

Note:

This short story is the earliest story, chronologically, within the continuity of *The Mongolian Book of the Sky*. Set decades before the main events of the series, it tells the story of the downfall of North Korea, and it's farcical yet malevolent leader, Kim Ilkal (AKA Kim Il-Caligula).

The story is a little more than 2,600 words, and is available here in its entirety. It is also available in audio format under the AUDIOBOOKS tab. It will be included in an upcoming collection, yet to be named.

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He cinched his tie, then felt the tightness on his neck and quickly slipped it back to where it was. He was sweating.

"Hey, Blaine, you've got something green in your teeth," Emily said from the far side of the camera.

"What?" he exclaimed. He was immediately picking at his teeth with his fingernail. "Where?"

But Emily was already gone. She'd sidestepped and was now discussing something with a security officer of the Imperial Bannermen.

"Bloody hell," Blaine seethed. "Joe, which tooth? Which tooth?"

"She's messing with ye, mate." replied the cameraman, not even so much as looking at Blaine.

He didn't believe Joe. For the love of Christ – this broadcast was set to be a record-breaker, more streams than the Superbowl and the World Cup combined. He couldn't stand before that bloody camera with a piece of fucking spinach in his teeth. He pulled out his phone, mirrored the screen – that little Scottish twat, she'd pay for that joke.

He and Emily had been having an office affair for the past two months. He was pretty sure most of the crew knew about it, even though they'd been careful. She was almost twenty years his junior, young enough to be his daughter. It was for that reason he didn't want his wife to know – not this one – although, knowing Gretchen, she probably did.

"Thirty seconds," announced Yvette, the on-site producer.

Blaine had his earpiece in, same as everyone else. He could tell when the anchors were pivoting towards the story of the hour – the story of the century, some were calling it. Callan Bryant, back in London, was just setting up. Blaine listened, feeling the sweat on his brow.

Yvette shushed everyone. Blaine tried to steady his breathing. Bryant finished up his intro, the light on the top of the camera flashed from red to green, and they were live.

Right that moment, he was live. Ten digits worth of viewers, all eyes on him.

He froze for only a half a second, then blinked and began spitting out the script. "Thank you Callan. The BBC is live from the Continental Hall of Justice here in Shenyang, for the opening day in the trial of war criminal and disgraced leader of the former Democratic People's Republic of Korea, Kim Ilkal. We're just minutes away from the beginning of the trial, which is set to begin at 8 AM, local time. Chief prosecutor Major Khaaltyrqiin Khenbish, and his team of legal experts from ten different nations have already taken their seats" – Joe zoomed the camera in towards Major Khenbish, decked out in military attire, his spine rigid as he sat erect at the prosecutor's table, a dozen advisers surrounding him, each wearing a slightly different military uniform – "and Bannermen of the Manchu Imperium are in rigid control of the room. Security is tight here – we're told there are snipers on each of the surrounding buildings, that an entire battalion is stationed here, and that bomb-sniffing dogs are to be brought through the building hourly."

Joe panned over the door at the rear of the courtroom, catching a blur of dozens of Bannermen, decked out in their imperial robes, each carrying traditional Chinese swords. You could be forgiven for mistaking them as mandarins from centuries ago, save the assault rifles on their backs. "In just a few minutes," Blaine continued, "through those doors will march the defendant, Kim Ilkal, better known to some as Kim Il-Caligula, continuing the Korean tradition wherein each generation of leaders is crazier than the last."

Yvette was now signalling that Kim Ilkal's mugshot had been put on the screen – the now-infamous image of the fat, bald-headed Korean dictator in chains, a scar over his right eye, a dishevelled Mao suit, a broken, dispirited face; the sort of expression showing utter disgust with oneself for not choosing suicide when he had the chance. "Among his many deeds, Mr Kim is alleged to have kidnapped South Korean and Japanese filmmakers to make comic book superhero ripoffs for him, selling crack-cocaine, methamphetamine and various date-rape drugs out of North Korean embassies around the world, laundering hundreds of millions of dollars in counterfeit foreign currencies, sending brainwashed spies to blow up a Japanese flight like something out of a Richard Condon novel, trying to orchestrate the international heist of a shipment of cognac from Vladivostok to Beijing, and naming a horse as chairman of the Assembly Presidium. The horse, an anonymous source tells us, was later eaten during the famine."

Joe brought the camera back to Blaine. "These allegations, minor as they may be in comparison to the larger allegations Mr. Kim is facing, we are told, will be read out this week. And I do mean *this week*. Kim Ilkal is facing more than 115,000 individual charges, including conspiracy to start and wage war, international terrorism, enslavement, and crimes against humanity. Just reading the charges is expected to take several days."

