

## Here Got Tygers One

The tip of Chrystoph's boot sent a spring skittering across the mossy floor of what used to be his bunk. Everything was gone now; all that remained were the broken fragments of bed frames, and the rusted husks that were once lockers. The slow drip drip dripping of water gave his feet tempo as he paced around the decrepit room.

His thighs chafed. His nose itched with the stench of mould and grubby plaster. The remnants of his camouflage face paint felt sticky on his skin. Coming to the windowsill, Chrystoph looked out at the sun setting on the overgrown ruins of Rocky Hill Camp. Only the birds sang now; a long time had passed since these walls last heard cadences.

He slumped to the ground, leaning against the wall, his head hanging between his knees. The mud on his uniform had dried in the hours since he woke up alone, when the pale morning light revealed the weeds and wildflowers now residing in the scattered mounds of dirt ringing his shell scrape. The decayed chassis of the five-ton lay sunken into the track beside his Field Camp site. The dusty trees that watched him wait for rescue no longer recognised him.

The day was on its last legs now. There came the soft night music of crickets and wind as the walls began to colour Carolina blue. He raked a dirty sleeve across his face, scraping at the grime clinging to him, the abrasive fabric stinging his cheeks.

There were no Safety Officers to govern this wilderness. No friends to fill it, or leaders to follow. His throat squeezed shut. He ran a hand over his filthy scalp, and closed his eyes. It was all beyond his comprehension; the hums of a sleeping forest

pressed into his temples, threatening to crush his skull between its gentle palms. A small whimper escaped as he screamed inside his head, and willed it all to go away.

Something outside roared.

Chrystoph got up and peered through his riflescope at the old parade square up the road. There, standing at the centre of the cracked, pallid concrete was a lone tiger. It was looking in his direction, almost like it was returning his stare. Its body shimmered in the waning light.

The tiger threw back its head and let out another roar before sauntering toward the gate, disappearing behind the cookhouse just as the last of the echoes died.

*“Since when Tekong got tigers one?”* he wondered.

A bright streak tore across the pinpricked darkness above. The stars, their gazes aloof and ancient, saw him but paid no mind. They would provide him no solace tonight. Chrystoph laid his head down on his field pack, and courted an elusive, lonesome sleep.

#

Chrystoph stared up at the sheer rock face that now interrupted the old highway back to Ladang. The trees standing atop it were strangers to him, but their ancient roots made clear that this was their dominion, not his.

He huffed and adjusted the straps of his pack. His skinny shoulders ached. His shaved head itched beneath his helmet. There was no way he'd make the climb. Maybe he could go in a circle; head the other way round the island and get to the ferry terminal that way. Looking back, the ashen clouds that had hung overhead since before dawn now threatened to ablate the broken road behind him. With them came the grumble of thunder. He started walking.

The monsoon had swept inland by the time he reached the ammunition dump. Its fences lay abandoned in the grass where they had fallen. Weeds ran over their tarnished chains. Wildflowers blossomed on the few poles still standing. He crossed the broken gate, and slipped through the empty doorway of the administration building.

Most of the cramped interior was dark, the faint grey light of the squall only extending a few feet beyond the entrance. Holding his torch out ahead of him, he cleared the structure, crushing underfoot the muddied leaves that blanketed the ground. The air here was still, and musty. Even the fresh, green-grass smell of the rain couldn't mask the stink of decay.

He clenched his jaw to stop his teeth from chattering. His toes were slick from the rainwater pooling in his boots. He was soaked. Even with the biting wind, it'd still be too warm to put on his Gore-Tex. He could only shiver, and lament.

Chrystoph found the Guard Armoury deeper inside. The locks were gone, and its steel door was rusted shut. Tugging on the handle, he managed to get it to give way by a few token inches. All the while, its hinges would release an awful groan that reverberated against the vegetated concrete.

He peeked inside, shining a light through the gap. The rifle racks stood empty. The ammunition boxes were missing. Whatever remained lay scattered, and decomposing from disuse.

