

[A Cruel Romance, Vol. I] Commander Ho and His Deeds

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Commander Ho and His Deeds

Commander Ho was the seventh child of his family. He was preceded by six older sisters: Chao-Di (Beckoning Brother), Nian-Di (Thinking of Brother), Hsiang-Di (Wishing for Brother), Pan-Di (Hoping for Brother), Deng-Di (Waiting for Brother), and Yin-Di (Drawing Brother). Judging by just the nature of these names, one could form a general speculation of Commander Ho's status within the household—in theory, he should have been fairly well-respected.

In practice, no one could attest to how respected he actually was. After all, while all six of the young mistresses were the First Wife's own offspring, our Commander Ho was bore by the Fifteenth Concubine. The First Wife acted as the overseer of the Ho Household, and like any wife, her fondness for a concubine's son was limited. Nonetheless, since Master Ho—or Marshal Ho, as most people knew him—doted on the boy dearly, Lady Ho was hardly in a place to interfere. But then again, the Old Marshal had his own great deeds to attend to and couldn't sit home and amuse his son all day, so ultimately, it was most likely that Commander Ho ended up in Lady Ho's hands for the better part of the time...

The situation was a bit complicated to speak of, but that could be overlooked for now. By this time, Commander Ho was already a grown man and had celebrated his twenty-second birthday last May. His childhood incidents were as ephemeral as fading smoke and fleeting clouds; he had long grown past them.

For now, we shall continue with the introduction of Commander Ho's names.

As the seventh young master, Commander Ho was known in public as Ho Ch'i-yeh, or the "Seventh Master". In more domestic settings, Lady Ho referred to him as the Seventh Son, and his sisters called him Little Brother. Marshal Ho's approach was much more original—he called him Ch'i-Bao, the Seventh Precious.

Of course, when he eventually reached the age of eight, he followed the trend of the time and abandoned his family school to seek new knowledge at private institutions such as Marianne Elementary, where he started going by his formal name, Ho Bao-Ting.

In addition to that, he had a courtesy name—Ji-Ch'ing.

Ho Bao-Ting, Ho Ji-Ch'ing. Both of these names seemed becoming and appropriate enough for the young, untrammelled commander-in-chief. But regrettably, due the Old Marshal's influence, the world knew only of the "Seventh Precious".

Commander Ho didn't like being called Ch'i-Bao. He didn't like it one bit.

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At the age of sixty-two, Marshal Ho died in the bed of his Twenty-First Concubine, leaving the hundreds of thousands of his men guarding Jehol in total chaos. A number of the regimental commanders, all young and bright, harboured considerable egos and believed themselves capable of replacing the Old Marshal. However, after a period of internal conflict and heavy casualties, they found themselves in a deadlock. The remaining young "gallants" agreed to make peace, and decided they would politely invite the Old Marshal's son over for succession,

so that instead of nurturing the possibility of regimental war and collective doom, they could remain unified under the Army's banner.

And so Ho Ch'i-yeh, who was still preparing for university and studying the Sciences at a missionary school, was tracked down and carried off to lead an army in quite some confusion.

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Ho Ch'i-yeh was an attractive man by nature. When he was younger, his complexion and features—with those elegant upturned eyes and lengthy eyelashes—were reminiscent to those of a fine porcelain doll. His inert expression and dull gaze only added to the effect.

After more than twenty years of maturing, the porcelain boy became a tall, slender porcelain young man. From an aesthetical perspective, being comparable to a work of art shouldn't be any hindrance, but as for the state of affairs, the Seventh Master was to be the commander-in-chief of the Anguo Army, in which case looking porcelain would seem somewhat absurd, or inconsistent with his standings, at the very least.

But nothing could be done about that, since the Old Marshal had only one Ch'i-Bao. Despite his resemblance of porcelain dolls, the "gallants" barely managed to snatch him away—Lady Ho refused to let the family's only son associate with some warmongers her late husband left behind. Having no alternatives, the gallants resorted to liberating the Seventh Master from school through the means of abduction, coaxing and hauling until he was securely stuffed inside their car, which then drove off to Tientsin in a trail of smoke. Before they even reached their destination, Ho Bao-Ting's succession as the Commander-In-Chief of the Anguo Army was telegraphed.

After that, Ho Ch'i-yeh never returned to his home in Peking.

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As lifeless as he may have seemed, Ho Ch'i-yeh was in fact quite haughty and bad-tempered due to the Old Marshal's conditioning. The gallants coaxed and tickled him in hopes of making him their permanent puppet, unaware that peace would end abruptly within the year. War was upon them.

When Ho Ch'i-yeh left school, he didn't even know how to handle a brawl, let alone a full-scale war. He retreated with the gallants in befuddlement, barely aware of their whereabouts. Anyhow, by the time they finally made settlement, he discovered that the richly-feathered phoenix he was—before having a chance to take off—had fallen into a stinking little valley in the middle of absolutely nowhere.

Ho Ch'i-yeh had never passed his Geography; he only had a very vague sense of his current location. Perhaps they were in a small county-town on the Honan-Shensi border—or was it the Shensi-Kansu border?

He gave up on naming the specific border, but the small county-town part was true enough.

There were no opera houses, no Peking Restaurant, no Beihai Park... There was nothing except for an excess of cow droppings and dust.

The Seventh Master was deeply dissatisfied with his current circumstances. He had grown up in the sumptuous luxury of Ho Mansion, and if he had the time, he would happily embark on vacations in the most prosperous places of China, taking his time to spend away his gold like water, absorbing the best of the Modernism that had newly reached the country. As a Modern Man, he had his share of roseate dreams; for example, as he cheated his way through his final exams, he too thought about studying abroad and pursuing further education, and when he had tea at the local brothel, he too pondered over the sacredness of love and the freedom of marriage... His mind was all-embracing, and could incorporate reality and fantasy seamlessly.

But at the moment, he seemed to believe that his abilities were in fact limited, and was quite unable to associate the

rotten dust-road outside his door with the bright and glorious future he was meant to fulfil.

Since there was always something going on inside his head, he appeared absent-minded most of the time. When a man was distracted, his reaction time slowed down remarkably.

Absent-minded, slow, porcelain-like. It was almost against the gallants' conscious to even call him "Commander".

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Since the Seventh Master was promoted from Ho Bao-Ting to Commander Ho, the accompanying ostentation and extravagance of a commander was only reasonable. Currently, he made residence in the strongest and grandest courtyard cottage of blue bricks and tiles, with one administrative squad, one guard squad, six adjutants, a cook who made pastries, plus a maid who did an exceptional job with the laundries.

Commander Ho's daily routine consisted of sitting at home and accommodating the few regimental commanders in the Army. These commanders varied in age, but were consistent in their crudity and difficulty. Since the area wasn't under anyone's jurisdiction, their modernized equipment made them nearly invincible, and left them with no battles to go to and too much time to pick fights amongst themselves.

Commander Ho positioned himself in a stately Guangxu palace chair, where he'd listen to the colonels' complaints and instigations with the uttermost patience and a blank face. When they had finished said complaints and instigations, the Commander's pale visage would then, according to its particular beholder, reveal the appropriate expression. Commander Ho was indeed of scholarly origins, yet his berating possessed the might of ten thousand thunderbolts, its roar of rage becoming quite an attraction in the Army.

On an average day, he would kick one man out with his berating, beat one away with a horsewhip, and gently persuade another into departure. The ones that received the gentler version were usually the gallants who were involved in his own abduction a while back. Commander Ho knew he was clueless when it came to military affairs, and would likely remain clueless since he had no interest in the subject whatsoever. Hence he relocated his field of concentration. Instead of warfare management, he would focus on personnel management!

Other than the yelling and humouring, he had no other work to do. The days were long, so Commander Ho idled about in his room with a simple looking orderly squatting beside him, cracking open walnuts on the brick floor with a little hammer.

Walnuts were a local specialty. Commander Ho had consumed *jins* of them since his arrival—he could almost skip his meals.

Walnuts were supposedly good for the brain. Commander Ho was nearly becoming a *Yaojing*^[1].

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^[1] *Yaojing* – "a Chinese term that generally means 'demon'. Yaoguai are mostly malevolent animal spirits or fallen celestial beings that have acquired magical powers through the practice of Taoism." (Wikipedia) Yaojings are believed to be highly intelligent and cunning.

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[A Cruel Romance, Vol. I] Li Shih-Yao

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Li Shih-Yao

There was a staff officer from the Anguo Staff Division by the name of Ma Hao-Tian. A man of womanly appearance.

This was by no means an implication that he was in any way dainty looking. His womanly looks were roughly the ones of a middle-aged farm-wife, and in his uniforms, he looked more like an old maid in drag. For this reason, Ma was given a nickname: Aunt Ma.

At the moment, the Staff Division was at a lack of things to staff. The Army had long stopped issuing them pays, and while the troops found their own sources of income elsewhere, the staff officers could hardly go plunder around with their pistols. Faced with a very real possibility of going hungry, Chief Ma forced himself to come imploring Commander Ho for advice.

Commander Ho listened and drank his tea. He was silent for a long moment.

Ma stole a glance at him from the right-hand seat. He knew well enough that Commander Ho was nothing but a young former student with neither any military power nor experience to speak of, maneuvered into place only as a puppet of sorts. Yet for some incomprehensible reason, he felt a bit uneasy. Ho Bao-Ting had an air of dankness about him, looking contemplative all year round and mulling perpetually over some undisclosed matter. In his dealings with mysterious characters, Ma always kept his distance.

For a while, they sat facing each other in silence, then Commander Ho finally spoke, his tone gentle. "Li Shih-Yao has captured the County of Wantong recently. He's got money."

"Even if he does, he won't be sharing any of it with the staff division," Ma laughed wryly.

Commander Ho smiled as well. "Then why don't you go talk to him?"

Ma stuck out his tongue. "Commander, I wouldn't dare!"

Commander Ho put his tea down and withdrew his pleasantness. "More scared of Li Shih-Yao than of me?"

Ma was somewhat thrown off. "No, no no, of course not! What I was trying to say, Commander, is that because you're so generous and show such solicitude to those beneath you, every one of our men bears witness to your nobility. So the Division have elected me to come for your advice."

"It's a difficult time," Commander Ho began icily. "People are dying in famines. The Staff Division may be on a tight budget at the moment, but you ought to find ways to make do."

"Commander," Ma begged. "You've no idea. Our men of every rank are practically living on millet."

Commander Ho nodded slightly. "Millet is extremely nutritious. Daily consumption can improve mental sharpness, making them the perfect staple for your division."

At this point there was nothing more Ma could say. Sulking, he turned to leave.

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Ma didn't get very far from Ho Residence before he ran straight into Colonel Li Shih-Yao. Li had just turned thirty this

year and stood tall and imposing with a distinct ruffianly air. He laughed loudly when he spotted Chief Ma. "I say, Auntie Ma, did you go begging for alms at the Commander's?"

Ma had always looked to Li Shih-Yao with some measure of fear and dared not to say much at the jest. "Colonel Li is very astute," he chuckled obsequiously. "Our division is indeed... We won't be able to hold out for much longer."

Li Shih-Yao laughed out a "Ha". "So what did the Commander say?"

"He wouldn't help," Chief Ma grimaced.

Li tried to give him advice. "Let Old Lan do the talking, the Commander would listen to him."

"Chief Lan's already gone to Hsian. He's the one with the plans. Did you expect him to stay behind with us and live on millet?"

Li Shih-Yao let out another "Ha". Without another word, he walked past Ma and swaggered on.

Once he entered the courtyard, he feigned a kick at an orderly with a little hammer. "Little imperishable brat. What are ya doing?"

The young orderly dodged the kick nimbly. "Don't you push me around, Colonel Li," he said indignantly. "I have a name. Why do you keep calling me little brat?"

Li Shih-Yao laughed in spite of the offence. "All right," he gave a wave with his hand. "So Chao Hsiao-Hu, I see you've been dawdling around with that hammer all day. Enjoying life, eh?"

Chao Hsiao-Hu shook a heavy looking cloth sack at him. "I was going to prepare walnuts for Commander Ho. I wasn't slacking off!"

Li stepped toward him and wrapped an affectionate arm around his shoulders. "You little tigerling [1]. Where's the Commander?"

"Commander Ho's in bed, taking a nap," Hsiao-Hu answered. "You can't disturb him right now!"

"You little fucker," Li whacked him across the head, "I was the one who dug you out of a corpse pile, but look at you now! A watchdog for the Commander!"

Awkwardness filled Hsiao-Hu's face; he was only a sixteen-year-old boy after all. "If you go wake up the Commander now, I would be the one on the receiving end of the punishments. Actually, Colonel Li, Commander Ho will only be asleep for half an hour at most, so why don't you sit down and relax for a bit, and I'll get you some walnut. By the time you're done, the Commander should be awake. How's that?"

Li knew all about Commander Ho's temper, and since he hadn't come with urgent business, he had no intention of provoking the Commander—not that he couldn't afford to. It just wasn't worth the trouble. But the October weather wasn't exactly suitable for a picnic in the courtyard either.

Hsiao-Hu had already carried out a wooden chair and wiped its seat carelessly with his sleeves. "Do have a seat, Colonel Li. I heard you seized Wantong and made a grand fortune! Tell me all about it!"

"Well..." Li Shih-Yao rubbed his chin and hesitated elatedly. "There isn't really much to tell. Haven't you seen a capture before?"

"I heard Wantong was a real large county. And you burned the governor alive like a lantern!"

"That's what you call a show of authority," Li laughed. "And it lets any by-looking commoners know the consequence

of disobedience."

Hsiao-Hu was curious. "I heard the governor was real fat, all dripping with grease. Is it true that he almost burned for an entire day?"

"Not just an entire day!" Li bragged animatedly. "Goodness, I don't know what that old brat fed himself with. He was meatier than three grown pigs combined!"

Hsiao-Hu crouched down and took out a single walnut from his cloth bag, setting it on the brick floor and hammered it open with a couple of casual strikes. He handed its content, perfectly intact, to Li.

Li ate his walnut. "What's the Commander up to these days?"

Hsiao-Hu was thoughtful for a moment. "Nothing much," he replied. "Mutters something about Chief Lan once in a while."

That got Li interested. "What's he muttering about Lan for?"

"Dunno," Hsiao-Hu continued to hammer his walnuts with his head down.

"How can you not? You follow him around all day."

Hsiao-Hu was deeply absorbed in his hammering. "If you ask me how much walnut the Commander eats a day, I would know then."

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Li Shih-Yao wasn't too fond of walnuts. Fortunately, after his third one, Commander Ho woke up.

After his awakening, the Commander had yet to go through his yawning, absently gazing, dressing, and face-washing. Though the process wasn't overly complex, it lasted a good twenty minutes due to the pace of his movements. Li waited with the uttermost patience until Commander Ho stole silently into the drawing room and sat down on the wooden chair regally.

Li Shih-Yao didn't stand up and merely flashed a wide grin at the commander. "I'm here, Commander! How was your nap?"

Commander Ho lowered his eyelids, his short hair sticking out in every direction. "Fine."

"See, I just got back from Wantong," Li continued. "The place was impoverished. Weren't anything of value there, but I did get you some Tar. Prime quality stuff."

"The consumption of opium," Commander Ho said quietly, "is unhealthy."

As if Commander Ho's presence was influencing him, Li couldn't help but adopt a more civilized manner as well. "Just a puff or two once in a while, that can't hurt!"

Commander Ho wore army trousers with riding boots. A brown tweed army-coat hung open and revealed a white shirt tucked loosely into his belts. As he listened to Li Shih-Yao, he looked down abruptly began to button his coat.

After the third button, he steered his eyes back to Li. "You get addicted easily."

Li burst out laughing. "So? It's not like we can't afford it!"

Commander Ho gave a faint smile and said nothing more.

They sat facing each other in silence. Feeling a bit awkward, Li dug a wrinkled pack of cigarettes out of his pocket and stuck a cigarette between his lips. When he searched again for matches, he found none.

He spotted a box of them on the small table beside Commander Ho. The commander didn't offer him any, and he didn't really have the nerve to reach for it himself. After a moment of hesitation, he suddenly gritted his teeth and asked himself: why the fuck should I be scared of him?

With that, he drew up his courage, got to his feet and made his way to Commander Ho, picking up the box of matches in the process. Commander Ho kept his eyes downcast, his gaze hollow.

Li lit his cigarette and took a deep drag, feeling markedly more relaxed. With his face hidden behind the pale blue smoke, his expression became more animated.

"Commander, I heard Lan Bai-Shan went to Hsian? When did he leave? And how come I haven't heard anything all this time?"

Commander Ho was still thinking: "the wealthiest county of Wantong... fooling me with some Tar... these bastards..." when he noticed Li Shih-Yao staring straight at him. Startled, he asked: "What?"

Li flashed his white teeth with a smile. "Commander, you really awake? I was just asking, when did Lan Bai-Shan go to Hsian? And why didn't I get the word of that?"

"About half a month ago. He went to see Chairman Fu."

"Fu Yang-Shan?"

"Yes."

"What's he seeing him for? We have the men and the guns, we can occupy this place permanently, shoot whoever we want. Live like emperors for a few days, isn't that all good and well? If that Fu were to take us in, wouldn't it just impose more restrictions on our men?"

"The newspapers outside are calling us bandits," Commander Ho explained.

Li laughed out loud. "Who cares! Soldiers and bandits are essentially family! Again, we have the men and we have the guns, why put ourselves under Fu's service?"

"It's just a title. We need him to assign a designation."

Li suddenly sat up straight. "Will we get paid?"

Commander Ho shook his head.

"Dammit!" Li sat back. "Then what's the fucking point? We'll still have to fend for ourselves!"

Commander Ho thought again, "you've gathered tens of thousands of tax money...and you're only giving me a bit of dope..."

Commander Ho had an extremely petty mind. Otherwise he wouldn't be able to find enough things to brood over all day and night.

Li raised a hand to rub at his short bristles of hair and steered the conversation toward his true intention.

"Commander," he said. "Jin Hwan-Ran said he was on your orders when he led his troops into Wantong, what's that all about? I was the one that took down the city, just who the hell did he think he was? He did nothing during the fight yet came running for the loot—there's no such thing as a free lunch in this world!"

Commander Ho looked up, his impassive face showing very faint traces of surprise. "Colonel Jin said he was going to aid you. Why, did the two of you get into another quarrel?"

"Jin's full of it!" Li rolled up his sleeves. "How can you believe anything he says?"

"Colonel Li," Commander Ho's face fell. "I beg your pardon."

Li saw anger fill the porcelain face and knew his last comment had gone over the line, so he grinned and tried to turn his words around. "Commander, Jin Hwan-Ran is a sly one, likes nothing better than bullying around under your name. You're too honest and kind to know about this sort of underhanded businesses."

Commander Ho had always disliked Li Shih-Yao, and his face visibly paled in rage at Li's disrespect. He paid no attention to Li's explanations, and merely reached for the teacup on the table and smashed it back down with force.

"If Colonel Li has a problem with me, he's more than welcome to take his troops with him and leave! To come to me and throw wild accusations around—what is your meaning? "

He was angry. Li Shih-Yao, on the other hand, was not. He just found the situation very tricky.

"Commander," he began, "why do you have to be so short-tempered? How can I possibly have any intention of leaving? I was just ranting, nothing more to that. All right, it was just my filthy mouth emitting barks. Don't be angry."

Commander Ho had only dared to suggest Li's dismissal because he was confident that it would never happen. He knew that at the moment, if Li's Regiment were to declare independence, they would probably get mass-annihilated by the next day—there were a unit of some ten thousand soldiers who had moved out from the Northeast garrisoned fifty miles away in Tuolo Bay. A few days ago, Li Shih-Yao had strafed one of their squads for no apparent reason, and the Northeasterners were not known to just bend over. If it wasn't for the fact that he served under the Anguo Army, he would have been swarmed and eaten alive by now.

Commander Ho was a very practical man. For him Li's apologies were nothing more than the bumping of his upper and lower lips and had no significance. Lifting a hand to feel his disheveled hair, he forced down his anger and spoke. "The Staff Division is almost going into starvation. You should at least help them out."

"All right, all right," Li nodded. "Tomorrow I shall..." his eyes shifted, "send them some grains to replenish their supply. Well... Since Chief Lan isn't around, there's no one in charge over at their division. How about I simply send the stuff to you, and when Lan comes back, he can take care of the rest?"

"So he refuses the toast and would rather drink a penalty. Despicable!" Commander Ho thought. "He wouldn't know his place until I beat him to it! The crude and ignorant thing! Warmonger! Took over an entire county and only gives me some dope! Damn it all..."

After a taking a chaotic tour inside his head, Commander Ho returned to reality. His expression calmed and he turned to face Li Shih-Yao. "You were the main force in the capture of Wantong, there's no question about that," he pacified. "If Jin Hwan-Ran ever tries anything out of line, I will be the one to scold him, so don't worry about it. Furthermore, I have very limited space. Where do you expect me to store all those grains? Convert them into silver dollars and send those here instead!"

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Li Shih-Yao had come to see Commander Ho full of enthusiasm, only to have it crushed as he retreated from the Residence ashen-looking. Yet he still wasn't angry. Just a bit depressed, as if he had done something horribly wrong and hadn't been able to make amends.

Stepping out of the front gates, he strode down a couple of steps and felt increasingly upset as he dwelt on it.

Suddenly he smacked himself on the head. "Hey," he blurted out. "Why the fuck should I be scared of him?"

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Having said that, he still sent someone to deliver five-hundred silver dollars to Ho Residence the following morning. As Commander Ho sat alone in his Guanxu palace chair and counted his silver dollars, a sudden sadness washed over him. He felt like a beggar.

[A Cruel Romance, Vol. I] Lan Bai-Shan

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Lan Bai-Shan

Like his name, Chao Hsiao-Hu looked tigerishly simple and upright. With his roundish face, wide eyes, and well-built physique, he would make a good lad anywhere.

Li Shih-Yao claimed to have dug him out of a corpse pile, but this description wasn't entirely accurate. True, he had been the one doing the digging, but it was under the direct command of Commander Ho who stood ten meters away.

Ever since then, Hsiao-Hu had regarded the Commander as his personal saviour. Towards the Commander, he was respectably loyal, though he back-talked and slacked off regularly. Towards him, the Commander was exceptionally kind, and for the most part just let him be. On the rare occasions when he didn't, he would hang Hsiao-Hu by the ceiling and flog him up with a horsewhip.

After a couple of whipping sessions soaking in freezing water, Hsiao-Hu learned his lesson. So every now and then when he caught the strange glint in Commander Ho's gaze, he would reflexively start to run for his life, only daring to return after the sky had turned completely dark.

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To Chao Hsiao-Hu, Commander Ho clearly led a very boring life. He had an entire army under his command, yet he neither led nor fought with it. He merely sat about without any form of entertainment, not a glimpse of women in his courtyard since the start of the century, and practiced the art of debate with his subordinate officers, pleasant for one moment and furious the next, as if it were all—though not nearly as entertaining as—acts in a play.

One night, he carried a basin of hot water to the Commander's bedroom as usual. Commander Ho sat at the edge of his bed, his long legs stretched out before him on the floor, and appeared to be, once again, in a trance.

Used to this particular look on his master's face, Hsiao-Hu didn't comment. He simply placed the basin in front of the bed and bent down to take off the commander's shoes and socks.

Commander Ho rarely walked. After a life in clover, his feet almost had a delicate tenderness. Washing another man's feet was by no means a pleasant task, yet Hsiao-Hu had a certain investigative interest in Commander Ho's. In other words, he'd always wanted to take a bite at them!

Commander Ho's feet too, were made of fine porcelain, and would shatter at once with a bite.

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After he was done soaking his feet, Commander Ho went to bed. Lying under the white linen and red satin quilt, he started muttering to himself all of a sudden. "Why isn't he back yet?" he said with a sigh.

Carrying the basin, Hsiao-Hu nudged the door open quietly with his feet and left. He knew that Commander Ho was talking about Lan Bai-Shan.

Lan Bai-Shan, Chief of Staff, was a medium sized man, sharply dressed at all times and wore his uniforms with exceptional elegance. When he smiled his eyes would turn crescent-shaped, and his thin lips knew how to talk, amuse, and coax.

In addition to these talents, Chief Lan also made a close acquaintance with Commander Ho. He had been one of the kidnapers back at the school, and after Ho Ch'i-yeh was stuffed inside the car, it was Lan who held Ch'i-yeh in his arms and carried him all the way from Peking to Tientsin.

Ho Ch'i-yeh might have gotten too comfortable in Lan's arms. When he got off the car and became Commander Ho, though expressionless, he showed no sign of anger. He even asked Lan rather unnecessarily: "You must be exhausted, carrying me all the way here."

Lan Bai-Shan wore a smile. "Not at all. I could have held you all the way to Mukden."

Commander Ho smiled and said nothing more.

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Commander Ho slept well—or at least made it appear so. He never wasted the lamp oil to stay up like a night owl, nor did he get up before the sun shone high in the sky. Since he cared nothing for his appearance, he didn't waste any time grooming himself—at this point in life, appearance was the last thing that mattered. Nobody was around to appreciate or criticize it anyway, so he simply made himself as comfortable as possible.

After finishing a breakfast of noodle soup, he sat back on his bed and began his contemplations for the day.

"I must get a designation," he thought to himself. "Even if it means bowing to Fu Yang-Shan! That title is the only way to be considered a regular army and have a future career. Otherwise I'll be stuck here marauding, and if things continue this way, we'll become actual bandits. Li Shih-Yao and his ignorant, short-sighted likes see only the benefits at hand, never the larger picture. After all, they came from peasant stock, none of this matter to them. But I'm not like them...I can't stay in this hellhole and play the local despot forever!"

He had unwittingly knitted his brows. His fingers were gripping the hem of his shirt, his hands clutched into tight fists.

Hsiao-Hu's sudden yell came through the window. "Commander! Chief Lan's back!"

Lost in his thoughts, Commander Ho jumped at the abrupt noise.

"What?"

"Chief Lan is back," Hsiao-Hu repeated himself out of habit. "Just got off the car outside the courtyard. He's waiting to see you in the front hall."

Commander Ho stood up and took a few steps forward, but stopped in his tracks.

"Tell him to come in here," he ordered.

Hsiao-Hu sounded his affirmation and ran out with heavy thuds, leaving Commander Ho in his room to undo his belt in a frantic rush and tuck the bottom of his shirt into his trousers. He did most of the buttons on his army coat—the coat was fairly wrinkled, but fortunately, he's figure could be decked in anything and still look like an untainted porcelain statue.

He'd wanted to comb his hair as well, but didn't have the time. A moment later, Lan Bai-Shan had already helped himself in and saluted him in his straightest posture.

"Commander! Bai-Shan reports back!" he declared in a clear voice.

Commander Ho was trying to find his comb at a dresser, his back to Lan. He turned his head and threw him a glance, his face without any visible sign of joy.

"When did you come back?" he inquired flatly.

Lan shut the door behind him and took a few steps forward.

"Just now, and I came straight here," he said cheerfully.

Commander Ho threw him another glance. Lan Bai-Shan stood erect in his unruffled uniform and appeared to be in high spirits. His eyes were shining with laughter.

Under their influence, Commander Ho decided to say some kind words, though his tone always counteracted his intentions.

"You must be tired from your journey."

Lan stepped in closer to him. "Not at all. Don't worry, it's not like I walked there on foot, nothing to really tire me. How about you? I was worried about leaving you here all by yourself."

Commander Ho walked to his bed and sat down, his hands tucked into his pockets. He started to say "I'm fine—" before realizing that something wasn't quite right. He glanced up at Lan and thought to himself, what have you got to worry about? A staff officer worrying about his commander? How odd!

Lan Bai-Shan met his gaze and gave him a calm smile. "Ji-Ch'ing, I've gotten you some presents from Hsian. Had them brought back with the trucks and unloaded in the courtyard. I promise you'll be pleased once you see them."

Commander Ho stared down at the floor, savouring over the "Ji-Ch'ing" with amusement.

"I'll trust your taste."

Lan didn't answer and dug out an ivory comb from his pocket instead. He steadied the Commander's shoulder with one hand and with the other, started to comb through his dishevelled hair.

"How can a young man like you treat yourself this way," he muttered.

Commander Ho let him fiddle with his head. "Haven't got an audience."

"Well! What about me?" Lan laughed.

"You?"

"Am I not worthy?"

Commander Ho let out a sudden laugh. "Sure you are, but why would you be looking at me?"

Lan put away his comb and bent down in front of Commander Ho as if he were a child. He looked straight at Commander Ho's snowy forehead.

"I find you rather good-looking."

Commander Ho couldn't find a reply and didn't feel like discussing the matter any further, so in his panic, he gave a little chuckle and changed the subject.

"How did they respond in Hsian?"

Lan Bai-Shan paced before him with a hand in his pocket. "Fu Yang-Shan still isn't taking a clear stand. He probably knows we need him, so he plays indecision. But that doesn't matter. He's now on terrible terms with Chao Chen-Sheng. Before they openly declare war, all we have to do is go to Chao for a visit and put out some rumours, then

he'll be the one running to us for incorporation. And if we're lucky..." Lan smiled and sat down beside the Commander. "We might even earn some extra cash."

A very good idea indeed, but Commander Ho wasn't smiling.

His mind wasn't on Fu Yang-Shan. Lan Bai-Shan had a faint trace of perfume on him—where did it come from?

Meanwhile, Lan was still softly prospecting their bright future. Commander Ho forced himself to listen, but the scent was becoming stronger by every second and ascended to a point where it was almost irritating his nose.

Reaching the end of his forbearance, he finally leapt to his feet. He cut Lan off mid-sentence and pointed a finger at the door.

"Get out," he said through gnashed teeth.

Lan Bai-Shan was enraptured in his animated speech, never suspecting the sudden change in the Commander's demeanor. He froze for a moment, and rose slowly to his feet.

"Ji-Ch'ing, what's wrong?"

Commander Ho was indeed a man of few words, but his mind raced. The more he thought about it the odder it seemed, and eventually he almost killed himself with self-inflicted rage. When he looked up at Lan his eyes shone dangerously, which in fact made him look more alive than usual.

"Out!"

Lan wasn't any dumber than Hsiao-Hu. Once he saw the Commander's transformation—though he had no idea where the madness came from—he knew it wouldn't do him any good to antagonize the Commander any further. Thus after a brief moment of hesitation, he turned away awkwardly and left with a crestfallen look.

- : -

After kicking Lan Bai-Shan out, Commander Ho brooded in depression and almost wished he could cough up blood. His hands clasped behind his back, he strolled to the front yard and saw a group of orderlies transporting all sorts of packages to a spare room. Chao Hsiao-Hu was standing in command. He ran up to Commander Ho and flashed a blandish smile.

"Commander, Chief Lan brought these fabrics back from Hsian, and there're two more bags of foreign sweets and cigarettes. I already had those moved to the inner yard. Do you wish to see them right now?"

Commander Ho let out a deep breath.

"Get your men and go check if Lan Bai-Shan's brought back a woman," he ordered with a troubled look.

"Huh?" Hsiao-Hu asked in surprise.

Commander Ho raised his hand and gave him a resounding slap across his face. His expression was almost ferocious.

"Huh' your mother's fucking cunt!"

That effectively ended Hsiao-Hu's "huhs". Rubbing his face, Hsiao-Hu called a couple of his mates and ran out of the courtyard.

- : -

The county-town of Luyang was a small place, so Ho Residence wasn't very far from anywhere. Hsiao-Hu led his squad to Lan's front gates and chatted the guards up for a while. It didn't take very long before he got his answer, but he wasn't in a hurry to report back. He brought his boys to a small local restaurant and dug leisurely through a plate of stewed beef and fried peanuts, perfectly at ease. Only when he had filled his satiety did he wipe his mouth clean, and started a sprint from the restaurant's front door. He arrived at the Ho Residence just in time to run short of breath, his face appropriately flushed to convey his fatigue caused by the mission.

"Commander! I've got it figured out!"

Commander Ho was still standing in the front yard. He gave him a vicious stare.

"Speak!"

"Chief Lan did bring back a schoolgirl from Hsian. Said she's only about seventeen, all dressed in Western clothes with leather shoes and bare thighs. And she's real pretty."

Commander Ho nodded and looked as if he was about to become red in the face.

"Well, well. Go on!"

Hsiao-Hu blinked. "That was it."

Commander Ho spun around and began to head inside.

"Tell Adjutant Chang to deliver a message, I'm holding a meeting this afternoon."

Hsiao-Hu nodded a yes, and rushed off again cheerfully.

- : -

Commander Ho took a very brief nap, got up—this time dressing himself properly—and left the house.

The Anguo Army Headquarters was located at what was once a small school in Luyang. Over ten regimental commanders and a number of staff officers sat scattered in a classroom as they listened to Commander Ho's lecture in silence.

Commander Ho stood in front of the mass, his downcast eyes looking at no one but glaring angrily at the floor. He first went over the situation in Hsian concerning Fu, then immediately switched the subject.

"The Anguo Army was once known for its excellent reputation back in the Old Marshal's days, and as his son, it is partly my failure that it's come to what it is today. But since we are now heading back onto the right track, it is important that from now on, everyone here corrects his body and soul and behave like a soldier, not some bandit! For example, when travelling in the army, one must never bring women! When your soldiers are sleeping alone in their cold beds, how can you officers have the face to seek entertainment with your women? If you continue to lack this sort of self-discipline, we might even lose our morale one day. Without morale, who's going to fight and die for you? Where are you going to get your money?"

He looked up suddenly and glanced around the room. Without warning, he changed his subject again.

"Where is Jin Hwan-Ran?"

"Still in Wantong," Li Shih-Yao answered wearily. "He finally managed to find a place to stay. Why would he sacrifice it to come back? He'd rather die there!"

Commander Ho pounded the ramshackle desk. "You scoundrels! Only a few days of peace and you're all fighting

with each other! Go ahead, kill yourselves in battle, and then get wiped out by those Tuoluo Bay Northeasterners, so we can all be finished for good! Damn it, Officer Ma! Go deliver a message to Jin Hwan-Ran and tell him to come back here this instant! I have something to say to him!"

Officer Ma—Aunt Ma gave his reply immediately and carefully. "Yes sir, I shall go to Wantong tonight."

Commander Ho pounded the desk again as if something else in him was triggered. His eyes gleamed.

"Just what the hell is this place? There isn't even a telephone around! You hopelessly unambitious fools, how can you be so content with yourselves in this stinking valley? You lot are fit for nothing but bandits! All in all, I only have two points to make in this meeting: One, no infighting! Two, no women! That's all, meeting dismissed!"

After that announcement, Commander Ho left the room by himself in rage. The rest of the crowd, however, were in no hurry. Colonel Sun turned around and whispered to Li Shih-Yao. "What was he getting at? Am I the only one thrown off?"

Li laughed as he turned back to look at Lan Bai-Shan. "Chief Lan, you're on the friendliest terms with the Commander, why don't you give us an analysis of the Commander's intentions?"

"Don't ask me," Lan smiled. "I've no more idea about what's going on than the rest of you."

Li Shih-Yao turned to Chief Ma. "What do you think, Auntie?"

Ma was smiling as well. "I don't know about anything else, but the thing about women was definitely for Chief Lan."

"What's that supposed to mean?" Li asked. "Chief Lan, you went to Hsian and brought back some lass?"

