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# **TREEMACS**

**I.M. RODBAR**

**Dadicated to my family which help  
me fight and defeat the evil spirits.**

# Chapter 1

The Siamang monkeys' cries mingled with the laughter of the children, who were playing in the Moosi River. The Kouching tribe had settled along this riverbank some hundred years earlier. Twenty straw huts had been built in the clearing in the rain forest, and here the women were cooking a variety of dishes from sweet potatoes that they had collected on the previous day. Two bored dogs were sprawled on the sand, idly picking out ticks that were sticking to their skin. There was no sign remaining of the heavy storm that had burst over the village the previous night. Outside the circle of straw huts stood the three small straw shacks being used by Professor Garden's small research expedition.

Professor Alan Garden was a botanist, employed by the British Royal Botanical Gardens, researching the tropical forest fauna in Southern Sumatra. He specialized in the study of rare plants, and the types of soil that suited each of the rare species. He had enriched the botanical gardens and the royal parks with tropical species, which were flourishing amazingly well, considering the distinct climatic differences between the two growing areas.

Chief Mysong, the head of the Kouching tribe, had agreed to host the research expedition, when it first arrived in his village, in return for a few tins of food. From the first few days of the expedition's stay, a cordial relationship had developed between Mysong and Professor Garden, and he agreed that the white foreigners could extend their stay in his village, without payment. As time passed, the chief understood the advantages that his tribe gained from the presence of the expedition and its scholarly members, and he adopted them, as if they were part of his tribe.

His real name was Chief Touranga Mourtando Rawalsindi. Alan had given him the nickname "Mysong", because he was always singing. He kept humming a tune to himself, repeating the tune over and over again, and making sure that everyone knew that he had composed it himself. Alan rewarded him for assisting the expedition, and over the years taught him many useful lessons. He was particularly grateful to Alan for having taught him a method of drying and preserving the game that the hunters brought back to the village, so that the meat lasted much longer than before.

Alan was busy packing the necessary equipment that he intended to take back with him to London. This urgent packing was

forced upon him as a result of the mysterious death of his wife, Debra, who had died during the storm the previous night. Painful thoughts kept rushing through his mind, disturbing him to such an extent that concentration was impossible. He tried to imagine his next meeting with his wife's parents, and didn't know how he could give them the bitter tidings. Cold sweat covered his brow, and he tried to reorganize his thoughts in a logical manner, in spite of the waves of pain and fury that filled his being. He gathered together the seeds that had been selected, the soil samples and fertilizers that he had collected in the last few months, and put them all in his bag. Pressed for time, he had to finish packing for his son, Jack, who was sleeping quietly in the next hut.

Amanda, chief's Mysong eldest daughter, appeared at the entrance to the hut, carrying a large coconut. The oppressive heat prevented him from concentrating, and perspiration kept running into the colourful bandana tied around his forehead. Amanda's tapping attracted his attention and he looked up at the doorway, which was almost blocked by the young woman's large frame. She handed him the already opened coconut, so he could drink the refreshing milk.

Amanda's eldest son had died a month after Allan's arrival in the village. Since then, she felt an obligation to look after him and take care of all his needs, to show her appreciation of all his efforts to save the life of her child. Alan had heard the shouts of the friends who had been playing with the boy, but did not pay attention to them at first. But the mother's cries of distress at finding her son lying on the ground, had alarmed him, and he rushed to the spot. Alan found the boy hovering between life and death. On his right toe there were the marks of three stings, in the form of a triangle, signs that Alan had never before encountered. In spite of his prolonged efforts to save the boy, Sampai, the chief's eldest grandchild, died in his arms. The leg that had been stung turned black within a few minutes, in an incomprehensible manner. His skin wrinkled and stuck to his body, as if his life fluids had been pumped out of him. His shocked mother could not stand the sight, and, supported by her friends, she was led away from the place where her son's distorted body lay.

