

# [A Cruel Romance, Vol. II] Peking

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## Peking

Ho Mansion, Peking.

A gatekeeper leaned on a broomstick outside the front gates, his shoulders hunched in the cold. He adjusted his winter hat with a hand and set to work sweeping the firecracker shreds on the concrete ground. The shreds have formed a thick, downy layer underfoot, looking like a red carpet from a distance. During the previous evening, the sounds of firecrackers erupted in the streets before dusk had fallen on New Year's Eve, and by midnight, the smoky scent of gunpowder filled the air as joyousness raptured with each crisp pop of explosion. These explosions went on in a continuous chorus of sounds, sending out waves after waves of revelry.

For a while the gatekeeper swept the floor diligently and cleared out a small area in front of the gates. He was sweating profusely, his hat barely on. Just as he was about to straighten up and catch his breath, he heard the blare of a car horn coursing down the street.

The gatekeeper looked over and wondered if it was somebody paying their New Year visits. But wasn't it a bit too early for that? Unless they were going out of town.

While he was mulling over the thought idly, the car made its way over and slowed to a stop. Both of its doors swung open and three travel-worn men stepped out.

A tall man was in the lead. In the freezing weather, he only wore a black wool coat, a bowler hat sitting above ears that were frozen haw-jelly red in the cold. The two men behind him were dressed similarly, their ears the same shade of red.

The tall man paused and gave the Ho Mansion gates a once over, then pushed them open and walked in. The other men trailed close behind, each carrying a large leather trunk.

The trio of men barged in with such righteous boldness that the ignored gatekeeper gaped for a second, then recovered and rushed over to intercept them.

"Oi, this here is Ho Mansion! Who are you? Why're you marching in without a word?"

The tall man covered a sneeze with a hand and sent the gatekeeper tumbling to the ground with a kick. "Fuck off. I'm your Seventh Master, this is my own house!"

A recent hire, the gatekeeper knew the Seventh Master only by name. He stared dumbly for a second as he processed the words, then quickly scrambled to his feet.

"You're *Ch'i-yeh*? Dear me—I mean, nobody knew you'd be coming back today... I'll go announce your arrival to the Lady right away!" Then he turned and hollered every which way: "Somebody come on out! The Seventh Master is back!"

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With her fair complexion and full figure, Lady Ho carried her over fifty years of age well. Upon hearing that her son had returned on the morning of New Year, she felt like she had woken up to a dream. Dreams came in pleasant and nightmarish varieties; she couldn't be sure which kind of dream she was in.

Ho Ji-Ch'ing wasn't her birth son to begin with, and after more than six years of separation without any form of communication, what little affection she held had all but faded away. At this point, she could no longer muster any maternal love for the child, but it was still a good thing to have a son at home. A House as large as Ho couldn't be run by herself forever. Chen-Ch'i was a good child, but he was still a nephew on her side. However much she fostered him, someone who didn't carry the Ho name couldn't appear in public.

She dipped a small comb with a bit of hair tonic and tidied her hair in front of a mirror. "Has the Seventh Master changed much after all these years?" she asked a servant standing by the door.

The servant considered the question for a moment. "Well...he still looks the same, but everything else about him is different."

She gave him a glance. "What's that supposed to mean? Has he changed or not?"

He pondered over this very solemnly. "It's like...he's still the same man, but his soul isn't the same soul."

The young maid next to him let out a giggle and chipped in: "How morbid, Old Li. All this talk about men and souls—are we being haunted?"

Lady Ho shot her a glare, "no manners." She set her comb down and with the maid's support, got to her feet languidly. She moved through the room as she muttered to herself with a sigh: "Why hadn't he notified anyone before coming home? The first day of New Year..." She paused suddenly. "Old Li, go bring Master Nephew to the eastern parlour. He hasn't met the Seventh Master yet."

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When Lady Ho stepped into the parlour, Ho Ji-Ch'ing—who'd now parted with his title of Commander Ho—was warming his shivering hands with a cup of steaming tea.

Spotting Lady Ho, he put down the cup and nodded at her with a slight bow. "I'm back, Mother."

The children of the family normally greeted her with kowtows on the first day of New Year. Lady Ho didn't expect her grown son to drop to his knees for her, but she never imagined that after a few years apart, he'd come back with a demeanor like his devil of a father's.

The demeanor was one of lofty apathy, as if everything around him was below him. A meager glance was enough of a perfunctory greeting.

A lump of ire caught in Lady Ho's chest.

Lowering herself into the head seat with an unimpressed face, Lady Ho gave him a look. "Bao-Ting, where have you been? Why didn't you send a message home beforehand?"

Ho Ji-Ch'ing gave an enormous shiver and picked up the cup of tea again. He sipped it slowly. "Where have I been... It's an obscure place, you wouldn't know it even if I told you. How have you been in the past few years?"

"I'm fine," Lady Ho replied mildly. "But I'm reaching an age when no matter how careful I take care of myself, I still get aches and pains here and there. The doctors couldn't find anything wrong."

Despite his recent change in status, Ho Ji-Ch'ing's manners and habits were still those of Commander Ho's. He drank his hot tea sip by sip. When he was just about to open his mouth after a long moment of silence, the sudden sound of footsteps were heard approaching outside. The door swung open and a young man in blue satin robes came in with a grin.

Spotting him, Lady Ho allowed a small smile: "you do move fast." Then she turned to Ho Ji-Ch'ing. "This is the third

son of your second uncle, formal name Lu Chen-Ch'i. The boy moved in and helped me run the household when you were away.

Ho Ji-Ch'ing threw him a glance and took in his slicked hair and powered face that gave him the appearance of a typical fop, and couldn't even be bothered with a nod. "Thanks for your trouble, lad," he merely said.

His tone and expression made it look like he was placating some grunt.

Lady Ho frowned. Was this the same cultured and elegant Seventh Son that left home a few years ago? He'd changed completely—a ruffianly haughtiness seemed to radiate from his very core.

Lu Chen-Ch'i didn't seem bothered by it. "It's no trouble at all, you're too kind! I didn't believe it at first when the servants told me you were back, so I rushed over right away. You probably haven't seen me before since my family used to live in Nanking. I've seen Auntie's photographs of you, but you were still little back then. I was anxious to even greet you when we first met."

Commander Ho sat back into the chair, leaning on one side. He'd gotten used to the life of a rural despot where nobody cared about his posture, so he wasn't even aware of his discourtesy at the moment. At Lu's lively chattiness, he gave a smile. "How old are you, lad?" He gestured at a chair in front of him. "Have a seat."

The Ho Ji-Ch'ing in the photographs always gave Lu Chen-Ch'i an impression of beauty and elegance. Now that he'd seen him in person, the beauty was still present, but the elegance was glaringly absent—in fact, he even exuded the air of a military thug. Lu found himself both shocked and dismayed.

He did as he was told and took a seat. "I was born during the twelfth moon," he said with a smile. "I'm twenty-three this years."

Ho Ji-Ch'ing continued drinking his tea and simply fell silent.

Lu waited for his reply. For a long moment he watched the other man as he drank his tea with whole-hearted concentration and seemed to have no intention to speak. Lu turned awkwardly to Lady Ho.

"Auntie," he began with a smile, "will you be heading over to the Gu Mansion later? I had them prepare the gifts yesterday. The usual things, plus a Ruyi, since their new daughter-in-law is one of our own mistresses."

Through the entire morning Lady Ho had been psychologically tormented by a son who'd materialized out of the blue, feeling like she was stuck in a never-ending nightmare. At Lu's familiar chatter, she finally managed to snap herself back to earth, where life returned to its normal order.

"Add in the necklace as well. We should make it generous."

Lu Chen-Ch'i mulled over it as he batted his eyes. "The necklace, the Ruyi... By the way, the pastry shop's offering new packaging. They've got much nicer boxes this time, but they cost a few more coins each."

"We should certainly get the nicer ones."

"I've already ordered fifty of them, had them inscribe our emblem in gold."

Lady Ho looked at him affectionately. "Good boy, that's thoughtful of you."

Next to them, Ho Ji-Ch'ing sat up straight with a pensive look. "Where's the Sixth Sister?"

Lady Ho threw him a glance. "Married into the Gu's from Finance last June."

"Which one?"

“The second son.”

Ho Ji-Ch'ing nodded. “Good. As long as she got married. She’s a year older than me; would be an old maiden now.”

The Sixth Mistress, Yin-Di, was Lady Ho’s birth daughter. Lady Ho was not pleased by the remark at all.

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Lu Chen-Ch'i stayed with Lady Ho and continued their discussion of New Year visits while Ho Ji-Ch'ing looked on with boredom. Since Lady Ho was giving him the cold shoulder, he soon decided to take his leave. Fortunately, the wing he used to reside in had been left empty. The servants ran about sweeping and dusting the place, replacing the curtains, beddings, and tablecloths. After an hour or two of chaos, they managed to more or less clean out a room.

Ho Ji-Ch'ing stood next to the windows with a vacant expression while Adjutant Feng and Hsiao-Shun ate their breakfast next door.

Staring at the old gnarled tree in the courtyard, he suddenly felt very alone.

After all the pains he went through in order to rid himself of the status of Commander Ho, he thought he'd be able to live a life of freedom. In truth, the closer he got to Peking, the more lost and aimless he felt.

He'd wanted to return to the simple life he had—Ho Bao-Ting at school, Ho *Ch'i-yeh* elsewhere. That was all. Yet life could be restored, what of the man himself?

During the six years he'd been Commander Ho, most of his time was spent in pillage and slaughter among barren lands where he'd gotten used to the tang of blood and war. Now that he'd finally gotten his way and returned to the civilised world, he found himself out of place amid his surroundings.

The discovery made him feel terribly depressed and lonely. He had hated Luyang, had trudged through countless perils and hardships when he risked his life to come home. But he had left his home too suddenly and for too long. There was no longer a place for him within the splendour of Ho Mansion. Moments ago while he listened to the soft conversation between Lu and Lady Ho, he felt like he was unnecessary, be it to Ho Mansion, Peking, or even the entire world.

It was a scary feeling, and because it was unexpected, he was at a loss as to what to do. He had been seeking peace and comfort, not neglect.

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Retirement—men could grow old in retirement.

It sounded easy enough, but the passage of time had to be endured day by day. He stood there until his legs grew stiff and checked his pocket watch. Only half an hour had passed.

Adjutant Feng walked in. “Commander—I mean, *Ch'i-yeh*. Are you going to have breakfast?”

He finally detected the emptiness of his stomach. “I'll have it now.”

“Hsiao-Shun’s already eaten everything. Where’s the kitchen? I'll go get something for you.”

Ho Ji-Ch'ing wasn't sure where the kitchen was. After a moment of hesitation, he gave an irritated sigh. “Never mind, we'll eat out. I'll have to take care of the gold on my hands anyway.”

- :-

Ho Ji-Ch'ing was about to go out, but found that he didn't have a car to ride.

The House owned two cars. One of them was for Lady Ho, the other for Lu Chen-Ch'i. Ho Ji-Ch'ing knew that Lady Ho was going out for visits later, so he selected the older of the two. "Get the car, I'm going out."

The driver wore a smile. "You are—the Seventh Master? Er—this is Master Lu's personal car," he snuck a look at the other man's face. "If Master Lu finds his car missing when he comes out, I'd be at fault here."

"Are you a Ho driver, or a Lu driver?" Ho Ji-Ch'ing asked the driver sharply. "If you work for the Lus, get the hell out of here. If you work for the Hos, get in the fucking car now."

Looking awkward, the driver implored Ho Ji-Ch'ing with a pained expression: "Seventh Master... Would you like to send someone in to check with Master Lu first? It really isn't my decision to make. Actually, there's a car rental not far away. How about I go reserve another one for you?"

Without warning, Commander Ho pulled out a pistol and slammed it into the driver's head. "Go fuck yourself!"

Then he turned around: "Feng Guo-Chung! You'll drive!"

Feng Guo-Chung—Adjutant Feng—gave an answer and went searching for the keys on the driver, who was now howling in pain with his arms around his head. He opened the front door and started the car.

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**[Long ramblings that may contain slightly spoiler-ish content. Not really though.]**

Enough of my rambling. The second volume is quite a bit longer than the first one and there are two more volumes after that, plus an "epilogue" that's 29 chapters long. You have been warned...

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# [A Cruel Romance, Vol. II] A Small Conflict

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 [sl-Ilian.livejournal.com/11607.html](http://sl-Ilian.livejournal.com/11607.html)

## A Small Conflict

Ho Ji-Ch'ing had a sizable meal at a restaurant in Peking Western Station. Feng Guo-Chung munched away at the same table while Hsiao-Shun got the short end of the stick—he'd had too much to eat beforehand. Besides, he couldn't even swallow a drop of soup sitting next to Ho Ji-Ch'ing.

His appetite happily sated, Feng wiped his mouth with a napkin and sipped his coffee. "Commander—would you listen to that, I keep forgetting. Ch'i-yeh, what are we going to do from now?"

Ho Ji-Ch'ing fell silent for a moment and shook his head slowly. "Don't know. If you have somewhere to go, you may go. Otherwise, stay."

Feng waved his hands. "Commander—I mean, Ch'i-yeh, I don't have anywhere to go. I've been with you all these years, I don't want to go anywhere."

Ho Ji-Ch'ing cast Hsiao-Shun a glance. "What are you doing over there? Sit up straight!"

Hsiao-Shun jumped and straightened his back immediately. He did have a bit of a stoop, since he never had the chance to keep his head up in front of Ho Ji-Ch'ing. Even at night, he slept curled up on a rug.

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After he'd had his fill, Ho Ji-Ch'ing called the waiter over for his bill. He'd long forgotten what little English he'd learned at the missionary school, and the foreign waiter was more or less a bit dismissive towards patrons who didn't speak English. Ho Ji-Ch'ing's first inclination was to put a bullet through his head, but realizing that he was no longer in Luyang, he changed his tactics and gave him a ten dollar tip instead. It turned out that even the white boy knew how to smile. Pocketing the money, he saw his affluent patrons off with a ninety degree bow.

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Ho Ji-Ch'ing spent his afternoon in Dong'an Market with his pair of attendants.

Leaving the market, he stopped by all the big-name department stores on his way. It was fortunate that he came by car, or Feng Guo-Chung and Hsiao-Shun would have to become thousand-armed Avalokitesvaras to carry his bags. Afterwards, he took great pains to find a tailor shop that was open during New Year, where he got measured for a few sets of suits. All three of them needed to restock their wardrobes—they were in Peking, after all. It wouldn't do to have a dapper master with unsightly servants. Besides, the three of them were still young. They should take care of themselves accordingly.

Dinner hadn't started when they came home after dark. Ho Ji-Ch'ing took a satin brocade box to Lady Ho's rooms, "I came back in a rush and didn't have the chance to buy any presents for you. I thought these bracelets looked nice when I was out earlier today. Keep them."

Finally hearing a few caring words, Lady Ho opened the box and examined its contents. She saw that they were indeed quite nice and felt a bit better, so she allowed herself to be more agreeable. "Bao-Ting, I'm happy enough for you kind thoughts. You needn't to go to such expense."

"It's nothing. It's New Year, have fun with them."

Lady Ho smiled and put the glittering golden bracelets around her wrists. Against her jade sleeves, they did look quite nice. She was still admiring herself when she suddenly remembered. "Why did you hit the driver earlier today?"

"The bastard couldn't take orders."

"Why would you bloody a servant's head just because he didn't behave, New Year and all? Bao-Ting, you're a grown man now; you don't need the nagging of an old woman. I can see you've changed a lot in your years outside. You were such a well-behaved child before—you never even cursed. Look at you now, beating people left and right! Most military men are crass brutes; you shouldn't follow your Papa's example."