The camera now shifted to the right, zoomed in on the bench, where various legal aids were making final adjustments; audio testing the microphones, laying out pens and notepads, filling glasses with water, ensuring the translation earpieces were in working order.

Blaine took a brief second to swallow, moisten his throat. Then he continued, "Presiding will be a tribunal of five

justices: Chief Justice Teragai Noyan, special judicial counsel for the Khanate of Mongolia; Eje Xi, secretary of state for the Manchu Imperium, who are hosting this trial; Lee Hyeonsik, acting president of the Republic of Korea; Takemoto Yamagata, the Japanese minister of justice; and Chen Xuanli, vice president of the Republic of Taiwan.”

Blaine hoped to God he'd pronounced all those names right.

“You can see there at the end a sixth seat. That's reserved for a representative from the People's Republic of China. The office of Teragai Noyan confirmed with us again just this morning that the offer remains open for the PRC. The Chinese are not expected to take part, in protest of sovereignty conflicts with the Manchu Imperium and with Inner Mongolia. The BBC reached out the People's Republic for comment, but has received no response.

“You can also see a seventh seat, also vacant, off to the side of the tribunal bench. That seat is reserved for the Americans, in honour of the thirty thousand service members lost in Korea. The Americans have been invited to observe and advise, although the Council of Asia insists upon reserving final authority with regards to sentencing. The Landauer administration last week issued a statement that United States will not be participating. In the statement, President Landauer says, ‘The crimes of Kim Ilkal and his regime are grave, unspeakable and abominable, and justice should be swift and exact. However, it is the position of the United States that Mr Kim's crimes are not solely crimes committed against his own people, not solely crimes committed against his neighbours and brethren to the south, not solely crimes committed against Japan or China or Asia as a whole – but crimes against all peoples of the world. As such, true justice cannot be delivered in Jeju City, nor Tokyo, nor Beijing or Shenyang. Nor could it in Washington. Mr Kim's crimes can only be answered in the Hague. Until Mr Kim is marched into the International Criminal Court, the American people – and the world – cannot view justice as having been served.’

“It should be noted that in that statement, President Landauer, when he refers to China, is referring both to the People's Republic and the Manchu Imperium, echoing the American sentiment on that sovereignty dispute.”

Joe brought the camera back to Blaine. The sweat, he could feel, was a sheen on his forehead now. “His opposition, House Speaker Olivia Newman, fervently disagrees. In a press conference in Phoenix on Tuesday, the congresswoman declared, ‘I for one applaud Teragai Noy – *sic* – and the people of Mongolia. Mr Ilkal's crimes are more unconscionable than I can give voice to. The firing squad or the hangman's noose is what he deserves, and I don't care whose firing squad it is. The Chinese, the Mongolians, the Japanese... whoever's flag is waving doesn't matter to me. How much more oxygen we let him breathe debating that flag does.’

“Opinions in Parliament roughly echo those in America. Abigail Park, representative from the Orkneys, where more than two hundred thousand refugees have been naturalized, said this: ‘The Kim Dynasty never had sovereignty upon that peninsula. It was a criminal regime. All Koreans were and are citizens of a united Korea. What Mr Harujin has done is aid that united Korea in healing, and he continues to aid it still; this is needed for the healing of the Korean people. President Lee sits upon the tribunal, and I for one shall consider the tribunal's verdict legitimate, just, and final.’

“Prime Minister Mannerling, however, is in the opposite camp. He, too, echoed the sentiments of President Landauer in session yesterday, alienating many in his own party. Ms Park responded that he was ‘toeing the China line’, a reference to the fact that the United Nations Security Council are unanimous in their dismissal of this trial and the illegitimacy of this tribunal. The Hague, demands the UNSC, the Hague.”

Blaine just then thought about what Emily had said the night before, when she'd sneaked in through the adjoining hotel room door in their Shenyang hotel. “Ah, just shoot the fucker,” she'd said as she read through his notes in the nude. Then, almost as an afterthought, she said, “Or put him in a cage fight with a dragoncat princess.”

She'd been referring to General Harujin's lineage, which he could trace back to the nation's founder centuries ago. Some bloodthirsty ninja chick had evidently levelled a city, back in the day, with her own death squads, naphtha trebuchets, and a pet leopard. Drinking from upturned human skulls and what have you. Tombs, they called the bitch.

Then Emily had remarked, half as a whisper, “If ever there were a bird I'd let take me with a strappy, it would be her.”

Damn that woman. If he blushed or popped a boner during the broadcast from a war crimes tribunal...

