SAMPLE

The Guardian's Shadow: The Buaya

The River's Lord — The Placenta's Twin, the Oath Before the Sun and Stars, and the Covenant That Runs One Reach Up and One Reach Down

Aiden Nightfall

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The Guardian's Shadow

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Introduction

There is a river in every volume of this series, but only in this one does the river have a lord. The buaya — the crocodile of the Malay waters — is the register's richest animal-file, and the tradition read him not as a beast among beasts but as a sovereign of the water: a being with a species- register of his own, a doctrine of named fangs that decides which men die, a legal oath he swears to the witnesses of heaven, a covenant with the pawangs that runs exactly as far as the river's reaches, and a place in the birth-cosmology as the placenta's twin — the water-sibling of the forest's tiger. The last volume gave the series the mountain's princess, a sovereign who priced an empire into retreat. This one gives it the river's lord, a sovereign who digests what the mountain only refused.

The record is Skeat's, and it is the best animal-folklore file in the colonial corpus. The Selangor Malay gave every crocodile three named sets of fangs — "si hampa daya, the 'Exhausters of all Resources' at the tip of the jaws; entah-entah, 'the Debateable,' half-way up; charik kapan, the 'Tearers of the Shroud,' near the socket" — and a fate-doctrine with each: caught by the first, a fair chance; by the second, problematical; by the third, a dead man. The same register kept the oath: the crocodile drowns his victim under a snag, then rises and "calls upon the Sun, Moon, and Stars to bear witness" — "Bukan aku membunoh angkau, Ayer yang membunoh angkau" — "It was not I who killed you, It was water which killed you" — sworn thrice before the feast.

It kept the anatomy's ethics: crocodiles were made tongueless by design, "in order that they might not acquire too pronounced a 'taste' for human flesh." And it kept the law: the pawang's pact with the river's lord, bounded by the water's own geography — "our agreement extends one tanjong upriver, one tanjong down."

The chapters read the whole file. They open with the definition and the birth-cosmology that makes the crocodile the tiger's twin; they walk the species-register from the Bight crocodile to the "Crocodile that Rolls up the Weft"; they file the fang-doctrine, the oath, and the tongueless design; they follow the covenant and its strangest detail — the bait-fowl of the crocodile-charm named, in Skeat's footnote, "Her Highness Princess Rundok," the same name the mountain's princess bears in the pawangs' charms; they give the kramat crocodile his own chapter, the dead raja who floats listlessly at the Selangor river's mouth; and they close on the river's law itself, the doctrine of the boundary that eats, and the covenant that lets two worlds share one water.

How the book works, for a first-time reader of the series: the colonial record is

quoted exactly where it speaks, the world's parallels are kept to their comparative place, and the modern retellings are filed under retelling, never as record. Where the chapters read the material — the boundary that eats, the oath's court-craft, the treaty drawn in reaches — the reading carries this book's own mark, and the record's voice is kept separate from the interpretation throughout. What the tradition kept — the census, the fangs, the tongue, the pact — remains the tradition's; this volume only files it, and the river keeps its lord either way.

One note on the record's character, for the reader who weighs sources. The crocodile-file is the register at its most realistic, and its realism is the volume's ground: the fang-doctrine is field-knowledge a fishing community could verify on scars and survivors; the oath records a predator's actual method (drown first, then feed) with a legal fiction wrapped around it; the species-census runs close to the naturalist's own count; and the escapes the record keeps are the ones with names, places, tides, and prices. The volume's standing hedge is the series' own: what follows is folklore's crocodile — the sovereign of the register, not the reptile of the estuary — but the two are unusually close in this file, and the reader should know it: the tradition that filed the river's lord was filing from experience.

The file's provenance, for the reader who keeps the sources: everything quoted here comes from the colonial register's Selangor coast — Skeat's own informants, Mr. Bellamy's Journal tales, Mr. Wray's Perak Museum notes, the newspaper-season of the Klang outbreak — and the coast's names are in every line of it, from Batu Burok to Sungei Sembilang to the lighthouse at Tanjong Kramat. The register that built this volume was not an imported one. It was the river-mouth's own.

