

*Some time has passed since our heroes and heroines' [training in Siberia](#). Out in the world, with Oilberger and Siberia far behind him, Ben Hammer embarks on a new adventure...*

From the top of the radio tower, Hammer scanned the mountains. They were blanketed by an impossible green.

He thought back on what had brought him here. What seemed real, what seemed unreal. Siberia. The fire. Hartman's voice calling through the flames.

He watched a hawk, a speck, circling below.

He wondered, briefly, what Alex was doing now. Back home, it was night time on Sunday. She would just be making dinner. Something cheap and simple simple—a chicken quesadilla or some noodles. In the distance, the same sun he'd left in Colorado hung behind Mount Hua.

Suddenly, he heard a boom below.

Thick black smoke rose up amongst the green.

He radioed down to the outpost, which looked the size of a Monopoly house below him.

"Hey, Kip," he radioed down. "I'm seeing some black smoke somewhere on the other side of the village. Any idea what that could be?"

"I don't know, I just saw it too." said Kip. "Wanna go check it out?"

"Sounds dangerous."

Hammer met Kip down at the base of the tower, where orange butterflies circled above the ground. A stray dog sniffed at the wild strawberries that ran along the path.

They walked down the path, past laborers carrying mechanical parts and farmers carrying wicker baskets and tanks of water.

Kip had curly hair and an always-earnest face. The strong jaw that had blessed Hammer had never suited his personality, he thought.

"Should we wait for Gordon?" said Hammer.

"It's up to you," said Kip. "He won't be back til night, I bet. By the time he gets there it might be hard to find the source of the smoke. If we go a little bit closer and watch from a good vantage point we should be safe."

"Sounds to me like you're the EXPERT, Kip," said Hammer.

They set off on the pathway into town. They passed day laborers, shirtless, carrying shovels, into rice fields.

"It looked like it was just past the village," said Hammer.

A highway ran along the river, and the village had grown alongside it. Blue motorcycles hauled wood and baskets of fruit along the road. Trash and liquor bottles littered the shore of the river.

They passed rows of concrete brick houses. All had red doors and most bore a large sticker of the character for "luck" upside-down. Tired laborers passed, sitting in truck beds and crammed into buses, squinting over cigarettes. The sky was blue above the little town.

They passed the junior high, its concrete block-built buildings painted blue, a basketball match in session under the noon sun.

Older kids waited in line for bowls of noodles in plastic bags outside shops, some with ornate golden characters carved above the entryway.

A Chinese man in his twenties crossed them on the path. He was about their age. He eyed them suspiciously.

"You shouldn't go past here," he said.

"What's going on?" said Kip

"Listen. I need to get back to town," said the stranger.

"You work here in the village?"

"No, town meaning Xi'an. I'm just an inspector here. ...Listen, I've already said too much."

He seemed determined to set off on his way, before he changed his mind. He pulled a card from his wallet.

"Meet me here tomorrow morning at 11. I'll explain then."


The card read:

“Laser Xu, cloud engineer. LUCKY 8 INTERNET BAR.”

But he must have given them the wrong one by accident. The card was crumpled and worn, not the kind of fresh business card you would hand to a client. And where the card should have read “cloud engineer,” a word was scratched out and rewritten to read:

“CLOUD MAFIA.”

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