Ho Ji-Ch'ing gave a brief smile. "What's wrong with Papa?"

Lady Ho threw him a glance. "I know you hold nobody higher than your greatest father in the world, nothing from me will get through to you. You might have looked like dull-witted boy, but you're sharper than anyone. I'm sure your intellect grew with your age after all these years among military men, and you don't have much regard for us fossils anymore."

Ho Ji-Ch'ing was a bit disquieted by her reprimand. "Now that I'm back, I won't be in contact with the military world any longer. What do you think I should do next?"

"What you should do? Settle down and lead a proper life, of course. Our family isn't the wealthiest, but we don't need you to go out and make a living. All we hope is that you stay out of trouble and get married, then I can put my mind at rest."

Ho Ji-Ch'ing gave a low sound of affirmation and stood up. "Mother, dinner's starting. Let's go."

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At the dinner table, the three masters of the family dug through their meal in silence. Beside Lady Ho, Lu Chen-Ch'i finished his bowl of rice and broke into a smile: "Auntie, our Hopeh property delivered the funds today. I made a deposit at the Bank of Communications. The account book's still on me; I'll go over it with you later."

"There's no need for that, it's too much trouble," Lady Ho said casually. "I still owe the fur shop two thousand dollars. You can pay them with what's in there."

Lu agreed and continued: "Auntie, since Ch'i-ke [1] is back now, why don't I give up my car so it's available when he goes out? That ignorant driver even made Ch'i-ke angry. Ch'i-ke, the servants can be thoughtless idiots. Let's not get into quarrels with them!"

Ho Ji-Ch'ing filtered each word through his narrow mind and his face darkened instantly. "No need for that. I'll buy another one."

Lu laughed. "Gosh, you must be loaded! Buying cars at a moment's notice. Looks like Chi-ke's made a fortune outside!"

Ho Ji-Ch'ing poured water over his rice and said: "Lad, seems like you only have money in your eyes. How long have you been working for my house? Still haven't seen enough money?"

The snide comment clearly dismissed Lu Chen-Ch'i as some sort of domestic servant. Having been treated as the one and only Master Nephew of the house over the years, it was always Lu who bullied others, never the other way around. He certainly wasn't going to tolerate such an insult and became a bit red in the face at once. "Auntie, listen to Ch'i-ke. It's like I have eyes for nothing but money."

Lady Ho too felt indignant on her nephew's behalf. But the Ho Ji-Ch'ing before her now wasn't the same Ch'i-ke he

once was. She kept sensing a malicious aura around her son.

“Go back to your dinner, both of you. The new chef has a way with ducks. I’ve never had duck soup this good before,” she changed the subject in a gentle voice and gave Lu a look. She personally lifted the large soup spoon and leaned over to fill the small bowl in front of Ho Ji-Ch’ing. “Here, Bao-Ting. Have some soup.”

Ho Ji-Ch’ing didn’t give Lady Ho any regard and clarified his stance steadfastly: “I’m vegetarian.”

Lu Chen-Ch’i chimed in again with a grin. “Vegetarian? Why would a young man like you become vegetarian? Does Ch’i-ke intend to master the ways of Tao and attain immortality?”

Ho Ji-Ch’ing didn’t respond to his gibe. Gobbling down his water-and-rice mash, he stood up wordlessly and advanced on Lu dragging his chair.

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Out of reflex, Lu Chen-Ch’i’s leapt away the moment the chair came down.

Just as he scampered off, Ho Ji-Ch’ing chair came barreling down with a hiss of air. With a thunderous crack, the bowls and dishes at Lu’s seat were smashed into pieces.

The table fell into a brief moment of silence.

Lu was the first to come to himself. Letting out a panicked wail, he tried to take cover behind Lady Ho while Ho Ji-Ch’ing plucked a fork out of the roast chicken and closed in on Lu expressionlessly. Lady Ho noted the happenings with alarm and was about to interfere, but Ho Ji-Ch’ing moved too fast, and had already seized the other man by his collar. With a howl of pain, the fork was embedded brutally into Lu’s arm.

Lu stood trembling with his mouth wide open, his sobs coming out in bits and pieces.

Ho Ji-Ch’ing let go of him and patted him on the shoulder. “Lad, don’t talk too much. Careful you don’t shorten your lifespan.”

Lu put a hand over his mouth and began a loud wail. Among the wailing, there were some muffled cries for help.

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Wielding iron was considered the utmost act of violence. On the first evening of New Year, Lu Chen-Ch’i got his blood spilled in public and continued to have nightmares for days. The servants in the house were equally frightened, and greeted Ho Ji-Ch’ing as if they had ran into the devil himself, wishing more than anything to give him a wide berth.

Ho Ji-Ch’ing had attacked Lu solely to vent his anger. There were many ways to give vent to anger, but he favoured methods that allowed him to regain his peace of mind by dispensing his suffering to others.

Back in the Anguo Army, although he was clueless when it came to commanding troops, he was extremely fond of massacres—the large-scale, total annihilations of flesh.

Villages after massacres held a peculiar tranquility. As all things on earth faded from life, mortal torments too would disperse like smoke and clouds. When blood saturated the arid soil, when the most precious gift of life lost its meaning, what more was there to be adamant about? What more couldn’t be overcome, couldn’t be let go?

Ho Ji-Ch’ing used death to counsel and console himself. Perhaps his soul could reach a brief moment of absolution when the scent of blood rose in the air. But these moments were too brief. He thought he might need a bit of religious faith, might need the company of a god.

Otherwise... It was much too lonely.

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The kind of men Lady Ho despised the most were savage brutes, yet her husband, the Old Marshal, happened to be one.

Although Ch'i-ke wasn't her son by blood, he had grown up under her care. As a stern mother, she had hoped to forge the ideal son, but a few years after her husband's officers snatched him away, her son had come back surpassing his father in atrociousness.

Lady Ho was extremely disappointed. Meanwhile, she also came to realise that this seventh son of hers really wasn't to be trifled with.

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Two months after New Year when flowers began to bloom in the warmth of spring, Lady Ho passed by Ho Ji-Ch'ing's room and saw him counting prayer beads and murmuring Buddhist scriptures.

Delighted, she thought it would be a great thing if her son could purge some of his savagery.

But when she visited her son again on the same evening, she arrived at the sight of Ho Ji-Ch'ing tying a noose around Hsiao-Shun's neck with the long string of prayer beads, making the boy crawl on the ground like a leashed dog.

She heaved a long sigh and left wordlessly. She had given up on this Chi'-ke quite thoroughly.

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In May, Ho Ji-Ch'ing suddenly informed Lady Ho that he wanted to go to Tientsin for a change of scenery.

Lady Ho didn't dare to intervene, and even secretly hoped that he'd leave right away. The presence of such a fiend hidden in the house was making everyone uncomfortable. When he learned that his Chi'ke was about to leave, Lu Chun-Ch'i was even more ecstatic.

But before he could finish being ecstatic, he saw in the papers that the Peking-Tientsin Express was suspended due to a malfunction, which meant that Ho Ji-Ch'ing's departure would be delayed indefinitely.

Lady Ho and Lu Chen-Ch'i spent their days praying that the train would be fixed soon. Ho Ji-Ch'ing didn't mind the delay. He didn't have any urgent business in Tientsin other than to pay Bai Su-Chen a visit, which he could do sooner or later.

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[1] "Seventh Brother"

# [A Cruel Romance, Vol. II] Tientsin

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## Tientsin

Bai Su-Ch'en stood before the Sino-Japanese Trading Company building. It was high noon, the weather warm. He wore a light-coloured suit with a white embroidered tie, looking gentle and untrammelled.

A car sped towards him and braked to a stop before its door swung open, and Arimitsu Kiyoshi poked his head out. "He's here," he said in Japanese. "He's staying at the Astor Hotel."

Bai got into the car and slammed the door shut. "How is his mood?" he said with a smile.

"Very stable."

"Does he believe you?"

"I don't know. Perhaps he does, perhaps he doesn't. But he's here, nevertheless."

Bai didn't speak again.

Arimitsu Kiyoshi continued: "You must greet him warmly. He clearly favours you, and since the two of you are related, you're able to openly fraternise with him."

Bai crossed his arms and remained silent. Then he gave a tiny smile.

Noticing it, Arimitsu Kiyoshi smiled back. "Don't be daunted by what that Major-General Li said in Luyang. That was only his one-sided account. He seems like a fairly amiable man to me."

Bai nodded. "So I hope."

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The car stopped in front of the Astor Hotel and a porter boy came forward to open its door. Bai Su-Ch'en stepped out of the car and went straight to room 308.

There, he saw Ho Ji-Ch'ing.

He didn't smile this time, and looked the other man up and down with a worried expression. "Ch'i-ke, Arimitsu Kiyoshi told me you were ambushed in Peking—are you all right?"

Ho Ji-Ch'ing also looked him up and down. "Little Uncle, aren't you looking dapper today!"

Bai gave him a pinch on the cheek. "Still in the mood for such things? Looks like you're obviously fine!"

Ho Ji-Ch'ing sat down in an armchair next to him. "Somebody took a shot at me in Dong'an Market two days ago. Funny enough, the car I took cover behind happened to be Arimitsu Kiyoshi's. Little Uncle, Arimitsu is an interesting one. He's obviously a spy, but won't admit it and insists that he's a traveler!"

Bai listened to him attentively. When the topic shifted to Arimitsu Kiyoshi, he asked with interest: "What do you mean?"

Ho Ji-Ch'ing threw him a glance. "Our traveler told me that the assassin was sent by the Nanking Government."

Bai's face showed traces of a smile. "And?"

"The traveler invited me to take refuge within the Japanese Concession in Tientsin."

"So you followed his advice?"

Ho Ji-Ch'ing poured himself a cup of tea. "If what he said was true, then the assassin who missed his mark will certainly make another attempt. If what he told me was a lie, then the man who attacked me..." he took a sip of the lukewarm tea, "must be acting on Arimitsu Kiyoshi's orders."

Bai wore a small frown. "Arimitsu sent an assassin after you, then saved you and invited you to hide out in Tientsin—why would he do that?"

Ho Ji-Ch'ing gave an icy laugh. "Why? We will see! Anyhow, had I remained in Peking, there's no telling when I'll be slaughtered either by the Chinese or the Japanese. In any case, I won't be left in peace, so I might as well come to Tientsin with him and pay you a visit." He turned to Bai. "Little Uncle, we haven't seen each other in four months. Have you missed me?"

Bai stood and walked over to him. Propping himself up on both armrests of the chair, he bent down over Ho Ji-Ch'ing. "I have. What about little Ch'i-Bao?"

Ho Ji-Ch'ing laughed. "What's wrong with you? You're calling me little Ch'i-Bao again!"

Bai lifted a hand to pinch the tip of Ho Ji-Ch'ing's nose. "What are you if not little Ch'i-Bao? I'm your uncle, why can't I call you Ch'i-Bao?"

Ho Ji-Ch'ing wasn't bothered by Bai's pinch. Bai's hand was warm and soft, its movements gentle. It would never cause any pain.

After pinching his nose, Bai stroked his hair and said: "Don't spent all that money staying at the hotel. I've got rooms in my house and there isn't an aunt-in-law to bother you. Why don't you move in today?"

Like a dog enjoying a pet, Ho Ji-Ch'ing's narrowed his eyes contently. "I have two men with me. Won't it be inconvenient?"

"You mean Feng Guo-Chung and Hsiao-Shun? It's fine. They're both well-behaved and not bothersome."

Ho Ji-Ch'ing ruminated in silence for a moment. All of a sudden, he shot up and wrapped his arms around Bai's waist, laughing. "Little Uncle! Pick me up!"

Startled, Bai's first inclination was to shove him away. He froze for a moment and gave Ho Ji-Ch'ing a pat on the back. "Look how big you are, how am I supposed to pick you up? Let go, I'll take you out for lunch!"

- : -

Bai Su-Ch'en lived in a little two-story European house. For an interpreter at a trading company, Bai and his ownership of such a house was something of a miracle among his profession. Ho Ji-Ch'ing stood looking around in the ground-floor parlour and praised: "Little Uncle, you've got a nice house here!"

Bai smiled. "I'm renting it from Arimitsu Kiyoshi—the spy you were telling me about. He wouldn't stay put in one place and thought it was a shame to leave the house empty, so he rented it to me at a discount."

"Is Arimitsu going away again?"

"I've no idea. Anyhow, I won't be accompanying him even if the president himself gives the order—he really talks too much."

Ho Ji-Ch'ing's interest wasn't on Arimitsu. Sitting on a couch, he followed Bai with his eyes and kept wanting to reach out and touch the other man.

Since Bai was bachelor, he had no personal attendants other than a cook and two housemaids. At the moment, he could only rise to the task himself and bustled about procuring a bag of English chocolates to entertain his nephew. His nephew wasn't interested in sweets; after a few casual offers, it was Bai who ended up go gobbling down one after another delightedly, and before long a small mountain of chocolate wrappers had accumulated in front of him. Only then did Ho Ji-Ch'ing realise—his Little Uncle had a sweet tooth!

Bai had little desire to chat while he ate his chocolates. Once he finished the entire bag, he finally took a pleased sip of tea and turned to Ho Ji-Ch'ing. "Ch'i-Bao, I'll be out during the day and won't be back from work until evening. Make yourself at home here."

Ho Ji-Ch'ing made no reply, but he put his hand over the nape of Bai's neck and slid it slowly down the side of Bai's waist, where he gave a few gentle pats.

Bai continued gulping down his tea, his hair almost standing on end.

"Little Uncle, you never put on much weight."

Bai gathered the pile of wrappers into a ball and stuffed it into the bag. "I run around all day trying to make a living, when do I ever get the chance to put on weight?"

Turning towards him, Ho Ji-Ch'ing wrapped his arms around Bai and rested his chin on the other man's shoulder. With some hesitation, he leaned in and puckered his lips, placing a loud kiss on Bai's cheek.

Bai was still drinking his tea. At the kiss, he spat out a mouthful of tea and choked himself into a coughing fit.

- : -

That night, Ho Ji-Ch'ing tossed and turned on the spring mattress bed in the guestroom, unable to fall asleep.

The shooting incident at Dong'an Market had already appeared in the Nanking papers. Although the papers reported it as an unsolved crime, Ho Ji-Ch'ing knew for a fact that the bullet had been heading for him.

What a close call. If it hadn't been for Arimitsu Kiyoshi, he might have met his end right there on the street.

At the thought, he felt a sudden tinge of regret. He shouldn't have disclosed so much to his little uncle. All that talk of the Chinese and the Japanese—there was no need to bring up such matters. But it changed little in the grand scheme of things. Who knew if Little Uncle was conniving with Arimitsu? In that case, what he said would soon be

passed on to Arimitsu, which was just as well, since it meant that they'd know he wasn't stupid and drop the cryptic act.

But considering his current lack of manpower, rank, and wealth, what could the Japanese possibly want with him? He turned over again in bed hugging a pillow in his arms, still unable to come up with an answer.

There were faint sounds of breathing in the corner of his room, their source heard but not seen. It was Hsiao-Shun. Ho Ji-Ch'ing changed the subject of his contemplation. He began to ponder over Bai Su-Ch'en.

Rationally, he knew that his little uncle's position must be somewhat dubious; at the very least, he was too closely associated with the Japanese. But emotionally, he wanted to initiate a love affair with his little uncle—Little Uncle was gentle and kind, a much better fit for his ideals than Lan Bai-Shan.

Of course, the love affair would be limited to its platonic stage. To involve carnal prospects... It wasn't impossible, but it was probably best not to flaunt his prowess—or lack thereof.

