

These stories are part of the 2219 Stories series envisioned by author Alvin Pang. Set in the year 2219 in Singapore (or what's become of it) and featuring contributions from a diverse range of writers, this ongoing series responds to the 2019 commemoration of Singapore's Bicentennial—marking 200 years since the arrival of the British in 1819—by imagining our future 200 years hence. For more information, email: 2219stories@gmail.com.

HOW THE LION BROUGHT DOWN THE CITY

By Judith Huang

Shou Hui drew the trailing sleeves of his daopao up as his ship glided to the dock, so he could step onto the landing without tripping over the gauzy material.

No one was expecting his arrival on the island, and the stars glimmering overhead were silent. All was going according to plan. He had not stepped foot in the Imperial capital for twenty years, and of course everything looked completely different - the giant hovercraft Canopies were larger than ever and encrusted with jewels, and the snaking river now glowed with bioluminescence. At this elevation, he had a satellite's view of the capital, and though his eyes had not taken in the city for two decades, his surveillance team recorded every minute movement on the island.

He had been careful to activate his autonomous ship's mirrorshields to avoid detection, but still, he had seeded false rumours that he was still at the Swiss chalet, and had even planted a body double as an extra precaution. He knew his aunt tracked his every move, and was extra cautious every time he imbibed any laksa sauce, since the fragrant coconut milk was perfect for masking the Imperial family's favourite poisons. Although he had not seen the Empress in twenty years, he knew her well. It was not in her interest to have him anywhere near the capital.

An enormous hovercraft docked at the next gate, and out spilled a retinue of Nigerians, with geles stiff and shiny with the latest technofabrics that incorporated ruby dust, a couple of silver hijabs and a dizzying array of hairstyles. It was clearly a diplomatic mission, as the gold sculptures borne by the men were of exceptional quality, and the Mandarin tripping off the tongues of the women was mellifluous and precise. Bringing up the rear of the contingent were four men bearing a beautiful bronze leopard from the kingdom of Benin, with an intricate pattern of spots all over its body.

Shou Hui approached one of the women in the retinue. She was wearing a stunning gele pleated to look like a setting sun, with a matching dress. Silver pearls were draped around her neck, clearly iridium, or perhaps one of the newer alloys her country had developed.

"Excuse me," said Shou Hui in passable Yoruba. "Are you part of the delegation to see the Empress?"

She looked Shou Hui up and down. His topknot was dishevelled and his cloth shoes worn, but what interested her most was the tiny piece of jade that hung from his belt with a tassel designed, she knew, to hide a minuscule microphone.

The jade was lustrous and pale, mutton fat nephrite that hadn't been mined in five centuries, and it had clearly never touched Burmese soil. It was carved into a tiny dragon.

"If you are who I think you are, then you already know the answer to that question," she said in the plummy tones of the deposed British aristocracy. Shou Hui swept the piece of jade beneath his robes. He had been careless.

"Not everything is as it seems," said Shou Hui, still in Yoruba. "You have come for the G8 summit, yes? But let me tell you - there will only be six at the table, and even if you are granted an audience with the Empress, that may mean nothing in six months."

The woman tilted her head and folded her arms across her chest. Her retinue was already moving towards the gates where imperial diplomats received them.

"Ile oba t'o jo, ewa lo busi," said Shou Hui in a low whisper. *When a king's palace burns down, the palace rebuilt is more beautiful.*

The woman looked him straight in the eye, then held out her hand.

"My name is Kehinde," she said.

Shou Hui bowed slightly as he shook her hand. "Your elder twin. Brother or sister?" "Sister. And two younger brothers. But the last one is no more."

"I'm sorry to hear that," said Shou Hui. "I am the firstborn myself and I know how difficult it is to lose a younger sibling. My name is Shou Hui. I have not been back to the island for twenty years, until tonight."

"You must be hungry for some laksa, then," laughed Kehinde.