Chapter 1: What Is the Buaya? The Sovereign Beast of the Water

A definition here has to start by correcting scale, because the buaya is the catalogue's first animal, and the register's filing habits do not fit him. The register's other beings are offices: the Polong is a feeding, the Toyol is a theft, the jembalang is an appointment, the Princess is an address. The buaya is a species — a real animal, estuarine, armored, ancient beyond every dynasty in this series — and the tradition's work was not to invent him but to govern him: to read the river's greatest danger as a subject with law, taxonomy, oath, and covenant. The crocodile is thus the register's proof that its ghost-filing was never escapism. A people who file the actual man-eater of their rivers as a litigant with a defense, a citizen with a treaty, and a tenant with a title are a people using the register for its truest purpose: the equipment of living beside what cannot be removed.

And the register's own word for his standing is lordship. The water-ghost of Volume 14 is a presence, an omen of the drowning-places; the jembalang of the soil is an official, born to the ground he haunts. The buaya is neither presence nor official: he is the river's ruler, holding the water as the Princess holds the mountain — by tenure so old it has no origin-tale. The tradition gave the crocodile's lordship everything it gives its sovereigns: a court (the kramat crocodile of the Selangor river, the subject of Chapter 8, is the dead raja's very shape); an administration (the pawang's covenant, Chapter 7, is a standing treaty between the river's government and the shore's); a legal procedure (the oath of Chapter 5, the lord's own defense in his own court); and a census (the species-register of Chapter 3, the kingdom counted by variety). The reader who has kept the series will recognize the structure at once, because it is the register's structure everywhere: a sovereign, a court, a law, and a list.

The deepest definition, though, is in the birth-cosmology, and the chapter files it here because everything else in the volume stands on it. The tradition taught that the afterbirth of a child becomes the tiger, and the placenta becomes the crocodile — uri menjadi harimau, tembuni menjadi buaya — and the two apex predators of the Malay world are thereby not rivals but siblings, the land's lord and the water's lord born of one birth. Volume 20 gave the forest to the Huntsman and his kennel; the tiger's file is his neighbour. This volume gives the river to the crocodile, and the pairing is the volume's own key: every doctrine the register kept about the tiger — the respect, the charm, the refusal to name him in the forest — the register kept about the crocodile in the water, doubled and darkened by the fact that the river's twin swallows what he takes. The tiger's boundary warns; the crocodile's boundary digests;

and the Malay world lived on the shore between them with a full legal apparatus for each.

What the register kept, then, is a manual of coexistence, and the volume's promise to the reader is the manual's whole content, honestly filed. The chapters that follow read the birth-cosmology, the species-census, the fang-doctrine, the oath, the anatomy's ethics, the covenant, the kramat- tenant, and the river's records — and they end with the doctrine the whole file teaches, the one the series has been assembling across every boundary it has walked: that the lawless thing does not exist in this register. The river's edge is the hardest boundary in the catalogue, and the tradition's answer to it was not avoidance but jurisprudence. The buaya has a taxonomy, a doctrine, a defense, and a treaty; what he does not have, in all of Skeat's record, is a single line that treats him as a mere animal. That is the volume's subject, and the reader is now inside it.

The volume's last definitional note is a method-note, because the buaya forces it: what changes when the series files a beast instead of a being? The ghost-files could be read in the pure register — the Polong has no corpse, the Kum-Kum has no origin in the primary sources, and the reading can stay textual. The crocodile has a corpse, a nest, a season, and a body- count, and the reading must therefore keep two ledgers open at once. The volume's rule, stated once: the folklore-ledger is the book's subject (the oath, the fangs, the treaty, the census), and the naturalist's ledger is its hedge (the real estuary, the real man-eaters, the record's own realism), and the two are kept separate in every chapter — the river's lord and the river's reptile, filed beside each other, never confused with each other.

The series' readers have watched the tradition build its ghosts from grief and envy and refusal. This volume watches it build a spirit-government on top of a working predator, and the build is the more astonishing for the foundation being real: every doctrine in the chapters ahead was drafted against an animal that actually took the shore's people, and the tradition's answer to that animal was not the stake or the bounty but the census, the court, and the covenant — the whole of this book, written tooth by tooth, by people who lived at the water's edge.

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