



# ALTERED STRAITS

A Novel

KEVIN MARTENS WONG

# **ALTERED STRAITS**

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# ALTERED STRAITS

KEVIN MARTENS WONG



EPIGRAM BOOKS

SINGAPORE • LONDON

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10 9 8 7 6 5 4 3 2 1

*Pra yo sa song kung strela*

*Dah nus bai buskah ngua bista di mar*

*For my voice and my star*

*Let us seek a glimpse of the sea*

**ONE**

IN HIS MAJESTY'S *Most Esteemed Service*  
*Wednesday, March 19, 1947*  
*Printed at the Royal Printing Yard, Pulau Blakang Mati,*  
*Kingdom of Singapura*  
*Authorised under Royal Decree 1947/2/5*

*To: Mr Muhammad Masud bin Khairy*

**NOTICE OF DRAFT**

**NAUFAL JAZAIR BIN MUHD MASUD B1102319**

Honoured Sir, Faithful Servant of the Kingdom of Singapura, on behalf of His Majesty King Azahar II;

In accordance with Royal Decree 1947/2/3, your SECOND son (name: NAUFAL JAZAIR BIN MUHD MASUD; national registration number: B1102319; born 29-11-1933) is to be drafted for the Royal Singapuran Army on 07-04-1947 (MON) at 8am sharp. Your son must report to Jerung Quay at this date and time for deployment to Pulau Seraya Royal Singapuran Army Training Command, where his training will begin immediately.

Under Alteration 2 to Royal Decree 1943/12/I, your son will be drafted for a period not exceeding 5 years, the terms of which may be renegotiated at any time. At time of present writing, therefore, your son will be released from military service on 06-04-1952 (SUN) at 8am.

#### **ADDENUM 5—ROYAL ANTHRONAUTICAL CORPS**

Based on our inheritance records, your son is suitable for Merlion pair-bonding and will be drafted into the ROYAL ANTHRONAUTICAL CORPS OF SINGAPURA. You and your family are hereby eligible for special privileges conferred under Royal Decree 1913/10/4 and the Marine Cavalry Enactment of 1916. Please contact your district administrator by telephone or in person for more information.

I wish you and your family peace and security in this coming time of war.

Faithfully Yours in the Name of God and King

Maj MUHAMMAD BAKIR

Commander, Royal Singapuran Army Training Command

Naufal, tugging miserably at his brother's hand, missed who Nabhan used to be.

"Stop it, lah. Abang, please."

His brother's attention had been caught by a squirrel racing up a nearby tree and he was now thumping the tree's side in an effort to get the squirrel out of a hole. Leaves and twigs drizzled down over Naufal's head.

"Han," he hissed. "Stop it."

Nabhan muttered something and tossed a branch at the hole.

"Come on. Let's go."

Nabhan let out a noise somewhere between the bark of a small dog and the crow of a young rooster, and relented. Naufal marched them off, ignoring the stares.

It was a warm, thick evening in Port Farquhar's pedestrian district. The air sat still and heavy in the heat, punctuated by the clouds of dust set off by the clap-trap of hooves and the shuffling of Nabhan's feet, calloused and bare on the patchwork of Singapuran cobblestones and dirt. From the street came the rumble of motors and the jangle of tram bells; in the distance, where river and town ended, stood the masts and funnels of New Harbour; above them, in the darkening sky, was the faint outline of a zeppelin between burnt orange clouds.

Nabhan didn't like shoes, or squirrels, or about a thousand other things that could set him off, including Naufal (though only occasionally). About the only thing he did like was open water, which was why his mother usually sent the two of them walking down the river while she did her bartering and gambling. Naufal had always supposed it was some residual psychological thing related to the merlion.

"Aceh, 'Han. Remember? Aceh? The flag with the red sword? You

used to point them out to me all the time.” Naufal pointed at the steamrunner, puttering down the waterway. Nabhan’s eyes were blank and unfocused; if at all, his gaze seemed to be directed at the broadsheets lining the promenade. *MANILA BURNS. SULU DUG IN DEEP. SECOND FLEET DEPARTS FOR SIANTAN. KING TO MEET WITH BALIKPAPAN DEFENCE MINISTER.*

But Naufal was having none of that. “Aceh? Remember, ‘Han?”

A part of Naufal had always recoiled at talking to Nabhan in this way. Maybe Nabhan knew this, even in his current state, because he honked loudly, and kicked Naufal in the knee.

“Fine. No more ship. Fine.” Naufal took his hand again and limped them away from the river. He was blinking rapidly. “You cannot—” He didn’t know how to say it. He’d never known how to say it. “You cannot...you cannot kick me. Okay, abang?”

Nabhan struggled in Naufal’s grip, against muscles strengthened and tightened over two years of holding Nabhan’s slippery, sweaty hand. He gibbered.

*Just once. Just once. I’d give anything in this world to hear you say okay, just once.*

Naufal looked Nabhan in the eyes. Eyes he missed. Eyes he detested. “Okay, ‘Han?”

Nabhan spat in Naufal’s face.

*Three more days of this*, thought Naufal, wiping his face with his shirt, but he was already regretting it the instant the words slipped out from under the covers of his mind.

*I don’t want to enlist.*

It was a primal kind of fear, one that welled up from somewhere deep below whenever he gave it permission, and suffocated the flimsy, wavering resolve he’d tried to sustain since the letter came.

Because Naufal would look at Nabhan, and what pair-bonding had done to Nabhan, and his resolve would die away.

Pair-bonding, and the army, had driven Nabhan insane.

It wasn’t that his brother couldn’t handle the pressure, or the mental restructuring, or even the new powers. It wasn’t the merlion, or the regimentation, or even the war that had caused his mind to snap.

It was the merlion, Nabhan’s merlion, dying.