- : -

At the thought of carnal prospects, Ho Ji-Ch'ing became aroused.

The poorly-timed arousal had come out of nowhere. At his age and after staying celibate for the better part of the year, it seemed only natural that he'd be a bit stirred up over a few sensual thoughts. He snuck a hand into his pyjama bottoms and took a hold of his eager little friend, wondering why it suddenly decided to perk up instead going to sleep. Even if he actually found it a hole, would it be able to crawl inside?

He tugged on it gently for a while but did not come, much to his surprise. He began to loathe the useless thing—instead of being a quick shot as usual, it had to play tenacious this time! But who had the patience to take care of it in the middle of the night?

He threw back the covers and called out softly: "Hsiao-Shun."

Hsiao-Shun jolted upright from his soundless slumber. "What is it, Ch'i-ye?"

Ho Ji-Ch'ing drew down his pyjama bottoms and dropped his feet to the floor. "Come over here."

It was a cloudy night and there were no streetlights outside, so darkness masked the room quite thoroughly. Hsiao-Shun fumbled his way to the bed and felt a tug on his shirt. "Kneel."

Baffled, Hsiao Shun thought he was going to be beaten again, but he resigned himself to his fate and got on his knees.

Ho Ji-Ch'ing pushed Hsiao-Shun's head between his bare thighs. "Open your mouth."

- : -

The only thing Hsiao-Shun could provide during the occasion was an unskilled mouth, but for Ho Ji-Ch'ing, it was enough.

He quickly spent himself inside the hot cavity. The room was too dark for him to see Hsiao-Shun's expression; he only knew the boy was still kneeling between his legs.

He patted Hsiao-Shun on the head. "Swallow it."

Among the silence, he heard the soft sound of swallowing.

He let out a laugh. "Does it tastes good?"

"Yes," Hsiao-Shun answered lowly.

He gave Hsiao-Shun a kick in the chest. "Scram, then!"

Hsiao-Shun got up silently and crawled back under his covers in the corner.

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# [A Cruel Romance, Vol. II] Dinner Party

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 [sl-Ilian.livejournal.com/13025.html](http://sl-Ilian.livejournal.com/13025.html)

## Dinner Party

Ho Ji-Ch'ing spent a few languid days at Bai's residence. Since there was little to do and Bai didn't have the time to take him out and about, he could only meander around with Feng Guo-Chung and Hsiao-Shun.

The incident at Dong'an Market had left Feng in a lingering state of apprehension. "Ch'i-yeh, isn't it a bit dangerous to go out with just the three of us?"

Ho Ji-Ch'ing gave a confident snort. "It'll be fine. If Arimitsu could bring us to Tientsin, the last thing he'd do is allow me to be killed. Heavens know what the Japanese are up to, we might as well enjoy ourselves while we can."

Feng did place a certain amount of trust in the former commander-in-chief. When even the prime target was optimistic about his longevity, as a mere attendant, Feng could safely restore his heart to its original position.

The only times Bai Su-Ch'en came home were during the evenings, when Ho Ji-Ch'ing found himself beaming uncontrollably whenever he laid eyes on his little uncle. He was a man who rarely wore genuine smiles; they made him look almost boyish, taking years off his face.

Bai had no objection to his nephew's smiles. But despite the pretty smiles, Ho Ji-Ch'ing was still a man, not to mention one who exudes a lazy sort of ferociousness and whose childish antics often turned physical—there was only so much Bai could take.

Three days went by like so. On the fourth day, he returned from work and found a momentary respite of peace and quiet, since Ho Ji-Ch'ing had received an invitation from Arimitsu Kiyoshi earlier in the afternoon and had left to attend his dinner party.

- : -

Sitting in a private room at the Astor Hotel, an expressionless Ho Ji-Ch'ing took in the guests around table and only felt perplexed.

Arimitsu Kiyoshi wore a dinner suit, his greased hair parted on the side and held down by what must have been a large amount of hair tonic. Pointing to a short man next to him who sported a nearly identical face and build, he announced to Ho Ji-Ch'ing with a grin: "Mr. Ho, this is my brother, Arimitsu Tsutomu."

Ho Ji-Ch'ing supposed he should be polite to Little Uncle's boss, but while he was still mulling over the thought, Arimitsu Kiyoshi had already abandoned his brother and proceeded to point to the burly man next to him. "This is Colonel Nikaido."

Colonel Nikaido wore a black kimono and a commanding yet amicable expression. A small and perfectly square toothbrush moustache sat above his lips.

Ho Ji-Ch'ing's mind struggled to catch up.

Before he could arrange a smile for Nikaido, Arimitsu Kiyoshi pointed to a lama in red silk robes. "This is *Tulku*<sup>[1]</sup> Tsongkha."

His finger then veered to the last guest. "This is Prince Altan."

Having no alternative, Ho Ji-Ch'ing directed his belated smile entirely to the young Mongol prince.

Prince Altan appeared to be barely over twenty. He had a round face, a straight nose, and large eyes; he looked nothing like a Mongol. He threw a limpid glance at Ho Ji-Ch'ing and immediately looked down. One of his hands was tucked under his *magua* jacket like he was hiding something in there.

Receiving no response to his smile, Ho Ji-Ch'ing instantly regained his impassive demeanor.

Never to miss an opportunity to show off his Chinese, Arimitsu's mouth was already gushing a stream of words before the dishes were fully served. He fixed his attention on Tulku Tsongkha. "Your Eminence, I am a traveller, I am extremely interested in Chinese culture. I have a deep understanding of it, immeasurably deep. I have heard that you too are very knowledgeable, which is good. We can share a discourse."

Tulku Tsongkha's was engrossed in filling him mouth with food and grease. He managed to momentarily extricate his tongue and answered, "Have at it!"

Arimitsu took a sip of beer. Just as his teeth came into contact with air, the sound of a chirping cricket filled the room.

His back turned to the other guests, Prince Altan pulled out a jade cricket jar that was engraved with an intricate depiction of the Eight Immortals crossing the sea. A pair of quivering antennae, which must have belonged to the noise's culprit, peeked out through the air holes.

"Shhhh—shhhh—", Altan puckered his lips and blew air at the antennae. Tulku Tsongkha rose from his seat and made his way in front of Altan, where he bent down and praised in a fluent Peking drawl: "Nice cricket jar!"

Altan looked up and smiled at him. "The jar's noth-nothing. I have a Re-re-red-Sand Green in-in here!"

"I've got a Golden Back back home," the tulku said. "Want to see them fight?"

"All-All right! P-p-pick a t-time!"

His love for crickets was such that the tulku wasn't bothered by the prince's stuttering, and the two of them remained there—one seated and one squatting—and launched into an impassioned discussion. Arimitsu regarded the scene with both shock and embarrassment and turned to give Ho Ji-Ch'ing an apologetic smile, but discovered that the man was craning his neck and watching Altan's Red-Sand Green with interest.

He turned to his brother, but Arimitsu Tsutomu was involved in a heated discussion with Colonel Nikaido and gave him no opportunity to interject.

He was the one who arranged the event, but now everyone had found something to do and took no notice of him!

- : -

When the dinner came to an end, the prince, the tulku, and the cricket left together in the same car. Ho Ji-Ch'ing was about to ask the concierge to get him a ride when Arimitsu Tsutomu spoke up: "Mr. Ho, it is still early. May I speak to you for a moment?"

Walking in front, Ho Ji-Ch'ing looked back at him and gave a hesitant nod. "All right."

He followed Arimitsu Tsutomu and Colonel Nikaido into a car; Arimitsu Kiyoshi had already left at some point. The car brought them to a Japanese restaurant near Fifth Avenue, and they stepped out and moved into a remarkably elegant and quiet *washitsu*. Since Arimitsu Tsutomu did not speak, Ho Ji-Ch'ing was even less inclined initiate the conversation. After the waitress had finished serving them tea and departed, Arimitsu Tsutomu finally began steadily:

“Mr. Ho, it’s a bit awkward that we’re here getting tea and dessert right after having dinner at the Astor Hotel, but I wanted to speak to you somewhere quiet. I hope you do not mind.”

Ho Ji-Ch’ing noted that unlike his somewhat deranged brother, Arimitsu Tsutomu seemed fairly stable and eloquent.

“Please speak your mind, Mr. Arimitsu.”

Arimitsu threw Nikaido a glance. “I’ve heard that Mr. Ho once had a very successful career in Northwestern China.”

Ho Ji-Ch’ing’s heart gave a jolt and he waved a hand hurriedly. “You flatter me. If I did, I wouldn’t have gone back to Peking alone.”

Arimitsu smiled. “Young as you are, Mr. Ho, you are very modest. It’s a rare virtue.”

Ho Ji-Ch’ing shook his head. “You give me too much credit. I was just speaking the truth.”

“But then again,” Arimitsu continued. “It’d be a great shame to leave Mr. Ho’s youth and talent idle at home.”

Ho Ji-Ch’ing remained silent this time. He felt like he was getting an idea of Arimitsu’s intention.

Looking down, Arimitsu picked up his teacup and brought it to his lips for a moment, then set it back down on the table without drinking from it. “I know you are a smart man, Mr. Ho. You’d never resign yourself to a life of mediocrity.”

Ho Ji-Ch’ing lowered his eyes. “Actually, I do yearn for a quiet—”

Smiling, Arimitsu interrupted him with a raised hand. “Let’s stop playing word games. Mr. Ho, I’ll be frank with you. Colonel Nikaido here is a representative of the Japanese Imperial Kwantung Army. He greatly admires your military talent, and hopes that you will join forces with the Kwantung Army in contribution to the prosperity of East Asia and the development of Manchukuo. If you’re willing, the Kwantung Army will appoint you as the commander-in-chief of the Manchukuo Second Army. What do you—?”

Before he could finish, Ho Ji-Ch’ing gave a small laugh. “Mr. Arimitsu, if I still harboured any desire for fame and fortune, why would I go through all that trouble to come back? I could have simply stayed in Shensi. When I returned to Peking, I made up my mind to cut all my ties with the military and political world and live my life in peace. That’s all there is to it. So while I appreciate Mr. Arimitsu and Colonel Nikaido’s kindness, I have nothing to offer.”

Nikaido didn’t seem to know much Chinese and gave Arimitsu a blank look. Arimitsu’s expression did not waver as he continued to smile. “There’s no hurry, please take some time to consider it.”

Ho Ji-Ch’ing also smiled. “I hope Mr. Arimitsu and Colonel Nikaido can understand my perspective.”

“I absolutely do. But please give it more thought. Your father, Marshal Ho, had given me a lot of help, and I am very grateful for it. I hope we can continue this friendship, for the benefit of common prosperity! Ha-ha! Also, the Second Army is stationed in Jehol. Your father once told me that Jehol was his land of fortune; now if Mr. Ho returns to Jehol, it’ll be like... How does that saying go? I’m sorry, I can’t remember the proverb at the moment, but you understand what I mean.”

Ho Ji-Ch’ing shook his head and said nothing more. He drank his tea with a forced smile.

Arimitsu cleared his throat and changed the subject. “I heard from my brother that there’s been an assassination attempt on Mr. Ho back in Peking, which is very troubling. If Mr. Ho so desires, the Kwantung Army can provide the necessary protection.”

At this, Ho Ji-Ch’ing couldn’t help but shoot Arimitsu a thoughtful glance. “Well...”

Arimitsu began to laugh. “Mr. Ho, please try the desserts here. They’re very good!”

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I wish I could do something about the whole speaking to each other in third person thing, but I’ve gone along with it in the past so... consider it local colour.

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# [A Cruel Romance, Vol. II] Dissent

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 [sl-Ilian.livejournal.com/13250.html](http://sl-Ilian.livejournal.com/13250.html)

This should be obvious, but just in case: all racial/homophobic/sexist/etc slurs within this work exist in a historical context and are made purely from each character's perspective.

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## Dissent

Arimitsu Tsutomu dropped Ho Ji-Ch'ing off at Bai's residence. Ho Ji-Ch'ing got off the car with a strained smile, which turned into teeth-grinding when he stepped into the courtyard and cursing when he stepped into the house: "Damn it all! What was that all about? How did I get dragged into this?"

Bai Su-Chen was sitting on a couch in the parlour. A novel in hand, he read the book comfortably as he popped chocolate beans into his mouth. He frowned at the other man's aggressive entrance and profanity. "What's wrong?"

Ho Ji-Ch'ing strode ahead and flopped down next to him. "What else? Those Japs! Little Uncle, be honest with me. Are you affiliated with them?"

Bai paused for a moment. "I work with them every day. What do you mean, affiliated?"

He waited for Ho Ji-Ch'ing's reply, but the other man only stared at the plate of colourful jellybeans on the tea table, lost in thought.

"Protection..." he thought to himself. "But what if I insist on not cooperating? If they can actively protect me, they can certainly also... What a cozy little hint! The incident at Dong'an Market was probably arranged by these very Japs!"

He was suddenly furious—so even dogs could insult a tiger on level land! Even a handful of Japs tinier than beans dared to threaten him! If he only had a few men in his hands—he didn't need that many, a few thousand would be enough—he'd off them all!

But what men did he have? He was a loner whom the Japs played all the way from Peking to Tientsin, who was about to be sent to Jehol and used liked a gun. How was working for Manchukuo any different from working for the Japanese? First a bandit, now a national traitor—what kind of fate was this?

He couldn't do it! He shook his head at himself. Bandits and traitors were still different in nature. Banditry had little consequence; many men of bandit origin would quickly make it to regimental and divisional commanders once enlisted, and nobody would say a thing. Traitors were different, especially traitors in command of armies. To aid the Japanese against the Chinese—it would be bad, it would be bad both for the State and for himself.

He couldn't do it! He nodded at himself. He would be careful from now on. As important as patriotism was, his own life was far more invaluable. He'd still focus on diplomacy. Military affairs existed to serve diplomatic affairs, but diplomatic affairs were eternal constants. But with whom should he practice said diplomacy? The Central Government—He'd count himself fortunate if they didn't kill him. The Japanese Kwantung Army—they likely wouldn't rest until they'd bundled him off to Jehol.

Wasn't that splendid. It'd all come back to him!

- :-

Ho Ji-Ch'ing was very displeased. He'd intended to spend his retirement in peace and comfort, but his life was filled with nothing but boredom and frustration. Whatever peace and comfort looked like, he hadn't seen it yet.

“Chi-Bao...”

Next to him, Bai’s sudden voice startled Ho Ji-Ch’ing out of his rumination.

“What is it?”

Bai lowered his head and seemed a bit embarrassed. “Your hand. Knock it off.”

Only then did Ho Ji-Ch’ing realise that one of his hands had wandered onto Little Uncle’s thigh and showed signs of inching further upwards.

Lamely, he withdrew his hand and gave a laugh. He was coming up with an explanation when he reconsidered. “What the hell have I got to explain?” he thought to himself. “Might as well lay it on the line and let him know how I feel. It’ll be up to him whether he’s willing—perhaps he will be! If this works out, at least I didn’t come to Tientsin for nothing!”

At the thought, he turned and wrapped his arms around Bai’s waist, resting his chin on the other man’s shoulder. “Little Uncle... I—I really like you.”

Bai heard blood rush between his ears, but he only patted Ho Ji-Ch’ing on the back and said kindly: “I know. Little Uncle likes you too.”

Ho Ji-Ch’ing snuggled in and pressed his face against Bai’s, cursing how his height made it impossible for him to latch on to Bai’s like a child. “Not...that kind of like. I *like you* like you.”

Sweat began to form on Bai’s head. “Little Ch’i-Bao, how old are you now? And you’re still clinging to me like this? Get off and go get changed.”

