The Yangtze Delta Orthogonal Zone was to China what California had become to the United States. Great powers inside great powers, doves growing fat in the bellies of hawks, surprise twins. Neither wanted war. More to the point: neither wanted to be militarized, to be made a target for the other. Both the blue delta and the golden coast had wriggled and convulsed right up to the brink of sovereignty. Both now dangled from their motherlands by tense threads, the parallels uncanny, the details a mess. In San Francisco, in bombed-out China Daily newsboxes, I saw Xia Zitian’s name in three-inch print. I understood that in Shanghai the fiasco with the cameras had tipped the balance somehow.

Back home we tried calling our double defection the Shanghai-California Mutually Assured Security Arrangement. On TV they gleefully pronounced it *shikamasa*, like a foreign word, or a shaken maraca. The English translation of the Mandarin name is worse, though. It was a big day at the networks when they got ahold of *CASH Axis*. But I was grateful. It was Deng who invited me to Shanghai, but it was SHCA-MASA that arranged my position at YINS, my passage across the Pacific, and a very favorable ward alignment. I would have the run of the city. I could go anywhere.

But mostly I just stayed at home.

I didn’t understand this fractured city of twenty million. My Mandarin was far more brittle than I thought, my Shanghainese nonexistent. And I had bet my whole life on the whims of one singularly strange woman. I was at YINS a year before the undergraduates, and an excess of student housing sat idle in Beiwan Ward. I was given a two-bedroom apartment to myself, and told to expect a flatmate soon. But that whole year, no one arrived to join me. Sometimes I’d wander into that empty second room for its view of the skyline. I’d curl up on that cold concrete floor, one earbud tuned into an emergency radio app.

I'd hear strange things, on the far side of midnight, that in the static I could only half-understand.

I was badly lonely and eager for company, and in my second September it arrived with no warning. It took the form of a shipping container’s worth of bags, and a new graduate student named Cai Yuhui.

“I’m here for the other room,” she explained cooly.

She spoke in curlicue Shanghai slang no dictionary understood. She wrote in shanzi, that semantic ultrasound of obscure Chinese characters floating disused above the spoken language. I’d have to hit my tryptamine pen, sometimes, to make sense of her messages. She’d eat her takeout, crouched with her feet on the chair, engaged in dozens of chats. She’d take two bites and throw the rest away. She was skin and tits and bones and she wandered around with it all on full display, like she lived alone.

Her father was a Blue Delta midwig, a Ward Council delegate for some heap of glass in Pudong. I never saw her doing coursework, and so I thought she was the kind of rich and stupid that grew YINS new wings. The truth was much worse. Cai Yuhui was rich and *smart*. She had finished her coursework years ago; she was publishing papers, elaborating on the mathematics of the Lam-Waldmann Hash. All during the day, too, because her nights were her own. Somehow it took me three months to figure out what she did with them.

“You’re a Ripplechaser?”

She lifted a headphone and tinny music spilled out. I gestured to the pile of windows crowding her side of the laggy kitchen counter.

“A Ripplechaser! You, ah —”

But she cut me off with a finger to her glossy lips. Shhh. As in, duh.

It wasn’t like she tried to hide it. Along with her group chats and keyword spiders and Doujiang amalgams, she’d always have five or six windows open right into the Mirror Sea. Some of these feeds were public. Some she paid for. I later learned that some were hers alone, a thousand cams sliced off some unsuspecting ward’s subnet as a gift from her *fans*. A unique vantage point in the high-dimensional silt of that other world, a competitive edge, for her eyes only. I never saw much float by. Just the odd tendril, or the corner of a choir-bubble clipping through her projections. But her eyes were always darting back to those screens, seeking something. And when she’d find it —

“*Wo xian zou la*,” she’d shout into the apartment at nine, nine thirty at night, as though we had been deep in conversation. The door would rattle and I wouldn’t see her again, sometimes for days. Then there was a whole week where I thought she was gone for good. I thought about calling...who? Campus security? The Beiwan redlights? It seemed stupidest of all to call the bluelights, knowing it would probably get back to her father somehow. Fuck it. She was probably on holiday.

She resurfaced one night while I was alone in the Neikotic Safety clinic, scrubbing vomit off a scanner. Maybe she was surprised to see me there, maybe not, I dunno. But even in the half-light I could see it behind her eyes. She had been using Tenfold Gate.

“T-t-ten...”

She couldn’t get the words out, but Tenfold Gate was the only game in town. It was the clinic’s nightmare, ripping through YINS like a fever for weeks before the Safety faculty could even begin to compute an inversion. The debris that it left behind was atrocious. It worked farther into the lower functions of the brain than anything else. Vestibular chaos. Arrhythmia. Phantom limbs. But it did graph traversals faster than anything else, too. It was an indispensable subroutine in everyone’s research. They’d come to the clinic unable to swallow, speaking in tongues, but elated by the heights that it let them reach in loop-lock. They’d take the inversion, which didn’t really work, and be back within days. We started to realize, even if they didn’t, that Tenfold Gate was addictive.

I led Cai to the least-filthy scanner bed. I had to strap her in. She had been scratching welts into her skin.

“I have to warn you, this isn’t very effective yet.”

I felt bad admitting it. Deng and Rui and Qin were sleeping in shifts in the faculty lounge, sharpening their Dirac deltas, trying to find an inversion that would stick. And here I was, Deng’s supposed protégé, still good for cleaning up bodily fluids and not much else. I fired the current version over and over into Cai’s tilespace, *zwoop* and *zwoop* and *zwoop* and so forth. It bounced right off the debris.

*Zwoop.*

No one told me about the Deng Bridge during my training as a clinician. But stories swirled around my advisor: I knew that it was supposed to exist, and what she had supposedly built it for. I hadn’t been looking for it; I had been looking for mop heads. But I found it in the back closet, a dark metal box the size of a minifridge with two gigantic, antique EASL 1.0 ports. It was impossible to mistake.

*Zwoop.*

Cai came down in bad shape. Her debris was resistant to inversion, and all we had done was provoke it.

“I can run it a few more times, but I’m already damaging your neikotic channels.”

She pulled the visor hood off her eyes. She was a mess. Never a glint of vulnerability from her, and now *this*. I could tell she hated me seeing her this way. I was shocked to find I might hate it even more. I was shocked to hear what that tug in my gut was offering on my behalf: “There’s something else, maybe, that we can try.”

In the dead of night, months previous, I had tested the Bridge in loopback mode, probing around my own tilespace, learning how to manipulate myself at remove. And at the peak of the Tenfold Gate crisis, I overheard a brief, furious exchange between Rui (*I wouldn’t ask if we weren’t desperate*) and Deng (*If you so much as show me that box, I will walk right out of this institute*). This wasn’t the way to prove myself to my advisor, but then, what was?

Reckless, *reckless*, Mona! But I swear even then I knew it would work.