Debra Shirer, the young student who was helping Alan in his work, asked each of them whether they had seen such a case before. Their wide-eyed stares gave her the answer clearly, without their uttering a single word. Alan carried the small body to the chief's hut, while DJ, the children's favourite, tried to get them to tell him if they had seen the creature that stung the child and caused his death. DJ, or David Jones to

give his full name, was the third member of the expedition. In the previous six months he had dedicated much of his leisure time to the children in the village. But in spite of the great affection that the children felt towards him, all he managed to draw out of them was the fact that, before falling to the ground, the chief's eldest grandson had given a small cry of pain.

Before the mourning rites commenced, Alan asked the chief's permission to take a small sample from the site of the sting. He took the sample to his laboratory and started to try and find any the traces that might be left. DJ disturbed him in his work, calling him to join the chief and his daughter in the funeral march.

The procession was led by the village shaman, whose name, Kurimi, meant "he who speaks to the spirits". He carried the dead child's body in his arms, covered with a brightly coloured cloth. Behind them walked DJ and Debra, leading a column of weeping women carrying their babies on their backs, men performing mourning dances, and confused children with heads bent low.

At the end of the funeral ritual, the three expedition members made their way to the chief's hut, to join in the mourning meal. Gradually, the hut became too small to contain the long line of visitors, who had come from all the villages in the area to offer their condolences, after hearing the news of Sampai's death. At the end of the brief meal, the expedition members exchanged embraces with the chief and his daughter, and hurried to the laboratory hut, to continue their attempt to find any trace that might have been left in the child's leg by the deadly creature.

In spite of their hard work, all that the researchers managed to find was a remnant of sea salt, from which they assumed that the creature must have come from the sea. This clue didn't help them greatly, particularly taking into account the fact that the village was in the interior of Sumatra. However, it wasn't possible to ignore the information, as few sea creatures can walk on dry land. But soon enough the three of them reached the conclusion that there weren't any known creatures on the island that could have caused such great damage to Sampai's little body. These findings brought them to a dead end. The men from other tribes on the island refused to talk about the matter. Everyone the researchers tried to talk to turned away from them with obvious apprehension.



## Chapter 2

Five months after Sampai's death, Alan received some new information regarding his investigation. It took place two days after his return from London with Debra, whom he had married in a modest ceremony, and who was already two months pregnant with their first child, Jack. The newly-wed couple were honoured with a solemn welcoming ceremony by the villagers, and the three expedition members quickly returned to their work. One day, Alan was on his own in the laboratory hut, when he noticed Kurimi trying to sneak into the back of the hut without being seen by anyone outside. Such behaviour seemed very peculiar to Alan, who went up to the shaman, grasped his hand and dragged him into the corner of the hut, as if Kurimi wanted to tell him a secret.

Kurimi peered around anxiously, as if frightened that their meeting would be overheard. He bent forward towards Alan, and whispered softly in his ear the word: "Battasinda", while stealthily placing a small seed on the palm of Alan's hand. The shaman closed Alan's fingers tightly over the seed, then shut his eyes and nodded his head in a quick smile, as if he wished to leave Alan without the slightest doubt that he was doing Alan a great favour.

Before Alan could utter a single word, Kurimi left the hut through the back door. He bent over even more than he had done when entering the hut, as if he had just taken part in a major robbery and was trying to leave the scene of the crime without being detected by anyone.

Alan realized immediately that the object that Kurimi had given him was the seed of the Rafflesia plant, but he didn't have the slightest idea how to interpret the shaman's strange behaviour. The Rafflesia is a parasitic plant, found all over Sumatra. It has a single flower that blooms with glistening red or yellow petals. It is said to be the largest flower in the world, and can reach a diameter of a meter or more. When it blossoms, it gives off a smell like that of a stink bomb, strong enough to chase the toughest of teachers out of a classroom, even if they were suffering from a heavy cold that day.