Naufal knew little about the pair-bonding process, or what it entailed beyond joining a human mind to a merlion’s—the family hadn’t seen Nabhan after he’d been drafted and packed off to fight the Sulu. The army kept a very tight lid on the changes merlionsmen went through. Those few who eventually returned sane at war’s end were either career soldiers or polite, consummate media professionals, tight-lipped and closely watched (it was rumoured) by the King himself.

Nabhan, unfortunately, hadn’t returned sane, or at war’s end. No, he’d returned much too early, screaming, shrieking, carted back to the family in a soundproof carriage and wrapped in white. Lost his merlion at the Battle of Lingga, the army doctor said. Catastrophic stress reaction. His mind is unsteady. Unstable.

On the surface, his parents had accepted it far too readily. But Naufal knew that everything that followed—the gambling, the drinking and the fights—was to numb their pain. Nabhan had been everything to them, and to Naufal too. Naufal was the younger brother, the quiet one, the slow-witted. Nabhan was the intelligent one, the glorious, the courageous.

And he had been Naufal’s best friend before the army. Before the merlion.

Naufal was Nabhan’s caretaker now. Nabhan’s best friend, just as Nabhan was your best friend, his mother said. Nabhan’s soldier, just

as Nabhan was your soldier, his father said. When Nabhan attacked strangers, or killed stray cats, or wet himself, Naufal got the blame. When Nabhan wandered out of the house and disappeared for a week, or injured Madam Chee's daughter with a broom, Naufal was shouted at. When Nabhan bit Naufal's ear, or broke Naufal's little finger, Naufal was at fault.

As time wore on, Naufal's patience wore down: with his parents, with his brother and with himself.

Naufal missed his brother, and he detested him.

And he detested himself for hating his brother.

There was another part of him, deep inside, that wept late at night when everyone was finally asleep and his thoughts could roam free. A part of him that wept for Nabhan and cried in deep, paralysing fear of what was to come for him in the army.

After several nights of this sleepless state, Naufal had begun to think seriously about running away.

The idea teetered now on the precipice of his mind, as Nabhan ran his unthinking, unfeeling hands down Naufal's front and slammed his wet, shining face into Naufal's chest like a smelly, overgrown puppy. People stared; Naufal flushed red, his eyes the same dim, watery scarlet as his cheeks.

"Stop it," he pleaded. "Stop it, abang."

But Nabhan would not stop. He enfolded Naufal in his arms and squeezed, and bit Naufal's neck. Naufal yelped and pushed Nabhan away. Nabhan fell to the ground, shrieking, as Naufal stood over him, his hands trembling.

"Go away," he said, his voice hoarse and halting. "Please go away."

Nabhan mewled and whined, and Naufal cried softly as he pulled Nabhan to his feet, dusting his shirt off, doing his best to wipe the

drivel off Nabhan's face.

"Is there a problem here?"

The horse grunted. The mounted policeman was resplendent against the orange sky, his indigo uniform cut in two by a red sash.

"None," said Naufal.

"Would you speak up, please?"

"My brother and I were having a disagreement," said Naufal, his voice quavering. Nabhan, for once, seemed cowed; yet his eyes bored accusingly into Naufal's. "We apologise for disturbing the peace."

"What is your name?" said the policeman, a notebook in hand. The crowd that had gathered murmured apprehensively.

"Nadir," said Naufal. "And this is my brother, Nabil. We're from Kluang, sir."

At the mention of Kluang, the policeman snorted. His pencil bit into his notebook. "This is Colonel Farquhar's town, not—not some"—he looked around, then back at Naufal,—"provincial backwater."

A breeze rose, sending ripples through the trees and the Enlistment posters. Naufal said nothing. The policeman's head tilted up ever so slightly as he glanced at the heaving Nabhan. "Such behaviour will not be tolerated in future. From either of you."

"Thank you for the warning," said Naufal.

"Northerners." The policeman grit his teeth. "And you can stop crying, in the name of God. Are you enlisting?"

Naufal managed a nod.

"You look like a decent young man," said the policeman, not too unkindly. "Act like one."

The horse clip-clopped on, dispersing the crowd as it did so. Naufal took Nabhan by the hand. Nabhan grunted, and resisted, and bent Naufal's fingers.



Naufal didn't care. Something had broken in him, and something else had resolved in its place.

*I'm running away.*

"Woor," said Nabhan. "Ytes."

"Shut up," said Naufal.

"Ereaz."

"I wish you weren't here," said Naufal, wiping tears from his face and from Nabhan's.

"Httt. Aiz." Nabhan twisted Naufal's fingers backward into a crescent moon. He tore his hand away.

"I really wish you had died at Lingga."

There. He'd said it. His whole body was shuddering. He didn't care. He'd said it.

Nabhan said nothing. He took Naufal's hand in his.

**TWO**

2047-04-05 06:03:15 Titus: *How*

2047-04-05 06:03:48 Titus: *Later can?*

2047-04-05 06:44:04 [A.V.]: *ya*

2047-04-05 06:44:11 [A.V.]: *ill be early*

2047-04-05 06:44:16 [A.V.]: *5+?*

2047-04-05 06:51:02 Titus: *Ok. I'll try and leave early*

2047-04-05 06:59:36 [A.V.]: *k*

2047-04-05 06:59:59 [A.V.]: *dun forget*

2047-04-05 07:01:40 Titus: *Forget what?*

2047-04-05 07:02:03 Titus: *Oh yeah*

2047-04-05 07:02:19 Titus: *Ok*

Titus, tugging at his sister's arm, only wanted to protect her. "Don't," he said.

She ignored him, her eyes still glued to the screen.

"Come on," he said. He struggled through the mass of commuters and positioned himself between her and the screen. Priscilla struggled against him. Someone next to them grunted in annoyance. She pushed hard against his frame. The rumble of the train through the tunnel drowned out most of the sounds coming from the train screens, but a few screams could still be heard through the carriage's speakers. Titus shut his eyes. "Come on, Pris. I don't want you to look."