He set his things down where it was dry and took stock of his remaining combat rations: one packet of Makhani Bean Stew and some sundries. Remembering when he swore off the disgusting paste, he laughed, before putting the stew back. He had staved off eating it for this long; a little longer wouldn't hurt. Sitting by the entrance, he looked outside as he bit into a biscuit.

Watching the rain felt good. The motion, the gentle static of the cascade touching the earth, the coolness that carried on the breeze and settled on his wet skin. He took another bite, and thought how easy it would be to just forget the crumbling vestiges of the old world still littering his view.

He thought back to the start of Field Camp, and felt for the letter his Ma had written him. The plastic Ziploc bag he'd used to waterproof it crinkled inside his thigh pocket. A couple of pages of smudged paper stuffed inside a dirty envelope were the last tethers to the life he knew. He decided against reading it again. There'd be time for that when he got home.

A pack of dogs emerged from the treeline across the road and advanced toward him, stopping just shy of the fences. Their wildness showed in their mangy coats, their hungry eyes, their fangs glistening in the downpour. Some of them started barking. The others carried carcasses. They must have been out hunting when the storm came.

This was a bad position. Trapped indoors. Nowhere to run. Chrystoph got up and raised his rifle. Maybe blanks would scare them off. He cocked the weapon, and fired.

Bang. Bang. His ears rang as the shots erupted from the chamber. He realised too late that he'd forgotten his earplugs.

Bang. Bang. Bang.

"GO AWAY!" Chrystoph shouted over the report of his rifle.

The dogs stopped barking. Then came a flash over the treetops. The rolling, roiling crash of thunder shook the ground, eclipsing whatever terrible noises he made. The dogs inched forward, emboldened, snarling.

*"Siao liao."*

The Alpha Male tucked its head and sank low on its haunches. He'd seen his dog do the same when it was preparing to charge. He pulled the trigger again. Nothing. The magazine was empty.

Something moved in the treeline. The storm and the distance blurred his view, but Christoph saw it: a wraith, camouflaged against the earthen leaf litter, gliding on powerful legs behind the pack. The dogs paused and raised their heads, tuning their ears. They were aware of the predator much too late.

A great mass of striped orange fur burst from the brush and pounced on the dog furthest on the flank. Its body went limp as the tiger's jaws throttled its neck. The pack scattered, yelping. Some dashed away up the road. The Alpha and one other mongrel stayed to face the beast.

The tiger flung the corpse aside and circled them, baring its massive fangs. Christoph watched them dance to the tempo of thunderclaps. The tiger gave a mighty roar, as if it were teasing them, the way a bullfighter baits his quarry into attacking.

The mongrel lunged. Rearing up as it whipped around, the tiger brought its claws down and tore into its side. The dog howled, and collapsed on the road. The groundwater began to run red.

*"This can't be the same tiger from Rocky Hill... right?"*

The tiger turned and made its way for the Alpha. Like its first kill, it bit down into the dog's torso and dragged it to the ground, jerking its head as it shook the life from the body. The Alpha cried out once, and then, nothing. Only the patter of raindrops. Its legs stopped flailing soon after.

In all that time, Christoph hadn't budged. Now, the tiger approached him. He drew his utility knife from his grenade pouch, holding it in front of him with trembling hands. Its dirty blade glinted with each flash of lightning.

The tiger stopped a few metres short of him. The white fur beneath its chin was stained carmine with blood. The massive cat, its broad, sharp face, its black stripes glistening in the dim light of the tempest, fixed upon him with its shimmering golden eyes.

*"Dear God please let me get out of this alive."*

The animal tilted its head upwards. Its whiskers twitched, like it was sniffing for his scent. Finally, it made a series of chuffing noises, before turning to disappear back into the jungle.

His knees buckled. He slumped against the nearest wall as he desperately sucked down air. His hands quaked, and his head swum. He fell over onto his back, watching the ceiling spin before going unconscious.

