

A Merlion for His Majesty

Kevin Martens Wong

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“Which do you want?”

There are no cameras there; his father took him aside after dinner and walked him down to the Royal Nursery, one royal hand draped regally around the boy’s shoulder like an inert, inconspicuous dragon.

“I don’t know,” the boy whispers, clinging tightly to his father’s side. To his six-year-old eyes, the Nursery is colossal; a sheet of glass raining down from the stone ceiling is all that separates them from what seems to be pure, unadulterated ocean. Pale, wavering beams of light struggle through the grey stillness; it is early evening, and the sky provides some measure of form to the shapeless sea, but come here just a few hours later and water will be indistinguishable from night.

A shadow floats lazily just above eye level; another, to the right, just out of the boy’s field of vision. He inclines his head so that it remains out of sight.

His father peers dimly through the glass.

“Can’t really see them today, huh?”

“Don’t want to.” The boy shuts his eyes and buries his face in the waves of his father’s clothing. His father runs his fingers through his son’s dark, shimmering hair, then gently pulls him away and steadies him with both hands. Traces a finger down his cheek, where the reddish tinge of a bruise floats over olive-brown skin.

“Still so gentle, Haidie,” murmurs his father.

Thump. The glass is Prussian and well-made, so there is little reverberation, but all the same the boy is shaken. The shadow on the right is gone, but the water looks as undisturbed as ever. His father’s arm again, curling, snaking around his shoulder.

“Who gave you this?” His father strokes the bruise with his free hand. The boy winces.

“Master Feng Hao, Father.”

“What for?”

“Refusing to speak loudly.”

“Very good. What happened after that?”

“I spoke loudly.”

“But not loudly enough,” his father observes, squeezing the boy’s arm. The boy yelps with fear; his father has been known to break fingers with his bare hands.

Thump. A few bubbles this time, and a flash of scaly grey. A single hair, floating in the brine.

“I don’t want a-a-a...”

“Don’t stammer,” his father says lightly, and backhands him across the same cheek. “Princes don’t talk to themselves.”

The boy looks up from the floor. The salty taste of the sea (or is it tears? It cannot be tears. His father would never allow it) is in his mouth now, along with the rusty metal of blood from an earlier wound now torn open anew.

“Up,” says his father, and the boy jerks to his feet, failing to bite back the sea and the blood. “They will make you strong.” Once more, the loving caress of the hair. The boy tries not to shudder.

“‘Someday, I will be king’,” his father says, the words dripping into his ear. “Say it to them, Haidie.” His father presses his face to glass, but ever so carefully so that only the barest tip of his nose meets the freezing surface. *Thump.* Shadows on both sides now; more tendrils of hair float past the boy’s burning eyes. “‘Someday, I will be king.’”

“Someday, I will be king,” the boy sobs hoarsely.

“You don’t want to be King Haidar the Broken-nosed, do you?” His father draws the boy’s head back. “Master Feng Hao already told you.”

“Someday, I will be king!”

“Louder.”

“*Someday, I will be king!*” the boy screams.

Thump.

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MANSOUR’S SON TO GET MERLION AT AGE 15

Does Unprecedented Move Signal Singapuran Arms Buildup?

Diego Rowland Vittorio, for the Oriental Observer

27 February 1943

Port Cavenagh, Kingdom of Singapura—Singapura's King Mansour III today announced that he intends for his eldest son, Prince Regent Haidar, to be pair-bonded to an adult merlion by the end of the year.

Prince Haidar will be the youngest Singapuran royal, and the third youngest royal in the world after the United Kingdom's Princess Anastasia and the Viceregent of Montenegro's now King Milan, to be paired to a semi-sentient. He is also the kingdom's first royal to be paired since Prince Muhammad Ilyas in 1924, King Mansour's brother, who died in the Singapura-Sarawak War in 1933. He was 22 when first paired.

King Mansour made the announcement during his annual State of the Kingdom address at the Istana. He also suggested that his two younger twin sons, Prince Adil and Prince Alif, will be paired at similar ages.

Male Singapuran royalty have been traditionally pair-bonded with merlions since the reign of King Ibrahim (1875–1889), when a team led by anthropozoologist Chen Ho Mun determined that merlions were semi-sentient, making them the seventh and newest species in the world to be classified as such, after dragons, rocs, tulpari, dolphins, greater phoenixes and garuda. The first merlion pair was between King Mansour I (1889–1901) and the merlion Hailongdi. Although merlions have been proven to be suitable for pairing with both human sexes, only males of either species have ever been paired.

Merlions were used in the Singapura-Sarawak War and the War of the Nine States by Kelantan, Trengganu and other belligerents, although their use has been pioneered and continually refined by Singapura. It is therefore believed that this pairing signals a new Singapuran arms buildup, although some regional observers of the Singapuran monarchy are of the opinion that King Mansour is nursing a grievous (though as-yet-unknown) illness, and instead wishes to ensure a smooth and early transition of power.