She ignored him, her eyes still glued to the screen in front of her.

The announcement chime saved him. "Mattar Station," said a man's voice, dull and uninterested. "玛达. This train terminates at Defiance. Mind the gap. 小心空隙."

"Have a good day," said Titus. Priscilla looked away and pushed through the crowd, as the train shuddered to a halt and the doors hissed open. "I love you."

"Berhati-hati ketika melangkah ke platform. ரயில் தடம் இடவளையையே கவனத்தில் கொள்ளுங்கள்."

"Pris," said Titus, but she was already through the doors with time to spare—the announcer was only at Cantonese.

"请小心月台空隙. Kuidadu stradu sa buraku."

She looked back at him as the doors slammed shut, her face a storm.

She was only 12. When Titus had been 12, he'd never allowed himself to watch this sort of thing, government-sanctioned or not.

Although, the government hadn't really been very big on public executions when he was 12.

"Next station: Geylang Bahru," said the man's voice. It lingered in

the air, stale and rank, unpleasant. "芽笼巴鲁. This train terminates at Defiance."

Titus looked up at the display, at the man being shredded alive and fed to pigs and cattle, and thought of Akash.

It wasn't that food was scarce, or so Titus believed anyway. The KPE farms and the Cross Island hydroponists were still churning out their yearly quotas, meeting all the targets for war mobilisation, or so it was reported. Their new underground way of life was sustainable indefinitely, or so it was said. Even if Singapore was the last city on the planet left defending against the Concordance, it would survive, or so it was attested. There were still other cities, or so it was whispered, with just the barest pinprick of doubt. But this last rumour Titus knew to be true; like all post-Concordance SAF officers, he'd trained alongside the Pyongyang cadre. No. Titus, like many people, knew that pulverising criminals into livestock fodder live on state media every first Friday of the month, was more about the fear it nurtured than the food it generated. A good fear, a healthy fear. A fear that kept them all in line.

He dreamt about it sometimes. What it might feel like if he were ever caught. If Akash was ever caught. The pain, sharp and white-hot, relentless. The scratching of the blades that instantaneously became an incising, a ripping, a tearing apart of your entire universe till you were nothing more than bloody grains of sand, red and white. Ready for the feedlot.

Pris had learnt to shake him awake when the screaming began. He'd never told her why, of course. Only the what.

He thought of Akash, probably watching the execution on his way

to work. He'd be standing at the back of the train, watching the tunnel recede into darkness.

"Defiance Station. 挑战. Keingkaran." It was a different man's voice; this part of the announcement had been tacked on after the Downtown line had been split in half. "எதிர்ப்பு. Afrontasang. Pangsuguay. This train terminates at this station. All passengers must alight."

Defiance. They'd changed the station's name almost immediately after the war began, after West Coast and Tengah, and the Evacuation. Singapore, shaking its collective fist in the face of the Concordance.

We are not you. We are independent, and we defy you.

As Titus stepped out into the station's bright interior, the irony wasn't lost on him. His own little rebellion, his own defiance, would be waiting for him later that day.

\* \* \*

"In our society, what is a criminal?"

The video was still playing on his glasses. Four years ago, in 2043. Titus had just enlisted. They'd all watched in rapt, ravenous attention as Prime Minister Ho began his penal code emendations address. It was only his second speech to the nation since coming to power.

"A criminal is anyone who does not contribute to our society. And not just to our society, but to the survival of our species." Wild, airy gesticulations. Hand-waving. Arm-throwing. "The immense threat posed by the Concordance is real. The destruction it has wrought on not just us, but on our neighbours, is real. Its twisted, evil ways and its express commitment to the eradication of humanity as a free species are real." Now the gaze. "As free, independent human beings, we have a duty, not just to our nation, but to humanity, to protect ourselves, our society, and our way of life." The compulsion. "All Singaporeans are

called upon to active, community-oriented citizenship. Anyone who presumes to behave otherwise acts against the interests of society, and is therefore a criminal."

Titus had left work an hour early, as he usually did on Fridays. To pick up his sister from school, he usually said. That never got anyone's concern—especially not today, with the deadline for his decision looming—because Titus was an excellent worker, capable and creative, possessed of almost ferocious patriotism, as his platoon commander had written on his Commissioning e-certificate. Those comments were record now, and legion; countless more had been added in the three years since Titus had earned his first golden bar.

Lieutenant Titus Ang Chee Howe. He'd been proud. They'd all been so proud. His mother had kissed him on the cheek.

As the train pulled out of Defiance, he wondered if they knew.

Titus Ang. The lieutenant. The criminal.

He wasn't leaving an hour early to pick Priscilla up from school. Pris knew the way home; she was definitely old enough.

"Next station: Bayfront. 海湾舫."

Titus was going to see Akash.

"This train terminates at Bukit Panjang."

\* \* \*

Before the war, Titus had only been to Bukit Panjang once. Strange, considering he'd lived at Teban Gardens, a 15-minute drive away. He remembered the viaduct, the aging LRT cars and the towering blocks. Aside from the LRT tracks, Bukit Panjang had basically looked like any other HDB town built before the 2020s: imposing, pastel-coloured, crowded. Titus had gone there to try out a new tuition centre at the integrated transport hub. His mother hadn't liked the centre, but he'd

loved the hub, standing at the window gawking at the grey-and-red double-decker buses coming and going.

Now, of course, almost all of it was gone. Hub, viaduct, HDB blocks. Bukit Panjang was a glassy, dusty wasteland, one of the first places the Concordance had landed, turned quite successfully into concrete rubble. Most of the human remains had been ground to dust, but as he crept across the deserted surface, Titus would run across the occasional thigh-bone, or skeletal hand still clutching determinedly at a long-disintegrated evacuation notice.

