

THE INVISIBLE THREAD

by

Austin McKinley

FADE IN:

TITLE CARD: "The year is 2152 - 4938 in the Chinese counting. Quantum computers define our reality, and the trans-national companies who make them are the dominant power on the planet. The world is more connected than ever before, but it is far from united."

EXT. EASY CITY, CHINA - DAY

A vertical canyon of fashionable high-rises. A river of flying cars flows past the headquarters of CHANG'E COMMUNICATIONS - an outcrop on one of the megalopolis's city-sized buildings.

XIAODAN (pron. "Zhow-dan," 30s), watches the building from across the street. She has shock-dyed hair and wide, black-rimmed eyes. She appears as a TELE-PRESENT HOLOGRAM.

A car pulls up to the entrance breezeway, three men get out. LEI HUIZHONG, (70s), a financial expert, shuffles to keep up with MURONG KANG, (50s) eccentric CEO, and DEPUTY DIRECTOR FU RENSHU (50s).

HUIZHONG

So it's true, we work for the government now?

KANG

For a fraction of our costs.

FU RENSHU

I told you this would happen, Kang. We don't have time - they're waiting.

KANG

(to Huizhong)

I've never kept secrets well, so I'm not surprised you know - but you gotta trust me, Huizhong.

HUIZHONG

Well, I don't. The company's all but bankrupt. You want solutions, you've got to talk to me. What can be so important it's worth risking your entire inheritance, the livelihood of your employees?

Kang stops.

Xiaodan crosses the street and falls in with them, but she's INVISIBLE to them - the three men don't see her.

KANG

You realize I have a dozen departments, all working on different aspects of the project, and none of them knows what it does except my top staff and I.

HUIZHONG

(raises eyebrows)

Yes.

KANG

Okay. Okay, you're right.

FU RENSHU

Your lack of security protocol is appalling.

KANG

You just hate it when I decide who needs to know.

INT. CHANG'E LAB - DAY

Kang ushers Huizhong through a maze of raised and lowered platforms grouped around a massive network core to where several cell operators in yellow coveralls stand in a trench behind thick nanoplas and tinker with bits of organic tech.

At the fore:

FENRIS SHIRE (40s) - stout, sharp-featured, prosthetic eyes.

MA QUIOLIAN, (pron. "Key-o-lian" 30s) looks exactly like Xiaodan (double-cast.) She's a little less glamorous, more ordinary, but she has the same features and colored hair.

They look up as Fu Renshu, Kang and Huizhong approach.

KANG

These're the top people I've got on the wet side of the project. They're the best in Easy City, or so they often tell me in performance reviews.

(introduces each in turn)

Ma Quiolian and Fenris Shire. Fenris is our head biophotonic engineer.

HUIZHONG

What's that?

FENRIS

I work on the Link's nerve interface, tie its onboard Quantum Computer into your visual cortex. I control what you see.

Xiaodan watches, a step apart. She's still invisible, no one notices her.

KANG

Quiolian's our quantum programmer, she designs the wetware applications.

Kang looks at Quiolian for a moment.

KANG (CONT'D)

This is Huizhong, our former financier and my father's personal friend. You already know Deputy Director Fu from CIEDA. I've just given Huizhong top-level clearance. Tell him everything.

FENRIS

How about a brief rundown, if it's all the same?

Quiolian generates an airborne holo-schematic of an organic device implanted in a brain. Another device hovers beside it.

QUIOLIAN

This is the XDN-1 prototype. Experimental dominant node - it creates Virtual Qualia, an artificial means of altering our differing perceptions of sensory occurrences.

HUIZHONG

I'm sorry, what are 'Qualia?'

QUIOLIAN

We 'see' this because the system transmits it to our Links, right?

Huizhong fishes an HUD monocle from his pocket, wedges it into his eye.

HUIZHONG
Never had the damn update
installed.

QUIOLIAN
We can do it right now if you want.

HUIZHONG
No, no. Let's just get on with it.

The animated hologram of the XDN-1 supplants the device in the brain. Its color changes from red to blue.

QUIOLIAN
I've done it already.

HUIZHONG
What?

QUIOLIAN
The hand is faster than the eye.

She SNAPS, and disappears! Huizhong looks around. Kang smiles, Xiaodan frowns.

QUIOLIAN (O.S.) (CONT'D)
Behind you.

Huizhong whips around, as if yanked. Quiolian's behind him.

QUIOLIAN (CONT'D)
(indicates monocle)
You won't need that anymore.

Huizhong takes it off, following her gesture, drops it on the ground and STEPS on it, his eyes glazed over.

QUIOLIAN (CONT'D)
The XDN-1's the proverbial back door to a Link. An untraceable gateway to what happens between our senses and our brain. It can supplant, override, and manipulate the information going to and from a Link - any Link.

Xiaodan nods understanding - she's not happy. Quiolian releases Huizhong.

HUIZHONG
(dazed)
My God.

KANG

Nothing's impossible, Huizhong,
just a matter of time and money.

FENRIS

The math was no picnic either. It's
not so simple as determining a
pattern to thought. You're talking
about a different pattern in each
person, every time.

QUIOLIAN

And the Links are tied into that
network - the proprietary and
draconically closed-source Cypro-
corp Links to which we now have
access. We'll be able to learn and
decrypt the actively changing code
of individual thought.

HUIZHONG

It's genius, no denying it.

KANG

No, just the result of
perseverance. Haitong looked at a
Leshan cliff face and saw a
finished Buddha while I... there
may be some pieces of the original
cliff left, but none of them are in
the same place they started out.

QUIOLIAN

Haitong also gouged his eyes out
trying to save the project.

KANG

Let's not overburden the metaphor.

HUIZHONG

You're precipitous as usual, Kang.
In certain hands, this could do
untold damage.

Kang laughs, pats Huizhong on the back.

KANG

They said that about molecular
construction, my friend - and cold
fusion. I'm not a mad scientist
here, Huizhong. I'm filling an
order.

(to Fu Renshu)

A ruinously expensive order.

FU RENSHU

Until we have a working prototype to present, there's a limit to what I can siphon from CIEDA's operating budget.

HUIZHONG

This, I... I can't believe it.

KANG

I did warn you.

(to Fu Renshu)

Well, that's my part of the deal - My financial guy's on board. Now it's your turn. What do you have for me?

FU RENSHU

We've been offered a package deal, a private equity fund managed by Julu Transnational. They'll help float the project until it's completed in exchange for certain assurances. They agreed to a meeting. They're upstairs in your office right now.

KANG

Life's about making connections. What's the catch?

Xiaodan looks from one of them to the other.

INT. KANG'S OFFICE ANTEROOM - DAY

Xiaodan (still a hologram, still invisible) and Huizhong trail Kang into the room. Kang looks through to his office where GENERAL CADE TALGAT (40s) sits behind Kang's corner desk. His long hair and goatee give him an almost barbaric look.

Two Cypro-corp Guards flank him, each carries a long, wicked-looking halberd. The walls behind them are floor-to ceiling windows.

KANG

Are they who I think they are?

FU RENSHU

The one behind your desk is General Cade Talgat, with a proposal for you.

KANG

They're here in person, no communication records. How'd they know?

FU RENSHU

To contact me? They've had a man in place here for a while.

KANG

Who?

HUIZHONG

That's not important right now. They're waiting.

KANG

(grunts)

Kang reaches for the door, but Huizhong stops him, pulls him aside. Xiaodan (still invisible) follows them.

HUIZHONG

What do you think you're doing?

KANG

The only thing I can do - going to get something out of this meeting. I have to think of my employees.

HUIZHONG

Think of the consequences, son! This Julu Transnational is surely a Cypro-corp front. If Cypro-corp gets the prototype... well, that's what your father would've called giving away the store.

KANG

Relax. Who says they can do anything with it once they get it? It's not so easy as simply possessing the device. It is - if I do say so myself - far more clever than that.

HUIZHONG

There has to be another way. Just have patience.

KANG

Don't worry, I know what I'm doing.

Xiaodan watches Kang go through the door, and sets her jaw.

XIAODAN
No... you don't.

INT. JIANJUN'S OFFICE, CIEDA - DAY

RHEE JIANJUN (pron. "Jee-an-jun," 40s) leans on his elbows on his desk and rubs his eyes. Xiaodan (invisible) links in beside him and observes. Light from the stratospheric street outside the window casts shadows on the office wall.

Jianjun scratches the stump of his missing right arm, severed at the elbow. He looks into the air, sees a...

HOLOGRAPHIC READOUT: 5:04 pm

Jianjun gets up, puts on his coat.

INT. HALLWAY, CIEDA - CONTINUOUS

Xiaodan (still invisible) follows Jianjun into the hall. Jianjun links his office door shut. He winds his way through the building - still, silent, antiseptic. He reaches the...

INT. LOBBY, CIEDA - CONTINUOUS

At the lobby's center, a two-story waterfall column cascades into a fountain and seating arrangement. Colors pour through the vertical skylight from the city outside.

Holographic images of heroic CIEDA agents play in the face of the waterfall. Jianjun summons the elevator, and Xiaodan follows him in.

INT. FU RENSHU'S WAITING AREA - DAY

A bridge spans the lobby to the office threshold, where a pregnant aide, JIAYING (20s), guards the door.

JIAYING
You can go in, he's expecting you.

Xiaodan follows Jianjun into,

INT. FU RENSHU'S OFFICE - CONTINUOUS

It's beyond Spartan. A holodesk and a cryogenic bio-chip storage bank. No other chairs. Fu Renshu sits with his back to the door, hands steepled in his lap, and looks out over the lobby.

Fu Renshu links to opaque the nanoplas windows and turns to face his agent. They stare at each other. Jianjun shifts uncomfortably.

FU RENSHU

I understand it's time for your annual performance review.

JIANJUN

Yes, sir.

FU RENSHU

Well, we've been through this before, every year at this time. Your work, your case load and results have always been satisfactory. There's really only one thing holding you back from a long overdue promotion.

(indicates missing arm)

Your failure to make a complete report about the Xinjiang mission.

Jianjun closes his eyes.

JIANJUN

And as I always say, I've told you everything I can remember.

FU RENSHU

Let's go over it again, shall we? Please explain your reasons for going to Xinjiang.

JIANJUN

I acted on your orders, sir.

FU RENSHU

What were those orders, as you understood them?

JIANJUN

To capture a spy code-named 'Moon Rabbit.'

FU RENSHU

What happened when you arrived in Xinjiang?

FLASH - Jianjun remembers the plane crash, the radioactive fire, the tracer bullets in the dark, and the silhouette of 'Moon Rabbit' reaching for him...

JIANJUN

My plane was shot down, I was hurt
in the crash,
(indicates the arm)

FU RENSHU

Did you make any attempt to
complete the mission?

JIANJUN

It was too late. The geothermal
injector detonated, 'Moon Rabbit'
was gone. The resulting
international incident is a matter
of historical record.

FU RENSHU

You know what I think? 'Moon
Rabbit' turned you. Xinjiang was an
illegal operation in which you
colluded up to the end.

JIANJUN

If you say so, sir. He hit me with
a ghost virus. I tried everything
to recover the memories, but that
sector is just gone, corrupt.

FU RENSHU

We already know 'Moon Rabbit'
conspired to steal confidential
CIEDA records and data. We just
need your confirmation of his
identity to close the record. It's
been sixteen years, Agent Rhee.
Tell us what we need to know. Let
us finally regenerate that arm.
Honestly, it hardly matters to
whomever you're protecting anymore.

JIANJUN

I understand, sir, but I cannot in
conscience confirm or deny facts to
which I'm not privy.
(indicates arm)
Besides, I've gotten used to it.

FU RENSHU

Then I'm sorry to say I cannot in
conscience promote you. Unless you
change your mind, I'll see you next
year, Agent Rhee.

Xiaodan (still invisible) watches Jianjun turn and perform a stiff march from the room.

INT. FU RENSHU'S WAITING AREA - CONTINUOUS

Xiaodan follows Jianjun towards the elevator.

JIAYING
Have a good evening.

EXT. CIEDA HQ - DAY

Jianjun exits through the lobby, past the two-story waterfall, through the corporate facade and onto the breezeway that overlooks the gaping canyons between buildings where droves of traffic fly by.

He merges into the crush of people headed towards the parking garage, then stops, turns, and shoulders his way sideways through the mob.

INT. DOMED PARK - DAY

Xiaodan catches up with Jianjun past the lobby of CIEDA branch.

Water meanders under bridges and plays about post-postmodern statues - an oasis of life outside the cramped warren of offices.

Jianjun sits on a park bench, reads the evening newsfeed projected as a hologram in the air before him. Xiaodan approaches the bench along the pathway. Jianjun looks up, sensing her proximity.

Xiaodan - clearly visible now - sits on the bench beside him, places a small portable DMZ on the seat between them, and thumbs the blue light on its side.

DMZ
(filtered)
Secure.

Xiaodan looks at Jianjun, they talk techno-pathically.

XIAODAN (V.O.)
My name's Xiaodan. I'm going to gate with you once, one time only. This link has a code bomb attached that will delete any reference to it on your cell. Do you understand?

Pedestrians pass, oblivious to their conversation.

JIANJUN (V.O.)
(closes newsfeed)
Couldn't focus on what I was
reading anyway.

XIAODAN (V.O.)
You know how to gate?
(off his look)
Open your Link for stream-of
consciousness input. I need you to
hear my thought echo. It'll be a
bit disturbing if you don't know
how to do it.

JIANJUN (V.O.)
Who are you?

XIAODAN (V.O.)
I told you, I'm Xiaodan. You're
still CIEDA Internal Affairs, yes?
I'm running an op, investigating
Deputy Director Fu Renshu.

JIANJUN (V.O.)
Fu Renshu's my immediate superior.

XIAODAN (V.O.)
Right, well he has immediate
superiors, too. I'm working in
cooperation with 'Moon Rabbit' -
you met him in Xinjiang.

JIANJUN (V.O.)
I have no memory of the events
you're discussing. I really don't.

XIAODAN (V.O.)
The ghost virus, right? I can help
with that when we're done.
(off his look)
I'm a neurohacker, like 'Moon
Rabbit,' the one who wrote the
virus. They sent me to contact you
because we need your help. Director
Fu is involved in something
dangerous, a device beyond his
ability to control, with
ramifications he can't possibly
imagine. We want him stopped.

JIANJUN (V.O.)
Sounds distinctly like treason.

XIAODAN (V.O.)
It is, exactly.

JIANJUN (V.O.)
I mean talking to you, what you're suggesting.

Xiaodan sighs.

XIAODAN (V.O.)
It won't hurt you to hear me out. I'll only incriminate myself, and then you can turn me in if you can catch me, okay?

JIANJUN (V.O.)
Fair enough. Why do you want to gate with me again?

XIAODAN (V.O.)
You know why. Linking works by transmitting thoughts into data and back. Gating leaves no record.

JIANJUN (V.O.)
You're not going to brainwash me or anything?

XIAODAN (V.O.)
It doesn't work that way. Look, are we doing this or not? I wasn't born for talking.

JIANJUN (V.O.)
Fine.

XIAODAN (V.O.)
Okay, look at this.

She types on a holographic keyboard which appears in the air with a flash of her digits.

FLASHES of Fu Renshu talking to Kang, of the device, wetware, Cypro-corp, the device animation, Julu Transnational on the CIEDA watch list.

INT. FU RENSHU'S OFFICE, CIEDA - CONTINUOUS

Three agents join Fu Renshu to observe Rhee Jianjun on an airborne hologram. They are:

RONG (30s) - a weasely sort, too eager to ingratiate himself, his mishapen nose has been broken at least once.

TENGFEEI (20s) - the rookie, with a hawk face and shoulder length hair - sharp and eager.

LAU (40s) - stocky, tough; a female bulldog.

Fu Renshu squints at the image of Jianjun, seemingly alone in the park.

FU RENSHU
What's he doing?

RONG
He was reading the news. Now he's just sitting. Any progress?

FU RENSHU
He's still not talking. Let's prepare to move things forward again.

INT. DOMED PARK - CONTINUOUS

Jianjun blinks as the gate closes.

JIANJUN (V.O.)
Where did you get this information?

XIAODAN (V.O.)
Not at liberty to discuss.

JIANJUN (V.O.)
Well, what do you want me to do about it?

XIAODAN (V.O.)
I have a plan in place to remove the device from play if and when it becomes operational.

JIANJUN (V.O.)
You want me to steal it?

XIAODAN (V.O.)
Not steal, not personally. I want you to help me orchestrate a plan to secure a dangerous and illegally funded weapon and keep it out of the hands of China's enemies.

JIANJUN (V.O.)
You haven't explained how helping you isn't treason.

XIAODAN (V.O.)
 The law isn't always on the right
 side. For the good of the country,
 it's time to reconsider your
 loyalties.

Jianjun looks away.

JIANJUN (V.O.)
 I think you'd better leave, before
 I figure out how to catch you.

When Jianjun turns back, she's gone. He looks at her empty
 seat, lost in thought, scratches his chin with his good hand.

EXT. EASY CITY TRAM STOP - NIGHT

Jianjun gets off the tram into a driving rain. Xiaodan
 (invisible) shadows him, watches as he tries to run without
 getting too wet, then gives up and walks towards his house.