Lan Bai-Shan smoothed his well-greased hair and smiled good-temperedly. "I did bring one."

Colonel Sun gave a clap. "Good for you, Old Lan!"

"Not only that," Ma added. "It's a schoolgirl! Is that right?" he turned to Lan.

Lan Bai-Shan simply smiled and remained silent.

Li Shih-Yao started to laugh. "So we've found the key to the problem! Our young commander has to sleep with a pillow every night—did you know that? He sleeps holding a pillow—while Chief Lan gets to spend his nights with a schoolgirl. Ha, Ch'i-Bao *shaoyeh* is jealous!"

"Colonel Li, you can't throw things like that around," Lan warned immediately. "With Commander Ho's narrow mind, he'd bite your head off if he ever hears about this."

Li Shih-Yao gave a defiant snort. "And I should be scared? He's nothing but Ho Ch'i-Bao."

Colonel Sun detected that the conversation was heading off the rails and quickly interrupted: "Come on, Old Li! We haven't even congratulated Chief Lan for winning his schoolgirl yet, why are you going on about the Commander? Schoolgirls are rarities, Old Lan, you must buy us dinner!"

"Dinner?" Lan replied distractedly. "Commander Ho's still on my case, and you expect me to be in the mood for dinner?"

Li Shih-Yao wanted the whole world to be free of fear for Commander Ho, and frowned disapprovingly at the comment. "Why the hell are you all scared of him? So what if he has a problem with you? You fellows make no sense! Not scared of enemy bullets but afraid of Ho Ch'i-Bao!"

The crowd fell silent.

Li was exasperated at their cowardice. What he didn't know was that he and these men shared the same concerns. While Commander Ho certainly didn't bite, it was better not to provoke him if it could be avoided in any way.

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[A Cruel Romance, Vol. I] Good Men and Bad Men

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Good Men and Bad Men

On the afternoon following the meeting, Jin Hwan-Ran appeared at the Ho Residence silently.

Only two years ago, Jin had still been a thoroughly handsome man. Unfortunately, shellfire of the battlefield knew no mercy, and a piece of shrapnel landed just below his eye and streaked all the way down to his chin, leaving behind a long, clean gash. The wound later healed and became a red line drawn abruptly across his face, disfiguring it effectively.

Commander Ho was very polite to him. "Colonel Jin, please have a seat. Bring in some tea!"

There was no smile on Jin's face. He sat down with disciplined propriety and got straight to his point. "Commander, there's no need for courtesy. I heard from Ma Ho-Tian that you've asked for me, please issue your orders."

"This isn't about me, it's Li Shih-Yao. You should know what I mean."

Jin Hwan-Ran jerked his head up. "Before seizing Wantong, he borrowed sixty carts of my provisions. Now that he's in the county, why can't I tag along for a small gain?" He said with disdain.

An orderly appeared with tea. Commander Ho took one of the cups and raised it to his lips ambiguously.

"You have a point. But Li Shih-Yao thinks otherwise."

Jin Hwan-Ran sneered. "I know exactly what he thinks. He simply wants Wantong all for himself. But there's no way that will happen!"

"Nobody's asking you to withdraw your troops. Wantong will be split equally between you and Li Shih-Yao."

Jin Hwan-Ran sighed a bit with relief. "This is why I only bow to you, Commander. You are fair with your decisions, just like the Old Marshal. It is what they mean by 'tigers do not sire dogs'"

Commander Ho sighed a bit as well. "Naturally, I must maintain fairness on my part. However, being fair is much easier said than done. I want to grant you fairness, but its actually success is not entirely up to me. Colonel Jin must try to understand my difficulties."

Jin nodded. "I'm no fool, Commander. If Li Shih-Yao dares to cause any trouble, I won't stand by."

"You're very straightforward," Commander Ho chuckled, "it's what I like about you. You are from the Academy, unlike Li Shih-Yao and his lot, so you must strive for the best in every aspect. A young man must not only take care of his interests, but also his name. It is the only way to wealth and glory later in life."

Jin Hwan-Ran nodded his acceptance earnestly. "Commander, though you are young, your words are filled with invaluable wisdom. I thank you for your teachings, Commander, and shall remember every word by heart."

Commander Ho decided that Jin had already given him enough face with his respectful attitude, and knew when to leave off: "I don't have anything else for you, you may leave."

Having received his dismissal, Jin promptly took his leave. Commander Ho remained in the drawing room, and for some incomprehensible reason, let his thoughts wander back to Lan Bai-Shan.

The hard wooden chair pressed uncomfortably against his backside as flames of jealousy burned his soul. Clenching his hands tightly around the arms of the chair, Commander Ho gritted his teeth and felt his body tense. The black clouds above his head gradually transformed in a dim figure of a schoolgirl.

In the end he could no longer remain seated. He stood up and strode toward the courtyard, only to discover that the air outside was too cold, and had to turn back to fetch a cloak.

With the newly added warmth, he walked on with remarkably more energy. Except when he emerged outside the main gate, an adjutant came running to him.

"Commander, the car isn't starting!"

"Why?"

"We're out of gas."

A sudden flare of rage engulfed him. A car without gasoline—life was indeed coming to an end!

He took a deep breath, quenching his anger in the process.

"Prepare me a horse!"

- : -

Commander Ho arrived at the Lan Residence at around five in the afternoon, almost as if he had come specifically to join him for dinner. Lan Bai-Shan was, in fact, having dinner at the time. The dinner consisted of white rice, stewed pork and dried vegetables. By Luyang standards, it was already bordering on luxury.

After his initial surprise at Commander Ho's sudden arrival, Lan hurried to swallow his mouthful of dried vegetables and rinsed his mouth with tea. He rushed out and greeted Commander Ho with ebullience.

"Commander, please come in!" He said as he stole a glance outside. "You got here by horse? That's too much trouble. If you wanted to speak to me, you could have sent someone after me. You didn't have to travel here in person."

Commander Ho still held his horsewhip in his hand. Staring at Lan Bai-Shan, he was at a loss of words.

"It's nothing, I just wanted to see you," he said when he finally conjured a sentence.

Lan beamed at him. "You came all the way here just to see me? I must thank you for your concern, Commander. It's cold out, come inside."

Commander Ho followed him in noncommittally. Lan smiled at him again. "Have you eaten?"

Commander Ho had no intention of cadging a meal at Lan's, but slow as he was, he'd already muttered out a "No" before considering his reply.

Lan drew him in to an inner room that was half occupied by a heated brick bed. A small table was lying atop, bearing a feast of stewed pork, dried vegetables and half a bowl of rice.

Commander Ho realized that he had come at a bad time.

Sitting down at the edge of the brick bed, he tossed his whip away and lowered his head, then began to remove his gloves with wholehearted concentration. Lan filled him a bowl of rice and placed a pair of chopsticks in front of him.

"Ji-Ch'ing, I don't have anything fancy here, but please have something to eat."

Commander Ho didn't have the appetite. He merely raised his eyes and scanned the table.

"You're eating by yourself?" he asked.

"Of course I am," Lan replied.

"What happened to the schoolgirl?"

Lan started laughing. "I sent her away."

"To where?" Commander Ho stole him a glance.

"Hsian. Otherwise she kept making a fuss. Says there's nothing here and the place isn't humanly inhabitable."

Commander Ho started to feel a little better, as if he'd just had a drink of iced plum juice during the hottest of the dog days.

"Oh...You sent her away."

Lan fixed his gaze at Commander Ho and chuckled meaningfully.

"Ji-Ch'ing my Ji-Ch'ing, you're such a child."

Detecting the conversation's digression towards the inappropriate, Commander Ho raised his head sharply.

Lan's smile was warm and open, emitting a faint trace of elderly affection and resignation. "Why are you speaking in riddles with me? You don't want me to bring along a woman, yet instead of talking to me about it, you throw a fit at the meeting. Why?"

Commander Ho felt that Lan Bai-Shan was ridiculing him, and wanted to give him a personal whipping, but...

Gathering his gloves and whip, an expressionless Commander Ho left the mansion. Come and gone like the wind—or a madman. But Lan Bai-Shan didn't mind him at all. The fact that Commander Ho had allowed himself to play his temper out meant that only Lan could jolly him along. This, at the same time, testified for the intimacy of his relationship with the Commander. The term "to have the emperor in one's power and order the dukes about in his name" would be referring the soldier-less and fund-less Chief Lan.

- : -

Back at his own place, Commander Ho felt as if his heart was being pinch by an invisible hand, relaxed for one moment and tense for the next, all without his consent. In his irritated depression, he wanted to set the house on fire and then go slaughter Lan Bai-Shan. Lan had been toying with him right from the start—he saw it now!

"Commander, do you want your dinner?" Chao Hsiao-Hu inquired behind him with great trepidation.

Commander Ho turned around and gave him a shove.

Hsiao-Hu stood slightly further away. "Do you want walnuts then?"

Commander Ho snatched off his army cap and hurled it at Hsiao-Hu's face with all of his might. Hsiao-Hu saw that the weapon lacked lethality, so he merely stood there and allowed the light touch of a strike to land on him.

"What do you want to do then? Go to bed?"

Commander Ho sat on his old-fashioned chair and buried his head in his hands, muttering, "I don't want to live."

Hsiao-Hu wasn't even slightly frightened. "Again? I know, Chief Lan must have offended you."

Commander Ho gazed dramatically up at the sky and let out a long sigh.

"What's he really thinking? Why don't I have the slightest idea? Hsiao-Hu, do you think he's a good man, or a bad man?"

"A bad man," Hsiao-Hu answered squarely.

Commander Ho looked at him in surprise. "A bad man?"

"You're friends with him, that's why you can't see any of his faults. Even if you do, you wouldn't think they are faults. You really shouldn't be asking me, I don't like to talk behind people's backs."

"Good. Splendid." Commander Ho nodded. "Even you won't speak the truth."

Hsiao-Hu curled his lips. He went forward the table to pour a cup of hot tea, and removed the lid to let it cool off.

A myriads of words stood at Commander Ho's throat in a cluttered mess, rushing to emerge without any consideration for their lack of audience. Unable to repress them any longer, he rose up and seized Hsiao-Hu's wrist, his lips trembling.

"Just wait and see. If he dares to reject me, I will kill him! Who does he think he is? Just another dog my father used to keep, yet now he comes to me and pretends—he fucking pretends to—"

Commander Ho couldn't go on. The excessive amount of excitement was sending him to the verge of breakdown. Other than his firm grasp of Hsiao-Hu's sturdy wrist, he could reach neither the heavens nor the earth, not single support to lean on. His expression remained dull, yet his eyes shone as if his entire soul was buried in there, clamouring for eruption.

Hsiao-Hu was becoming a bit frightened by his erratic display. He reached out and patted the Commander on the arm. "Commander, are you all right? Sit down, please sit down first."

Commander Ho took a rigid step back and fell stiffly into the chair, his fingers still gripping Hsiao-Hu's wrist.

"I don't want to live anymore!" he said, and suddenly started screaming in an amplified volume. "I want to go home—sons of bitches, fuck all your mothers—I WANT TO GO HOME!"

His voice broke off at the last word. Hsiao-Hu stared at him, dumbstruck. He saw tears in the Commander's eyes.

"Poor him," Hsiao-Hu thought. "Nobody really cares for him. He sleeps with a pillow—he's truly friendless and alone."

- : -

After his outburst, Commander Ho slumped back into his tall, rigid chair. His pallid face appeared even more lifeless than usual. Only the occasional tremor of his eyelashes indicated that he was still a living being of flesh and blood. He appeared to be either resting or impending death.

Carefully, Hsiao-Hu dislodged the fingers around his wrist and turned to fetch the hot tea. He tilted the cup toward Commander Ho's lips. "Do you want a sip, Commander? Just open your mouth."

Commander Ho opened his mouth and slowly drank half of the tea out of Hsiao-Hu's hand. The slight warmth of the tea reanimated his body and mind. He sat up straight, his gaze moving across Hsiao-Hu's face like a blade.

Hsiao-Hu curled his lips again. "Are you going to bed this time?"

"All right," Commander Ho looked down tiredly. "There's nothing else to do."

- : -

Having discharged his madness, Commander Ho slept soundly through the night with his pillow. Late in the following morning, he rose out of bed languidly, stared, yawned, washed, got changed, and strode into the drawing-room, starting a new round of guest reception feeling quite refreshed.

Li Shih-Yao came.

Li was about to go to battle with the North-Eastern troops. Out of courtesy, he came to notify Commander Ho in advance. Commander Ho didn't want him to fight the North-Easterners; he fantasized demoting him to a commoner—or even better, slaughtering him, had that been possible.

Realizing that the Commander was refusing to make a stand, Li wanted to pinch those porcelain cheeks and see if he could break them.

"Commander, why the—" he swallowed the "fuck" on his lips, and decided on a more civilized approach. "Why are you still hesitating? I barely laid my hands on those flocks at Wantong, and before our own brothers could even quit being vegetarians, they came and stole half of them. Now what kind of logic is that? If we don't teach them a lesson, they'll think I could be bullied!"

Commander Ho kept his head down, since he couldn't be bothered to look at Li. "Those Tuolo Bay troops, what's their designation again?"

"What designation? They were withdrawn from Mukden and somehow managed to end up here. They're even more irregular than us!"

"Their commander is..."

"Ron Hsiang."

Commander Ho lifted his head in sudden revelation. "Right, Ron Hsiang. There's no need to go to war over something like this. The two parties can negotiate. If the negotiation fails, then we declare war."

"Negotiate? With who?"

"Ron Hsiang."

"You'll do it?"

"I'll do it."

Li rubbed his bristled head. "You?"

Commander Ho pounded the table, about to lose his temper again. "What, you have a problem?"

Li rose to his feet and gave a frivolous bow. "I wouldn't dare. Negotiate if you will, but I won't take the loss in vain."

Commander Ho couldn't afford to rebuke him, so he held his anger back and lowered his head again. "You may rest assured. Refrain from screaming for bloodshed at every occasion. War has its expanses, after all."

Li looked up, catching the sight of him seated upright, a hand still resting on the table. The hand was truly fine to look at. Its snowy skin and long fingers clearly had never been subject to any physical toil. In comparison, his own palms

felt like sandpaper.

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[A Cruel Romance, Vol. I] Preoccupations

 sl-Ilian.livejournal.com/2075.html

Preoccupations

Commander Ho's decision to negotiate with the Head of the Northeastern Troops was made solely with the incentive to seek entertainment. The result of the negotiation was secondary, and the main focus was the search for a source of distraction. Otherwise the thoughts of Lan Bai-Shan filled his head until they virtually drove him insane.

The site of the negotiation was located in the County of Wantong near Tuolo Bay. The distance between Luyang and Wantong was only a little more than twenty miles, and since Commander Ho had recently secured a new supply of gasoline, he could travel by car, which made it all the more convenient.

The place of the negotiation was in the manor house of Wantong's former governor. With the governor burnt alive and the members of his entire household chopped up, his residence was left empty to subsequently provide lodging for the occupying soldiers. In preparation for the meeting, Li Shih-Yao had two of the best rooms cleaned out and placed in them large round tables to be used for dinner. The stage outside in the courtyard was also set up, prompting a night of feasting and drinking, joy and merrymaking. When men are happy and entertained, their conflicts can easily be put aside.

Commander Ho arrived early. Instead of Lan, his was accompanied by Jin Hwan-Ran and Sun Wei-Ying. The regimental commanders were there exclusively for the party, and Jin had brought a companion—a male one—along with him. The companion wore a delicate prettiness, all tall and slender with a clear, melodious voice and a slightly effeminate look. They all knew he was once a Dan^[1] actor called something along the lines of Fan Yü-Ch'ing. A worthless thing. Jin only brought him all the way from Hsian because in the military, using him was more convenient than taking women.

Commander Ho glanced sidelong at Fan Yü-Ch'ing from afar, his mind clicking again. Men...do men have to remain close like husband and wife?

This particular question occurred to him not because he was innocent or naïve in the matter. He had lost his virginity at the age of thirteen, and had played around with both genders over a period of time. However, he had been too young and his built too slight. Failing to take care of himself properly, he was diagnosed with a form of spermatorrhea, and found himself in a situation where he was quite willing in the spirit but helpless in the flesh. Forced to go into recuperation, he managed to hold back before things got too out of hand.

After all these years of recuperating like a celibate, the ailment still surfaced more or less at different times and remained cureless. Fortunately, he had already had his share of experiences, and though the pleasure had been extremely gratifying, even the most luscious delicacies had a satiation point. Ironically, Commander Ho didn't suffer from suppressed sexual tension like most young men. His dissatisfaction with his pillow was not due to its lack of a hole for the emission of his desires. He merely needed a tinge of external warmth to dry off his damp and disturbed heart.

His thoughts jumped back to Lan Bai-Shan. This Fan looked neither like a man nor a woman, which was not to his tastes. He preferred people like Lan Bai-Shan, and it wasn't about his gender. He purely liked him as a "person".

Lan, in fact, did not possess any form of outstanding merit, his only virtues being his clean neatness and gentle smile. Yet when Commander Ho was stuffed inside the car with only a reeking Li Shih-Yao for comparison, the Chief of Staff Lan Bai-Shan who sat behind him and held him close in his arms seemed especially likable.

He rarely found anyone likable. But this time, for some unfathomable reason, he'd taken a fancy to Lan Bai-Shan.

"He can't possibly want to be with me..." Commander Ho thought indifferently. "He knows exactly what I want. He's just teasing me!"

- : -

As the regimental commanders partied away and Commander Ho remained solitary, Ron Hsiang arrived.

Two regiments of cavalry were clustered around a black automobile as it came to a stop at the front gates. The car was brand new, the horses strong and the soldiers high-spirited. The side door opened and a tall man in a dinner jacket stepped out.

The man stood by the car and looked about, removing his black top hat and passing it behind him, where an adjutant caught it with his hands. Without the visual obstruction of the hat, Commander Ho laid his eyes on the man's true visage—which should have been quite well-favoured, if it hadn't been so consumed by morphine overdose. His chalky face was tinged with blue, giving him an air of sickly lethargy.

Looking at Ron Hsiang, Commander Ho caught on to his contagious languidness and grew drowsy, and developed a strong urge to go home and have a good slumber. Ron Hsiang, though, glanced up at him with a smile and nodded. "Commander Ho, I've long been looking forward to meet you."

Smiling, Commander Ho stepped forward and stretched out a feeble hand. "Knowing a man by repute is never as good as seeing him in the flesh, Commander Ron, you are truly striking."

Their hands joined and bobbled weakly for a few of times, then the two men accompanied each other inside.

- : -

Commander Ho shared a few words with Ron Hsiang, and almost died of drowsiness.

This wasn't to say that Ron's speech was dull. In fact, Ron's character is quite distinguished; for instance, though he was a man of few words, when he did speak his tone was bound to be terribly gentle, almost as if he was flirting.

In turn, Ron Hsiang found communication with Ho Bao-Ting an excruciating task. Ho's mind seemed to function at a significantly slower speed than any normal man, and since he didn't appear to suffer from any actual mental retardation, Ron could only deem that the commander's thoughts were wandering elsewhere.

They yawned in unison and slowly guided the conversation toward their true topic. Before Commander Ho could finish refining his words, Ron smiled and interrupted him with a wave of his hand.

"There's no need for this, brother[C]2 Ji-Ch'ing," Ron started to say. "To tell you the truth, my troops will be moving out to Hsian in less than a month."

"Hsian?"

Ron smiled. "It wasn't a permanent solution to have this many men garrisoned here to start with. Since Fu Yang-Shan just sent me his invitation, I naturally chose to accept it."

Commander Ho's features finally formed into an expression of surprise. "Oh, you are going to Hsian."

Ron Hsiang continued to smile and couldn't be bothered to waste another word with Ho. After a pause of contemplation, Commander Ho finally announced his opinion. "That's great, going to Hsian. At least it'll be more exciting and prosperous there..."

What he left out was, "I would like to go there as well."

Ron Hsiang finished a listless dinner with Commander Ho, then left in a haste.

In front of the stage, Li Shih-Yao sat messing about with a pair of whores in his arms. They were performing a local Huaku opera onstage. Not understanding a single word, and therefore having no appreciation for its quality, Li was simply drawn to the deafening sound of the gongs and drums, which seemed to be cheering their liveliness right into people. To his left, an even more jubilant Colonel Sun grinned from ear to ear, gulping down endless liquor and biting at a girls' cheeks with his alcoholic breath. Jin Hwan-Ran, on the other hand, acted in a more refined manner and whispered with the effeminate former boy-actor, his hands groping about as they chatted.

Just as the men were in the midst of their rapture, Hsiao-Hu made a sudden appearance and tapped on Li's shoulder.

"Colonel Li, Commander Ho asked for you."

Li turned his intoxicated head toward him, his hand closing around a girl's breasts. "Now?"

"Yes," Hsiao-Hu nodded.

Li mumbled out a curse, and let go of the girl. He stood and staggered behind Hsiao-Hu, who lead him into a room and shut the door behind him before retiring, leaving Li alone to face Commander Ho.

In his drunken state, Li's usual reluctant respect for the Commander faded away. Casually, he pulled over a chair and sat down, looking up at Commander Ho.

"Commander, how did your negotiation with Ron Hsiang go?" he asked. "What's his take?"

With a hand in his pocket, Commander Ho began pacing in front of Li. "There will be no need for an attack. He's just about to pull away."

Li stared at Commander Ho, noticing quite suddenly that tall and thin as the Commander was, his backside was in fact surprisingly perky and full. It filled out his trousers very nicely.

Commander Ho looked at Li, who had remained silent and was staring at him with a grin. He scowled before continuing. "They are moving out to Hsian. Once they're gone, Tuolo Bay will be left unoccupied, and we will gain a large piece of land without a single bullet—all is well."

Really, Commander Ho's much finer-looking than that boy-actor of Jin's, Li thought to himself. Quite fit as well. It will sure be interesting to get a hold of him and fuck him!

Both men were silent. Commander Ho continued to pace, while Li continued to envision the means of sodomizing Commander Ho, so engrossed in his thoughts that he was almost oblivious of himself.

How hard can it be to do him? The only hard part will be dealing with the aftermath, unless I fuck him to death. Or I can make everybody go at him once, so nobody stands out—then he can't get anyone to do his revenge. To hell with it, I'm definitely taking that ass!

Li swallowed at this thought. Since he was seated, the tent that formed near his crotch went unnoticed. Commander Ho paid him no attention to begin with, but as he grew tired from his pacing, he took a seat across Li. "Do you have anything else to discuss? If not then get out."

Li grinned. "I'll sit with you for a bit."

Commander Ho couldn't help but scowl at Li, who reeked of liquor and tobacco. "There's no need for that. You may

leave!"

"Commander," Li continued. "How about you stay over for the night? I'll have your bedding prepared, all brand new. Just leave everything to me."

Commander Ho sensed Li's abnormal enthusiasm. "There's no need. I have trouble sleeping in new places."

Under the effects of alcohol, Li's felt his cock swell painfully. Unable to do anything about it with the other man in the room, he could only try to hold still in his perturbation.

"It's difficult to travel by night," he said. "Especially the part right outside Wantong, where it's all dirt roads with those huge pits. You've already seen those on your way here, haven't you?"

Commander Ho shook his head. "Then I'll let them drive slow. If it really ends up getting stuck, I can always ride a horse."

Irritated, Li's eyes were almost spitting fire. "Are you really this determined to go back?"

Having his breathing almost cease due to the smell, Commander ran out of his patience to continue a civil exchange. Rising from his seat immediately, he called out for Hsiao-Hu and stalked out of the room.

Unable to stand, Li could only sit there helplessly and leave him be.

- : -

While Li Shih-Yao wanted to lay his hands on Commander Ho and give him a bit of a fuck, Commander Ho wanted to lay his on Lan Bai-Shan and give him a bit of a fuck.

From the way things had been going, Li's idea seemed more like a fantasy that didn't really hold much of a possibility. Commander Ho's, on the other hand, was far more realistic, but he was still somewhat reluctant to proceed.

Towards Lan, he didn't really have any strong erotic feeling. Rather than to seek sexual relief, Commander Ho's idea of to "give him a bit of a fuck" was more like a ritual, a way to say "I've fucked this man. He is mine."

Then no matter how Lan would try to stir up trouble in the future, this fact will remain unchangeable. Rather like the brand of cattle.

- : -

Lan Bai-Shan's life in the county-town of Luyang was not too bad.

He'd always been able to take things as they came at ease. His ease was superficial, and deep down, he naturally had his own mind, only he'd never let any of his thoughts wander to the surface. Hence, he was at ease yet uneasy.

Originally, he had served the Old Marshal and had served him well. As a result, he rose steadily from an orderly to an adjutant, then to a staff officer, then finally the chief of staff. When the Old Marshal had been alive, he enjoyed quite some prestige; now that the Old Marshal was gone and the Anguo Army governed each by his own, he found himself with neither men nor equipment, and had become a floating-duckweed sort of character. It was because of this that he had taken a very active role in the Seventh Master's abduction.

To be honest, Commander Ho was a bit of a disappointment. This wasn't to say that the Commander was either weak or foolish. From what he had seen, Commander Ho was not only far from a fool but something of a conspirator, while his tantrums had a touch of the Old Marshal's style. The problem was that though the commander was very close to him, they each seemed to have a different set of goals.

Commander Ho had his grand plans and wanted secure a designation to rectify his status. Then he would rule as the local despot and continue to play his little trick where he promoted one subject as he beat down another, slowly eliminating his dissidents in the process. Lan, on the other hand, wanted to seek shelter within the Central Government—the regimental commanders of the Anguo Army would never allow him the opportunity to develop his own forces, so rather than putting all of his eggs in one basket, he wanted to go out and explore the broader horizon. With talents like his, it couldn't be hard to find help from a new master who would aid him to completely cleanse the Anguo Army.

At the moment, however, talks of cleansing seemed rather distant. In terms of more immediate matters, Commander Ho still had to be entertained. The entertaining wasn't even completely against his will—in fact, Commander Ho proved to be quite an interesting man. Though normally he showed no lack of masculinity, he always seemed somewhat effeminate when he's in a fit—perhaps it was because he had such a petty mind. And there was another thing—he could sense that the Commander's feelings toward him obviously leaned toward the romantic.

Lan Bai-Shan had no intention of going into any romantic relationship with a porcelain doll, particularly one with a dick. But he could still humour him and tease him. Either way the porcelain man had fine looks—it would almost be like keeping a boy-actor for free.

[1] A *shizi*, the *Dan* was a Peking opera performer who played female roles.

[2] “brother” was a form of address between men of equal rank.

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[A Cruel Romance, Vol. I] Futility

 sl-Ilian.livejournal.com/2467.html

Futility

One evening, Commander Ho invited Lan Bai-Shan over for a chat.

Lan had been somewhat surprised, not expecting the Commander to come forward and make nice with him. He stepped through the Ho Residence's gates and followed Hsiao-Hu into a wing-room furnished with a daybed, on which Commander Ho, clothed in a black Chinese silk gown, sat lost in his thoughts.

It was warm in the room, yet he had his hands tucked in his sleeves. Upon hearing the other man's entrance, he finally turned his head and threw a quick glance at Lan, giving him a slow and expressionless nod. "You've come."

Lan brought in a waft of cool air. Seeing that Hsiao-Hu has taken his leave and shut the door, Lan removed his army coat and draped it on the back of a chair by the wall. He made his way to the daybed and sat down.

"Ji-Ch'ing," he said with a smile, "you're finally talking to me again."

Commander Ho looked at him. Lan's eyes were crescents in a smile.

Lan's features were, in fact, quite plain, but they seemed to have a certain hazy warmth. Even to Commander Ho who harboured such profound feelings for him, it was impossible to describe his physical appearances in words. He simply found him pleasant in general, whether he actually was or not.

Commander Ho pointed at the opium tray beside him. "Come over here. Light me a few rounds."

Lan bent down to untie the laces of his leather shoes. Removing the shoes, he got onto the daybed and lay on his side facing Commander Ho, propping himself up on an elbow. With some inexperience, he scooped up a globule of opium paste and held it carefully over the lamp.

"I thought you never touched the stuff," Lan said with a smile. "What made you change your mind tonight?"

Commander Ho pulled over a small pillow and lay down facing Lan. "It's a pastime."

Lan glanced up and gave him a smile. "You're this bored?"

Commander Ho's gaze rested on Lan's face. The dusk was settling outside, and only a pair of large candles lighted the room. He had electric lights, but electricity itself was hard to come by. In the dim glow, Lan seemed a little more handsome than usual. Engrossed in the burning, Lan's eyes were downcast, his eyelashes casting two patches of heavy shadows on his cheeks.

As though seeing him for the first time, Commander Ho gazed at Lan infatuatedly, and suddenly reached out to touch his face.

Lan allowed his hand to linger. He made no move to get away and simply smiled.

"Bai-Shan, you have such long lashes."

Lan darted him a look. "You've just noticed?"

Commander Ho drew back his hand. He sniffed at his fingers.

After finishing the third globule, Lan passed the pipe to Commander Ho. "You don't have an addiction. This should do."

Commander Ho's eyes were starting to glaze over. "How do you know I don't?" he asked quietly.

Lan lay down across from him, his voice gentle as well. "How can I not?"

Commander Ho smiled faintly and fell silent.

The room became an enclosed space. Endless darkness and cold raged outside, but the room shone bright with candlelight. The coal in the brazier burned with glowing warmth, making the scent of opium grow all the sweeter.

All around, silence persisted except for the gurgling sound of the opium pipe. Commander Ho breathed in his last draw, then abruptly, rising a bit, he blew a puff of smoke in Lan's face.

Staring at Commander Ho, Lan suddenly found himself almost hypnotized; the man before his eyes seemed unreal. Behind the candlelit fog and with his fair skin and inky hair, Commander Ho seemed to have walked out of the most meticulous Chinese ink painting, a dab of rouge forming a smiling pair of rosy lips.

Pushing away the opium tray in silence, Commander Ho inched closer to Lan wordlessly, grasping his shoulders and pushing him down onto the bed. He pressed his own body on top of Lan's, then allowing no protests, lowered his head and covered Lan's lips with his own.

Lan's body stiffened—Commander Ho's actions went far beyond his expectations. Dubious intimacy was one thing. Why would he require this kind of unabashed physical contact?

He opened his lips slightly, and felt Commander Ho's tongue teasing and pursuing him in his mouth like a frisky fish. He should respond, or he'd seem too cold. But to share a wet kiss with another man...

Hesitantly, Lan reached out and returned the embrace. In the warm and confined room, anything could happen. Reaching a hand downward, Commander Ho started to untie Lan's belt.

Lan caught his hand, turning his face away to evade Commander Ho's kiss. "Ji-Ch'ing, don't do this.

Light shone in Commander Ho's eyes. "No," he said with great clarity.

Lan couldn't outright fight him, and Commander Ho proceeded with unhurried resolution. Breaking free from Lan's hand, he removed the leather military belt around Lan's waist methodically. He ignored Lan's reserved struggling and pulled down Lan's trousers by force.

Lan's skin had a sleek tan, his hips and thighs were firm yet lithe. Commander Ho placed a hand between his legs, rubbing a few times along his inner thighs, and then closed his fingers around Lan's flaccid member.

After a few tugs, the shaft began to show signs of interest. Thrusting a leg out, Lan begged breathlessly. "Ji-Ch'ing, stop—stop playing. Let go of me, please."

Upon hearing these words, Commander Ho, as if having received some sudden stimulation, became highly excited. In a flurry of movements, he removed his own trousers and seized Lan's arm. "Turn around and get down, quick!" he said urgently.

Realizing that the Commander was going to act in earnest, Lan couldn't sit by and await his doom any longer. He did turn around—and started to crawl away.

Lan's disobedience was no surprise to Commander Ho, who launched forward at once and pinned Lan under him. Lan couldn't exactly scream for help, so he put out a desperate fight. But perhaps it was the effects of opium,

Commander Ho had gained a sudden and enormous strength. Lan was not a trained soldier; he neither had any combat training nor dared to outright attack Commander Ho, so after a careless moment, he found himself pinned under the Commander's body, and immediately felt a burning hardness shove its way between his legs.

His heart sank. "Ji-Ch'ing, please let me go," he begged in a shaking voice.

Commander Ho clung to Lan, clearly without any intention of letting go of him.

Lan sucked in a breath. He felt the other man's cock give a couple of mindless thrusts in the crack of his buttocks, then without entering, emitted a stream of heat. Commander Ho seemed to spasm slightly above him, his arms around Lan tightening.

They both went still.

A moment later, Commander Ho released Lan and rolled over in exhaustion. Lan reached a hand to his backside and touched a cold stickiness, feeling both disgusted and ridiculous.

"This is all you've got, and you wanted to screw a man?" He thought to himself.

Commander Ho stared at the dark ceiling expressionlessly. He pulled his trousers up.

Lan tidied up his own clothing as well. Sitting beside the Commander, he suddenly felt extremely at ease and content—Ho Ji-Ch'ing was a joke, a terribly great joke! And a dead funny one; too bad he was the only audience.

"Ji-Ch'ing," he stroked Commander Ho's sweaty hair and said affectionately. "When did you develop this condition?"

Without a sideward glance, Commander Ho slapped his hand away.

Lan stuck his arms under the Commander's, pulling him into an embrace. "Don't be shy, I'm no stranger."

Commander Ho pushed him away and sat up, realizing that he had brought his own humiliation onto himself. He should slaughter Lan, right there and right then, or Lan would always hold something over his head. Yet what position was he in to kill Lan? It was all because his own incompetence, because he wasn't enough of a man!

Commander Ho swallowed a suffocating breath, then abruptly, slapped himself in the face with a clear, loud whack. He stepped down to the floor and stormed out of the room with his head low and his back slouched. Young as he was, he didn't have a single breath of youth about him. At the moment he appeared even older, as if he could no longer afford to live.

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[A Cruel Romance, Vol. I] A Cold Moonlit Night

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A Cold Moonlit Night

It was difficult to discern Commander Ho's age from his appearance.

His skin was notably fair; not a wrinkle or freckle marred its smooth expanse. This was perhaps the only evidence of his youth. Beyond that, everything about him from his demeanour, his speech, to his interests, was all drearily dull.

Contrivance clouded him was like a thick web, leaching out every last bit of the rawness, fervour, and innocence he should have had.

Perhaps for someone like him, a bit of excitement was needed to rekindle his vivacity. Commander Ho's life didn't lack any excitement. Time after time these excitements had driven him down the abyss, their falls injuring him so severely that he had nearly met his death.

He had thoroughly made himself a laughing stock in front of the person he loved, all at his own discretion. What more was there to be said about that?

Nothing. In the December night, Commander Ho rode out to a riverside by Luyang at full gallop, wearing nothing more than a thin silk gown. He went moon-gazing.

The orderlies and a pair of adjutants tailed after him, the orderlies clothed in wadded jackets and adjutants in thick cloaks. Holding an overcoat, Chao Hsiao-Hu stepped forward with the intention to wrap the coat around Commander Ho's shoulders. Without turning, Commander Ho raised a hand and signalled his refusal.

The Commander advanced slowly along the river bank. It was cold and the wind gusty, yet he marched calmly on. Stopping near an open view of the water, up towards the glorious moon he raised his head, then down he dropped his head (1)—and wanted to throw himself into the lake.