Ho Ji-Ch’ing felt like the conversation had gotten off on the wrong foot; it wasn’t the right tone for a heartfelt confession. He tightened his hold on Bai and wished he could melt against him like a lump of candy. “Little Uncle, I meant... I love you.”

“All right, all right, I love you too. Why do you smell like Kuantung tobacco? Was somebody smoking a pipe at the party?”

Ho Ji-Ch’ing straightened up and grasped Bai by the shoulders. “Be with me! As long as we don’t talk, nobody will know you’re my uncle!”

Bai was silent for a moment, then gave an abrupt laugh. “Little one, what are you talking about? Had too much to drink?”

Ho Ji-Ch’ing stared at him with furrowing brows and reddening cheeks.

“Little Uncle...” he began hesitantly and softly. “Don’t—don’t play dumb with me. I meant everything I said. If you’re bothered by how I have no power or prestige at the moment, I can put together a comeback. Once I commit myself to you, there’s no changing my heart. I—“

Before he could finish, Bai surged to his feet and cried: “Hsiao-Feng! Hsiao-Shun! This man is drunk! Come help him up the stairs!”

Seeing his reaction, Ho Ji-Ch’ing’s heart grew chill. The rest of his words got stuck in his throat while a clutter of footsteps stamped their way down the stairs. Feng Guo-Chung was first to arrive. “Ch’i-yeh, did you have too much to drink? Are you all right?”

Ho Ji-Ch’ing stared at Bai with wide eyes. After a long moment, he took Feng’s arm with a pale face and turned

away stiffly. "I did have too much to drink," he said softly. "I'm feeling dizzy. I want to lie down for a bit."

Feng had never seen Ho Ji-Ch'ing drink, and taking in his dispossessed state, he didn't think the man looked drunk. Suspicious, he helped the other men up by the arm: "let's go." He then looked back up. "Hsiao-Shun, I don't need you here. Go up and make the bed."

- : -

Back in his rooms, Ho Ji-Ch'ing sat on his bed with a hollow look and waved Feng Guo-Chung and Hsiao-Shun out.

The door clicked shut and left him in complete silence.

He stood and pulled out a leather trunk underneath the bed. Throwing it open, he picked up the white porcelain urn.

"Bai-Shan." He pressed the urn against his lips and gave it a kiss. His heart throbbed airily as blood coursed through his body, its pace so swift that he could barely breathe. "You're better than him... If you hadn't died, why would I look for another?"

He sniffled and forced his eyes wide open to stave off tears. "He could have told me straight up that he didn't want me. Why did he have to play dumb? Bai-Shan, I genuinely wanted to be with him, like I did with you. But he..."

He gave a frosty sigh. "Why did I come back? I came running home all excited, but everyone looked at me as if they saw the devil. Come tomorrow, he'll be just the same. And now the Japanese have targeted me... If I had known any of this, I might as well have stayed in Luyang and lived for the day until Li Shih-Yao couldn't tolerate me anymore and shot me dead. I'll probably go look for you in the underworld then. I know you didn't love me, you humoured me along at first and couldn't leave me afterwards. Even though you were always by my side, none of it was by your own choice. But if we could be reborn as man and woman in the next life, would you want us to be husband and wife?"

He undressed and crawled into bed, placing the urn under his pillow. "Bai-Shan, come find me in a dream. Let's have a chat. I have so much to say and nobody to say it to."

- : -

When Bai Su-Ch'en came home the following evening, he discovered that Ho Ji-Ch'ing had already moved out.

Neither of the maids knew where he had moved to. Just when Bai was feeling puzzled, Arimitsu Kiyoshi dropped in.

"Bai-san!" He complained in an exasperated voice. "Why did you drive Ho away?"

Bai was bewildered. "When did I drive him away? I just came back myself and found him gone! Where did he go?"

"Not far. Back to the Astor Hotel. He got two rooms there, him and his two attendants. He was very fond of you, why would he leave without cause?"

Bai snorted. "I have done all I could to appease him. You can't possibly expect me to emulate that chief of staff who went up in flames!"

Arimitsu stamped his foot. "You keep getting carried away by what that Major-General Li said! Ho isn't necessarily that horrible! If he was, you'd already be..."

Bai went red in the face. "Arimitsu-kun, do not speak such nonsense! I do not wish to hear it!"

Helping himself to a spot on the couch, Arimitsu took some toffee from the plate on the tea table and shoved it into his mouth. "You are his uncle," he said as he chewed. "He is fond of you. The two of you could have made the perfect couple and saved us the men to keep an eye on him! But now...!"

Bai darkened his face. "Arimitsu-kun, do you really want to finish that thought? If he likes men, go find him some men! Please do not involve me in this! We are uncle and nephew, and I'm not interested in men! Regardless of what you, the president, or anyone want, I will not be forced to make that sort of compromise!"

Arimitsu knew that although Bai looked softer than toffee on the outside, his hard core had to be subdued by a firm hand. At a time of emergency, Arimitsu didn't have to time to stay and chitchat. Stuffing a handful of fruit drops into his pocket, he stood and left hurriedly.

- :-

Being a traveler and a diplomat, Arimitsu moved with the utmost urgency and made his way to the Astor Hotel gasping for breath.

Ho Ji-Ch'ing was enjoying a lavish dinner with his companions in one of the private rooms. Seeing that Arimitsu had found him, he gave a polite but cool nod. "Mr. Arimitsu is here to see me? Take a seat and have something to eat."

At his words, Feng Guo-Chung played it by ear and called the waiter over for an extra set of plates and chopsticks.

Arimitsu took a seat. He wasn't in the mood for dinner and asked straight away: "why did Mr. Ho move back here, all of a sudden?"

Ho Ji-Ch'ing poured some water into his bowl of rice and whisked its contents with his chopsticks. "There were too many of us. It was becoming an inconvenience to stay with my uncle." He picked up his bowl and gobbled the watery rice down.

Arimitsu rubbed his hands together with a grin. "Ah—I see. But there are many people coming and going at the hotel, a stream of traffic, an endless torrent. If Mr. Ho stays here, safety cannot be guaranteed..."

"Wasn't the Kwantung Army going guarantee it?"

"Yes, of course. Um...tomorrow. I'll send some men over tomorrow." Arimitsu considered this, his eyes turning skywards. "All right, tomorrow it is!"

Ho Ji-Ch'ing gave a frosty laugh. "You'll send some men over? Aren't you a traveler? You're doubling as a bodyguard now?"

Arimitsu continued to grin. "I am indeed a traveler. I've journeyed through many famous mountains and rivers. Manchuria, Sikang, Yunnan, Mongolia... I've walked them all."

Ho Ji-Ch'ing raised a hand. "I'm done here, please enjoy the rest of your dinner." He snatched up a napkin and wiped his mouth, then simply stood and left.

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# [A Cruel Romance, Vol. II] Deceit

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 [sl-Ilian.livejournal.com/13365.html](http://sl-Ilian.livejournal.com/13365.html)

## Deceit

Arimitsu Kiyoshi had made his stance clear over dinner and promised to ensure Ho Ji-Ch'ing's safety. Ho Ji-Ch'ing didn't put much stock in it. Indifferent, he retired to his rooms.

Arimitsu Kiyoshi came by in his car again the in the following afternoon, his mood jovial. He didn't mention anything about bodyguards. "Mr. Ho. My brother, and me, and other people, want to take you out for dinner. You must do me a favour and come. What do you say?"

Ho Ji-Ch'ing had already gotten used to his peculiar way of speaking. Out of reflex, he wanted to refuse, but he caught himself after giving the thought a few slow turns. "My thanks."

Arimitsu was the picture of heartless delight. "Together we go, together!"

Ho Ji-Ch'ing gave it some thought and couldn't find anything amiss. He had nothing to say, so he stood and followed Arimitsu downstairs.

- : -

Arimitsu Kiyoshi brought Ho Ji-Ch'ing to a restaurant near Fifth Avenue. Ho Ji-Ch'ing entered a private dining room and found himself at a relatively vacant table that seated neither princes nor lamas. Only Arimitsu Tsutomu and Nikaido were present.

Ho Ji-Ch'ing's face remained impassive even when his heart began to thump. He'd rather have a few irrelevant parties acting as comic relief, or the environment was too well-suited for intrigue.

After exchanging a round of pleasantries, they took their seats while the waiter began serving their dishes. Arimitsu Tsutomu entertained his guest with small talk and chattered away, his manners amicable. Ho Ji-Ch'ing responded cautiously, paying close attention to the other man's every move.

Once the dishes were served, the waiter retreated and clicked the door shut. Beaming, Arimitsu Tsutomu took a sip of wine and began: "Mr. Ho, we've really taken to each other, which is why for us, 'one day apart feels like years of separation'. After one day, we meet again."

Ho Ji-Ch'ing didn't touch his wine. "Mr. Arimitsu is indeed very hospitable."

Holding his wineglass, Arimitsu shook his head slowly. "No, Mr. Ho, you're wrong about that. Both my brother and Mr. Nikaido here know that I'm not a sociable man."

Ho Ji-Ch'ing smiled. "So Mr. Arimitsu is giving me preferential treatment."

"I do admire you very much, Mr. Ho," Arimitsu said. "Or I wouldn't be this insistent about our collaboration."

Ho Ji-Ch'ing stopped smiling.

Without the smile, he seemed to have lost every bit of his vitality. He was a porcelain statue deep within a temple, forever hidden from the light of day.

"Mr. Arimitsu—" he leaned back into his chair, "I'm very sorry, but I really have no interest in this collaboration."

Arimitsu looked at Ho Ji-Ch'ing with a grin that deepened with every passing second.

"Will Mr. Ho tell me his reasons?"

"Mr. Arimitsu is an intelligent man. You must be able to guess."

Arimitsu shook his head. "Mr. Ho, I think I might be rushing you too quickly into this. For this sort of matter, you'll need some time to really think things over. In fact, Mr. Ho, why don't you consider my offer for a few more days, take your time. It's quite all right."

Ho Ji-Ch'ing faltered for a moment. Just when he was about to speak, Arimitsu continued: "A short stay at the hotel is fine, but it isn't a good long term solution. I've found a clean and secluded residence for Mr. Ho. If you don't mind, you're welcome to move in and stay for as long as you like."

Ho Ji-Ch'ing declined at once: "That's not necessary. I might not stay in Tientsin for that long."

Arimitsu turned away and shared a look with Nikaido, then said with a smile: "don't stand on ceremony, Mr. Ho. In fact, why don't you move in tonight? We can send our specialists over for your protection. Doesn't that sound perfect?"

Ho Ji-Ch'ing crossed his arms in front of him and snuck a hand towards the pistol hidden at his waist. "There's no need to rush. I can move in once I actually decide to stay in Tientsin," he said as he rose to his feet. "Thank you for the dinner, Mr. Arimitsu and Colonel Nikaido. I still have business to attend to so I can't linger. Farewell."

Smiling, Arimitsu shared another look with Nikaido, then turned to the door and yelled something in Japanese.

The door burst open before he finished speaking. Over a dozen men dressed as civilians poured into the room aggressively and filled up most of it.

Arimitsu looked equally disappointed and embarrassed by the situation. Sighing, he said kindly: "Mr. Ho, let's be on our way. So far, I'm still very sincere. I hope you'll make your decision with care."

- : -

Ho Ji-Ch'ing didn't know where the residence was, but once he stepped inside, he saw a badly frightened Feng Guo-Chung and Hsiao-Shun.

Ho Ji-Ch'ing swung around and grasped Arimitsu Tsutomu by his collar. In an instant, he felt multiple gun-barrels press against his head.

He gave them no regard and tightened his hold. "You little Jap! You've been planning this all along, haven't you?"

Arimitsu's feet were almost lifted off the ground, but his demeanor was still amicable. "Mr. Ho, calm yourself. I have no intention of harming you."

A few civilian-clad attendants rushed forward in a flurry and extricated Arimitsu out of Ho Ji-Ch'ing grasp. He continued once he found his footing: "Mr. Ho, I won't intrude any further. Please relax and think things over."

- : -

Four days went by. On the fifth day, Arimitsu Tsutomu showed up.

He finally got a satisfactory answer this time.

During this meeting, Ho Ji-Ch'ing didn't play any verbal games, nor did he rage and grapple him. He didn't even

speak—he could only lie back on the sofa and respire.

This was only natural, since his lips had touched neither food nor water in four days. It was a small miracle that he could still open his eyes.

Arimitsu took hold of his dangling hand and gave it a shake. “Mr. Ho—oh wait, I should call you Commander Ho. Ha-ha! Here’s to the start of a wonderful working relationship!”

The smell of rice gruel began to drift in the air. Its source was unclear, but the scent was strong. Ho Ji-Ch’ing eyes brightened and the hand clutched tight within Arimitsu’s grasp gave a feeble twitch.

Arimitsu seemed very pleased and couldn’t help but laugh every time he opened his mouth. “Ha-ha-ha! You know, I’m very sorry about all of this. Mr. Ho has gone through a lot of discomfort in the past few days. But I have my own reasons and pains, so I hope Commander Ho won’t hold a grudge. By the way, your uncle, Bai-san, came with me today. I think you’ll be very happy to see him. Ha-ha-ha!” He turned and said to an attendant: “bring in Bai-san,” then turned back to the barely-breathing Ho Ji-Ch’ing. “The two of you are close kin. You must have a lot to say to each other, so I won’t intrude. Good-bye, Commander Ho! Ha-ha-ha!”

Arimitsu Tsutomu ‘ha-ha-ha’ed his way out jubilantly, and Bai Su-Ch’en stalked in silently.

- :-

Ho Ji-Ch’ing lay on Bai’s thighs and drank a small cup of water out of his hand.

A bowl of warm rice gruel was served. Bai brought a small spoon to Ho Ji-Ch’ing’s lips, but he didn’t eat and murmured with half-closed eyes: “Hsiao-Shun and Feng Guo-Chung...”

Catching on, Bai said: “they’re being look after. Worry about yourself.”

- :-

Half a bowl of rice gruel later, it all began to dawn on Ho Ji-Ch’ing.

The Japanese were smart. They’d locked him up for four days to see if he would give in, and if he really fought to the end and shriveled to death, they’d only have a patch of soiled floor. Who was going to demand justice for him?

Despite his frequent complaints about not wanting to live, he valued his life above all else—it was his *own* life!

The Japanese had nearly starved him to death under the guise of dinner—it was practically one of the most massive failures in his life. Starvation? Never known it! All through his life, he’d never suffered for food, never endured this sort of torture! Very well then, he’d secure his own safety first. Once he reached Jehol... He’d show them what their Seventh Master of Ho was capable of!

- :-

After a long and methodical session of pondering, Ho Ji-Ch’ing finally made up his mind. He turned his eyes to Bai Su-Ch’en once the hot gruel had adequately warmed his cold insides. He was still lying in the other man’s lap, after all.

“Little Uncle, why are you here?”

Bai didn’t know how to answer that question. He couldn’t exactly tell him the truth and say something like “President Arimitsu brought me here at gunpoint.”

“I heard you were... in some trouble, so I came to check on you,” he answered.

Ho Ji-Ch'ing didn't know how to feel about that. "Thank you for your concern."

Bai caressed his cheek with a hand. "You're a good boy, of course I'm concerned for you."

Ho Ji-Ch'ing shut his eyes. Bai's hands were warm and soft. They felt inexplicably nice against his face.

"He's working with the Japanese," he thought to himself. "They're conspiring against me together."

He gave an internal sneer. "A honeypot."