It's part of a vast urban sprawl - an endless sea of middle-
 class housing. Convoluted terraces, courtyards and bay
 windows overlap in an amalgam of free-form shapes.

INT. JIANJUN'S HOUSE - NIGHT

Jianjun tramps in. The floor quickly absorbs the water
 dripping off him. Xiaodan looks around the immaculate, almost
 sterile living room.

SHUCHUN (40s) - elegant, her thick black hair tinged with
 gray - looks up from setting the table.

JIANJUN
 Bad day. I'm going to bed.

He goes upstairs. Shuchun blinks, taken aback, and then
 storms up the spiral staircase that leads to their bedroom
 loft after him. Xiaodan follows.

SHUCHUN
 Were you planning on talking to me
 tonight? I made dinner--

JIANJUN
 Sorry. It's just... something
 happened at work today. I've got a
 lot on my mind.

SHUCHUN
 Want to talk about it?

JIANJUN

You know I can't do that.

SHUCHUN

I'm not asking for specifics, just--

JIANJUN

I'm trying to protect you from getting involved in this. Believe me there are times... some things you're better off not knowing.

SHUCHUN

I work at a hospital, Jianjun; you think I don't know that? But we're not getting any younger and I don't want to go through the rest of my life alone.

She sobs. Jianjun drags her struggling into the grip of his one good arm.

JIANJUN

Okay, okay. Calm down. I'm here.

SHUCHUN

I'm serious, Jianjun. It scares me.

JIANJUN

I know.

INT. JIANJUN'S HOUSE - NIGHT

Jianjun and Shuchun sleep in their bed. Xiaodan clears her throat, Jianjun starts awake. He sits up in bed, can barely make her out - she slouches in a side chair, kicks her crossed leg, her back to the panorama of the city.

She stands, slips towards the staircase with a look that bids him follow. Jianjun gets up, scowls, wraps the bed sheet around himself, and does so.

The kitchen light links on as Jianjun enters. He sets a tea kettle on the stove, and joins Xiaodan in the breakfast nook.

JIANJUN

You could have woken my wife.

XIAODAN

I couldn't. I'm not really here, and only you can hear me.

JIANJUN

What are you doing here?

XIAODAN

Now that you've had some time to think about it, I wanted to repeat my offer. Do you really want to go on like this?

JIANJUN (V.O.)

You're asking me to cross a line - to cross the Deputy Director.

XIAODAN (V.O.)

I'm not your enemy, Rhee Jianjun, Fu Renshu is. You used to be one of CIEDA's best agents. Director Fu wasted all that talent just to further his own career. Are you really going to stick up for him?

JIANJUN (V.O.)

(scratches his stump)

I'm not; I have a life. Not a great one, but if I get mixed up in this... I just don't want to make things any worse.

XIAODAN (V.O.)

I know what you're thinking. You stuck your neck out once, and you got burned. Pretty bad, I'll admit,
(indicates the arm)
but you became a CIEDA agent because you thought you could make a difference. Director Fu is never going to put you back in the field. I will.

She puts a hand on his leg, watches the conflicting emotions play across his face.

XIAODAN (V.O.)

I can't promise you a happy ending. You may still go to jail, but at least you'd finally be working at your true capacity. This is your chance, Rhee Jianjun. Help me make a difference.

Jianjun makes a decision, nods.

JIANJUN (V.O.)

I'm going to regret this, aren't I?

XIAODAN (V.O.)

Probably.

(looks around house)

We'll need an insider at Chang'e, someone with access to the device who'll see things our way. Problem is, only high level employees with a direct hand in creating the device even know it exists. They won't be easy to turn. Perhaps you can see what a level four background check turns up on all the top-drawer people there.

The kettle begins to steam, then cry. Jianjun gets up, brews himself a serving of strong black tea.

JIANJUN

I'd offer you one, but you're not really here.

XIAODAN

I appreciate the thought.

Jianjun sits down and blows on the mug.

JIANJUN

Correct me if I'm wrong, but as the resident neurohacker, isn't this more along the lines of your expertise?

XIAODAN

Probably, but we may yet need to use your team, so let's keep them involved. Either way, let's see what these reports turn up.

JIANJUN

What'll you do in the meantime?

XIAODAN

I'll keep myself busy, have no fear. There are a lot of facets to this situation.

JIANJUN

Once we have our inside man, we'll need a way to get it out of the building.

XIAODAN

I have a few thoughts on that.

JIANJUN

What are we going to do with it
once we get it?

XIAODAN

We'll turn it over to 'Moon Rabbit'
for study and disposal, of course.

JIANJUN

We could just destroy it; that
might be the simplest thing.

XIAODAN

That would limit our options. I
want to curb the radical
progression of technology, not
eliminate it.

Jianjun nods, sips his tea.

JIANJUN

Where are you really? Where's your
physical body?

XIAODAN

I don't know, it's kind of a blur.
You have to realize, I do half a
dozen things at once, all the time.
I guess I just don't pay much
attention to that part of it.

JIANJUN

You neurohackers are weird.

Xiaodan thinks this over.

INT. JIANJUN'S HOUSE - DAY

Jianjun's alarm clock goes off. It contains a tiny sailboat
tossed on a sea of blue oil, and reads: 7:00 AM

Shuchun gets up immediately, Jianjun fumbles for the snooze
button with his good hand. Xiaodan observes them, two
different worlds.

INT. CIEDA HQ, RECORDS - DAY

Jianjun's internal affairs team - Rong, Tengfei, and Lau - go
through stacks of bio-chip storage devices and other
equipment. They look up as Jianjun and Xiaodan (invisible)
come in.

TENGFEI
Abandon all hope, ye who enter.

LAU
A level four check on all the
Chang'e people? We vetted these
guys already, there's nothing here.

TENGFEI
What are we looking for, again?

JIANJUN
We're an internal affairs team,
aren't we? Just being thorough.
Give me a few.

He takes a handful of bio-chips. Each activates in turn, as he holds them up to his Link, and stores them in his buffer.

His Link syncs with the others in the node, cross references any red flags. As they slog through the pile, Xiaodan can see Rhee's resentment of the task growing.

JIANJUN (CONT'D)
Does anybody know a Xiaodan?

Xiaodan's eyeballs pop. No one around the room shows any sign of recognition.

RONG
I'll put it in the search
parameters. What's one more
variable?

In an airborne hologram, Xiaodan adds a quick bit of biographical data.

XIAODAN
You want backstory, I'll give you
backstory.

She saves and backdates the file.

RONG
Got a reference in the deep files.

JIANJUN
Which ones?

RONG
The kind we don't admit to.

He calls up the hologram - all the others have a look.

TENGFEI

She was an undercover agent for CIEDA, specialized in infiltration.

LAU

Wait, I just cross-referenced our employment records. We never had a Xiaodan here.

XIAODAN

(curses in Chinese)

RONG

She might not've had a record if she was deep cover.

TENGFEI

Maybe Xiaodan's a code name for her undercover assignments.

JIANJUN

We'd have that under aliases.

LAU

I don't remember her.

TENGFEI

Why would you?

LAU

I make it a point to know all the lady agents.

Tengfei rolls his eyes.

RONG

Is she a person of interest? Do we add her to the list? Who here knows her?

JIANJUN

No, it was just a passing thought. I'll clear it up. Let's keep our eye on Chang'e.

RONG

Well, what are we supposed to be looking for, then, if that doesn't count as suspicious?

JIANJUN

Someone with access to information on the project, a high security clearance, and anything in their past that makes them susceptible to compromise.

TENGFEI

What do we think they're going to--

JIANJUN

Let's stay focused.

(finds a file)

I've got something on a Lei Huizhong. This is good.

He calls up a hologram of Huizhong.

TENGFEI

Where'd you find it?

JIANJUN

Former employees.

TENGFEI

I looked there!

LAU

What's it say?

JIANJUN

After he retired from Chang'e, Huizhong worked at a data mining company. Then just recently, he went back to Chang'e to facilitate a deal which gave Chang'e a significant infusion of cash from a private equity firm called Julu Transnational.

Xiaodan watches Jianjun consider this, wills him to follow the lead.

JIANJUN (CONT'D)

Let's pick him up.

INT. FU RENSHU'S OFFICE, CIEDA

Rong, Tenfei and Lau report to Fu Renshu.

LAU

He wants to pick up Lei Huizhong.

FU RENSHU
That could be a problem.

LAU
What are we supposed to do?

FU RENSHU
Recreate the crime scene, just as
we found it. See what he turns up.

EXT. EASY CITY - DAY

A UAV - urban armored vehicle - blasts down the street,
digital sirens squawk.

INT. UAV - DAY

Xiaodan (still invisible) sits beside Jianjun. Tengfei, Lau
and Rong check their guns for possible jams, and tighten
straps on their safety vests.

Jianjun primes the arm-mounted weapon on his good hand with
his stump.

EXT. LEI HUIZHONG'S APARTMENT - DAY

The UAV pulls up, and they storm out. The structure is slick,
well appointed. The finest materials knitted together with a
judicious application of nanotechnology.

The agents storm the lobby with looks of concentration and
mild jealousy.

Bay windows face the bottomless street and beckon them into
the well-lit interior. Xiaodan follows them in, unconcerned
with cover.

INT. LEI HUIZHONG'S APARTMENT - CONTINUOUS

They rush in, scan for resistance, but the palatial suite is
completely still.

Huizhong's sprawled on the couch, dead. His hand clutches his
chest. Xiaodan looks preoccupied.

INT. LEI HUIZHONG'S APARTMENT - DAY

Xiaodan watches Jianjun pace an upper balcony as his team takes Lei Huizhong's executive apartment apart and tags evidence.

JIANJUN
What d'you have?

Tengfei inspects the remains of a server farm.

TENGFEI
Nothing. It's totally stripped.

JIANJUN
By whom?

TENGFEI
Whoever it was, they knew what they were doing, and what to look for.

Jianjun grunts, walks into an office on the upper level, separated from the main floor by a window.

He sits down at Huizhong's desk, and the chair adjusts to fit him. He sorts through empty bio-chip containers in a storage bank with his good hand until something catches his eye.

He holds the containers apart, pulls a scrap of paper from the bottom of the bank, and unfolds it. The scrawl inside reads: "FENRIS"

Jianjun turns the scrap, looks over his shoulder, and tucks the note in his pocket.

INT. DOMED PARK - DAY

Xiaodan approaches Jianjun in the park, same bench as before.

XIAODAN
You shouldn't have mentioned my name; that was sloppy.

JIANJUN
You don't work for CIEDA, do you?

XIAODAN
Never said I did. I just said I was Fu Renshu's superior, you assumed it was in your chain of command.

JIANJUN
How am I supposed trust you?

XIAODAN

Because you saw how easily I cracked CIEDA files. Believe me; if I wanted to hurt you, we wouldn't be having this conversation. The neurohackers I represent don't want this device in the wrong hands. You know how far up this goes, do you really want those people to be able to do what I can do?

JIANJUN

I guess not. So tell me about this Fenris.

XIAODAN

He's the head biophotonic engineer, works on the Link interface. He's short, paunchy, he's got prosthetic eyes. They're good, but I can tell.

JIANJUN

He'd just have them regenerated unless he was trying to change the retinal pattern, which means...

XIAODAN

Cypro-corp.

INT. FU RENSHU'S OFFICE, CIEDA - CONTINUOUS

The three agents and the Director observe Jianjun - alone in the park - on a hologram.

RONG

He's on the same bench again, by himself.

LAU

What's going on, sir? I thought the point of this operation was to keep him mothballed. Now we're re-creating crime scenes?

FU RENSHU

You're internal investigators - I'd say the investigation has taken a turn. Do your job, maintain surveillance.

Fu Renshu turns to the window.

TENGFEI

(sotto)

We're getting it from both sides,
now.

INT. DOMED PARK - CONTINUOUS

Xiaodan and Jianjun continue their discussion.

JIANJUN

Why would Cypro-corp back Chang'e?
They're actively trying to break
Cypro-corp's monopoly on Link
technology.

XIAODAN

Call it a hedged bet. The enemy you
can see is less dangerous than the
one you can't.

JIANJUN

Shi dân - Fenris must've killed
Huizhong.

XIAODAN

(nods)

After Huizhong facilitated the
deal, he'd outlived his usefulness,
and since Huizhong was connected to
Julu, he could compromise Fenris's
cover as a Cypro-corp spy.

JIANJUN

How d'you suppose he managed it?

XIAODAN

Over the QuantumNet, of course.
Opened the sluice-gates of his
adrenal gland, over-cranked his
heart.

JIANJUN

You can do that?

XIAODAN

In theory. I'll set up a meeting
with Fenris, see what he says.

JIANJUN

Great.

INT. THE JADE SEA, VIRTUAL BAR - NIGHT

The place renders in sections: bar, tables, patrons - but remains dark, shady in more ways than one. Its corner windows overlook the unsavory part of a virtual city. A neon dragon above the bar illuminates the furtive clientele.

Jianjun and Xiaodan link in, look around.

JIANJUN
Virtual bar, nice.

XIAODAN
Don't get carried away. I've made this thread invisible, so no one else can... Fenris.

Fenris logs in, identifies them, and stares intently. Fenris sighs and sits at the bar beside them. The bartender brings him a drink.

FENRIS
What do you want?

Xiaodan meets Fenris's glare.

XIAODAN
I'll tell you what we know, save you the trouble of denying it. You had your eyes replaced so you could keep your job at a government contractor and pass CIEDA's usual background checks. Means you're a Cypro-corp mole, there to report back and probably steal the prototype when it's done. How'm I doing so far?

FENRIS
You can't prove any of this. What the hell are you?

XIAODAN
Let's just accept the fact I'm onto you and move on.

FENRIS
Move on to what?

XIAODAN
We want you to steal the device for us, instead.

Fenris nearly chokes on his virtual drink.

FENRIS

Why in the world would I do that?

XIAODAN

Because being a Cypro-corp spy isn't your biggest secret. You killed Lei Huizhong. Espionage and murder of a government contractor on a classified project will get you locked up in a cell forever, maybe even executed.

FENRIS

I'm not worried. There's a Cypro-corp safeguard in place, they see to that.

XIAODAN

You mean your kill switch - pop a vessel and Cypro-corp's off the hook - but I can kill the switch.

FENRIS

How can this be happening? How are you even possible?

XIAODAN

I can protect you - we work for the President; we only want to ensure the security of worldwide QuantumNet traffic. I can piggyback onto your planned theft, make it look like we swooped in and got the upper hand. You won't be exposed.

FENRIS

(indicates Jianjun)

Is that what you told him?

(leans into Xiaodan)

They'll kill me for failing. Don't you get it? They own everything, control everything. Our bank accounts, the places we live, the food we feed our pets. You don't know how fast it can all go away.

XIAODAN

They don't control me.

FENRIS

Give it time.

JIANJUN

I don't pretend to understand all the forces at work here, but it seems to me they'll kill you either way. Why not bite the bigger bad guy before you log off? Surely stiffing them is worth something. You can do this, hurt them with impunity. Make your death count for something.

FENRIS

(to Xiaodan)

You're amazing.

(to Jianjun)

And you don't really appreciate the situation.

Xiaodan never blinks. Jianjun turns a peanut bowl in circles.

FENRIS (CONT'D)

Let's say I do this, how will we go about it? The device is already functional. They've planned an unveiling ceremony for Friday afternoon. I'm supposed to deliver the device directly after.

JIANJUN

(to Xiaodan)

Then we need to go, set the plan in motion right now.

XIAODAN

(to Fenris)

We'll be in touch.

She disconnects Fenris - dumps him from the program. Xiaodan looks at Jianjun with newfound respect.

XIAODAN (CONT'D)

That was pretty good.

JIANJUN

I'm just spit-balling. I have no idea what your plan is.

XIAODAN

We'll string him along until he incriminates himself, then steal it a different way. Fenris takes the fall.

JIANJUN

I don't see how we're going to accomplish all this.

XIAODAN

Funny you should put it that way. You can replace the eyes...

JIANJUN

...but you can't change the way they look at things?

(gets it)

Fenris can see in the dark. We need to create a blackout.

XIAODAN

We need to create a blackout.

She takes a deep breath.

JIANJUN

This is where you ask me to misuse my authority as a CIEDA agent.

XIAODAN

I need you to get something from Director Fu Renshu's office.

JIANJUN

You're not serious.

XIAODAN

CIEDA can override, shut down and wipe any building or part of a building's network, but it requires a code. We need the Chang'e shutdown command.

JIANJUN

I've recruited for CIEDA, so I know how this goes. You just keep asking me for one more thing and I'm free, but it never ends.

She laughs, runs a hand through his hair.

XIAODAN

I know you're not happy, but you're an attractive man, Rhee Jianjun.

JIANJUN

I know this trick, too.

XIAODAN

It's not really cheating if you do it over the QuantumNet.

JIANJUN

Cheating's an unfair advantage you use to rig the game. Sound about right?

XIAODAN

Guess I'm used to it, I do that all the time.

JIANJUN

What's the deal with you neurohackers? You think you're so much better, so much more responsible than everyone else. Why do you get to be the zookeepers?