Yet even the Concordance, as mechanistically thorough as viral cyborgs might be, had not been able to destroy everything.

Titus fingered the duplicate of Akash's Singapore Survey Corps access card as he crept steadily across the desolation toward what remained of Senja LRT station. The edges of the card were fraying, the colour drained away; even the metallic strip was scratched and peeling. Titus would need a new duplicate soon, but he had no idea where he would get one. Old Soo Teck was almost two years gone, executed in the Crisis Raids of 2045, and Havelock MRT was not the under-the-table haven it used to be.

From a distance came the syncopated whine of an army drone patrol. Titus reflexively flattened himself against the ground. Army drones were stupid; they were little more than automated boxes with wings, only looking for Concordance biosigns. So long as Titus' body remained composed of less than 43 per cent transition metal — and he was quite sure it would be for the foreseeable future — and didn't move too much, he was safe. Home Affairs drones were another story: those had human pilots, and had become increasingly persistent after the Crisis Raids.

The whine died away, and Titus, skittish, dashed the last few yards to the cold, comforting pillars of the Senja station concourse. Akash

was there already, hidden in the gloom.

"Glasses," mouthed Akash. Titus had forgotten again. He swore, deactivated them, and tucked them in the back pocket that doubled as a signal jammer. The camera was off, of course, but they could never take chances in this new Singapore.

"Sorry," Titus managed.

"Fuck you," said Akash. "You have to remember."

"Sorry," said Titus again. "I forgot."

"And I forgot to kiss you."

For four resounding seconds they were one: a single, burning star in the centre of this forgotten, desolate ruin. Four seconds was all they would risk, but four was enough. There would always be another time, another chance to sneak away.

Except maybe not this time.

Titus lingered. Five seconds. Six. He felt Akash waver. Too long. The star flickered. But maybe this was the last time.

"Don't go."

Akash pushed Titus away and subsided into the darkness, the fire in his eyes withering. Titus knew he had been thinking the same thing.

"I haven't said yes."

"Don't."

"You know I have to." Titus realised he'd folded his arms; he didn't know why. He unfolded them, took Akash's hand in his.

"What do you mean, 'you know I have to'?"

"Money."

"It's fucking dangerous."

"Not like you aren't in danger every single day."

"I wear a big hulking CBRE suit and look for things. And I have big muscles."

"I have big muscles too," said Titus.

"Yes, yes," said Akash, squeezing his arm. Titus yelped, and Akash grinned momentarily. Then his face darkened again. "What kind of a mission requires you to sign up before knowing the details, Ty?"

"A controversial one," said Titus, as Akash ran his hand up Titus' arm.

"What if it's some stupid suicide shit?" Akash squeezed Titus' arm again. "Like, I don't know, go to fucking California, and shoot anti-nanites or some crap like that—"

"It didn't go through in the end lah, the top vetoed it—"

"Yeah, so if they hadn't? What if this is the same and—"

"It's not! It's different."

"How the fuck do you know?" hissed Akash. His voice was ringing off the walls, and his eyes were shining again. He grabbed Titus with both arms, his breathing heavy and jagged. Titus sank into his embrace, and Akash held him close, feeling their hearts beating against each other's chests. "What if I don't see you again?" said Akash. His eyes shone.

"Calm down."

"Don't go, you idiot. Don't fucking go."

Titus followed the trail of Akash's tears with one finger, and felt his own begin to run down his face. "Kash," he said, his voice cracking.

"Don't go."

They were silent.

Akash crumpled, burying his face in the folds of Titus' dirty, grubby shirt.

They stayed like that for a while, Akash's loud, constrained sobs rousing the still air.

"You know," said Akash, "if you go—" He took a deep, shuddering breath. "I have to live with my uncles forever."

"They'll die," said Titus.

"Not soon enough."

"I love you." Titus meant it as the barest of whispers, but it came out choked and forced, full of things he could not say. Things he wished he could say. Things he feared. "But I have to protect what I love."

"Protect me," said Akash, his head burrowing into Titus' shoulder. "Be here with me."

"I am here with you," said Titus, as he kissed Akash's hair, matted and damp with perspiration and fear. "My Kash-Kash."

"You know I hate that."

"Kash-Kash."

"I'm going to say it."

"Kash-Kash," said Titus.

"I'm going to say it."

"My little Kash-Kash."

"Tight-ass," said Akash. "Tight-ass the tiny ass."

"Fuck you, Kash-Kash."

\* \* \*

2047-04-05 19:43:12 Titus: *Pris you home yet?*

2047-04-05 19:43:29 Priszsz!: *Mmhmm*

2047-04-05 19:43:39 Priszsz!: *Mom asks where are you*

2047-04-05 19:44:03 Titus: *Still on the way back. Had a lot of stuff to clear. Should be home around 830.*

2047-04-05 19:44:32 Titus: *Hey*

2047-04-05 19:44:41 Titus: *Sorry about just noww*

2047-04-05 19:44:59 Titus: *Didnt mean to be such a dick*

2047-04-05 19:45:09 Titus: *Just tryin to protect ya from*

2047-04-05 19:45:23 Titus: *Like all those images*

2047-04-05 19:45:31 Titus: *Cos it can be quite horrifying*  
2047-04-05 19:49:20 Prizzz!: *Its ok. Just trust me a bit more? I'm old enough to judge for myself. Like whether I wanna see.*  
2047-04-05 19:49:41 Titus: *Yeah ok. sorry. Guess I'm just a little overprotective sometimes haha.*  
2047-04-05 19:53:00 Prizzz!: *Yeah. It's ok. Anw those guys totally deserve what they get right*  
2047-04-05 19:55:35 Titus: *I guess*  
2047-04-05 19:55:39 Titus: *Yeah*