The sun had come out by the time Christoph awoke. All but one of the bodies still laid outside. A long red trail led away from the road into the tall grass. At its end, he found the mongrel still alive.

It had managed nearly fifty metres before its legs gave out. It whimpered as it licked its wounds, trying to lap up the blood leaking out into the dirt. Its fur was slick with rain and gore. Its pulse was weak. The dog looked up at him, and seemed to plead. From this close, it reminded him of his own dog.

He sat down and pulled the dog's head into his lap, scratching its ears before slipping his knife into the base of its skull. There was a violent *thunk* of the blade striking bone, and its body went limp. Clutching the animal, he sobbed softly, rocking

back and forth. A few minutes passed before he let go. He avoided looking into its eyes. He couldn't bear to see them empty.

Afterward, he set about digging a grave with his entrenching tool. The earth now gave way more readily than it had when he'd dug his shell scrape. Whether the change was in him or the dirt, he couldn't tell. He chuckled. If only they could see him now, he thought. Digging a hole of his own accord. What a difference a day makes.

But no one would ever see this. No recruits, no sergeants. No PS, or PC, or OC, or CO. All the acronyms and 4D numbers had gone from the world. Only sounds and swathes of colour remained.

Chrystoph stopped laughing. It wasn't funny anymore. None of it was. He continued in silence.

He buried the dogs with their eyes closed. As he replaced the dirt, it dawned on him that this place must have been their den. He'd forced them to attack by intruding. This was their territory now; his claim had long expired.

Chrystoph looked down at his hands and the blood stains on his sleeves. He started walking again, all the while trying to ignore his growing discomfort at being rendered a trespasser in this savage new world.

#

The roads further inland had faded, leaving him with only unkempt dirt tracks to follow. The gradual onset of evening blanketed the jungle in shadow. Above, rolling clouds wore their ginger-stained fleeces.

Chrystoph came to the edge of a swamp maybe fifty metres wide. There were no other paths he could see through the mangroves around him. The dying light urged him to cross.

He made the first tentative steps into the frigid water. The soft peat below felt like sludge, trapping his feet. Brackish clouds bloomed in his wake. The stink of rot and abandon followed each pace deeper into the mire.

It was slow going, and he stumbled often. His boots grew heavy from the muck. With nothing to gauge the depth in front of him, each move was a guess at best.

A flurry of birds took flight nearby, their shrieks drowning out the clicks and croaks of the swamp. He stopped where it was waist-deep and looked around. Something was stalking him from the shore. Darting through the brush lining the periphery, it kept just out of sight, hiding in the shadows cast by the setting sun.

“I KNOW YOU’RE THERE!”

He raised his rifle and fired his laser into the trees. From this distance it looked like a red sprite. His eyes tracked the beam as it leapt and danced.

“COME OUT! STOP HIDING!”

Only the scattered calls of pond herons answered him.

He kept still, watching the vegetation back the way he came. Minutes passed. A pensive quiet settled. It was becoming impossible to see anything in the low light. He lowered his weapon.

Maybe he was imagining it. Maybe he was imagining all of it. How could he be sure he was even really here? The chill numbing his groin seemed real enough. So did the burning of his burst blisters. But those things failed to put him at ease. It disappointed him knowing that this wasn’t just a nightmare.

As he turned to continue, the tiger emerged from a thicket on the opposite bank, flashing its fangs. Chrystoph froze.

“Okay, okay. Just... just relax.”



The tiger watched him with genial, genteel eyes. They shined golden in the auburn light.

“I’m going. Don’t... please, just stay there, right? Don’t chase me.”

Chrystoph started backing away when the ground beneath his feet disappeared. He fell, plunging beneath the surface, his equipment dragging him the long way down. He squeezed his eyes shut as he sank. His open mouth flooded with scum that tasted like sweat and excrete. The weight of his rifle was ripped away as the water climbed over his hands.

Panic set in as his mind seized up, closed off, shut down. All he heard was his pulse pounding inside his skull. His ears filled with muck and his eyes stung. He reached out as he hit the bottom, searching with his hands until he found purchase on a slope.