It was merely a thought; he wouldn't really act on it. There was no need to sacrifice himself for Lan. His life—from heavens above to earth below, from the beginning of time to the moment present—was the most invaluable, simply because it was "his own". As a last resort, should a time arise when Lan would dare to use the information for his humiliation, he could always kill Lan.

Commander Ho crouched down and reached out a hand to stir the water, only to discover that the shallow part the river had frozen over, while thin fragments of ice floated further in.

Still hugging the overcoat, Hsiao-Hu summoned his courage and ran forward to drape it on the Commander's back. "Commander, let's go back! You'll catch a cold like this."

Commander Ho stood up and let the loose coat slide to the ground. As if unable to feel the cold, he strode to his horse and mounted it as if his soul has departed its body. He snatched his horsewhip from an adjutant and cracked it in the air, then with a jerk of the rein and without another word, left by himself in a trail of thuds.

- : -

There was quite some distance between the river and Ho Residence, though on a good horse, Commander Ho didn't spend much time en route. As he arrived at his front gate, he approached a guard.

"Has Lan Bai-Shan left?" he asked.

"Chief Lan just has, sir!"

Commander Ho nodded and strode across the courtyard into his room, falling stiffly into his bed. He hadn't even removed his shoes.

Hsiao-Hu wanted to give him some hot ginger soup, but when he stepped into the bedroom with the bowl, the Commander was already fast asleep. In his deep slumber, his body was cold like a corpse.

Sitting on the edge of the bed, Hsiao-Hu stripped him down and wrapped him in his nightclothes. The palms of his hands were so tender that since he'd been riding without his gloves, the reins had chafed his skin open and revealed the crimson flesh. His feet were like two lumps of ice, their skin so transparent that he could see the tiny mauve veins underneath.

Hsiao-Hu opened his own shirt and hugged Commander Ho's feet to his bare chest. Moments later, the Commander's body stirred suddenly, making Hsiao-Hu jump.

Hsiao-Hu pulled a bed-quilt over him and left in silence.

- : -

On the following noon, Hsiao-Hu entered the room to wake Commander Ho. His mission ended with the discovery that Commander Ho was flushed with fever and appeared to be delirious.

Panicking, he rushed out to find Adjutant Li who was in charge of everyday affairs. The adjutant took a look inside and had no suggestion to offer, so he proceeded to summon the medical officer.

The medical officer was a typical quack; he didn't know the first thing about Western medicine, and out of every ten, had one-half of a clue about Chinese medicine. He first measured Commander Ho's temperature—with his hand, and learned from Hsiao-Hu about the Commander's moon-gazing activities of the previous night. Coming to a conclusion, he fetched out a few doses of antipyretics jauntily.

Shortly after the medical officer's departure, Li Shih-Yao appeared.

He had intended to come over for a chat, and was caught off guard by the state of the Commander's health.

"What happened?" He asked Hsiao-Hu.

"He went out in his nightgown last night and caught a cold." Hsiao-Hu mentioned lightly.

"Out? Where?"

"Nowhere in particular. He just went for a ride."

His words left Li still quite puzzled. "I'll go see him inside."

Hsiao-Hu moved into his way. "Commander Ho has just taken his medicine. He's sleeping at the moment."

Li glared at him. "I won't be loud, what harm can a single peek do? Out of my way, you little brat!" he said, giving Hsiao-Hu a shove and strode straight into Commander Ho's bedroom.

- : -

Having just taken his antipyretics, a half-awake Commander Ho lay wrapped in his white linen and red satin covers. In his trance, he was aware of a body approaching his bed, but couldn't find the strength to open his eyes. He gave a feeble groan.

Li's clothes weren't particularly clean, and his relationship with the Commander wasn't particularly intimate. So after a moment of hesitation, he hadn't the nerve to sit down on the bed. Commander Ho's face was flushed with fever, he observed—it was a normal condition, but on the Commander, it appeared rather curious.

In his sickness, Commander Ho looked more healthy than usual.

Li didn't know how to care for others and had no need to care for others. He stared helplessly at Commander Ho and rubbed his hands.

Meanwhile, Lan Bai-Shan arrived.

Without receiving any form of resistance, Lan marched into the room unchecked. Spotting Li, he gave a smiling nod. "Colonel Li," he greeted quietly, "why are you standing there by yourself?"

Li turned and scanned the room around him, then approached a chair near the windows. As if sitting down in a theatre, he regarded Lan with quite some interest.

"This fever looks pretty bad," he remarked.

Lan sat on the bed casually. He removed his gloves and stuck a hand under the quilt, then turned to Li and nodded assuredly.

"He's burning hot," he confirmed.

Curling the corners of his lips, Li offered no comment. The scene before him looked very interesting, he thought. Lan seemed a bit like a father, but also a bit like a lover. Commander Ho was unrelentingly inviolable, yet Lan was able to touch him freely.

It could thus be deduced that Commander Ho was actually not so 'within sight yet beyond reach'. Perhaps screwing Commander Ho didn't require that big of a fuss. One must always use one's head to gain the most avail at the least cost.

So what should he do?

For the very first time, Li found his own head incompetent. After a prolonged moment of intense pondering, he came to another conclusion—one mustn't distress oneself; any means is plausible as long as it meets the desired end.

Having reached a conclusion, Li regained his magnanimity and lifted his head again to resume his patient observation of Lan Bai-Shan and Commander Ho.

- : -

Lan was in no place or power to kick Li out. After a while of sitting by a Commander Ho who showed no sign of regaining consciousness, Lan simply decided to take his leave.

Li too found it impossible to sit still, so he got up and moved outside to the courtyard, where he bantered and fooled around with the orderlies. Hsiao-Hu found him extremely loud. The sick was still resting inside, yet outside his walls, the visitor was having a laugh. How irritating!

Commander Ho woke up late in the afternoon. As he opened his eyes soaking in sweat, he felt somehow buoyantly refreshed. A signifier that he was in fact quite fit, despite his outward appearance of being thin and pale.

Seeing that the room was deserted, he called out for Hsiao-Hu, who appeared at the door a moment later with Li.

Startled by Li's presence, Commander Ho stared for a moment. "Colonel Li is here as well?" he asked.

Li stopped at the door. Candlelight flickered in the room. He could not see the details of Commander Ho's countenance, but heard his voice in the shadows.

"I've been here for a while already," Li answered. "Got worried that you were sick, so I stuck around."

Commander Ho was puzzled. What exactly, he wondered, did he need to discuss with me? If it wasn't something important, he had no reason to linger all day.

Since Li didn't volunteer any information, Commander Ho had no intention of starting a conversation. He simply nodded and turned to Hsiao-Hu.

"Help me up. I'm hungry."

- : -

Dressed in a light quilted jacket, Commander Ho sat propped up against a pillow as he dispatched a bowl of congee out of Hsiao-Hu's hand. Li had remained standing by the door. He was quite tall, but his graceless posture made him seem sloppy and unimpressive.

Having filled his stomach, Commander Ho finally found the energy to deal with one of the self-righteous "gallants" under his command.

"Colonel Li," he began, "did you need to speak to me about something?"

Li grinned. "Well, there's another bandit uprising in the County of Tianhua. They haven't seized the county town, but they've burned down three villages in a row. It used to be Old Sun's territory there, but the situation is going out his of control. I'd like to lend him a hand, if you don't object."

After a moment of contemplation, Commander Ho spoke again. "How is it that Colonel Sun can't even take down a gang of bandits?"

"The old brat messed about and overlooked his men's pays for too long. An entire battalion turned against him and gave the bandits some inside help."

"If you take over Tianhan, where will Colonel Sun go?"

"Aren't the Northeasterners leaving? Let him stay at Tuolo Bay then."

Considering it for a moment, Commander Ho decided that it would be unwise. Li's territories were already too vast and needed to be contained.

"Wait a bit longer," he said as he fished out a piece of neatly folded white handkerchief. He brought it up to his mouth as if to conceal something. "There's no rush."

Li, however, was unwilling to drop the matter. He was determined to unsettle Commander Ho's painstakingly administered balance.

"Why wait? Waiting won't get us anywhere! I can lead my men there and wipe out those ignorant bandits in one go. Three villages—men, grains, livestock. All the things I can take for myself. Why let them pass through those bandits' hands first?"

If there was one thing Commander Ho couldn't stand, it was Li's insolence. As he had just come out of his fever, he became a little lightheaded with anger. Leaning his weight into the soft pillow, he closed his eyes and adopted an imperious indifference instead.

"Colonel Li may have his own opinions," he said, "but when taking action, must bear in mind the situation as a whole."

Li leaned on the door-frame. "But Commander--"

"See your way out," Commander Ho waved an impatient hand. "I'm tired."

Li stared wordlessly at the Commander's beautiful yet wooden face. He gazed on for a moment longer, then left with a mindful of dirty thoughts.

- : -

On the following day, Li Shih-Yao pushed to Tianhua with his forces.

Colonel Sun hadn't said anything, but Commander Ho was already out of his seat. He summoned Jin Hwan-Ran and went about instigating him into action. Jin had long thought Li's appetite too extensive, and now that he had the Commander's decree, assembled his forces at once and advanced to Tianhua with the greatest urgency.

Jin had gone too late. By the time he arrived in Tianhua, Li had already secured a swift and immense victory. Emergence of bandits was an endless occurrence in the vast and unregulated area. Li was extremely weary of suppressing bandits, so as he happened to capture a large horde this time, he decided to make a good example out of them, which, incidentally, could also serve as a vent for his anger and amusement for his men.

The location of the execution was at the county-town's main gates, the time high noon. The few chieftains were dismembered alive by five horses before the masses, their torn limbs scattering on the ground and their guts leaving behind long trails. Then an executioner stripped down and tied up a chieftain's wife in an attempt to perform a Lingchi(3), but because of his lacking in skill, the woman gave her last breath after only a few hundred pieces of her flesh had been sliced off.

That had only been the teaser, so it was a bit more diverse in variety. After the teaser, they launched into the main game.

The main game was a doubtless massacre. The two hundred something bandits, young and old, where each dismembered, their bare torsos left hanging on trees in the nearby forest. Looking on in delight, Li almost felt a surge of pleasure.

The even dirt road outside the town gate was soaked muddy red with blood, its pungent sweet taste filling the air over the entire town. Li sat beside a badly frightened Colonel Sun and issued his orders in conceited elation.

"Good work brothers, you may loot freely for two hours!"

Colonel Sun hadn't dared to stop him. When Jin Hwan-Ran arrived later during the day, anguished howls greeted him as Li's men swept through the county-town like a swarm of mad locusts.

He didn't try to hold them back.

"Pillage on," he thought to himself. "Once you're done, you still have to piss the hell off, you arrogant fool!"

- : -

Li had wanted to occupy Tianhua, but in the end did not succeed.

Jin expressed his dissent. He appeared to be helping Sun and was especially righteous. A civilized argument failed and they found themselves at each other's throat and on the verge of war. Jin didn't mind war, since he wouldn't be at any disadvantage. Li had gotten quite a bit of nice loot this time, and even if Jin didn't win, he could still nick some

of it in the heat of the battle.

In face of Jin's enthusiasm, Li hesitated. He knew this was Commander Ho's shady work, but couldn't do anything about it. The Commander was the Old Marshal's Ch'i-Bao, after all, and without the Old Marshal there wouldn't be an Anguo Army. This was why he'd always been helpless when it came to Commander Ho.

He wasn't afraid of Jin-Hwan Ran, or of Ho Bao-Ting. But for the security of his newly looted rewards, he finally withdrew with his forces to Wantong.

(1)A spoof on "Up towards the glorious moon I raise my head, Then lay me down-and thoughts of home arise", a verse from "Night Thoughts" by the Tang poet Li Bai (translated by Herbert A. Giles).

(2)Lingchi, aka "Slow Slicing", was a form of execution where the condemned's body is sliced into pieces over an extended period of time in public.

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[A Cruel Romance, Vol. I] Disappointment

 sl-Ilian.livejournal.com/3218.html

Disappointment

After his recovery, Commander Ho was reluctant to face Lan for quite some time.

It was only human. Lan was very sympathetic towards his embarrassment, and in order to express his loyalty, decided to perform a bit of a confession.

“Ji-Ch’ing, why are you avoiding me?” he said with a sincere smile. “Are you going to let an attachment as intimate as our fall apart simply because of such a little thing? Besides, you were the one who took initiative. If anything I should be the one sulking. I didn’t even pay it any mind, why are you still letting it bother you?”

Commander Ho stood before him as he spoke. He could neither listen to him nor tune him out, so having no other choice, merely stood there shamelessly and played deaf.

Seeing that the Commander remained unmoved, Lan realized he had no alternative but to act in earnest. He steeled his heart, and stepped forward to pull Commander Ho into a tight embrace.

“Ji-Ch’ing,” he said with a long sigh, “what on earth should I do to make you happy?”

Breathing in Lan’s scent, Commander Ho’s body softened slowly.

Lan patted him on the back like he was pacifying a child. “Ji-Ch’ing, please stop sulking,” he said, then inched closer to Commander Ho’s ear and chuckled lightly. “Are you angry because you didn’t get to take advantage of your dear brother?”

Only then did Commander Ho allow a trace of a smile to show on his face. “What sort of brother are you to me?”

- : -

Lan Bai-Shan’s job consisted of more than just flirting with Commander Ho. For instance, after he managed to coax the Commander into coming around, he must set out for Hsian at once and pay a visit to Chao Chen-Sheng. A sworn enemy of Chao, Fu Yang-Shan had relied on his position as the chairman and displayed a dismissive attitude towards the miscellaneous Anguo Army. Commander Ho tolerated his arrogance, since he knew if he so much as swayed a little in Chao’s direction, Fu would surely be the one to come running to him.

He’d hated to make Lan leave, but surveying the entirety of the Anguo Army, there didn’t seem to be any other presentable candidate. He obviously harboured some bias, and had unconsciously held Lan higher than he deserved to be.

With Lan’s departure, Commander Ho’s life went back on its usual track. He sat home and engaged in battles of wits with his subordinates, feeling both tense and bored.

Li Shih-Yao visited him with considerably more frequency, bringing with him all sorts of trivialities unworthy of mentioning, and seemed to be intentionally harassing Commander Ho. Commander Ho was pestered beyond his endurance, and in the end, simply stopped receiving Li.

Shunning Li for good, however, was not a plausible solution, since there were times when he actually had important business to discuss. Commander Ho wanted to tell Li to stop coming to him for every little matter, but feared that once Li got his word, he’d decide to take the law into his own hands.

Finding no alternative, Commander Ho could only resume putting up with Li.

- : -

This day, Commander Ho was chatting with a band of traveling merchants passing through the area. The company came from Hsian and consisted of a few guerrilla merchants who stopped by Luyang every once in a while, always stocked with large quantities of novelties from Hsian.

They had everything from clothes, shoes, to hats, and from cold cream, hair tonic, to the newest music records, since they knew that Commander Ho of Luyang was the most generous buyer. Commander Ho had grown up in bustling cities, but had since fallen into the desolate backwater town. Time stood still in Luyang; he could only imagine the grand changes taking place in the world outside through little things.

At the moment, Commander Ho was flipping through a pile of celebrity pictures that came with the records. He already had many records, and needed a gramophone to play them.

The merchant leader's surname was Wen, his given name unknown, so his acquaintances called him Wen Nine. Wen Nine was quite young, and wore a pair of gold-rimmed spectacles that made him look very cultured. Upon hearing Commander Ho's request, he quickly smiled and answered. "Not a problem, please give us another month. We'll certainly be able to bring in a record player by then."

"And some dance music," Commander Ho added. "Waltz."

Wen Nine nodded. "And some waltz, of course. Please rest assured, I will have everything ready. In addition—" he paused, and said something hesitantly.

Commander didn't catch it at first, so he asked with some puzzlement: "What?"

Wen Nine repeated each of the syllables with emphasis, a suggestive smile playing on his face.

This time, Commander Ho heard it clearly. Wen Nine was proposing a person to him—these merchants dealt not only in goods, but also in men.

Commander Ho found the situation laughable. Turning his head and glancing outside his window, he took in the clutter of orderlies who stood in a circle shooting the breeze. It was true that he was a bachelor, but he had twenty orderlies, twenty guards, six adjutants, a cook, and a servant. At any rate, he wasn't at all lacking in bodies to order about.

The rims of Wen Nine's spectacles gleamed with light. "May I suggest that you take a look first, before you decide?" he said with a low chuckle. "This one used to be a little *shizi*, so there's no question about his looks. He's got quite the voice as well—if you keep him, he may prove to be a source of entertainment if you ever get bored."

Commander Ho was deep in thought for a moment, and raised his head in question. "A *Shizi*. A man?"

Wen Nine continued to smile. "What's wrong with that? What does gender matter to their kind?"

Commander Ho considered this for a moment, then made his reply. "Bring him in and let me take a look."

- : -

The boy Wen Nine brought in was named Du Ruo, presently sixteen years of age, who had a slender build and a delicate fineness—except he wore a timid expression, which was obviously a result of some brutal disciplining in the recent past.

Commander Ho inquired about Du Ruo's background. According to Wen Nine, his troupe sold him to pay off debt

when it was detained in a nearby county. Its owner had an addiction, so he sold an apprentice to make up for his deficit at the opium house.

Commander Ho eyed Du from head to toe, and standing up, stepped in closer to inspect his hands and teeth.

Wen Nine trailed behind him. "See, isn't he a fine thing?"

Commander Ho reached out a hand and touched Du's hair expressionlessly. "How much?"

"Whatever you feel is appropriate, sir."

"A hundred silver coins."

"My dear Commander, would you please spare a bit more than that?"

"No. One hundred."

"All right, one hundred it is then. The boy is yours now, Commander."

Commander Ho smiled, then turned around and called in Hsiao-Hu loudly. "Give him a bath. Don't let him bring in lice."

Hsiao-Hu looked at Du Ruo, feeling baffled. "Commander, what's he for?"

"Pillow."

Hsiao-Hu stared blankly for a few seconds, then understood at once.

"Go get Adjutant Feng," Commander Ho added. "Let him take them to the accountant's office for their pay."

- : -

Chao Hsiao-Hu brought Du Ruo into the kitchen and handed him a shoulder pole, instructing him to carry two buckets of hot water into an empty room behind the courtyard.

A large wooden bathtub lay in the vacant room. Hot water filled the bathtub, and emitted a warm steam. Hsiao-Hu stood with crossed arms and tilted his chin at the tub. "Get in and clean yourself. Lay on that soap, get it clean!"

Ruo stood next to the tub and began unbuttoning his collar. Seeing that Hsiao-Hu remained standing by the door, he seemed a little embarrassed and slowed his movements. He lowered his head, and refused to continue his progress.

Hsiao-Hu was well aware of his embarrassment, but stayed at the door on purpose. He didn't press him, merely stood there looking over him up and down.

They stood in stalemate for a moment until Hsiao-Hu lost his patience first. "What are you waiting for?" he snapped. "Do you want me to undress you?"

Ruo jumped. To a commoner like him, soldiers and bandits were the most terrifying beings in the world. He let out a frightened "ah". His heart beating frantically, he couldn't even utter a complete sentence.

Pulling off his clothes in a hurry, he jumped into the bathtub naked and began lathering on the soap nervously, his head low and his face flushed. Hsiao-Hu stared at him, and gave a sudden sneer. He walked up to the bathtub and drawled: "look at you, sissy boy. Are you a hare(1)?"

Ruo's face was covered in foam. He remained silent and kept on washing.

Hsiao-Hu reached out a hand and gave Ruo's tiny nipple a pinch. "How many men have fucked you?" he asked with a sneer.

Ruo sat huddled in the water, trembling even at his lips. "I—I'm done washing."

Hsiao-Hu grasped his dripping hair and dragged him closer, then struck him abruptly across his face. On his wet face, the slap sounded especially loud.

Ruo was scared witless. He stared blankly at Hsiao-Hu with wide eyes.

Letting go of him, Hsiao-Hu wiped his hand clean on his jacket. "Wait here. I'm getting clothes for you!"

- : -

Hsiao-Hu found him a set of shapeless cotton uniform that was way too large. In his new outfit, the thin boy looked as if he could crawl out from one of the sleeves. Hsiao-Hu brought him before Commander Ho, but the Commander didn't look his way. He merely asked Hsiao-Hu: "Is he clean?"

"He's clean," Hsiao-Hu replied with a grin.

Commander Ho glanced at the sky outside the window. "Take him away and give him something to eat, then bring him back."

Hsiao-Hu voiced an affirmation and took off with Ruo.

- : -

Before the scrutiny of the Ho Residence's various occupants, Ruo completed a meal of watery congee in trembling terror. Afterwards Hsiao-Hu brought him back to Commander Ho's bedroom, abusing him with the crudest vulgarities on the way. Ruo didn't feel any indignation, just fear.

As he entered the room, he saw a tall slender man with a pale face standing by the candlelight, flipping through a pile of pictures of beautiful people. He knew this was Commander Ho, but could not be completely certain, because although he'd met him twice already, he hadn't dared to raise his eyes at those times, and so had no knowledge of his actual appearance.

Catching sight of the boy, Commander Ho dropped the pictures and walked over to the bed.

"Take off your clothes," he said quietly as he seated himself on the bed.

Ruo knew that Commander Ho was an officer of some terribly high rank. Even the soldiers could kill people as they felt like, so the Commander must be the Yama(1). There was no sense in offending the Lord of Hell, if one had any sense of self-preservation.

He slowly removed his shirt and trousers, and walked over to the bed, uncertain of how to proceed.

Commander Ho had changed into a Western-style silk nightgown. He threw Ruo a look, then closed his eyes.

"Get in," he said.

Acting in compliance, Ruo climbed onto the bed gingerly.

Commander Ho removed his own trousers, then yanking Ruo's hair, pulled his head close to his crotch. "Use your mouth."

Obediently, Ruo closed his mouth over Commander Ho's flaccid member, and began sucking gently. He made the

utmost effort to please the Commander, yet Commander Ho's body seemed completely oblivious of his proceedings. After receiving the mouthwork for some time, the shaft finally showed the slightest signs of arousal.

Commander Ho's eyes remained shut. Ruo's mouth was moist and warm, his tongue soft and clever. He couldn't find any fault with the boy's work, yet something seemed to be missing, and it wasn't enough for him.

A few minutes later, Commander Ho felt like he was ready, so he pushed Ruo away and made him lie face down with his back to him and with his bottom sticking in the air.

Commander Ho knelt behind him and pressed his half erect member against the boy's entrance, then gave a few thrusts. This time he didn't leak, but softened altogether.

Ruo remained in position and shivered, waiting for the Commander to ravish him. Commander Ho did indeed want to ravish him and use him as a substitute for his lover, except sadly, his ability fell quite short of his wishes.

With his hair in Commander Ho's grasp, Ruo's head was yanked again to the Commander's crotch. An exasperated voice fumed with frenzied rage above him. "Use your mouth!"

Ruo was very obedient. Using either of his orifices didn't make any difference to him. He sucked on the man's penis like an infant sucking a breast, devoted and dispassionate.

Commander Ho closed his eyes in misery as sweat rained down his body. Although he had been celibate for years, he still hadn't shown any sign of recovery.

Pulling out a pistol under the pillow, he smashed it brutally into the boy's head. "Get the fuck off!"

Ruo dropped to his side with an agonized howl and raised his hands to cover his head, but blood was already seeping slowly through his fingers.

Murder was on Commander Ho's mind. He never liked androgynous *shizis* to begin with; the only reason he' bought one was because he wanted to test whether he was really "able" or not. Now that he acquired the result—and a very depressing one at that—what further use was there keep the boy? Might as well kill him, so he couldn't go out and talk!

The boy could be dispatched, but there was no need to dirty the bed. With a thrust of his leg, Commander Ho kicked the boy to the floor. He raised his pistol and shot him squarely in the chest.

Ruo really was a thin child. His body was blown back with the force of the bullet, falling to the floor and dropping flat on his back without a single sound. A cry, however, went off in the courtyard outside, and the shuffle of footsteps could be heard approaching.

A few guards rushed into the room. "Commander, what happened?"

Calmly, Commander Ho pointed to the floor. "Drag him out and clean the floor. Be quick. I'm tired."

- : -

Commander Ho slept till midday. When he woke, he saw Hsiao-Hu standing at the desk, fiddling something in his hands with his head bent.

Seeing that he was awake, Hsiao-Hu waved the picture in his hand. "Commander, who's this?"

Commander Ho squinted his eyes and looked. "Hu-Die," he mumbled.

"Who's that?"

“A film star.”

Hsiao-Hu started laughing. “And I thought she was somebody's *hsiaojieh!*”

Commander Ho coughed lightly. “Bumpkin.”

Hsiao-Hu dropped the picture and walked over to the bed, sitting down at its edge. He draped a quilted jacket over Commander Ho's shoulders. “Commander, I heard you killed that little hare last night. Why?”

Commander Ho was puzzled for a second. He'd just woken up and had forgotten about the incident.

“Because... he didn't serve me well.”

Hsiao-Hu tilted his head jubilantly. “When it comes to serving you, I'm always the best! I've been with you for years, has my service ever been anything less than satisfactory?”

Commander Ho turned his head and looked sideways at him. “You'll serve me?”

“Of course!” Hsiao-Hu nodded in a justified and confident way.

Commander Ho stared at Hsiao-Hu tigerish sturdiness. To let this tigerling “serve” him...

Commander Ho suddenly burst out laughing, thinking Hsiao-Hu naïve and innocent.

Hsiao-Hu started laughing as well, knowing that the Commander didn't catch his meaning.

(1) 兔子—“hare”, or “rabbit”, slang for catamites.

(2) Yama—King of the underworld.

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[A Cruel Romance, Vol. I] Transgression

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Transgression

Lan Bai-Shan came back.

He had taken the liberty to act on his own terms, and pledged dependence to Chao Chen-Sheng. Commander Ho's intended target had been Fu Yang-Shan.

Commander Ho didn't comment. It made little difference who they pledged dependence to, for it was nothing more than an instrument to acquire a title.

Under Chao, the Anguo Army was renamed the Twenty-Third Army. Commander Ho didn't know how the number twenty-three came to be, and had no interest in finding out. He only found Lan rather bold to have the nerve to act out on his own.

The regimental commanders under his command were promoted to divisional commanders. This too was only a change in title. Li Shih-Yao's division had over forty thousand men, which didn't fall under the proper size of a division. Neither was Sun Shu-Shan's division, which only had about three thousand men.

Lan had his reasons for choosing Chao. Unlike Fu and his affectations, Chao was relatively more generous and had agreed to pay them. The money went straight into Lan's pockets, allowing him, once more, some contact with a bit of wealth and power—at last!

He wasn't concerned that Commander Ho would denounce him for overstepping his authority. Commander Ho loved him, and he knew it.

This bit of love acted as his protection charm. He had no confidence in his ability to retain this love indefinitely, so while it still lasted, he must act to secure his future and ready his plans.

The colonels who'd become major-generals didn't care much for the identity of their administrator. The truth was, nobody could really administer them anyway. Upon hearing that they would be funded for no particular reason, they expressed their delight by demanding celebration and merrymaking. Commander Ho smiled tepidly, and gave them neither attention nor interference. Lan's daring self-assertion had made him extremely uncomfortable.

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Salary was not to be distributed gratuitously, and pocketing another man's money meant labouring and dying for said man. Even so, since nobody was a fool, Li Shih-Yao and the like didn't mind sending their troops off to war. It didn't matter whether they were victorious or not, the point was to follow the example of locusts—swarm across the lands and leave not even a blade of grass behind.

It was for this reason that war had become a profitable job. This time, Li failed to nick the job from Jin Hwan-Ran, and was forced to guard Luyang and protect Commander Ho. Did a lone ghost of a man like Commander Ho need the protection of more than ten thousand men? As he reflected upon Jin's entitlement to roam to his heart's content, Li became more irritated than ever. With each passing day, he raised his head up high and sighed: "That brat's making yet another fortune!"

On the tenth day of Li's torment, Chao issued another order which declared a shortage of men on the battlefield, along with instructions for the Twenty-Third Army to send out a few more regiments. Li couldn't stay put any longer

this time, so after rounding up a few comrades who were eager for victory and blind with greed, he set out with his troops at once.

Commander Ho sat at home and took little notice of the events outside. He was well aware of the fact that he wouldn't be able to hold back such beasts of prey at the moment, so he simply avoided being a garrulous nuisance. The years were long. If they could manage to stay alive, everything could take their time. Besides, he had his own problem weighing on his mind—his illness!

To term it an illness wasn't entirely accurate. It should have been called an "unmentionable condition," one that would never see the light of day and could only be endured in private. This would have been an entirely different matter were he actually an old man, but he was only twenty-two and still quite young. Even setting his recent problems aside, wouldn't he have to fulfil his ancestral duties eventually?

He sent Wen Nine a list of medicines that he'd put together himself—without any medical insight. A month later, Wen Nine delivered the medicines along with a gramophone. Calmly and silently, Commander Ho stored the foreign medicines in a cabinet, and took his doses diligently. He'd even managed to get a hold of some imported hormone shots, but because he didn't know how to administer an injection, he hadn't yet put them to use.

He continued taking his medication for a few days. Before he started feeling any of its effects, Lan left for Hsian again.

Leave then, thought Commander Ho. He knew Lan was reckless with greed, and now that he had Chao, he was no longer Lan's sole support. Besides, even if Lan were available, he wouldn't be able to do anything beyond chatting and bantering.

- : -

Curing himself was the crucial task.

If one medicine showed no progress, he'd switch to another.

- : -

Hsiao-Hu noticed that Commander Ho was throwing out a large number of empty pill boxes. He couldn't read much, so he brought the boxes to Adjutant Li, who then went through them and remained equally clueless.

Bold as he was, Hsiao-Hu decided to simply ask Commander Ho himself.

It was late in the afternoon. Hsiao-Hu carried a basin of warm water into the bedroom and said with a grin. "Commander, it's time for your footbath."

Commander Ho was sitting at his desk, fiddling with his record player. A disc spun leisurely inside while the speaker exhaled a thin, trembling melody. Hsiao-Hu had never found the music pleasant, but he was interested in its source. Commander Ho had explained it's mechanics to him once, and he had listened closely, yet he was still completely unable to comprehend any of it.

To the last beat of the melody, Commander Ho opened a new bottle of medicine with some effort. He dropped a small pill into his mouth—and not finding any water, he grabbed a bottle of wine off his desk and pulled out the cork, gulping down a mouthful of its content.

Hsiao-Wu watched behind him, and asked with interest: "Commander, are you sick? Why are you taking medicine all the time?"

"It's nothing. They're just nutrition pills," Commander Ho said absent-mindedly.

Hsiao-Hu took it for the truth. He crouched down and tested the water with his hand. “Come over here, Commander, the water’s almost going cold.”

Commander Ho walked over to his bed. Just as his backside touched the sheets, the lights in the room went out. The gramophone, too, fell mute.

In Luyang, blackouts occurred on a regular basis while electricity was something of a rarity. Hsiao-Hu stood up and lit a few candles, then hunkered back down. As per usual, he removed Commander Ho’s socks and placed his feet in the basin.

Hsiao-Hu’s interest in Commander Ho’s feet had persevered through time. He massaged the Commander’s feet with lively enthusiasm, and while he was right at it, Commander Ho jerked his foot away with a sharp intake of breath.

“Did you just tickle me?”

Hsiao Hu looked up and grinned. “Wasn’t on purpose.”

Commander Ho inserted his foot back into the water and leaned back. He propped himself up on his arms as he lay facing the ceiling, deep in thought.

He remained so for some five minutes, until he felt a sudden and unexpected spark of arousal creep up on him. Hsiao-Hu’s titillating hands sent the sensation up through the soles of his feet, and his entire body prickled for a second with something almost like an electric shock. He swayed as his arms grew weak, and collapsed on his back.

Caught off guard by Commander Ho’s sudden fall, Hsiao-Hu looked up and was about to speak, except the first thing that entered his vision was Commander Ho’s exposed crotch. Commander Ho was wearing a pair of unlined silk trousers. The soft fabric flowed around his body like water, fully betraying the shape of his erection.

Hsiao-Hu had never seen the Commander in such a state. He froze in shock, his head buzzing while all the blood in him rushed up and boiled on his face.

He stood up, wiping his wet hands on his trousers. “Com—Commander?” he probed in a small voice.

Commander Ho raised a hand. He said nothing but sighed heavily, sounding almost as if he might cry.

What is this, some fucking aphrodisiac? He thought to himself as he held on to his sheets, clenching his teeth. *But where the hell am I going to get some relief?*

Commander Ho groaned despite himself, fully aware of how he must have looked. He wanted to get rid of Hsiao-Hu so he could relieve his infuriating member in private, but before he had a chance to say a word, he felt a sudden tightening around his erection. Looking down, he saw that Hsiao-Hu had wrapped his hand through the fabric of his trousers and around his cock.

“Not you...” he panted. “Get out of here...”

Hsiao-Hu remained silent, his eyes wide and completely engrossed in stroking Commander Ho. Through the fine silk, he could feel, acutely, the heat and hardness of the Commander’s erection. He’d had no experience pleasuring others, but being a teenaged boy himself, Hsiao-Hu knew what he had to do.

As if possessed by demons, he ignored Commander Ho’s mumbling refusals. Taking a seat on the bed, he pulled down the Commander Ho’s trousers gently and took a full grasp of the Commander’s engorged cock.

Outraged, Commander Ho struggled in an attempt to sit up and knock Hsiao-Hu’s hand away. But before he had

mustered the energy to execute such actions, Hsiao-Hu, in a sudden motion, bent down and lowered his head, taking the burning length of the shaft into his mouth as he moved his tongue lightly around its head. Commander Ho moaned in both pain and arousal, and couldn't help but thrust his hip even further, seeking to completely bury himself inside Hsiao-Hu's mouth.

Within two minutes, Commander Ho came gushingly inside Hsiao-Hu. It couldn't really be called an ejaculation though, for the semen merely trickled out in a feeble but ample flow. Swallowing without a second thought, Hsiao-Hu made his way between the Commander's legs. He bowed down to retake the deflating cock into his mouth, and sucked as if he were licking on sweets.

Despite having climaxed once already, Commander Ho's body was still quite sensitive. Since it seemed that Hsiao-Hu had no intention to cease his pleasuring, Commander Ho, in a moment of inertia, had somehow brought up his dangling legs and rested them on Hsiao-Hu's shoulders. His trousers too had been removed entirely, and Hsiao-Hu's hands glided up his thighs and grasped his hips while he wetted Commander Ho's groin with a meticulous and eager tongue.

Sweat started forming around Commander Ho's brow and his half-closed eyes. With a sudden and startled "Oh!", he reached another mini-orgasm—though it came reluctantly, as his member hadn't achieved full erection.

This time, Hsiao-Hu's tongue pushed the fluid toward the crack of his buttocks. Commander Ho's "oh" had come softly and timidly, enough to shatter something in Hsiao-Hu and send him plummeting to perdition.

Meanwhile, Commander Ho was still submersed in a trancelike state of elation. He rested his calves on Hsiao-Hu's shoulders, too tired to wriggle even the tip of his toes. Hsiao-Hu could be trusted, and besides, he was probably too young to notice his abnormality. At ease, Commander Ho closed his eyes as he recovered.