**THREE**

**FORM IV—APPLICATION FOR WAIVER OF DRAFT STATUS  
IN ACCORDANCE WITH ROYAL DECREE 1942/6/3**

Name: NAUFAL JAZAIR BIN MUHD MASUD

National Registration Number: B1102319

Scheduled Date/Time of Draft: 07-04-1947 (MON)/8am

Reason for Waiver: APPLICABLE UNDER ROYAL  
DECREE 1942/6/3 MAINTENANCE OF SULU WAR  
VETERANS ACT

**DECLARATION OF APPLICABILITY FOR MAINTENANCE OF  
SULU WAR VETERANS PROGRAMME**

Name of Veteran: MUHAMMAD NABHAN BIN MUHD MASUD

National Registration Number: B0009984

Relationship: BROTHER, OLDER

Dates of Service: 15-05-1941 (THU) to 17-12-1941 (WED)

Date of Discharge: 17-12-1941 (WED)

Reason for Discharge: CLASS A2 INJURY, BATTLE OF LINGGA STAGE 5

If you wish to apply for waiver of draft status, please mail this notice to the address printed on the back of this form at least one week before your scheduled date of draft.

\* \* \*

Naufal listened to Nabhan's wilting snores for a while longer, then sat up. Faint splashes of moonlight rippled across his body as he slipped out of bed and felt along the wall for his bag.

Sixteen sisik and 45 sirip, the sisik tied together with some string. A tin of tuna, some fruits from Abdul Hamid's sister, a spare shirt, a torn, fraying school leaving certificate. Despite his racing heart, Naufal couldn't resist a small, quivering grin as he felt along the edges of the certificate. The swell of pride. The school hall. His mother's embrace, his father's hand on his shoulder. Nabhan's smile, full and sincere. Unrequited.

Untarnished. Naufal looked over at Nabhan's heaving form, buried beneath the heavy patchwork covers. A line of dribble had slithered out of his fluttering lips and was sinking steadily into the mattress.

On impulse, Naufal dabbed at the dribble with the corner of Nabhan's blanket.

Nabhan snorted, and Naufal's heart contracted. He dropped the blanket and froze.

Nabhan scratched at his mouth, murmured something that sounded like "apple cheeks", and went on sleeping.

"Goodbye," whispered Naufal. The moonlight fell across his trembling hands. "Goodbye, abang."

He dared not linger any longer, and crept out of the room, pulse hammering in his ears.

The main room was draped in darkness. Naufal followed the contour of the walls, avoiding the table laden with photographs, his father's fishing equipment, the light switch, the expensive Canton vase Madam Chee had given the family after Nabhan's enlistment. His parents' door was ajar, and Naufal's eyes remained fixed upon it, even as his hands finally found the doorknob they had been looking for.

The sea breeze was cold in his face as he stepped outside. Naufal took the anjung steps carefully: the second was splintered, the fifth squeaked. His fingernail scraped the banister; the sirip coins in his bag tinkled as he recoiled. A frog croaked as the stars watched pensively.

Slowly Naufal relaxed, as his feet found purchase on the sandy ground. The fronds of the coconut trees murmured to each other, and the crickets hummed a discordant song.

Naufal took several halting steps, then broke into a brisk, steady pace. Past Munawar's house, and Mat Jason's, and Nabilah and Shah's, and Abdul Hamid's and Muhammad Nabhan's. He skirted the edges of Madam Chee's provision lorry, parked haphazardly in the middle of the path, and the dented metal sign that demarcated Kampung Tanjong Pecah from the wilds of the Singapur jungle. For a moment, his gaze lingered wistfully on Pak Razak's motorcycle, parked by the banana trees; then it drew back to the path, heading out toward the coast, and the jetty, and the sea.

Naufal shivered in the cold, and remembered dinner.

He thought they would have been sad to see him go, but no. There was a feast, and treats, and relatives. His mother wore a beautiful Siamese gown which she had bartered for. There was a chocolate cake from Guthrie's, with real icing, brought by the Chees. There was dancing to a record player with European songs; lively, jumpy tunes, the kind a real soldier listened to, his father had said. After dinner the uncles had sat around and told stories of the great merlionsmen of old. Of course, one could not tell merlion stories without the rousing, patriotic tales of shrewd King Ibrahim and evil Crawford, and Prince Abu Bakar and the British fleet. But there were stranger ones too, stories about mutations and possessions that drew them all in, even Naufal, who had been doing his best not to listen, and indeed, his best not to be there at all.

None of them could really run away from the truth, though they all tried to. He could see it in the faces of his father and surviving aunts and uncle, try as they might to smile and dance. No one mentioned Uncle Faris and Auntie Shafiqah. No one mentioned the Sulu, or the Night of Solace, or the wars; not the first war, the one that had claimed Nabhan's mind, nor the second, soon to come. No one mentioned Nabhan, who remained locked in his room, sputtering and growling. But he knew, and they knew. What was this party for, after all, if not to mark his descent into hell?

They had smiled, and danced, and eaten cake, and it terrified him.

Off to war, his mother had said, as they waved away the pick-ups and the motorcycles, kissing the top of his head, stroking the side of his chin. Off to war, my dear 'Fal. My darling 'Fal. She'd been crying before the party; now she smelt of dank, sulphurous perfume. He

could almost taste the opium on her teeth.

There had been a choice, of course. Nabhan was a special case, and there had been a special form. Naufal had been sorely tempted. But he would be trapped at home. There would be checks by the military police. He, alone with Nabhan. Forever.

And the enemy was the Sulu. If it had been Java, or Siam, or even the Europeans, he might have stood a chance. But it was the Sulu, and it was his family, and it was personal.

Naufal hadn't known Uncle Faris and Auntie Shafiqah very well, but he had known Faris' sons. Amir and Arif, his cousins, made from the same roaring fire as the Nabhan from long ago. The two had been closer to Nabhan, but they'd all still been friends, and Naufal had genuinely loved their company.

