The conversation proceeds in this sort of circle, and in the end I finally insist that he *just show me.* Quietly, under the radar of Min’s footsteps and tuneless whistling, he leads me through an emergency exit, putting us on the street outside Old New Prosperity. Not the way I came. I trail him, two paces behind, for several blocks. Tethi walks weightless, breathless; If I closed my eyes I’d swear I was alone. We’re not two blocks from the hatched-out grey area on my map. I can see into it from here. I can see it has a beauty all its own.

In these embers of daylight, it could be a normal Shanghai street: just another mile of mopeds and magnolias. But, okay, that’s a lot of *stuff*, belonging to everyone and no one. Pushcarts and satellite arrays and blackened-out grow towers. An old military veetle half-tucked beneath a tarp. A silent chorus of red LEDs blinks from walls dense with cameras and wires stretched taut across the narrow lane. No other light, not really. The streetlights will be emitting that infrared color-of-nothing for the Mirror Sea’s eyes only. Something shifts, and momentarily all I can see is the *chalk*: ever-present on the walls of Shanghai, but here a brilliant white-on-black tapestry, thickening, spilling into the third dimension, detail crammed into the negative space of sigils within sigils within sigils. It looks like the back entrance to another world.

“Don’t go in there,” Tethi tells me flatly.

But then, of all things, he produces a nub of chalk and puts it to the wall of what was once a charge-swap station. “Yes and no,” he mutters, answering the unspoken, obvious question. “There are layers to it. I’ve picked up some tricks.” He pulls a long, left-handed stroke across the brick, slowly at first, like a thief picking for tumblers. It hooks suddenly, and there’s a received, passive quality to the slashes and arcs he draws next. The darkness around me feels formless, liquid. The shape of this street is, surely, interchangeable with another. My head spins with a smearing of position, a sharp wherewards momentum. When he’s finished, he reaches for a door that — trick of the light? — I swear wasn’t there before.

Behind it, quasigraphic candles flicker along the an uneven floor, their false angles revealed in the shatterglass and motorbike mirrors lining the the walls. Thick cables dangle parabolically from the ceiling, emerging from grey PVC pipe stamped regularly with the blind-eye.

“The Mirror Sea,” I state the obvious, starting too loud and falling quiet halfway through that, startled by the echo of my own voice.

“*A* Mirror Sea,” he corrects. And, sure, he seems one to make such a chiding distinction. *The* Mirror Sea fell with Xia Zitian; what we have now are fragmented subnets, tidepools and shards. He runs his finger along a cable as it reaches a splice-box. “Three, actually, that have been joined together. A triple point.”

My mind reels, imagining all the places these cables could lead: anywhere in the city, all the way to Suzhou. Any set of cameras, with their particular placement and angle, together reveal a unique part of the Mirror Sea. I saw the view through a single camera earlier: not quite nothing. Perhaps only Xia knows what you’d see with all of them.

“It’s getting harder for regular people to access.” The lack of light helps me pick these qualities from his whisper: defensive, prideful, Francophone, and vaguely drunk. “They get what the Weather Bureau will let them see. Which is time-delayed flats and the odd quasigram. But the raw stuff…you need to be someone, or know someone.”

“Or fall in with the Nine-Eyes,” I venture. There’s another way to see the Sea, of course, which is to promise yourself that it’s already there, that it’s always been there. To follow the Chalk down its steepest quadratic valleys, surrendering your agency in whole. He says nothing, busies himself unlocking another door, but I see his eyes flash.

And the next room brings sweet, visible, fluorescent light. I *think* that’s a UTMS rig in the back corner — I haven’t seen anything this ramshackle since Deng’s hacked-together scanner bed back at Stanford. This one has all the reassuring qualities of a county fair roller coaster, but plenty of the surrounding gear, the EASL arrays and monitor bank, looks off-the-shelf. Next to the keyboard are several copies of the Sunflower Sieve egg. I offer an appreciative little *phew* sound. It’s all pretty janky and damp, but c’mon. This is right up my alley.

“Does she know you’re doing this?”

“Not a clue. She knows I spent a little money, brought in a little more, that’s all.”

“Do *they* know you’re doing this?”

What a stupid question. The Nine-Eyes are known to smash up unremarkable Mirror Sea displays unprovoked, miles from their redoubts. Watching their home patch of the Sea from *loop-lock* is a middle finger to their central faith, a turn from the sublime to the pornographic. Tethi laughs humorlessly. “I’ll know when they find out.” He’s flicking more switches now, kicking the EASL array to free it from a bootloop. “Let me ask *you*. You ever consider why the market rate of a Mirror Sea feed is so high these days? Why the Big Three snatch them up?”

I thought I had. Suowei buys feeds because that’s what Suowei *does*: amasses a dragon’s-lair treasury of assets, homogenizing them into silken threads from which the parallel yuan is spun. Suowei has teams of astrologers operating lasers in space, vaporizing asteroids it deems inauspicious. Suowei’s reality-distortion field bulges across the globe, and it’s only here in the dead center that anything they do seems remotely sane, remotely sober. Chaoyue, Paracoin — they just follow Suowei’s lead, trying to keep the triumvirate less isosceles.

No, I haven’t really considered it. I shake my head.

The scanner is purring under my hand now. I’m trying to find comfort in the familiar noises it’s making, but my head is throbbing, my mouth is dry. “Min’s Mix,” Tethi tells me once I’m sitting inside it. “Some 5-subs in here, probably spicier than the YINS breakfast blend. I’d spread out my zeroes to compensate.” He flicks an autovial and slots it into the machine. “I don’t want to bias you, so I’m just going to put you in. Let you see what I saw. Afterward, we can talk about it.” He clicks through dialog boxes complaining that his free trial of Kanwei Pharos is years expired. “Afterward, I’m going to ask a favor of you.”

I don’t like that knowing look. He seems to see how badly I want this, and how badly I need to keep that longing under control. I try to imagine I’m Cai, who does this all day, who keeps the queasy quadratic madness always at arm’s length. I channel her airy detachment as I pull the scanner hood over my eyes.

“So put me in.”