XIAODAN

Because progress run wild is chaos. Who better to police it than those who've shown themselves responsible?

JIANJUN

You call what we're doing here responsible?

XIAODAN

I do.

Jianjun says nothing, but Xiaodan waits him out.

JIANJUN

Guess I don't really have a choice, do I? I'm already compromised, you or Fenris could kill me if I jump ship.

XIAODAN

(nods)

This is how it has to be.

INT. JIANJUN'S BEDROOM - NIGHT

Jianjun links in as a hologram. Shuchun's in bed, she reads a holographic medical journal on her Link.

JIANJUN

I've got some stuff left to do at the office. I'm going to stay a while, so don't wait up, okay?

SHUCHUN

When're you coming home?

JIANJUN

Not sure.

SHUCHUN

You know you could work from here.

JIANJUN

I prefer the office, Shuchun.

SHUCHUN

Okay, 'night.

Jianjun closes the link.

INT. JIANJUN'S OFFICE, CIEDA - NIGHT

He stares into the air where Shuchun used to be.

JIANJUN

'Night.

Xiaodan taps her foot.

XIAODAN

Let's go.

They head out into the,

INT. LOBBY, CIEDA - CONTINUOUS

It's empty. The two-story waterfall POUNDS. Xiaodan and Jianjun look up at the Director's office - the light's off.

INT. FU RENSHU'S WAITING ROOM - CONTINUOUS

The hallway outside the Deputy Director's office is dark. Jianjun blinks at the hexadecimal keypad and biometric sensors guarding the blast-proof door.

He looks at Xiaodan, who only raises an eyebrow at him.

XIAODAN

This is the easy part.

Jianjun checks the door again, it slides open. Surprised but pleased, he creeps through.

INT. FU RENSHU'S OFFICE, CIEDA - CONTINUOUS

The same Spartan layout looks eerie with no one there.

The holodesk, still on, has no decoration but an etched sign: "Fu Renshu, Deputy Director, CIEDA." Jianjun sits down, opens a link, and browses through the holo-files.

JIANJUN

Not sure what I'm looking for.

XIAODAN

Let me drive, I'll know the kind of code when I see it. Just needed a Link with CIEDA clearance paired to crack the encryption.

Her fingers fly across the holo-desk.

XIAODAN (CONT'D)

By the way, I'm seeing records Lei Huizhong brokered that series of capital infusions by Julu Transnational on Fu Renshu's orders. You'll want to check into that after we're done here.

JIANJUN

Thought we were looking for a code.

XIAODAN

I'm a natural multi-takser, can't help myself.

Jianjun sees a flash of a Chang'e prototype couch for long-term virtual Immersion.

JIANJUN

What was that?

XIAODAN

Nothing.

She sweeps the image away.

Jianjun, confused, hears a door whoosh open down in the lobby. He looks down from Fu Renshu's window, and sees Fu Renshu cross the lobby.

JIANJUN

Shi dân - he's coming back. We have to get out of here.

XIAODAN

Just a minute. I've got the shutdown protocol. Let's go.

INT. FU RENSHU'S WAITING ROOM - CONTINUOUS

Xiaodan and Jianjun rush out of the office onto the bridge above the lobby. Jianjun links the door shut, but it's too late. The elevator light chimes. The door opens.

Jianjun and Xiaodan vault over the counter into the aide's alcove. Xiaodan lands on top of Jianjun. The two huddle and hold their breath as Fu Renshu walks by above them, and enters the office.

INT. FU RENSHU'S OFFICE, CIEDA - CONTINUOUS

Fu Renshu goes to his desk, inspects the storage bank.

INT. FU RENSHU'S WAITING ROOM - CONTINUOUS

They're about to move when Fu Renshu enters the alcove. He turns on the light, and looks in. Jianjun and Xiaodan press themselves into the shadow under Jiaying's desk, sweat pours down their faces.

While she has Jianjun trapped, Xiaodan kisses him. Jianjun tries to protest, but she puts her full weight onto him, and he's terrified not to make a sound lest Fu Renshu discover their presence.

The Deputy Director looks right at them, tries to focus, but can't. He takes his coat from the rack in the alcove, waves out the light, and closes the door.

Confused, Jianjun catches his breath. Xiaodan smiles a conflicted smile at him. Jianjun won't meet her eye.

XIAODAN

Having fun?

JIANJUN

(moans)

XIAODAN

Next comes the hard part. I got the shutdown code - we go tomorrow.

JIANJUN'S DREAM

Water pounds in the dark, a toy sailboat bobs in the current of a river. Jianjun is in the current with it.

The current becomes the waterfall in the CIEDA lobby. Past the waterfall, out the vertical skylight, the silhouette of a black building rises - its massive shaft crowned at the top by a nest of fluted structures like screaming birds.

Jianjun falls by the building, over the waterfall, into the darkness.

INT. JIANJUN'S HOUSE, BEDROOM - DAY

Jianjun wakes to the buzz of his alarm clock.

He gets up, goes into the bathroom where Shuchun gets ready for work. Xiaodan (invisible) watches Jianjun wash his face. Shuchun finishes what she's doing and leaves without a word. They avoid each other's eyes. Jianjun ties his tie.

INT. JIANJUN'S OFFICE, CIEDA - DAY

Lau, Tengfei, and Rong gather around Jianjun's holo-desk. Xiaodan stands behind him (still invisible). Jianjun leans over from his side.

JIANJUN

Julu Transnational. I had our financial guys go over it, but it's a black box. I want you to go in, raid its cells. Find out where the money comes from.

He brings up informational holograms to illustrate.

JIANJUN (CONT'D)

I think Cypro-corp is using Julu to fund Chang'e - a Chinese company - illegally, and I think Director Fu knows about it. What I don't know is why. Report directly to me until our case is ironclad, understood?

They all nod yes.

LAU

Where'd you get this?

JIANJUN
(finger to his nose)
You know the drill.

Tengfei scans the directions on an airborne hologram.

TENGFEEI
These coordinates put Julu in the special economic zone, outside our jurisdiction. Without proof of wrongdoing, we're not allowed to raid them.

JIANJUN
Unless we do, we'll never prove the Cypro-corp connection to Chang'e. I assume you're all familiar with the story of the Battle of Julu.

Jianjun paces around the front of the desk.

JIANJUN (CONT'D)
When Xiang Yu led his men across the Yellow River to fight the Qin Dynasty, he ordered them to smash their cooking pots and sink their ships, so there could be no retreat from the fight.

He stops, faces them.

JIANJUN (CONT'D)
This is our Battle of Julu - the point of no return. Cypro-corp no doubt named the company to mark the beginning of an attempt to control China. With this act, we will mark its end.

TENGFEEI
You're not coming with, boss?

JIANJUN
Got other work to do, I'll catch up with you when you get back.

RONG
What about security?

JIANJUN
Minimal. It's Friday afternoon, and it's the Moon Festival this weekend, everyone goes home early.

LAU
Everyone except us, huh, boss?

JIANJUN
(nods)
Happy Friday.

The agents leave, Xiaodan circles to stand beside Jianjun.

XIAODAN
Nice speech. Bit melodramatic.

JIANJUN
Maybe. I just need them out of the building so we can do what we have to do.

INT. LOBBY, CIEDA HQ - DAY

As the agents exit past the waterfall, Rong opens a link. His eyes betray a slight glance towards Fu Renshu's Office.

INT. FU RENSHU'S OFFICE, CIEDA HQ - DAY

Fu Renshu paces at the window, in direct view of Rong, below.

FU RENSHU
Uh-huh. Good work. Keep me informed.

EXT. CHANG'E HQ - DAY

Cars arrive at the building, people in tuxedos get out.

Talgat, and two other Cypro-corp agent agents, SKYLOS and AIZAHN (30s) sit in a long, black hover car. Skylos is a gangster type, tribal tattoos cover Aizahn's face and neck.

AIZAHN
Why can't we go to the party?

TALGAT
We're just here to get the delivery. You can party later.

INT. CHANG'E LAB - DAY

Operators and investors in tuxedos gather on multi-level platforms around the biotech core column.

Kang addresses the group from one of the raised levels around the core. A simple silk cloth obscures an object which hovers above a pedestal behind him.

KANG

It's my sad duty to inform you of the death of our friend and former CFO Lei Huizhong after a protracted illness. My family and this company owe him debts of gratitude we can never repay, and no one is sorrier he can't be here to share today's triumph.

Kang clears his throat and continues, reads from notes on an airborne hologram.

KANG (CONT'D)

My fellow pioneers, we are the caretakers of a community - a community of the mind.

He closes the hologram.

KANG (CONT'D)

Imagination is the beginning and end of human worth, the catalyst of creation. No one knows it better than you, who have devoted the past seven years of your lives to make this dream a reality. Well, we did it. Friends, the XDN-1.

Kang whips the cloth off the pedestal to reveal a clear, semi-organic device. It curls, a graceful, colorless mollusk, ready for implantation.

In the crowd, operators Ma Quiolian and Fenris Shire look proud. The crowd claps.

KANG (CONT'D)

We can shape the reality of the QuantumNet into anything we can imagine, and I imagine the community we will now create will be unlike any pioneered before.

The crowd continues to clap.

INT. CHANG'E LAB - LATER

Waiters pass cocktails around the R&D lab - the party's in full swing. A band plays.

All the operators gather around the pedestal talking, drinking, and having a good time as the XDN-1 floats, rotates slowly; the culmination of their work.

INT. JIANJUN'S OFFICE, CIEDA - DAY

Jianjun goes to the window and links to lock his office door. He goes to his desk. The interface reads: "FORMAT CELL. ALL DATA WILL BE LOST. EXECUTE?"

He links 'OK', and it prompts him for his pass code. He looks at Xiaodan, who stands by the window.

JIANJUN

You sure this is going to work?

XIAODAN

(nods)

The prototype's a one-way ticket. All their carefully cataloged backups and fail-safes will be wiped in the crash, Fenris has seen to that. Chang'e doesn't have the resources to create another. Whoever we give this thing to will be the only one to have it for the foreseeable future.

JIANJUN

Why me? Why did you choose me?

XIAODAN

An ancient Chinese proverb says, "an invisible red thread connects those destined to meet, despite the time, the place, and despite the circumstances. The thread can be tightened or tangle, but will never be broken."

JIANJUN

Like quantum entanglement.

XIAODAN

Exactly. Like the QuantumNet - neutrinos independent of gravity, mass, time... faster than light and hopelessly intertwined. The fabric of our reality, fashioned into a substrate for communication.

(MORE)

XIAODAN (CONT'D)

Like all of us - we're all made of the same stuff, so it wasn't a question of choosing you. You were there. I could only ever choose you.

JIANJUN

How do I know you won't double-cross me, keep it for yourself?

XIAODAN

You don't - but it's still the right thing to do, isn't it?

JIANJUN

Perhaps, but I might sabotage the whole operation just for spite.

XIAODAN

If you were the sort of man who would do that, you'd have done it to Fu Renshu long before now.

JIANJUN

I guess you're right.

He starts to press OK, stops.

JIANJUN (CONT'D)

Why is it red?

XIAODAN

What?

JIANJUN

Why is the invisible thread red? If it's invisible, what difference does the color make?

XIAODAN

I don't know, that's how the proverb goes. Why?

JIANJUN

Just curious.

He links, 'OK.' The interface reads: "FORMAT COMPLETE."

Jianjun takes a few bio-chips out of his storage bank, and drops them in the garbage chute / atomizer. He tears a number out of his notebook and atomizes the rest.

Jianjun collapses in his chair, and glances at his Link's time readout. It reads: "4:57 PM." Xiaodan watches him.

XIAODAN

You have the shutdown code I gave you? You remember how to route it through Fenris's pirate relay?

Jianjun leans on his hand, looks at the scrap of paper.

JIANJUN

If it's not on this square inch of wood pulp, it's too late.

Jianjun opens a link, enters the code on the scrap of paper. His eyes go wide as the screen pops to white.

INT. CHANG'E LAB - DAY

The party's still in full swing. Operators, investors and shareholders mill around the room. Then the lights go out. The generators spin down. Silhouettes in the darkness.

Various walla: "What?","Hey!", and "My drink!"

QUIOLIAN

Well, what do we do now?

INT. CHANG'E CORRIDOR - DAY

Xiaodan (invisible) follows Fenris Shire down the hallway from the lab.

Rays of light stream through the forest of metal outside the observation windows. Chang'e is soaked in a pool of self-contained darkness.

Fenris heads for the door, and the car waiting outside, but Xiaodan reaches out, puts a hand on his shoulder, and he hesitates as she hacks his link.

XIAODAN

Sorry about this - change of plans.

In a trance, Fenris puts the device in a pneumatic chute, enters an address in the interface hologram.

He pushes 'send,' and heads back to the lab.

FENRIS'S POV

He can easily see the entrance in the dark, with a sensitivity greater than human eyesight. To Fenris, the computer core past the shield doors is incandescent.

INT. CHANG'E LAB - CONTINUOUS

Fenris steps through the doors, and enters onto a balcony above the computer core room, its shadowy expanse ablaze with flashlight beams.

Essential systems alarms with countdowns to life support failure. Various walla: "blackout", "core down" and "impossible."

KANG

Fenris!
(bumps into Quiolian)
Where's Fenris?

QUIOLIAN

I... he was over by the core.
(shouts)
Fenris! Where are you?

KANG

Anyone have a light?

Several more flashlights come on. Operators crawl under consoles, dig into wall circuitry.

KANG (CONT'D)

What's going on? Where's Fenris?

Fenris bumbles into him, blinks, and shakes his head.

FENRIS

I'm here.

QUIOLIAN

Where've you been? We're hung.

FENRIS

Stepped out for a sec. Got trapped when the power went out. What happened?

He sits next to Quiolian, looks at her holo display.

QUIOLIAN

All our stations are down. I've got a total system-wide failure.

FENRIS

Environmental?

QUIOLIAN

We don't know. We'll try to get--

Across the room, an operator shouts,

OPERATOR
Auxiliary power's on now!

KANG
Don't shout, damn it!

Red emergency lights come on.

Fenris ditches his tuxedo jacket, throws on his operator's rig - a suit that plugs into his immersion couch, integrates him into the network. Quiolian pulls hers over a dress.

QUIOLIAN
My console's back on line, gonna re-initialize the system.

FENRIS
We have to do this slow to assess the cell damage.

QUIOLIAN
Is the whole city blacked out?

KANG
I saw lights out the windows.

The interfaces start back up.

FENRIS
It's just our part of the building.
(scans his interface)
A shutdown command came across the QuantumNet from CIEDA, but it's repairable. We'll have main power back on soon.

QUIOLIAN
You think they'd steal the data?

FENRIS
It's possible.

Kang opens a link to CIEDA.

KANG
Director Fu Renshu?

The hologram of Fu Renshu blinks to see him.

FU RENSHU
What did you do? We're blacked out over here!

KANG

I was going to ask the same thing.
Someone on your end shut us down.

QUIOLIAN

Boss, take a look at this!

Kang looks over. The display is only a ready cursor.

QUIOLIAN (CONT'D)

I've checked all the nodes. Our
memory cells are wiped. We're
running on the raw quantum
programming language. Even our
operating system, it's all gone.

Kang stares, unable to take it in.

FU RENSHU

Murong Kang, the prototype. Murong
Kang! Is it there?

Kang's eyes drift to the pedestal. The device is gone.

KANG

Xiaodan.

INT. CHANG'E LAB - LATER

Kang stands over Quiolian at the console. Xiaodan (invisible)
watches them.

KANG

What haven't we looked at?

Fenris crawls stiff-backed from underneath the console, and
sits down. He rubs his eyes, blinks in the now too-bright
light. He puts on his goggles - a modified array of HUDs.

FENRIS

No clue. I still have to debug... I
don't know. Everything.

His immersion couch adjusts to his posture and carries him
across the console, where he manipulates the glitchy
interface with looks, gestures, thoughts.

KANG

Go over the uplinks from CIEDA's
grid, and our own.

QUIOLIAN

The definition of insanity's when you do the same thing and expect different results.

KANG

And yet, I owe any success I've had to hanging on long beyond the time it was sensible to do so.

Kang looks across the lab to a small antechamber where Jianjun lies in a long-term immersion couch - a virtual reality interface. Xiaodan follows his gaze, goes to look at Jianjun. She examines him tenderly.

KANG (CONT'D)

Here's something different for you.

Kang walks back towards Quiolian.

KANG (CONT'D)

Parse the uplinks from our guest. He's supposed to be isolated here, but maybe we missed something. If we did, my guess is it might be bounced through CIEDA's grid.

QUIOLIAN

Well if so, it won't be on the surface. The connection will be deep, scattered across his Link, and the grid. I'll have to drill pretty far into the guy's head. He's gonna be seriously confused when he wakes up.

KANG

That's a given. So? You know the algorithm, what's the problem?

FENRIS

A deep-level scan of a government agency - and its assets - is more than a little illegal.

KANG

We're in deeper than that. Fu Renshu can shut us down any time he wants, but he'll want answers about the prototype more. Do it, already.

Quiolian shakes her head. Kang wanders over to the pedestal where the XDN-1 rested until recently, passes a hand over it.