He lay on his back, his breathing slow and slight, and his expression satisfied and serene. As he was just about to slip into a luscious dream, a sharp pain between his legs made him cry out—it was a muffled cry, since a hand had clasped over his mouth the moment he opened it.

And the pain grew increasingly intense before turning into a tearing torture.

The hand over his mouth withdrew, and his legs were pressed against his chest, contorting his body as if to highlight the point of the penetration. This was the position meant for fucking women, a position in which Chao Hsiao-Hu was now fucking him brutally. Commander Ho broke out in a cold sweat in pain, but he couldn't cry out for help. Not only was he unable to cry out, he had to swallow his pained groans through clenched teeth.

He wanted to reach for his pistol under the pillow, but lost control of his body with Hsiao-Hu's thrusts. He struggled to make eye contact with Hsiao-Hu, whispering fitfully: "sto—stop it..."

Hsiao-Hu rearranged Commander Ho's legs on his shoulders, and with his hands clutching the commander's waist, he rammed into Commander Ho savagely. His movements were so desperate that it was as though he had some unspeakable grudge against the commander, and wished to fuck him to his death. Commander Ho had stared at Hsiao-Hu viciously, but at last even his eyes lost their focus, and all he could feel was a burning wedge being driven inside him, time after time, drilling deeper and deeper into his guts.

With bloodshot eyes, Hsiao-Hu emptied himself deep inside Commander Ho with exhilarated delight. Exhaling heavily, he pulled out and looked down, only to gasp in shock at the sight.

Droplets of blood were splattered along edge of the bed, evidently shed as he withdrew from Commander Ho. Upon closer inspection, he saw that Commander Ho's torn entrance was still protracted, and blood continued to ooze out with streaks of white, which must have been his own seed.

Panicking, he looked up at Commander Ho, his voice breaking into something of a sob: "Commander, are you all right?"

Commander Ho had gone very white. He opened his mouth, and pointed a strenuous finger at Hsiao-Hu. "How—how dare you..."

Hsiao-Hu blinked, tears dribbling down his face. He turned to clean up the blood with straw paper, sniffing. "It's all my fault. I didn't know it would turn out like this... Don't be afraid, I'll get some medicine."

Commander Ho pummelled his bed feebly, and with his last gasp, murmured: "there's medicine in the cabinet... Keep quiet."

- : -

Chao Hsiao-Hu was certain that Commander Ho was going to kill him. He thought his crime quite horrendous, and probably deserved death, though he had absolutely no wish to die.

As he reflected upon the events of that night, a delayed fear caught up with him. He had no idea where he'd gotten the nerve to simply pull off his pants and shove it into the other man. He really didn't. It was as though something had possessed him.

But the experience was still very much worth savouring. It had been tight, warm, soft, quivering... Like the virgin girl he'd raped at Guwang Village. Even that virgin body wasn't as nice as Commander Ho's—it turned out that he was really made of porcelain from head to toe.

With a wet towel, he cleaned up the blood on Commander Ho, and applied the powdered medicine. Commander Ho had first groaned in pain, but quieted as the powder started working its effect.

Hsiao-Hu pulled the cotton quilt over him, and kneeled at the foot of the bed.

Commander Ho fell asleep, and Hsiao-Hu remained kneeling for the rest of the night.

At noon, Commander Ho woke up on time. He noticed Hsiao-Hu's kneeling form by the bed, and said nothing while he ordered him about his daily business, as if nothing had happened the previous night. Hsiao-Hu was puzzled, and highly alarmed. For years he had served Commander Ho, and he knew that the Commander's heart was not much wider than the point of a needle. Things would be less disconcerting if Commander Ho had torn off a chunk of Hsiao-Hu's flesh the moment he woke up, or had shredded him into pieces with his pistol.

Commander Ho could not leave his bed, and since his wound had been on his backside, it had to be kept quiet. With the intention to atone for his crime through his actions, Hsiao-Hu looked after Commander Ho tirelessly. Fortunately, the divisional commanders were off fighting with their troops, allowing Commander Ho to heal his wounds in secluded peace.

By the fifteenth day, Commander Ho had recovered for the most part. He could sit, and he could walk, though he sat with caution and walked very slowly.

During these fifteen days, he had never once looked at Hsiao-Hu in the eye. Hsiao-Hu didn't let his guard down at the Commander's apparent calmness—Commander Ho couldn't possibly simply let the matter drop, unless he wasn't really Commander Ho and something else had taken his place.

- : -

On the sixteenth night, a few guards tied up Hsiao-Hu in his sleep. He was about to cry out, but his mouth was gagged.

He was left hanging inside the woodshed at a most painful height where the tip of his toes could only brush against the floor. He groaned, thinking he was going to dislocate his arms.

“What have you done?” A guard whispered to him. “The Commander ordered us to tie you up.”

And Hsiao-Hu knew his life was over. The only reason Commander Ho hadn't turned on him yet was because he needed someone to look after him in secret. Now that he had recovered, he was out to settle the entire score!

He started to panic, and tried to stand on tiptoes in a desperate attempt to find a point of support.

The glow of torches emerged through the door. With one hand in his pocket and another holding a horsewhip, Commander Ho strolled in.

The woodshed had a small door, and because the Commander was quite tall, he had to lower his head as he stepped through. In the torchlight, Hsiao-Hu could see that he was wearing a black padded silk jacket; his clothes were black, his hair black, even his eyes and brows were black—a sharp contrast against the deathly white of his face.

Pale and expressionless. His eyes were still, his gaze empty.

Hsiao-Hu stared at Commander Ho with wide eyes, a bit frightened.

Commander Ho produced a pair of white gloves from his pockets and put them on. Holding the whip in his right hand, he swung out at Hsiao-Hu wordlessly.

Commander Ho had been storing up a lot of force. The first strike managed to rip open his army shirt, and the second one carved into his flesh. Hsiao-Hu squirmed around desperately, emitting muffled groans, and because his mouth had been gagged, he felt like he was about to suffocate.

After thirty-five lashes, Commander Ho's arm was starting to ache from the exertion. He handed his whip to a nearby guard. The guard, understanding, walked up to Hsiao-Hu.

Because they had all been good friends in former days, the guard could only lower his eyes in an awkward moment before swinging the whip regardlessly. The guard was stronger than Commander Ho, and didn't dare to withhold his strength. By the end of the affair, the tip of the whip was unravelling. Hsiao-Hu had first groaned in pain, but later fell silent. His head lay drooping on his chest as he lost consciousness like a dead man in a noose.

Commander Ho ordered a guard to splash him awake with salt water, then waited wordless. After making sure that Hsiao-Hu had fully regained consciousness, Commander Ho walked up to him, and dragged the blade of a knife diagonally across his face.

Hsiao-Hu looked up at him, his gaze fervent, weak, tortuous.

Commander Ho's lips curled into a mirthless smile, and carved another line into Hsiao-Hu's face, marking a bloody cross.

He spoke his first words since the start of the torture. “I could rescue you from a corpse pile, and I can send you back. I have fostered you, yet you have failed me. There's nothing I can do about it.”

At this, he pressed the tip of the blade against Hsiao-Hu's left shoulder and pushed in slightly. He dragged it downwards in a slow motion until he reached the waist, where he turned his wrist, and like the stroke of a child's painting, brought it upwards.

Trembling grunts escaped Hsiao-Hu's through his nose as the knife carved over his ribs. He looked at Commander

Ho pleadingly, like a large, confused animal begging for forgiveness.

Commander Ho looked back at him, his eyes obsidian and devoid of temperature.

He drew numerous soft curves on Hsiao-Hu's body. Blood seeped through these curves, decorating Hsiao-Hu's body into a bloodied gourd.

Finally, he seemed to have gotten tired. He shoved the blade into Hsiao-Hu's chest with force, but was hindered by a rib.

He became impatient. He yanked the knife downwards in a ferocious streak, and as the blade entered the tender abdomen, he rammed it in, leaving only the hilt of the knife outside.

Hsiao-Hu made a sound deep in his throat; his eyes were still fixed on Commander Ho.

Commander Ho released the knife. Taking a step back, he removed the bloodied gloves and dropped them on the floor. He turned around, and as he was leaving, commanded: "when he stops breathing, throw him out of town."

- : -

Back in his rooms, Commander Ho washed his hands and got changed for bed. He slept till late morning, when he opened his eyes drowsily and called out for Hsiao-Hu.

The orderly who came in at the call had a face he didn't recognise.

"Commander, did you need something?"

Commander Ho stared at him. After a moment, he finally said: "I need water, a change of clothes, the toilet, and breakfast. Who are you?"

"I'm Li Bai," the small orderly replied docilely to the floor. "I'm here to take over Chao Hsiao-Hu."

Commander Ho laughed. "Can you read?"

"No."

"And you have the face to call yourself Li Bai?"

The orderly didn't know of Li Bai the poet, and couldn't understand what the Commander meant.

Seeing that he was rather dull-witted, Commander Ho said nothing further. "Where's Hsiao-Hu?"

"Thrown into the mass grave at dawn."

Commander Ho nodded, and sighed.

- : -

Breakfast was prepared, and Commander Ho sat at his table with his chopsticks. He was about to begin his meal, but his head snapped up as if he had suddenly remembered something. "Li Bai, send some men out to recover Hsiao-Hu's body."

Li Bai answered and ran out to pass on the command. After an hour or so, Adjutant Li jogged back in gasping for breath.

"Commander, I went looking for Hsiao-Hu outside, but I couldn't find him. He probably got carried off by stray

mongrels.”

Commander Ho picked up a teacup, and took a quiet sip.

“Look again.”

- :-

Hsiao-Hu’s wounds were severe, and when he had been thrown out into the mass grave, he had not only ceased breathing, but had a knife sticking out of his belly. There wasn’t a possibility that he had somehow survived. Adjutant Li and his men looked for him for a few more days, but couldn’t find even a single strand of Hsiao-Hu’s hair. Perhaps he really did get carried off by mongrels.

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[A Cruel Romance, Vol. I] Commotion



sl-llian.livejournal.com/4118.html

Commotion

Time flew, and soon, New Year was upon them.

Commander Ho's New Year was not spent alone. Lan had kept him company throughout New Year's Eve, and by morning, flocks of his subordinates and members of the local gentry were swarming in to pay their new year's respects. Commander Ho sat in his Guangxu palace chair, his manners placid as he greeted his guests with smiles.

Li Shih-Yao alone had been late. It was nearly dusk when he finally made an appearance at the front gates.

Commander Ho had been fooling around with Lan in the central room. Lan ruffled Commander Ho's tousled hair, chuckling: "How can a young man like you treat yourself this way? Just look at your hair. Why don't you tidy it up a bit?"

Commander Ho allowed him to play with his hair. "Haven't got an audience."

Lan took out a comb and some hair oil. "Neither have I, but have I turned my head into a bird nest?"

Commander Ho laughed. He wasn't one to concern himself with appearances. Besides, in his current occupation, how he looked hardly mattered.

With considerable effort, Lan succeeded in taming his hair into a glossy coiffure. This only made Commander Ho look even more porcelain.

Commander Ho turned to him, his upturned eyes curving slightly with a smile. They held a silent seductiveness.

Lan was lost in them for a slight moment. "Ji-Ch'ing..."

Not noticing Lan's predicament, Commander Ho picked up a silver cigarette case on the table. He took out a single cigarette and stuck it between his lips, and was about to open the drawer in search for matches, when an orderly at the door announced that Major-General Li had arrived.

Before Commander Ho could respond, Li Shih-Yao pushed open the door and proceeded to invite himself in.

"Commander! How are you?" Li was clad in a black wool coat with fox fur for collars, looking like an upstart mogul. He stood near the door grinning widely, and looked to Commander Ho before turning his eyes to Lan. "Chief Lan is here as well? Wonderful! I was worried Commander Ho might get lonely all by himself." At this, he cupped one hand in the other before his chest. "Commander, I hereby pay you your New Year's respect! I wish you a year of power and wealth, and may we dip in some of your glory!"

Commander Ho was a very suspicious man, and had always taken a disliking to Li. The propitious words sounded anything but to his ears, and he suspected there were words within words. But since Li appeared to be in good humour and his mannerism sincere, the Commander was not in a position to ruminate in silence.

"Thank you," Commander Ho constructed a smile on his face, taking the cigarette out of his lips. "You've just come back?"

Li helped himself to a chair. "Aye! And first thing I did was to head over here." He then examined Commander Ho from head to toe. "Commander, that's a nice outfit on you."

Commander Ho glanced down at himself reflexively, but failed to see anything of note. He was sporting in an East-meets-West look, a mix of black dress trousers, leather shoes and a crimson Chinese chiffon jacket. The jacket was only half-buttoned, the collar opening to reveal a white silk shirt.

Li decided to comment again. "You know, no counting women, only you can pull off something like this. It suits your complexion."

Commander Ho went from his usual pale to red rapidly. "Well..."

He could neither agree nor disagree with Lee's audacious remark, so he simply smiled and changed the topic. "Major General Li must have had a rough journey."

Li crossed his legs, his eyes staring straight at Commander Ho. "Not at all," he smiled. "Riding isn't all that tiring if you're accustomed to it. By the way, Commander, after so many victories—and, in effect, beating the shit out of these so-called Fu's Army, shouldn't Chao Chen-Sheng express some gratitude?"

Commander Ho threw him a glance and smiled faintly. "These days, war means fortune. You're able to fry grease out of mud, yet you're still after Fu's money?"

"Commander, why would you side with outsiders?" Li laughed. "Money doesn't bite, the more the merrier!"

Commander Ho looked down, staring at the cigarette between his fingers. "A man cannot be ruled by greed, and should know contentment in what he has. Besides—" He laughed out a "Ha", and stopped.

Li had no idea what the commander was laughing at, but catching sight of the unlit cigarette in Commander Ho's hand, he smartly dug a gilded English lighter out of his coat, and brought it lit in front of the Commander with both hands. Deep in thought, Commander was perplexed for a moment as a burst of flame came to life in front of his face. He recovered quickly and brought the cigarette to his lips, lighting his cigarette and exhaling a grey cloud of smoke.

Li placed the lighter on the table beside Commander Ho. "Keep it, it's new."

Biting on his cigarette, Commander Ho looked at the lighter, then at Li. "All right," he said nonchalantly.

Li remained standing in front him, and appeared to have no intention of leaving. He stared down at the Commander. "It's New Year, Commander. I came back in a rush, so I haven't prepared anything fancy. All I have for you is a bit of...you know."

Commander Ho didn't care for Li's gifts, but since Li was being intentionally vague, he couldn't help but ask: "What?"

Li turned to the door and clapped. An orderly appeared on cue, bringing in a small leather case to Li. Li placed it on the table before opening its lid for the Commander. "Snow."

Commander Ho glanced at its content, his face impassive. "Where did you get this?"

Li flashed his white teeth in a roguish grin. "Where do you think?"

Commander Ho resented his manners, and made no attempt to be pleasant. "Looted it?"

Li clapped. "No wonder you're the Commander! Correct on the first guess! This is premium Japanese stuff, you wouldn't be able buy it with money!"

Commander Ho made a rough estimate in his head—heroin was indeed quite valuable, but the locals didn't acknowledge that. If he wanted to profit, he'd have to ship it out.

He closed the lid with his hand. "Too inconvenient."

Li's eyes lowered, his gaze landing on Commander Ho's hand lying atop the case. Its fingers were well proportioned and long, its pale skin almost translucent.

"Not at all! If you find it inconvenient, you can always keep it for personal use," he grinned.

Commander Ho finally looked up at him. "Trying to ruin me?"

"No, it's good stuff."

"If I get addicted..."

Li leaned on the table with one arm, his body tilting forward. He could see the Commander's dark eyelashes from this new angle. "I'll support you."

Commander Ho turned to look at Lan, who had been sitting in the corner. "How very generous of Major-General Li."

Lan, who had remained silent during the conversation, joined in on Commander Ho's cue. "Major-General Li had made a promise. If Commander Ho ever does need you someday, you better keep your words!"

Li glanced at Lan, finding him rather offensive to his eyes. "By the way, Chief Lan—since you keep around the Commander all day—are you just all talk, or do you have something to show for it? Everyone knows the money from Hsian goes through your hands first. Why don't you honour the Commander with a bit of your fortune? Don't be such a penny pincher!"

Not expecting such blatancy, Lan was at a loss of words for a moment. Commander Ho came to his rescue. "It's all right, your kind thoughts are more than enough. How much you offer hardly matters. Please sit, Major-General Li." He picked up an empty teacup, looked into it, and turned to the door. "Li Bai! Tea!"

Li knew that the Commander was bound to defend Lan, and wasn't especially offended by his senseless attempt at mediation. After some chitchatting, he rose to leave, his heart still itching mischievously—the mere sight of the Commander made him restless now. Commander Ho, the wooden beauty, who probably looked even better when he's stripped naked. Always so proper—Li wondered if Lan had ever fucked him, or if he'd ever fucked Lan.

He considered himself much more of a man than Lan. If Commander Ho liked men, why hadn't he come to Li?

In fact, Li didn't harbour any particular interest in other men; he wasn't Jin Hwan-Ran. To his eyes, Commander Ho was more like a symbol—a symbol of sexual dominance and authority, hidden behind in a dark veil of forbiddance, one that could only be viewed from afar and not trifled with. Symbols had no gender; symbols were just metaphors.

Therefore, as he molested Commander Ho mentally, he wasn't slightly bothered. Ho Bao-Ting, the Seventh Master, the Old Marshal's son, the Commander-in-Chief... Fucking him, would be like fucking legions instantaneously.

Li Shih-Yao fancied himself a hero. What was a hero? Heroes meant boundless pillage and conquest.

One day, he'd strip Commander Ho naked, and conquer him thoroughly.

- : -

Commander Ho watched as Li took his leave, a look of disgust flickering across his features.

Lan smiled when he caught it. "Now, now. He won't be here very often, just bear with him."

Commander Ho tapped the small leather case on the table. "This is trouble. Valuable, but difficult to dispose of, not

to mention disreputable. I prefer crude opium.”

Having no further suggestion to offer, Lan simply smiled.

Commander Ho glanced at him, wondering exactly how much he profited from the army’s commissions. Lan hadn’t mentioned anything about it. Did he think him a fool? But if he were to actually cut off Lan’s route of wealth...

Commander Ho shook his head to himself. He knew Lan. Lan was simply toying with him, as he was with Lan. If one day he were to withdraw Lan’s power, he’d probably abandon his allegiances without a second thought—providing that he could find a new master.

But why should he indulge Lan so? In fact, Lan was a most ordinary man. He had a bit of ambition, but his intelligence was limited. Commander Ho didn’t even know why he liked him so much. Perhaps it was because he’d spent his whole life surrounded by heroic personages—even his mother in title, Lady Ho, was something of a heroine.

Lan Bai-Shan was no hero. His smile was like sunlight, his twinkling eyes like crescents. When he spoke, he spoke of everyday trifles, and now and then when he did speak of greater affairs, his manners would remain placid. His stance never showed aggression—he was like a cunning but adorable little fox, his bite quite harmless.

Commander Ho was getting a headache. His hand was still resting on top of the case as the ghost of an idea formed in his mind. It was an island enshrouded in the thick mist of the sea, seemingly an otherworldly paradise, but in reality barren and perilous.

“Bai-Shan,” he turned to his lover. “Don’t leave tonight.”

Lan blanched. “Wha—what for?”

“Stay with me.”

Lan smiled awkwardly. “Ji-Ch’ing, you want me to spend the night with you? If this ever gets out, what will I become? We’ll both become laughing stock. Don’t act on caprice. I’ll stay late for a bit, and come in early next morning. Would that be alright?”

“No.”

Lan stood up and moved towards the Commander, bending down to gaze into his eyes. He nudged the tip of Commander Ho’s nose, laughing softly. “Ji-Ch’ing, don’t be childish.”

Commander Ho tilted his head slightly, reaching forward to land a light kiss on Lan’s lips. His face, however, showed no pleasure. “Stay! You know me, I won’t be able to do anything to you. All I want is for others to know, you are mine!”

Lan went a bit red. “And what do you aim to achieve by this? The Commander slept with the Chief of Staff, does that sound like a good story?”

Commander Ho placed an arm around Lan’s neck, arching a brow as the corners of his lips curled ever so slightly. “Sounds splendid.”

Lan suddenly found the situation very tricky. Commander Ho was going out of his mind. He hadn’t had anything to drink, so where the hell did the madness come from?

“Ji-Ch’ing, have you ever considered my reputation? If people know we’re in...that kind of relationship, how will I ever show my face again?”

“Then don’t.” Commander Ho’s hand climbed slowly up Lan’s head, and abruptly, took a grasp of his hair. “Bai-Shan,

I've suddenly realised that I made a terrible mistake. I've just come to my senses, and it's not altogether too late."

Lan had a sinking feeling. "What mistake?"

Commander Ho increased the force of his grasp, almost as if he was trying to rip out Lan's hair. "See for yourself! But remember, I really do love you."

At the drop of his words, Commander Ho turned to the door. "Guard!"

Li Bai came running in. "Commander, what's the matter?"

Commander Ho let go of Lan, rose to his feet and strode across the room to Li Bai. He grabbed the pistol hanging by Li's belt, and turned around wordlessly. Without warning, he aimed it at Lan's leg and pulled the trigger.

A sudden scream of pain erupted with the gunshot. Commander Ho watched as his bleeding lover lay cowering on the floor. Sighing deeply, he tossed the pistol away. "Good, now my heart's finally at more ease. Call in a medic!"

- : -

Commander Ho had shattered Lan's kneecap with a single shot. When it was time to treat the wound, he forbade the medic from using anaesthetics.

"HO JI-CH'ING—" Lan was howling in agony. "ARE YOU—TRYING TO—FUCKING KILL ME?"

Commander Ho ignored him. When the wound was tended and bandaged, he called out the medic and whispered a set of instructions. The medic listened with a startled look. "Morphine would be enough to curb the pain. Why heroin?"

Commander Ho stared at the medic in silence.

The medic realized too late that he should have kept his mouth shut. He nodded frantically. "I see, Commander. Please rest assured, I'll administer the appropriate dosage."

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- Current Mood:  melancholy

[A Cruel Romance, Vol. I] Investigation

 sl-Ilian.livejournal.com/4485.html

Investigation

No matter how hard he tried, Lan Bai-Shan could not understand why Commander Ho had shot him.

Commander Ho gave a single explanation. “Stay and tend to your wound.”

The explanation was evidently not very convincing. Lan was a hot-blooded man, and refused to have his kneecap shattered for no reason. Sitting on the bed, he looked at the Commander with furious resentment, shouting: “This leg is ruined!”

Commander Ho stood in the middle of the room, his back perfectly straight, his hair extremely tidy. “It matters not.”

Lan threw a hateful punch at the wall. “It’s my leg that’s crippled, of course it doesn’t matter to you! How have I ever wronged you to deserve this sort of cruelty?”

Commander Ho threw back his head, and sang in a lively tone: “I only did it because—” he extended a hand towards Lan elegantly, as if inviting him to a dance. “—I love you!”

Noting that the Commander was acting like he had lost his mind, Lan became highly alarmed. “Ji-Ch’ing, what’s happening to you? Do you know what you’ve done?”

Commander Ho brought his lips together in a smile, which later turned into a laugh. His laughter was constrained, his body trembling. “Bai-Shan, don’t worry about me, or about yourself. I’m here, so have no fear.”

In face of his erratic behavior, Lan remained silent, deciding that the brat had gone round the bent—but why had he?

While Lan was busy being puzzled, Commander Ho suddenly dropped his smile, and stalked out without another word.

- : -

Right after Commander Ho took his leave, the medic showed up for Lan’s injection.

Lan was a bit suspicious. “What are you giving me?”

“Dolantin,” the medic said without hesitation.

“I don’t think I need a shot just now, I’m not in pain yet.”

But the medic insisted. “Chief Lan, why would you wait until the pain hits? That would be torturing yourself! If give you a shot now, you can just lie back and take a nap afterwards. Isn’t that much better?”

Lan didn’t know much about medicine. The medic seemed to know what he was doing, so he gave in. He rolled up the sleeve of his army coat and unbuttoned his cuff. “Don’t give it to me too often though, even Dolantin can form an addiction.”

“Don’t worry, I’ll be careful. You’ll only need it for a few days, just so you don’t have to endure the pain.”

Lan sneered. “Pain? Do I look like I still give a damn about the pain?”

Wary of the shift of tone, the medic didn't dare to comment, and left hurriedly after he'd given the shot. Lan lay in the bed, his eyes closed in a half sleep, and in his trance, he felt his body grow light. The pain in his leg and the resentment in his heart evaporated altogether, leaving him in such bliss that he thought he'd ascended to the land of the immortal.

- : -

Within three days, the local assemblage had all learnt of the shooting incident. Surprise aside, they soon came up with various speculations. Knowing the unique nature of the relationship between Commander Ho and Lan, the speculations were soon laden with a range of condiments, and eventually the gossip turned quite bizarre.

From the staff division came a very reluctant Officer Ma and a few fellow officers and secretaries, who wished to visit Chief Lan but didn't have the nerve to walk through Ho's gates. Luckily, Commander Ho didn't actually bite, and merely stood in the central hall with his hands tucked inside his sleeves, a cigarette between his lips. "I thank you for your kindness on Bai-Shan's behalf. Now that the staff division no longer has Bai-Shan, it's good that Officer Ma can take on more responsibility."

Sensing the Commander's irritation, Ma could only mumble in agreement. He and his colleagues retreated from the Ho Residence, debating amongst themselves on the entire way back.

Two days later, Jin Hwan-Ran showed up with others, and still couldn't get to see Lan. Commander Ho sat in his palace chair, his manners mild but indifferent, and managed to drive them away with sheer nonchalance.

Li Shih-Yao was the last to come. After arriving, he threw himself in a chair next to the Commander, and asked brashly: "Commander, I heard you nearly killed Chief Lan the other day? There I was thinking the two of you are best mates, what's with the sudden hostility? You can't just talk things over, and had to resort to violence?"

Commander Ho kept his eyes downcast, since he couldn't be bothered to look at Li. "I shot Lan. He hasn't complained yet, but you seem more concerned."

Li smirked, and said boldly: "Of course, this is all between you lovebirds, so we wouldn't know anything about it!"

Commander Ho glanced at him, and slightly raised his voice. "What did you say?"

Li waved his hand and laughed. "Nothing!"

Commander Ho snorted. "Major-General Li is very humorous. Bold, too."

"Bold? Even if I was, I wouldn't dare to be in front of you! Commander, it's not like anyone owes you money, why don't you ever smile a bit for me?"

Commander Ho stared at the floor silently. A moment later, he looked up to Li. "You want me, to smile a bit, for you."

Li nodded with a grin. "Precisely! I mean Commander, you give all your smiles to Lan, and leave us with nothing. That's just unfair!"

Commander Ho wanted to give Li a big fat slap in the face, but then he thought about the forty thousand men under Li's command, and merely wiped his sweaty palms on his trousers. He forced down his anger and spoke: "Major-General Li has come here for a laugh?"

Li waved his hand hurriedly. "No, no no! You misunderstand, Commander. I've nothing but the deepest respect for you, I just thought if you were a bit more benevolent, I'd love you even more!"

Having reached the end of his forbearance, Commander Ho rose to his feet. "I'm tired. You should head back and

rest.”

Noting that the Commander was about to leave, Li stood up as well. He reached out and grasped Commander Ho’s wrist. “Commander, I still need to talk to you—“

Commander Ho turned around to glare at Li. “What are you doing? Let go!”

Li maintained his smile. “Commander, what’s the hurry? I might have to go back to Wantong in few days, it’ll be hard to see you then.”

Commander Ho finally dispatched the slap he’d been holding back solidly onto Li’s face.

- :-

Stunned, Li cupped his face with one hand while other released Commander Ho’s wrist. Commander Ho glowered at him with gleaming eyes.

“Fuck off,” he growled through clenched teeth.

Li’s brows furrowed for a bit, as though he was about to lose his temper but had controlled himself. Swallowing, he dropped his hand. “Commander, isn’t this temper of yours a bit too violent?”

“Now!”

Li shrugged indifferently. “Alright, I’ll fuck off then. Calm down, Commander, it’s not good for your health! Good-bye!” He laughed disdainfully, then turned and swaggered out.

Commander Ho was light-headed with anger. What kind of scum was Li, daring to come and mock him! He should fucking kill him!

Sitting back down on the palace chair, he held his head in his hands while Li’s words reverberated in his mind. Moments later, his cerebrum was starting to ache, so he shut his eyes and threw back his head, whispering to himself: “I don’t want to live anymore.”

Someone gasped loudly near him. “Commander! You don’t want to live?” –it was Li Bai’s voice.

Commander Ho was lost in thought. Considering the question, he nodded slightly. “I don’t want to live.”

Li Bai sucked in a deep breath, and promptly raced outside, all the while screaming at the top of his lungs: “SOMEBODY HELP! THE COMMANDER WANTS TO KILL HIMSELF!”

- :-

Li Bai had nearly exasperated Commander Ho to death.

He drove out the adjutant and orderlies who came to his rescue, keeping only Li Bai behind. He aimed a finger at Li’s nose. “You’re not even worth one thousandth of Chao Hsiao-Hu! If slaughtering you will bring him back, I’ll feed you a bullet right now!”

Li Bai felt aggrieved. “I thought you were serious,” he explained in a low mumble.

Commander Ho was suddenly very tired. He waved his hand weakly. “Get out. Don’t come in unless I call for you.”

Eager for such a dismissal, Li gave a salute and answered “Yes sir!” before running out on light feet.

- Current Mood:  tired

[A Cruel Romance, Vol. I] Departure

 sl-Ilian.livejournal.com/5020.html

Departure

It was an April day. The grass was tall and nightingales danced in the warm breeze.

A walking stick in one hand and the wall against the other, Lan Bai-Shan struggled to lift his crippled leg and limped forward shakily.

After stepping through the door, he leaned on the doorframe to catch his breath. He raised his eyes to an opium bed in the room.

Commander Ho sat reclining on it. An orderly carried a smoking tray at the foot of the daybed, and at the sight of Lan, he stood up and backed out of the room in silence, his head low and his back bowed.

When he felt he'd regained some of his strength, Lan gritted his teeth and trudged forward, finally advancing close enough to the daybed to collapse flat on his backside.

Commander Ho watched impassively as Lan took off his shoes and climbed onto the daybed. Once Lan positioned himself against a soft cushion, Commander Ho leaned in and propped his chin against Lan's shoulder. "Where have you been?"

Lan didn't look at him. "Taking a leak," he answered coldly.

"Why would you go outside for that, with that leg of yours?"

Lan sneered. "I'm not a new bride, and I don't need a red chamber pot in the room!"

Commander Ho gazed at Lan's profile while his nimble yet persistent hand untied Lan's trousers. Lan merely turned his head away resentfully. "Everything I have, you have on yourself. Don't you ever get sick of touching me all day?"

Commander Ho had already taken a grasp of Lan's cock. It was soft, like an insignificant little adornment. After a few firm tugs, it would harden somewhat into an unwilling erection.

Commander Ho inclined his head and sniffed lightly at Lan's face and neck. He held Lan in his arms like an infant, and yanked Lan's trousers down to his knees.

Lan gave no resistance; his faced remained buried in Commander Ho's arms. Commander Ho's hand was tender and cold, reminding him of a snake coiled around his prick.

"Still nothing," Commander Ho said to himself thoughtfully. "Not even with the medication."

Lan let out an anguished yet contemptuous snort. "If you know you're useless, then give up what you're doing. It will bring you nothing but humiliation."

Commander Ho reached a hand between Lan's legs, caressing him back and forth. "You know, Bai-Shan, ever since I was in that car to Tientsin with you, I've been wanting to"—he smiled and lowered his voice—"fuck you."

Lan made no reply.

Commander Ho continued. "After all these years, my long-cherished dream is finally near its realisation, and I refuse to give up now. If I had known I would eventually meet you, I'd spent all those previous years waiting in abstinence."

“Your words make me sick!” said Lan.

“You still have to listen to them!”

“You are sick in the mind!”

“You know my sickness has nothing to do with my mind.”

Lan suddenly sat up in a struggle, grasping Commander Ho by the collar. “The whole world should see you like this! You madman!”

Commander Ho raised an eyebrow, his expression still impassive. “I don’t want them to see, so they won’t. I know it looks disgraceful, so I’ll save it just for your own enjoyment.”

A muscle twitched on Lan’s face. Commander Ho narrowed his eyes, a hint of a smile touching his lips. “Don’t get too excited, think about where your Snow comes from. Without me, you’ll be in living hell within a few hours.”

Pausing for a moment, he pulled Lan into an embrace. “You were very charming once. But now that you’re filled with wrath, you aren’t so charming any more. Look now, I’m embracing you, shouldn’t you embrace me back? In fact, you’re not worthy of my unreturned affection. If you insist on gluing your legs together every night, I might toss you out someday.”

Lan flinched slightly, and fell silent. He wasn’t afraid. He just had nothing more to say to Ho Ji-Ch’ing. If he had known it would come to this, he’d never have led the way to the school and abducted the seemingly gentle Seventh Master.

Lan Bai-Shan was no hero. He only had small ambitions, and would be satisfied with acquiring a small bit of wealth and power. But under the combined tyranny of Commander Ho and heroin, Lan had no choice but to obey. One cannot criticize his incompetence. Commander Ho had acted too fast, and struck too ruthlessly.

Even when the army was still under the Old Marshal, heroin had been strictly forbidden. From the generals to the grunts, opium and morphine were tolerated, but Snow was never to be touched—because it was too expensive, and poverty often led to thoughts of rebellion. The same logic applied to Lan. If Lan had been an opium addict, it wouldn’t be a problem, and he’d simply have to be careful with money; but heroin...

There was no way to come off it, and it was extremely costly. Because of heroin, Lan would never be able to leave Commander Ho.

- : -

After stripping Lan, Commander Ho removed his own clothing. Just like Li had fantasized, Commander Ho looked much better nude. His porcelain body was white as snow, almost blinding to the eye. His naked form was a resplendent view.

He forced Lan on all fours, and gripping Lan by the waist, he pushed forward for all he was worth. After two or three thrusts, he suddenly closed his eyes. His body trembled in light spasms.

Semen streamed out uncontrollably, and wetted Lan between his legs.

Lan barked out a scornful laugh.

Commander Ho followed suit. He gave Lan a slap on the ass and pressed a finger against his opening. With semen acting as lubricant, it slipped in easily.

He pushed in a few times, then added another finger.

Lan turned his face around. "What are you doing?"

Commander Ho cocked his head, and forced a third finger in. "Fucking you."

Lan scowled. "It hurts."

Commander Ho wore a sneer on his face, like a smile frozen at the corner of his lips. "Who cares. I might as well fuck you to death!"

- : -

Commander Ho didn't plan to spend all his time on Lan. As the weather got warmer, his heart thawed with it—Chao Chen-Sheng had sent for him from Hsian.

Chao had founded the provincial garrison army of Shansi, and appointed himself the commander-in-chief. He invited Commander Ho to take up the role of deputy commander, so the two families could join as one, and together make history. Commander Ho had never considered working this closely with Chao, but it didn't matter, for he could use an opportunity to get out of Luyang.