Then he pulled, digging into the mud with his boots and fingers and climbing on all fours. Higher and higher he went, the pressure pressing in on his eardrums easing as he clambered upward. Finally, his head broke the surface, and he spewed the foul water out in a forceful spray. Sucking down deep, desperate lungfuls of air, sputtering, gasping, he gorged himself on dryness until he felt faint.

Chrystoph opened his eyes. His vision was blurry but he could see the orange mass of the tiger still watching. The shore was only a few metres away now. He’d crossed the swamp without realising it. Kneeling in the shallows, he swung his arms and screamed.

“DO IT! YOU WANT ME SO BAD THEN KILL ME LAH!”

He tore off his pack and flung it at the beast, his spittle mixed with the beads of filth still rolling down his face.

“FINISH IT YOU COWARD!”

The tiger chuffed and ambled up the path away from him.

“DAMN YOU! DO SOMETHING!”

It disappeared over a small rise, its tail still swishing.

“WHY? WHAT THE HELL DO YOU WANT FROM ME?”

The echo of his voice died amongst the trees. He crawled to the water’s edge and collapsed onto the dirt. It stung where his flesh had been rubbed raw. The grit inlaying his uniform pricked his back. His spit tasted like salt, and sand. It made him gag.

He hated that damned tiger. The cruel beast was toying with him, living off his fear. Chrystoph had sensed its presence tracking him all day, but he didn’t know what for. Its gaze was maddening. The next time they met, he would kill it. Or it would kill him. One way or another, it would end.

For now though, being alive sufficed. Patting his thigh pocket, he felt his Ma’s letter. He rested his head on the earth, feeling it on the back of his scalp. He breathed in the coolness of the night air. His skin glowed warm beneath his wet clothes. Above his faint pants, all the cicadas in the jungle crooned for him.

#

The noon sun shone hot on his sunburnt face. It was already hanging high when he set off. Now that his rifle was gone, the waterproofed thunderflash in his magazine pouch was all he had left. Somehow he’d lost the packet of Makhani Bean Stew too.

Propping the spear he’d carved earlier across his shoulders, he shook his canteen, hearing the little water that was left rattle. He ignored his parched tongue, and the gnawing in his stomach. There would be time to indulge them later.

The hazy heat radiating up from the ground shimmered with dust. Chrystoph squinted, peering down the sandy road, his eyes trying to see past the fatigue and the blurry tears of his sweat. His helmet jostled in his pack as he walked. He'd given up on wearing it after it became clear last night that this wasn't all just an elaborate test for Command School.

He kept the ocean to his right as he followed the twin trails of rocks and grit that ran down the centre of the track. Somewhere ahead was Ladang. He fought off the weakness that ate at his knees and aching feet. His shoulders were numb. His spit congealed in his throat.

Somewhere. Somewhere, somewhere. In his giddy mind, it was always somewhere just beyond the next bend.

This next dozen bends provided more road to walk. Then came one that gave him a worn sign, glimmering like a mirage in the distance. He broke into a slow trot. Pain stabbed up into his left heel. He limped to take the pressure off and kept going.

The sign read:

BASIC MILITA–TRAIN–ENTRE

SALABIN GATE

TRESPA–SERS WILL B–

The words were weathered but he remembered this place from his brother's story about the Tekong hot spring that hid somewhere nearby.

He leaned on his spear as he wandered past the rubbled guard post. Brambles lined the long boulevard before him. His heart palpitated. There was nothing familiar about this place. Old doubts resurged as his feet began to slow.

And then, from behind a thick bout of trees, appeared Ladang's parade square and the crumbling grandstand. Behind it towered the Headquarters building. Beyond that, he knew, lay the ferry terminal.

"Home. There's actually a way home," Chrystoph mumbled.