The Rafflesia was a protected plant, which attracted many tourists to Sumatra. They came to admire its beauty, so the island's inhabitants were forced to put up with its revolting smell. All the tribes living on the island kept away from the forest's depths, where the most suitable growing conditions for the flower were found. They preferred to settle as far as possible from the flower, and built their villages in secluded forest clearings, to which only a hint of the stinking odour could

reach... The parasitic plant clings to trees, robbing them of nutrition and killing them slowly in agonizing torment. Many dried-up trees could be found in the middle of the forest, their lifeless trunks and branches left like silent memorials, recording without words the agony suffered by the tree before it succumbed.

Alan went over to Mysong's hut, with the seed in his hand, to find out the meaning of the strange word that Kurimi had whispered in his ear. When Alan showed him the seed, the chief retreated in alarm, as if he had seen the angel of death in person, waving his scythe towards him. When he heard the word "Battasinda", the chief fled from the shack in wild panic, leaving Alan standing alone, dumbfounded. Alan believed that he must have unwittingly mentioned a dangerous subject. The word "Battasinda", he assumed, must be associated with some sort of a curse, which sowed deep fear in the hearts of the members of the tribe.

Two hours later, Alan sent Debra to try to get the chief to tell her what was the matter, but she came back "empty handed", saying that Mysong was not in his hut. Alan went down to the place where the chief liked to sit in solitude by the river, and found him sitting in the shade of some Rizophora bushes, which were growing along the river's bank. He was murmuring strange phrases to himself, in a trembling voice that rose and fell. When he noticed Alan approaching him, he stopped singing; he shrank back and signalled to Alan to stop. He beseeched Alan to go away and leave him alone. So Alan had to postpone the attempt to talk to him about the seed, and the strange word that had upset him so much. He realized that he had to give Mysong more time to recover from his extreme agitation.

Three days later, after two more attempts by Debra, the chief agreed to meet him, but he stipulated that the shaman must be present at the meeting. The latter became very agitated when he saw Alan approaching the chief's hut. The three men sat there for an hour or so, talking on quite different matters, in order to calm the tense atmosphere in the hut. Alan could feel the inner tension pent up in both Mysong and Kurimi, in spite of his deliberately waiting before mentioning the real subject of the meeting. Deciding that he wouldn't find a better time to discuss the matter in the near future, he started to ask the questions that were gnawing at his mind. He turned to Kurimi and asked him to explain the circumstances of their clandestine meeting in the hut. The shaman asked Alan to come closer to them, so close that he could smell the odour of both their bodies. It was clear that Kurimi dreaded to say the words

out loud, lest he be overheard outside the shack, and his words would return to him like a deadly boomerang.

When the three of them were close enough together, Kurimi explained to Alan that Battasinda is the name given to the bad spirit, the root of all evil - the spirit that incites mankind to perform all the atrocities that are perpetrated upon the face of the earth. The shaman said that his father, who taught him the secrets of black medicine, had warned him never to mention the bad spirit out loud and openly. He warned him that if Battasinda should suspect that its name had been mentioned by any one of them, it would set a terrible curse upon the whole tribe. That is the reason, Kurimi explained, why he took such precautions, and did all he could to conceal the subject of his meeting with Alan, or the fact that it had taken place.

“Battasinda is a spirit that is moved to anger very easily, and takes revenge upon anyone who it suspects of acting against it. It never forgives, and never gives in. Up to that time, all those who it had suspected of acting against it had met with a sudden death. It is a very elusive spirit”, he added, “and no one has yet managed to set eyes on her.” He said that the shaman of the Sintang tribe had told him some years earlier that he heard her laughter echoing in the forest; it was at the time that the dreadful plague broke out, which caused the death of every member of the Flambeng tribe, who had been their neighbours for many years. The reason why that deadly plague had spread wildly among that peaceful tribe remained a mystery, up to that day. The day after the shaman of the Sintang tribe had told him about Battasinda, in a loud voice, he had disappeared in a very strange manner. He had never been found, said Kurimi, in spite of many efforts to find him. “But how is the seed connected to all this?” Alan asked with a hint of impatience. “I’m going to tell you what I learned from my grandfather”, the shaman replied.

