

There are many thieves in the train but I am not a thief.

There are always many trains coming and going, and many people, and much hustle and bustle, and they use this to their advantage, as a distraction. And though my clothes are dirty and my beard is long, though my eyes are weary and my cap is worn, I am simply a traveler and I would never cause another person pain just for my own gain. I am a decent man.

It is summer now, and so the stations are more hot and dusty and chaotic. The cafes, once something of a refuge from the crowds, have been overrun—the tables are all full and even the spaces on the floor are taken, and I've heard that by the afternoon there isn't any tea left at all; although this is hard for me to verify as I don't touch the stuff.

Summer is also the time when I begin my travels in earnest. In June I will leave Xi'an and take a train to the coast, to Guangzhou where I once had relatives; but I have not been for a long time. I will look them up, I think, but I should not torture myself with old family history as they will want me to. Perhaps I will not look them up.

%

Fen Yi, Emily, Laser, and Hammer walked stormed down the KTV's concrete steps. A green glow: the dragon hovered above them in the street.

Below the dragon were the words: "Green Dragon Cigarettes. Embrace a new today."

Laser ran into the street to hail a taxi and the four of them crammed in.

Laser turned around in the front seat.

"The Ling Da," he said, in English. "They're an organization... I suppose you could describe them as a gang. They're famous for removing fingers as a punishment. I had suspicions about Mr. Grey, but I convinced myself he just lost the finger in an accident. But the fact he had the tattoo—he must be a member."

The taxi stopped suddenly and Fen Yi, Emily, and Hammer flew forwards. Hammer ended up partially entangled with Emily. She freed herself from him and held onto the handle above the door.

"Where are we going?" said Emily.

"To the train station," said Laser. "If Mr. Grey believes that I have wronged him, I don't feel safe being here any more. I have some relatives in a city to the west, Kangding. We should be safer there."

They drove through the city's chaotic traffic, along Xi'an's ancient city wall. The wall had contained the inner city's dusty streets for thousands of years. Hammer recalled the feeling of being in the present as the grey-eyed man chased them through the streets. They were traveling on the back of generations, living in a present that had been built by a history with no connection to his own.

The city walls were built by a bloodthirsty emperor consolidating his power. Two thousand years later, a gang that treated human life as a commodity now pursued them. What choice did he have in anything?

"□□," said the taxi driver. ("We're here.")

The square in front of the train station was like stepping back a hundred years in time into the past. People sat on spread-out newspapers in the dusty yellow courtyard: families, shifty-eyed pickpockets, commuters carrying briefcases to work.

Every kind of human life pulsated through the square, in and out of the city, in and out of the entrance to the train station itself.

Laser moved cautiously across the square. "The Ling Da are everywhere," he said. "Don't let anybody get too close."

They proceeded in a tight group towards the entrance.

They stayed in their tight group through the security checkpoint and through the lobby of the train station. The departure hall was packed: there was not a seat open, and much of the floor was taken up by commuters sitting with their suitcases. They stood near the gates to the train, while Laser tensely eyed everyone that passed.

With five minutes until the train arrived, Laser seemed to realize something. "Stay here," he said. "I'll be right back." He darted down the aisle into the crowds waiting for their train.

The group stood nervously waiting for him to return. What would they do if the train arrived without him? With one minutes left, he reappeared from the crowd. He was holding a little bottle filled with a brown liquid and printed with the words: 啤酒. It was some kind of alcohol.

"Can't forget this!" said Laser.

When they boarded the train at last, they shared a sleeper compartment. Four bunks on two levels were crammed into the compartment.

The train cut through the green mountains, ascending, taking tunnels through the mountains.

As it got dark, they talked and passed the bottle of alcohol between the bunks.


At night, Hammer stood with Sedgwick in aisle in the dark. The world rushed past outside: dark mountains against a darker sky. Hammer again felt an indelible sense of being in the present moment, of this being his life.

"When you got up this morning, did you think you'd be on a train to Kangding?" said Laser.

"I hadn't heard of Kangding this morning," said Hammer. "Or the Ling Da."

"That's how it goes sometimes," said Laser. "I didn't think I'd be working for them. Sometimes you have no choice."

1+

 Send to Kindle

- [Twitter](#)
- [Facebook](#)
- [Tumblr](#)