He imagined that his parents had felt the same about Uncle Faris and Auntie Shafiqah, and so he could also imagine the devastation they had felt when Faris' family had been taken into slavery.

Two thousand, five hundred and eighty nine missing persons, the newspapers had reported on the morning of 13 May 1941, the morning after what came to be known as the Night of Solace. But that number hadn't included Amir, or Arif, or Auntie Shafiqah, or Uncle Faris, or hundreds of others who had simply disappeared when the Sulu had smashed through Singapura's eastern defences and raided the island on the night of 12 May. Two days later Nabhan had been called up, like thousands of others across the Kingdom, to bring Faris and his family home; three days later, the first Sulu War began.

And now Nabhan was gone too.

Neither war nor Nabhan was a real choice for Naufal any longer.

His mind had worked with ferocity after he had folded the form up, hidden it away. Where he would go. What he would do. The things



he needed. Everything had been ready three or four days earlier; he could have left at any point. Yet he had been tentative, unsure. He didn't want to think about how it might affect his parents, or even Nabhan, but part of him knew he had to think about it at some point, and so he had waited until he was ready to think about it. Which he still wasn't. But time was running out, and so he had waited until the last possible moment, the night before enlistment, to run away.

Now, as he trudged through the night, fireflies and memories glimmered to life around him. Nights under a full moon with Nabhan and their cousins, catching lizards and spiders; helping to push the broken down provision van through a monsoon; walking home with his father, baskets swimming with fish and crabs. Each memory he pushed away, but it got harder and harder. His mother and father, walking along the street, Naufal's hand in his mother's. The smell of nutmeg and cinnamon. Swatting away bats with angkana leaves, Nabhan laughing merrily as they cleared them out of the mosque's eaves. He and his father, kneeling in prayer, as Nabhan rushed in, wet and late from swimming along the coast, a jellyfish sting on his neck. The touch of aloe vera and palm oil, sticky-sweet and soothing.

Prayers. He hadn't asked for forgiveness, or mercy, or understanding, or any of those things. Naufal looked up at the stars and their incomprehensible flickering. Too late now.

*I ask your pardon. This is not my war.*

He thought of the mosque's eaves, of bats and their fluttering wings. He'd seen Christians kneel down by the road to pray. He couldn't bring himself to.

Naufal pushed on.

\* \* \*

He heard the footfalls first, as the path opened up and crossed into the road that led down the sandy peninsula. The snarls and the gasping as he crossed the tram lines and at last glimpsed the lights of the jetty and the waves lapping at its edge. The breathing, like smoke shuffling through the air, as he turned around.

"Go home, abang."

Nabhan stood there, one hand fixed upon the blanket that trailed behind him, the other reaching out, imploring, beckoning. His eyes glistened in the dark. Naufal blinked rapidly.

"Please. Go home."

Nabhan snuffled, and let go of the blanket. He took a step forward. Naufal took a step back. "Go home."

Nabhan pulled at his own hair and began to wail. A keening, caterwauling wail that broke the night and sent crickets and frogs scurrying. Wings fluttered in the tree behind them; the jetty and the stars looked on.

Naufal seized Nabhan by the shoulders. "Stop it, abang!" Nabhan's mouth was open, dry and alive, raging and singing for Naufal. "Han, stop. Nabhan, stop!"

Naufal tried to get his hands around Nabhan's mouth. "Stop it! Let me go. LET ME GO!"

The wailing stopped. The punch had thrown Nabhan to the ground. He looked up at Naufal in horror, one finger to his mouth, touching the rivulet of blood that was winding down his chin.

Naufal collapsed, a puddle of exhaustion under the dark, indifferent sky.

Nabhan came and ran his fingers through Naufal's hair, and Naufal let him. Nabhan licked the salt from Naufal's cheeks and left blood where the salt had been, and Naufal let him. Nabhan reached inside

Naufal's bag, pulled out a scarlet, bruised apple and bit into it noisily. Apple bits littered the sandy path and Naufal's face. Still, Naufal let him do all these things.

They sat like that for a while, just beyond the reach of the tranquil sea, Nabhan scoffing down Naufal's fruits and Naufal huddled in a heap next to him, eyes staring and vacant.

After a while, Nabhan made a new sound, a cross between a bird-whistle and a snarl. From not so far away, something responded. Naufal blinked and looked out to sea, and there it was, watching them. He wondered if it had been there all the while.

It was intelligent. There was no doubt about that. It seemed to know Nabhan.

The merlion looked at them, and Naufal was afraid.

## FOUR

THERE WAS A particular mural in the reception hall of SAF Operational Underground Command that Titus saw every day. He knew it like the back of his hand: it was heavily stylised and a little too rousing, but he knew it because he had been there, deep in the scene. A little younger than the women and children the mural depicted, but still there all the same, sheltered behind the wreck of a Terrex as its former occupants charged, fought and died against the Concordance.

Again, the mural had taken some liberties with the zorgs, but he still remembered what they looked like. The missing jaw replaced with a whirring, buzzing void. The impossibly wide eyes, flecked with bits of grey steel, and drawn back in glorious, gleaming rapture. The arms that ended in blades and hooks and a thousand silver needles. Bodies mounted on carapaces, or welded to treads, or pistons capped

with huge, metal clamps that cracked asphalt and concrete and skull alike, reaching for the human minds within.

Some time before the country retreated underground, Titus had learnt from his mother how to devein prawns in the sun-dappled kitchen of their 14th-storey flat in Teban Gardens. She'd stood behind him, her hands guiding his.