Other regional powers responded to King Mansour's announcement with cautious approval. The Governor-General of Portuguese Malaya, Josué Borrego, sent his congratulations, as did representatives from the Kingdoms of Siam and Seremban, the Republic of Sumatra, and the Philippine Islands.

More reports on Page 2 (including photographs)

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They blink.

He feels what it feels. The ocean. The songs. The food. The cold. The cold that is not cold, just like the invasion that is not an invasion,

permeating the smooth, slippery folds of his brain and taking up permanent residence in the reefs and caves of his mind.

It knows what he knows. The beatings. The executions. The desires. The quiet that is not quiet, a silence that is not silence, but a searing defiance, a hatred that courses silent and red through the rushing waters of the boy's veins.

They blink again, and they are one. The cold and the silence. The ocean and the wavering flame.

The anthropozoologist nods, and the boy's father unfolds his arms. The boy and the creature watch him impassively.

"How do you feel?" says King Mansour.

"Extended," says Haidar, as the anthropozoologist pulls the needles from his arm. And this is true, one of the few truths he will allow. His mind is flooded, a vast, almost limitless vista of knowledge and sensation stretching out before him. He knows how the giant squid sings, and why, and where the cold ocean trench gives way to drafts of tectonic heat. He knows who the mysterious marauders who attacked the Sarawak coast this morning were, and how many of them were Singapurans by blood. He knows the composition and contents of his own blood, that which the anthropozoologist has collected in his delicate little vials that line the operating area, and he knows the smell of pride and war and fear that surrounds his father.

"We are equals," says the king, but Haidar plunges the words into the depths of his mind, strips them of their weights, drives them bare into the void where he can examine them for what they are.

You lie. You only seek to control. To use. I am no more your son now than I ever was. You crave power and land and sea. You want them all.

He looks his father full in the face.

I will be stronger than you ever will be.

"Yes," Haidar says.

The merlion dives, released of its constraints.

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Someday, I will be king.

In public, he calls the merlion Ghalib. *The conqueror. For a kingdom that demands one.*

In private, he calls it nothing, because he knows merlions have no names.

They swim together every evening, once Haidar is free of his lessons and his tutors. Haidar learns to swim easily, and swims naked; the waters around the southern coast of Pulau Panjang where the palace is situated are warm and relatively free of pollution, thanks to the meticulous efforts of his grandfather and father to keep all vessels away for fear of assassins. Moreover, any sort of clothing would immediately give him away as the prince, which he would rather not happen when he surfaces in Port Cavenagh.

Yes, in Port Cavenagh, for the merlion wishes to know what ordinary men and women and children are like, and so too (but to a lesser extent) does Haidar. The men and women (and maybe even children) they will fight alongside, and command to live, or to die. Rarely does the public see him, and rarely does he see the public, the “common masses” which his father has, on many occasions throughout Haidar’s childhood, condemned him to be “not even fit for”.

Haidar walks among them at night, first in the clothes of a drunkard he’d borrowed on his first visit to the town, and then in the more respectable garb of a businessman, which he stashes in a small cove just outside the port area, where he now usually surfaces. He wears no false moustache, or spectacles; only a battered brown hat, and even then he takes it off when in taverns and restaurants, as is the custom. No one recognises the royal nose, or the royal eyes; life here is too divested from the intrigues of the court to care who he is.

But he cares who they are. He meets traders and mothers and labourers, farmers and merchants and physicians, from every part of Indochina and Asia, and even some from the great states of Europe. He once encounters an ex-soldier from one of the warring American states (Sequoyah, the merlion assures him, although he remembers it as being Manitoba), and a great, swarthy brute of a man from the Maghrib Empire. He comes across slaves on their way to the distant Republic of Texas, and lawyers returning home to Nippon, and even Sarawakans who, despite the belligerence Singapura continues to display against their country, have come here to recruit more to their strange and radical cause of democracy.

Most people, though, are from Port Cavenagh, and Johor, and Tambuwang: his towns, his citizens, his kingdom. His people. Haidar and the merlion learn of their hatred for the king, and their constant fear of war. Their terrified admiration of those who command the merlions, and the

garuda. But also of their stories and fears, wishes and dreams, pasts and possible futures. Over tea and coffee and shisha and smoke, the prince hears them all.

His heart, once thought hardened and polished like stainless steel by his father, now begins to soften and corrode, as do most things when exposed too long to the drifting tides of ocean.

Someday, I will be king.

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It comes suddenly for most people. *Fifth Sarawakan merchant vessel sunk by Singapuran navy—hostilities declared!* wail the newspapers of 3 March 1947, and Port Cavenagh is once again plunged into the realities of war.

Battles are fought, many of them in Singapura's favour; this is a war of attrition against Sarawak, already worn down by its overwhelmingly militant and aggressive neighbour. Yet traitors and democratists are still hung from the palace ramparts, and Prince Alif still finds himself on a Singapuran warship that is somehow blown to bits by the Sarawakan fleet in the Straits of Singapura, just weeks shy of his fifteenth birthday.