"You have no idea. I don't know why, but the Singaporean diplomatic restaurants in Boston are pretty rubbish." He was relieved that they had switched back to English - he had pretty much exhausted his Yoruba by this point.

"Well, if you haven't had dinner, I know a place near the Nigerian High Commission that does a decent laksa," said Kehinde.

"Paiseh," said Shou Hui. "I should be recommending laksa places to you, not the other way round."

"At all at all- o," said Kehinde. "If we were in Boston I would grill you about where to find decent pepper soup, but I'm in Singapore so often I'm practically a local. Come lah."

—

The Empress slept fitfully in the huanghuali bed. The moonlight was spilling over the silk sheets, glaring into her eyes, but she didn't want to activate the blinds because she wanted a direct view of the port.

A dream had woken her - and though it faded upon waking she recalled the shattering of an ancient pot, so the water gushed out in an extravagant spray.

The Empire was secure, of course. The Zhenghe missions to the lunar and planetary colonies had been a diplomatic triumph, and the weaponised moondrop demonstration at the August Imperial Day Parade hadn't hurt. She held all the worlds in the palm of her hand, and Singaporean citizens were so revered everywhere that there was hardly any need to quell unrest in the Voids.

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2219: Futures Imagined

An exhibition by ArtScience Museum for the Singapore Bicentennial
23 November 2019 to 5 April 2020

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24G succession was going smoothly for the rubber stamp parliament, where the commoners aired their petty grievances and drafted petitions. The only real challenge could come from just one place - Boston, that stubborn province that still refused to capitulate to her cinematic empire, where people bizarrely insisted on relying on opera troupes, theatre practitioners and live musicians as their primary source of entertainment.

The Empress was painfully aware that her nephew had something to do with this. She deliberately ensured that all the laksa in that provincial backwater was virtually inedible. But this was not enough to flush the exile out.

It also had the undesired side-effect of affording fewer chances to do away with him altogether, and unfortunately he was as wiley as the mousedeer his famous ancestor was often likened to.

Perhaps the Yoruba girl would finally manage to do him in. But there was a distinct danger that she might turn, too, since Kehinde's twin sister was a power broker in the People's Republic of Ethiopia, though she maintained a low profile at the Institute for Political Science at Addis Ababa University, which was a hotbed for resistance to Imperial encroachment on that continent. Although that particular university did also provide the technology for the Zhenghe missions. Such hypocrites, all of them.

The Empress was used to being able to control almost every aspect of her subjects' lives. But there was still the human element. And there was another thing she could not control - Death itself.

Her timepiece, embedded in her wrist, with its exquisite mechanical movements tracking the paths of the stars, also measured her remaining heartbeats. Everything had to fall in place in six months. Her grandson, aged just twelve but enhanced with wisdom implants, would ascend the throne. The ballet of diplomatic gifts and tributes would commence. All her trusted Imperial advisors had family members in secret prisons throughout the Empire to keep them in line. Everything was going according to plan.

—

“Please excuse me, I need to powder my nose.”

Kehinde slipped off the round wooden stool, leaving Shou Hui with his elbows on the marble table.

Two steaming bowls of laksa arrived, borne by a small boy wearing a white singlet and shorts, a Good Morning towel tossed over his shoulder. Beads of sweat shone on his forehead.

Shou Hui looked at his bowl, and immediately saw there was something wrong. Aside from the two shelled prawns, the boiled egg half and thinly-sliced fish cake, there was a large fishball in the middle of the orange soup.

He took his chopsticks and prodded it, then split it open.

A tiny slip of paper nestled inside. His fingers trembled as he pulled it out.

“Merdeka at midnight. Run!”

Shou Hui consulted his timepiece. It was 20 minutes til midnight.

A low level war had been raging in the Voids for months now, and the bodies were piling up. This was why he had come. This was what he was born to do. He couldn't just turn around and fly back to Boston now.

Was Kehinde in his aunt's employ? Was this meant to be a final warning? Where was Kehinde, anyway? It didn't take that long to powder your nose.