*Take your knife, steady in your hands, and make a small incision along the back of the prawn. See the vein? Now you gently lift it out with the blunt end of your knife, and once you have it between your fingers, tug it out.*

The Concordance wanted the nervous system intact in order to ensure the neuro-cybernetic uplink took full effect. Or something like that. Titus had sat through both mandatory OCS lectures. They had been bombarded with slides filled with walls of text, protecting them from the images and the videos, which most of his classmates had gone to look up almost immediately afterward. But Titus hadn't needed to. He'd been there. He'd heard the cracking of bodies; the odd, wet, splintering sound that put a sudden halt to the shrieks and the cries; the whine of gears, the spatter of fresh blood, the thud as the body was discarded; the snapping of cables as the treasure was reeled back to the turbinecraft hovering overhead.

But for the sounds of their movements, the Concordance was completely silent. No crackle in the air, no pulsing, scratchy buzz of radio waves, nothing. Exactly how they communicated remained a mystery. Most scientists believed they were in fact a gestalt, a communion of minds, natural and artificial. Or just one mind. No one knew for sure. Nor did anyone know what became of the minds that had once been human, and whether they had been soldered to artificial ones or enslaved...or persuaded. Enticed. Perhaps consumed.

They'd gotten used to the air raid sirens. Too used to them; maybe

that was why Titus never really believed the Concordance would attack, even though they'd been told, over and over, that Singapore was likely humanity's last real chance after the nukes, after Beijing, and Tokyo and the siege of Pyongyang.

He had been at school when it happened. The sirens. Under your desks, his teachers had said during the drills, but he'd been returning to class from the toilet. From his vantage point on the third floor corridor, he saw the turbinecraft riot across the sky amid a welter of Air Force jets, disgorging their hordes into the broad, sweeping lanes of the expressway; onto the roofs of HDB blocks; and even upon the Air Force jets themselves, propelled at impossible speeds. The siren wailed; the roof partially collapsed, and then the floor, and he lost consciousness.

When he came to, he was propped up against the wreck of the Terrex, a helmet strapped to his head, its original owner's body lying some distance away from him. One of the canteen aunties was dying next to him, his hand in the rubble besieged by her blood. There was shouting and gunfire. And still the feeble, belated warbling of the siren—

Something exploded behind him, the canteen auntie died, and he felt fire, and searing pain and fearful, cloying helplessness. The Terrex shuddered and groaned. Something clanged against its other side.

Then he was lifted up, hoisted over a padded shoulder and spirited away, his face to a rifle butt, even as the wreck of the Terrex tore down the middle. Something with five legs and writhing, slithering wires where its arms should have been strode between the two halves, glistening in the midday Singaporean sun. It looked down at the body of the canteen auntie, distorted in the heat.

The train station had been dark, and cold, and full of the cries of the wounded and the dying. But it was alive, so much more alive than the silence of the zorg, the silence of the Concordance. The silence of

the canteen auntie.

He'd kept the helmet. It hung in his room in MacPherson. It reminded him of why he fought.

\* \* \*

Salehah's office was larger than Titus remembered; then he also remembered she'd recently been promoted to captain, just after she'd approached him regarding the mission. He wondered if it was a little useless moving her into a new office when the mission she was about to go on was protracted and quite possibly suicidal. He thought a little more about it, and decided it meant there was probably a decent chance of surviving.

"Mmm," said Salehah, gesticulating at a chair, which Titus took. She sat in front of her desk, bare and swept clean of documents and personal effects except for a single, unassuming frame of her and Keenan taken at their commencement. She thumbed at something on the desk; the lifelike landscape of the Barrage and the aging Flyer in 2036 shimmered and faded into the dull grey of the rest of the wall.

"I've decided," said Titus. Salehah looked at him impassively. "Though Mom and Dad took a little convincing."

"Is that a yes?" said Salehah.

Titus wanted to tell her about Akash, and how he wanted just to be able to stay in contact with him, somehow, no matter how secretive the mission might be. He yearned to tell her everything. After everything they'd been through in OCS, she deserved to know.

"Yes," he said. Salehah's mouth twitched.

"What's wrong?"

"Nothing. Is that a firm yes? I can't tell you more until you confirm it."

"It's a firm yes."

Salehah nodded. "Great."

Titus nodded as well, although his nod was less confident than hers.

Salehah pressed a button on her desk, and the room darkened slightly. "Under the revised 2046 edition of the Official Secrets Act, Chapter 213," said a woman's voice from the desk, "this segment of your conversation will be recorded for official documentation and preservation of the security of the Republic of Singapore. Your participation in the following conversation demonstrates your understanding of the protection of all information disclosed in this conversation under the Official Secrets Act, and the severe penalties attached to the unauthorised dissemination of any of this information. Do you agree?"

"Yes," said Titus.

"Yes," said Salehah. She looked back up at Titus. "So. I don't know very much more than you do at this point, but I do know a bit about the terrain."

She paused. Titus presumed she was sizing up how he might react.

"International," he said. She shook her head. "Australia. America."

"It's not international."

Titus looked at her. "Ocean," he said. "It must be. Ocean?"

"It's interdimensional," said Salehah.

"Say that again," said Titus.

"Between dimensions." Salehah sighed. "I know."

"You know...what?"

"Look, Ty, I also don't understand how it can be possible. But that's what I was told."

"By Colonel Morales?"

"By Dr Zaid."

Titus blinked in surprise. "You spoke to him?"

“This comes all the way from the Joint Chiefs.” Salehah rubbed her wrists. “Dr Zaid has been speaking personally to everyone who’s said yes. It sounds like one heck of an op.”

Titus didn’t really know how he felt about talking to Ruslan Zaid, Singapore’s current Minister for Defence and previously one of the loudest voices in Parliament for the death penalty, but he suddenly felt very apprehensive. Salehah seemed to notice this. “I know it’s a bit to take in, but they’re briefing everyone on Thursday.”

Titus nodded at the desk, and Salehah deactivated the recorder. The room lightened slightly. “Keenan?”