QUIOLIAN
 (curses in Chinese)
Shunsheng duh gaowahn.

Kang turns, Quiolian stares at her array of interfaces.

QUIOLIAN (CONT'D)
 I don't want to reward bad
 behavior, but I've got something.

Kang goes to his side, reads over his shoulder.

KANG
 An uplink from CIEDA's grid.

QUIOLIAN
 But the signal didn't originate
 there. I've traced it as far as a
 pirate relay... I can't determine
 the actual user, but it's a Cypro-
 corp encryption.

Xiaodan smiles.

INT. KANG'S OFFICE, CHANG'E - DAY

Kang seals the door, opens a link. Talgat blinks in by the
 window, transmitting from the car outside.

TALGAT
 Mr. Murong.

KANG
 The prototype's gone, General. We
 were blacked out. We traced the
 shutdown link to a pirate relay on
 a Cypro-corp node.

TALGAT
 Unfortunate news. You have a
 suspect?

KANG
 (off his look)
 You were expecting this! Damn
 right, I have a suspect. Did you
 think we wouldn't deliver?

TALGAT
 Be careful, Mr. Murong. We will
 conduct an investigation to
 determine if the perpetrator has an
 accomplice in our organization.

He blinks out. Kang collapses in his chair.

EXT. CHANG'E - CONTINUOUS

In the hover car, Talgat turns to Skylos and Aizahn.

TALGAT
Something's gone wrong. I need to
tell the ambassador.

INT. KANG'S OFFICE, CHANG'E - CONTINUOUS

Another link opens. Kang looks up as Fu Renshu blinks in.

FU RENSHU
It's Rhee Jianjun. I don't know
how, but he's responsible. I'll
explain when I get there.

He blinks out.

KANG
Tell me something I don't know.

Kang stares out his windows.

INT. SPA, CYPRO-CORP EMBASSY - DAY

AMBASSADOR ELEINA RHODON (40s) swims towards a pool light.

Talgat's shadow falls in the marble colonnade surrounding an Olympic-sized pool. He steps through archways and down a low flight of steps. Colored light shimmers on the water.

Eleina senses Talgat's approach. She leans back, smooths the water from her hair.

TALGAT
The Chang'e device was not
delivered according to plan.
(thinks)
It was stolen as planned, but not
by us.

Eleina climbs the stairs out of the pool, water drips from her pointed chin down her iridescent snake-scaled suit.

ELEINA
When?

She towels her hair, lets the towel fall, takes the robe Talgat offers.

TALGAT

Our operative just informed me.

ELEINA

Our operative was supposed to prevent this. I want that device.

TALGAT

He's working to contain the situation.

ELEINA

We'll have to tell the Board before they hear it on the MediaWeb. Come on.

She sweeps from the room.

INT. CHANG'E LAB - NIGHT

Kang, Quiolian and Fenris stand around an immersion couch, where Jianjun lies hooked up to IVs and a feeding tube. He's been in virtual reality all along... still is.

His hands - both of them - clutch stress balls, taped into place. His teeth clench a mouth guard. Fu Renshu paces around the small chamber adjacent to the main lab, hands in his pockets, behind other operators and agents.

FU RENSHU

(to Kang)

You're certain he hasn't moved from this couch since we brought him in from the Xinjiang mission?

KANG

My operators and your internal affairs crew monitor him constantly as part of your investigation.

Quiolian scans Jianjun's head. They're all tired and irritated. Tengfei and Lau are in immersion couches nearby.

FU RENSHU

Has he ever given an indication when we dive in with him that he's aware of his situation?

QUIOLIAN

None, he's fully immersed. We still can't crack the ghost job they did on him - it's progressive, counters everything I throw at it.

KANG

(to Fu Renshu)

He's in a dream state, sedated. He can't be capable of consciously carrying out a theft.

FU RENSHU

And yet, he's our primary suspect. You have coffee?

KANG

It's on the sidebar.

QUIOLIAN

Well, it looks like there's some new activity here. Looks like a link and a lot of data transfer, but I can't decrypt it.

FU RENSHU

Product of the ghost job?

QUIOLIAN

Not sure. It's located in a sector of the Link we don't understand too well. Cypro-corp doesn't tell us how the Link works. Some of it's proprietary, and we haven't been able to hack it. Part of what the XDN-1 was meant to alleviate.

KANG

Subliminal program?

QUIOLIAN

Or an occult virus. No way to tell.

FU RENSHU

I don't think you understand how much trouble you're in. This man may have stolen a top-secret super-weapon on your watch. I installed him here against my better judgement because you're supposed to have the most advanced facility, the most sophisticated program.

Quiolian throws her hands wide.

QUIOLIAN

It's buried too deep, you'll need a better operator than me to dig it out. Good luck with that.

FU RENSHU

Put my men back in there, they'll make him talk.

Fu Renshu drags Kang aside.

FU RENSHU (CONT'D)

Who's Xiaodan?

Kang looks at him askance. Quiolian watches them both.

FU RENSHU (CONT'D)

We know she's in contact with Rhee Jianjun. Despite your precautions, she's been able to infiltrate the environment - manipulate it.

KANG

You mentioned this to Rhee Jianjun?

FU RENSHU

He mentioned her to us, but it makes my job harder. Does she work for Chang'e?

KANG

(thinks)

I honestly don't know.

INT. CYPRO-CORP EMBASSY - DAY

Eleina and Talgat arrive at a massive pair of oak doors with cast brass handles. A brass sign reads: 'Committee of Administrative Affairs.'

INT. BOARD ROOM, CYPRO-CORP EMBASSY - DAY

They cross the great Cypro-corp seal set into the marble floor, and face the board members, who sit behind a polished oak table. All are dressed in their robes of office.

Reporters with glowing retinas stream the meeting live.

BOARD MEMBER #1

We've received news, the theft of a highly sensitive prototype Link.

(MORE)

BOARD MEMBER #1 (CONT'D)
China suspects Cypro-corp is
involved in this theft.

ELEINA
They suspect us because this
prototype, developed by Chang'e
Communications, is a weapon that
threatens the safety of every Cypro-
corp citizen, counselor.

BOARD MEMBER #1
We can assume then, your committee
will do everything in its power to
discover those responsible.

ELEINA
I assure you madam, we will turn
every stone, and spare no expense
to clear Cypro-corp of these
pernicious charges.

BOARD MEMBER #3
We must be sure not to offend our
partners in China, or we'll face
repercussions.

ELEINA
My staff and I will ensure that
doesn't happen.

BOARD MEMBER #2
Very well, thank you for your
report, Madam Ambassador.

Talgat falls in with Eleina as she exits the chamber.

TALGAT
Orders, Ambassador Rhodon?

Eleina raises an eyebrow as though this should be obvious.

ELEINA
Find that device. Find it now.

INT. JIANJUN'S OFFICE, CIEDA - DAY

Xiaodan finds Jianjun head down on his office desk and knocks
on the door frame.

XIAODAN
Jianjun, wake up! There's no time.

He starts awake and stares around, disoriented, a little scared. He blinks and winces at a massive headache.

JIANJUN

Did I go to sleep? Head's killing me. Sorry, come in. Who are you?

She strides towards him, beginning to be concerned herself.

XIAODAN

What do you mean? Jianjun, it's me, Xiaodan.

JIANJUN

Who?

XIAODAN

Oh my god, this is not happening. What's wrong with you?

JIANJUN

Um, is this is some kind of joke--

XIAODAN

Snap out of it, Jianjun! *Wenshén*, this is serious!

JIANJUN

I don't...

XIAODAN

Come on!

She grabs him by the wrist and drags him from his office. Jianjun's too stunned to resist.

INT. HALLWAY, CIEDA HQ - CONTINUOUS

Xiaodan takes him down a long, silent corridor on the level above the lobby and shoves him through a hatchway, into the...

INT. WATERFALL ISOLATION BOOTH - CONTINUOUS

The sound of rushing water surrounds Jianjun and Xiaodan as they press into the claustrophobic conduit.

XIAODAN

I found this place in the building schematics when we broke in to Fu Renshu's office.

JIANJUN

Where... wait, when we did what?

XIAODAN

We're in the hollow column of the building's waterfall. It's shielded, so it's safe a place as any right now.

Their breaths come in bursts of steam as they huddle by the chilled condensers.

JIANJUN

I had no idea. Who are you again?

XIAODAN

Damn it, the blackout must have screwed up your memory somehow, corrupted the ghost job they did on you, I don't know. I have to talk to you, but they're coming for you and I don't have a lot of time.

JIANJUN

(shivers)

I don't understand. What do you mean they're coming for me?

XIAODAN

I was trying to avoid this, but... you're on the QuantumNet - right now. Your life, none of this is real. CIEDA put you in an immersion program to interrogate you.

JIANJUN

Is that why Director Fu's always asking about 'Moon Rabbit?'

XIAODAN

Exactly. Except it hasn't been sixteen years since your mission to Xinjiang; it's been more like six months.

JIANJUN

How is that possible? I remember--

XIAODAN

Compressed time blurs the inconsistencies.

JIANJUN

Why... why'd they do this to me?

XIAODAN

I don't know, but I've got to get you out of here.

The sound of rushing water shuts off.

XIAODAN (CONT'D)

Tâ mède, we're out of time. They've found us. I'm going to keep them from seeing me. Don't worry, I'll get you out of this... somehow.

LAU (O.S.)

(muffled)

Come out of there slow, keep your hands in the air.

With a look at Xiaodan, Jianjun opens the hatch and steps out into...

INT. LOBBY, CIEDA HQ - CONTINUOUS

Past the security desk, a large, domed window frames a vertical slice of the city.

Tengfei and Lau stand with railstorms trained on the hatch as Jianjun and Xiaodan come out into the fountain pool that surrounds the waterfall.

JIANJUN

Men, er... agents.

Xiaodan (invisible to the CIEDA agents) watches him. Jianjun's memory of these agents is clearly distant, but not as unfamiliar to him as she is.

JIANJUN (CONT'D)

I never knew this was here.
(jerks thumb at hatch)
Want to tell me what you dug up?

TENGFEI

Not what we're here about. Fu Renshu wants to talk to you.

JIANJUN

What about?

LAU

The link you just made.

Jianjun sits on the edge of the fountain.

JIANJUN

What link?

They don't notice Xiaodan. She looks on, concerned.

JIANJUN (CONT'D)

If Fu Renshu wants to talk, he can call me in. You guys can't just--

Tengfei pushes Jianjun back against the column, splashes ankle deep in the shallow pool. Lau prowls around the bench seat that encircles the waterfall column.

LAU

You don't get it. We're not your friends. I don't know how you managed it, but we know you stole the thing--

(brandishes gun)

--admit it. Our network has protocols set up to incapacitate anyone who uses shutdown codes without authorization, and you set them off. Why not make it easy on everyone and admit it now?

Xiaodan starts to reach out, type on the air, when Fenris enters from behind the waterfall column.

He types on a holographic interface which appears in the air. He doesn't see Xiaodan, she hangs back and observes.

Lau and Tengfei freeze, unable to move, a hung data stream. Jianjun sees what's going on. He doesn't understand it, but he doesn't hesitate.

JIANJUN

Sorry about this.

He kicks Lau in the chest. Lau crashes over the bench seat surrounding the pool. Her arm-mounted railstorm goes off - its automatic fire arcs along the wall and hits Tengfei and Jianjun.

Fenris types in the air again to counter the damage, Tengfei and Lau unfreeze. Jianjun's shocked, but unhurt.

JIANJUN (CONT'D)

What the hell?

Jianjun knees Tengfei in the nose, grabs him by the pants and throws him across the bench seat into Lau. Jianjun dives for the railstorm before Lau can bring it to bear again. They struggle for it, and it goes off.

The window above the lobby shatters - explosive decompression! The lobby's emergency doors seal, and unequal pressure blows Jianjun, Tengfei and Lau from the room.

EXT. EASY CITY - CONTINUOUS

Jianjun, Tengfei and Lau plunge down the long street. Crystals form on their faces, as they tumble, twist, suffocate. Their skin turns white.

INT. LOBBY, CIEDA HQ - CONTINUOUS

Xiaodan watches Fenris and he types on the air a final time, turns, and walks back behind the column.

INT. CHANG'E LAB - NIGHT

Quiolian and Kang look up from her interface. Tengfei and Lau gasp, stagger from their immersion couches. Fu Renshu fumes.

FU RENSHU

What happened? This is supposed to be an isolated program!

Xiaodan (still invisible) watches them scramble to make sense of the anomaly.

QUIOLIAN

We should end the environment. This isn't doing any good.

FENRIS

Wait.

FU RENSHU

(to his men)

You were supposed to talk to him, find out what he did with the device, not attack him! What the hell is wrong with you?

LAU

I don't... the gun just went off!

Quiolian reviews the data, sees something, stands up at her interface and backs away from Fenris.

QUIOLIAN

You were supposed to contain him.

Fenris doesn't move, he looks into the air in front of him. Fu Renshu looks from Fenris to Kang.

FU RENSHU
What does that mean?

Kang looks at Quiolian's interface.

KANG
The Link buffers information as an AI before it writes to storage. Fenris sent Rhee Jianjun's AI out onto the QuantumNet along with all his memories since he's been immersed--
(to Fenris)
--to give your real employers time to find him.

FU RENSHU
Who?

KANG
And to find the XDN-1.
(to Fenris)
I assume it's out of the building.

FU RENSHU
I should never have agreed to this. Wake Rhee Jianjun up and question him the other way.

KANG
You don't understand. The programming on Rhee Jianjun's Link has been copied onto the QuantumNet before it could be stored here.

He stalks around Fenris.

KANG (CONT'D)
It will have been cascaded through any number of systems. Whatever he did, whatever he's learned, it isn't here in his head. It's in the wild now.

They all turn on Fenris. Lau throws Fenris in a corner. Fu Renshu bends in close, clutches Fenris's operator's rig.

FU RENSHU
Who d'you work for? What did you do with Rhee Jianjun?

FENRIS

Wouldn't you prefer to know who Murong Kang works for? You've got bigger problems than me.

FU RENSHU

I know all about Murong Kang's funding deal with Cypro-corp, I set it up! Why shouldn't I let them help foot the bill? Why shouldn't I let them pay me for the privilege? Now where is Rhee Jianjun, and where is my device?

Fenris looks from Fu Renshu to Kang.

FENRIS

I downloaded his Link to a remote network.

FU RENSHU

Cypro-corp can get to him without interference, but so can Xiaodan.

QUIOLIAN

(to Kang)

He knows about Xiaodan?

Kang waves her off.

FENRIS

She contacted me. I helped design the blackout, but I never intended to go through with it.

He peels his collar from Fu Renshu's fingers.

FENRIS (CONT'D)

When the lights went out, I knew the plan had gone ahead without me. I laced the device with an electrolytic pheromone. It'll lead my other employers right to it.

Xiaodan looks concerned at this revelation.

QUIOLIAN

Xiaodan contacted you?

FENRIS

I don't remember what happened much after I laced the device. Maybe I'm working for her, now.

KANG
That's impossible--

FENRIS
Is it?

FU RENSHU
(to Kang)
Who's Xiaodan? Don't lie again. We have her on file as an undercover CIEDA officer, but no one's ever seen her. Tell me now, before this gets any worse.

KANG
Those files are lies. She's a rogue agent, a neurohacker who used to work for us. Now she wants to get the XDN-1 away from us.

FU RENSHU
Why'd she go after Rhee Jianjun?
(to Fenris)
How do we detect the pheromone?

Fenris doesn't respond - his eyes are already glazed over. Quiolian shakes him. Kang slaps his face.

KANG
Fenris!

Fenris slumps, his head lolls. The goatee goes slack.

FU RENSHU
I've seen this before. Micro explosive in the brain creates a convenient aneurysm.
(to Lau)
Lau, I want you to search the lab top to bottom for that electrolytic pheromone. Fenris probably atomized the remainder, but you never know. We need to trace that device.

KANG
Fenris was working for Cypro-corp?

FU RENSHU
Maybe. We won't get it out of him now. So I guess we maintain the ruse a little longer. Find the node they copied Rhee Jianjun to, shut it down, and keep searching for Xiaodan.

KANG

They've been looking for her since
the blackout.

INT. JIANJUN'S HOUSE - DAY

Jianjun sits up, gasps for air, realizes where he is. He flops back on the bed, examines the ceiling, breathes hard.

His alarm clock buzz makes him jump. It's 7:00am. He's in bed alone, Shuchun's already up. Jianjun closes his eyes, listens to the sounds of Shuchun getting ready.

JIANJUN'S DREAM

He stands in the dark, a great rush of water pounds, the tiny sailboat from his alarm clock bobs, tossed in the current. The thunder of water becomes...

JIANJUN OPENS HIS EYES

...the buzz of his alarm clock. It's 9:00 a.m. Jianjun realizes he's overslept, jumps to his feet and rushes to the bathroom. He splashes water on his face, dresses quickly as he can.

EXT. EASY CITY - DAY

Jianjun walks to the tram stop - just another tired face in the thinning crowd.

INT. EASY CITY TRAM - DAY

Jianjun's gaze drifts past alternating domes and platforms as the train zips noiselessly along, builds up to the city proper and disappears into the clouds beyond.