—

Puteri Kemala Delima knew that the typhoon was artificial. She was well-versed in the arts of the tempest herself. However, that didn't prevent her from getting drenched. As she stood at the helm of the ship, she held up the elegant gold crown that had been in her family for time before time. Its seven curved spikes resembled one-eyed fish with delicate

floral patterns carved into their flesh. She would need it to challenge the Singapuran upstarts, but the storm was more pressing. Her crew was already panicking, despite being the best mercenaries money could buy in Palembang.

With one grand gesture, she let the crown go. It plunged into the ocean, flashing in the lightning before the water swallowed it. Like magic, the sea flattened out. She knew the Empress had designed this trap precisely to make her life more difficult. No matter - her bearing alone was enough to announce she was the rightful ruler. She would fight all the other contenders to the death if she had to.

But of course, that would not be necessary.

Adebola, or Bola, as she addressed her when they were intimate, had ensured that the uprising would occur at midnight, just as she reached the shores of the Voids. Her twin would ensure that that Li boy would not interfere. The Ethiopian technology in all the Singapuran weaponry would fail when turned upon the people, and all the Imperial subjects would kneel at her feet, for only she would control every device on the island - indeed, every device throughout the Empire.

Except for the Empress' timepiece. That was unhackable, running purely on mechanics first developed by the ancient Swiss. Only the blade of the parang would rob that woman of her life. But if the rumours were true, she was not long for this world, anyway.

As for the young crown prince, he was only twelve, and she would adopt him in a gesture of motherly benevolence. Wisdom implants were so easy to hack, and he would be reprogrammed within months, if not days. There was no need for the barbaric methods of these Li's - hers would be a more enlightened regime.

That stupid woman never did understand mythology.

—

The House of the Harimans had been silent for generations. But the heart of the forest still beat in the dark. Chairman Hu still sent regular reconnaissance missions to the island capital - tigers were good swimmers, and crossing the Straits was never a problem.

The Harimans had withdrawn from the human economy generations ago, but still retained an interest in island politics. Their main concern was the devastating loss of their habitat, which even the Imperial dynasty had come to see as a mistake.

“Go to the princess,” said the Chairman to his youngest son, “and show her your true form at midnight. Swear your allegiance. She will need an army, and ours is not the worst she can find. When she ascends the throne, she will remember us. I will give you the white stone. Do not reveal its true name until she is Queen.”

“Our people are the true guardians of the island, although we have been exiled for an age and a half. Without our blessing, none can rule. Without our blessing, regardless of her signet ring or her bloodline, the princess's Empire will fall.”

“The Empress is blind. She thinks the Nigerians are on her side, but the twins' youngest brother killed himself when the last of our cousins died in the razing of Old Oyo National Park. The beams of its greatest trees hold up the Empress' own throne. His name was Ogidan, and he was the greatest lion of them all.”

“We let the Imperial Family rule for a time because it was necessary. But they have forgotten the true meaning of the island. The exiles must return.”

“And what if she tries to kill me?”

“Show her the stone. If she is truly who she says, she would never lay a hand on a tiger.”

—

At the stroke of midnight, the moondrops rolled onto the Padang - sleek lines that gleamed silver in the moonlight.

The denizens of the Voids froze, their chants fading to silence.

A woman, her hair wet from the rain, placed one golden slipper onto the land.

A tiger flashed through the air like lightning.

A man in daopao bowed before bringing his lips to her hand.

In the Istana, a heart stopped, as a timepiece ticked down the nameless stars.

Judith Huang was born and grew up in Singapore, did her A.B. in English and American Literature and Language at Harvard University, and has since lived in Singapore, Australia, the United States and China. She has always loved writing and recently completed her first novel, *Sofia & The Utopia Machine*, which was a finalist for the Epigram Books Fiction Prize 2017. She is also a poet, and is working on her debut collection of poetry. She is a translator of literary fiction and poetry. She enjoys knitting, singing to bunnies and painting and has been known to send postcards with her art on it to random people in other countries.