Although a trip to Hsian wouldn't really cover "thousands of miles", it was something close. Commander Ho studied a large map on the wall, and decided to make the first stop at the prosperous county-town of Guanghua, where he could have access to the railroad and take a train.

Commander Ho drew out the route, tossed away the pencil and walked up to Lan. "What do you think?"

Lan was sitting by the wall, his uniforms neat and his back straight. His hair was cut short, and looked decidedly sharp. He looked up to the curved line Commander Ho drew on the map, and hesitated slightly. "We'll have to cover hundreds of miles in the mountains if we depart from Guanghua. It might not be safe."

"The mountains?" Commander Ho laughed. "Are you worried about uneven roads? Trains can't turn over."

Lan shook his head. "What I meant was, there might be bandits in the mountains."

Commander cocked his head and looked at him, an absent smile on his face. "Bandits?"

"The rest of the army can't advance at the same rate as the train," Lan explained. "And when..."

Before he could finish, Commander Ho caught up. "No bandit will have that sort of audacity," he asserted with certainty. "They're nothing more than desperate men trying to stay alive, and would pillage a few county-towns at most. They'll never dare to even consider robbing us, unless they've lost their minds."

Lan considered this, and thought that it did make some sense. "That's true," he nodded.

- : -

When they realised they were finally about to leave these barren and secluded lands, the Twenty-Third Army went wild with hysteria. The exact symptoms were as follows: they slaughtered every man they came across, and raped every woman they saw. When it came to the thatched cottages that were left behind, they lit them up and burnt them to the ground. Once they went to Hsian, they would have to be extra cautious, so before they take their leave, they would celebrate in a final revelry in this god-forsaken land!

Commander Ho had never restrained his subordinates much when it came to these matters, and since it was a special time and all, he was especially liberal. During the last two months of the Twenty-Third Army's occupation of the area, no numbers recorded exactly how many had died. Summer approached rapidly, and in the steaming June heat, the Twenty-Third Army withdrew contently from the stench-filled land of rotting bodies, and marched on to

Guanghua triumphantly.

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- Current Mood:  awake

[A Cruel Romance, Vol. I] To Hsian

 sl-llian.livejournal.com/5135.html

To Hsian

When Commander Ho arrived in Guanghua, he found with great surprise that his journey was cut short. Although they had located the railroad, it was an empty one.

This was why Commander Ho hated these lands so much—cars without gasoline, railways without trains, records without gramophones—he'd had enough of this!

Since Jin Hwan-Ran and Li Shih-Yao were still far behind with the rest of the army, Commander Ho had no choice but to send Major-General Sun on a train-hunt. Sun bore the mission in his hands like a red-hot mace—he didn't know how to conjure a train out of thin air.

Commander Ho was a nuisance, but his wrath would be far more troublesome. After spending the better part of the night in contemplation, Sun gathered his forces at the break of dawn and set out for the nearest major station.

The train station happened to be under the People's Protection Army's control, making Sun's operation of the day something akin to armed robbery. To insure the success of said robbery, Sun made ample preparations, going as far as mobilising an artillery battalion.

- :-

Meanwhile, Commander Ho waited in what appeared to be high spirits. Compared to Luyang, Guanghua was decidedly livelier. Its main town was full of grand restaurants and theatres, and even the girls at the brothels looked comelier. Traveling merchants from Hsian passed through the town on a regular basis, granting it a persistent sense of prosperity.

Commander Ho watched two shows at the theatre and enjoyed a number of proper meals at the Futai House. On the seventh day, when even Li and his men had caught up, Sun finally returned with a train.

"I'm done for," Sun's face was contorted in a bitter grimace. "We've made an enemy of the PPA. My cannons took out one of their Commander Ruan's brothers."

Unfazed, Li Shih-Yao waved him off. "Nothing to worry about, Old Sun. So what if you blew up his brother—or even his old ma. What's he going to do?"

Sun relaxed somewhat: "True, what can he do?" He then turned to face Commander Ho. "Commander, the train looks pretty new, has a nice clean carriage. It's even carpeted."

Commander Ho nodded with a faint smile. "Major-General Sun has done a fine job."

It had been a while since Sun saw a smile on the commander, and he perked up considerably. "You flatter me, Commander! I'm just doing my duty."

Li glanced at Commander Ho and thought about the time he got slapped in the face.

- :-

After running about for three more days, they finally got Commander Ho on the train. When he was boarding, the men laid eyes on Lan Bai-Shan for the first time in months.

Lan was in his uniforms and looked as sharp as ever, though his pasty face lacked its usual vivacity. He leaned on a black walking stick, while two orderlies, one supporting his arm, the other lifting him at the waist, struggled to haul him onto the train. Sun stared at him dumbly; he'd wanted to call out to Chief Lan, but sensing the silence of his peers, he hesitated and kept his mouth shut.

Li looked on with amusement. Ho's certainly got the nerve, he mused to himself, to ruin so completely the once red-blooded man. At the moment, Lan was something like his outside paramour—although an inside one didn't yet exist.

A wild move, very interesting.

Commander Ho himself boarded soon after. In contrast to Lan, he looked as dishevelled as ever. He wore tan army trousers with black riding boots, and a white shirt that hung loosely around his shoulders, its collars unbuttoned. Whenever he dipped his head or bent down, it revealed everything from his bare chest to the belt around his waist—his skin was a snowy white, with two buds of pink dotting its expanse.

Aside from Commander Ho's own compartment, the train consisted of about ten other carriages that carried Major-General Sun and his men, who would be acting as guards. The ordinance, staff, and logistics divisions, along with the rest of the idle departments, trailed behind with Li and Jin in a sluggish march.

- : -

After settling into his compartment, Commander Ho collapsed into a couch near the windows. Sunlight glared harshly into his eyes, so he grabbed Lan's service cap and threw it haphazardly over his head, covering his eyes.

"Bai-Shan!" he said, his face half-hidden under the brim of the hat, a pair of crimson lips gathering into a smile. "We're finally getting out of this hellhole!"

Lan sat on the opposite side across a small table that lay between them. Recalling their retreat from Tientsin to Jehol, followed by defeat after defeat that drove them westward, their newfound fortune was indeed uplifting.

For a brief moment, Lan was lost in elation and smiled in spite of himself. "Look how excited you are at the prospect of going to a city. Such a child."

Commander Ho sprung forward in his seat, the hat still tilting on his head. "Good brother, I'm just a simple countryman!" he said and pushed the hat back, revealing a pair of shining black eyes.

Lan gazed at him, unsure of what to feel—he should be kinder, since Commander Ho did really love him; but he had also single-handedly ruined him. What a dilemma!

Lan took Commander Ho's hat off, his gentle voice trembling slightly: "Good Ji-Ch'ing, let your brother take you out to play in the city."

Commander Ho seemed to freeze momentarily. Blinking, he stood up and paced before Lan, then turned and squatted down in front of him. He opened his mouth as if to speak, but merely rose to his feet again.

This time he hurried out, returning moments later with a bottle of brandy and a pair wineglasses.

Uncorking the bottle, he filled the wineglasses, one of which he pushed toward Lan, the other he raised to himself. "Bai-Shan, you haven't spoken to me like that in a long time. Let's drink!"

Before Lan could answer, his fingertips barely touching the glass, Commander Ho had drained his glass. He doubled over and started to cough violently, his face red and gasping for breath.

- : -

Commander Ho's train squirmed among the unbroken chain of mountains like a little snake.

Lan had been worried about bandits, but as Commander Ho had predicted, bandits were mere men, and hadn't suddenly grown the hearts of bears or the guts of leopards to have the nerve to rob someone like Commander Ho.

On the afternoon of the third day, his train finally reached the Hsian station.

Under Lan's suggestion and guidance, Commander Ho changed into a new set of wool uniforms, a Sam Browne belt strapped across his waist. Putting on his hat, he writhed his neck at his reflection in the dress-mirror. "It's too damn hot," he complained.

Lan started, "How can a young man like you—"

"Treat yourself this way?" Commander Ho finished for him.

Lan smiled. "See, so you understand everything."

- : -

The train slowed to a stop, and the adjutants from the neighbouring compartments stood in lines by the exit. Commander Ho walked towards the doors, all the while wringing his shoulders disapprovingly—he really was hot.

The doors opened, and he bent down to descend a flight of small metal steps. At its bottom he found himself facing a tall man, who stepped forward with squared shoulders and his head held high, a reticent hand extended in front of him. The man smiled most brilliantly: "Ah, Commander Ho, my dear brother, you have finally arrived!"

Slow as he was, Commander Ho stuck out his own hand in response, but only stared at the newcomer blankly. After taking a better look at the Commander, the man also stared.

They fell into an awkward silence before a secretary who used to accompany Lan on his Hsian trips came forth. "Commander, this would be General Chao," he prompted gently.

Commander Ho recovered at the hint, and gave Chao Chen-Sheng's hand a shake. He was about to speak when a sudden tide of deafening cacophony startled him. Glancing around, he spotted the few clusters of military bands lying about in ambush. The bands consisted of burly men blowing into their trombones and French horns, their faces bright red and brows drenched in sweat, as if they were aiming to kill someone with sheer volume. Commander Ho listened in for a moment, but failing to discern a tune, managed only to be spurred into a state of disarray.

Under the influence of such music, Chao too felt slightly agitated. It was said that some time ago when the leader of the North-Eastern troops, Commander Ron, came to Hsian, Fu Yang-Shan had given him a welcome of the highest standard. Now that Fu had won over Ron Hsiang, Chao Chen-Sheng was unwilling to lag behind, and had planned to express his own generous hospitality. When Fu received Ron Hsiang, he had rallied four marching bands, and despite not having the title of Provincial Governor, Chao was in no way inferior and could certainly arrange for the same fanfare.

Commander Ho shook Chao's hand, shouting: "General Chao, this is too much trouble! I'm terribly flattered!"

"Good brother, there's no need to stand on ceremony!" yelled Chao, who then having reached the end of his patience, hollered into the sky: "SILENCE!"

Silence fell at once.

Which only made Commander Ho's tittering snigger all the clearer.

Chao Chen-Sheng was deeply embarrassed. He wasn't sure why, but he'd been quite prone to embarrassments

lately, all of them self-inflicted. Some days ago when he had been doing a military showcase for Ron Hsiang, he was accidentally engulfed in a square of marching infantry and had his hat fly right off in the confusion; this time...

Commander Ho and he stood facing each other, hands still locked in a handshake. Commander Ho was trembling with laughter, and because he had a pretty face, made one think of the proverb "quivering blossoms", though it wasn't exactly appropriate, since Commander Ho wasn't at all feminine.

Swallowing, Chao began with a blush: "Ah...My brother, you must find this all terribly funny."

Commander Ho thought there had never been a funnier scene in the whole world, but taking a deep breath, he forced himself to put back on a serious face. "No, think nothing of it. Has General Chao been waiting for a long time?"

Chao shook his head self-consciously: "No, not at all," his previous air of confidence shattered beyond recovery.

- : -

In his attempt to ingratiate himself with Ron Hsiang, Fu Yang-Shan had offered one of his most extravagant mansions to house Ron. In name, Commander Ho was still Chao's subordinate, but Chao was very much aware that the name Ho Bao-Ting represented an unknown yet large number of men and wealth, and would never think of neglecting him. Although he had no pretty modern mansions to spare, he did own a few nice residences, and out of the very best, he chose a stately western-style house with a large courtyard and invited Commander Ho in. After years of living in a small tile-roofed cottage back in Luyang, Commander Ho could hardly find any fault with his new residence.

Chao found Commander Ho's physical appearance very peculiar—he looked neither like a living man, nor a dead one. Beautiful he sure was, but he lacked vitality and seemed to be perpetually absent-minded. Chao would be droning on and on, only to find that Commander Ho was lost in his own thoughts, and when Chao in turn lost all interest and fell quiet, Commander Ho would suddenly look back up and pick up a conversation from an hour ago.

Chao Chen-Sheng was one of a bolder temperament and found communication with Commander Ho excruciating. Fortunately, after they had slowly gotten better acquainted during the course of several days, Commander Ho's reactions became noticeably faster, and for the most part could follow Chao's train of thought—if Chao could hold a calm and unhurried conversation.

Chao addressed Commander Ho as Ji-Ch'ing affectionately: "Ji-Ch'ing, if we could only kick away the foul and dense rock that was Fu Yang-Shan, Shansi would be ours!"

Commander Ho too used Chao's courtesy name. "Brother Cheng-Ch'en, what you say is true, but Fu Yang-Shan will not be waiting for us to kick him. Moreover, he has the Central Government's support, everything he does would be perfectly justifiable."

Chao smiled enigmatically. "The Central Government supports him? They might have in the past, but after he threw out their Commissioner Jin, there's no telling where Nanking stands!"

"Wasn't Jin Yuan-Bi summoned back by the Nanking Government?"

"Ji-Ch'ing, you've been falling behind on intel."

Commander Ho smiled. "Indeed. I've long been cut off from the world in my years of seclusion."

"Of course, Ji-Ch'ing, we don't have to be concerned about him. Now that you're here, I am like a tiger with added wings. There's no need to fear for whatever trouble Fu can cause. Ha-ha!"

Commander Ho continued to smile along. Once Fu Yang-Shan falls, he thought, I will be the next rock you kick away.

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[A Cruel Romance, Vol. I] Unrest in Hsian

 sl-llian.livejournal.com/5388.html

Unrest in Hsian

In Hsian, Commander Ho was having a very good time.

Cocktails parties, department stores, foreign establishments...it had been long. He was happy to stroll about and see things, and regretted crippling Lan's leg. If the two of them could only walk together side by side, what a beautiful scene it would be!

The political world of Si'an knew that Ho Bao-Ting had been Chao Chen-Sheng's recruit, but both Chao's and Fu's forces had been extremely friendly. Outside powers were bound to have variables, who knew which side of the battlefield Ho Bao-Ting or Ron Hsiang would be standing on in the end? It was very hard to say!

Commander Ho was concurrently the Deputy Commander of the Shansi Provincial Garrison Army; young as he was, great powers rested in his hands and his future stood boundless. Nobody in their right mind wanted to offend him, and for the very first time, he felt like he was loved by all.

Lan Bai-Shan seemed to have suddenly come around, and had not only ceased his spiteful sarcasm, but gradually reverted back to his initial gentleness and amiability.

- : -

This evening, Commander Ho attended a banquet at Fu Yang-Shan's mansion. The name of the banquet was unknown, but the scale quite sizable. A row of crystal chandeliers with two hundred candles floated above the halls and illuminated them brightly. Groups of gentlemen and ladies, all decked out in fineries, conversed with each other jovially, and before long music could be heard floating down from the adjoining ballroom. It appeared that a White Émigré band had started performing, and pairs of men and women locked in embraces were already slipping onto the dance floor, all swinging to the music.

Commander Ho sat on a sofa in the corner of the ballroom, a glass of wine in hand as he watched the spectacle in silence. Most of the younger guests were gathered here in a sea of fancy suits and resplendent gowns. Dancing trippingly to the sounds of decadence, they evoked a very real sense of peace and prosperity. There had been a time when Commander Ho was a part of this world, but looking at it now, he only found it highly amusing and very distant.

While Commander Ho stared absently at the dance floor, a man walked by and sat down next to him. "Brother Ji-Ch'ing," he said gently. "Why are you sitting here by yourself?"

Commander Ho looked to the man, who turned out to be the soft-spoken Ron Hsiang. Perhaps dosed with sufficient morphine, he appeared to be in good spirits and was smiling charmingly, and because his eyes turned up slightly at their corners, reminded him of a fox.

Commander Ho tipped his chin at the dance floor. "Just catching my breath," he said with a smile.

Ron crossed his legs, brushing off a bit of dirt on one of his cuffs gracefully. "When did Brother Ji-Chi'ing come in Hsian? I wasn't even informed of such news."

Commander Ho brought his wineglass to his lips and took a small sip. "My arrival was no cause for a commotion. Besides, it wouldn't do to disturb you, my brother."

The men were of a similar age, and addressed each other as brothers. At Commander Ho's words, Ron smiled. "Brother Ji-Chi'ing is too humble. You're now the Deputy Commander of the Garrison Army, and that's a deed deserving congratulation!"

Commander Ho lowered his head, and licked his lips against the wineglass. "Well..." He dipped his head at Ron in a nod. "But you jest, Brother. The title of Deputy Commander is just that, a title."

Ron lifted a finger to his lips smilingly, and exhaled a soft but drawn-out "Shh". "Have caution with your words, Brother."

Commander Ho smiled with him. He knew that like him, Ron Hsiang was another insidious spectator.

- :-

The pair of them chatted for some time before Ron insisted on finding Commander Ho a dance partner. When on the topic of women, Ron Hsiang spoke as if every female creature in the world was in his grasp, and would act on his command. Commander Ho had been doubtful at first, but Ron pointed at a couple on the dance floor.

"That's Fu Yang-Shan's brother," he said. "What do you think of his lady friend?"

As he was nearly celibate, Commander Ho could make an objective assessment: "Not bad."

Ron laughed. "Wait here!"

The song ended, and Fu Yang-Shan's brother, Fu Jing-Yuan, led his lady companion back to their seats. Just as the two of them were chattering away affectionately, Ron Hsiang charged in by himself, and within a few words, he was ushering the pretty lady towards Commander Ho.

- :-

As a tall man, Commander Ho's long legs should have been well-suited for dancing—from a physical perspective. Commander Ho did in fact dance well, and after dancing through two songs with the pretty lady, he was beginning to break into a sweat. Sitting back into his seat, he felt quite exhilarated—from an athletic perspective.

When he was in a good mood, Commander Ho's mind tended to operate at a faster rate and the usual distractions would come to a momentary halt. This condition was very favourable for socialising.

As a matter of fact, he had wished socialise with Ron, but after exchanging a few more words with him, Ron started trembling. Wiping his nose with a handkerchief, he suddenly rose to his feet and said to Commander Ho: "I'm sorry, please excuse me for a moment", and left in a hurry.

Commander Ho gave it some thought, and realised that Ron's morphine addiction must have worked up. He needed to get another shot, like Ban-Shan.

- :-

When the banquet ended, Commander Ho left for home in his car.

Feeling exhausted and coming to a better understanding of his own abilities, he found that although he was still willing in heart, he no longer had the strength for such opulent occasions.

Why was that? Perhaps it was because he had gotten used to a quieter life.

He took a bath and went to bed in his bathrobe. Lan Bai-Shan was already fast asleep. Commander Ho gazed at him for a moment under the lamplight, and because beauty was in the eye of the beholder, he found Lan extremely

handsome.

Pulling back the blankets, he lay down against Lan and reached for the light switch. Darkness filled his vision. He fumbled to pull Lan into his arms, and breathing in Lan's scent, felt very content.

- :-

On the following day, Commander Ho woke up at noon.

After washing himself, he got dressed lazily. It was a hot day, and although he had opted for short sleeves, it was still much too hot. If it hadn't been for the sake of propriety, he would probably have trimmed off the legs of his trousers and taken off his socks and leather shoes.

It was at this time that Li Shih-Yao and Jin Hwan-Ran arrived in Hsian.

Li was the same as ever and sat carelessly before Commander Ho as if he was determined to invoke the Commander's ire. Jin, on the other hand, appeared to be in low spirits—his troops had been ambushed by the PPA on his way to Hsian, and although he hadn't sustained any heavy losses, the has-been boy actor he used to keep around had been killed. Yü-Ch'ing, or whatever his name had been, had been with him for years, and the two had more or less formed a certain amount of attachment. Jin Hwan-Ran had thus become Jin An-Ran [1].

Commander Ho could not offer him console over the death of a hare. After a brief inquiry of the situation, he exhorted: "You must keep a tight rein on your men. We are no longer in Luyang; whoever causes trouble would be intentionally bashing me in the face!"

Jin nodded. "Rest assured, Commander. I understand."

Li remained quiet.

Commander Ho eyed him. "Major General Li, what about you?"

Li rolled his eyes. "I'm not deaf. Didn't Old Jin already answer for me?"

Commander Ho hesitated, and didn't lose his temper.

- :-

After three months of peace, Fu Yang-Shan and Chao Chen-Sheng finally opened fire outside the city. Ron Hsiang, however, hurried away with his troops to Tungkwan. Commander Ho remained in the city, not taking a stand.

Chao had sent him multiple requests for reinforcements, all of which he neither declined nor accepted. He was not a speculator, and hadn't intended to profit from the war; he merely wanted to preserve his strength—first to protect himself, then to make long-term plans. When he saw much later that Chao was winning victory after victory, he finally sent the few regiments under Jin's command to aid Chao on the frontline. Chao was displeased with him, but since he hadn't actually defected, the extent of Chao's displeasure was limited.

Another two months later, the situation took a very sharp turn. Just as he was falling into despair, Fu received the sudden aid of Ron Hsiang. The weather was getting colder and Chao's soldiers, running low on both winter clothes and ammunition, were falling one after one, and before long they were showing signs of utter defeat. This time Commander Ho saw the chance, and held a private conference with the self-righteous gallants under his command. After a round of secretive consultation, they finally reached a conclusion.

What that conclusion had been, perhaps only the participants of the conference would know. But the result was for all to see—Commander Ho was soon publically announcing his anti-Chao declaration. Fu was ecstatic at the news and immediately transferred the title of Commander-in-Chief of the Garrison Army from Chao to Commander Ho on

behalf of the provincial government.

The Commander-in-Chief, Commander Ho, sat back in the city and observed the distant battles with amusement.

After a month of observation, Chao led the remnants of his army to Lanchow with little chances of a comeback. Commander Ho had made the right wager. Just as the entire Twenty-Third army was wallowing in secret delight, news arrived from the battlefields of Hutou Post—Ron Hsiang had killed Fu Yang-Shan!

They were dumbfounded. Thankfully nobody knew how to respond, since Fu Yang-Shan's brother, Fu Jing-Yuan, immediately lead the ten-thousand men garrisoned at the city on a direct attack of Hutou Post. As it happened, internal dissention broke out within Ron's army, and before long the forces of Ron Hsiang had all but vanished into the void.

No longer having anyone to attach himself to, Commander Ho had unwittingly regained his independence. Within Hsian, a brief period of chaos followed Fu Yang-Shan's death before the Central Government sent in a new chairman.

The new chairman Ts'ui came to Hsian all on his own and couldn't even command a dog.

- :-

The strange thing happened. Instead of Commander Ho, it was Fu Jing-Yuan who were placed in the eye of the storm at such a time.

It was as if they had completely overlooked the existence of Commander Ho and the numerous assortments of troops under his command. Chairmen Ts'ui kept his eyes on Fu Jing-Yuan all day long, but what was there to see? Fu Jing-Yuan had no lust for power.

The Twenty-Third Army didn't know whether to laugh or cry. Commander Ho was still living in Chao's house, where he said to Lan Bai-Shan: "Look now, nobody's even taking notice of me."

After the passage of more than half a year, Lan looked much the worse for wear. He sat on a sofa, too tired to even open his eyes, and said gently: "Cause some trouble, and they'll come running to negotiate your terms."

Commander Ho walked to him and sat down. He placed a hand on his thigh—and simply left it there. He knew Lan was no longer in the shape to withstand any more excitement. His heart aching for Lan, Commander Ho had become completely celibate.

"To be honest, I don't like to resort to violence. I'd rather settle things in peace," Commander Ho said as he put an arm around Lan. "I would like to be the Director of the Military Council, that's not too much to ask for, is it?"

Lan thought about it. "No."

Commander Ho turned to place a kiss on his cheek. "If you say so. If Ts'ui dares to brush me off with excuses, I'll wipe him out and establish a military government."

"Confident, aren't we," said Lan.

Commander Ho smiled. "What's there to fear? I have an army."

Lan sighed. "Ji-Ch'ing, it's time for my shot."

- :-

After getting his injection, Lan lay down in his bed in a dreamy trance. Next to him, Commander Ho held him in his

arms and complained: "Bai-Shan, why don't you pay much attention to me anymore?"

Lan reached out a hand and patted him weakly on the head. "Ji-Ch'ing, I don't think I have much time left."

Commander Ho's eyes went wide. "What sort of nonsense is that?"

Lan turned to look at Commander Ho, his gaze empty. "I feel like...I no longer have the strength to breathe, or even care to breathe. But it would be truly absurd if I simply die like this."

Commander Ho tightened his arms around Lan. "Don't scare me like that, Bai-Shan. How can heroine kill anyone?"

Lan nodded. "I don't want to die either."

Commander Ho had Lan in his arms, but out of nowhere he was struck by a panicking terror. "Bai-Shan, you're family to me. You can't die. If you die, I won't even have anyone to talk to."

Lan closed his eyes. "You only ever think about yourself, Ji-Ch'ing. You're selfish to the core!" He took breath: "But when I think about it, I'm also at fault. I shouldn't have led you on like that. I had my own selfish motives at the time... I just never thought you would be this—relentless, and ruin me like this."

Commander Ho wished he could pull Lan into his own body, and his voiced was laced with pain: "If I hadn't done it, would you have stayed with me like this? You're the only one in my heart, but you could never stay put! Don't die, Bai-Shan. We'll spend our lives together. I'll be good to you—for now and forever. You're older than me, I'll take care of you once you retire, I'll care for you in old age. Don't die!"

Lan's face was a yellowish white, and no trace of life could be seen on it. At Commander Ho's hysterical confession, he nodded lightly. The corners of his lips curved slightly upwards, forming a faint smile. "A child's talk."

Commander Ho gazed at Lan dumbly. Moments later, he snuffled and leaned down to press his face against Lan's chest. He choked out a pained sob. Tears began rolling down like broken beads, rapidly wetting the front of Lan's shirt.

Vaguely, Lan Bai-Shan heard Commander Ho's sobs, but the sounds were muffled and faint. They echoed distantly from time to time, like the sounds of a dream.

Confession: this story is full of possible spoilers. Nearly all of the minor characters here are featured in Niluo's earlier works, some of them protagonists... It really can't be avoided, since Niluo tends to work within the same general universe.

[1]{C} Jin's name, Hwan-Ran, can mean "delighted" or jubilant". An-Ran means "dejected".

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[A Cruel Romance, Vol. I] The Fire of New Year

 sl-Ilian.livejournal.com/6437.html

The Fire of New Year

On Commander Ho's orders, Jin Hwan-Ran sent a few of his squads out to deliberately cause trouble. Alarmed, Ts'ui quickly approached Commander Ho with his offerings.

Commander Ho rose to eminence. He soon received his commission from the Nanking Government and became the Director of the Hsian Military Council, and incredibly, the whole affair proceeded without a single hitch. When he had first come to Hsian, Commander Ho never imagined that he would ascent to such a height.

Of course, although the Director of Military Council had the nominal command of the Shensi, Kansu, Ningsia, and Tsinghai Provinces' military and political powers, Commander Ho's actual capabilities limited him to managing his immediate surroundings.

The young Commander Ho was barely twenty-four. Prosperous at such an early age, he was almost delirious with delight—and he was not alone. The entire Twenty-Third Army went delirious with him.

Their delirium led to revelry, and the Twenty-Third Army's idea of revelry was quite terrifying. Since they couldn't act within the city, they instead went on a killing spree in its surrounding areas. Despite the fact that they were no longer in the remote County of Luyang, they had nothing to fear under their leader, Commander Ho the Director and Commander-in-Chief.

A month after Commander Ho took office, Fu Jing-Yuan was assassinated. With his death, the last remnants of Fu's forces scattered off like startled birds. Chairman Ts'ui was thrilled at the news, yet outsiders were claiming that Commander Ho was behind the assassination.

Commander Ho found the rumours ludicrous—why would he ever bother to lift his hand against someone like Fu Jing-Yuan?

Dauntless, he took no concern.

Another month later and right before New Year, the Twenty-Third Army was involved in another scandal. The officers had colluded with caravans from Sikang and were found smuggling drugs in great quantities.

Commander Ho had been in the trade for long enough to find it perfectly acceptable; the outsiders had no cause to be startled. He had forgotten, however, that back in Luyang where he had been something of a crime lord, nobody paid any attention to his undertakings. Now that he'd rose to such prominence, he had not only forgone his self-discipline, but had opted to openly traffic drugs at a time when the whole nation was under prohibition. He was setting the worst possible example.

As a result, Commander Ho's and his subordinates' reputations quickly ended up in the gutter. But as much as the onlookers bristled with indignation, the parties involved remained unfazed. The Twenty-Third Army never had a good reputation to begin with and they had indeed been smuggling drugs. They were very magnanimous about it, public opinion be damned.

- : -

Commander Ho's New Year in Hsian was very festive—almost outrageously festive.

As he received his guests' flattery and praises, he vaguely experienced the thrill of Lan's heroin high. It was a feeling

of light-headed satisfaction.

Eventually he grew tired of it and stopped receiving guests, and kept to Lan's side instead. These days, Lan spent most of his time in dozing away. If Commander Ho wasn't visiting, he could easily sleep through the entire day. Other than getting his heroin shots, he didn't even seem to eat.

His looks went with his weight. When he appeared at Commander Ho's banquet on the fifth evening of New Year, no one recognised him.

Normally, Commander Ho's behavior never went out of line, but when it did it'd go off by thousands of miles. In front of all his guests, he helped his half-dead lover down unabashedly, paying not a heed to his own manifold and eminent status. From his seat, Li Shih-Yao cocked his head and grumbled to Major General Sun: "looks like Ho Ch'i-Bao's ran out of shame."

Major General Sun concurred. "If he'd kept a hare like Major General Sun, no one would say anything. But Chief Lan—Chief Lan barely looks alive now."

Li began to laugh: "In any case, Old Lan's out of luck, but he's dug his own grave. Remember how he led Ho on? Now look what happens! Didn't catch the hare but got his eyes pecked out by the eagle! Rumour goes he's drugging himself to death. Just wait, I think he's near his end."

Sun chuckled with him. "If he goes, Commander Ho might make us mourn his passing."

Li laughed. "I'll mourn his mother's cunt!"

- : -

Lan Bai-Shan was too weak to remain sitting for extended periods of time—besides, the crowds bustling about the room made his head pound. He didn't feel shame. His soul had died a step before his body; what the hell was there left to be ashamed of?

"I'm going upstairs," he said to Commander Ho. "I'm tired."

Commander Ho was in the middle of a conversation with Chairman Ts'ui over the table. At Lan's comment, he rose quickly from his seat and lifted Lan by his arm. With the further support of his walking stick, Lan got up shakily, a footman tailing close behind in case he lose his strength and fall on his backside.

Commander Ho helped Lan to his rooms. After merely ascending the small flight of stairs, Lan's forehead was already covered in sweat. He sat down on a sofa and let out a deep sigh.

"I need another shot," he demanded suddenly.

Commander Ho was all compliance. Reaching for the call button, he summoned the private doctor in residence.

A syringe of heroin later, Lan leaned back into the sofa. He closed his eyes as his breathing evened out slowly. Commander Ho sat down beside him. "Was it too loud downstairs? I'll sit with you here then."

Lan waved him off. "I'm fine. It won't do to neglect the guests."

"Doesn't matter, I'll keep you company. I can't leave you with an empty room while I go socialize downstairs."

Lan scowled. "And what about those people down there?"

"I'll go down in half an hour," Commander Ho said with a smile.

Lan opened his eyes. "I don't have anything to entertain you with. Are you going to just sit here?"

Commander Ho considered it. "Let's drink!" he proposed suddenly.

"Haven't you had enough downstairs?"

"I'd rather drink with you."

- : -

Sitting across from each other, Commander Ho and Lan Bai-Shan finished a bottle of brandy together. Half an hour later, Commander Ho went down to send his guests on their way, and stumbled back up the stairs drunkenly to resume his swigging with Lan. At the end of the night, a fully smashed Commander Ho hugged Lan close and slobbered all over his face. He let out a few barks, and fell to the floor laughing. Lan too had lost his senses. After a session of frolicking on the floor with Commander Ho, he crawled towards a small cabinet in the corner of the room and reached up for the call button. But searching the wall with his hand and finding no trace of a button, he simply opened one of the upper drawers and took out a small paper bag. He opened it and brought it to his lips, and with a tilt of his head, he dumped its entire content of dusty white powder into his mouth.

His hands shook violently. Bits of the powder went into his nose and incited a few dusty coughs. He found a bottle of wine, and taking a couple of large gulps, he finally manage to wash everything down.

He dropped the bottle and crawled back to Commander Ho. Collapsing on his back, he stretched out his limbs and closed his eyes groggily.

Commander Ho was curled into a ball, already fast asleep.

- : -

On the sixth noon of New Year, Commander Ho opened his eyes.

He really had too much to drink the night before. His head was pounding and dark spots assaulted his vision. With a moan, he turned over and rested his head on Lan's arm, throwing an arm around Lan and a leg over his waist.

In this new position, Commander Ho dozed off again.

He slept fitfully. His aching brain throbbed painfully as if it had separated itself from his skull. Even his swollen eyes felt a feverish burn.

"Bai-Shan," he patted Lan on the chest. "Wake up."

He rubbed his eyes. "Why do I feel so sick? Don't you have a headache?"

After a yawn, he suddenly remembered. "Aren't you getting your shot?"

Lan offered no reply. Commander Ho reached for Lan's nose and pinched it shut with his hand. "My brother, why are you even lazier than me today?"

He held on to Lan's nose, and held it for three whole minutes.

Then he suddenly looked up at Lan's profile. "Bai-Shan?"

He let go of Lan's nose and rubbed his hand on his trousers. Holding his breath, he placed a careful finger under the tip of Lan's nose.

"Bai-Shan?"

He kneeled in front of Lan. Bending down, he pressed his head against Lan's chest and listened quietly for a long moment.

Looking up, he called out again softly: "Bai-Shan?"

A deathly silence filled the room.

Commander Ho staggered to his feet. Staring at Lan's resting form on the ground, he stumbled backwards, and with his hands clasped tight around the hem of his shirt, he began a soul-wrenching scream.

- : -

Lan Bai-Shan had died.

The doctor arrived for an inspection, and decided that his death was caused by heroin overdose. Commander Ho drove out the doctor and the servants in the room. Locking the door, he went and sat down next to Lan with his legs crossed. He did not weep, and simply heaved a heavy sigh.

He sat there from midday to evening, without a word and without a sound. The wary adjutants outside knew of Commander Ho's moody ways, and grew fearful for him. As they dared not to knock on the door, they rang up the more authoritative figures among their ranks.

Major General Sun was the first to arrive. He too dared not to knock, but he came up with the fanciful suggestion that they should set up a ladder outside the house and send someone to get a peek through the window. The adjutants thought it a feasible plan. Just as they were on their way out to look for a ladder, Li showed up.

Hearing about Sun's plan, Li found the whole idea ludicrous and rejected it on the spot. He strode up to the upper-floor bedroom and banged on the door. "Commander, open the door!" he hollered. "We all heard about Lan, and came in to check on you. We're sorry for your loss, but don't do anything rash!"

There was no reply in the room.

Li pulled out his pistol and blasted the lock right off.

Kicking the door open, he spotted Commander Ho kneeling in the room with his back to him. The gunshot did not seem to startle him in the slightest. His back looked still and forlorn, and he appeared to have been kneeling for a long time, with no intention of getting up.

Li turned to wave a hand at Sun and the rest of the men, signaling them to leave.