Kurimi’s grandfather was famous throughout Sumatra for his exceptional powers. His forefathers had already guessed that the Rafflesia plant was connected to the Battasinda, and served it in some way, he whispered. They had tried to trace the link between the plant and the spirit, but they hadn’t been able to find out any more. He had been told that Trankomeli, one of the Flambeng tribe’s first chieftains, had tried to dig up the roots of the plant, in order to learn more about it. Trankomeli had dug beneath the huge flower and found to his surprise that it had no roots. It looked as if the plant simply emerged from under

the ground. It seemed to be nourished by some unseen source, hidden deep in the ground.

Next day, Trankomeli's eldest son was found dead. His lifeless body was sprawled in a strange posture on the river bank, close to the waters' edge. There were no signs on his body that he had been bitten by a crocodile or any other beast of prey. This tragic event had increased their suspicion that Battasinda had caused the son's death, in order to punish the man who had dared to try to find out more about the spirit. The fact that the spirit had slain the son and let the father live, was a clear sign of her cruel nature. There is no greater pain to a father than the loss of his child. Anyone who has experienced such extreme grief will agree. Had the bad spirit killed the father, it would have left scars in the hearts of his relatives. But it was a far worse punishment for Trankomeli, being left alive, leading the funeral procession of his son. Losing his eldest son must have been a terribly sharp and cruel blow, which emphasized the heavy price exacted as retribution for his investigation.

Kurimi admitted that he could not point to a direct link between these two strange deaths. However, he could not ignore the fact that in both cases those who had perished were eldest sons. He suggested that Battasinda was directly involved in these tragic deaths, although the three signs left on Sampai's body were not found on the body of Trankomeli's son. The shaman said that he had stopped trying to learn more about the evil spirit, when he heard that the man who told him about the echoing laughter had disappeared without trace. Regarding chief Mysong, Kurimi added that he could not point out any reason why the bad spirit had punished him and his family so cruelly. He was ready to swear that Mysong had never performed any deed that might have caused the evil spirit to turn against him. He asked what Alan had done with the seed that he had given to him, and Alan said that he had put it in his desk in the laboratory hut. Kurimi and Mysong made a mutual decision to abandon any further efforts to try to track down Battasinda. The two men feared that the presence of the seed in the laboratory hut might infuriate Battasinda, so they asked Alan to get rid of it in any possible way, provided he didn't bury it in the ground. Kurimi advised Alan to remove the plant nucleus from the seed, to prevent it from germinating.

Alan nodded his agreement regarding what the shaman had said about the seed's life source. He took leave of them and went over to the laboratory. As soon as he entered the hut, he saw that his desk drawer was wide open, and when got closer he realized that the seed was no longer there. While he was still wondering what he should do, he was

astonished to see three black points, in the form of a triangle, on the handle of the drawer. The points looked as if they had been scorched into the wooden handle by a fierce heat. As he gazed nervously at the open drawer, the doubts that gnawed in Alan's heart regarding Kurimi's tales of an evil spirit turned slowly to real fear that none of this could possibly be a coincidence. With a few quick steps he returned to the chief's hut, and found the two men sitting in the same posture as before. They were murmuring some kind of a prayer, which, of course, he could not understand.

Without ceasing his prayers, the chief beckoned to Alan to sit next to him: when he finished, he explained to Alan that, in accordance with Kurimi's advice, they were making a prayer of appeasement to the evil spirit, to prevent any further affliction. Alan told them of the unexpected development concerning the Rafflesia seed. The shaman was horrified that Alan has mentioned the subject of the seed before they could take the necessary precautionary steps. He tried to silence Alan, and beckoned to him to come closer to them, before continuing his report. Only when the three men were standing as close as possible to each other, with their heads pressed together, was Alan permitted to tell them what he had seen in the hut. After a few seconds of confusion, Kurimi declared that now he had no doubt that Battasinda must have taken the seed out of Alan's desk. According to him, the sign of the three-point burn on the drawer handle was evidence of the spirit's raging anger – as if one of the spirit's offspring had been stolen from him.