- : -

In October, Ho Ji-Ch'ing took up the post of the Jehol Garrison Army's commander-in-chief in Chengde. All hell broke loose when the news reached out. The only son of the great hero General Ho Chih-Mei had given in to the Japanese and commanded Manchukuo troops! It was like a tiger siring a dog. He had brought shame upon his ancestors!

The Chinese were of one mind in their reproach for Commander Ho. The Japanese, however, were also very dissatisfied.

As the military advisor of the Garrison Army, Colonel Nikaido's status was supposed to be quite distinguished, but since Commander Ho gave him little regard, the Chinese soldiers under his command followed suit. The Kwantung Army had given Ho multiple orders to move his troops out to Ji'an and aid the Japanese in their offensive, but however much he urged him, Ho merely played deaf and dallied around doing god-knows-what!

Commander Ho sat in his bright and spacious mansion. Since he had his own plans, he paid no mind to the noises outside.

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Aaand the politicking continues.

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# [A Cruel Romance, Vol. II] Life in Jehol

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 [sl-Ilian.livejournal.com/14043.html](http://sl-Ilian.livejournal.com/14043.html)

## Life in Jehol

Commander Ho stood at the Command Center's front doors and stared thoughtfully into the distance.

He was developing a bit of a posture problem these days. His great height and lean build could have cut an impressive figure if he only straightened up properly, but he never did. He always wanted to lean against something, like his bones weren't solid enough. At the moment, he leaned against the doorframe and tucked his hands inside his black silk sleeves in an attempt to ward off the cold. His trousers and riding boots, though, were immaculate.

Perhaps he'd put on a bit of weight, or perhaps his trousers had the wrong fit. His uniform trousers were stretched taut over his backside where the hem of his padded jacket ended, accentuating a veiled sort of plumpness. Feng Guo-Chung happened to notice this particular trait and stole a long peek at it, snickering internally while his right hand itched to give it a loud slap.

Of course, it was only a thought. There was no chance that he'd put it into action, unless he had gotten tired of being alive. Feng had just been promoted to the Head of the Adjutant Department, and thanks to Commander Ho's favouritism, his Adjutant Department had the power to actually raise an army. A wonderful life was just about to begin, and he had quite a lot to live for.

A car appeared around the corner and came slowly to a stop in front of the Command Center. Its door swung open and a burly man leapt out. Once he spotted Commander Ho, he sprang to attention and gave a salute before putting on a smile. "Commander, I've got good news. The Chaos from Jinsha have sent their reply."

At his announcement, Commander Ho straightened. "Let's speak inside, Colonel Sung."

Colonel Sung followed Commander Ho inside. Seeing that the room was otherwise unoccupied, he began in a low voice: "The Chaos said as long as we bring their second son back, they'll thank us with a hundred thousand silver coins."

Commander Ho fished out a silver cigarette case from his pocket and took out a cigarette, sticking it between his lips. He passed the case to Colonel Sung, who took one hurriedly and lit a match for Commander Ho.

Commander Ho took a deep drag and gently, blew out a puff of smoke. "Excellent! A large catch on the first job! The men who kidnapped the Chaos' second son are—"

Colonel Sung was quick to answer. "From Changshan. Have no fucking respect. Just came strutting into our territory and kidnapped someone. We need to teach them a lesson!"

Biting on his cigarette, Commander Ho smiled and revealed a row of white teeth. "Old Sung, I'm handing this job over to you and giving you command of an artillery battalion. Once those one hundred thousand silver coins are in our pockets, half of them will be yours.

Colonel Sung widened his eyes and gave a whoop, his face lighting up. "Commander... You're the best! I'll go assemble my men right away. I'll be a dick if I don't bring Chao back! Wait for my good news!"

- :-

Once he'd sent Colonel Sung on his way, Commander Ho called Feng Guo-Chung over.

“How many men do you have now?” he asked.

“Around five hundred,” Feng answered without a second thought. “Less than five-twenty.”

Commander Ho made his way to him and whacked him on the shoulder. “You idiot! How is it that you can’t raise an army with the all the money gave you?”

Now that Feng was a part of Commander Ho’s inner circle, he dared to give some cheek. “Commander, there still isn’t enough!”

Commander Ho turned around and spat out the half-burnt cigarette, grinding it flat on the floor with his foot. “Moron! Even strangers can bring me money, but look at you! You know only how to hold out your hand and ask for more! Are those five hundred men here for free rations? Send them out and settle a few deals like Sung Chih-Ping. I’ll consider you competent if you bring back a hundred thousand silver coins!”

Feng scratched the back of his head. “Um... I was just an adjutant before. I’ve never done anything like this...”

Commander Ho gave him a light kick in the shin. “Fuck off! Don’t you bullshit me!”

Feng laughed awkwardly.

- : -

After he’d kicked Feng out, a seemingly idle but actually busy Commander Ho cried out for Hsiao-Shun, who came running out from the inner room. “Chi-yeh.”

Holding his head up, Commander Ho began to unbutton his jacket himself. “Get me changed. I’m going out.”

He peeled off the black silk jacket and put on his uniform and coat. February in Chengde was still quite cold, and despite the lack of recent snowfall, the frost that coated the ground from evening to dawn wasn’t all that different. From a heat conservation perspective, he’d rather go out in his quilted jacket, but since he was still a young man, he should groom himself accordingly.

Lan Bai-Shan had told him so countless times, and he only took it to heart after Lan died. The truth was, the utterance had little actual significance, but as he happened to remember it, he couldn’t help following its advice.

Stepping through the front gates, he put on his gloves and tugged his service cap down. It was still better than nothing when it came to warding off the frigid wind.

- : -

He got on his car and went for an inspection at the barracks. It wasn’t that he “loved his soldiers like sons”—his main objective was still personnel management.

Since he’d been forced to join the army at the age of eighteen, although he was a commander-in-chief in name and had held even larger titles back in Hsian, the number of soldiers actually under his command was next to nil. Things were different now. Although he couldn’t claim much authority among the Garrison Army, it was still better than before when his power was built completely on an empty foundation. Now? There was at most some disobedience among his subordinates.

As to his subordinates, he had to discipline them, cajole them, and make sure they behaved. But nobody was foolish enough to be charmed by a few sweet words, and in order to make them his willing followers, he had to throw out some tangible benefits.

Commander Ho didn’t own and gold mines, and “benefits” weren’t going to turn up out of the blue, so after he

assumed office, he'd worked hard to bring about reforms and proceeded to raise an army of bandits in broad daylight. As Commander Ho's personal bandits, these men were able to rob and kidnap freely within Jehol—mostly within the Garrison's Army's jurisdiction—and the ransom they earned would be Commander Ho's to distribute.

Commander Ho not only took up plundering himself, he encouraged everyone to follow suit. It was as if he had some grudge against Jehol.

Yet when Nikaido urged him to head out to battle, he suddenly developed an ardent love for these lands— he refused to leave no matter what.

Nikaido eventually had enough and lost his temper, and pointed a finger at Commander Ho as he screamed at him in Japanese.

Next to him, the interpreter's face also twisted in anger: "Commander Ho, the Headquarters are very displeased with your behavior! You shall pay for your obstinacy!"

Commander Ho went up to him and leaned in, his face pale from the cold. Softly, he breathed out the following words: "Go fuck yourself, little Jap."

Then he ordered his men to lock up the furious Nikaido.

- :-

Bai Su-Ch'en said nothing when he learned that Commander Ho had turned on the Japanese.

He, too, hated the Japanese, especially the Arimitsu brothers! He considered himself the biggest victim in this whole affair. From Arimitsu Kiyoshi to Arimitsu Tsutomu, they were silently doing all they could to use him! By the end of it, they even sent him to Chengde with his nephew! Heavens knew how somebody who'd been a law-abiding citizen for the majority his life could be dragged into this political conspiracy!

The Arimitsu Brothers...didn't treat him like this at first!

He found it all very perplexing. From boy to man, he had studied at school, gone abroad, come back home, become an interpreter at the trading company, reached a high position... And now?

He stared at the soldiers standing guard in the courtyard, feeling bewildered and confused.

- :-

The small furnace next to the door glowed a weak red. Bai took a long nap on the burning brick bed and woke up at around three, his lips dry and his tongue parched. He moved lazily to the floor and put on his shoes, and sitting down at the table, he lifted the teapot and poured himself a cup of strong, bitter tea.

There were a couple of knocks at the door and a heavily armed soldier boy came in. He saluted Bai and cried: "Reporting to Sir Uncle! The Commander wants to notify you that he doesn't know when he'll be back tonight, so you can go ahead and have dinner!"

Bai nodded. "All right."

"Does Sir Uncle have any other instruction?" hollered the boy very seriously.

"No. You may leave."

The boy saluted again, "Yes! Sir Uncle!" and ran off.

From Bai-san at the trading company to Sir Uncle at the garrison army. Bai gulped down the strong tea and felt like he was dreaming.

Perhaps it was because he had slept too much in the afternoon, although he had laid down on the brick bed in the evening, his eyes were bright with sleeplessness. He wasn't sure how late it was when he heard the sudden sound of footsteps outside, and hurriedly, he turned away from the door and dragged the covers over the lower half of his face.

Commander Ho came in with a waft of cold air. He switched on the lights and removed his hat and gloves as he made his way to brick bed, craning his neck for a look at Bai. "Little Uncle," he said.

Little Uncle was asleep.

He chuckled.

So the Japanese had thrown him a honeypot. That suited him perfectly well, since he could toss their trick right back at them.

He'd come to realise that he'd never had any luck when he threw himself at others. Yet once things went sour, he'd easily get his way—wasn't Bai Su-Ch'en lying in his bed at this very moment?

It could thus be concluded that all men were base by nature!

Not concerning himself with whether Bai was awake, Commander Ho had Hsiao-Shun bring him hot water for his bedtime wash-up. The warm water splashed into the metal tub, which he knocked over with a clang by accident. The tea Hsiao-Shun served was too hot, so he smashed the teacup and smacked Hsiao-Shun on the head. Caught off guard, Hsiao-Shun gave a startled yelp.

It was quite boisterous in the room, and sensing that his charade was about to fail, Bai turned over and opened his eyes. "You're back?"

Still damp, Commander Ho climbed onto the brick bed and slipped under the covers next to Bai. "You're so warm, Little Uncle! I was freezing to death outside."

Hsiao-Shun switched off the lights and left in silence, a tub and bucket in each hand and a towel over his shoulder. Bai cradled Commander Ho and forced himself to imagine that the man in his arms was only his nephew, Little Ch'i-Bao. As an uncle, he ought to hold his nephew. It was normal, it was perfectly normal.

His nephew unbuttoned his pajama shirt and rubbed his icy face slowly against his chest. "Little Uncle..." Commander Ho whined. "Touch me."

"Go to sleep," Bai said in a soft voice.

Commander Ho shifted under the covers and stripped himself, naked as the day he was born. He reached for Bai's hand and pressed it unceremoniously between his legs.

Bai felt his hand touch the semi-erect manhood. Giving it a few tugs, he felt a sudden and uncontrollable surge of disgust.

He yanked his hand away and turned his back to Commander Ho. "Go to sleep."

Commander Ho said nothing. He grabbed his pajamas and dressed himself again under the covers.

Then he sat up. Without warning, he grabbed Bai by the arm, pulled him to the edge of the bed, and kicked him to the ground.

Taken by surprise, a bewildered Bai found himself sprawling to the floor. His knees and elbows collided against the concrete and he cried out in pain.

Commander Ho's voice emerged above the brick bed. "What is it? You find it disgusting? Don't want to do it? Fine! Go ask your Japanese daddies to take you back! Do you know why Arimitsu Tsutomu sent you here? So you can sleep with me!" At this, he gave a sneer. "What a family you've got. The sister served the father, the brother serves the son. You've got two generations of Hos covered!"

Bai stood up in the darkness. "What did you say? My sister was your birth mother!"

"Birth mother? So what? I call you uncle only for the sake of our childhood friendship. Do you really think you're a big deal?"

Bai trembled in anger. "If that's how it is, let me go back!"

"Back where? Now you're having regrets? When you colluded with the Japanese against me, did you consider where you'd end up today?"

Bai couldn't deny Commander Ho's accusations. He did work with the Japanese against Commander Ho, but it wasn't with any ill intent. He never thought that being the commander-in-chief of the garrison army was any cause for misery, and due to Arimitsu's being president, he wasn't in a place to withhold help.

They both fell silent.

Commander Ho suddenly parted his lips, his voice a dreamy whisper. "Jehol was Papa's land of fortune, and it will be my land of fortune. Since a life of seclusion and leisure eludes me, I might as well untie my hands and do something big!"

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All typos and mistakes are mine!

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# [A Cruel Romance, Vol. II] A Grave Mistake

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 [sl-Ilian.livejournal.com/14304.html](http://sl-Ilian.livejournal.com/14304.html)

Trigger warning: non-con

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## A Grave Mistake

Nikaido had escaped.

He'd made a run for it during the night, killed the guards and scaled the courtyard walls. A Japanese accomplice rendezvoused with him outside, and they raced off to Tientsin without a backward glance.

It was already early morning when the news reached Commander Ho. Dawn had barely arrived. He didn't panic, and switched on the lights as he rose lazily out of bed. After he'd washed up and gotten changed, he sat down at his desk and retrieved three Brownings out of the drawer unhurriedly, checking each of their clips before opening his jacket and arranging the pistols carefully next to his body.

He had returned to living alone instead of messing around with Bai. It wasn't that he hated Bai that much—the hate was there, but it didn't abate his love. Fueled by the combined passion of love and hate, he gave Bai a very thorough tongue-lashing a few days ago, then walked off and never returned.

Hsiao-Shun emptied the bucket of leftover water outside and went back to the outer room, where he waited to be called upon in silence. Without anyone's notice, he'd managed to gorge himself into a tall young man. If his previous lankiness had made him look frail, his frailty was now replaced by the swell of youthful flesh.

In his tan adjutant uniform, he looked very handsome. Since he had a round-faced and wide-eyed look, his handsomeness had a “charmed[1]” boyish quality. There was a small issue though—he had a slight stoop. He slumped all the time as if he couldn't keep his head up.

They all thought he resembled Commander Ho—in disposition, not in features. He was sombre, slow, and dull, unapproachable like a temple statue on a rainy day. He was now considered an adjutant by rank, yet from his equal-ranked colleagues to the orderlies underneath, nobody feared him. They didn't fear him, but didn't goad or tease him either, since he was still Commander Ho's man and wasn't to be antagonized.

Commander Ho also thought he'd grown up to fast. It would no longer do to have him sleep on the floor, so he had a bed set up for him outside his main bedroom. Lying in bed, he still couldn't unfold his body, curling up into a ball like an animal in winter hibernation. Whenever Commander Ho called out “Hsiao-Shun!” in his bedroom, he'd jolt upright and answer “Ch'i-yeh!” before he opened his eyes.

- : -

“Hsiao-Shun,” Commander Ho's voice drifted out of his bedroom.

He went up and opened the door nimbly.

“Go give the Adjutant Department a call. Let the regiments know that there will be a meeting this morning.”

“Yes.”

After daybreak, Commander Ho rode his car to the main camp and gave the following speech in front of his officers:

“The Japs among us ran off last night. Now that they’ve fled, they’ll no doubt bad-mouth us back at the Kwantung HQ! There will only be two possible outcomes. One: the Japanese will deploy their troops and attack us. Two: the Japanese will make us risk our necks fighting for them, and we’ll still be the ones to die, all without a single gain. Since we aren’t getting anywhere working under the Japanese, we might as well keep this area under firm control. If anyone dares to come in, we shoot them dead! The Japanese are busy fighting in Ji-An right now. Since we’re technically Manchukuo troops and keep out of their way, it’s unlikely that they’ll have the manpower to strike us anytime soon, regardless of whatever drivel Nikaido spouts at them. Besides, Jehol is a rich land. We’ve got mines, farmlands, forests... We can earn thousands just by kidnapping a mine owner. We even have opium fields. It’s like paradise on earth! All the wealth and resources here belong to the Chinese, belong to us. Why should we let the Japs rob them away? Not only will we stop them, we’ll stamp out that thought for them! From now on, we’ll operate under the following principle: if the Japanese dare to provoke us, we’ll beat them to death, we’ll beat them all the way back to their grandmother’s!”

