When I told Dr. Zhang that I wanted to meet in a public place, this isn’t exactly what I had in mind. There are, it transpires, two New Prosperity Shopping Centers near Fudan University. The newer one lies just northwest of campus, and looks from a distance like a bathtub. Arriving early, I cased the outside, watching bubbles cascading ivy-like down the translucent walls, half-expecting an enormous dangling arm. I spent five cheerful minutes with a grass-jelly tea in a bustling central cafeteria, before I realized that this is not the place.

The *old* New Prosperity is further west, over in Fengzhen Ward. In its photos I can just make out Min’s Miscellaneous Electronics, which Dr. Zhang mentioned as a meeting point. I guess I can’t blame the guy. He looks about a million years old in his Fudan headshot, and in his heyday it might have been the spot. But — *fuck*. With ten minutes to spare, I hustle against the remaining daylight, brushing upstream through soccer teams, passing dorms big enough for an entire YINS undergraduate class. Fengzhen’s wardgates are in a dim concrete checkpoint beneath an overpass. I tap; the card reader grinds, samples my ward-trail, and buzzes unhappily.

{.mono.centered} DENIED (0x1E) PATH LENGTH EXCEEDED — SEE ATTENDANT

There’s no attendant. The booth is empty; the wardboard screens are shattered. My app for this tells me that Fengzhen and Xietu South are in a standoff over some Ward Council edict, caught in a hairball of wards refusing their tokens to each others’ residents. So if I want some FZN, I can trade for it on the open market. Or...

Three figures in billowing black tentcloaks appear at speed, faces painted: delicate black lines on a stark white field. Without slowing down, they each pick a gate. Taking the card reader as a suggestion — no, wait, as a foothold — they grab the plexiglass gates’ top edges and sail over in silent unison. *If they look like Chalkers, they’re probably not.* This is my rule, and that, just now, looked like cosplay. Only there was something entirely too uniform about their motion. It was so quiet, so fluid, that it was barely a disturbance; I almost missed it, hunched over my wanji.

With no experience and no gecko gloves, the climb takes me longer. Awkwardly straddling the top, I consider what might happen if I were spotted; downtown is one thing, but if you’re sneaking into a mid-ring residential ward, you’d better have friends there. But the blind-eye winks encouragingly from the cameras above: *go on, do your thing. I’m not really watching*. I land, all wrong, in Fengzhen Ward. Pretty sure no one saw me come through.

Five past the hour. The towers are squat, peeling, off-white, redeemed by balconies overflowing with laundry and starlinks and greenery. The magnolias, half-blighted but too precious to spare, are ringed with cytogenic spray-foam, sprouting synthetic limbs. Dusk falls behind dense power-line thickets. Quiet, overly so, save for the last of the cicadas and my own breath, my own footfall.

Quarter past. Old New Prosperity Shopping Center is a simple structure, a three-story concrete maze of indoor stalls ringing a square courtyard. Pigeons hoard daylight atop the dusty, angular skylights, and chickens strut around in old skincare boutiques. Fenced sneakers line the walls of a former moped showroom. The public safety checkpoint is a converted cell kiosk. The word that comes to mind is *carapace*. But an inflatable, visor-wearing pig still advertises a children’s tiyan-guan, and the laoban of a cerulean-tiled fishmart gives me a look like *I will defend you with this broom.* No one else is around. So I order some fish balls (why wait hungry?) and eat them with the slow, dignified air of someone named Dr. Zhang Peifeng. I’m fifteen minutes late, but I’m meeting an old-time academic. Those are rookie numbers.

Thirty minutes. Sixty. He never comes. I listen as the grates go down, counting on one hand the stars in my rectangle of washed-out sky. A passing raincloud sends me under an arcade of rounded concrete. Figures lope by, weary with the day’s business, a world away from the Fudan Applied Neikotics department. And when the only light I can see is from the mottled red-and-white sign of Min’s Miscellaneous Electronics, I begin to worry. And only then do I pay the place any attention, look past the LED tickers all advertising themselves, and notice what else is in the window. Arranged in profile on white wire shelves, prices dangling from bright paper tags, are cameras.