He still didn't have an explanation for Sampai's agonising death, but deep inside he suspected that it was in some way connected to the arrival of the small research expedition in the village, and with the warm welcome with which the tribe had received them. He had no definite proof of this, so he preferred, at that stage, merely to ask Alan to cease all interest in Battasinda and the Rafflesia plant. To justify this, he voiced his concerns about the dreadful punishment that the whole tribe might suffer, as a result of any further research. He visualized in his mind's eye the great plague that had wiped out the Flambeng tribe years earlier. He made the professor take an oath, in a weird ceremony that included drinking some type of fruit juice that Alan had never tasted before, but which was quite refreshing in the oppressive heat inside the hut. As soon as Alan had drunk the juice, Kurimi started hopping around him in a strange dance, growling and groaning at the same time, as if he had been suddenly attacked by dreadful stomach pains. The shaman stretched out his hand and almost touched Alan's lips with his fingers, as

if he was trying to prevent Alan from making any sound. Kurimi kept dancing around him, as Alan stood there without moving. When he finished his ceremonial dance, the shaman asked Alan to swear that he would make no further experiments that might jeopardize the members of the tribe.

## Chapter 3

About a month after he swore to Mysong that he would not investigate the evil spirit further, Alan and Debra left for London. Debra was already in her eighth month of pregnancy, and as the child's birth was approaching, she had to stop working almost completely. When Alan told her the details of what had taken place in the laboratory, about the disappearance of the seed, he saw signs of distress on her lovely face. In spite of the feeling that it wasn't just coincidence, since she didn't believe in the existence of spirits of any sort, she encouraged Alan to keep on with his investigations. She was not aware of the promise that he had made to Mysong, that he would not continue these activities while under the shelter of the chief.

Most of his time in London was dedicated to studying reference books, and examining every piece of information available about the *Rafflesia* and its sources of nourishment. The more he learned about the plant, the more he suspected that the plant had a mysterious source of nourishment, not yet discovered. Some inexhaustible resource must supply it with the ability to develop such a huge flower, and produce such a strong smell. The odour was a considerable nuisance, but as he continued with his investigations Alan understood that the stench was the least of the evils that were afflicted on the plants growing in its vicinity.

Whenever the huge flower blossomed, it was the death penalty to all the vegetation in its vicinity - the development of the trees and plants growing near the flower was disrupted by the extremely powerful odour of the huge flower, which blocked the odour of the flowers of all the other plants in the vicinity. None of the other flowers could attract the insects needed for their reproduction. If pollen grains can't be transferred from the male flowers to the females, all the trees and plants in the vicinity would perish - to the last one.

Alan's suspicion about the plant's mysterious source of nourishment strengthened further, when he discovered an additional astonishing attribute. The plant could sow its seed stealthily inside any tree trunk that it had decided to attack, and it could leave the seed there in a dormant state for over twenty-five years. This ability allowed the plant to choose the right time to attack the unfortunate tree, which was doomed to die in agony. Alan believed that such a long delay in the development of a live parasite, without any external support, required a special source of nourishment. He kept remembering Kurimi's tale about the chief who dug under the huge flower and did not find any roots. It indicated to him

the plant's cunning in concealing its tracks, whenever there was an attempt to locate its roots. The plant was smart enough to realize that its roots might lead an investigator to discover its hidden sources of nourishment, and expose its secret.

