

LAST TIME, ON THE CRYSTAL DRAGON: OUR HEROES, Hammer and Laser, meet in an Internet cafe to discuss the “Cloud Mafia”—a band of criminal elements controlling the mining of the metals used to make phones and computers, those essential pieces of our modern lives—but their talk is interrupted by a mysterious grey-eyed man!

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Hammer and Laser thundered down the steps of the internet cafe. Behind, the grey-eyed man pursued them.

They crossed the street. A heavy stream of traffic blocked their pursuer.

He had one grey eye and one normal, and wore a dull grey dusty ruffled suit.

He stood there helplessly, blocked by a car.

Time seemed to stop. Though they were far from the ancient city center, Hammer felt that they were in the middle of the city—of the world. The present dilemma a seamless part of the tapestry of his life.

Hammer and Laser stood in a town in the midst of three skyscrapers. Children played in the space underneath the grey buildings housing sixty stories of families. Every necessity for life was there, packed into the corners of the dirty streets. In a general store, Bottles of water and packaged food crammed onto tiny shelves. Cramped Sichuan restaurants served spicy pepper dishes. A cell phone shop, a bank. A basketball court in the concrete lot behind the supermarket. At a table on the street, family sat around a steaming wok filled with peppers, long-stalked mushrooms and potatoes.

He thought of her: Alex. The wooden steps, the falling snow, his beating heart.

His eye caught the pink, shimmering lights of a KTV, a karaoke center.

A scantily-dressed model stood outside. Her sequined pink bra revealed her fleshy stomach.

Hammer thought, inexplicably, of Alex Long. The wooden steps leading up to her apartment.

Her body, sheets and bra, embracing him.

“What are you looking at?” said Laser. “karaoke?”

“No,” said Hammer.

“I don’t think that’s one of the legit ones anyway,” said Laser. “Or—depends what you mean by legit, I guess. It depends what you’re looking for.”

The grey-eyed man appeared atop the stairs. One eye watching them, the other grey, opaque.

“Run!” said Laser.

They ran through the smoky streets between the skyscrapers. Past a karaoke bar where skinny women stood below gauzy pink lights illuminating the street. Down concrete stairs.

They hopped across a board between two roofs.

The grey-eyed man behind them reached into his coat. When he withdrew his hand, it held a dull grey revolver.

"Duck!" yelled Laser.

Hammer ducked. A shower of sparks rained from the fire escape above his head.

They ran down the concrete stairs. Laser bumped a wok, launching food into the air.

The peppers landed on the grey man's face.

"AHHH!" he yelled. "MY EYE!"

Hammer and Laser sprinted down the street.

"Sorry!" He yelled back, still running.

They were back outside the KTV again.

"In here," said Laser.

They ducked into the entrance and ascended a set of glimmering LED-lit stairs.

"Who was that?" said Hammer.

"We just call him Mr. Grey," said Laser. "He more or less runs the rare earth mining operation in this province."

"That was your boss?"

"I don't think I'm employed there any more," said Laser.

Midway up the stairs, they stopped.

"I thought I saw her!" said Hammer.

"Who?"

"Alex Long. My ex."

The wooden steps that led to her front door. The white snow falling softly on the stairs.

They continued up the KTV's glimmering stairs.

In the inner entrance stood someone.

Alex! Hammer thought. At last!

But it wasn't wasn't Alex. It was—

□□, she said.

Her skimpy clothing shimmered in the light.

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