I shouldn’t be thinking about the Mirror Sea at all. They gave me pills to take if I start.

But it’s not easy, not thinking about the Sea, when its inhabitants are the city’s unofficial mascots. This spring we passed a milestone: ten years after Shanghai Party Secretary Xia Zitian’s signature surveillance project was outed as a fraud, after the original system was hastily dismantled, there are more Mirror Sea cameras than ever before. An official tally would be impossible, would involve unprecedented cooperation between Blue Delta and the Ward Council and tribes of squatters in abandoned power plants. But that’s what they think.

Why? *Why?* It was the first question I posed to Deng when we stepped off the plane at Hongqiao International. She gave a quiet little sigh when she saw the fiberglass Ripple models hanging from the terminal ceiling, projected into three dimensions and frozen in a wispy moment of wall-clock time. The city had torn itself to pieces when it learned that this is all there was to the Mirror Sea: no large language model making sense of the latent space behind the billion eyes. No enlightened, forward-looking governance model to replicate all across China. Only a small cadre of officials watching the blobs in the world’s most expensive lava lamp, pawning their own opinions off as a supercomputer’s. So why on earth had the city resurrected it, block by block, ward by ward? What was there to celebrate?

“I don’t know,” Deng had said curtly. Her eyes were fixed on the baggage carousel — mine were already drifting to the screens proudly pointing out known thoroughfares in the Sea. Dozens of Ripples streamed by, though back then I could barely see them, much less pick them apart. “I’ve been gone for too long. You’ll have to figure that out for yourself.” I bet, even now, that she regrets saying that.

But I shouldn’t be thinking about the Mirror Sea at all, so I don’t.

This first night, I take the train right home to Xietu South. I live here because it’s one of few wards in the city where there are no cameras and no displays. At night, Xietu is the hum of ancient air conditioners, parents chasing children chasing bubblecopters, a starmap of flaring cigarettes. It’s a flimsy plastic bag of dumplings, my own footsteps on five flights of dusty stairs, the echo of the click of the light. I fish out Kasibar and Kuang, which Deng wants me to review, and fall asleep with it tented on my face. Nothing happens this first night except that it starts to rain.

The rain is a reminder of how much sky there is, how many layers of clouds can pile up above the mouth of the Yangtze this time of year. The lobby of Building 1 is a muddy mess, and the Mirror Sea display in the corridor beyond glows with a dull, persistent grey. *Do the Ripples know what rain is?* I allow myself the question, but not an answer.