EXT. CIEDA HQ - DAY

Rong, Tengfei, and Lau see Jianjun exit the train, walk down the pedway to intercept. Jianjun waves, they don't smile.

Jianjun's confusion turns to worry as their hands go to their jacket sleeves and they increase their pace towards him. He crouches, uncertain whether to run or not. A blast of air blankets them.

JIANJUN

Wha--?

A Chinese Air Force hover transport (really, Cypro-corp disguised as Chinese AF) lumbers into position over Jianjun, poised on concentric rings of draft.

Cypro-corp guards disguised as Air Force soldiers descend on drop lines from the black metal ceiling above, and encircle Jianjun.

HONGHUI

Stop him!

The four CIEDA agents rip their railstorms from their jacket concealments and run at him, blasting.

The soldiers loop Jianjun's good arm and his stump into a harness attached to a line from the transport. It pulls Jianjun and the soldiers up as the ship banks away.

The CIEDA agents on the ground fire up at it, plasma charges glance off the nano-plated surface.

TENGFEI

Why would the Air Force be after Jianjun?

LAU

They're not - the registry on that transport doesn't match any Air Force number I know. It's Cypro-corp... they've found him.

RONG

(considers her)

You must be very lonely.

EXT. EASY CITY - DAY

Spreads below the transport.

INT. CYPRO-CORP/AIR FORCE TRANSPORT - CONTINUOUS

Jianjun sits with his rescuers. General Talgat looks across the compartment at him.

TALGAT

I'm General Cade Talgat. I'd like to congratulate you on the successful initiation of the plan.

(MORE)

TALGAT (CONT'D)

Unfortunately, our mole has been compromised. We lost contact with him before he was able to supply us with the location of the device.

Xiaodan (invisible) sits on the bench next to Jianjun, looks at Talgat suspiciously.

JIANJUN

Excuse me, what?

TALGAT

Come now, surely I've divulged more than enough information for you to realize I know exactly how much you know, so why don't you do me the courtesy of a little reciprocation?

JIANJUN

I'd help you, sir, but I'm unaware of the events you're discussing. I'm not even sure what I'm doing here, or why my agents were shooting at me.

TALGAT

I don't know who or what you want to protect, but I assure you, you can trust me.

JIANJUN

I'm just a little confused.

TALGAT

Let me spell it out for you. You contacted us. Your agency was involved in the development of a device you felt was a threat to the state's authority. We agreed.

JIANJUN

I did?

TALGAT

You arranged for the theft of the device, but we haven't received it. Without the device, we cannot ensure your protection.

JIANJUN

I don't remember stealing anything.

They glare at each other.

TALGAT
 (gets up)
 Excuse me a moment.

He goes into the transport cockpit, opens a link to Eleina.

TALGAT (CONT'D)
 We've got him, but I can't get any
 information.

ELEINA
 Interrogation?

TALGAT
 I don't think so. Something's wrong
 with him. He may not know.

ELEINA
 Use the spider, then.

TALGAT
 Ambassador, the Kryptos say--

ELEINA
 Those are your orders, General.

Eleina blinks out. Talgat motions to his subordinates.

INT. CYPRO-CORP/AIR FORCE TRANSPORT - LATER

Two soldiers hold Jianjun down as Talgat approaches with
 surgical headgear. Xiaodan (still invisible) watches them.

JIANJUN
 What's going on here, boys? This is
 unfriendly.

TALGAT
 We just want to get a read on your
 Link. We'll introduce a harmless
 spider just to check if data
 related to our case is hidden, even
 from you.

Talgat puts the headgear on him, turns it on.

TALGAT (CONT'D)
 We may all learn something.

The headgear makes a high-pitched squeal, lights on it flash.

JIANJUN
 Kinda tickles.

TALGAT
Completely normal. Full name?

JIANJUN
Jianjun. Rhee Jianjun.

TALGAT
Where do you work?

JIANJUN
Justice.

TALGAT
I mean the name of your division.

JIANJUN
(blank)
Justice is adherence to the law.
Which law? The laws we've enacted
as a society and feel to be just.
Sounds like a paradox.

He closes his eyes. Talgat and the soldiers look at each other, confused. Xiaodan looks concerned.

JIANJUN (CONT'D)
So can there be justice? Not
perfect justice, but something has
to be done.

Lights on the headgear pulse. A pop, a whine, Jianjun screams.

TALGAT
What's happening?

Talgat and the soldiers try to hold him down.

SOLDIER #1
Interference! An incompatible
program's causing dieback in the--

Xiaodan puts a hand on Jianjun's shoulder.

XIAODAN
Don't worry.

She types on a holographic interface in the air.

TALGAT
Cut it!

INT. BEACH-FRONT PAGODA - NIGHT

Jianjun wakes on a pile of silk blankets. He looks out the window: mountains, mist, the sound of the ocean. Xiaodan lies beside him, catches her breath. Their eyes meet, she smiles.

INT. BEACH-FRONT PAGODA - LATER

Jianjun stands, wrapped in a silk sheet, on the balcony. Perched atop a pile of tumbledown boulders, the disused monastery overlooks a stretch of beach.

XIAODAN

Come back to bed. Well, the floor.

JIANJUN

Did you... did we...?

XIAODAN

Funny, I'd have thought you'd remember a thing like that.

JIANJUN

Where are we?

Xiaodan sighs, runs a hand through her flame-colored hair.

XIAODAN

You're not going to make me go through this again, are you? Your memory hasn't been right since the blackout. I don't know what's going on there.

JIANJUN

Back up... blackout? The last thing I remember, I was at work, only my friends had all turned against me. I had something... I can't...

He leans on the rail. Xiaodan gets up, wraps herself in the remaining silk sheets.

XIAODAN

We're in the Zhoushan Islands. I found you trapped in an immersion program at Chang'e Communications. I enlisted your help to steal the XDN-1 prototype, a bit of reverse-engineered Cypro-corp technology Chang'e developed for CIEDA.

Jianjun crosses his good arm over his stump and shivers at the chill ocean breeze.

XIAODAN (CONT'D)

Things went a little sideways, my cover was blown, but we got the device out of Chang'e, and we escaped. We came here to the...

(thinks)

...Sandbox to lay low for a while before we go pick it up. All we need now is to secure the device and we can be together.

JIANJUN

Why don't I remember any of this?

XIAODAN

I told you, your sense of time is all screwy since the blackout, an incomplete transfer or something. Maybe the unexpected shutdown caused a problem in the program they were running; interfered with the ghost virus - corrupted your memory...

JIANJUN

Why would I do all of that?

XIAODAN

What Fu Renshu put you through, you really have to ask that question?

JIANJUN

Who did we supposedly steal this device for?

XIAODAN

'Moon Rabbit.' You really did made contact with a Presidential spy back in Xinjiang. The device goes to him.

JIANJUN

This is where my memory problems started in earnest, I suppose.

XIAODAN

(nods)

He did some kind of ghost job on you to cover his tracks.

(MORE)

XIAODAN (CONT'D)

It's made things difficult for me, but if we can get the device to him, it would be just the kind of edge the President needs. We'd be safe, and they'd probably remove the memory blocks, too.

JIANJUN

Why would you do that for me?

XIAODAN

Isn't it obvious? There's something different about you, the way you never broke no matter how they tried to wear you down. I wish you could see that.

JIANJUN

No, this can't be right. I'm married. At least, I thought I was. I wouldn't just run off with you. I wouldn't do any of this.

XIAODAN

Hell of a dream.

JIANJUN

Was it?

Xiaodan wraps the sheet more snugly around her shoulders.

XIAODAN

Nothing's real, the senses lie, etcetera.

JIANJUN

Well, it matters to me.

XIAODAN

That woman, Shuchun... were you ever really happy with her?

Jianjun starts to speak, then looks at his feet.

JIANJUN

I thought I was, once.

XIAODAN

Wenshén, they did a number on you. She was just part of the program they used to make you miserable. She never really existed.

JIANJUN

My god, I... I can't believe it.

Jianjun sits on the bench and looks out at the ocean. Xiaodan puts a hand on his shoulder.

XIAODAN

Relax, you're safe, and you're not doing anything wrong. We just need to stay put until we can secure the device, and then this will all make a lot more sense.

EXT. POST OFFICE - NIGHT

A taxi pulls up, and GAO RU (40s) gets out. Xiaodan (invisible) links in alongside him, reads his holo ID.

XIAODAN

Gao Ru. I can't let you hear me. If I could, I'd say I'm sorry. I need your help to get this thing out of the city, and I'm through asking. That only ends up... as well as you'd imagine.

Gao Ru enters the...

INT. POST OFFICE - CONTINUOUS

Gao Ru goes up to the Postal Clerk at the counter. When he speaks, he echoes Xiaodan, trancelike.

GAO RU/XIAODAN

Package for Moon Rabbit.

POSTAL CLERK

Seriously?

She IDs Gao Ru's link, and with a wave of Xiaodan's hand, sees nothing wrong.

EXT. POST OFFICE - CONTINUOUS

Gao Ru exits the building, a small plastic shipping container in a metal sample case. Xiaodan (invisible) walks behind.

XIAODAN

Your sample case gave you away, you know - you're a water vendor from Sichuan Province, last place anyone would look for my hardware.

She notices a long, black hover car pull in nearby. Gao Ru gets back in the taxi, and Xiaodan follows him in.

INT. TAXI - CONTINUOUS

Xiaodan (still invisible) shares the back seat with Ru.

XIAODAN

(to Gao Ru)

I've cancelled your appointments, booked you a new hotel suite and a flight in the morning. Don't tell Jianjun, he might be jealous.

(thinks)

No, he probably wouldn't.

The driver turns around.

DRIVER

Where to, chief?

GAO RU/XIAODAN

The Imperial. Change of plans.

Xiaodan notices the black hover car follow them into the street.

XIAODAN

Damn, how did they track us?

A flash, she blinks out.

INT. BLACK HOVER CAR - CONTINUOUS

Xiaodan blinks into the back of the hover car, she observes Cypro-corp agents Aizahn and Skylos as they follow the taxi into traffic.

Skylos's Link, connected to the car's scanner, shows him an altered-wavelength image of the sample case on the taxi seat.

AIZAHN

You got the package?

Xiaodan tries to interfere with the signal, and the image glitches, but remains.

SKYLOS

I think... no, I have the signal.

The taxi drives on and the Cypro-corp agents follow. Xiaodan looks concerned, blinks out.

INT. KANG'S OFFICE, CHANG'E - DAY

Kang sits in his office chair, broods over a photo of his father, former CEO of Chang'e.

KANG

(sotto)

What have I done?

A link opens.

KANG'S FATHER (O.S.)

You're a dreamer, Murong Kang.

Kang jumps. His father crosses the office towards him.

KANG'S FATHER (CONT'D)

You're concerned with possibilities, not profits. It's bad for business.

KANG

Father?

KANG'S FATHER

You only care about what you can create, regardless of the consequences, and who suffers by your inventions.

Kang stands up.

KANG

That's not true. My goal has only ever been to realize the potential of this device to protect your legacy and ensure my company... this company's future.

He paces the room.

KANG (CONT'D)

It's true I got in over my head with the lines of credit, ties to the government and foreign companies. I'm not cut out to be a contractor, it's not my style.

(MORE)

KANG (CONT'D)

But I was desperate, and we were so close...

He sits back down.

KANG (CONT'D)

Why am I telling you this? You're dead. So, who's linked me your AI?

His Father becomes Fenris.

FENRIS

Who did you think you'd fool, Kang? Did you think you'd play God and no one would notice?

Kang moves closer.

KANG

You're dead, too. It's you, isn't it? Xiaodan?

Fenris becomes Huizhong.

HUIZHONG

Guess again.

The door opens, and Fu Renshu's head pokes through.

FU RENSHU

We're back--
(off Kang's look)
Who're you talking to in here?

Kang looks around, unsettled. Fu Renshu enters and shuts the door. Huizhong stalks behind Fu Renshu.

HUIZHONG

Why don't you tell him?

Fu Renshu studies Kang. Another link opens, it's Quiolian.

QUIOLIAN

I've got her! I've got Xiaodan!

A hard look passes between Huizhong and Kang as Huizhong blinks out. Fu Renshu exits the office, full tilt, Kang at his heels.

INT. BEACH FRONT PAGODA - DAY

Jianjun turns on Xiaodan when she returns to the room.

JIANJUN

Where did you go just now?

XIAODAN

For a walk on the beach.

JIANJUN

Hùnzàng, I would have seen you from here.

XIAODAN

I don't know what to say.

JIANJUN

It occurred to me, I hadn't needed to use the bathroom in hours. Then I went looking, and you know what? There aren't any, not anywhere on this floor. What's going on?

XIAODAN

If you loved me, you wouldn't ask me that.

JIANJUN

Sure I would. Besides, how can you know if I love you or not if don't stop trying to control me?

XIAODAN

I gave up everything to be with you. The only thing I need in return is the device. Can't you just leave it alone?

JIANJUN

Not if you're not being honest. If you know me at all, you know how I feel about that.

XIAODAN

If I tell you, you'll know what I've done. You'll hate me.

JIANJUN

You have to tell me, Xiaodan, it's the only way I can help you.

Xiaodan thinks about it until she boils over.

XIAODAN

I'm trying to get you out, but it's harder than I thought.

JIANJUN

So what the hell is this? This *chaofàn* beach resort with no bathrooms?

XIAODAN

I wasn't lying; it is a sandbox - a program where I can run whatever I need to, safe and isolated from the system. I made it for you.

JIANJUN

I can't believe you didn't tell me. What else isn't true? 'Moon Rabbit?' My wife? When we broke into Fu Renshu's office...

XIAODAN

I needed your help, but the environment was mostly for your benefit.

JIANJUN

Was he even there?
(sotto)
Why should I believe anything you say right now?

XIAODAN

Because I could do anything I wanted to you, and I tried to keep you safe and happy. Doesn't that mean anything?

JIANJUN

What gives you the right to decide what's going to make me happy?

Xiaodan thinks, multi-tasking.

XIAODAN

Because, Jianjun, I'm a neurohacker. We have a responsibility to each other, and the world, not to let things get out of control. People get caught up in the excitement of discoveries. They never think of the consequences.

JIANJUN

So you just shut down anyone who doesn't subscribe to your idea of balance and harmony?

(MORE)

JIANJUN (CONT'D)

Or do you even give them a choice?
Wenshén, how many of you are there?

XIAODAN

If we want to grow stronger as a species, we have to make sure only the best ideas, with the most potential for real improvement of society as a whole have the chance to reproduce.

JIANJUN

So you cull the herd? *Wo cào*, you really expect me to be okay with this?

XIAODAN

I don't mean it like that. We find violence abhorrent. You know the Hippocratic Oath? We have a similar one. A hundred years ago, the society of neurohackers would even blink all the lights in the world at midnight G.M.T. to salute a member who died upholding the code.

She paces the balcony.

JIANJUN

So why all the secrecy? Don't you want people to know what a wonderful service you provide them, the difficult moral choices you magnanimously make on their behalf? I'm sure they'd thank you.

XIAODAN

We both know better.

JIANJUN

So we're still at Chang'e. We're there right now. I'm still a prisoner, and you're just screwing with me. What's your connection, why are you so obsessed with Chang'e and what they do or don't?

XIAODAN

I told you--

JIANJUN

You lied to me from the minute I met you.

(MORE)

JIANJUN (CONT'D)

Played with my mind, and this
fantasy about protecting the world
- why have you dragged me into it?

XIAODAN

I need your help, need to get away--
(thinks)
No, I need to find the device.

JIANJUN

Your first story was better.
There's a personal connection here.
Who are you trying to hurt by
stealing this device?

XIAODAN

CIDEA. Cypro-corp.

JIANJUN

No, you don't hurt them by denying
them some piece of tech - but
Murong Kang - his company goes
under if this thing turns up gone.
Who is he to you?

Xiaodan clams up. Jianjun climbs up on the balcony rail.

JIANJUN (CONT'D)

It's a good fifty meters down that
cliff face.

(teeters on edge of rail)

If you're telling the truth you can
just reset the program and this
conversation never happened, but if
you're lying and I really am on the
run from a meaningless job and a
loveless marriage, maybe I'll be
better off.

XIAODAN

What about the part where I said I
cared about you?

The railing Jianjun's on wavers precariously. Xiaodan stews -
she doesn't have time for this.

XIAODAN (CONT'D)

He's my father, okay? Murong Kang's
my father.

JIANJUN

Wenshén, of course. So why this
pretense of stealing the device?
(MORE)

JIANJUN (CONT'D)

You have to run off with it to get his attention?

XIAODAN

I can't have this conversation right now - they're coming. You joined CIEDA; you can't really believe the world doesn't need protecting. Just wait here, and it will be okay.

JIANJUN

Don't you dare cut me off.

But Xiaodan does.

INT. HOTEL ROOM - NIGHT

Gao Ru sits on the bed, trancelike, his metal sample case with the shipping container inside cradled on his lap. The window's open to the domed arboretum below.

Movement outside the door. Xiaodan, invisible, links in. The handle turns. Ru looks at it, unfocused. He gets up, stands just inside the door. It opens.