He quickened his pace. He could smell salt on the breeze. Past the collapsed structures and broken skeletons of vehicles still in their lots, he saw the statue of the soldier standing in front of Headquarters covered in vines. Wildflowers bloomed at its feet. Beyond them was the sea. He staggered past the security office out onto the boardwalk.

The metal was corroded and ruddy. The concrete beneath him had cracked. The benches were missing, as were the posters that once hung from the ceiling beams. But still the pillars of the ferry terminal remained upright. The pier floated. He ventured further, and saw ships berthed to their bays, intact.

And there, on the horizon, was home.

He fell to his knees and laughed. His hoots were drowned out by the crashing of waves. Here she was. It felt like he'd been journeying for a lifetime, and from the look of Singapore's green shoreline, she'd been awaiting him for even longer.

#

Further inspection of the ships revealed empty tanks. They were dead in the water. By the time he found a small inflatable life raft he could paddle back with, it was the late afternoon. A brief stint in his school's sailing club taught him the dangers of venturing onto the water with the sun that low. Chrystoph decided to make the journey in the morning instead.

He took his time hobbling back from the hot spring in the cool evening darkness. It'd taken an hour to find that disappointing puddle of lukewarm water. His

stomach cramped from the hunger pangs. Stopping to retch and spit up bile, he wished to hell that he hadn't lost the packet of stew.

Along the way, he stuffed his pockets with dry wood. He made camp at the base of the soldier's statue in the courtyard beside the ferry terminal. Clearing away the weeds and loose dirt, he started a fire with his last block of solid fuel.

The twigs crackled and popped in the budding flames.

He reached over to his gear and pulled out the last pack of biscuits from a magazine pouch. They would worsen his thirst, and he had maybe two or three sips left in his canteen, but he needed to eat something. The last he heard, the journey back was a good ten clicks. It was a lot of distance for something to go wrong.

He recalled an urban legend about a recruit that was so desperate to leave that he swam all the way back to Singapore. He lay down and took as small of a bite as he could manage from the biscuit between his fingers.

*"Think my situation's a bit more jia lat than yours eh?"* Chrystoph mused.

The consensus was that the recruit got caught in the end, but there were small differences based on who told the story. And there were many who told it. Soon those same people would repeat his story in its place as the newest Tekong legend.

He prodded the fire with his spear, watching the sparks leap. Silhouettes moved across the field around him, lulling him to sleep as they danced upon his eyes.

Scattered images rushed out at him as he began to dream. Bursts of colour and sound and the overpowering stench of blood. It felt like his fingers were running over carpet. He heard whimpering in the dark beneath his closed eyelids. The fur

beneath his palms grew warm and pulsed with heat. Terror rose in his throat; he started screaming, filling his ears with anger and fear.

Chrystoph recognised that this was a nightmare. His limbs thrashed as he tried to shake himself awake. Forcing his eyes open, he looked down at his hands. They were wrapped around the neck of a wild dog.

He snapped awake as a roar came out of the darkness.

Chrystoph staggered to his feet. His hands trembled as they coiled around the rough wood of the spear. It bent under the tension. The thought that it might snap floated through his mind as he scanned the quivering light playing across the lush face of the Headquarters building. The time to worry about that was past.

The night melted away as a familiar wraith stepped forward.

The tiger.

Only its head and shoulders were illuminated as it stopped at the edge of the fire's glow. The light tinted the matt white of its ruff golden. It almost looked like a halo.

Chrystoph inched forward, his shoulders braced, arms outstretched with the spear. The tiger watched him as it had before, circling around when he got too close, keeping its distance. It let out a hoarse groan. Its tone made him think of a parent pleading with a child.

*"It's just an animal,"* he thought.

He charged, stabbing with the spear. The tiger leapt away, growling, flashing its fangs. Its swishing tail stiffened and drooped as it sank low on its haunches. Its eyes hardened.

*"No turning back now."*

He advanced and stabbed at it again. Darting away, it rounded on him. Chrystoph spun, stumbling, almost losing his balance. He swung the spear in front of him, jabbing to hold the advancing beast at bay. It lashed out with unsheathed claws.