“I told him that I might not make it back,” said Salehah quietly. Her eyes wandered over the frame. “He was all right with that much.”

“And your mom?”

“She’s sad. But she knows it’s for a really important cause. I’m sure your parents know that as well.”

*Akash.*

“What’s wrong?” said Salehah.

“Nothing,” said Titus.

“Your sister, right? Don’t worry, lah. She’ll be fine.”

“She’ll miss me a lot. And I won’t be around to protect her.”

“You can’t protect her forever.”

“Isn’t that our job? To protect the ones we love.”

Now Salehah frowned. “What are you saying?”

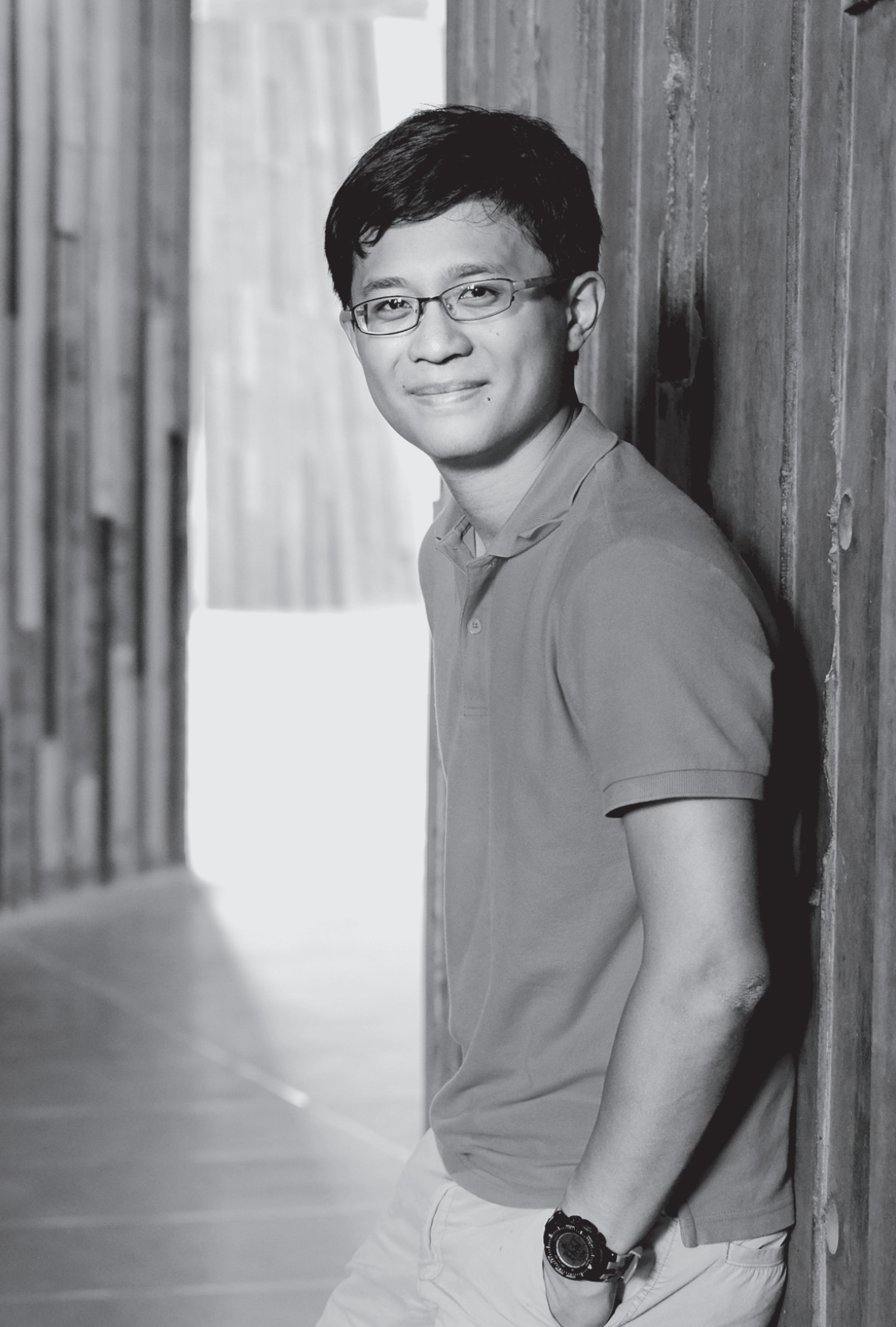
“Nothing,” said Titus, a little too quickly. “I mean... I’m really worried about Pris. She’s headstrong. She wants to grow up too fast.”

“There’s no such thing these days.” Salehah keyed the display on the wall back into existence. They watched the scene, idyllic, decadent, forever lost. “It’s us or them. Grow up too slowly, and they do the growing up for you.”

Titus noticed her hand on her belly. He knew she still felt strongly about Talia, and decided to say nothing further. She’d told him about Talia in confidence, about four or five months after graduation; that was when he knew they really were friends, and not just acquaintances thrown together by virtue of platoon allocation.

Still, having a baby in the army was against the law, but it wasn’t against society the way the law would have it. It ensured humanity’s continued existence. Akash, on the other hand... Salehah loved the country even more than he did. He didn’t know if she’d turn him in.

They talked about other things, and all that while, Titus thought of Akash.



## ABOUT THE AUTHOR

Kevin Martens Wong is a linguistics major at the National University of Singapore, founder of *Unravel: The Accessible Linguistics Magazine*, and head of the *Kodrah Kristang* revitalisation initiative for the critically endangered Kristang language in Singapore. He won the NUS Creative Writing Competition in 2015 for his short story “A Merlion for His Majesty”, and his work has also been published in *Transect* and *Entitled* magazine. He lives in Singapore.



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connection with a merlion.**

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