Xiaodan hyper-adrenalizes Gao Ru's body.

XIAODAN

Fight.

Gao Ru pulls Skylos in, punches him out. Aizahn stands, baffled, in the doorway. Xiaodan looks at her.

Aizahn sees an altered wavelength version of the package in Gao Ru's sample case, and attacks.

At Xiaodan's prodding, Gao Ru delivers a viscous gut jab/elbow combination. He charges Aizahn before she can level her gun and body-checks her into the wall.

A solid kick to Aizahn's kidney, and back to Skylos for a knuckle-duster and the Cypro-corp agents are out. Ru snatches up his sample case, steps out the window. He pauses on the ledge, a baffled, frightened look on his face.

INT. CHANG'E LAB - NIGHT

Quiolian turns from her interface as Fu Renshu and Kang storm in from the hallway.

QUIOLIAN

She got to Rhee Jianjun, I didn't see it earlier. Her AI's buffered in a sandbox on his Link. How did she do that?

KANG

Don't take any action against her. Transfer her to an unconnected node, keep her there until we know what we're dealing with.

QUIOLIAN

She's adapting too fast, she's already replicating--
 (shakes her head)
 Shit - it's a code bomb.
 (to other operators)
 I need everyone's help!

The operators leap to, concentrate on their interfaces.

KANG

Quiolian, wait!

INT. BEACHFRONT PAGODA - DAY

When Xiaodan checks back in at the Sandbox, Jianjun's sick - corrupt data creeps through his veins. She runs to his side.

XIAODAN

I'm here.

Jianjun lies curled in the silk sheets, gray as death and burning with virtual fever. He wakes up, sweaty and shivering. She touches his head.

XIAODAN (CONT'D)

It's the virus. I thought I cleaned it out before, but it's a Cypro-corp military grade spider - tough stuff.

She types on the air, attempts a patch. Jianjun convulses.

XIAODAN (CONT'D)

Any better?

JIANJUN

No, worse.
 (laughs)
 How is this possible?
 (MORE)

JIANJUN (CONT'D)

I can't believe none of this is real, but it can kill me.

(takes her hand)

Let me out of here. Please.

XIAODAN

I can fix this. I know I can. Bodies are overrated. I just need a little more time.

JIANJUN

Can't you just kill it, aren't you like a god in here?

XIAODAN

There's no such thing, Jianjun, you know that.

His head lolls, and his mind drifts.

JIANJUN

Where are you right now?

XIAODAN

I'm multitasking. No matter how many times I move, they keep finding me. How are they doing that?

The Sandbox Pagoda's catches fire. Jianjun watches it rage outside, crawl inside, lick at the walls and he can't move.

JIANJUN

It's coming apart. I can feel it.

Jianjun convulses, gasps for breath in the smoke-filled air.

JIANJUN (CONT'D)

Where is it now? Where are you now?

XIAODAN

In the river. It's been nice dreaming with you.

JIANJUN

Xiaodan, you have to end this. You said before you could un-ghost my memory. I think it's time.

A small sound escapes her lips, and she shakes her head.

JIANJUN (CONT'D)

You found me in a nightmare, all because of this memory.

(MORE)

JIANJUN (CONT'D)

You tried to make it all right, I'm thankful for that, but it's time to wake up.

XIAODAN

Damn them, they couldn't just leave me alone. I knew they couldn't, but I was a fool to think... oh, god.

(off his look)

I made the Sandbox, but it exists in your mind. When I do this, when I wake you up, there'll be nowhere left for me to hide from them. I'll have to attempt a transfer, but to buy myself the time, I'll have to hurt them.

JIANJUN

Is that absolutely necessary?

XIAODAN

It's a lot of data. A consciousness is not a simple thing. It's beyond our dimension, wherever quantum particles go to get entangled.

JIANJUN

You're the neurohacker, Do what you have to do.

Her hand snakes out and grips his chin. Xiaodan closes her eyes, and dives into his mind.

XIAODAN

I love you, Rhee Jianjun. Remember that, if nothing else.

Jianjun shudders as the memories flood back.

INT. CHANG'E LAB - NIGHT

Quiolian's interface goes white.

QUIOLIAN

This doesn't look good.

Xiaodan stands in the center of the lab, throws her hands wide. Electricity courses around the operator's heads, sparks fly from the conduits on the ceiling.

Quiolian, along with every other operator in the room, convulses in her immersion couch as Xiaodan pours current through their bodies. Jianjun, on an immersion couch, convulses too.

KANG

She's attacking! Shut it down!

Fu Renshu whirls, grabs him.

FU RENSHU

What will that do to Xiaodan and Rhee Jianjun? Destroy the program? Lose them?

KANG

She's causing feedback, overloading the system. My people are dying!

FU RENSHU

So help me Murong Kang, if you sabotage my investigation, I will see you burn! We need Rhee Jianjun and Xiaodan alive.

KANG

That may be a problem.

Kang shrugs Fu Renshu's hand off, runs. Fu Renshu chases after him.

FU RENSHU

Kang!

Xiaodan watches him go, concerned, but unable to abort.

INT. LAB ANTEROOM, CHANG'E - CONTINUOUS

Kang dashes in, tears open an emergency panel. Fu Renshu's right behind him, his plasmafoil pointed at Kang.

FU RENSHU

Don't you--

Kang throws the switch without even a backward glance.

INT. CHANG'E LAB - CONTINUOUS

Operators collapse in various states of distress. Xiaodan panics, looks at Quiolian just as she disappears.

Quiolian stands from her interface. Her red hair smolders, her eyes dead. She staggers towards Jianjun and collapses, arm outstretched towards him.

Jianjun opens his eyes. He looks down, realizes he's strapped to the couch. Also, he sees he has both his arms.

Jianjun sees Quiolian and stares, she looks just like...

JIANJUN

Xiaodan.

INT. LAB ANTEROOM, CHANG'E - CONTINUOUS

In the anteroom, Fu Renshu lowers his plasmafoil.

FU RENSHU

(to Kang)

This isn't over.

INT. CHANG'E LAB - NIGHT

Kang re-enters the lab as CIEDA officers and unharmed operators rush to help the wounded. He walks to the couch where Jianjun lies bound. Jianjun's eyes are open, his face drenched with sweat. Kang's hands clench in helpless rage.

KANG

What have you done?

Jianjun just looks back at Kang, he has no idea.

INT. CHANG'E LAB - LATER

Paramedics cart operators out of the Chang'e lab on stretchers. The others stand around in shock.

EMT

(to Kang)

Some might regain consciousness. I need to get a list from you. Families flood the hospital network when these Links go offline.

KANG

Of course.

Fu Renshu pulls Kang aside.

FU RENSHU

The girl, she was Xiaodan? Did you know?

KANG

Quiolian? Of course not. Xiaodan couldn't have been one of my operators.

FU RENSHU

Sure. But if Fenris was the Cypro-corp mole, who's Jianjun working for?

He looks at Quiolian on the stretcher.

FU RENSHU (CONT'D)

Will she be okay?

KANG

Quiolian? I don't see how. Most likely she'll be brain-dead, just like Fenris.

FU RENSHU

I need you to unlock Rhee Jianjun's couch.

They look over to where Jianjun lay seconds ago. He's gone!
Fu Renshu turns to his men.

FU RENSHU (CONT'D)

Damn it! No one saw him go, really?

KANG

How did--

FU RENSHU

I told you when I brought him in, he's a CIEDA agent, you can't take your eyes off him!

LAU

In our defense, he hasn't moved for months.

FU RENSHU

(thinks)

Link to Rhee Jianjun's wife. He won't leave town without calling home.

Kang sits on the steps of the lab. He locks eyes with Fu Renshu as the Director and the other agents exit.

Kang, alone in the lab, puts his head in his hands. After a moment, he senses he's not alone, and looks up. Huizhong steps out of the shadows.

KANG

Huizhong? But you're...

HUIZHONG

Dead? Suited me for a while, but Xiaodan can run circles around Fenris. Who do you think taught her to do it?

(off his look)

Still think you know what you're doing?

Kang shakes his head.

HUIZHONG (CONT'D)

Good, 'cause we have a lot of work to do. Things are unravelling fast, it'll go easier if you let me take the lead.

INT. JIANJUN'S HOUSE - NIGHT

Xiaodan blinks in, watches as Shuchun accepts the link from Fu Renshu.

SHUCHUN

Director Fu Renshu, any news on my husband?

FU RENSHU

I'm afraid so.

SHUCHUN

(covers mouth)

Oh god. He's not--

FU RENSHU

No, but he's in a lot of trouble. We had him in for questioning--

SHUCHUN

You've spoken to him?

FU RENSHU

Yes, but--

SHUCHUN

Is he okay? Why didn't you link me immediately?

FU RENSHU

Ms. Shuchun, the investigation he was a part of is highly sensitive, he had to be debriefed--

SHUCHUN

My husband's been missing for months! I've been linking you for months! Are you telling me not once in all this time has he tried to contact me? I don't believe it!

FU RENSHU

Well, he's disappeared, and we believe he may try to contact you now. We need to bring him in.

Shuchun puts her hands on her hips.

SHUCHUN

You people are impossible.

FU RENSHU

If he does contact you, don't give him any indication you've spoken to us. Find out where he is, then link us back. You have the number?

SHUCHUN

Yes.

FU RENSHU

Good. I assure you, we have only his best interests in mind.

INT. OPERATIONS ROOM, CIEDA HQ - NIGHT

Fu Renshu ends the link, exchanges looks with the other agents.

Agent Rong looks up from his interface.

RONG

Director Fu, I have a link from the PSB. They picked up a Cypro-corp employee involved in an altercation an hour ago. Could be a connection?

FU RENSHU

Let's get over there, I want to talk to that man.

INT. PSB BUREAU - NIGHT

Gao Ru, his sample case held close for security, sits across from a bored Public Security Bureau detective. Skylos sits nearby, handcuffed. Xiaodan (invisible) watches the room.

DETECTIVE

So this man and his accomplice attacked you in your hotel room. You've never seen them before, and then you beat them up using kung fu you didn't know you had and left through the window.

GAO RU

It felt like I was being controlled, like a marionette.

The detective gives a mighty sigh.

DETECTIVE

I'll be honest with you, mister Ru. From the sounds of it, you're overworked. We can't prosecute Cypro-corp employees, they have diplomatic immunity. My advice? Make that flight.

The detective gets up to intercept newcomers to the bureau - Xiaodan's startled to recognize Fu Renshu and his men. She watches as Fu Renshu confers with the detective.

XIAODAN

(to Gao Ru)

I was wrong, what I said before. I can't stop caring, it's not my nature.

Xiaodan tries to get Gao Ru to his feet, but she can't. She waves her hands, but nothing works.

XIAODAN (CONT'D)

Damn it!

(to Gao Ru)

Go, please go.

She walks towards the Detective and Fu Renshu, unsure how best to run interference. As the detective gestures back towards Gao Ru, Xiaodan breathes a sigh of relief to see he's gone. The detective scratches his head.

XIAODAN (CONT'D)

I'm gonna need some help.

INT. JIANJUN'S HOUSE - NIGHT

Shuchun sits in Jianjun's chair, and stares into space. Her eyes drift closed. Xiaodan stands in front of her, shows her...

THE BEACH, PEACH BLOSSOM ISLAND

Shuchun and Jianjun kiss on the sand behind a large boulder.

BACK TO SCENE

SHUCHUN

What's this mean? What's going on?

XIAODAN

I'm reminding you who you're about to turn in.

SHUCHUN

I have to. They said--

XIAODAN

There's more at stake here than you realize. Jianjun is involved in something; something big. Something his employers want, but it's imperative they don't get it.

(off her look)

He needs your help, not your judgment.

SHUCHUN

He left me without an explanation, and he didn't even try to contact me. He never tries, never thinks--

XIAODAN

So were you lying when you said you'd love and trust him forever? He was trying to protect you.

SHUCHUN

What is he to you?

(studies her)

You slept with him, didn't you?

XIAODAN

If I had, he wouldn't be giving you a chance to stab him in the back.

Shuchun leaps up and tries to slap her, but her hand travels right through - she loses her balance, sprawls on the floor.

SHUCHUN

I don't know who you are, or how you've hacked my Link, but I'm glad you did. You just made this decision a lot easier.

XIAODAN

It doesn't have to be this way. Give him a chance.

SHUCHUN

I already did.

A link opens. A weary and beaten Jianjun faces Shuchun.

JIANJUN

Hi.

He knows it's an understatement. Shuchun looks up, gasps to recognize her husband on the line.

SHUCHUN

Jianjun, my god. Are you okay? Where have you been? I've been going out of my mind.

INT. OPERATIONS ROOM, CIEDA HQ - NIGHT

Fu Renshu and his men watch both sides of the conversation.

RONG

Okay, we're on, tracing. The signal's bounced all over.

LAU

Looks like he's leaving the Central Business District.

RONG

It's altered.

JIANJUN

(filtered)

Look, it's not safe for you to stay at home right now. I know this is strange, but I need you to meet me. It's nothing to worry about - the situation is splendid.

Shuchun blinks in confusion.

SHUCHUN
 (filtered)
 Jianjun, what?

JIANJUN
 (filtered)
 I'm so sorry. It's complicated, no
 time to explain. Just meet me.

RONG
 Link's closed. I got nothing.

FU RENSHU
 Rhee Jianjun's file up here?

RONG
 Yes sir.

FU RENSHU
 Splendid?

Rong blinks, consults the file.

RONG
 No matches.

INT. JIANJUN'S HOUSE - NIGHT

Shuchun hasn't moved from Jianjun's chair.

SHUCHUN
 Splendid...

Xiaodan paces the rooms concerned. She looks at Shuchun.

FLASH - Shuchun's in bed with Jianjun in the Peach Blossom
 Island pagoda. They laugh.

JIANJUN
 It's a disgrace for a girl from the
 Zhoushan Islands to have a thing
 about boats.

Shuchun's smile dies as she takes note of Xiaodan -
 indistinct, barely there.

SHUCHUN
 Who are you?

FLASH - A small fixed-sail solar catamaran tosses in a storm
 out on the endless Indian Ocean.

SHUCHUN (V.O.)
Jinghua, (pron. jing-WA) our
 boat... the name means "situation
 splendid."

BACK TO SCENE

Shuchun shakes her head and sinks into the chair.

SHUCHUN
 No... no! What are you doing to me?

EXT. SHENJIAMEN DISTRICT - NIGHT

The Mid-autumn Festival's on - fishing boats lit up along the river front, every sail a beacon. Paper lanterns fill the air. Shuchun walks through fish stalls packed with moon cakes.

Xiaodan follows, shouts in her ear, but Shuchun either can't or won't hear. Xiaodan tries to control Shuchun, but no dice.

XIAODAN
 I can't... I'm connected through your home node, from my time with Jianjun, but I can't intervene. You have to stop.

Shuchun walks through her, descends a ramp, goes out onto pier 478-B3 under a huge bayside canopy - dark girders where the sky should be.

She approaches a pool of light, past a berth containing the small fixed-sail solar catamaran Jinghua. Jianjun steps from behind a large generator. Shuchun freezes.

In the Marina control tower, Fu Renshu and Rong look down on them from an observation booth, through a window with H.U.D. read-outs on it. Rong opens a link with Lau, who wears frogman gear, underwater.

RONG
 Contact with the suspect. You got him?

LAU
 No problem.

Lau secures a fire-bomb to the underside of the boat.

LAU (CONT'D)

Be nice to do this in the 'real'
for once.

Xiaodan paces the dock. She screams in Shuchun's ear, but it has no effect.

XIAODAN

Don't do this, please. Don't.

Jianjun looks at his wife.

JIANJUN

Glad you made it.

He steps towards her. Right next to him, the windows of the Jinghua EXPLODE, knock Jianjun off his feet! Shuchun staggers in shock.

SHUCHUN

Wha... why? You didn't have to...

Two CIEDA frogmen - Tengfei and Lau, leap from underneath the pier and over the burning boat, railstorms trained. They surround Jianjun, cut him off. Jianjun raises his hands.

The frogmen bind them with liquid-metal cuffs, drag him to his feet. Fu Renshu joins them on the dock.

Jianjun locks eyes with his wife. Shuchun returns his gaze, defiant. Xiaodan watches as they lead him away.

FU RENSHU

Tengfei, get the car ready, and
link Warden Loeng; tell him we're
coming.

TENGFEI

Yes, sir.

Jinghua burns and sinks as a suppression armature grinds into place overhead and dumps fire-retardant foam. Alone on the pier, Shuchun leans her head on a lamppost, a wreck.

Xiaodan links out.

INT. COMMUTER PLANE - DAY

Onboard, a dark eyed and disheveled Gao Ru tries to relax. He drinks a double scotch, and leans back as the hum of the engines lull him into an uneasy sleep. Five rows behind him, Aizahn watches, her facial tattoos knot in dislike.

EXT. SICHUAN PROVINCE - DAY

Hexahedral cities rise on pillars, pass sunlight through to the farmland below. Acres of wind turbines line the landscape around and below the cities. The plane descends.

