I first visited the Observatory during orientation, but of course it was Cai Yuhui who finally got me to come to a showing here. Of course, the Observatory is not just the projection system, not really. It’s YINS’ massive network of Mirror Sea feed subscriptions and exclusive leases. The neikonauts who comb them for footage — mathematicians or biologists, depending on who you ask — just happen to produce gems like *Interference Patterns: The Birth of a Ripple* and duds like *Hyperlagmites: The Sea At Night.* I’m embarrassed to say I still have the stub. Today, the domed theater looks almost abandoned. The box office is closed, the Now Showing board empty, and although I have been very diligently *not thinking about it*, I realize I haven’t seen any flyers or banners advertising this place for a while.

But there are signs of life at the back office. Light through the blinds, for one. A wastebin full of styrolite coffee cups, and the muffled whir of UTMS scanners. *Please don’t be there*. I re-up my plea, and knock.

No one comes to the door for a while. I knock again, a notoriously poor way to get the attention of someone in a CPU-bound psychedelic trance. YINS doors have little buzzers to get the attention of someone in loop-lock — and if you ever, ever use one, *tong fengwo*, poke the beehive — well, there’d better be a fire. I gaze up at the security camera in the corner: a perfectly ordinary one, though someone with a sense of humor has dangled a few red prayer cards from its stem. Maybe they’re inside, watching, waiting for me to leave so they can go pee. I get it.

Just as I turn to go, a woman hefting a box of cold-storage drives rounds the corner and stops short when she sees me. “Help you?” she grunts, red-faced.

“Are you with the Observatory?”

She glances me over, at my YINS tank and my general grubbiness, and seems to weigh putting down what looks like a very heavy box. “Yes I am. Do you have an appointment?”

I tell her no...that I’m a student...that I’ve always heard YINS affiliates can get some observatory time...that I’m happy to make an appointment and come back, yada yada. As I wind on, I infer from her skeptical expression that they must field this exact request about six times a day. “By the way, what happened to the theater?” I finish, trying to sound less deranged. “I loved the soundtracks, you could just melt into your chair...”

This seems to crack her. She sighs wistfully. “It attracted the bad kind of attention. Some people, you give ‘em a little taste, and they keep coming back for more. The public, definitely. But people from campus, with the craziest ideas in their heads about the Ripples. We give them an hour of footage, and they’d come back demanding eight hours in loop-lock. We’d have to pry them off the rig, call campus security and sometimes the...well, you know.”

Neither of us are very subtle about looking each other over for telltale signs. Some of them change with the trends, with the Ripples of the moment — wickervine arm wraps and tessel trainer treads and, well, I try not to know about all this. Others are timeless: sigils and notches and embeds, a certain forever-faraway look in the eyes. This woman has none of those. With her chunky black frames and striped T-shirt filling out her overalls, she’s determined to look and sound like she moved from the countryside last week. Me? Well, I finally had my coral sigil tattoo lasered over, and you can only see the scars in the right light...

She purses her lips, deferring judgement. “Anyway. Lots of wards are trying to claw back their feeds. *We’re* fine, I mean, but they’re still adding riders to the leases, tight access controls and all that. And with undergrads now, and half of them wannabe chasers, I’m sorry to say we have a new policy on guest observation slots. You’ll need a faculty member to sign off on your request.” She blinks, possibly for the first time. “Who are you with? I’m Yue Fang, by the way.”

Finally Yue Fang unlocks the office, drops her drives onto a couch, and fetches a tablet for me to fill out “just a liiittle bit of paperwork”. The waiting area is spartan, and behind it is a long hall of closed doors. Only tight timetables pasted up on A4 paper provide any hint of what goes on here. I peer glumly at the tablet and the twenty-eight places it says I need to sign.

“I wonder,” I begin, breaking a weird and humming silence. “If it helps at all, I don’t actually want to enter loop-lock myself. It’d actually save me a bunch of time if I didn’t. What I want is to search the Sea for a particular pattern. Is that something you could just do for me?”

I wave a thumb drive loaded with Deng’s mathematical model of the diving-bell. Yue looks thoughtful, looks around at all the nothing in the room. She looks back at me, newly curious. “Who did you say your advisor was?”

And of course now is when Cai Yuhui appears in the hallway.