Although his father kept the twins away from him, Haidar knows he considered Alif weak, just like his mother, and his uncle Prince Ilyas, and all who have died in the roaring floods of treachery against his own house that King Mansour has unleashed since ascending to the throne. He knows Adil has been battered into the man that Haidar only recently used to be, and that his father refuses to pair him with a merlion, knowing that it will lead to the man Haidar only recently has become.

Yet Haidar and his merlion fight on, tearing into the nearly defenceless Sarawakan vessels (military and merchant alike) and letting the merlion cavalry feast on the corpses that they shed. Haidar's merlion will have no part in this, of course, although there is no choice, sometimes, when the cameras are on. It is repulsed, but it carries on.

No longer can Haidar afford to visit Port Cavenagh, being constantly re-assigned to the front as soon as one battle is won; but he knows the stories of the men and women under his charge, stories of woe and loss and sorrow that resonate as keenly with him as the loss of his younger brother, who was as much a stranger to him as these soldiers and sailors and nurses, but whom he will now never know, and whose life represents an opportunity tossed away to the whims of the storms of the sea.

The merlions do not feel sorrow when one of their number is killed by Prussian-made Sarawakan mines, or shredded by Sarawakan submarines purchased from the Maghrib Empire and Russia. Instead they sing, and their song carries meaning enough to make Vancouverian dolphins five thousand miles away stop in their paths toward Mexico to listen.

After all, what can one do in the face of death but sing?

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The opportunity presents itself when he is least expecting it.

On the night of 26 June, a Sarawakan ravager fleet somehow evades the second and fourth Singapurans in the Straits and makes it into Farquhar Bay. How they manage the journey is never fully ascertained, although it is later revealed that Governor-General Borrego of Portuguese Malaya has been allowing democratist Sarawakan fleets to refuel in the Melaka harbour.

Just returned from a successful battle near Bintan, Haidar rushes back to the palace to find dead Sarawakans and Singapurans, and even a fallen garuda, littering the palace grounds, with five Sarawakan frigates burning on the beach.

Adil is dying on the steps to the upper chambers in the rather inexpert care of an apprentice nurse, his legs and right arm a bloody mess after a Sarawakan cannonball blew through the walls, but it is not him Haidar has come for.

Someday, I will be king.

The words blot out Adil's dying screams as Haidar ascends the steps. He can only hear the groans coming from the uppermost doorway.

Parts of Haidar's pair-enhanced brain determine that at least four dead Sarawakan commandos are scattered around the room, along with the more wholly coherently-assembled remains of King Mansour's elite guard. King Mansour himself is being attended to on the royal bed by three nurses, his lower torso covered by blood-soaked blankets.

"Get out," says Haidar to the three nurses.

They look uncertainly at him.

"I will be king in a few minutes," says Haidar. "Listen to me now, or regret it later."

"Let me be," his father croaks. "The boy speaks the truth."

Haidar turns to regard his father as the nurses flee. "Still 'boy', huh?" He can no longer hear the sounds of the sea, or the songs of the

merlions. The room is cold. Something new is pounding in his ears.

“Get it over with...Haidie. The democratists have done...most of it for you.” His father’s mouth is contorted into an ugly shape. An expression of spite seethes at the roiling corners of his mouth. “Or are you too weak... boy?”

Someday, I will be king.

Haidar’s ears ring with the blows of a thousand whistling lashes, and the screams of a thousand dying men. He looks down at the man he has detested all his life, and the tyrant who has led his people into death and ruin. A river of hate runs seething and boiling over the confines of his heart.

He fastens his hands around his father’s neck.

“You? Strangle...me? Ha! Boy. Your hands are limp. Weak.” His father gasps, even as Haidar begins to squeeze.

Adil. Alif. Mother. You made this country a shadow. A pale, trembling shadow of what it could be.

“Where is your strength, Father?”

I may not be king yet, but I’m more king than you ever were.

“I’m not you.”

He releases his father’s throat.

“There is no strength in strength that destroys.” Haidar smells his father’s hate and his fear, a fear still and unmoving as the deadest current on a windless night. A fear that has frozen him, broken the currents of humanity that would have ordinarily carried him to better days, better seas. A fear that has been handed down from generation to generation, and that has raged against the reefs of Haidar’s own heart in the last few hours.

Haidar sees the frightened child they both were, treading water in a sea of fear. He learned to swim, while his father fought the sea, trying to bend it to his will.

“You’re...w-weak,” his father tries to say, but Haidar knows what strength is. Strength is giving in. Strength is knowing the other. Strength is weakness. Strength is letting go.

Strength is singing in the face of death.

“Don’t stammer,” Haidar whispers, his voice wavering. “Kings don’t talk to themselves.”

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There are no cameras there. He carries his father down the steps, one by one, the king’s royal hands folded in his lap.

King Mansour is dying; in very little time, Haidar will be king.
But a different sort of king.

“Which do you want?” he whispers to his father, awash in tears as the light of daybreak streams into the Nursery chamber, and his father’s life floats away on the tide.

Strength is letting go.

Far away, near the wrecks of the Sarawakan fleet, a merlion begins to sing.