He kept himself composed. “The rest of the world, it seems, is just as divided. Mass protest marches are set to occur today in Paris, Brussels, Amsterdam, Sydney, Toronto, Rio de Janeiro, New Delhi and many other cities. Security forces around the world are on high alert, and the global terror alert system has been elevated to six. Security here, as mentioned, is *par excellence*, but various governments are warning about possible insurgent activity in response to the trial. Guerrilla fighters continue to assail South Korean, Manchu and Mongolian soldiers in North Hamgyeong Province.

“Manchu laws preventing us from filming during the trial itself, we'll keep you posted as things progress. Blaine Devlin, BBC, Shenyang.”

“Aaand we're out,” declared Yvette.

“Thank fucking God,” he muttered, immediately loosening his tie. He felt like he was going to overheat in this courtroom. “How did I do?”

Emily smirked at him. “You mispronounced President Lee's name.”

“Oh, son of a...”

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The cuffs were tight around his wrists. The weight of the chains, too, pulled heavily on him. Part of that weight, he knew, was only in his soul.

He was a broken man. Thank Lenin's embalmed corpse that his uncle – so too his grandfather, and great-grandfather – couldn't see him now. Draped in an orange jumpsuit, chained like a slave, at the mercy of imperialist–*Yeotmeogeo*, he thought, snorting a little. All that propaganda is shit – pure, unadulterated shit.

“What was that?” asked one of the Bannermen in heavily-accented Korean.

“Nothing, officer,” he said, his voice so soft even he himself could barely hear it.

The Bannerman grunted.

He hadn't so much as had a moment alone to piss in the past eight weeks. When there wasn't someone else physically in the room with him, he was on camera, watched by a team of people, from every angle, twenty-four hours a day.

He'd always known he was inheriting a rotten pie. The glory days of his great-grandfather were long gone. But he'd only really ever half-acknowledged to himself that, even when that pie was fresh, someone had pissed in the filling.

The entire system was rotten.

He had tried to reform it. By Lenin's ghost, he'd tried reforms. Eunhye, he prayed, would tell the court and the world that truth.

Ah, Eunhye, his most beloved mistress. He missed her, even now, despite her betrayal. He remembered vividly, as the Mongol troops were combing the hillside above them, how Eunhye had snuck out of bed that last night. She'd shot the guard. That sound was what had woken Ilkal. And then there was gunfire reverberating through the entire bunker, and a grenade went off and–

He should have shot himself. He'd had the time to do it.

But despite her duplicity, he also remembered the good times. The parties that went on for days, how she could sing and dance and hold her cognac like someone twice her weight, and always had a smile on her face. She was carefree when playing roulette, betting huge sums that he'd have to cash for her. This was a game of hers, her way to pay him back in sexual favours.

This brought a bittersweet smile to his face even now – remembering that night she gambled away thirteen million on double-zero. Those Russians inspected every bill to ensure they weren't superdollars.

(Her punishment that night was a gallon on lubricant and a spiralled dildo attached to a drill. Too bad the power cut out thirty seconds into it.)

She, he imagined, would be a star witness. Yes, she was sure to describe in detail all the other mistresses he'd had machine-gunned (she'd pulled the trigger herself on one group, wondered if she'd mention that), but she would also mention the reforms he tried to put through.

Izanagi, too, the Japanese director, had known about the reforms. Ilkal had had many conversations about the problems with the *juche* system. Izanagi too, he imagined, would be a witness.

Yes, and so would Yeonsi, his wife, and Pyeongsan, his cousin. Yeonsi hated him. These last few years, she'd seen him only on public occasions, and otherwise stayed in her own villa. She'd never liked his indulgence with the Joy Brigade, refused to sleep with him atop the human bed. Pyeongsan didn't despise him, so far he knew, but his cousin was the one given the order to... make the camps go away when it was clear war was imminent.

That had been eight months ago. Ilkal hadn't seen his cousin since. To this day, he didn't know what had happened with the camps. He feared he would find out during the trial.

He cleared his throat.

“What is it?” asked the Bannerman again.

“I was just wondering,” he croaked, “will I get a chance to speak with my counsel before the trial begins?”

Since he was told a tribunal was to be convened, he hadn't so much as spoken to any legal counsel. He assumed they were assigning him someone, but hadn't been permitted to speak to any experts in international law. They hadn't even told him the official charges, or when the trial was set for.

The Bannerman snorted, a half-chuckle. Checking his watch, the man said, “Come now, you should be familiar with how a show trial works, no?”

Just then another Bannerman opened the door. A hundred or more faces glared in from the courtroom. He felt small somehow in this orange jumpsuit. “Come,” the Bannerman said, nudging him in the back. “It is time.”

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