Debra gave birth to her baby without any complications. Jack was born on a Sunday morning, just as the bells of the London All Saints church near the Middlesex hospital began to chime. At the party that was held by the family, to celebrate the baby's birth, Alan strutted around Debra's parents' garden like a proud peacock. He dedicated most of his time now to his wife, and to the excitement of caring for their first son. However, the efficient assistance that Debra received from her mother enabled him to find a little time for his own work. He made a few planned visits to the Parks of the Windsor and Hampton Court palaces, and was delighted to see how the last species that he had sent home had adapted without the slightest problems. Some of the later species that he had sent had developed larger flowers than he had seen in their original areas of cultivation.

Debra began to accustom herself to her new status as a young mother. Her first worries, so characteristic of a new mother, were replaced with self-confidence, which enabled her to gain a great deal of pleasure from caring for the small newcomer. Alan's mother-in-law had turned into a worrying grandmother, and she persuaded Alan to return to Sumatra alone. He agreed with her that it was preferable for Debra and little Jack to stay on in London, till the baby was a little older. Both women were of the opinion that the oppressive heat in Sumatra would not be at all healthy for the baby, and Alan had to agree with them. It was particularly true concerning the minimal sanitary conditions that prevailed in the area where the Kouching tribe lived.

DJ welcomed him, on his return to the village, and immediately told him that in the last two weeks he had noticed a degree of tension in Mysong's attitude towards him and towards others. Two days later, Alan learned the reason for the chief's nervousness. Mysong waited until Alan was alone in his living quarters, and then slipped into the hut very furtively, as if he was seeking shelter from unknown pursuers. As soon as he was inside, Mysong rushed to draw the curtains, to make sure that no one outside could see what was happening in the hut. With obvious apprehension, he went up to Alan, who was sitting on his bed and looked at him in surprise. The scared expression on the chief's face reminded Alan of the expression on Kurimi's face the first time they met. Mysong sat down next to Alan, and, before explaining his mysterious behaviour

to Alan, asked him to swear that he would never reveal to a living soul what he was about to be told.

When Alan agreed to his request, the chief whispered in his ear that, just before he died, his father gave him a leather pouch, containing very important information, which had been passed in complete secrecy from each chief to his son, over many generations. Even the shaman of the tribe knew nothing about the existence of the pouch. He told Alan that the pouch contained a small piece of deerskin, with signs burned into it; signs which were not familiar to him and whose meaning he didn't understand. When his father gave him the pouch, on his deathbed, he had instructed Mysong to hide it in the ground. The chief had buried the pouch in a deep hole under the tallest coconut tree, close to the path going down to the river.

Alan asked the chief to show him the exact place where he had buried the pouch, but the fearful expression on the chief's face made it quite clear that he would have to find the spot himself. To justify his refusal, the chief added his suspicion that Battasinda had killed his son so cruelly, to punish him for keeping the pouch in his possession. As far as he knew, the signs on the piece of deerskin must have something to do with the evil spirit, which is why he had decided, in the last few days, to give Alan the pouch, out of fear that harm would befall the remaining members of his family. He had decided to get rid of the evil and disease-carrying object, having recalled the deadly plague that annihilated the Flambeng tribe. When he finished speaking, he refused to leave the hut before receiving Alan's explicit promise, yet again, that he would keep their meeting and its subject a secret. He virtually begged Alan to keep the pouch away from him and his tribe, after he unearthed it from its hiding place.

A few seconds later, Alan left the hut. Bursting with curiosity, he went over to the tall coconut tree in the darkness. Never before had he dug with so much energy, as he did this time, around the tree trunk. After a short time his hand touched a small leather pouch. He untied the leather strap that bound it, and found the scrap of deerskin with the black signs on it. Since he could hardly make out the signs on the deerskin or understand their meaning, he decided to give up the attempt to decipher the signs on the spot. After filling in the hole he had dug, he closed the pouch and returned to his hut.

There he found DJ, just returned from a refreshing night swim in the river. DJ was drying his long thick hair, from which water was dripping on the floor of the hut. Alan signalled him with a movement of