He stepped softly into the room. "Commander?" he called out cautiously.

His head bent low, Commander Ho gave no response.

Li walked up to Commander Ho and squatted in front of him, throwing a glance at Lan in the process. "Look, Commander. What is this you're doing here? Since Chief Lan has already passed, we should be making arrangements for his funeral. We can't just leave him lying here."

Commander Ho remained expressionless.

Li knew that Commander Ho was probably in shock, like how Jin Hwan-Ran had become Jin An-Ran a while back. But Jin had eventually recovered, which means that as much as the shock can hurt, it wouldn't leave any long-term aftermath.

“Commander, maybe I should send someone in. Wash Chief Lan up and get him changed.”

Commander Ho stared impassively into the distance. Suddenly, he raised his hand and slapped himself hard in the face.

Li caught his hand quickly. “Stop that! Why are you hurting yourself over Chief Lan’s death?”

Commander Ho ignored Li’s hold of his hand. His mouth opened dispassionately: “Bai-Shan died by my hand. I have wronged him.”

That you have, thought Li, but isn’t it a bit late for that particular load of bollocks? Swallowing, he opened his mouth to offer Commander Ho some words of comfort.

However, as soon as his tongue came in contact with air, Commander Ho rose to his feet and said emotionlessly: “Burn him. Once I get back to Peking, I’ll find him a good resting spot.”

Li did a double take. “What? Burn him?”

Commander Ho turned and walked toward the door. “There’s space in the courtyard.”

“What? In the courtyard?”

“Go get some firewood.”

“What? Now?”

Commander Ho didn’t answer him, because he was already a long way off.

Li turned back to Lan’s remains. “Old Lan, what is this fate of yours? You’ve got Commander Ho raving mad, and what about you? Don’t even get to be laid to rest—you’ll be thrown straight into the fire. Each other’s banes, that’s what you are. No good has come of it in this life, but perhaps in the next one, you’ll be born as husband and wife! Ah well, never you mind, rest in peace now. I’ll go fetch you some firewood!”

- : -

Li Shih-Yao stood in the courtyard and directed the orderlies as they piled up the firewood and prepared the buckets of kerosene. Adjutant Feng walked up to him, his face filled with disbelief. “Are we really going burn a man in the courtyard right during New Year?”

Even Li winced a bit. “Well... It’s what he wants.”

Just then Li Bai ran out from the house, gasping for breath. “Everybody wai—wait! Commander Ho wo—won’t let anyone move Chief Lan.”

Li clapped his hands. “Great, now he doesn’t want to part with it! If he won’t bury him or burn him and just leaves him rotting in the house, then good luck to you all!”

Fortunately, Li’s prediction didn’t come true. Two hours later, Commander Ho dressed Lan in a new outfit and had the orderlies place him on top of the woodpile, then personally poured two buckets of kerosene over it. Finally he lighted a match, and dropped it on Lan.

The flames leapt into the sky with a whoosh. Commander Ho kneeled in front of it and kowtowed thrice at the fire. He remained prostrated on the ground, like a pious man in prayer.

The servants of the Ho Residence had never seen anyone burn a dead man in their own house. They hid away in

the house fearfully, not daring to take even a peek outside. In the courtyard, only Li and a few adjutants managed to remain unfazed. Lan Bai-Shan lay atop the woodpile as he turned from a smartly-dressed gentleman into a scorched skeleton; in the end even the bones were burned crisp, and the flames emitted small popping sounds from time to time.

The fire began to subside after two hours. During this time, Commander Ho remained on the ground without ever lifting his head. Spotting the strange happenings from the gates of the residence, Jin Hwan-Ran and the others slipped in quietly and questioned Li for details in low voices.

- :-

Commander Ho placed Lan Bai-Shan's remains in a white porcelain urn—the bones were black.

As he had been kneeling for too long, he staggered as he got up, and nearly stumbled in to the dying fire to accompany Lan. Luckily Li had been keeping an eye on him. He lunged forward and pulled him back, saving his life.

- :-

The smell of a burning corpse lingered persistently above the Ho Residence. Commander Ho placed the white urn against his pillow and refused to see anyone for many days.

By the thirteenth day of the New Year, he could no longer keep to himself—the Nanking Government had relieved him of his post as the Director of Military Council.

Not only had they dismissed him, they had enumerated his crimes such as killing, pillaging, and smuggling, making it clear that they weren't going to let him off. Commander Ho was bewildered by the turn of events, but he did not panic. After dwelling on it for a few hours, he felt like he was getting an idea of the ins and outs.

Ts'ui had been using him!

He had used him to eliminate the separatist forces of Shensi's military, and if he could then get rid of Commander Ho, Shensi would be Chairman Ts'ui's. As for the Central Government—of course the Central Government would never truly rely on a second-rate army like Commander Ho's.

Commander Ho sneered at the thought. None of it mattered. As long as he had his army, he had nothing to fear.

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- Current Mood:  frustrated

[A Cruel Romance, Vol. I] Dead End

 sl-Ilian.livejournal.com/6888.html

Dead End

Commander Ho was not expecting a group of military police to charge into his residence and demand to arrest him for questioning.

The military police had arrived around noon. Over a hundred policemen surrounded the house immediately, and their sergeant began shouting his message, requesting Commander Ho's presence.

Commander Ho was just sitting down at the dining table. Before he could pick up his chopsticks, he saw a pale-faced Adjutant Feng rush in. "Commander, a group of men has surrounded the house. They're asking for you!"

Commander Ho paused for a moment. Dropping his chopsticks, he got up and strode toward a window. He parted the white curtains and glanced outside, identifying the policemen's uniforms. "Give Jin Hwan-Ran a call. Tell him to send a regiment over."

Sounding an affirmation, Adjutant Feng ran out make the call, only to dash back in panic before the minute was up. "Commander, our phone line has been cut!"

Commander Ho scowled. "Get their speaker in here!"

Adjutant Feng hurried out to invite the police sergeant in, but the sergeant refused steadfastly. "We're only following orders. Please, we only ask that Commander Ho grace us with his presence and accompany us on a short trip."

"Where to?" Adjutant asked.

"It's nothing major, it's just—" the sergeant faltered, "—just a meeting with a few commissioners of the Military Council."

"What's the meeting for?"

"Well, that we really don't know."

Adjutant asked no more, and hurried back to report to Commander Ho.

Commander Ho meditated for a moment with closed eyes, and had an idea.

"Including the guards and orderlies, how many men do we have?"

"About eighty."

"And weapons?"

"Just guns, and some hand grenades."

Commander Ho nodded. "That's enough."

- : -

The policemen were not expecting those inside the house to suddenly open fire.

They began with the grenades. Explosions went off in the crowds, and soon the guards charged out with their guns. The policemen's daily responsibilities had mostly consisted of standing on guard and catching thieves, and were clearly no match for actual soldiers who killed for a living. Besides, Commander Ho's personal guards were elites among his men.

The police sergeant had anticipated some form of resistance, but he hadn't expected it to be this sudden and fierce. As he had finally made it to the rank of sergeant and had several wives and children awaiting him back home, he was far from willing to risk his neck to arrest some bandit commander. After hiding from the bullets behind his car, he opened a door and climbed in, instructing the equally cowering driver: "Start the car! Are you waiting for your death?"

Since their sergeant has ran off, the policemen had no further desire to fight, but the soldiers had already charged out of the residence and gave them no chance to escape. The policemen fired blindly as they retreated—they hadn't counted on killing anyone, but at such a close range, someone was bound to get shot every time a trigger was pulled. The policemen were great in number, the guards few; the guards were valiant, the policemen meek. The two sides had thus reached a delicate balance, and it was just enough for the chaotic scuffle to wage on.

Commander Ho could not risk to linger any longer in the house. His army was stationed outside the city, and now that he had lost contact with them, a lockdown of the city would render him helpless like a turtle in an urn.

If that happens—he'd be done for!

Under the adjutants' cover, Commander Ho hurried down the stairs and ran to the entrance of the residence, where he got in a car, sped out of the city, and raced towards the main camp of the Twenty-Third Army.

- : -

Li Shih-Yao stood at the entrance of the barracks and stared idly into the sky.

His intent was to go on an appetite-stimulating stroll and prepare himself for the sumptuous dinner about to commence in an hour. He checked the weather and predicted the temperature of the following day, wondering whether he should discard his wadded jacket in favour of lighter clothes.

But unexpectedly, he spotted Commander Ho's car.

Commander Ho's car was a 1931 Bugatti. Not only was it unique in Hsian, it was so new that its surface was reflective, which was quite a sight on the streets. At the moment, this majestic Bugatti was bouncing violently along the uneven dirt road—if any car could go mad, it would be this one.

The car hopped toward Li and jolted to a stop with a screech. The rear doors opened and a disoriented Adjutant Feng jumped out of the car, a hand over his mouth as he raced to the car's rear and began emptying his stomach violently.

Shortly after, Adjutant Li stepped out with a leather trunk and took a moment to regain his balance on the ground. Turning around, he reached a hand into the car, and like inviting a lady to a dance, pulled Commander Ho out elegantly.

His face pale, Commander Ho still looked somewhat composed. With one hand in Adjutant Li's and one in his pocket, he looked up at the dumbstruck Li Shih-Yao. "Ts'ui had his men surround my residence."

His words cleared things up immediately. "He dared to attack you openly? Some audacity! Are you all right, Commander?"

"The Commander got hit in the arm," Adjutant Li said in a low voice, "nothing serious."

- : -

The bullet had gone through Commander Ho's upper right arm, missing the bone and leaving only a hole in the flesh. The wound was dribbling blood, but perhaps because Commander Ho was wearing a padded black silk jacket, Li didn't detect anything unusual at first.

Commander Ho feared that news of his injury would damage the morale, and refused to even call a medic. He intended to simply have his arm bound with gauze, but Li disapproved. "Look at that tender skin. It will cause more trouble if you mistreat the wound and get it infected!"

Commander Ho, however, refused to budge. "I'm not that delicate."

Frustrated but resigned, Li brought Commander Ho to the resting area of his camp—it was a row of tiled-roofed brick houses, and apart from flush toilets, they housed most of the essential facilities. Dismissing the orderlies in the room, Li shut the door and fetched some bandages and half a bottle of liquor.

Li pulled out a chair and sat down in front of Commander Ho, and leaned forward to unbutton Commander Ho's jacket. Commander Ho sat solemnly on his chair as if he couldn't feel his wound.

As he removed the black jacket and revealed a white silk shirt, Li saw that the entire right-hand sleeve was drenched in blood.

"Fuck! Why's there so much blood?" he said in alarm.

Fearing that he might feel faint at the sight of his own blood, Commander Ho closed his eyes and turned away. "I'm fine."

Li tore the shirt off as well, and pulled over the wounded arm. "Hold on, it'll be over in a moment," he said as he began to pour liquor over the wound.

Commander Ho gritted his teeth and lowered his head. His body trembled slightly, but he made no sound.

After rinsing the wound with liquor, Li sprinkled medical powder on it before wrapping the arm in gauze. He fetched a towel and wetted it to clean off the blood on Commander Ho's arm.

"If it hurts too much, let out a few grunts or something. Nobody's here to hear it anyway!" He took off his own dirty army coat and draped it over Commander Ho, and took the chance to rub the backs of his hands on Commander Ho's skin, which seemed smoother than fine silk.

Commander Ho didn't speak, and he certainly didn't grunt.

Li stared down at Commander Ho's chest. Two pink buds stood erect in the cool air, as if waiting to be pinched.

Li thought that his hands were too rough, and would probably pinch off a layer of Commander Ho's skin on the spot.

"Why didn't the bullet hit him on the thigh or in the ass?"

Li thought to himself.

- : -

It appeared that Commander Ho did have some real fortitude; at least, apart from Li Shih-Yao and the few adjutants in his company, no one could tell that he was injured. However, it would be a great mistake to assume that Commander Ho was a battle-hardened soldier.

In the following days, Li was put in charge of changing his dressing. Li enjoyed the extra duty—undressing Commander Ho garment by garment was like peeling a lychee; eventually the snowy pulp would be exposed, and one could imagine its juicy sweetness just by the sight.

In the end he couldn't help himself, and groped Commander Ho firmly on the waist.

Commander Ho paid him no mind. "Your hands are like sandpaper," he merely commented.

Li could have launched into a lengthy banter in response, but he still felt quite sheepish in front of the Commander—not that he was afraid of him. He simply had a guilty conscious.

- : -

Commander Ho would not suffer in vain. After catching his breath at the barracks, he immediately deployed his forces to storm Hsian.

Chairman Ts'ui failed to flee, and was captured along with his equally high-ranking followers. He waited for the Central Government to hold a parley and ransom him, but Commander Ho had no such intentions.

The men within Ts'ui's faction of the Provincial Government were tied up and gagged before they were hauled onto a temporary platform erected in the market area, where soldiers pushed them into a straight line with the butts of their rifles.

A pistol in his left hand, Commander Ho got on the platform and advanced slowly from right to left, taking a single shot at each man.

Then the soldiers swarmed in and kicked the men to the ground. They stabbed their bayonets wildly into them and cut off their heads, which they later hung on telegraph poles for a public display.

- : -

Commander Ho had gotten his revenge for getting shot.

However, by killing Chairman Ts'ui, he had also cut off his own way out.

But he'd always believed that life was a path with no loops and no room for retreat. Retreat was nothing but another name for compromise.

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[A Cruel Romance, Vol. I] Defeat

 sl-Ilian.livejournal.com/6937.html

Defeat

Commander Ho occupied Hsian for another month after Chairman Ts'ui's death. In the meantime, the Nanking Government, livid at his behavior, sent a punitive expedition in his direction.

Chao Chen-Sheng learned of the news in Lanchow, and as he had recovered some of his strength, he answered the call from Nanking in with sounds of whetting swords, and set out to take revenge on Commander Ho's betrayal. The Twenty-Third Army was garrisoned in the city, and soon found themselves stranded.

Commander Ho and his men had been optimistic about the situation at first, but as the war waged on for a fortnight, the Twenty-Third Army began to lose their nerves—the armies of Chao Chen-Sheng and Chairman Yen of Shansi had laid siege to Hsian and began a series of incessant onslaughts. On the fifth day of his resistance, the whole division of Jin Hwan-Ran was wiped out, and Jin himself killed in battle. Li Shih-Yao retreated into the city at once—the Twenty Third Army had its glorious tradition: run when you can't win, and run fast!

Although Commander Ho wasn't exactly mentally prepared for such a scenario, he wasn't all that demoralized. Back in the days when he had fled all the way from Tientsin to Luyang, he'd become very experienced in running away. Now that Hsian was slipping out of his grasp, he wasted no time with lamentation, and simply shut the city gates, unleashed his subordinates, and began looting.

- :-

Commander Ho felt very little attachment to Hsian. When he had first come, he saw it as no more than a springboard for his eventual return to Peking, and now that he had to leave, he felt little reluctance and only wished he could roll the city into a tight ball, and squeeze out every last drop of its sap with his fist.

They robbed all they could, and set fire to the remaining houses they couldn't take away. After turning Hsian into hell on earth, a satisfied Commander Ho finally led his troops on an assault at a weak spot of the siege, and breaking through, raced off to Tungkwan like hares.

Commander Ho and his tattered gallants thought they could finally spare a moment to catch their breaths. Except there, the Twenty-Third Army suffered a nearly catastrophic bombardment.

Who would have thought that the enemy would mobilize their air force?

- :-

Major General Sun was blown into smithereens. This time Commander Ho became truly frightened.

When even he was frightened, others were positively trembling with fear. Unable to find a reliable or insightful consultant, he could only hold on to the somewhat unimpaired Li Shih-Yao. "Major General Li, we can't stay in Tungkwan any longer. We must further retreat!"

Li, though, had retained his casual composure. "Then let's go back to Luyang! It's actually not bad, that unadministered area. They can't pursue us all the way there!"

Commander Ho would have preferred to never lay eyes on Luyang again, but considering Li's words, it seemed that it was the only option.

So be it, then! He hadn't a blood feud with anyone; once he vanishes from the view, what can they possibly do?

- : -

A defeated Commander Ho withdrew from Tungkwang. In order to make himself scarce as soon as possible, he seized a westbound train at the station of a nameless county-town, and clearing out its passengers, boarded it with one of his regiments. Li Shih-Yao trailed behind with the rest of the army.

Last June, Commander Ho had come to Hsian winged with hope and ambition. A flash of a year later, he stepped onto the train miserably, and fled back to Luyang along the same tracks.

Seated next to the windows in his compartment, Commander Ho stared out at the bleary scenery flashing past, feeling even blearier than the scenery.

"Bai-Shan, look..." he smiled at an empty space in front of him. "I'm going back again."

"What if..." he scowled slightly. "I quit?"

He stood up and paced back and forth with his hands in pockets.

"The army—they're nearly all dead except for Li Shih-Yao. What if I really quit? Let's go back to Peking!"

He came to a stop, and looked up at the ceiling of the train.

"No!" he lowered his head dejectedly. "I'm in big trouble this time. They'll probably kill me on sight!"

"Bai-Shan, help me come up with a plan!"

For a moment Commander Ho fell silent, and his face darkened. "You won't speak? I knew it! If you hadn't died, you'd have abandoned me for another master! Would you have cared whether I live or die? You bastard, you're better off dead!"

Here he let out a long sigh, and softened his voice. "Come on, I was just joking. Don't take it seriously."

- : -

Adjutant Feng stood next to compartment door with a large tray of small dishes and a bowl of congee, and heard low voices drifting through of the door.

He knew the Commander was talking to a dead man, and was doing so with a passion and animation that made his hair stand on end. Unfortunately, Li Bai's death had forced him into the personal service of his strange and apparently psychic commander.

When the voice quieted, he finally said through the door: "Commander, your dinner's here." Nudging the door open with his feet, he entered the compartment and set the tray on a small table next to the windows.

Commander Ho did not look at him. Sitting down, he picked up the bowl and began eating his congee.

He had never paid much attention to what he ate, and ever since Lan Bai-Shan's death, he'd become vegetarian.

He had no interest in food, or fashion, or recreation. Other than loneliness, danger, and wealth, Commander Ho's life held little more.

- : -

Commander Ho finished the congee and pickled vegetables. Putting down his bowl and chopsticks, he waved a

hand.

Taking note, Adjutant Feng picked up the tray and left.

Despite his somewhat unkempt image, Commander Ho did pay attention to his personal hygiene. Stepping out of his compartment, he brushed his teeth and washed his face languidly in the bathroom, and draping the white towel he'd used to wipe his face over his shoulder, he strolled back to his compartment absent-mindedly.

In front of his bed, he lowered his head and untied his brown leather belt. His over-sized army trousers slipped down to his knees the moment he released them, stopping only at the rim of his riding boots. Sitting down on the bed, he shook off his trousers and boots in one move and tossed them on the floor.

He crawled under the covers, where he tossed and turned like a pancake in a frying pan, unable to fall asleep.

He closed his eyes and forced himself to count sheep.

On the twelve thousand three hundred and twenty-eighth count, he couldn't stand it anymore and sat up, getting out of bed on his bare feet to switch on the lights. Sitting next to the windows, he finished half a bottle of brandy he'd brought from Tungkwan.

The alcohol sent little blue sparks down his veins. Feeling drowsy at last, he rushed back to bed, lest the bit elusive sleepiness suddenly slip away.

- : -

He slept heavily. In his slumber, he felt someone shaking him, but couldn't for the life of him open his eyes until he was forced into a sitting position.

"Commander! Something's wrong!" Adjutant Li's terrified face was magnified in front of him. "Somebody has destroyed the tracks in front of us! I'm afraid there's trouble ahead!"

Commander Ho blinked, disoriented by the sudden light. His mind clicked slowly into operation. "The tracks?"

Well aware of his commander's shortcomings, Adjutant Li did not waste his breath with further explanations and merely bent down to pick up a pair of trousers, and throwing back the covers, he grabbed one of Commander Ho's legs and began shoving the trousers on.

After donning his trousers, Commander Ho suddenly paled with shock. "What? Where are we now?"

"We're still hundreds of miles away from Guanghua! The train's deep in the mountains; it could be a bandits' trap!"

Commander Ho was expressionless, though perspiration formed rapidly on his forehead. Getting to his feet, he fished out pistol under his pillow and tucked it into his waistband, and grabbed his jacket. "Where is Li Shih-Yao at the moment?"

"It looks like they're more than eighty miles behind us."

Commander Ho stared at Adjutant Li, his face colourless. Quickly he turned around, and switched off the lights with a snap.

There was no moonlight outside the windows; the compartment was plunged into darkness. Adjutant Li detected slight tremors in Commander Ho's voice. "Tell the men to stay alert! If anyone approaches the train, hit them hard! If we can make it to dawn, Major General Li should be able to catch up."

Adjutant Li gave his answer and hurried out in a flurry. The moment he stepped out of the compartment however, the

sound of a gunshot went off outside.

Commander Ho threw himself flat on the carpet reflexively. He waited silently for nearly a minute, but the other side fell quiet again.

He crawled forward on his stomach and pulled a leather trunk out under his bed. Opening the locks, he dug out a white porcelain urn with a narrow neck and a rounded body, and hugged it close to his body.

When he dropped back to his stomach, the urn dug uncomfortably into his chest. Placing it in his pocket wasn't a good idea either, and he ran the risk of crushing it with his movements.

Sighing, Commander Ho stuffed the urn back into the trunk. "Look how much trouble you are," he whispered to himself.

Before his voice had died off, the sounds of gunfire went off again.

This time the gunshots came in a volley. The regiment of soldier moved out of the train in a counterattack, and as adept as Commander Ho was at running away, he had nowhere to run and could only remain sprawled on the floor with his arms over his head, not daring to rise.

When the battle had waged for ten minutes, Adjutant Feng rushed into the compartment, his back bent. "Commander, we can't hold them off any longer! All of them—they're all charging at us right now!"

Commander Ho's voice rose in the dark. "Put up a white flag! Worst comes to worst, we can give up our assets and keep our lives. Get down, there're stray bullets!"

Adjutant Feng fully concurred with the decision. Voicing an affirmation, he crawled out quickly on all fours.

In front of the train, a white flag emerged in the torchlight. Since its carrier was shot down instantly, somebody in the dark shouted immediately: "Friends on the other side, please cease fire! Let's talk this over! We are simple passersby, and have no intention of making enemies of brave men like you! Let's each take a step back—you may take whatever you need from our train, as long as you hold your fire and spare our lives! What do you say?"

After a moment of silence, somebody replied: "Lay down your arms! Put your hands behind your heads, all of you, and crouch down!"

Members of the Twenty-Third Army eyed each wordlessly, and knew they had encountered a large horde this time. Resistance would mean certain death; better to let the bandits rob them to their hearts' content, so they might still make it out alive. One after one, the men threw down their weapons and lined up in squatting positions around a clearing next to the train.

Another cry went off on the other side. "Light the torches, light them up! The rest of you, get out of the train immediately, or we'll start shooting!"

- : -

The soldiers of the Twenty-Third Army had a reputation not unlike the Yama's [1], but at this moment they turned, collectively, into a flock of docile sheep. A captain planted several torches into the ground while Commander Ho and his adjutants exited the train in terror, stepping right into the torchlight.

Spotting Commander Ho's assembly, the voice cried out again: "Surrender your weapons! Get down!"

Despite his extensive experience in fleeing, Commander Ho had always fled with grace and composure. To lower himself in front of a bunch of bandits would be a terribly humiliation.

All around him, his men lay squatting on the ground like petrified toads. Hesitating only for a brief second, Commander Ho too tossed away the pistol in his pocket and crouched down with his hands over his head.

Slowly, the bandits moved out of the darkness, rifles in hands. Commander Ho dared not to raise his head, and only heard the soft shuffle of footsteps approaching.

A pair of muddy shoes stopped in front of him.

Commander Ho had no wish to look up to the likes of bandits, but the man simply stopped in front of him, and did not move or speak.

Very strange, that is. Commander Ho held still for a moment, but finally curiosity got the better of him and he looked up.

Commander Ho leapt to his feet.

He pointed a finger at the other man, and raising a hand to his lips, he stared at the man with wide eyes, unable to speak. The adjutants behind him looked up as well, and the moment they got a look, some fell back to the ground in fright. Adjutant Feng parted his trembling lips, and let out a ghastly squeal: "Hsiao—Hsiao-Hu?"

Commander Ho stared at the man before him, forgetting to breathe in his shock.

In the flickering torchlight, Chao Hsiao-Hu stood before him with his head slightly raised, a cross-shaped scar faintly visible on his face. The face was collected yet feral—Chao Hsiao-Hu did not look like this, but it was indeed Chao Hsiao-Hu!

Commander Ho took a backward step. "You—you—"

Perhaps he was truly frightened, for he only managed to stutter out two "you"s. He suddenly reached for his waist, ready to pull out his pistol.

Regrettably, before his fingers could reach the gun, Hsiao-Hu had already smashed him in the head with the butt of his.

In a sudden flare of pain, he felt his vision darken, and blacked out in an instant.

[1] Yama – the lord of hell.

[A Cruel Romance, Vol. I] Chao Hsiao-Hu's Ambition

 sl-Ilian.livejournal.com/7433.html

Trigger warnings: violence, torture, rape.

Chao Hsiao-Hu's Ambition

Chao Hsiao-Hu stood inside a woodshed, before a wooden window.

The frame of the glassless window was black and decayed. Yellowed tissues of paper stretched over the frame; dried to crisps and torn off at places by mischievous youngsters, they flapped noisily in the rare gusts of wind.

The morning sun shone brightly through the cotton paper and its cracks, casting the room in radiant light. The interior of the shed was as crude and run-down as its wooden window. The ground was fashioned in dirt, the walls in mud. Lengthy strings of cobweb and dust hung from the ceiling and drifted softly in the air.

Commander Ho lay in a heap of straw on the ground. Hsiao-Hu considered the date, and realised that he had been separated from the man for nearly two years.

Two years was not a particularly long time, but it was long enough for a young man to go through a complete metamorphosis. In these two years Hsiao-Hu had grown from a boy to a man, an orderly to a bandit chieftain. But what about Commander Ho?

Hsiao-Hu squatted in front of the Commander, and studied his face carefully.

Commander Ho hadn't changed. His face was still the same porcelain white, his features the same striking elegance. His sleeping state made little difference, since either way he would be equally expressionless.

He'd only given him light knock on the head. There was no need to stay unconscious for so long.

Hsiao-Hu fetched a bucket of water from the corner of the room, and emptied it in Commander Ho's face.

The bone-chilling water had been drawn fresh out of a well. With a yelp, Commander Ho jumped into a sitting position and opened his eyes.

Hsiao-Hu dropped the bucket and advanced towards Commander Ho with the shadow of a smile on his face. "Rise and shine, Commander!"

Commander Ho stared at Hsiao-Hu dully. "You... How?" He said after a long stretch of silence.

Hsiao-Hu laughed. "Don't be afraid, Commander, I'm no ghost," he said. He caught Commander Ho's hand and pressed it against his face. "It's warm, isn't it?"

Commander Ho snatched his hand back. He rubbed his head with a scowl. "You hit me?"

Hsiao-Hu nodded. "Yes, so what? You want to cut me up again?"

Commander Ho lowered his hand and wiped a bit of water off his face. "Long time no see, Hsiao-Hu," he said coolly, his face impassive.

"Have you missed me?" Hsiao-Hu said with a smile.

Commander Ho looked down. "No."

Hsiao-Hu bent forward and stared into Commander Ho's eyes. "But I've missed you."

Commander Ho remained silent for a moment. Then he looked up, and broke into an abrupt smile. "Hsiao-Hu, I know you want revenge, but I did save your life once. I could also, if you were to release me, gift you with a very large sum money. Then we can call it even, can't we?"

"Hey, I never said anything about revenge," Hsiao-Hu shook his head with a smile. "I just missed you."

No longer able to maintain his smile, Commander Ho put on a straight face instead. "Who is your leader? I'll speak to him."

Hsiao-Hu pointed a finger at his own nose playfully. "That'll be me! This whole area is under my control."

Commander Ho's obsidian eyes shone for a moment, then dulled again.

"No bad," he nodded at Hsiao-Hu. "You've got ambition."

"All owing to your guidance."

Commander Ho's face was slightly pallid, and since it was wet, was reminiscent of the phrase "pear blossoms in the rain". "Just tell me what you want, Hsiao-Hu. If you really want me dead, there's nothing I can do to stop you right now. But once I die, Li Shih-Yao will never let you off. You've managed to surprise me with your ambush, but you're still no match for Li. A young man like you should to look at the bigger picture."

Hsiao-Hu's teeth glistened white in a laugh. "Li won't let me off? I wouldn't be so sure. He'd probably even thank me! I heard you're in some big trouble this time, killing off those government men back in Hsian. Li has no choice but to go against the Central Government under your command, but with you out of the picture, he'd be able to seek his own fortune—and a much brighter one at that."

Commander Ho stared at Hsiao-Hu with his head cocked to one side. After a long moment, he smiled bitterly. "I only have one demand—don't torture me needlessly. For the sake of our past acquaintance, grant me a clean death."

Chao Hsiao-Hu narrows his eyes, his gaze moving back and forth across Commander Ho's face like a blade.

"Commander," he began slowly. "I don't remember saying anything about killing you! I've just missed you so much. I want to..."

He trailed off, snickering.

Commander Ho's sensed danger instinctively. "What do you want?"

Hsiao-Hu advanced closer, reaching a hand to pat his face. "I want to...fuck you!"

Commander Ho slapped Hsiao-Hu's hand away, leaping to his feet. "How dare you!" he spat.

Unabashed, Hsiao-Hu rose up as well. "Yell at me all you want, the louder the better, it adds to the excitement! Last time you stuck a knife in my guts, this time I'll plow you in the ass. Seems to me my methods are kinder—at least I'm not using a blade!"

Commander Ho reached behind his belt, only to find that his pistol has been long taken. He looked around the room, but there were nothing to defend himself with other than the straw on the floor. He took a step back and leaned against the damp mud wall. His eyes flickered as his expression wavered, a porcelain man on the verge of shattering.

Hsiao-Hu gazed at Commander Ho and searched his memory, feeling like he'd never seen him in such a state of

panic.

The panic-stricken Commander appeared strangely frail. Stripped of his almost neurotic virility, he'd become a trapped beast, beautiful and helpless.

Hsiao-Hu's excitement grew. The definitions of "fuck", when associated with Commander Ho, became vast and titillating. Before this day, who'd have dared to lust after the high and mighty Commander Ho? Who'd have dared to fuck him like a whore?

Chao Hsiao-Hu became a starved tiger, and leapt at the Commander without warning.

Commander Ho was knocked flat on his back. He had tactfully chosen to halt his resistance.

Since he wasn't resisting, Hsiao-Hu's movements became much tamer. Methodically, he stripped down Commander Ho as he lay on the heap of stray, his pale body like jade among mire.

Hsiao-Hu knelt by his side and took in Commander Ho's naked form like a peepshow, looking like he was deeply astounded by the sight. After a moment of gaping, he mounted the Commander and took the two small red dots on his chest in his hands. Giving them a few rubs, he bent down and sucked on one firmly.

Commander Ho shut his eyes in disgust. He didn't know what Hsiao-Hu was playing at, only that it hurt and tickled—he wasn't a woman. It wasn't like he'd start rutting once he got his tits played with!

He endured the proceedings with a deep frown for a while before he finally lost it. "Hsiao-Hu," he began quietly.

Hsiao-Hu looked up at him with misty eyes.

Commander Ho's eyes remained shut. "Careful with it."

Hsiao-Hu paused for a moment, then let out a startled laugh. "You sure get squeamish! If you're complaining about the pain already, what are you going to do later?"

Commander Ho opened his eyes and threw Hsiao-Hu a glance. "Don't push me," he said coolly, turning away and closing his eyes again.

Hsiao-Hu bent down and gave his chest a lick. "Don't worry, I won't break you," he said as he got off Commander Ho, rustling around with something. A moment later, Commander Ho felt a coolness between his legs. A slick finger forced its way into him, applying some sort of strongly scented lubricant—it seemed to be a fragrant cream women favoured.

His legs were pulled wide apart as fingers rubbed his entrance in small circles, pushing in and pulling out in slow soft motions. The buttery cream was pushed inside him, where it melted in the heat.

Commander Ho's face remained tense and frigid, but his body was warm and soft.

Hsiao-Hu removed his own trousers. Pressing Commander Ho's legs against his chest, he drove his large and long-swollen cock slowly but steadily inside Commander Ho.

Commander Ho clenched his teeth, his breath hitching as he trembled. His fists convulsed around the straw on the ground, and muffled sounds escaped his throat. Although Hsiao-Hu had used lubrication, he was in even more pain now than the time a bullet blasted through his arm.

The agony had been momentary that time, but the rape was a slow torture. As Hsiao-Hu went in deeper, Commander Ho felt, to his terror, that his body was being split open. A satisfied sigh fluttered above him—it all seemed like retribution!

Hsiao-Hu was almost weeping with joy. How can there be a creature as exquisite as Commander Ho in this world? He flipped the Commander over on the heap of straw, grabbing and kneading his ample backside, and spread the cheeks apart forcefully. The small pucker was swollen red and slightly open. He pushed two fingers in for a few careless thrusts, and rammed his cock in one violent motion. Commander Ho's head jerked up, a weak wail tearing from his throat.

Hsiao-Hu fucked him in this position for a while, and pulled out breathlessly. He dragged Commander Ho onto his back and pushed his knees hard against his chest, and plunged in once more. Commander Ho endured the ordeal with clenched teeth, but before long his resolve dulled, leaving his limp body to be arranged into all sorts of positions. Sharp pain radiated from the point of penetration and pierced into his brain like steel needles.

"No, no," he murmured with his eyes squeezed shut, lifting his hands to shove off Hsiao-Hu. "Stop—stop."

Hearing the defeated plea, Hsiao-Hu felt a new rush of excitement. He gripped Commander Ho's shoulders, and pounded even harder.

- :-

Hsiao-Hu had come three times inside Commander Ho before he finally tired out at noon. Commander Ho lay on the ground silently, his white skin now disrupted by red and purple.

Hsiao-Hu sat down next to him, giving his body a sidelong glance. He let out a sudden laugh. "That's a nice ass you've got. Looks as great as it feels, ha!"

Commander Ho lay within an inch of his life, his eyes half open.

Hsiao-Hu gave his ass a slap, and pushed two fingers into his burning hole. It felt thick and slick, full of his seed.

He pushed in one more finger with ease. "Tell me, Commander Ho," he asked. "How many times do I deserve to die for fucking you today?"

He ran his nails lightly along the soft interior. "Dismembered by horses? Or burned alive?"

He pulled out his fingers and wiped them off on Commander Ho's waist. "Commander, I've been waiting for this day for a very long time. They say that those who survive great adversities are bound to find great fortune—seems true enough for me!"

As he spoke, a cry went off outside. "Chieftain, are you done in there? News has arrived. We're waiting for you!"

Hsiao-Hu threw on his clothes haphazardly and threw a coat over Commander Ho. "I got to run. See you in the evening!"

- :-

Commander Ho spent the entire afternoon on the ground.

When the lights went on for the evening, Hsiao-Hu returned.