“Alright, that was one thing. There’s another: that Anti-Japanese Resistance Alliance keeps on fucking raiding us! An Anti-Japanese Resistance doesn’t go resist the Japanese and resists us instead. What’s that all about? I’ll send them a message and let them know that the Garrison Army has severed all its ties with the Japanese. The Japanese are in Ji-An. Let them go resist them there! If they don’t head off after they’ve received the message and continue to harass us here, then we won’t need to be polite! I know the commander of the Resistance Army. It’s that Chao Chen-Sheng from Hsian. Don’t be afraid of him, I know him very well. He’s a real son of a bitch, one old bastard!”

Commander Ho’s speech ended there. The colonels in attendance expressed their admiration and praised Commander Ho’s sensibility. To further exploit his victory, Commander Ho added: “Gentlemen, even though I am young, I have traversed the country over the years and can claim some knowledge and experience. Jehol truly is a great place—it doesn’t get any better than this! We must take advantage of this opportunity and cash in, so even if circumstances change in the future, we can simply run off with our savings and hide away in the foreign concessions in Tientsin or Shanghai! We’d still be able to enjoy our retirement in comfort!”

Under Commander Ho’s guidance, the colonels envisioned their wonderful prospects and broke into radiant smiles. They clenched their fists and rubbed their palms, wishing they could lead their troops out and sack the entire country in an instant.

- : -

The main purpose of Commander Ho’s meeting was to bolster his men’s morale, though he didn’t expect to bolster his own along with it. He sat in the car feeling elated with excitement, and decided to put down his grudge and pay a visit to his little uncle.

A bag of biscuits in hand, he entered the room ebulliently. “Little Uncle, I’m here.”

Bai Su-Chen sat at a desk by the window with a tattered novel. His bedchambers had been moved to a different room, since it was now warm enough to sleep without the heated brick bed. At Commander Ho’s entrance, he glanced up at him and gave a hesitant nod.

Commander Ho placed the bag of biscuits on the desk and pinched Bai’s face with a freezing hand. “You haven’t seen me all these days. Have you missed me?”

Bai shook his head. “Why should I miss you?”

Commander Ho pulled over a chair and sat down next to him. “Because I’m the scoundrel that does nothing but bully Little Uncle!” He wrapped an arm around the other man’s shoulder and lowered his voice. “I won’t leave tonight. Why don’t you show your dear nephew a bit of love?”

Bai flinched. He continued flipping through his book wordlessly.

Commander Ho leaned into Bai and pressed his face close to him. He breathed in his scent and left soft kisses on his cheek. "Little Uncle," he murmured. "You're like cotton candy, all sweet and soft. Let me eat you, hmm?"

Bai sat perfectly straight and turned another page.

Commander Ho placed a hand on the book. "Stop reading. You're knowledgeable enough."

He couldn't play deaf any longer, so he turned around to face Commander Ho and forced down his fear and anger: "What do you want now?"

Commander Ho stared into his eyes with his head cocked to one side. The hint of a smile appeared at the corners of his lips. "Little Uncle, you're playing dumb again."

Once he'd reached the breaking point, Bai appeared to calm. He gave a sudden sneer: "Little Ch'i-Bao, do you really want me to screw you that badly?"

Commander Ho paused for a moment, then fell against Bai's shoulder laughing. "Little Uncle..." he said brokenly between laughs. "Screw me? ...You'd screw me? You've got quite the nerve!"

Bai's embarrassment grew into anger at Commander Ho's gibe. He shoved Commander Ho away and stood up, pointing at the bed. "Go laugh in bed! I've indeed got the nerve! What of it?"

Commander Ho stood as well. "In a rush? Don't be. Little Uncle, I'm serious about you. Don't be ungrateful," he said and began to remove his clothes methodically.

His attire was quite complicated. Once he'd removed his coat, he had to take off his jacket, and once he'd done that, he then had to unequip the three Brownings before he could proceed to his shirt, trousers, shoes, and socks.

After he'd removed the pistols, he fished out a small paper packet from his pocket and dumped its contents into his mouth, washing down the bit of yellow powder with a gulp of water. One of his underlines had given it to him with a smirk and assured him that with the help of the drug, any woman could be tamed.

Bai stood next to the bed and watched him dispassionately. "What are you up to now?"

Commander Ho smiled wickedly. "It's for your own good."

- : -

Since Bai didn't show any firm objection this time—perhaps he didn't dare to—Commander Ho felt daring enough to strip himself naked again. He kneeled on the bed and dragged Bai into it.

A half-naked Bai lay pinned under Commander Ho, who felt abnormally warm. He was kissing Bai on the mouth, and Bai could detect an unsteadiness in his breaths. He was becoming suspicious when Commander Ho's head suddenly drooped to his shoulder, and the hands exploring his body grew limp.

He had never seen anything like it and paused in bewilderment. "What's going on?"

Commander Ho gave a small grunt, but seemed unable to reply.

Bai pushed him off. He sat up and patted him on the chest. "Ch'i-Bao! What's happening to you?"

Commander Ho lay on his side, his face flushed and his eyes half open. He appeared to be still conscious, though his lips moved and he could only produce a whimper.

Bai had an idea. "What did you swallow just then?"

Commander Ho mouthed a silent word: "Drugs."

"Aphrodisiacs?"

Commander Ho blinked.

Bai fell silent for a long moment, then struck the bed and howled with laughter.

His laughter was sudden and persistent. Bai laughed for nearly three whole minutes before finally quieting down. Still short of breath, he lowered his head and spoke into Commander Ho's ear: "Silly boy, those drugs are for women! When newcomers at brothels get uncooperative, they'd be given the drug and lose all control of their bodies, helpless against anyone who took them and could only watch as they were defiled. Where did you get such a thing? No wonder you said it's for my own good," he laughed. "It really is for my own good."

Commander Ho frowned. One of his hands rose halfway and fell back heavily.

Bai shifted to the side as his eyes traveled down from Commander Ho's face. "Since Little Ch'i-Bao is so eager, it would be very impolite of me to decline!"

- : -

Bai never took an interest in men, but Commander Ho had pushed him too far. Now that he was lying right in front of him fully nude, all pink and pale, Bai was willing to rise to the task and exact a bit of revenge on his monster of a nephew.

Removing only his trousers, he flipped Commander Ho on his stomach and stacked two pillows under his belly. Commander Ho had a full, rounded bottom, and now it stuck out even more in its elevated position. Sunlight streamed through the window, and his skin, supple and smooth, seemed almost bright enough to glow.

Bai gave his ass a violent slap. The ample flesh trembled with a crisp crack. He parted Commander Ho's thighs and saw that his entrance was pink and tight, so he gave it a jab with his finger. "Since you like men so much, this must've been used already. But maybe not. Like you said, who'd have dared to use you?"

He pushed his finger a bit harder. The opening was tight and dry, so he got off the bed and found a cup of water, which he dribbled between the other man's thighs. Using the water as lubrication, he pushed his finger inside Commander Ho and found it warm, firm, and tender. He imagined that it would still be pleasurable to fuck him for real.

He put down the cup and knelt behind Commander Ho, his hands clasped around his waist. He pushed his now erect member against the entrance but wasn't in a hurry to enter, and teased and prodded him outside. Once he had terrified the other man enough, he finally drove forward and rammed nearly half of his manhood inside.

Commander Ho gave a small grunt but showed no other response. Bai withdrew a bit as if he was about to pull out, yet at the last moment, he sank back in and with a couple of thrusts, buried the entire shaft in the other man's body.

He loosened his grip and let out a long sigh. "Little Ch'i-Bao, you were always nagging me to give you love. Now that I've given you pain<sup>[2]</sup>, is everything to your satisfaction?"

Commander Ho, of course, provided no answer.

The faint pleasure of revenge began to rise inside Bai. He renewed his grip on Commander Ho's waist and resumed his movements with all his strength. If his member were a blade, Commander Ho's insides would've been crushed into a mash of flesh and blood.

For a while he continued his frenzied thrusts. Commander Ho's insides seemed to slicken gradually, almost like it was growing moist, and its walls began to somewhat relax and tighten around him. He pulled out and saw that the once closed-off entrance now gaped wide open and revealed a bit of the pink interior. The sight seemed startle him. He hurried back up and aligned himself, and without any difficulty, he rammed all the way in and carried on thrusting.

- :-

At noon, Commander Ho had come to amuse himself with a bag of biscuits.

When the sun was about to set in the evening, he regained control of his body.

He was full of Bai's spend. When he pushed himself up on his arms, some of the thick fluid clung between his legs and on his inner thighs.

Bai sat next to the window, his back turned to Commander Ho. He flipped through his battered book under the dimming daylight.

Commander Ho crawled to the foot of the bed. Forcing down his discomfort, he slowly put on his shirt and trousers.

"Little Uncle," he began softly, his voice airy like an apparition's. "Am I very stupid?"

Bai didn't turn around. "Yes," he answered coolly.

"Pathetic, am I not?"

"Yes."

Commander Ho dug out a pistol under the pile of clothes. With a tight grip, he aimed it at the back of Bai's head and pulled the trigger wordlessly.

- :-

Bai died a clean death. It could be said that it was completely painless.

His head burst open in an instant, his brains spattering everywhere. His body remained seated at the desk and his hands still held the book. Even without a head, he still wanted to continue reading, oblivious and ignorant.

A whole minute when by. When the guards rushed into the room, he finally slumped to the ground, apparently having resigned himself to his fate and submitted to death.

Commander Ho gave his orders expressionlessly: "Drag him out and bury him. Keep quiet."

The guards brought Bai's body away. Commander Ho dressed himself and followed them out.

He made his way slowly through the courtyard. With the tremble of his footsteps, Bai's seed dripped down his thighs. It was warm, full of his and his body heat.

The setting sun shone like blood in the distance, its glow more brilliant than Bai Su-Ch'en's brains.

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[1] This has to do with face reading. I think.

[2]疼 is short for 疼爱 which means "to love" or "to dote on". The word 疼 itself also means "pain", "ache", "to hurt",

etc... It does make an odd sort of sense, now that I think about it.

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# [A Cruel Romance, Vol. II] Buddha Bless Me

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 [sl-Ilian.livejournal.com/14588.html](http://sl-Ilian.livejournal.com/14588.html)

## Buddha Bless Me

Commander Ho began to question his own sanity.

“Why did I kill him?” he asked himself.

He didn't know the answer. Now that Bai Su-Ch'en was six feet under feeding ants, an answer would be pointless even if he arrived at one.

He wouldn't admit that he was remorseful, even though he was practically choking on remorse. Heavens knew how much he liked Bai. Even if Bai didn't accept his love, it'd still be nice to see him occasionally and have some fun.

But now, because of a single, thoughtless pull of the trigger, the man Bai Su-Ch'en ceased to exist.

He couldn't think too hard about it or he'd go mad. He didn't dare to. Countless men had died by his hand. Such things were inconsequential. When a scythe was swung crops would fall, it was as simple as that, fair and logical. Yet somehow, this time around, Bai's grievance hung heavy above him like an invisible cloud.

When he lay between sleep and wakefulness at night, he was frequented by the dim impression that someone else was in the room with him. The man paced soundlessly before his bed in a light-coloured suit, looking trim and dashing. He stopped to bend down and look upon Commander Ho. A voice rose: “Little Ch'i-Bao, how could you kill me?” Red and white erupted from his head and dripped down his face.

Commander Ho shot up in bed. “Hsiao-Shun!”

An army cot creaked outside. “Chi-yeh.”

“Come in here!”

Hsiao-Shun stepped into his slippers and hurried into the room, switching on the lights on his way.

Commander Ho sat in bed, his face a deathly pale. He was drenched in cold sweat and his short hair stuck wetly to his forehead. He turned to look at Hsiao-Shun and discovered that the boy had grown into a strong young man.

The sight reassured him. “Come sleep inside.”

Hsiao-Shun didn't asked for an explanation. He went back to roll up his bedclothes, then carried them and laid them down in a corner by the entrance. He shut the door and stood there.

Commander Ho had nothing else to say. He only wanted another man's presence in the room so that the heavier yang would make him feel a bit braver.

“Turn off the lights, go to sleep.”

He pulled back his covers and lay down. Darkness fell, and the sounds of shifting and shuffling soon turned to silence.

Commander Ho closed his eyes.

“Little Ch'i-Bao.” Bai's head raptured with a pop. His voice remained. “Give me back my head.”

- : -

Just when Hsiao-Shun was slipping into sleep, Commander Ho's sudden cry jolted him awake.

Commander Ho sat panting in bed. "Turn—turn on the lights!"

Hsiao-Shun sprang up and switched on the lights. "Ch'i-yeh?"

Commander Ho jumped out of bed and paced barefooted on the ground. Since his face was colorless, his brows and eyes appeared even darker than usual. His eyes were turbulent, bottomless ponds. Some untold mystery churned a thousand of feet under the surface, but up above, only ripples remained.

"Is there someone else in the room?" he asked quietly.

Hsiao-Shun was slightly baffled. "No?"

Commander Ho kneeled before the bed. He pulled back the silk sheets and looked under the bed, then stood up and opened both the closet and the dresser. When he finally concluded his fruitless search, he sat back down on the bed, his chest rising and falling rapidly.

"Hsiao-Shun," he patted the space next to him. "Come sleep up here."

Hsiao-Shun faltered, thinking he'd misheard.

To make room for Hsiao-Shun, Commander Ho tugged his down pillow to the side. The movement exposed a pair of pistols and a white porcelain urn. He tucked the pistols back under the pillow and held up the urn. "You're just watching him scare me," he said bitterly. "Why aren't you helping? I may be afraid of him, but what's a dead man got to be afraid of?"

He spat at the white urn and shoved it back under his pillow.

Hsiao-Shun made his way to the bed, his own pillow and blanket in arms. He stood there hesitantly, not daring to lay his things down. Commander Ho didn't spare him any further attention and settled down himself. He waited for a while, then seeing that Hsiao-Shun was still standing there, finally snapped crossly: "Turn off the lights and get the fuck in!"

- : -

With both terror and curiosity, Hsiao-Shun lay next to Commander Ho.

Commander Ho tossed and turned under the dim moonlight, and simply refused to shut his eyes and go to sleep in peace. Not only did he not go to sleep, he mumbled incomprehensibly, his tone sharp and almost threatening.

At the edge of the bed, Hsiao-Shun lay ramrod straight on his side. He shut his eyes and tried to get some rest, knowing that he wouldn't catch any real sleep tonight. It didn't matter to Commander Ho whether he slept or not, since he could sleep whenever he wanted during the day. It was a different matter for Hsiao-Shun—a full day of service and labour awaited him. There would be no time for naps.

He began to grow drowsy, eventually, when suddenly and like a live fish, Commander Ho dove under Hsiao-Shun's blanket—or rather, he dove head first into Hsiao-Shun's arms.

"Hold me, hold me!" Commander Ho demanded, trembling and drenched in sweat. He pressed his hot body into Hsiao-Shun's.

Alarms went off in Hsiao-Shun's head like sudden bells. Eyes wide and bright, he stared straight in front of him.