INT. COMMUTER PLANE - DAY

On the plane, Gao Ru links his wife. Xiaodan (invisible) links in beside him.

WIFE

I didn't hear from you. I was worried, what happened?

GAO RU

You wouldn't believe me if I told you, we'll talk about it later.

His wife looks at someone outside the view range, who rests a hand on his wife's shoulder. Xiaodan recognizes Talgat.

TALGAT

I believe you have something of ours. Why don't you tell her now?

EXT. SICHUAN AIRPORT - DAY

A ground-effect limousine meets Gao Ru at the terminal, the driver holds a sign with his name on it. Gao Ru and Aizahn get in. Xiaodan (invisible) joins them in the limousine, resigned, unable to affect anything.

EXT. SICHUAN DESERT - DAY

The limousine drives them into the desert. The city's black bulk rises into the haze of their rooster tail.

INT. LIMOUSINE - CONTINUOUS

Gao Ru and Aizahn glare at each other.

EXT. SICHUAN DESERT - CONTINUOUS

The limousine drives up to a low, sleek drop-ship parked on the flats. Cypro-corp soldiers in flowing robes surround the car. With them are Gao Ru's wife and Talgat.

Aizahn and Gao Ru get out and the limousine pulls away at high speed. Ru approaches warily, clutches his sample case and squints in the sunlight.

TALGAT

Gao Ru. Sometime yesterday you came into the possession of a package; a device intended for me - for Julu Transnational, that is.

Xiaodan glares at him, paces.

TALGAT (CONT'D)

I realize it was rather gauche to bring your family into this, but much depends on a successful end to my mission.

GAO RU

I don't know what you're--

TALGAT

Of course you don't.

Talgat motions to Aizahn. She takes the battered sample case from Ru, opens it, and takes the small, foam-padded shipping container from it.

Talgat opens the shipping container, takes the silk-wrapped petri dish out of it and confirms it's the XDN-1: a clear, slug-like device suspended in a solution.

GAO RU

I don't know what that is.

TALGAT

It doesn't matter now.

Talgat turns on his heel, boards the plane. Aizahn follows him, and Xiaodan follows him. The guard goes up the ramp and it closes. Ru's wife rushes to his arms.

They back away. The Cypro-corp plane powers up its engines and lifts off. It rises out of the Sichuan Basin, banks, heads off.

INT. DROP SHIP - CONTINUOUS

Xiaodan rushes to the cockpit, attempts to interfere with the plane, but before she can, Talgat clamps the device in a shielded box. Xiaodan eyes go wide as she glitches out!

CUT TO BLACK

INT. FU RENSHU'S OFFICE, CIEDA - NIGHT

The holodesk at the center of Director Fu Renshu's Spartan office sheds dim light on Jianjun, who sits in a chair with his hands cuffed behind him.

Director Fu sits on the edge of his desk, sips from an oversized mug.

FU RENSHU

It's safe to say I know far more than you've given me credit for.

He calls up a file on the holodesk - Jianjun recognizes Xiaodan's fake CIEDA file.

FU RENSHU (CONT'D)

Do you think I'll put in my report you stole a top secret device from a government contractor while under immersive interrogation, because a neurohacker told you to?

JIANJUN

Not really, but it seems to be the case.

(flexes bound wrists)

I just have one question. Why was I under 'immersive interrogation?' Do we do that now?

Fu Renshu sets his cup down.

FU RENSHU

You were a good field agent, Jianjun. We had to break you of the one thing that prevented us from getting at the truth - your sense of duty. We made you think you'd spent sixteen years in a desk job. Why didn't you just quit?

JIANJUN

I guess we never know what we're capable of until given the opportunity.

INT. JIANJUN'S HOUSE - DAY

The home's node blinks rapidly. Xiaodan glitches back to life. She storms to the bedroom where Shuchun lies, asleep. Xiaodan looks at her.

SHUCHUN'S DREAM

Water pounds, a boat tossed in the waves.

XIAODAN (V.O.)

Help me.

BACK TO SCENE

Shuchun wakes, sees Xiaodan, and gets up. She stands face to face with her tormenter.

SHUCHUN

You again! Who are you?

XIAODAN

Xiaodan. Well, a backup of Xiaodan, anyway, stored on your home node. Rhee Jianjun helped me steal something from Chang'e; something very important we can't allow to fall into the hands of Director Fu Renshu. Surely you see why now.

SHUCHUN

Chang'e the QuantumNet company?

XIAODAN

Chang'e Communications.

SHUCHUN

You're in love with my husband, aren't you, Xiaodan?

XIAODAN

Do you know the legend of Chang'e, the moon goddess? She was a mortal woman who fell in love with the son of the king of heaven. Her lover acquired an elixir of life so the two could be together for eternity. Before they could drink it, a jealous man killed the prince for this potion, but Chang'e denied the villain his prize and drank it all herself. Consumed with grief, and now immortal, Chang'e ascended to heaven. Even now she looks down upon the earth, doomed to live alone and remember the love she lost there forever.

Shuchun swallows.

SHUCHUN

Did you sleep with him?

XIAODAN

He's an honorable man. No doubt that's what made him a good CIEDA agent. If you're angry, Shuchun, it's me you should hate.

Shuchun shakes her head, unable to take it in.

XIAODAN (CONT'D)

I know you don't want to hear this, but when I was immersed with him, we had a connection. I saw in his mind his regret at how the two of you have grown apart.

Xiaodan stands closer to Shuchun.

XIAODAN (CONT'D)

It's funny - the environment I made for him - I tried to draw it from a time in his memory when he was truly happy. Turns out it was a memory of you.

SHUCHUN

The Pagoda on Peach Blossom Island. We stayed there... well, Jianjun was staying there when we first met in Zhoushan.

XIAODAN

His every thought is of you, even when he doesn't know it.

SHUCHUN

But he stole this thing. He'll never change.

XIAODAN

He didn't steal it, not really. He's not innocent, but he doesn't deserve prison.

SHUCHUN

Oh god... Jianjun--

XIAODAN

You can still save him, and right now, I'm your connection.

(off her look)

If you want to help him, help me.

INT. WARDEN'S OFFICE, QINCHENG PRISON - DAY

Kang and Huizhong enter. Warden Loeng looks up.

KANG

Warden Loeng? You've got a man here I've spent most of the day trying to find. I'd appreciate it if I could have a few words.

The warden checks records on his link.

WARDEN LOENG

I'm not supposed to let anyone talk to him.

HUIZHONG

Yes, and I'm sure you're not going to tell us Director Fu Renshu gave you that order. Thing is, we don't want him to find out we came here any more than you would want him to find out how we found out who you were holding. So why don't we do each other a favor?

INT. JIANJUN'S CELL, QINCHENG PRISON - DAY

Jianjun sleeps, curled on his bunk in the dim recesses of the Prison.

JIANJUN'S DREAM

Jianjun trudges through a jungle. He breaks through the foliage, and sees a river aglow with radioactive fire. He sees a tiny boat ablaze on the river. Jianjun looks deeper into the water.

The sound builds, he sees the waterfall in the CIEDA lobby, which becomes the waterfall in front of a massive building - the Cypro-corp Embassy, its segmented spires branch like a black bird of paradise.

XIAODAN (V.O.)

This is where it is. This is where I need you to go.

BACK TO SCENE

Jianjun opens his eyes and sits up as Kang, Huizhong and a guard come to his cell.

GUARD

Visitors.

He cuffs Jianjun, and leads him from the cell.

INT. INTERROGATION ROOM, QINCHENG PRISON - DAY

Jianjun sits across a table from Kang and Huizhong. He's haggard, unshaven, and hollow.

HUIZHONG

I nixed the monitors, we can talk.

Kang removes Jianjun's handcuffs.

KANG

A lot of good men have been killed or injured over this. Only you know what was supposed to happen, so out with it.

Jianjun and Huizhong share a look - Jianjun recognizes him.

JIANJUN

Had it sent to someone I know. Same reason I was your guest in the first place, I think.

HUIZHONG

No ghosts anymore, Rhee Jianjun?

JIANJUN

Something they did to me. A spider, I think? I've been seeing Xinjiang again, the river, all of it.

KANG

You sure it wasn't Xiaodan?

JIANJUN

I don't know what you mean.

HUIZHONG

I'm sure if you agree to testify against Fu Renshu, we could get the charges against you dropped--

JIANJUN

You don't rat out the agency.

Jianjun scratches his regenerated arm.

KANG
You know they'll never let you go.
There's not going to be any trial.
They'll just leave you here to rot.

JIANJUN
I'm aware of that.

KANG
So help me get my device back.
Without it, there's nothing we can
do for Xiaodan.

JIANJUN
She asked me to go to a building.

HUIZHONG
How?

JIANJUN
Showed it to me in a dream.

HUIZHONG
(shakes head)
Amazing.

KANG
(off Jianjun's look)
Tell me what I need to do.

EXT. CYPRO-CORP CARRIER AIRCRAFT - DAY

A giant, air superiority platform jet.

INT. CYPRO-CORP CARRIER AIRCRAFT - CONTINUOUS

Talgat and Aizahn stalk down the corridor, accompanied by a contingent of Cypro-corp Guards. A holographic Eleina hovers alongside them.

TALGAT
This is a secure channel - I have
the device. I'll put it in the
vault at the embassy soon as I
arrive.

ELEINA
You're going directly there?

TALGAT

Stopping only to pick up our agent Skylos from CIEDA custody, I'll arrive shortly.

ELEINA

No, leave him. I want that device in my hands without delay.

TALGAT

Yes, Ambassador, but I have to ask, is it really necessary for us to visit China while our diplomatic position's so delicate?

Talgat and Aizahn board a drop ship.

EXT. EASY CITY - DAY

The drop-ship plummets from the bottom of the carrier, and fires its jets. The spires of Easy City reflect in its compound curves.

INT. DROP SHIP - DAY

Eleina's hologram re-appears on the console as Talgat and Aizahn ride in the back.

ELEINA

Getting the device is the only way to ensure our security, and hold CIEDA to account for their arrogance - trying to undermine our control of the Links.

TALGAT

And the official reason for our visit?

ELEINA

The Acclivity Ballet Company's performing for us tonight at the embassy as part of the Mid-autumn Festival. You wouldn't want to miss the show, would you?

EXT. CYPRO-CORP EMBASSY - DAY

The facets of the building reflect the drop ship on approach.

INT. WARDEN'S OFFICE, QUINCHENG PRISON - DAY

Fu Renshu rages at a cowed Warden Loeng.

FU RENSHU

What do you mean he's gone?
Honestly, is it that hard to hold
on to one man?

(thinks)

Bring our other suspect. Time we
put an end to these games.

INT. LOBBY, EASY CITY HOSPITAL - DAY

Shuchun and Xiaodan cross the floor of the hospital lobby,
towards the elevator.

SHUCHUN

Why do you need my help with this?

XIAODAN

The link I want to hack is damaged.
Since we escaped from Chang'e I
can't control... can't do things
the way I used to. I don't know why
I'm cut off from the QuantumNet,
but I'll need you to load the
recovery program manually from the
bio-chip I gave you.

SHUCHUN

Okay, give me a minute.

INT. HALLWAY, EASY CITY HOSPITAL - DAY

Dressed in her scrubs, Shuchun enters the critical care ward,
and approaches the two guards outside the room to which
Xiaodan leads her.

SHUCHUN

I'm going to take some blood.

The guards take no note of Xiaodan, nod Shuchun through.

INT. QUIOLIAN'S ROOM, EASY CITY HOSPITAL - DAY

Quiolian lies unconscious. Spiked red hair. Shuchun
recognizes her - she looks exactly like Xiaodan.

SHUCHUN

She looks just like you. Her medical file says Ma Quiolian, an operator for Chang'e Communications. It lists her as brain dead. So why is she guarded?

XIAODAN

In case of something exactly like what we're about to do.

Quiolian's hospital bed is a modified immersion couch where surgeons can perform remote surgery.

XIAODAN (CONT'D)

Used to, I could have linked right to this equipment.

Shuchun turns Quiolian on her stomach, pivots a piece of surgical headgear onto the nape of her neck.

XIAODAN (CONT'D)

Now the bio-chip.

Shuchun takes a bio-chip from her breast pocket, inserts it in the couch's interface. Shuchun listens to the headgear's feedback, a high-pitched whine, and adjusts a setting.

SHUCHUN

I've rebooted the link, but it won't make any difference if she's in a vegetative--

XIAODAN

I don't need her conscious.

The headgear sizzles, safeguard circuits blown by the overwhelming data transfer. Xiaodan vanishes, takes possession of Quiolian's comatose body.

Quiolian sits up, her face contorts, her eyes empty.

XIAODAN (CONT'D)

(sotto)

This is weird. You'd think this body would feel more familiar.

SHUCHUN

Xiaodan? What's going on?

XIAODAN

I'll explain in a minute. We don't have much time, do what I told you.

INT. HALLWAY, EASY CITY HOSPITAL - DAY

Shuchun exits the room, nods to the guards, turns a corner about halfway down the hall and sets off a fire alarm. Others evacuate the ward.

INT. QUIOLIAN'S ROOM, EASY CITY HOSPITAL - DAY

The guards rush in. Xiaodan hyper-adrenalizes Qiolian's body, slips from behind a bank of equipment and grabs the guards by the throat. One in each arm she lifts them, feet off the floor, and chokes them into submission.

Shuchun returns with a wheelchair, into which Xiaodan collapses. She pulls the scarf Shuchun provides over her hair as Shuchun steers around the unconscious guards.

INT. LOBBY, EASY CITY HOSPITAL - DAY

Shuchun pushes Xiaodan out of the hospital in the flow and confusion of other evacuating traffic.

INT. PARKING LOT, EASY CITY HOSPITAL - DAY

Shuchun and Xiaodan reach Shuchun's car and climb in.

SHUCHUN

How do we get to Jianjun?

XIAODAN

I know where he'll be. I need you to get to the Cypro-corp Embassy in Upper Acclivity.

SHUCHUN

You know where he's going to be?

XIAODAN

A river isn't hard to follow.

She looks out the window. Shuchun pulls out of the lot.

INT. CIEDA TRANSPORT - DAY

Rong drives. Tengfei and Lau ride along as Fu Renshu interrogates Skylos in the back.

FU RENSHU

(to Skylos)

I know you were supposed to retrieve the device, and I know your people got to Jianjun on the QuantumNet. So I'm only going to ask once. Where's the XDN-1?

SKYLOS

I'm a Cypro-corp diplomat with political immunity. You can't prove anything.

LAU

I thought we were giving it to Cypro-corp anyway, boss.

FU RENSHU

Selling it, Agent - on our terms.
If they cut us out we get nothing.
(to Rong)
Open the hatch.

Fu Renshu grabs him, loops a restraint belt through Skylos's cuffed arms. The hatch opens, Fu Renshu flings Skylos towards it.

Skylos jerks to a shoulder-wrenching halt, suspended face downwards by the restraining harness above the bottomless canyon below.

FU RENSHU (CONT'D)

Last chance.

Fu Renshu yanks on the strap, Skylos winces in pain.

FU RENSHU (CONT'D)

I'm honestly curious whether you'll hit the ground or a passing car first.

SKYLOS

They'll have your badge for this, you crazy *guí sūnzi*. You wouldn't dare.

Fu Renshu pushes the button. Skylos screams as he drops, Fu Renshu catches him by the handcuffs.

FU RENSHU

Close one. Better hurry, I'm an old man - can't hold you like this forever.

SKYLOS

The Embassy. They'll take it to the embassy.

Fu Renshu hauls him back in, and drops him on the floor.

FU RENSHU

(to Rong)

Cypro-corp Embassy - and link an ambulance, I expect there'll be casualties.

EXT. CYPRO-CORP EMBASSY - EVENING

Waves of traffic break around the monumental Cypro-corp Embassy. A waterfall pours from its spires to form the grand façade. Aggressive, shell-shaped roof vaults house the...

INT. ENTRANCE FOYER, CYPRO-CORP EMBASSY - NIGHT

A well-heeled crowd of Easy City aristocracy attend the pre-concert reception. Eleina makes her entrance down a grand staircase. Cypro-corp Guards stand beside her, watchful.

Xiaodan pushes her way through the crowd surrounding the Ambassador, Shuchun runs after her. Both are invisible now.

SHUCHUN

Why isn't anyone looking at us?

XIAODAN

I'm a neurohacker, remember? We're not invisible, it's just their eyes are misinformed. They'll see us when they need to.

Xiaodan grabs the Ambassador, presses a plasmafoil to her neck. To the eyes of all present, Xiaodan and the Ambassador seem to vanish. The guards hover, search for an opening, but can't see the Ambassador, or Xiaodan and Shuchun.

XIAODAN (CONT'D)

Where's your bodyguard, Ambassador?

(waves gun at the guards)

Tell them to back off!

ELEINA

(to guards)

It's okay, do as she asks.

From the guard's POV, her voice comes out of thin air.

XIAODAN
You have something that belongs to
me. Hand it over, now!

ELEINA
I expected Chang'e or CIEDA to try
something crude like this.

XIAODAN
I'm neither one.

ELEINA
(indicates Shuchun)
Who's she?