He wrapped a blanket around Commander Ho and carried him to his own room. In its center sat a great wooden bathtub filled of hot water, clouding the room with steam.

Hsiao-Hu lowered Commander Ho into the bathtub. He couldn't risk showering him with well water like he did this morning due to the Commander's current state, so he proceeded to wet a towel and began to wipe his face gently. "Guess what, Commander," he said as he cleaned. "Li Shih-Yao's men have made camp near the tracks, but he's never sent anyone to ask for you. I say he's hesitating—once he figures everything out, he'd be off on his way!"

Slowly, Commander Ho opened his eyes. His eyes were soulless; only a tiny spark of severity glinted in their depth. "What will it take to release me?"

Hsiao-Hu grinned. "Awake now? What will it take? It won't take anything, since I never plan to let you go."

"You want to keep me here?" Commander Ho's face had gained some colour in the steam. "What will you do with me?"

"What we just did, this morning."

Commander Ho turned away from him, a sneer on his face. "So this is your ambition."

Hsiao-Hu reached out and tilted Commander Ho's chin, forcing him to meet his eyes. "It isn't worth much, but it's enough to screw you!"

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[A Cruel Romance, Vol. I] Night Raid



sl-Ilian.livejournal.com/7886.html

For some reason Niluo's home page is currently inaccessible. Before you start to worry, I did manage to find some mouldy old .txt version of the fic on my hard drive. They're weirdly formatted, but I'm sure I can still work with them. I do hope this is just a technical thing and not another censorship crackdown D:

Night Raid

Hsiao-Hu stepped into his courtyard and spotted Commander Ho sitting on a log of wood, staring into space.

He had transported the countless spoils he'd acquired from the train to his little village, with no regard to their actual usefulness. Among them he'd located Commander Ho's clothes, so that the Commander didn't have to suffer in the nude.

Although Commander Ho cared little for his attire, Hsiao-Hu didn't have the heart to put him in rags. Commander Ho was currently dressed in black shoes and slacks, with a black silk shirt buttoned firmly up to the collars. It wasn't his usual style.

Hsiao-Hu sauntered towards him feeling quite pleased, though he refused to let it show. "Sunbathing?"

Commander Ho glanced up at him, and rose slowly to his feet.

At his full height, he still stood slightly taller than Hsiao-Hu. His figure was like a mannequin's, filling his clothes with an upright poise.

Hsiao-Hu wore an impish smile. Like a wide-eyed child he rubbed his hands together in excitement, and reached out to pinch Commander Ho's face.

Commander Ho jerked away, taking a few steps back.

Hsiao-Hu grinned widely, for a moment looking guilelessly simple. He leaned forward and pulled Commander Ho in by the collar. "Why did you back away? Feeling shy?"

Commander Ho was hunched a little forward in Hsiao-Hu's grasp. His eyes were lowered and his face expressionless.

Used to seeing him like this, Hsiao-Hu paid it no mind and leaned in to steal a kiss on his cheek. "Commander? Ji-Ching? Can I call you Ji-Ching?"

Commander Ho blinked. Abruptly, he grabbed Hsiao-Hu's wrist and gave it a violent yank. "Let go!" he snarled.

With his powerful build, Hsiao-Hu appeared every bit a grown man, but his temperament still retained traces of a child. Commander Ho didn't manage to yank his hand away. At his reprimand, Hsiao-Hu almost did let go, purely out of habit, but he quickly remembered that things were different now. He was no longer obliged to follow Commander Ho's orders; in fact, he could even push him around a bit. Now that was interesting!

As interesting it was, it placed a curious itch in his heart, like a soft feather tickling at his spine on a bright sunny day.

Latching onto Commander Ho's collars, Hsiao-Hu pulled him in closer. "Ji-Ching? Ho Ji-Ching? Ho Ji-Ching..."

The words seemed honeyed as he chewed on them with fascination, turning the syllables in to a chant. Commander Ho listened with cold indifference. The young body pressed up against him intimately, and he noted with both alarm and disgust that a burning erection was forming between Hsiao-Hu's legs.

Hsiao-Hu chanted Commander Ho's name ceaselessly, finally letting out a bark of laughter. Without warning, he reached down and hauled up Commander Ho by the waist.

- : -

Hsiao-Hu tied Commander Ho's hands behind his back and positioned him in his lap with his legs spread far apart, and forced him down with a firm grip on his waist. The enormous shaft sank slowly and painfully into Commander Ho, but he made no sound. His head bowed, he breathed heavily as he tried his best to relax.

Afterwards, Commander Ho lay on his back, pinned under Hsiao-Hu. Hsiao-Hu teased his swollen nipples with his fingertips. "I'll be good to you, Commander—no, Ji-Ching. Why don't you cheer up a bit?"

Commander Ho remained silent.

Hsiao-Hu lowered his head and sucked gently on an erect bud. "I've always had a thing for you," he said, looking up. "When Li pulled me out of the corpse pile, I was so starved I could barely see. But somehow, even that far away, I saw you clear as day. You were wearing your beige uniforms and a black cloak, your face was like white jade. Com—Ji-Ch'ing, why don't we make up? I'll be good to you, I'll do everything you say. The men used to piss you off all the time, but I'm not like that! Heavens smite me with lightening if I ever betray you!"

Commander Ho waved his hand dismissively. "Get the fuck off."

Hsiao-Hu paused, staring into Commander Ho's face with wide eyes.

Commander Ho's half-lidded eyes stared motionlessly into space, the black orbs emotionless and unfathomable.

Hsiao-Hu pouted and sat up. Crawling back, his eyes landed on Commander Ho's bare foot lying next him. He dragged it into his lap, and gave it a caress before leaning in to lick at a jade toe.

Commander Ho jerked his leg away and glared down at Hsiao-Hu. "What the hell are you doing?"

Hsiao-Hu didn't know what he was doing either. "I—" he began, at a loss.

Commander Ho pushed himself up on his elbows and waved Hsiao-Hu over. "Come over here."

Hsiao-Hu crawled to him on all fours, eager to please like a hound nuzzling his master with its moist nose.

Commander Ho stared pensively at his face for a moment, and without warning, gave him a resounding slap across the face as his feet connected brutally with Hsiao-Hu's groin. With a howl, Hsiao-Hu curled into a ball, writhing on the bed in pain.

- : -

Hsiao-Hu's netherparts wore swollen red after Commander Ho's assault. For days he had to walk with his legs far apart, feeling like he was carrying a lump of burning coal in his pants.

He had bared his heart to Commander Ho, and in return he'd gotten a thunderous slap across the face and a maiming kick to the balls. He fumed in bitter anger.

He picked out ten or so men from the captured soldiers serving under Commander Ho, and tied them to poles as human targets. His youth spent among military has eroded away most of his humanity, and as there were still traces

of innocence left in his nature, his savagery was particularly bold. With a bayonet, he carved his targets into bloody guards. As he breathed in the sweet tang of blood, he felt sated at last.

He knew Commander Ho resented him—it wasn't just him. It was as if the Commander lived in his own world, a world where nobody merited his attention. But Hsiao-Hu didn't feel like he was any worse than the rest. What good were those colonels and commanders? Weren't they just powerful bandits? If Commander Ho had gone through the troubles to appease them, why couldn't he at least play nice with Hsiao-Hu? He'd already let him off for trying to kill him!

Hsiao-Hu didn't understand. Before he could, he didn't want to face Commander Ho again.

- :-

Commander Ho hadn't left Hsiao-Hu's place, being locked away in a room, never to see the light of day.

It had already been seven days since his train was hijacked. Li Shih-Yao had yet to make a move, Commander Ho noted with a chilling heart. He knew that Hsiao-Hu's logic was sound—Li had no reason to retrieve a burden like him. With his resources, Li could easily look to other prospects.

Commander Ho wished he could speak to Li face to face, tell him that he'd been having thoughts of quitting. If Li could get him out of here, he'd give up everything and go back to Peking alone—no. He'd killed too many of the Nanking Government. Peking wouldn't be safe for him.

Peking wouldn't work, but he could go to Tientsin or Shanghai, maybe hide away in one of the foreign concessions. Either way, he'd be able to survive just on ancestral wealth.

Dimly, he noticed that he had begun pacing around the room. In midst of the pacing, he dropped abruptly to his knees with a heavy thump, and lowered his head to ground as if in worship. 'Give me your blessings, Bai-Shan,' he thought in a silent prayer 'help me make it out of here.'

And was promptly caught off guard when the door swung open.

A boy entered with a little bamboo basket. It was apparently dinnertime.

Commander Ho was still on his knees. He looked back at the lad, feeling extremely awkward.

The boy, on the other hand, didn't spare him a glance. He placed the basket on a table and turned to leave, relocking the door on his way out.

Commander Ho stood and approached the table. He didn't have any appetite, but he still glanced inside the basket out of habit.

A bowl of white rice and two bowls of cooked vegetables rested inside.

Commander Ho reached in to retrieve the rice, and was surprised to find a crumpled ball of paper in the corner of the basket.

He spread out and inspected the bit of paper, and munched it down along with the rice. His heart was racing a little, his face slightly flushed.

- :-

Commander Ho was halfway through his rice when Hsiao-Hu returned.

He had been standing in front of the table, rice bowl in hand. Hsiao-Hu glanced in his direction, not understanding

why the man simply refused to come around.

Commander Ho put his bowl down, and wiped his mouth with his sleeve when he failed to find a napkin.

For a long moment, they faced each other in silence. Finally Hsiao-Hu jerked his head up, the cross-shaped scar twitching with the movement. "Anyhow, I'm not letting you go! You're stuck with me whether you like it or not!"

"Are your eyes attached to the back of your head?" Commander Ho began placidly, his tone cool. "Take a good look at me! I'm a man six years your senior. What are you going to do with me?"

Hsiao-Hu hadn't expected him to spill so many words at once, and his heart rose slightly. "What about Chief Lan? He was a man, older than you as well! Didn't stop you from wanting him!"

Commander Ho sat in a chair. "How immature can you get? What, you want to shack up with me now?"

"What if I do!" Hsiao-Hu yelled, his face an angry red. "Why can't I? Lan had nothing but pretty words. I'm a million times better than that!"

Commander Ho sneered. "Chao Hsiao-Hu, you're also a million times more depraved."

Hsiao-Hu stood with his back against the wall, his eyes staring straight into Commander Ho's. "I know you look down on me because I was your orderly, but many great men have risen from humble beginnings! I heard Major General Li was just a coal picker once, but would you dare to offend him?"

Commander Ho found Hsiao-Hu childish stubbornness a pain to deal with. Other than putting him down, there really didn't seem to be any other option.

His mind set on murder, Commander Ho felt himself calm. He waved a hand towards the door. "Get the hell out of here, you're making a racket."

This was Commander Ho's usual demeanour towards servants. Hsiao-Hu didn't feel particularly upset, just a sense of helpless dissatisfaction.

He grinded his teeth at the Commander with a frown, wishing he could smash the porcelain man to pieces, except he felt like their relationship was still salvageable.

The thought reined in his violence. In the end, he simply left the room resentfully.

- : -

Hsiao-Hu's village housed a few dozens of women, all of them kidnapped elsewhere. Hsiao-Hu normally took great pleasure in picking one out to warm his bed, but since Commander Ho's arrival, he seemed to have forgotten about them.

He stood awhile in the evening breeze, feeling like a complete fool. Pinning after another man—he be laughed at if anyone found out. Especially since that man happened to be Commander Ho.

Besides his good looks, Commander Ho really didn't have any redeeming quality—He was too ruthless, too cruel.

Hsiao-Hu shook his head furiously at the glowing clouds and decided he should go have some fun with his underlings. He was determined to follow Commander Ho's example, and took great care in appeasing his subordinates. How would he succeed without their service?

Hsiao-Hu partied exhilaratingly with the men and women into the night.

The men of Ch'ing-Yun held Hsiao-Hu in great regard, and were glad to call him Chieftain. They were sure that as long as they followed the boy-chieftain, they'd be on their way to great wealth and fortune! And it wasn't just wishful thinking. For example, who'd have thought that trains could be hijacked? Who'd have known that the train would be laden with snowy cash and dazzling gold?

But the Chieftain did!

The men waited eagerly for their leader to celebrate their victory. But Hsiao-Hu spent all his time with the pale-faced commander, and seemed to have forgotten about the matter. Finally they'd gotten the chance, and were determined to celebrate to their heart's content.

- :-

Later around midnight, when the residents of the villages were either too drunk or passed out, Li Shih-Yao's troops attacked.

Retrospectively, Li was a bit perplexed by the whole thing. Sure, it had been a sneak-attack, but even sneak-attacks shouldn't have gone this smoothly. When they'd charged chaotically into the village, they'd only run into a few drunkards, whom they chopped down easily like melons. He'd ended up feeling apprehensive, convinced that he'd fallen into some sort of trap.

He was constantly on the lookout for Hsiao-Hu's ambush, all the way from the peak to the bottom of the hill. When he was finally sure that there wasn't going to be an ambush, he couldn't help but scratch his own head with a grin, thinking that he'd never won an easier victory in his life.

But...where had Hsiao-Hu gone?

Commander Ho sat in front of him, panting and covered in sweat. He had run all the way down from the hill. "Go after him—whatever it takes, don't let him get away!"

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[A Cruel Romance, Vol. I] Manhunt

 sl-Ilian.livejournal.com/8652.html

Trigger warning: non-explicit violence and rape.

Manhunt

Turning to Commander Ho, Li Shih-Yao reined his horse to a stop. “Commander, you should really go back to the camp. What’s the point of running around with us in the wilderness? We’ve already sent out ten thousand men. As long as Chao Hsiao-Hu doesn’t grow wings, he’ll never make it out of the Ch’ing-Yun! You have my word on this.”

Commander Ho glanced around the sky. Seeing that the horizon was already aglow in sunset, he whipped his horse into action again. “Spread my word!” he cried, “I am awarding one thousand silver dollars for Chao Hsiao-Hu’s severed head!”

Li caught up with him with a light kick at his mount. “You might as well just hand the money to me! Since when was Hsiao-Hu’s thick head worth a whole grand?”

Commander Ho’s pale face was flushed in distress. He pointed his whip at Li. “Then why don’t you bring it here!”

Li was a bit displeased by his tone. *I’ve just saved your life*, he thought. *Not only do you not thank me, you’ve got the nerve to give me attitude! The brat could really use a good fucking!*

His thoughts strayed at the last word, and Li felt his heart give a little jitter. He threw Commander Ho a meaningful glance.

- :-

Commander Ho hadn’t spared a moment to rest since he sprinted out of the hills. He’d first coerced Li into sending his men—who were just recalled from the site—right back into Ching-Yun, and conducted a very thorough massacre in the dark. Failing to locate Hsiao-Hu, he sent the troops into the wilds and in his blinding fury, he’d even joined the hunt personally. This was a first since he’d been enlisted.

Ching-Yun was a small balding hill, which shouldn’t have been hard to search. The men sieved through the hill like it was a basket of rice, but didn’t even catch a glimpse of Hsiao-Hu’s shadow. Weary of suppressing bandits, Li would rather call it a day and go back to whatever they were doing, but Commander Ho refused to even utter the words “pull out”, his eyes vicious like a wildcat’s on its nighttime prowl. Li was almost afraid of getting clawed, so he held his tongue.

When the soldiers made their way down the hills, Commander Ho reined in his horse and inspected his surroundings, spotting a village up ahead.

“What’s that place?” he turned to ask Li.

Li didn’t know, so he turned to ask a soldier. An answer emerged only after a long chain of questioning—the village was called Gu-Wang, and it was the richest one in the area.

Commander Ho thought the name sounded familiar. After a brief moment of contemplation, he remembered Hsiao-Hu mentioning a blind fortune teller from Gu-Wang, who said that a man twice touched by death was destined to

great fortune and prestige.

Commander Ho gripped the reins tightly. Great fortune and prestige? Worthless bastard, I'll give you fortune and prestige!

Li had stayed up all night, and was in the middle of a wide yawn when Commander Ho's chilling voice began: "Judging from their distance to Ch'ing-Yun, the villagers are probably accomplices of the bandits. Perhaps Hsiao-Hu is hiding there at this very moment! I'd rather kill a thousand in vain than let that one escape. Let's go!"

- : -

Li Shih-Yao's division were supposed to be only passing by, and was therefore not planning to profit en route. But since Commander Ho had already given the order, the soldiers were happy to make a small fortune at the opportunity.

Commander Ho rounded up the inhabitants of the village, and made his way in front of the mass.

"Who knows the whereabouts of Chao Hsiao-Hu of Ch'ing-Yun?" he began, leaning on a rifle.

The villagers gave him terrified but blank stares. After a moment of silence, a bearded elderly man stepped out of the crowd and gave Commander Ho a deep bow. Straightening only halfway up, he stared respectfully at the ground as he delivered his answer. "Master Commander, I'm the head of the village. Chao Hsiao-Hu is a bandit up in the mountains—he's got no business with us. We don't know anything about his whereabouts either."

Commander Ho gave a frosty laugh. "No business you say? I heard you've got blind sod who told Hsiao-Hu's fortune, said he's destined to great fortune and prestige! Where is he?"

The elder turned to the crowd apprehensively, then immediately switched to a menacing expression. "Which of you have told fortune?" he roared. "Get out here this moment and answer to Master Commander."

"Old Chao used to tell fortune, but he drowned in the latrine last month," a man in the crowd answered timidly.

Commander Ho waved Li over. "Pick out a few women," he ordered quietly. "Kill the rest."

Li glanced at him with a smirk, knowing that he was just venting his anger.

- : -

On this bright and sunny morning, only a dozen of finer-looking young women had been spared out of two thousand villagers.

The women were tied naked to the backs of horses. The soldiers had already took their turns with them, and the women's distended bellies were filled with their seed. The soldier would be transporting them back to the camp as war trophies of sorts.

Hsiao-Hu's undeniable absence put Commander Ho on an agitated edge. Gu-Wang had been cleared out and set on fire. Flames surged into the sky, and quickly devoured the entire village.

The Village of Gu-Wang was no more.

Commander Ho did not see the fields of bodies nor the rivers of blood. He only knew that he didn't find Hsiao-Hu, and was therefore angry and distressed.

Li was exhausted. "How about we head back for some rest?" he urged Commander Ho, trying to hold back his yawns. "I know he held you prisoner for a few days, but it's not like he's feasted on your flesh! We've already burned

down his village, isn't that enough? Let's get some rest, we still have a journey to make."

Commander Ho gave him a whip on the back.

- :-

The troops withdrew from the hellish site that was once Gu-Wang, traveling around Ch'ing-Yun as they headed for Horse Dung Kiln.

Its unsavoury name aside, the village was appropriately desolate and remote; it could hardly be deemed a settlement. As they approached, Commander Ho and his men gave a collective cry of alarm.

Somebody had already gone through the place.

The houses hadn't been burnt down, but no lives had been spared. The village only had about ten families, all huddled in a few cottages on a small clearing next to the hill. Commander Ho dismounted, scanning through the littered corpses before him. He let out a sudden sigh, and turned to Li. "Chao Hsiao-Hu's work."

Li wasn't tired anymore; he was starving. "My Commander, let's go back," he said, sure that he could see stars. "We can't just kill all day without food!"

Commander Ho glanced up at the sky. "I must kill him."

"My Commander! Why don't we go kill him after we've had something to eat? Listen to my stomach, it's rumbling like thunder!"

Commander Ho sighed, feeling a bit weary himself. But as he turned to get back on his horse, a small whimper rose from the pile of corpses.

Commander Ho froze, and looked back to the source of the sound.

- :-

Li Shih-Yao was faint with hunger as he made his way back to camp and wolfed down two solid bowls of rice. Sated, he wiped his mouth before stretching out his legs and letting out a satisfied sigh.

He snapped his fingers and called over an orderly. "What's the Commander doing?"

The small orderly grinned cheerfully. "The Commander got the kid cleaned up. He sure looks skinny, but he's already fifteen!"

Li shut his eyes briefly. What kind of hobby was digging up half-dead brats out of corpse piles? Last time he'd gotten a Chao Hsiao-Hu, who ended up kidnapping him. Not only did he not learn from that lesson, he'd gone and picked up another dying little wretch. What was he hoping to get out of this?

Due to yet another internet crackdown, the online version of Niluo's original novel has been locked and taken down. Those Who Must Not Be Named haven't given anyone an explanation, but I have an inkling that it probably has something to do with politics and paychecks. On second thought, I actually know this because divine powers spoke to me in my dream and fed me strawberries that tasted like censorship. The English translation will continue, hopefully before the irony of the whole situation drives me to an early grave.

[A Cruel Romance, Vol. I] Resignation

 sl-lilian.livejournal.com/8787.html

Please have faith in the fact that I'll be continuing the translation, just probably not in a timely manner...

Trigger warning: child (?) abuse.

Resignation

He squatted in the corner of the room with his arms around his knees. He'd just been dunked in the river and scrubbed down from head to toe, and now everything hurts.

The brush was originally intended for horses. They slapped some soap on it and set to work, scrubbing off both dirt and skin. After he'd been adequately sanitized, they proceeded to shave off his hair and shoved him into a set of large uniforms. The orderlies looked at his tiny body hiding in the uniforms, and at his skinny neck and his round, bald head sticking out of the collars, and they couldn't help but laugh, horse brush still in hand.

After they'd done laughing, they gave him two buns of bread and watched him wolf everything down. They laughed again at the sight.

The old battered door swung open with a creak. A tall man stepped in.

He dared not to raise his head, and stole a quick glance at the stranger.

The man wore beige wool uniforms. His coat was unbuttoned, and his white shirt hung loose over his trousers. His knee-high riding boots, however, were black and polished.

These boots came forward and stopped directly in front of him. A gloved hand reached out with a horsewhip, and tipped up his chin.

He was suddenly afraid—not just afraid, he was utterly terrified. His small body shook evenly and his broken skin chafed against the rough uniforms, but it seemed as if his senses were dulled, and the only real struggle was for breath.

He looked down. Driven by some primal instinct, he would not meet the man's eyes.

"Do you know who I am?" The man asked dispassionately.

He opened his mouth and revealed a small patch of clean white teeth. With what seemed to be all his might, he squeezed a tiny sound out of his throat. "You're...the Commander, Sir."

"Are you afraid of me?"

His mind blank, he nodded stupidly.

The horsewhip moved away from his chin, and gave him a little pat on the face. The voice above him became tinged with vicious amusement. "You're right to be afraid."

He gave an inexplicable shudder. He glanced up for a brief second, and caught himself looking into a pair of black upturned eyes. Straight long lashes fanned out around their rims, like decorations for these elegant eyes.

"What's your name?"

He swallowed. "Hsiao-Shun," he said, timid as a kitten.

- : -

Hsiao-Shun made quite a spectacle on their journey.

The troops kept a few German shepherds. The soldiers assigned him the task of feeding the dogs, except Hsiao-Shun ended up stealing the dog food. The orderlies made him empty chamber pots in the morning, only to later find him dozing off with them by a ditch.

Clumsy and timid, he was lacking in every way, and was beaten every day.

- : -

Commander Ho always felt that he had no man of his own in the army. His willingness to drag survivors out of mass graves was born out of his need for absolute loyalty, which could be achieved by establishing himself as a savior. Chao Hsia-Hu was such an example, but sadly a counter example. It was like Fate giving him a big fat slap in the face.

Commander Ho was not given to altruism, and he could not reconcile himself to the results of the only charitable deed he'd done. He was determined to start over again with Hsiao-Shun, and prove that his methods were not invalid, and that Hsiao-Hu was an accident.

Commander Ho had learned from his mistakes with Chao Hsiao-Hu. He believed that Hsiao-Hu's transgression was the consequence of his own kindness. He had treated him as one of his own, and spoilt him so much that he'd be insolent enough to even think of such a violation.

It could thus be deduced that men were despicable by nature. If he wanted to gain an adequate subordinate, he should never treat him like a man! He must start off with a solid foundation and beat some obedience into him.

Under the guidance of such an ideology, Hsiao-Shun was in for the most unfortunate ride.

As he was hilariously dense, at first there were soldiers who would go and fool around with him for laughs. Eventually they stopped approaching him, since his presence reminded them of Commander Ho, which tended to send shivers down spines.

After a few months of getting properly fed, his dark and tiny body stretched out gradually. He was round-faced, his looks indistinct, but his brows were clear and his large, heavy-lidded eyes were terrified and vague—like those of a trapped fawn, knowing that death was approaching, but harboured no thoughts of resistance. His teeth were white and straight, which was rare among country folk.

Commander Ho beat him obsessively, in such a way that beats all the beatings one could beat in a lifetime and possibly beat into the afterlife. During the day he waited on and served tea to the Commander, and during the night he'd spread out a small rug in the corner of Commander Ho's room and curl up on it like a dog, ready to be called upon at any time. He was right at an age when boys slept the most, and after a long day of hard labour he'd lie down and fall asleep right away. Sometimes Commander Ho would fail to rouse him, and he'd get up in the dark and light a candle, then stalk toward the boy in silence and kick him right the face. Hsiao-Shun would then jump into the air with a yelp and then kneel trembling on the ground, not even daring to wipe away the blood streaming out of his nose.

One day he brought over a bowl of tofu pudding for Commander Ho, who took one sip of it, and detecting some unknown fault, overturned the bowl and smacked it right onto Hsiao-Shun's head. Startled, he dropped to his knees reflexively. The large bowl slipped off his head smashed into the ground with a clatter, and he squeezed his eye shut and clenched his teeth, scalding tofu dripping all over his face.

Li Shih-Yao was just arriving through the door, and took a step back at the sight. “Fuck! What the—“

Upon closer inspection, he finally exhaled. “Heavens. I thought you blew his brains out!”

Commander Ho gestured toward a chair. “Please have a seat, Major-General Li.”

Li sat down and took in Hsiao-Shun, who was still enduring his face getting burnt off in silence. “Boy did he grow! Look at him, he’ll be a great tall thing one day.”

Commander Ho spared Hsiao-Shun a glance, and gave him a square kick in the chest. He was painfully thin, and fell backwards like a paper cut-out.

Li laughed at the sight. “Why don’t you just shoot the boy if you don’t like him. What’s the point of torturing him by bits?”

Commander Ho waved a hand impassively. “I’m educating him.”

Seeing his gesture, Hsiao-Shun picked up the large bowl and scrambled up, and backed all the way to the door before turning around and running off.

When only Li and Commander Ho were left in the room, Li smiled and began: “what did you want to speak to me about?”

Commander Ho regarded Li, and found that he still despised him, as he is uncultured, ignorant, and rude. But he was in fact one of the men who brought him out of school—and the only one left, for that matter.

As it was, Li was something like a token of remembrance for him.

He covered his mouth and gave a light cough, deciding to initiate a little heart-to-heart.

“Major-General Li, I’ve been considering this recently—it’s been more than six years since I left Peking.”

Li nodded. “You were still a kid back then! I remember Old Lan dragging you on—I was in the rear, carrying your book bag, and Old Jin was in the front, clearing the path. And there was that nun at the school, screaming at us in some foreign tongue. It all seemed to have happened yesterday, but, well...”

Li thought about his rivals who all died in Hsian, and felt a bit gloomy himself.

Commander Ho had no intention of sharing a remembrance of things past with Li, and the moment Li shut his mouth, he continued: “When you put me in charge, it was with the intention of keeping the one hundred thousand or so men under the same banner. Now that all that’s left are the ten thousand men under your command, there’s no longer the need for a commander-in-chief. Major-General Li, I wish to return to Peking in a few days. The remaining men will be yours to rule, and will have no more to do with the House of Ho—“

With a loud creak, Li dragged his chair toward Commander Ho. “I’ll be damned. Are you trying to run off?”

Commander Ho was not expecting Li to suddenly come so close. He wanted to back away, but to avoid potential embarrassment, he held still and pressed on. “I’ve never been commander material to begin with. There’s nothing in it for either of us but awkwardness, so why stay?”

Li stared straight at Commander Ho’s eyes. “Commander, however you feel like I’m mistreating you, just talk to me! How can you just leave?”

Commander Ho remained unmoved by Li’s persuasion. “I haven’t been in touch with Peking for years; I don’t know what the situation is like back home. I can’t go back empty-handed. We’ve made something of an ill-gotten fortune

when we retreated from Hsian. A thousand silver-dollars shouldn't be too much to ask for."

Li frowned. "Commander—"

Commander Ho didn't give him a chance to speak. "Silver-dollars will be inconvenient on the road. Keep an eye out for Sikang caravans for me, I'll be exchanging the money into Pounds."

When he spotted Li opening his mouth again, he quickly continued: "All you have to do is send a battalion with me to Hopeh. That's all I wanted to speak to you about. You may leave."

"Like hell I'll leave!" Li finally exclaimed. "All we did was listen to you speak, I haven't even opened my mouth! Commander, what's gotten into you? I know staying in this place is difficult for you. I spotted something off with you the moment we set foot in Luyang last month. But then again, we only had ten thousand men left the first time we came to Luyang, but didn't we make it back to Hsian? Old Jin and his bunch were all idiots, I tell you! We gain nothing with them and lose nothing without them. Just give me a couple of years, I myself can recover all our strength, and then—"

Commander Ho was not interested in speculating the future with Li, and silenced him with a raised hand. "That is indeed a wonderful prospect, but it can be achieved by your strength alone, and has little to do with me. I too had once desired a remarkable career, but now I am beaten and tired.

"At your age?" Li placed a hand on Commander Ho's knee. "Besides, how will you even make it out? Do you know how many enemies we have in this area, not to mention elsewhere?"

Commander Ho remained under Li's hand and detected nothing untoward. "It's not like I'm leaving tomorrow. Worst happens, I'll take the long way around. The world is round—I'll end up in Peking one way or another."

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[A Cruel Romance, Vol. I] Guests from Afar

 sl-Ilian.livejournal.com/9621.html

Guests from Afar

Commander Ho said that the world was round. As long as he could take steps out and not die in the process, he'd make it to Peking eventually.

What would he do once he reached Peking? Li Shih-Yao asked the same question, to which Commander Ho answered without a second thought: "Retire."

This came as a surprise to Li. "How old are you? You're retiring already?"

Commander Ho considered this. "I'll grow old in retirement."

Li's eyes lit up as he scanned downward from Commander Ho's face. "My, my..." He sighed with regret, rubbing his hands together. "To keep such a great man idle at home... Such a pity...such a waste..."

Not catching on, Commander Ho thought Li was lamenting over his golden youth. "That's no big deal. The ancients used to say: 'even thousands of gold cannot buy an inch of time', but even if men were to have heaps of time, how many wouldn't spend it in vain?"

Li scowled. "You can't put it like that. The best years of life are short. After that point it's like overripe vegetables—who'd want to chew on withered cabbage?"

Perplexed, Commander Ho thought to himself: *is he talking about me? Fucking bastard. He's calling me a piece of withered cabbage!* But as he gave it more thought, he felt that it couldn't be—nobody phrased insults like that. Then what on earth did it mean?

Commander Ho pondered over this for a moment in silence, and decided to drop the topic for now. Just as he was about to order Li to leave, he found Li staring at him hesitantly, his grinning face awkward and flushed, and looked as if he was biting his tongue.

Commander Ho lifted an eyebrow. "Major-General Li, you have something to say?"

Li lowered his head and looked down at his hands, which lay clutched together in his lap, and felt a bit short of breath. He scolded himself: *why the fuck should I be scared of him?*

After such a reprimand, he seemed to have recovered some courage. He cleared his throat and said to the floor: "Uh—Commander, I have this idea, I don't know if it's appropriate."

In face of his sudden and unusual embarrassment, Commander Ho grew very curious. Somewhat fascinated, he leaned into his chair and rubbed his chin. "Go on," he encouraged.

Li had never been afraid of charging into forests of bayonets and hails of gunfire, but in front of Commander Ho—who didn't really warrant any fear—he found it almost impossible to breathe over his racing heart. "Uh—Commander—I think you're a great fella, so—so—"

Commander Ho had never been subjected to a comment like that, and since Li was being uncharacteristically nervous, he couldn't help but smile. "So what?"

Li sucked in a very deep breath and exhaled slowly. He hardened his resolve and blurted out: "I want to sleep with

you!”

Rubbing his chin, Commander Ho regarded Li smilingly. After a long moment, he asked: “What did you say?”

Having gotten the crucial part out, Li felt himself relax little by little. He looked up at Commander Ho, a tiny hint of a grin sliding back onto his face. “I want to sleep with you.”

Still smiling, Commander Ho extended a finger at Li. “You, want to—” He then pointed it to his own chest. “Sleep— with Me?”

Li forced himself to remain calm. “Yes. That’s right.”

As if speaking to himself, Commander Ho nodded. “Sleep... How?”

“How did you do it with Lan? But I have to be on top!”

Commander Ho’s smile receded like an ebbing tide, and vanished without a trace in an instant. He stood up and circled a few rounds before Li, then in one abrupt motion, he hauled up a nearby chair and sent it barreling into Li. “YOU’VE ASKED FOR YOUR OWN FUCKING DEATH!”

Li was adept at physical combat, and had leapt away the moment Commander Ho turned. Failing to land a strike, Commander Ho dropped the chair and raced to the hallstand for his gun. Li realised that things weren’t going to bode well for him and made a run for the door, yelling: “Think about it! You’re not going anywhere until you agree! I shall take my leave!”

He dashed through the courtyard like the wind, and sparing no time to call his orderlies, jumped onto a horse and fled.

- : -

Commander Ho sat in his house and felt like he was going mad with rage.

A sense of unutterable frustration accompanied his rage. He gave the toppled chair a violent kick and let out a frigid laugh. Unbelievable. All walks of life had the nerve to crawl on top of him these days! There’s no shortage of women in the army—Li was going out of his way to disgust him!

If Li had delivered these lines a year ago, Commander Ho could probably find a way to successfully slaughter him. As he had neither any troops of his own nor any real military control, he devoted himself to personnel management, and for years he sought favours and spurred conflicts among his officers, using his manipulations to establish a balance of power and maintain his supreme authority. But now that most of the personnel are dead, his work with personnel management had to be put on hold. Commander Ho had thus become a true loner.

He dared not to dispatch Li, but whenever he thought of Li’s demands, he almost wanted to go take a bite at someone in anger. In fact, he could simply forget about the whole business and continue playing the Commander-in-Chief properly, since however lewd Li was, he wasn’t going to leap over and pull off his pants. But he couldn’t let the matter go—his narrow-mindedness prevented him from letting anything go. Li’s words reverberated in his head from dusk till dawn, ceaselessly and tirelessly.

- : -

After spilling his guts in front of Commander Ho, Li Shih-Yao did not show himself for three days.

Commander Ho spent his days wallowing in resentment and rage, and was certainly not going to seek him out.

Hsiao-Shun, unfortunately, bore the brunt end of it.

Whenever Commander Ho's irritation became unbearable, Hsiao-Shun would be hauled over and used as a punching bag. He knelt on the floor with his glassy-eyed look and endured the abuse complacently, only curling up and putting his arms around his head when the pain became too much for him. He never made a sound or begged for mercy.

He was weak and helpless; his life was cheaper than dirt to the nefarious Commander Ho. His refusal to cry or beg was only form of rebellion he could accomplish. The rebellion was modest but firm—it was a silent declaration: beat me to death if you can!

Commander Ho eventually noticed his oddness. He bent down and grasped the boy's chin. "Why aren't you making any sound?"