Commander Ho wasn't there. His sweaty head was pressed against Hsiao-Shun's chin, his body nearly curled up into a ball.

As commanded, Hsiao-Shun reached out a hand and draped it loosely around Commander Ho's back.

- :-

Commander Ho'd had trouble sleeping ever since Bai Su-Ch'en died. Between his fits of sleep and wakefulness, he was unable to get any real rest. Tonight, his suffering reached a climax.

He got out of the bed in the early hours of the day. Since he'd gotten a momentary reprieve with the help of Hsiao-Shun, for the very first time, it felt like he didn't raise the boy in vain. He even resolved to be a bit kinder to him in the future.

He told the white porcelain urn: "even he's better than you are, you bastard!"

- :-

Once he'd washed up, he finished a large bowl of noodle soup anxiously and called over Feng Guo-Chung, giving him a set of instructions.

Unable to make much out of it, Feng departed to carry out his orders. Two hours later, he returned with three carfuls of Buddhist lamas. The orderlies sent out to buy incense and offerings for the dead also returned, and the two teams joined up as they headed to the grave site outside of town.

It wasn't hard to find Bai Su-Chen's grave, since he had a headstone and was buried recently. Commander Ho stood before it and had the men set up the offerings. Sighing, he said to the headstone: "Little Uncle, I didn't take your life on purpose. I was caught up in the heat to the moment and pulled the trigger without thinking. Please, go on to wherever you're supposed to be. What's the point of staying behind to torment me? You can't torment me to death, can you? I am genuinely sorry. Forgive me."

Stepping back, he kneeled thrice and gave nine kowtows, the high tribute of a mourning son. Flames blazed as they burned the paper offerings. The lamas chanted the scriptures in an echoing rhythm, which actually sounded quite pleasant.

He went to bed in a blissful calm that night. Within the hour, he dove right back into Hsiao-Shun's arms, drenched again in cold sweat.

- :-

He grew resentful. Since Bai refused to cooperate, he had no choice but to resort to brute force.

Feng understood the nature of his concerns, so he hired a few well-known local exorcists to take care of Commander Ho's residence. The exorcists, knowing their employer, were especially diligent in their efforts. They called upon the powers of everything from Wong Tai Sin to fox and centipede spirits, and made quite a ghastly racket as they filled Commander Ho's nice house with turbid mayhem. Pale-faced and wearing dark circles under his eyes, Commander Ho felt as if his chest was boiling. The blood gurgling and bubbling within him made him want to retch.

Once the exorcists left, he dared not wait for sunset and hurried to the nearest temple to invite a statue of Shakyamuni Buddha home.

- :-

Under the combined protection of exorcists, the Buddha, and Hsiao-Shun, Commander Ho finally enjoyed a good night of sleep.

Feeling rested and refreshed, he got out of bed in the morning and kowtowed at the Buddha statue respectfully. “May the Buddha bless me and grant me safety,” he prayed in silence.

- :-

Since he had temporarily subdued Bai’s specter, Commander Ho could focus his efforts once again on his local subjugation plans.

He sent a message to Chao Chen-Sheng’s Anti-Japanese Resistance Alliance, declaring his stance and hoping that the other man would piss off to resist the Japanese in Ji-An. Maddeningly, it turned out that Chao wasn’t actually stupid, and had seen through his schemes right away.

Chao gave him the following reply: “Jehol is a part of the Republic of China’s territory, not Manchukuo’s. I can either incorporate you or run you off. It’s up to you.”

Commander Ho nearly blew a fuse. Before he could respond, the Resistance Alliance already opened fire on Longhua.

Commander Ho sent out reinforcements immediately. When things began to look grim, he got on the concrete platform in the main camp and lectured the entirety of his army.

Through a loudspeaker set to the highest volume, Commander Ho’s voice reverberated through the camp. “If we win, you will get three days to plunder freely. If we lose, do not expect any leniency from me! You should already understand what you’ll have to do. I’ll tell you this: while you serve under the Garrison Army—extortion, thievery, gambling, whoring—you get to live like royalty, do whatever you want. Once the Garrison Army falls, do you think you’ll still enjoy this sort of privilege? Or find another commander as accommodating as I am? Only in your dreams!”

The soldiers listened in silence, knowing that their smooth-faced commander was speaking the truth.

At the end of the lecture, Commander Ho had a few hog-tied officers ushered onto the platform.

“You must all know who these are,” Commander Ho said.

The men stared up at the platform, recognizing a few officers from the Ordinance Department.

“These here bastards,” Commander Ho continued, “sold ammunition to the Resistance Alliance in secret. The bullets that cost us thirty pence each were being resold for fifteen pence! Every coin in the Garrison Army’s treasury were earned by the very lives of our comrades, and these brats not only lined their own pockets with dishonest money, they were doing it at a fucking loss! The Resistance Alliance are all laughing at us fools! This is a crime beyond redemption! Guards! Light these bastards up!”

- :-

They gagged and drenched the officers in cooking oil. Tied them to tall poles and set their feet on fire. Their screams were stuck in their throats, and they only let out a few strange noises that sounded like the squeals of butchered pigs.

Commander Ho stood to the side and observed the proceedings with some interest, his left hand hugging his chest and his right hand rubbing his chin. The soldiers, too, watched avidly, speculating which of the sorry bastards would last the longest.

The sudden crack of gunfire tore through the air.

Used to hearing the sound of gunshots, the soldiers didn’t even react and only stared dumbly at Commander Ho,

whose right hand jerked up before he fell over with a thud.

A moment later, the yelping crowd erupted into movement. Guards surged forth to envelope Commander Ho, and a battalion of heavily armed soldiers surrounded the meeting place, yelling at everyone to stay still. Amidst the chaos, Commander Ho struggled to his feet and appeared to be mostly unharmed, though the white glove on his hand was soaked red with blood.

He clutched his wrist with his left hand, gasping in pain. Behind the human shield formed by his guards, he hurried off the platform and headed for the clinic.

- :-

They caught the assassin right away, but he shot himself before they could hold him down and extract any useful information. Commander Ho found out later that the man's brother was killed by the Resistance Alliance, and decided that it must have been the Japanese behind the assassination.

Had the bullet struck an inch higher, it would have gone right into his skull.

Commander Ho's right hand was wrapped in bandages and dangling in front of his chest. There was a transparent hole in his palm. It will close off eventually, but he didn't know if it would leave him with any long-term issues.

Kneeling in front of the Buddha statue, he balanced himself on a single arm, touched his forehead to the ground, and thanked the Buddha for protection.

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Hi again, you lovely folks! Sorry about the wait, hope it wasn't too torturous D:

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# [A Cruel Romance, Vol. II] An Old Friend

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 [sl-Ilian.livejournal.com/14913.html](http://sl-Ilian.livejournal.com/14913.html)

I didn't have time to edit. I'M SORRY! :( If you don't mind waiting please come back in a few days for the edited version! Otherwise, let me know if something doesn't make sense.

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## An Old Friend

Commander Ho's desire to fight dwindled once he concluded that the Japanese wanted him dead.

On his own, it'd be exceedingly difficult to take on both the Japanese and the Anti-Japanese at the same time. Of course, Feng Guo-Chung's Adjutant Department had over three thousand men, so if it really came to it, they could always flee to Mongolia and revert to banditry. But leading bandits was not the same as commanding a proper army, as the steppes were not the same as Jehol. If they could, it would ultimately be better to stay.

The Resistance Alliance had already captured Longhua, but when they pushed forward, they got ambushed by the Garrison Army and suffered heavy losses. Spotting an opportunity, Commander Ho telegrammed Chao Chen-Sheng and expressed his desire to hold a parley.

Ever since his defeat in Hsian, Chao had harboured a profound hatred for the fence-sitting Ho Bao-Ting. But he did not outright refuse Commander Ho's demand for a truce, since he had limited resources and didn't want to sink all of it into some Jehol bandit.

The talks were to be held in the county-town of Longhua. The area belonged to the Garrison Army in name, but in reality, it was occupied by the Resistance Alliance and counted as neutral ground.

Out of concern for his own safety and fear that Chao might strand him in Longhua and murder him, Commander Ho arrived in town with a massive entourage. Chao, however, had no such intentions. There were plenty of puppets to go around. Even with Ho Bao-Ting out of the picture, the Japanese would find others to take his place, and the replacement would likely be much more loyal and obedient.

In any case, loose cannons like Ho were relatively rare. He'd be a volatile element no matter where he was, so Chao might as well leave him in Manchukuo to pester the Japanese.

- :-

They chose to hold their parley in the estate of a wealthy man in the area. The man and his family had been thrown out long ago, and his home was left to accommodate the soldiers. One of the parlours were cleared out to act as the meeting place.

Commander Ho was a cautious man. Nightmares plagued his sleep again, so he simply woke up early and proceeded to systematically outfit himself.

- :-

Commander Ho's car and armed escorts arrived at the estate at nine in the morning. The car's door swung open, and a dozen guards came up and surrounded the vehicle before Commander Ho emerged from it.

Regaining his balance on the ground, he was in no hurry to move forward and looked around to take careful stock of his surroundings.

Autumn had already arrived. It was particularly chilly that week, and since Commander Ho suffered from kidney problems that made him more susceptible to the cold, he could not abide by the custom of wearing “more in the spring and less in the autumn”. He’d usually be the first to break out the winter clothes around this time of the year, but today was a special occasion, and inside his uniform and bullet proof vest, he had five pistols plus their ammunition stashed around his body, totaling to about twenty pounds. If he had added any more insulation to his setup, the bulk would’ve looked ridiculous.

A humid breeze flitted past and he shivered in spite of himself. Nothing around him appeared out of the ordinary. Standing by the front gates were about a hundred Alliance soldiers who must have been Chao Chen-Sheng’s guards.

He raised a gloved hand to cover a sneeze and fished a handkerchief out of his pocket to wipe his nose. Under the weight of those twenty pounds of gear, he strode toward the front gates. The soldiers parted in front of him and created a narrow path, admitting him alone.

The air was cold and the ground was hard. The soles of his riding boots were rigid. Everything had lost its softness, and the click of each step made the walk seem slow and determined.

There were only a few feet between the car and the gates, but the distance seemed to exhaust Commander Ho, who was perhaps weighed down by either his guns or his lack of sleep. Like a flighty child, the Buddha had suddenly withdrawn his protection and allowed Bai’s ghost to return.

Still in a daze after the agonizing night, Commander Ho felt like he was being watched. When he reached the front gates, he couldn’t help but stop and look behind him.

He was tall enough that his gaze went unobstructed above two guards. He saw only the cluttered troops of the Resistance Alliance. Nothing was out of place.

Reining in his thoughts, he stepped through the gates and continued into the courtyard.

- : -

Chao Chen-Sheng had arrived early. Spotting Commander Ho, he stood up and greeted him energetically: “my, my, brother Ji-Ch’ing. Long time no see, ha-ha-ha!”

Commander Ho laughed along. “Brother Cheng-Ch’en, still as dashing as ever, ha-ha-ha!”

Then like chirping birds, the two of them ‘ha-ha-ha’ed crisply and melodiously. Among these ha-has were pleasantries, and between the pleasantries were more ha-has. This instantly created an ebullient atmosphere.

After the customary back-and-forth offerings of seats and the two of them settled down, they avoided bringing up their past and focused instead on small talk and ha-ha-ing. Over ten minutes of ha-has later, Chao, sensing that Commander Ho seemed intent on laughing and could happily laugh through the entire day, could only nudge their conversation toward the right track amicably.

“I’ve got to say this, brother Ji-Ch’ing. Even though you are still young, nobody takes national honor more seriously than you do! Just for your outright refusal to work with the Japanese, you have my respect!”

Commander Ho took off his gloves and stuffed them inside his coat pockets. “You flatter me, brother Cheng-Ch’en. That’s the sort of mindset people like us need to have. Chinese land should be governed by the Chinese, it’s only logical! The Japs made a mistake to target me.”

Chao clapped his hands together. “Precisely! My goodness, brother Ji-Ch’ing, it’s really true when they say ‘heroes are forged out of youths’, and ‘the young will always surpass the old’! I have no great talent myself, but I’ve a great

love for talent! I can't help but admire your success, good brother. If you and me can join up as one, we'll no doubt kick the shit of those Japs and send them running back through the Pass!"

Commander Ho managed a few laughs. "Ah...brother Cheng-Ch'en, you do carry the weight of the world within your bosom! For this I admire you tremendously. But as important as reclaiming lost land is, we can't overlook the importance of guarding our current territory. Now that I'm here in Jehol, its people are my responsibility. I must at least guarantee their—uh—safety. My abilities are limited, brother Cheng-Ch'en. I've got to take things one at a time, or I'll risk botching them all. And wouldn't that be...ha-ha...disastrous."

Commander Ho covered another sneeze with a hand and raised a teacup to his lips. He seemed to want to soothe his dry throat, but only brushed the teacup against his lips and set it back down.

Chao regarded him coolly, knowing that he was worried about poison. He watched the teacup tremble in Commander Ho's hand and nearly spill over. "I heard you were attacked by the Japanese a while ago. Are you all right?"

Commander Ho looked down at his right hand. The gunshot wound had closed off, leaving pink round scars on both his palm and the back of his hand.

The hand was mostly useless now. It shook with the slightest exertion, and everything from the tip of his fingers to his wrist would itch and ache maddeningly on rainy days.

He looked back up and turned to Chao. "Thanks to the Buddha's protection, I am fine now," he answered with a smile. "But it was a very close call. That bullet nearly took my head off."

Chao smiled. "Brother Ji-Ch'ing, you're truly blessed by fate! They say that those who survive great adversities are bound to find great fortune."

Commander Ho laughed. "Auspicious words, Brother Cheng-Ch'en! If great fortune indeed arrives, I'll be sure to thank you first!"

Chao rubbed his smooth chin smilingly, looking as if he wanted to twirl a moustache. "As young and promising as you, my brother, and with so much power in your hands to guard Jehol with, as long as you want it, great fortune won't be far off!"

Commander Ho cast him a glance. "Ha-ha! If you turn out to be right about that, then we shall share that fortune!"

Chao laughed unhaltingly into the sky, then changed his tune. "My brother, they say that each man has his own ambitions and cannot be forced, but I do have a presumptuous request. My troops would like to rest in Longhua for a few days. Would you allow this for my sake?"

Commander Ho was already prepared to give up Longhua, so he answered placidly: "Of course I would. You've dedicated your life to the war against the Japanese. If only I could march onto the battlefield and fight by your side! How can I possibly refuse the chance to support you through other means?"

Feeling satisfied with their progress, they began to ha-ha knowingly again.

- : -

The success of the talks between Ho and Chao exceeded both their expectations.

They launched into idle chitchat once the important issues were resolved. Seeing that everything went well, Commander Ho let out the breath he was holding and leaned back into his chair. His body ached under weight of those twenty pounds of equipment, which he almost wanted to take off on the spot.

With much enthusiasm, Chao invited Commander Ho to dine with him at the largest restaurant in town. Just when Commander Ho was about to decline, an orderly burst through the door. "General, Sir!" he cried. "Major-General Li has arrived!"

Chao rubbed his chin and appeared to hesitate for a moment. "Oh..."

Before he could come up with any further comments, clattering footsteps approached from the courtyard and a tall man sauntered in. Without greeting anyone, he strode straight to a chair and plunked down, then looked grinningly to Commander Ho.

Commander Ho jerked up straight—Li Shih-Yao!

Before he could respond, Li leaned forward in his chair and scanned him up and down as if he could taste him with just his eyes.

When Commander Ho opened his mouth, Li gave a wide grin and revealed a row of white teeth. "Commander, you've put on weight!"