Retreating, his gaze danced between the tiger and the ground behind him. The tiger sank low and sprang again. Chrystoph dropped, ducking beneath the attack.

He was close enough now. He thrust out the spear and gouged the tiger's hind leg. The tip of the weapon drew blood. The beast roared and jerked away. The white spots on the backs of its black ears shone at him like luminous eyes staring out of the darkness.

It turned back to bare its long fangs. Chrystoph lunged. This time, he missed. The tiger dodged and brought down a powerful paw, knocking the spear from his grasp. It trampled the stick underfoot and stalked toward him.

*"Shit."*

He reached into his thigh pocket, past the letter, and drew his knife. The creature was limping now. If he timed the next few moves right, he'd have a chance. He armed the thunderflash in his other pocket and threw it at the tiger's feet.

BANG.

The blast rang in his ears. Panicking, the tiger loosed a wild swipe. Chrystoph dodged and swung his knife, cutting into its paw. From that close the roar was deafening. He felt the beast's hot breath rush against his face, stinking of death.

It charged. He dove to the side, driving the blade into the animal's torso. It pulled away with enough force to rip the knife from his grasp.

Then it reared up, and brought its claws down into the centre of his chest.

The pain didn't register. All he felt was the warmth of his blood starting to run over his skin. Chrystoph fell backward. The impact of his skull hitting the dirt shook his teeth. He couldn't breathe. He tasted copper. He raised his head to look, and saw bubbles escaping the long gashes goring his lungs.

His heart seized and shivered. A faint choking sound escaped his throat. The feeling faded from his toes. The tiger lay down by the fire, watching him as it licked its wounds, the knife still stuck in its side. In the light, he could see the red staining the powder white of its belly fur.

He tried to stay awake. His vision filled with stars. All of them, aloof and ancient as before, as they always would be, looked down at him but paid no mind. They held no pity for dead soldiers. Together, they flooded Chrystoph's sight with apathy.

And then, all the lights went out.

#

Wincing, he cracks open his eyes. Clear blue sky. His scalp burns. The heat radiates off his skin in a hot, heavy haze.

Trying to sit up, he feels a stab of pain in his side, just below his ribs. He checks, and finds his knife lodged into his body. He pats his chest. It is unharmed. Dry even, save for sweat. He rolls his head toward the remnants of his fire, and finds the tiger gone.

Gingerly, he removes the blade. Blood rushes forth. The knife clatters on the soft ground. He tears open the first aid dressing he had kept in his left thigh pocket and presses the thickest part to the wound. He supposes that's how it's used; he's never seen the bandage out of its green wrapper before. He feels a degree of amazement that there's even something inside at all.



Now Chrystoph gets up. Looking around, there's no trace of the animal. He walks toward the fire. The spear lies discarded where he remembers it fell. The claw marks he expects to see are absent. He finds the spent thunderflash, but not the drops of tiger blood. Right now, the only stains are from the dirt.

He stumbles toward his gear, and falls to his knees. The reality facing him squeezes in on his temples. He empties his canteen into his mouth, and licks at his peeling lips. His stomach knots and twists. It is too much to think about. At least he still has his letter.

He opens the Ziploc and pulls it out. It's as good a time as any, he reasons. Lifting the tab of the envelope, it tears a little when the glue refuses to give. It feels brittle in his hand.

The letter is yellowed. Almost blank except for a few stray letters and the grooves carved where his Ma forced the nib into the paper. Time has faded the ink. Chrystoph clutches it, unsure of how to react. He raises it to his dirty forehead and inhales. All he can smell is the sea.

He sighs. Tears do not come. He cannot muster them from beneath the fatigue. He folds the letter and puts it back. Shouldering his gear, he heads for the life raft, renouncing the knife, the spear. For whatever dangers now await him in Singapore, he will find kinder solutions than these.

As he leaves, Chrystoph hears a tiger roar from somewhere in the distant jungle behind him.

**END**

**4870 Words**