Hsiao-Shun looked at him with large limpid eyes; there was absolutely nothing in them.

Commander Ho suddenly began to suspect that he was actually simple, or had become simple. What was he doing with an idiot?

He gave him a kick in the chest. "Say something!" He roared between clenched teeth.

Hsiao-Shun swayed and collapsed to the ground. After getting properly fed, he had indeed grown a lot taller at an astonishing speed, but because of this, his lengthening body was so thin that it looked like it was carved out of cardboard. If Commander Ho had put any more force behind the kick, he'd have sent the boy flying.

- : -

The orderlies spotted Hsiao-Shun emerging from Commander Ho's room in the evening.

Somebody behind him asked quietly: "Hsiao-Shun, did you get beaten again? What happened to your face?"

Hsiao-Shun didn't respond. His head low, he headed to the kitchen to collect Commander Ho's dinner. An unbroken patch of swollen red stretched over his face, its burning sting like splinters pricking into his skin and stabbing around aimlessly in his flesh.

This was the product of the hot wax Commander Ho poured over him. He warned that if he continued to stay quiet, he'd switch the wax to boiling oil. Hsiao-Shun finally broke down and begged, "Have mercy, Commander," his voice like a kitten's.

He received an instant slap in the face. "What did you call me?"

Hsiao-Shun no longer felt any pain. "Have mercy, *Ch'i-Yeh*", he corrected automatically.

Commander Ho had instructed the boy to call him "Seventh Master", since Hsiao-Shun was a bound servant he meant to keep.

Hsiao-Shun had relented, yet Commander Ho continued to beat him, calling him a coward for showing weakness instead.

And Hsiao-Shun endured. His life consisted of eating, sleeping, working, and getting beaten. Since the punishments were reasonless and inevitable, he lived in perpetual fear and uncertainty.

Because of this, he was actually less anxious after the beatings. Before the abuse starts, there were an endless number of horrifying possibilities, but when all is said and done, he only had to find a corner to hide in and get through the pain silently.

- : -

Three days later, Commander Ho had gotten somewhat calmer. He decided to take a walk.

There wasn't much around in terms of scenic sites. He rode to the riverside as if the early winter weather wasn't already cold enough. Hsiao-Shun followed behind, and his frame could now hold up his shapeless wadded uniforms.

Commander Ho dismounted and took a few steps along the riverbank. He suddenly thought of Lan Bai-Shan.

After the bloodbath at Ching-Yun, Li Shih-Yao sent in his men and retrieved every single item the bandits had looted from the train. Commander Ho recovered Lan's urn and held on to it once again.

If Lan was still alive, Commander imagined that he would be consulting him about running away together. It sounded almost like elopement. Romantic and dangerous, it consisted of all the elements of a love story. His life had never resembled anything roseate, and he'd give anything to experience such an extraordinary romance, even if it meant dying at the hands of bandits on their journey.

At the thought, Commander Ho smiled dreamily. Elopement—they could run away into the dazzling world, but Lan would never be willing to stay with someone planning to retire. What would he do then? Perhaps he'd kill him!

In that light, he was probably better off staying alone. Besides, Lan probably wouldn't elope with him. It had always been a one-sided affair, an unrequited love that was both physically and emotionally destructive. But thinking back, it was still a good thing to have somebody to love, even if his lover had ended up wasting away.

Enthralled by his thoughts, Commander Ho stood alone by the river in a trance.

Since Marshal Ho's death, he'd been searching for a new "love", both under the broad light of day, among the shining heavens and the sunlit earth, and in the silent darkness of night, among the streams of blood and fields of carcass. In the year of his father's death he was still a boy; his love had been too precise and too powerful, and when it suddenly disappeared, his was left empty and dejected, like a man losing one half of his life.

So he needed love, a powerful and tempestuous love. Such an emotion could only be invoked through a passionate romance.

To his infuriation, nobody wanted to be involved in a romance with Commander Ho.

He'd fallen for Lan alone and offered himself willingly, but the other man merely laughed it off and played dumb, refusing to accept him.

How infuriating!

- : -

Time crept away silently in Commander Ho's contemplations. A chilling wind sailed along the surface of the lake and flitted against Commander Ho's face, tumbling and scrambling into the bushes up above. Commander Ho stood in the wind for a while, and gave a sudden sneeze. He pulled out his handkerchief and wiped his nose, pausing his meditation for the moment. Right then, he noticed a few soldiers crossing the small bridge nearby.

Li Shih-Yao was in the lead, and among the soldiers behind him there were two strangers tied up in ropes. He could tell that they were from out of town right away, since one of them was suited and the other was wearing a Tibetan leather robe, like he belonged to a Sikang caravan.

Li also spotted Commander Ho. He paused briefly and shouted: "Commander! What are you doing there?"

Commander Ho watched Li, and gave another sneeze. Li's manners appeared perfectly ordinary, as if he wasn't the

very man who had proposed to sleep with him just a few days ago.

His mind raced for a moment. "Major-General Li," he said with a nod, his tone nonchalant.

On long legs, Li made his way to him in large strides. "Aren't you cold, Commander?"

Commander Ho pointed behind him. "Where did these men come from?"

"They were lurking around unidentified. I happened to catch them right at it," Li said idly. "I was going to take them back for interrogation. If they can't explain themselves, I'll just dispatch them as spies."

Commander Ho blinked. He suddenly wanted to challenge him.

"Let them go, let them go. Are you going ban people from just passing through your territory?" Then he turned to the pair of men. "What are you really doing here?"

Seeing that somebody was coming to their aid, the men were obviously not going to pass up on an opportunity to ensure their continued existence. The suited man was shorter than average, at most in his twenties, and he stepped forward to answer: "Mister Commander, I'm a traveler, not at all a spy; my background is as clear as stream water!" He pointed his restrained hands at the man behind him. "This is a friend I travel with, he is an interpreter; his heart is as kind as a sheep's!"

Commander Ho burst out laughing.

It turned out that the little man did not only have a peculiar way of wording and phrasing, but his pronunciation was absurdly standard. His Official Mandarin had no hint of any regional accent or dialect, and sounded almost like a radio broadcast.

- : -

Commander Ho brought the men back to his residence. His sole purpose was to have a chat with the little man, who turned out to be Japanese. An excellent student back at language school, he was able to speak Mandarin fluently—if a bit academically, like he was reciting from a book. He was a good conversationalist, and since he came from the outside world and had a great deal of news and information to offer, his company held great appeal to Commander Ho.

Li Shih-Yao didn't join them. He merely stared intently at Commander Ho's retreating figure—focusing only on the middle section, right at his ample backside.

The men sat in the central hall where orderlies served them hot tea. The little man lifted his cup and took a sip right away. "Commander, I thank you for saving our lives. What is your honourable name?"

"Ho Bao-Ting," Commander Ho answered.

"And your courtesy name?"

"Ji-Ch'ing."

The small man gave a clap. "What a noble name! My humble name is—" and rising from his seat, he pulled out a business card and presented it to Commander Ho with both hands. "—Arimitsu Kiyoshi."

Commander Ho accepted the card and noted that under Arimitsu's name, there is another line that said "Sino-Japanese Trading Company, Trustee".

"Mr. Arimitsu is a trader?" he asked.

Arimitsu sat back down and shook his head. "I'm a traveler, a traveler. I have no money, the Trading Company is my brother's. It is a titular title, I receive monthly salaries. Idle when young, remorseful when old. It is my great shame!"

Commander Ho turned to the man in Tibetan garbs, a smile on his face. The man had just successfully untied the knot under his chin and removed his large fur hat.

Without the hat's obstruction, his face were finally on full display. He looked to be about thirty, his fair skin and soft features giving him a mild and gentle demeanour. A pair of gold-rimmed glasses sat on his nose, making him appear all the more cultured and neat.

Smiling gently, he raised his eyes to meet Commander Ho's.

Commander Ho stared at him with a frown, and found his face increasingly familiar by the second. It was an unnerving familiarity, like there was a thin film right before him, and once punctured, the whole truth would be exposed.

But what was the truth? Commander Ho didn't know. He merely stared at the other man dumbly, wordless and brusque.

In the end, it was the man who spoke first. "So this is where you've been." He then gave a slight nod and said with a well-mannered smile: "You probably don't remember me."

Commander Ho forced out a smile. "You are..."

The man's countenance remained placid like water in a still pond, his smile a breeze gliding over its surface. "I'm Bai Su-Ch'en. We haven't seen each other since my sister died. It's been a long time—if I hadn't learned your name just now, I'd never be so bold as to address you."

Commander Ho straightened up instantly. Like someone had poured sunshine right in his face, a look of joy took over his features. "You... You're Little Uncle!"

I kept typing "Hsiao-Hu" instead of "Hsiao-Shun". Then I realised they're only two letters apart...

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[A Cruel Romance, Vol. I] Bai Su-Ch'en

 sl-Ilian.livejournal.com/10127.html

Aaaaaand I am back! Apologies for the wait!

Bai Su-Ch'en

The Bais were not the most respectable of families. Had they been anything else, they wouldn't have shipped off their only daughter to become Marshal Ho's fifteenth concubine. But with the sizable fortune made through the sale of their daughter, they managed to pamper their son into a scholar.

Concubine Bai bore a son, but because there was a proper lady of the house perching above, she never managed to reshape her fate. Soon after his birth, Commander Ho was sent away to be raised by Lady Ho, but he still saw his birth mother every once in a while. On these occasions, Concubine Bai took him out in the city or to her mother's house, and showered him with kisses and cuddles.

Before Concubine Bai died at the age of thirty-two, Commander Ho had plenty of opportunities to see this "little uncle". The mild-tempered Little Uncle wore black school uniforms, and since he was aware that his sister had sacrificed her lifelong happiness for the family, whenever his sister visited, he treated his little nephew with utmost tenderness.

Commander Ho's recollection of this little uncle were limited to the vague blur of a smiling face and the memory of being tossed high up in the air. The family members of a concubine were not fit to step through Ho's gates. Since the death of Commander Ho's birth mother, he never saw his uncle again.

Out of sight, out of mind. Yet when he did lay eyes on his uncle again, all memories of those bygone days surfaced—his little uncle buying him sweets, his little uncle playing marbles with him, his little uncle carrying him as they wandered through the streets, enjoying the bustle of the city. The most vivid memory was of his little uncle holding him high in the air, tossing him up—catching him—tossing him up again while he shrieked in fright.

Technically speaking, Commander Ho shouldn't have called him Little Uncle—Commander Ho's uncle was the brother of Lady Ho, the former Mayor of Peking. As a concubine's brother, Bai Su-Ch'en wasn't even worth of mentioning, and had no right to call the Seventh Heir of Ho kin. Commander Ho graced him with the title Little Uncle only out of consideration for his birth mother and childhood affections.

Commander Ho was frustrated and lonely beyond hope, so when a gentle little uncle seemed to have dropped straight out of the sky, he went slightly delirious with excitement.

Commander Ho never did things halfway, and this time his delirium was quite thorough. He dragged his chair right up to Bai and plunked down into it, regarding him with a small smile. "Little Uncle, what have you been doing all these years? I haven't seen you since Concubine Bai passed away."

Bai felt a tiny stab of bitterness to hear his sister referred to in this manner, but he understood rationally that it was the proper way. In title, the Seventh Master's mother was Lady Ho.

"Let's see..." He seemed to mull over it with a smile. "Two years after my sister passed, I went to Japan and studied economics at the Imperial University in Tokyo. Once I came back I stayed in Tientsin, and worked as a translator at the Sino-Japanese Trading Company. You were barely ten the last time I remember seeing you, only about this tall. Look at you now—" he reached for Commander Ho's hand and patted him on the back. "Look how big you've become. All grown up."

Receiving the indulgent pat, Commander Ho felt a sudden flutter of warmth expand in his heart, almost transporting him back to his childhood. "Little Uncle, you won't be tossing me in the air anymore!"

Bai let out a laugh and ruffled Commander Ho's messy hair. "Says who? Little Ch'i-Bao."

Commander Ho smacked him on the knee. "Don't call me that!"

Bai covered his hand with his own. "But Ch'i-Bao is such a pretty name."

"That's only for Papa. You're my Little Uncle, not my Papa!"

Bai smiled. "You child... Always sticking up for the Old Marshal."

Commander Ho and Bai chatted away cheerfully. To the orderlies who stood at attention in the room, the Commander Ho they knew was perpetually aloof and glacial, just a breath away from a porcelain statue. They observed Commander Ho's childish silliness in fascinated horror, their hair practically standing on end. Even Hsiao-Shun stared at him unblinkingly, beholding Commander Ho's gushing performance.

Fortunately, Commander Ho's social delirium did not persist. Half an hour later, he pulled his chair back to its original position and slid slowly back to his usual impassive composure. "Little Uncle, since you're already here, why don't you stay for a while?"

Bai turned to Arimitsu. "What are your thoughts on the matter, Mr. Arimitsu?"

Arimitsu had been following their conversation very closely. He gave a solemn nod. "Very good. Stay for a while. Very good."

Receiving his approval, Bai said with a smile: "I'd love to. Since Mr. Arimitsu does not object, we will stay."

- : -

Never in his life had Li Shih-Yao imagined that through a random act of meddling, he'd end up bagging Commander Ho's uncle.

Li was a man of ceremony. Since he was in the middle of his attempt to subdue Commander Ho, it was imperative that he seize the initiative. Without asking Commander Ho for permission, he invited the pair of guests over with ebullience and offered them a most sumptuous dinner. Over the table, he began with an apology: "So a tide had flooded the temple of the Dragon King of the Sea—"

Before he could finish, the erudite Arimitsu Kiyoshi decided to latch on: "Indeed! Who would have thought that Mr. Bai would turn out to be Commander Ho's uncle? It is evidently a small world. The ancient Chinese had a saying —'the smaller the temple the stronger the demonic wind; the shallower the pond the more toads it contains'. This is precisely what it refers to."

Li eyeballed him. *Was this Jap dropped on his head? What the hell?*

By his side, even Bai felt a bit embarrassed. He proposed a toast to Li. "It's of no concern," he said with a smile. "There's much unrest in the area these days, best to play it safe when the troops are stationed here. Besides, our guises did look a bit suspicious."

Somewhat mollified, Li decided that the uncle did have some tact. At least he spoke with the listener's comfort in mind.

They downed a few more drinks. Li discarded Arimitsu and turned to Bai instead. "May I inquire your age, brother?"

“Thirty-five.”

“You don’t look it!” Li laughed. “Then you actually have a few years on me. How should we do this? I’d like to call you brother, but it feels like I’m taking advantage of Commander Ho.”

Bai smiled. “That does seem tricky. Speaking only of age, I’m only a few years older, the title of brother should still be fitting.”

Li smacked the table and roared with laughter. “Then I’ll do away with ceremony! Here, Brother Bai, let’s share a toast!”

Liquor in belly, Li smacked his lips. “Shame... This isn’t my best moment. If you came a year ago, you wouldn’t have to see us in this shoddy state. But speaking of our Commander, what an accomplished and brilliant young man...”

Grease and liquor loosening his tongue, Li casually recounted Commander Ho’s past deeds down to the last detail, and just happened to paint him into a psychopathic madman.

“Bold man, our Commander!” he gulped down a drink. “At Chao-Jia Valley, he buried over two thousand men. Dead, alive, dumped them all in the mines. No amount of pleading swayed him, killed every last one of them! A real man if there ever was one!”

“Dutiful man, our Commander!” he declared around a mouthful of food. “A coffin for every single soldier who didn’t make it at Huang-Jia Bay, each one with a living virgin nailed inside! All these young lives cut short, the Commander said. Paired each one them with a girl of their own to keep them company in the afterlife. Has there ever been a better commander in this country?” he gave a clap. “Hell no!”

“The thing about our Commander is, he’s too ardent when it comes to matters of the heart,” he picked up a bowl and shoved some rice into his mouth. “Got himself entangled with our Chief of Staff. What a heartbroken state he was in when the Chief died... Burned the body in the courtyard right away. He even kept the cremains in an urn and slept with it under his pillow every night. What a passionate fellow... Don’t get me wrong, our Chief of Staff was a man! How could we put a woman in charge? We’ve got strict discipline here!”

Bai and Arimitsu looked to each other and swallowed simultaneously.

- :-

His appetite for food and conversation sated, Li finally sent his men to escort the guests back to their lodgings. The two of them held their tongues on the way, as they were surrounded by Li’s guards. When they arrived at their small courtyard residence, they faltered again—Commander Ho was waiting for them.

Spotting the pair, Commander Ho ignored Arimitsu and came straight up to Bai. “What kept you so long?”

Bai stared at him. His countenance appeared no different from his younger days; it seemed that he could still be approached. Yet when Bai recalled Li’s lively account, he had to hide an impulse to flinch away. It was as if he smelled the stench of death on him.

Despite his inner abhorrence, Bai still maintained a smile as sweet as the softest cotton candy. “Major-General Li... He invited us to dinner. Silly boy, why didn’t you send for me? Had I known, I’d have come back early.”

Commander Ho was practically basking in his voice. He was only a decade younger than Bai, yet Bai treated him as if he were still a child.

His irritation dissipating, he only said to Bai: “Li isn’t a good sort. Don’t get too friendly with him.”

Bai took off his Tibetan garb. "I won't pretend to understand your history, but I must take leave in a few days. I can't help but feel lonely for you, here all by yourself."

His face blank, Commander Ho stood in silence for a while. "Little Uncle," he suddenly said. "Take me with you."

Bai looked back at him. "You wish to leave?"

Commander Ho fell silent again.

The more he considered it, the more plausible the plan seemed. He'd steal away quietly with his little uncle, Hsiao-Shun by his side. Bandits wouldn't bother them if they kept a low profile. A journey with his gentle and amiable Little Uncle should prove pleasant and joyful.

"Little Uncle," he began abruptly. "I've long lost the desire to play kingpin commander in the wilds. The thing is—I've killed the Nanking Government's provincial chairman back in Hsian. It was a big mess. I'm worried that Nanking won't let me off."

Bai ruminated in silence, but beside him, Arimitsu suddenly opened his mouth. "Commander Ho, You are my good friend. If the Chinese Government gives you trouble, I may be able to seek asylum for you at the Japanese Embassy."

His words were as shocking as they came. Bai gave him a sidelong glance, but Commander Ho merely turned to him, expressionless. A moment later, he finally asked: "This is within Mr. Arimitsu's abilities?"

The question came out rather rude, his distain evident, but Arimitsu didn't appear to detect anything untoward. He smiled as he answered: "You are the son of Marshal Ho. Marshal Ho was a friend of the Japanese; if it wasn't for his aid, my brother's trading firm in Manchuria would never have been established successfully. My strength may be meager, but I would still like to offer you protection from the Chinese Government's persecution."

Commander Ho didn't feel particularly persecuted. Arimitsu's peculiar handling of the language had given him a somewhat untrustworthy first impression. Besides, he was only a titular trustee at a trading company, what position was he in to speak for the Japanese Embassy?

Bai cut in. "Ch'i-Bao, Mr. Arimitsu's eldest brother, President Arimitsu Tsutomu, is a very influential figure in the political world."

His mind back on solemn matters, Commander Ho regained his usual porcelain bearing. He lowered his eyes to the floor and began tepidly: "I haven't been in touch with the larger world in a long time, so I'm unfamiliar the affairs on your side. I'm extremely grateful for your offer of kindness. If the need arises, I can only entrust myself to the power of Japan. My gratitude in advance."

Arimitsu waved a hand. "Do not stand on ceremony, Commander Ho."

So Commander Ho didn't. He lowered his head thoughtfully and meditated for a moment, then rose and left without another word.

Bai smiled at Arimitsu languidly. "Arimitsu-kun... Is this necessary?" he asked in Japanese.

Arimitsu raised his eyes and stared at the ceiling for a long moment. A sudden smile appeared on his face. "Yes."

- : -

Commander Ho went back home.

Before he stepped through the door, an orderly ran up and informed him that Major-General Li was waiting for him in

the main hall.

Commander Ho had already made his decision on his way home. When he heard the news, he merely mused that Li was right on time. Striding through the hall, he gave Li, seated in a chair, a slight nod, and went about removing his cloak and coat before calling for Hsiao-Shun to serve tea. After making sure he was thoroughly comfortable, he finally settled down in his palace chair.

“Hsiao-Shun, leave us and shut the door. What’s the purpose of your visit, Major-General Li?”

Li was slightly flushed due to his earlier drunkenness, his gaze a bit viscous. “Commander... I couldn’t sleep tonight, so I came to see you. By the way... Have you considered my proposal?”

Commander Ho shot him a glance and took a sip of tea. “No.”

Li nodded at his response. “I’ll take my leave then,” he said as he stood to leave.

Commander Ho started again: “I want to leave.”

Li sat back down. “Commander, you’re not going anywhere until you agree to it.”

Commander Ho sneered. “Are you threatening me?”

Li fixed his eyes on Commander Ho’s face, his voice earnest. “Just speaking the truth.”

“What if I insist?”

“Then you’ll have to see whose orders the soldiers follow. If they answer to you, you can easily dispatch me. If they answer to me, I won’t be letting you go. Ten thousand men are enough to conquer the world, let alone stop one man.”

Commander Ho’s face was cold enough to frost. “So...”

He dragged out the syllable slowly. “Let’s talk about this proposal of yours. I’ll tell you now, I’m dead set on leaving. If you cross me over this, don’t be surprised when I’m out for blood.”

Li stared at Commander Ho. After a long moment, it finally registered. “You’re agreeing?”

Commander Ho’s elegantly defined eyebrows furrowed slightly. His eyes were downcast, accentuating the length of his straight eyelashes. “Let’s get this straight, then. How does this thing work?”

Li licked his lips and stood up with a whoosh. He took a large step toward Commander Ho. “One—one night!”

Commander Ho looked up at him. “Once.”

“The whole night!”

“Once.”

“The whole night!” Li hunkered down in front of him, his voice almost pleading. “My good Commander, can’t you spare just one night?”

Commander Ho gritted his teeth, his face in open contempt. Taking a deep breath, he said: “One night it is then. Set a time!”

Li latched on to one of his legs. “What about tonight?”

Commander Ho shook his head. "Tomorrow, one night. If you dare to deter me the day after, I'll blast your head open with my pistol. Is that clear?"

Li caressed Commander Ho's calf through the fabric. "All right, all right, tomorrow it is. I'm a man of my word, you can rest assured."

Reaching the very end of his patience, Commander Ho's face darkened. He tore his leg free. "Then why aren't you getting the fuck out of here?!"

Li...

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[A Cruel Romance, Vol. I] A Dream Awakens

 sl-Ilian.livejournal.com/11183.html

I really, really hate translating smut. Love writing it, but translating it is a whole other matter.

A Dream Awakens

“The next day” always came too soon.

Commander Ho didn't go visit his mellow little uncle again and merely sat in his room in a daze. Days were short during the winter months. When dusk fell, Commander Ho sent Hsiao-Shun to sleep in the orderlies' quarters.

He shut the door and stood before his bed. Against the candlelight, he removed his clothing at a leisurely pace and crawled under the covers.

The bed was cold and he curled up against the chill, unfurling little by little over the next ten minutes.

There was movement in the courtyard. His door swung open.

Li came in with a trail of cold air. He shut the door behind him with a whisper: “I'm here, Commander.”

Commander Ho lay with his back to him, and neither moved nor spoke.

Li lifted his hands to unbutton his army coat and began to strip himself hurriedly as he blew out the red candle on the table. Darkness fell across room, yet moonlight streamed through glass panes and cast the room in faint shadows.

Li sat on the bed and leaned in, making sure the man in bed was really Commander Ho.

He didn't lift his head again, and inched closer until his lips brushed against Commander Ho's ear. “Don't worry, I scaled the wall. Nobody saw me.”

Propping himself up on an elbow, he reached inside the covers and with a grip on Commander Ho's shoulder, pulled him over on his back. He traced the Commander's skin with a hand and paused above his chest, where he kneaded a nipple gently and leaned in, covering Commander Ho's lips with his own.

His kiss was hungry and unrelenting. Commander Ho lay with half-open eyes, letting Li's tongue wreck a storm inside his mouth. He caught the faint smell of soap and tooth powder. The bastard probably scrubbed himself clean inside out before coming over, he thought to himself.

Li was well-prepared for Commander Ho's indifference. He'd come with the intention to entertain himself and wasn't hoping to receive a response of any kind. It was a curious feeling to touch and kiss the commander—this was “Commander Ho” himself!

Before the affair had even begun, Li was already roused beyond restraint. He drew down the covers and let the kiss roam to Commander Ho's neck, his collarbone, and finally closed his lips around a neglected nipple. He sucked on it gently, teasing the small bud to hardness, and brought Commander Ho's hand to his straining erection.

Commander Ho flinched as if burned when his hand came into contact with the monstrous length. Li held down his hand insistently, closing it around his member as he began to stroke himself. Commander Ho's palm was soft and tender. Even though the touch was light, Li felt his scalp tighten, and almost came on the spot.

Li forced himself to calm and stopped teasing himself with Commander Ho's hand. Climbing into bed, he crawled under the covers and pulled Commander Ho into a crushing embrace.

So this was what Commander Ho was like!

Under the darkness beneath the quilted covers, he ground his own body against Commander Ho's. Skin against skin, Li felt the coarseness of his own face, his own hands. His entire body felt crude.

He wondered if he might scrape off an entire layer of Commander Ho's skin. It wasn't right. He shouldn't put the frail Commander Ho in pain. But remembering that he'd only ever have this one precious night, he decided that there was no need to concern himself with the state of Commander Ho's skin.

After fumbling around under the covers for a while, Li finally poked his head out, panting.

With Commander Ho pinned under him, Li slid his hardened cock back and forth between the other man's thighs. "Have to say, you don't feel half as slight as you look."

Commander Ho blinked in the darkness and remained silent.

Li grabbed a handful of Commander Ho's ass and kneaded it slowly, spreading his cheeks apart from time to time.

"Carrying all your weight here, eh?" Li teased. "Always thought you had a great ass. Perky thing gives a man...a lot of ideas."

Commander Ho shut his eyes. "Get the fuck on with it," he hissed irritably. "Save that rubbish for yourself."

Li bent in and planted a kiss on his neck. He mumbled into Commander Ho's ear: "Commander, my little minx. We have the whole night ahead of us, what's the hurry?"

Commander Ho fell silent again.

Li nudged Commander Ho's legs apart and sneaked a finger toward his entrance. Slowly, he pushed in, then added another finger when the first was completely buried.

"Commander, why are you clenching so hard? Don't worry, I'll make it good for you. I'm almost afraid once you get a good taste of it, you won't be able to live without men! Ha!"

Commander Ho took a deep breath. "Will you stop being so fucking vulgar? Fuck your ancestors!"

Li removed his fingers and began to stroke Commander Ho's flaccid member. "Aren't you a boring one. But before you fuck my ancestors, let me fuck you good and proper. I bet once you've had a nice long fuck, you won't be so interested in my ancestors anymore."

Commander Ho propped himself up and glared at Li in the dark. "Go on then! I'm waiting!"

Li laughed. He pushed Commander Ho back. "Can't refuse such a generous offer. Will do!"

- :-

Li's cock was no small thing. With it only half way in, Commander Ho was already reaching the threshold of his pain tolerance. "Get—get out—it hurts—"

Unmoved by his pleas, Li continued at his own pace with shallow, meticulous thrusts. After twenty minutes or so, he finally managed to sheathe himself completely. He lifted Commander Ho's legs over his shoulders and reached under the other man's arms, gripping him by the shoulders as he began pounding into Commander Ho with slow but

powerful movements. Commander Ho kept his eyes squeezed shut and only let out a few small moans, though he never uttered the words “get out” again.

It was true that Li was an unrefined man, but there was a certain mindfulness within his crudity. This sort of affair between two men wasn't really anything of note, but it wouldn't be right to leave anyone bloodied and wounded, or a simple prank could turn into injury. Li wanted to fuck Commander Ho, not injure him. It was still along the same line of reasoning—Commander Ho wasn't exactly fearsome, but it wasn't worth the risk to offend him.

A little while into his efforts, Li began to lose himself in pleasure. It almost felt like he had taken a new wife, and was spending the wedding night conquering a virgin body. What good were virgins? They didn't know how to give pleasure or make the right noises, but because of their uniqueness, everybody wanted a piece.

In that light, Commander Ho had a lot in common with virgins. But virgins were easy to come by while Commander Ho was not, so in this regard, Commander Ho was still more valuable.

In bed, Li was the type that would go about his business with wholehearted concentration, then roll over and go right to sleep. But in this moment, his body kindled his mind as his mind roused his body. Within Commander Ho, his soul and flesh fell in sync.

It was a curious feeling, a feeling that involved a subtle kind of sensation and sentiment. Before this day, Li had only equated Commander Ho with the might of legions, but here above the small bed that creaked with his movements, Commander Ho seemed to also represent something more inexplicable. It was something that couldn't be put in words, couldn't be seen or touched. It was like a catalyst that multiplied his physical pleasures tenfold in his mind.

- :-

In the small hours before dawn arrived, Li dressed himself and bent down to plant a kiss on Commander Ho's cheek. “Precious, Commander. Thank you. It has been... great here.”

Commander Ho lay a boneless heap in bed, almost on the verge of unconsciousness.

- :-

Li slipped through the door silently. He leapt over the wall and left before sunrise.

Commander Ho slept until noon. Through the window, he spotted Hsiao-Shun munching on a sesame roll in the courtyard.

He called Hsiao-Shun over and instructed him to fetch a few buckets of hot water from the kitchen so he could take a bath. Hsiao-Shun answered him and left quickly. Moments later, he returned with the bathing supplies and emptied the buckets in the bathtub.

He kneeled before the bed, ready to put on Commander Ho's shoes. Yet Commander Ho waved a hand and gestured at him to leave.

After kicking Hsiao-Shun out, Commander Ho gritted his teeth and sat up. He threw back the covers and looked down at himself.

His body was unmarked except for his flushed and swollen nipples. There was a sticky feeling between his legs, which made sense, but why was there a dried blotch covering his belly? Was it the other man's or his own?

Commander Ho recalled the previous night. At first there was pain, but after a while, there was a different sensation. The other man's cock drove hard into him and stretched him wide open, then at one point it seemed hit the right spot, and he shuddered as a strange pleasure grew inside him.

Commander Ho shook off the thought. What good would it do? In any case, he had overcome this particular obstacle. And afterwards—he'd have to get out of this backwater hole first!

Sitting up, he climbed out of bed and shuffled toward the bathtub. He hauled himself into the steaming tub with great effort, and swallowing his discomfort, began his contemplations of the day.

- : -

After his bath, Commander Ho had Hsiao-Shun change his sheets and went back to sleep, not bothering with his meals. He stirred and woke up in the evening, feeling somewhat recovered.

Li arrived at dinnertime.

This time they avoided eye contact, and were extremely courteous.

"Has Major-General Li eaten?" Commander Ho asked.

Li shook his head. "I haven't."

"Come have something then."

Li stayed quiet as an orderly came forth and served him a bowl of rice. He picked up his chopsticks and pushed a few grains of rice into his mouth half-heartedly. Chewing for a moment, he said in a low voice: "are you...feeling all right?"

Commander Ho's bowl was only half-filled with rice. He poured some water into and whisked its contents with his chopsticks, then gobbled the whole mess down.

Setting down his bowl and chopsticks, Commander Ho wiped his mouth and took another gulp of water.

"I told you to exchange some pound sterling for me. How did it go?" he finally said.

Seeing that he was obviously fine, Li relaxed and answered: "We haven't seen any caravans so far. How was I supposed exchange anything? Actually, why don't you stay around for a while and wait till we get this currency problem sorted out?"

"I'll settle for gold. Go figure out how much ten thousand silver coins are worth, and get that gold to me."

Li looked a bit awkward. "Where are we supposed to find that much gold?"

Commander Ho wasn't in the mood to haggle with him. "Just give me however much you have!"

Li smiled wearily. "Look..."

At Li's reluctant mumbles, Commander Ho felt a sudden surge of fury. "What is it? Are you telling me you don't have the gold?"

Li held up his hands in surrender. "I didn't say anything!"

Commander Ho struck the table and shot up, pointing a finger at Li's nose. "Then get it to me! How many fucking years have I put up with you lot of army scum? Now you have the nerve to send me off empty-handed?"

Since Li had bedded Commander Ho, he couldn't help but associate Commander Ho with a new bride. He couldn't bring himself to be angry at Commander Ho's outburst and only felt a bit unsettled by his yelling. He caved in without much thought.

“Look, Commander, I said nothing of that sort! What are you yelling at me for? I’ve got some gold in the storehouse, the stuff we’d gotten from the banks back in Hsian. But it really isn’t much. You can come take a look if you like. Just a few dozens of gold bars, and some small bits we’d gotten from trading opium with the caravans. You can have as much as you want. As long as I have my men, I can make a living out of the lands. Money won’t be a problem for me.”

Commander glared at him for a moment, then sat back down a bit despondently. “You talk with sense, so you better act with it.”

Li lowered his head and resumed eating his rice.

The eating was only a cover, a cover for his absent-mindedness and thoughtfulness.

He realised that Commander Ho was hell bent on leaving this time. Recalling the pleasures of the previous night, he was a little reluctant to part with the other man.

But he was still in full possession of his faculties and hadn’t lost his senses to lust. Commander Ho always left the same impression—he was nothing frightening, but it was best not to offend him.

As enticing as his plump and shapely backside was, the affair was like chewing on a sugarcane. It was juicy and sweet to the taste, but once swallowed, it would give him indigestion.

Li didn’t think he’d be able to digest Commander Ho. If he had insisted on detaining him, they’d end up slaughtering each other in one way or another. It wasn’t worth it. For a piece of ass, it really wasn’t worth it. Li had already fulfilled his wish by bedding him. Better to let him leave before things could turn ugly.

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Three days later, Commander Ho took Hsiao-Shun and a very insistent Adjutant Feng and departed from Luyang in secret with Bai Su-Ch’en and Arimitsu Kiyoshi.

Li came to Commander Ho’s courtyard early in the morning. He watched as Commander Ho ate a hurried breakfast and prepared for journey in civilian clothes, and felt a bit melancholic all of a sudden. It seemed like it was only yesterday that he’d conspired with his rivals and snatched Commander Ho from school, but six years had passed, and all that was left of the former Anguo Army was himself, hidden away in these north-western hinterlands, not knowing when he’d attain the kind of fame and glory the Old Marshal had. Perhaps before he could ever find out, he’d meet his death on the battlefield.

Li heaved a heavy sigh. To him, Commander Ho’s departure would mark the end of an epoch in his life.

To avoid attracting attention, he didn’t see Commander Ho off with a grand farewell. Commander Ho felt no attachment to him, and left without delay. He slipped through the backyard and rushed off without a backward glance.

- End of Volume One -

It is done! It’d be a gross understatement to say that this has taken me a while... But volume one is finally complete and we only (ha) have four more volumes to go!

Anyhow, I’m glad that we’ve made it this far and nobody has tried to kill me yet. Given my habit of going on (ahem) unannounced hiatuses (ahem) which can be difficult to avoid due to the nature of my lifestyle, I won’t make any promises in terms of my update schedule, but the translation is still ongoing and will be seen through to the end.