When Commander Ho's tongue finally made contact with the air in the room, Li added: "In a good way! It's a good look on you."

Commander Ho's vocal cords finally vibrated successfully and produced a yelp of surprise.

Li began to explain his presence. "So. After you left, I took my troops to work for Chao. Fought from Hsian to Hopeh. I only found out a few days ago it was you guarding Jehol, so I came here with the General right away. Nothing else, just wanted to see you."

Commander Ho shut his mouth and broke out in an inexplicable but profuse sweat.

Chao spoke up again. "Brother Ji-Ch'ing, you know Shih-Yao lacks manners, but he is a good man. I'm a firm believer that 'a person's face reflects his heart'. A man with fine features like Shih-Yao's can't possibly be lacking in character." Then he added internally: "but you're an exception."

Commander Ho's mind tended to function at a slow speed. If he hadn't prepared for it beforehand, he could really remain silent throughout an encounter. Once Chao had finished speaking, he only nodded solemnly and let out a small humph.

Chao knew about this particular habit of his and paid it no mind. He slapped the armrest of his chair and laughed. "Let's go, brother! I'm telling you, 'men require good meals as women need good clothes!' Let's go get a good meal! The best restaurant here in Longhua is called Fu K'e Lai, we can get some good lamb hotpot there."

Commander Ho's mind whirled into operation and scrambled to catch up with Chao. "I—to be honest with you, I'm vegetarian. I—"

Chao thought Commander Ho was still worried about poison, so he pressed on even more exuberantly: "Vegetarian? I'll get you some vegetarian dishes! Let's get going! You've already lend me Longhua, how can I not at least treat you to lunch? Let's go, let's go, or else I'll take offense!"

He stood up and called out to Li. "Shih-Yao! You're an old subordinate of Ji-Ch'ing's, why are you just sitting there? Come attend to our guest!"

Once he received the command, Li quickly approached Commander Ho and bent down in front of him with a smile. "Let's go, Commander. How much time can one meal take?" He took hold of Commander Ho's arm and made a show of wanting to help him to his feet. "How about I take you arm and walk you to the door, your highness?"

Confronted with Li's behavior and Chao's earnest face, Commander Ho could not refuse them again without appearing rude. He stood up and mumbled reluctantly: "Let's get going, then."

Chao smirked internally: "Watch me scare the life out of you, little brat!"

- : -

The county-town of Longhua entered lockdowns every time the top brass went out in town. Fu K'e Lai was cleared out the day before and had its best private room set up, just so that said brass could enjoy a pleasant lunch.

As the guest of honor, it went without saying that Commander Ho had the head seat. Chao insisted that he humble himself and sit beside Commander Ho like Li, who sat on his other side. His main reason for coming here was to enjoy the hot pot. Terrorizing Commander Ho was the secondary purpose. Once the hot pot began to simmer, he could no longer spare his tongue to entertain his honored guest.

The hot, pungent steam of boiling lamb assaulted Commander Ho's face while his pistols and bullet-proof vest constricted his body. On top of his lack of sleep, the proceedings were an unbearable torture. Li sat beside him and took up the important task of accommodating the guest of honor.

The methods of his accommodation were rather intimate. He sipped his Maotai and eyed Commander Ho with a pleased pensive look, as if Commander Ho was one of the appetizers.

Commander Ho didn't look at or acknowledge him and turned to speak to Chao, but Chao was absorbed in inhaling his food and had little desire to chat.

Swallowing down his liquor, Li began: "Commander, what would you like to eat? I'll get it for you."

Commander Ho waved him off.

Li caught his hand halfway through the wave.

"Hey," Li placed a fingertip against the round scar on the back of his hand. "What happened here?" He turned Commander Ho's hand over and inspected his palm. "Fuck! It went right through. Did it injure your bones?"

Commander Ho yanked his hand back and said to the hot pot in front of him: "I'm fine."

Li pulled his chair closer to Commander Ho. "Who did it? Were they caught?"

Commander Ho also pulled his chair and moved it closer to Chao. "The Japanese."

Seeing that the other man was evading him, Li stopped moving and changed the subject. "You're quite talented. It's only been a year since I last saw you and you already took over an entire province. I knew you wouldn't stay put at home and retire."

Commander Ho thought it was a long a story and couldn't be bothered to tell it. But after a moment of silence, he decided that it would make himself appear petty to be overly cold to Li, like he held some sort of grudge against him. With some hesitation, he finally said: "You're looking well, Major-General Li. How have you been?"

"Not bad," Li answered. "A lot happened to me too after you left Luyang. I can tell you the details someday, if you like." When Commander Ho was off his guard, Li caught his hand again and studied it laboriously. "What a pity. Got this fine hand ruined."

Commander Ho frowned. "It's not like I haven't been shot before. What are you poring over it for? Anyway, it's nothing important. Hand wounds aren't life-threatening. What's there to pity?"

Li laughed and squeezed his hand. "Listen to you! I wouldn't be saying this if it wasn't you the bullet went through! Ungrateful thing!"

Commander Ho narrowed his eyes. "What did you say?"

Li tightened his hold on his hand and rubbed it back and forth. He grinned sidelong at him. "I haven't said anything! This temper of yours needs work."

Commander Ho continued to glare at him. "You'll fucking let go of me!"

- :-

The happiest participant of this meal was Chao Chen-Sheng. He consumed three pounds of fat tender lamb and one pound of fine Maotai, and was left utterly satisfied. The most miserable was Commander Ho, who nearly suffocated under the weight of his gear. As for Li Shih-Yao, he'd eaten almost nothing and had a few drinks on an empty stomach. In between the sips of liquor were glances thrown in Commander Ho's direction—he aimed these glances specifically below the waist, humming to himself some folksong of unknown origin. He didn't remember the lyrics, but two lines did leave an impression: "*the big brother married a little lass; the little lass had a nice round ass.*"

- :-

Commander Ho had always known that Li was crude and vulgar, but since it had little to do with himself, he'd only despised him from afar. But since that time Li took advantage of Commander Ho's misfortune back in Luyang, he certainly did have something to do with him.

He'd thought that he would likely never have the chance to meet Li again. Now that they did meet, aside from surprise, he didn't experience any burning desire for revenge. In any case, they'd soon go on their separate ways.

But how did Li feel about this?

It hadn't crossed his mind.

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Commander Ho parted with Chao Chen-Sheng and Li Shih-Yao in peace at the entrance of Fu K'e Lai Restaurant. Behind the protection of the human wall formed by his guards, he got on his car and sped away.

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I'm so proud of myself for making those lyrics rhyme.

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# [A Cruel Romance, Vol. II] A Sudden Development

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## A Sudden Development

Once he'd reached a truce with Chao Chen-Sheng, Commander Ho enjoyed a few days of peace and quiet.

Of course, this was an objective assessment. From Commander Ho's subjective point of view, his lack of things to do granted him neither peace nor quiet. His anxiety persisted despite the uneventfulness of his days, its cause unclear.

It was easy to fall into reveries and illusions when one suffered from prolonged periods of inner turmoil. Commander Ho was no exception. In addition to men, his enemies now included ghosts.

Bai Su-Ch'en still lurked nearby—he was certain of it. There was no other explanation for the vision of the smartly-dressed shadow that bent down over his bed and whispered "little Ch'i-Bao, where's my head?" whenever he closed his eyes.

He spent his days in pious worship. Prostrating himself before the Buddha statue with his forehead on the floor, he gleaned a sort of masochistic pleasure from the cold, hard surface.

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Feng Guo-Chung came to visit.

He fancied himself a trusted follower among Commander Ho's inner circle, so he didn't bother getting a guard to announce his arrival. He strode straight through the courtyard and into the house.

Hsiao-Shun opened the door for him and shushed him with a finger raised to his lips. Feng softened his footsteps and tiptoed to the parlour's entrance. Commander Ho knelt on a cushion before a Buddha statue, his back turned. He was holding a string of jade prayer beads and murmuring a scripture.

Feng waited in silence.

Commander Ho completed the scripture and made to get up. Perhaps he had been kneeling for too long and had lost feeling in his legs, he slumped to the side mid-rise and fell right on his tailbone.

Feng rushed forward. Wrapping a hand under Commander Ho's arm and another around his waist, he half-dragged and half-lifted Commander Ho into a nearby chair. Despite his grievous injury, Commander Ho's face showed no sign of pain. He accepted a teacup from Hsiao-Shun and took a sip, then looked up at Feng. "What is it?"

Feng broke into a smile. "About the funding I mentioned last time..."

Commander Ho's face darkened, and he waved a hand at Feng irritably. "You're nothing but a waste of space! What's the first thing you do when you see me? Ask for more money!" He gestured at Hsiao-Shun. "Even he's more useful!"

"That can't be! I must be better than him, at the very least!"

"He helps calm my nerves! What can you do beside get on my nerves?" Commander Ho wrapped the prayer beads around his wrist and stood to pace on the floor. "I'll give you thirty thousand silver coins this time. Don't you dare ask for more within six months."

Feng grinned. "That's enough. Thank you, Commander."

With a clatter, Commander Ho pulled the prayer beads off his wrist and flung them in a circle around his finger. "We'll need more recruits. Who knows when the next war will break out, and once it does, keeping them fed won't be an issue. I'm telling you—OW!"

Feng watched as the string of beads sail through the air and hit Commander Ho right in the eye.

- :-

A jade prayer bead struck Commander Ho under his left brow, nearly popping an eye. Commander Ho rested tearfully for two days. On the third day, they were to hold a meeting at the Command Center, and Commander Ho had no choice but to attend with a black eye.

Feng did not broadcast the cause of Commander Ho's injury, but the orderlies were loose-tongued and had gone around recounting the details of Commander Ho's self-inflicted injury with lively enthusiasm. The officers, having learned of the incident, already found it amusing. Now that they beheld the Commander's countenance in its full bruised glory, they could barely contain their laughter.

Commander Ho was somewhat embarrassed by his appearance, and after quickly getting caught up on the goings-on of each department, he ended the meeting and left with haste.

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Commander Ho viewed the accident as a sign of the Buddha's abandonment. While it was true that he had committed a few atrocities, his faithfulness to the Buddha couldn't be faulted. He presented Him with offerings and kowtows daily, never faltering, yet the Buddha still saw fit to allow some prayer bead to nearly take out his eye, which was surely an indication of the Buddha's own lack of honor!

He had a mind to smash the Buddha statue to pieces, but he feared that the Buddha was indeed all-powerful, and would collude with Bai Su-Ch'en to seek revenge. After much deliberation, he decided on a more diplomatic approach and got on his knees in front of the statue. He gave two respectful kowtows and began to recite the Diamond Sutra softly.

As he chanted the scripture, a thought suddenly occurred to him. "If everything is Emptiness," he thought to himself, "then life is Emptiness, death is Emptiness, man Emptiness, matter Emptiness, good Emptiness, evil Emptiness. So if I've killed and stolen, I've killed Emptiness and stolen Emptiness. 'Emptiness' means nothing, naught. That is to say, I've killed no one, stolen nothing; in other words: everything I've killed and stolen were for naught. Then by this logic, I've never actually committed any sins—I've done nothing at all!"

Arriving at this conclusion, he wanted to throw himself at the Buddha's feet out of sheer admiration. He kowtowed once more for luck, thinking: "praise be, the Buddha's far more ruthless than me! Then what am I afraid of? If it really comes to it, I can always 'drop the butcher's knife and become a Buddha!'"

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Having reached an understanding with the Buddha, Commander Ho felt deeply reassured. Not long after feeling reassured, the Japanese launched an attack.

- :-

When kidnapping civilians and robbing commoners, the men of the Garrison Army were all exceptionally fearsome and valiant. When it came to actually defending against the Japanese, they turned collectively into melons ripe for the picking. Aside from serving as target practice, they could only wet themselves in terror as they retreated, not

even bothering to pick up their weaponry and supplies.

Commander Ho was taken aback by the utter uselessness of his men. But although he was quite shaken by the situation, he refused to send out Feng Guo-Chung's elite troops. Feng had a few thousand men under his command, all well-equipped and trained to proper Academy standards. They were Commander Ho's last resort. Short of guarding his own safety, he'd never put them on the battlefield.

They could only watch while the Japanese laid waste to Chifeng and headed straight for Chengde. Without hesitation, Commander Ho made a quick exit and fled away with his personal army.

- : -

Commander Ho was normally a man of a slower temperament, but it wouldn't be a stretch to say that he was able to run for his life with a speed swifter than wind and lightning. He could no longer retreat to Mongolia, so he made for Longhua as he telegraphed Chao Chen-Sheng for help.

Chao was not in Longhua. He'd left Li Shih-Yao and his division stationed there. Before Chao's orders could reach him, Li had decided to open the city gates—but only to admit Commander Ho and his guards.

Commander Ho felt a bit anxious without his troops, and since Li wasn't a stranger, he demanded bluntly: "why didn't you let them in?"

Li wore a grin. "Commander, I haven't actually heard back from General Chao. I'm acting without permission here, so I can't openly let an army in. The Japanese won't reach us for some time. Just let them stay outside for now. Once General Chao's orders arrive, I'll open the gates right away."

The explanation seemed reasonable, and Commander Ho couldn't find a retort.

"Are you tired?" Li asked.

Commander was still musing over their previous topic of conversation, and he replied irrelevantly: "Those are the only useful men I have left. If the Japanese show up, you must let them in right away! Or else I'll have your head!"

Li nodded repeatedly. "All right, all right. I understand."

Commander Ho matched Li's steps, then paused when something occurred to him. "Where are we going?"

Li assumed Commander Ho was still disoriented from his trying escape, so he answered patiently: "I need to find somewhere for you to stay. Longhua's a large place, it's not like you and your men can sleep in the streets."

Hearing this, Commander Ho gave Li a sudden shove. "Fuck you! Longhua used to belong to me! Now you're telling me to sleep in the streets?"

Caught off guard, Li staggered on his feet. He was not angry, but he certainly wasn't pleased. He worried that Commander Ho might claw him. "Who's telling you to sleep in the streets? It was a figure of speech! Am I not allowed to use a figure of speech?"

Commander Ho considered this, realizing that he was being unreasonable. He quelled his unwarranted annoyance. "Never mind. Let's go."

Li sidled up to him and set out, muttering internally: "Did the brat swallow gunpowder? All that temper for what little he's good for! What's a little thing like him doing leading an army, anyway? Better to just get in bed and wait for my cock!"

- : -

Commander Ho and Li Shih-Yao ended up staying at the same place.

Commander Ho was immensely displeased by the turn of events. Li noted his displeasure and assured him unhurriedly: “it’s safer for you this way. What if there’s some secret agent or spy in town? Are you able take a straight up bullet?”

Commander Ho glared at him. “You’re right, Major-General Li. I’m not. Are you able to take one?”

Li did not respond to the veiled insult. We’ll see, he thought. No wonder they made a point to cow new brides into submission. People wouldn’t know their place without some active discipline.

But how exactly should he go about this?

Li took in the furnishings in the room thoughtfully. While he schemed, he instructed the orderlies to fetch beddings and toiletries from the storeroom. Eyes scanning the entrance, he spotted Hsiao-Shun.

“Hey! Little whelp—” He strode up to Hsiao-Shun. “Do you still remember me?”

Hsiao-Shun kept his head down and answered softly: “I do. You’re Major-General Li.”

Li smacked his shoulder. “Good lad! All grown up, eh? You were like some underfed monkey just a few years ago, but look at you now! Commander Ho, you’ve got a real eye for quality!”

Commander Ho had already taken a seat on the bare brick bed. He was slightly mollified by Li’s comment, feeling like he hadn’t failed completely.

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