathed hornbill! I now know what that sounds like! I see its shadow pass overhead.

Harun cries out briefly as a spiky young rattan catches on his sock. Jibrail reaches down to free it.

Winged things flit above us – bats or birds – sparks of black fire, here for a moment then gone just as quickly, back into the shade, the pattern of green flushed with red-gold as the hidden sun goes down beyond. The jungle feels like a massive whale, ancient, swimming in space, and we are just baby creatures in its belly.

—I'm scared, says Harun.

—Don't be scared, sayang, says Abah. Come on, chin up.

It's not long before a man appears out of nowhere, as if conjured by the trees themselves.

Abah seems to have been expecting him. He introduces himself as Salam.

—How long did it take you to get here? asks Abah.

—Half a day, walking, says Salam, gesturing over his shoulder. He rummages around in his bum bag as he walks, gets out a piece of chewing gum, puts it in his mouth. He has a heart-shaped face with a droopy lower lip and longish hair parted in the middle. He knows the terrain well, stepping lightly, not looking at his feet as he walks. There's something springy not just in his step but in his nature, like a deer ready to bound into the undergrowth. He is constantly chewing gum and he doesn't take off his sunglasses. Through a tear in his shirt, I can see that he has a leather strap around his neck with a glass bead attached, and on the bead is a woman's tiny face.

Salam speaks in a respectful, low voice to Abah and Jibrail in a mixture of Malay and English. He leads us on foot through the trees, along a thin creek, the water slow and trickling. Croaks and whistles and ribbits and whoops. We clamber over fallen logs, some of them already hollowed out by termites. We crouch down and can see all the way through them.

Every now and again, Salam pauses to hack at a vine or the under-growth with his parang, or point out a tree.

—Fig tree. The Dusuns call that Nunuk Ragang – the Tree of Life. All the animals in the jungle like eating figs. Anywhere there's figs, there's animals.

—Why doesn't that tree have rings? asks Harun, indicating a fallen log across our path.

—Good question, says Salam, helping us climb over it. We don't have seasons here, not like the Northern Hemisphere. Hardwood trees like this grow slowly and uniform – that's why they're so strong!

Abah and Jibrail sometimes hoist us onto their shoulders and carry us, at other times, they let us scamper around.

Abah trudges through the mud in heavy boots, framed by the enormous trees, carefully stepping over thick lines of fire ants. His face is spangled by light strafing through the canopy, and he looks at the trees every now and again. I can't help stopping every few metres to examine lantern bugs with funny long noses or millipedes rolled into a perfect armoured ball. I'm lagging far behind, agonising over what to spend my precious film on.

—Roz! Hurry up.

I jog to join them.

—Slowpoke, needles Harun, elbowing me in the ribs.

—You're the slowpoke.

—Kids, says Abah, listen to Salam. And in the forest, use a quieter voice.