

Hammer stood on the bus, holding the handle, swaying only slightly side to side at the bus's violent stops and starts as it wove among disorderly lanes of traffic into the city.

He watched the tired faces of the people on the bus. They were a mix of laborers and office workers. A man wearing a rumpled shirt got up to let an old lady sit down. She smiled and thanked him.

The bus passed under red archways on the way into the city. The words passed by too fast of Hammer to understand. Billboards promoted engineering projects and the "Chinese dream" over photoshopped images of giant malls and industrial parks.

A sign read "Xi'an: 10 km." Hammer closed his eyes and tried to get some sleep on his feet.

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The internet cafe was up four flights of dirty, graffiti-soaked stairs. Hammer was supposed to meet Laser here two minutes ago.

The girl at the front desk gave Hammer a sour look.

"Do you have an ID card?" she said.

"No," Hammer said. "Do I look like I'm Chinese?"

"No ID card, no the computer," said the girl.

Hammer was getting ready to put up a fight when Laser appeared from the stairs. "Forget about it," he said. The front desk girl rolled her eyes, lit a cigarette, and returned to her screen.

Rows of teenagers sat along the internet cafe's tables, wearing headsets. Rapt with concentration, taking breaks only when absolutely necessary. Cans of soda and styrofoam noodle cups sat half-eaten by their keyboards.

They sat down at a table with two computers in a quiet corner.

"Would you like some tea?" Laser asked.

He got a pot from the front, took the teapot poured the steaming neon-green stuff into plastic cups for Hammer and himself.

"I normally drink Pepsi but I know you guys like to experience the real China."

"You guys?"

"Americans. Laowai." He looked from side to side as he said this, as if he was suddenly self-conscious to be seen with an American.

"So, you're working for an American company up in the mountains," said Laser. "You must work for Nexus, right?"

"That's right," said Hammer.

"The largest internet provider in the world. And now you're penetrating China."

"Yep."

"And it's for free, as long as it comes with a Nexus home screen. Nexus apps, Nexus store, all lines of profit going back to Nexus."

"Hey, man, it's just a job," said Hammer.

"I'm just giving you crap," said Laser. "Your Chinese is not bad, by the way. How long have you lived here for?"

"Two years," said Hammer.

They had been slipping between Chinese and English through the conversation. Laser's English sounded cribbed from American movies, with a twangy accent laden with slang.

Around them, the blue light of the screens reflected on the faces of the youths. They were taking valuable hours away from their studies to immerse themselves completely in the game.

Their eyes lit up with wondrous colors from the screens. Adventure, competition, victory.

Hammer eyed Laser's clothes. They were cheap knockoffs, the kind you bought in past-their-prime malls that packed hundreds of clothes stores into their grimy colorful alleyways.

"So you work for the cloud," said Laser. "Me too." He grimaced.

"How's that?" said Hammer

"Rare earth metals," he said. "Mining."

Suddenly it became clear in Hammer's head. The explosion, Laser's shadiness. He searched for his phone in his pocket and began mentally composing a text to Kip:

He's with the cloud mafia!

That was what Hammer and Kip had taken to calling the rare earth miners. The mafia controlled the industry, exploiting others' labor to extract the minerals that went to create the chips in our phones and computers.

An alarm bell sounded in his head: they were dangerous. He eyed Laser more closely. He had slicked-back hair over shaved sides, and wore a thin tough look as he put a cigarette to his lips. He tried to project world-weariness, but Hammer guessed they were the same age.

Hammer looked past the young boy leading an aerial assault on a European village to the front of the cafe.

Wait. Over by the counter. Was that—

Her! Alex Long. The wooden steps that led to her apartment. The mix of emotions they brought back: lust, adventure, trepidation, love. He'd left them far behind.

The girl holding the notebook at the front of the cafe could have been her. But he thought he saw her everywhere. Every Chinese woman the right age...

Laser saw him looking and turned around. He jumped, spilling his tea on the table and Hammer's lap.

"We have to go," said Laser. "We were followed. They must have seen me talking to you outside the mine."

When Hammer looked up, the girl was gone but a man wearing a dark suit watched them. One of his eyes was normal and one was a dull grey.

They left the back way, keeping their heads low. Laser thundered down the steps, with Hammer close behind.

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