XIAODAN
The wife of Rhee Jianjun, here to
help me exonerate her husband.

ELEINA
Who?

XIAODAN
Wouldn't it be better to discuss
this in your office, Ambassador?

Xiaodan backs the Ambassador down the corridor and into an
elevator. Shuchun looks from Xiaodan to Eleina and follows
them. The guards follow at a distance.

EXT. GARAGE, CYPRO-CORP EMBASSY - NIGHT

CIEDA agents Tengfei, Lau, Rong, and Fu Renshu - dressed as
tourists - stake out the Embassy's monumental garage as a
black hover car approaches.

LAU
(over link)
We've got one turning in now.

FU RENSHU
Spike it.

As the car crosses the portal, Rong links to two small
devices that flank it. There's a flash and the car's lift
fails.

It crashes to the deck and grinds along the garage floor
until it hits a post. The agents look in from the doorway.

TENGFEI
Does anyone need assistance?

Talgat struggles from the wreckage. He staggers across the garage, clutches the shielded box close to his chest.

TENGFEEI (CONT'D)

(to Talgat)

Please, we're not allowed to enter the embassy unless you grant us access or are incapable of requesting assistance!

Talgat disappears up a set of stairs. No further movement or sound from the wreckage, but they still see Aizahn inside.

RONG

She must be unconscious.

FU RENSHU

I thought I heard something, didn't you? That's consent.

They rush in and drag Aizahn from the shattered vehicle. The RESCUE URV roars into the building and stops beside them.

Swat troops emerge from its payload bay and distribute weapons to the CIEDA agents-cum-tourists even as the EMTs load the victim on board.

The CIEDA agents don riot gear, disappear into the corridors and shadows. They make their way towards the top of the building, follow the trail of blood Talgat left.

INT. STAGE, CYPRO-CORP EMBASSY - NIGHT

The dancers appear as dark-cloaked figures. They disrobe, reveal nude-appearing bodies. The ballet depicts young Chang'e the moon goddess and her lover, the prince of heaven, meeting in the graveyard under cover of night. They begin to dance...

INT. AMBASSADOR'S OFFICE - NIGHT

Bay windows provide a breathtaking view of the city. Two axe-like fractal blades hang crossed above the desk, their mirrored edges branching to a swirl of sharp points.

Xiaodan closes the security door and locks it. A crimson trail leads to where Talgat, bloody and disheveled from the car wreck, lies slumped at the far end.

XIAODAN

Key open the vault.

TALGAT
Ambassador, no...

Eleina hesitates, Xiaodan gestures with the plasmafoil.

XIAODAN
Right now.

KANG (O.S.)
Stop, please.

Xiaodan, Shuchun, and Eleina turn as one. Kang, Huizhong and Jianjun move into view.

KANG (CONT'D)
Hello, Quiolian.

XIAODAN
It's Xiaodan now, father.

KANG
I know, he said. You don't have to do this.

XIAODAN
You know I do. You know why.

She looks at Jianjun, sizes him up.

ELEINA
Did you get here after him?
(indicates Talgat)
How disappointing for you. You couldn't open the vault?
(to Huizhong)
And you call yourself a neurohacker.

HUIZHONG
We don't use that word.

Talgat drags himself to his feet, leans on the wall. Xiaodan gestures with the plasmafoil again.

XIAODAN
Now, Ambassador, key it open or the shooting starts.

Eleina turns the emerald in her ring. The far wall near Talgat parts to reveal a reinforced vault. Inside, a blood-smeared pedestal houses the XDN-1 in its shielded box. Xiaodan breathes, steps towards it.

JIANJUN
Xiaodan, stop. Please.

HUIZHONG
If you do this, it will only end
badly. Back off, let us handle it.

Xiaodan looks at him - not likely. On her command, the lights flicker, and go out. Xiaodan lunges.

ELEINA
Take her!

KANG
No!

Gunfire blasts, Shuchun screams.

INT. HALLWAY, CYPRO-CORP EMBASSY - CONTINUOUS

The CIEDA agents arrive alongside the Cypro-corp guards in the hallway, Fu Renshu's eyes go wide as he hears.

FU RENSHU
Open it!

Agent Tengfei pulls the door's controls.

INT. AMBASSADOR'S OFFICE - CONTINUOUS

Explosive bolts blow the office door inwards. Fu Renshu, the Cypro-corp guards and CIEDA agents sweep in and engage. Xiaodan holds them all off as Huizhong, Kang and Jianjun try their best to stay alive.

Talgat lurches in pain and joins the fight.

INT. STAGE, CYPRO-CORP EMBASSY - CONTINUOUS

The dancers leap and pirouette. The audience - far as they can tell - are on stage in the middle of the action, the wash of symphonic sound drowns out the clatter of battle above.

INT. AMBASSADOR'S OFFICE - CONTINUOUS

In the confusion, Xiaodan darts for the vault, but Eleina's in her way. Xiaodan attacks, Eleina blocks, both faster than human.

Eleina begins to sweat under the assault, and her limbs don't respond as they should. She blocks and turns as Xiaodan attacks her nerves, saps her will.

Talgat notices Eleina's struggle, moves his own fight with Kang, Huizhong and Jianjun towards Eleina's desk. He grabs the fractal blades from the wall, throws one to the Ambassador.

TALGAT

Eleina!

Eleina catches it and turns back to Xiaodan. She grips the blade with both hands, crouches, and presses her advantage as Xiaodan dodges - right into the range of the fractal blade in Talgat's blood-soaked grip.

Talgat swings back, prepares to strike. At the last moment, Xiaodan twists out of the way as Talgat's blow goes wide - the fractal blade sinks into Eleina's chest!

TALGAT (CONT'D)

Ambassador, no!

Eleina coughs, spits blood, clutches Talgat as she topples.

INT. STAGE, CYPRO-CORP EMBASSY - CONTINUOUS

Dancers in the graveyard raise their hands - starlight engulfs the audience in the dance and musical chants as a chorus of peach blossoms sing Chang'e's love hymn.

INT. AMBASSADOR'S OFFICE - CONTINUOUS

Everyone freezes. Even the Cypro-corp guards hesitate in their attack. Xiaodan and Jianjun stare.

Shuchun rushes to their side. Blood soaks the Ambassador's clothing and spreads across the floor.

Jianjun moves to help Shuchun. Fu Renshu watches as Shuchun drops to her knees and trains a medical device on Eleina, works to save her.

SHUCHUN

The wounds won't cauterize.

She runs a hand through her hair, helpless.

ELEINA

The blade poisons the wound on the cellular level. Nothing you can do.

Eleina cries out as Shuchun applies pressure to the wounds, and something in her cracks. Eleina fades. She looks at Talgat, gurgles in pain, gasps.

TALGAT
Leave her alone!

Shuchun ignores him, thumps Eleina's chest. She trains the medical device again, shakes her head in frustration.

SHUCHUN
Don't give up, stay with me!

While the rest of the room's occupants are distracted, Xiaodan ducks into the vault, opens the shielded box, and picks up the device.

She makes a connection, and what she sees horrifies her.

XIAODAN
My god... we're the same.

Xiaodan runs from the room, down the corridor. Jianjun turns, face rigid. They follow his gaze: the vault's empty.

TALGAT
It's gone - she took it!

KANG
(to Jianjun)
Go!
(to Huizhong)
Find her!

Jianjun runs out the door, the guards let him go. He brushes by Fu Renshu, who looks at them all in shock. Huizhong's eyes take on an unfocused look.

FU RENSHU
How will he find her?

KANG
A neurohacker can track her interface with the device, even if it's damaged.

HUIZHONG
(to Jianjun, O.S.)
Take a right. Up the corridor to a stairway.

INT. HALLWAY, CYPRO-CORP EMBASSY - CONTINUOUS

Huizhong speaks in Jianjun's ear.

HUIZHONG (O.S.)
She's headed for the building's
core.

Jianjun rounds the corridor corner at a run.

JIANJUN
What about security?

HUIZHONG
The door will be open.

INT. AMBASSADOR'S OFFICE - CONTINUOUS

Fu Renshu strides to the center of the Ambassador's office,
his internal affairs team behind him.

FU RENSHU
Enough - you're all under arrest!
(to Kang)
You're in enough trouble, why did
your brain-dead operator steal my
prototype?

KANG
It's not your prototype. Everyone
here tried to steal it. Xiaodan
just beat you all to it.

INT. HALLWAY, CYPRO-CORP EMBASSY - CONTINUOUS

Jianjun rounds another corner.

INT. REACTOR ROOM, CYPRO-CORP EMBASSY - CONTINUOUS

Jianjun heaves his way up a staircase and staggers into the
plasma core room. Guards lay on the floor.

INT. AMBASSADOR'S OFFICE - CONTINUOUS

In the Ambassador's office, all eyes are on Kang.

FU RENSHU
Who the hell is Xiaodan? What did
she mean, 'we're the same?' Tell
me, or I will shoot you.

Kang sighs, resigned.

KANG

She's an artificial intelligence integrated into the XDN-1. For all intents and purposes, she is the XDN-1. Thus, Xiaodan. She's highly complex, the most sophisticated AI we've ever created. Only my lead programmers Quiolian and Fenris knew the extent. We gave her an ethics code to protect the prototype against misuse. She's the XDN-1's fail-safe.

FU RENSHU

Xiaodan's not alive?

KANG

Of course she is, why wouldn't she be? If it acts, thinks--

(to Kang)

--feels... what difference does it make if it's artificial? How is it not life?

FU RENSHU

Does it really feel anything or is it just programmed to emulate it?

JIANJUN

(over link)

The XDN-1 is organically based, like a Link, right?

Kang nods.

JIANJUN (CONT'D)

Whose DNA did you use?

KANG

Mine, of course, and Quiolian's: a woman's protectiveness, a man's sense of duty.

JIANJUN

Then you really are her father.

KANG

In a way.

Eleina snorts, spits blood. Her breath rattles, and she's gone.

Talgat looks up, his hands covered in blood. His mouth moves, his face contorts, he screams. Talgat staggers to his feet, and paces by the window, a cornered animal.

Fu Renshu stares from Kang to the others,

FU RENSHU

It's the girl, then? Quiolian is Xiaodan?

KANG

No, Ma Quiolian was a person like any other, and technically still alive. Xiaodan never had any physical form. She must've copied part of her program onto the QuantumNet before we isolated her, and then onto Quiolian's Link - taken the body of the woman she knew best.

HUIZHONG

(to Jianjun, O.S.)

Take a left.

FU RENSHU

But she's corrupted. She stole herself from you.

KANG

No. She behaved too perfectly. She stole the device - herself - before any of you could, and my guess is she'll destroy it before she lets you take it back.

FU RENSHU

(to Kang)

You told me she was a neurohacker who used to work for you.

KANG

Which was technically true. I merely failed to mention she wasn't - in the strictest sense - human.

FU RENSHU

Impossible. AIs don't act with autonomy. They don't possess bodies.

KANG

I know.

(to Huizhong)

(MORE)

KANG (CONT'D)

She shouldn't be able to do that - replicate, go viral. She should be confined to the prototype, not proactive.

Huizhong looks up.

HUIZHONG

(to Kang & Jianjun, O.S.)
She's there.

INT. REACTOR ROOM, AMBASSADOR'S OFFICE - INTERCUT

Jianjun runs out onto the catwalk, a grated gantry above a conduit. An array of fusion generators range down into the bowels of the building, throw off a sea of crackling plasma.

JIANJUN

Xiaodan, stop! Don't do this.

Xiaodan stops him - he freezes, suddenly unable to move. Jianjun looks desperately around, scans the reactor room..

JIANJUN (CONT'D)

You never planned to give it to 'Moon Rabbit,' did you?

Huizhong puts it on the Link for those in the office to hear.

XIAODAN

You know what'll happen when I do this.

JIANJUN

You could copy yourself over, destroy the prototype but save yourself.

KANG (O.S.)

(over Link)

She can't. Xiaodan's supposed to be confined to the XDN-1. She can buffer her program in the memory of other Links, but can't store herself.

XIAODAN

I did what I had to. It has to be this way.

JIANJUN

I understand. You didn't cheat; you just played by a different set of rules. You're right, I'm sorry I doubted you.

Xiaodan reappears, poised on the gantry's edge.

XIAODAN

You don't understand.
 (brandishes device)
 This is my body, my reason for being. My beliefs, my purpose - this is all I know. A life without them is no life at all. My father said life was about making connections. Well I made plenty, but am I even alive?

Jianjun can't answer.

XIAODAN (CONT'D)

(to Kang, O.S.)
 Am I, father?

In the Ambassador's office, Kang shakes his head.

KANG

I don't know, honey. I don't know.

In the reactor room, Xiaodan holds the XDN-1 out over the burning abyss.

JIANJUN

This isn't the way.

XIAODAN

I'm sorry Jianjun, this is the way I was made.

JIANJUN

Qù xià dì yù, (pron. ku-ZHA-die-YU)
 damn you - you can't!

XIAODAN

Cypro-corp almost won. I can't allow them to possess me. Too many people have died or almost died. This is the only way.

JIANJUN

There's more to you than the program. You don't have to do what it says.

XIAODAN

Everyone does what they're programmed to. It's the hardest thing in the world to change it. Remember the invisible thread - I need to do this, even though I'd prefer to stay with you. That's conscience, isn't it?

In the Ambassador's office, Shuchun looks into the air, much affected by what she hears. Jianjun comes to a decision, too, moves up to Xiaodan.

JIANJUN

I guess it is.

His eyes tell her he doesn't pose a threat; he's not going to stop her. He takes Xiaodan's hand.

XIAODAN

I'm scared.

JIANJUN

It's okay. I'm here.

Xiaodan opens her other hand, tilts her palm, lets the XDN-1 slip off. It plummets into the spider web of crackling energy in the depths of the plasma core. Xiaodan goes rigid as the device vaporizes, falls limp in Jianjun's arms.

In the ambassador's office, stunned silence. Xiaodan and Jianjun's fingers slip apart. Jianjun looks into Quiolian's dead eyes, lets her fall off the catwalk into the reactor.

Electrons stream around her body as the draft of plasma catches her up in a blaze of light.

Jianjun stares into the particle fire until there's nothing left. When Jianjun turns away, Huizhong stands behind him.

KANG

We need to get out of here, Agent Rhee.

JIANJUN

What about the Ambassador?

HUIZHONG

The ambassador's dead. Talgat's in command.

INT. AMBASSADOR'S OFFICE - NIGHT

Presidential guards storm through the door and surround the CIEDA agents, Talgat and the Cypro-corp guards.

A guard prods Fu Renshu with his MV-7, but the Deputy Director slaps it away. The guards eye each other, wait for Talgat's move.

FU RENSHU
What's going on here?
(looks around)
I asked a question.

Huizhong and Jianjun enter from the hallway. Huizhong flashes a holo-badge.

HUIZHONG
Director Fu, I'm placing you under
arrest for treason.

FU RENSHU
By whose authority?

HUIZHONG
The office of the President.

Fu Renshu glares as the guards bind him with LIQUID METAL SHACKLES. The faces of the CIEDA agents behind him bear reactions ranging from shock to malice.

LAU
We responded to an--

FU RENSHU
We're investigating illegal Cypro-
corp operation on our soil.

HUIZHONG
In which you colluded.
(to CIEDA Agents)
You're all under arrest.

He faces Talgat.

HUIZHONG (CONT'D)
Your entire delegation is hereby
declared persona non grata. This
Embassy is closed. You will leave
the country immediately, or we'll
prosecute you for corporate
espionage.

Shuchun rushes to Jianjun, and the two of them embrace, covered in blood and sweat.

JIANJUN

(to Huizhong)

So you're 'Moon Rabbit,' I thought I recognized you. Sorry I didn't get the device for you. It's probably better this way.

HUIZHONG

The President won't agree.

KANG

(to Huizhong)

You did something to Xiaodan. She never would've gone so far.

HUIZHONG

She never would've gotten so far. I opened the door, gave her a push. The distance she did on her own.

KANG

I made Xiaodan to ensure no one would misuse the power I gave her--

HUIZHONG

She was flawed, and if I hacked her, others could have, too. There are no noble savages, or civilized men. We're all just savages.

KANG

She did the right thing in the end, didn't she?

HUIZHONG

She did. So shall we. After all, you're still a government contractor. We have an investment to recoup.

(to Jianjun)

And Jianjun, I know what you've been through, but there's still a favor you can do for us. Fu Renshu won't be returning to work. You refused to testify against him, even when it would have saved you. We'd like to have a Deputy Director we can trust. How'd you like a promotion?

Jianjun scratches his regenerated arm.

HUIZHONG (CONT'D)
It's your life back.

JIANJUN
I'm not sure what that is anymore.

He turns to look out the bay windows as dawn breaks over the city, a blanket of light.

SHUCHUN
Can I help you remember?

JIANJUN
If you still want me.

Shuchun smiles, and they embrace. Jianjun looks at his wife with new eyes.

Just then, every light in the city goes out in unison. A brief blink - they're almost unsure it happened.

SHUCHUN
Oh my god. What was it?

JIANJUN
All the lights in the world, just
for an instant.

Jianjun shakes his head, shares a smile with the other three.

FADE OUT.

THE END