

Sedgwick and Hammer had known each other for a long time. That's not to say that they were friends—the closest they had come to that was when they had first met, at seven, and had lasted until Sedgwick learned the size of Hammer's Pokémon card collection, among other things—but it's hard to know a person for that long without learning a certain amount of information about them. They had somehow gone through life together—raised in the same neighborhood, went to the same elementary school, then onto Fenimore Cooper Jr. High, John Winthrop High, and Tennessee State University.

In the March of his senior year of college, Hammer walked in the door of Trang-Lo's Chinese café accompanied by Alex Long, his girlfriend of the last five months. Stuffed into his pocket was the acceptance letter from Oilberger which, if signed, stipulated that he spend the next six months in training at the company's research facility in Novostok, Siberia. This was a fact that he had meant to bring it up before leaving Alex's apartment, but his nerve had failed him.

Trang-Lo's was, in Hammer's opinion, awful. But it was cheap, and just down the hill from Alex's apartment, and its crab cheese wontons were, in Alex's words, "like crack" to her. He usually ordered a plate of fried rice and pushed the scrambled eggs to the side—those being, in his judgment, the most likely refuge of the food poisoning he was sure that the restaurant would give him some day.

Alex ordered her plate of wontons at the counter and they found a table that wasn't too dirty to sit down at. Class was long over, and students were just beginning to come up the hill again for dinner. Through the window, Hammer saw Andrew Sedgwick coming up the pavement with his usual group—Annie Brinecker (were they dating or not?), Brandon Chiu, Kandell Rhydecker, and a few people he didn't recognize.

He watched them come in through Trang-Lo's swinging screen door to stand in line at the counter. They were already visibly drunk.

Unfortunately, this was Sedgwick's group's usual haunt. More often than not, when Alex got her wonton craving late at night, after they walked down the noisy street together to the restaurant, they were there, drunk, leaning back in the restaurant's cheap plastic chairs and recounting stories from the night. Alex usually seemed amused by their antics. Hammer hadn't let on that he knew Sedgwick.

But today, it was six o'clock—much earlier than usual for them to be stumbling in.

Sedgwick was wearing a backpack, and before he sat down he produced a bottle of champagne from it. He began to pour it out into the clear plastic water cups stacked by the napkins and packets of chili sauce at the front of the restaurant. As he did so, he recognized Hammer sitting across the room. He left the cups half-poured on the table and wove around plastic chairs to drape his arm across Hammer's shoulders.

"Hammer! It's been a long old lonely time. I've been meaning to ask—didn't I see you at the Oilberger recruitment meetings a while back? In the fall? Did you ever end up applying or what?"

"Oh, yeah, I applied. Alex, how are those wontons coming?"

"Not too bad." She turned to Sedgwick. "I didn't know you two knew each other."

"Oh, yeah, Hammer and I go way back," said Sedgwick. "I've seen him naked probably... dozens of times."

"I wish I'd seen him naked that many times," Alex said.

Hammer blushed. He reached over to grab her hand, ready to give it a gentle pull and thereby escape the situation that he saw developing before his eyes. She resisted.

"When are you supposed to hear back about that anyway, Ben?" she said.

Just then, Brandon Chiu, Sedgwick's right hand man, stood up at the other table. He lifted his plastic cup filled with champagne and started to tap a plastic spoon against it. Seeing that this didn't produce a sufficiently attention-grabbing sound, he cleared his throat and said, "Speech. Speech!"

Everyone more or less became quiet.

"As we all know," he began, "in the course of human history... there are many times whereupon truly wondrous events come to pass. And wondrous events... like many other kinds of positive events... must be celebrated... in the manner of Dionysius... with a toast. And just such a toast I would like to give.

"Andrew Sedgwick... a man that many of us have known for a long time... will soon pass from us. He has been a student in this wonderful university for many long years, but now he must pass from this university, as we all someday must, to become a student in another, equally wonderful university... the university of Life."

There was general applause from Sedgwick's friends.

"That's right, my friends... old friends, new friends... the couple sitting at the other table over there that Sedgwick appears to know... the bearded fellow spilling rice on his computer... we are here to celebrate tonight because our friend Andrew Sedgwick has been offered a job at the fine establishment of aerospace engineering we know as Oilberger."

Alex turned to Hammer. "Ben, does that mean you're going to hear back soon, too?" she said. He looked from her to Brandon in alarm. There were still three uneaten wontons on Alex's plate.

"And what a fine first chapter Life has lined up for him—six months' training by this fine establishment in the fine Russian territory of Siberia!"

Alex turned to Hammer again. "Training is in Siberia?" she said. "You told me they were saying it was still to be announced."

"Well, I only just heard back today..." Hammer said.

"So you did hear back?"

"I... yes. I was going to tell you later on."

Alex didn't say anything. Her face resolved into something that looked like a grimace, which she then formed forcefully into a smile.

"That's okay," she said. "We can talk about it later. Why don't we just go?"

As they got up to leave, Hammer saw something building on Sedgwick's face—as if he was getting ready to drag the two of them into the whole drunken mess—but it faltered, and Sedgwick didn't say anything as the screen door of Trang-Lo's swung shut.

%

Back at the apartment, Alex and Hammer leaned against the wall. It was dark, but slats of light from passing cars illuminated their faces at intervals.

“Are you going?” she asked.

“Well, yeah. I mean, I have to.”

“Do you?”

NEXT TIME, ON THE CRYSTAL DRAGON—A MYSTERIOUS SEAL LEADS HAMMER TO THE TOWN OF NOVOSTOK, SIBERIA!

Read the other parts of The Crystal Dragon: [stories](#).

Follow Ed at [@edjamesking](#)

0

 Send to Kindle

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