“Mona,” Cai says, falling-rising. And I feel the spring-load of the moment, the outrush of months of coiled potential energy. But now, crushing devastation: in her eyes I see the same mechanism fail to fire. Nothing was leading up to this. She never wondered what this moment would be like. I am a problem to be solved. Yue Fang looks at me, then at her, and after trying to broker a pleasantry or two decides she really needs to file those drives.

Cai looks right into my clockwork and softly but perceptibly sighs. “Can I talk to you outside?”

*Outside* is a balcony ringing the dome of Building 6. Cai holds the door open for me, which I don’t like. But I don’t mind the pre-autumnal crispness up here, the cool breeze off the Huangpu’s tesselatory chop. I squint; her Contecs go real reflective. “Why are you here?”

“It’s good to see you, too, Yuhui.”

“If it’s good to see me, *call.* Or pick up the phone. When I heard your voice in the hall just now, my heart dropped*.* After all this time, this is where you come to find me? What am I supposed to think?”

“This is where you work. This is —” And I gesture sharply at...all of her. Cai is a walking map of Ripplechasing culture from the top of her head downward. Oh, all tasteful, of course. Her hair is pure, shocking white. Those sigils are done in neuro-fade ink, probably wiped and remapped every six months. Her long, folded arms, her almost cranelike neck, are ringed with minimalist strata, topaz and bone. Six or seven layers up, I see coral. The Mirror Sea is Cai’s research and her hobby, her livelihood twice over. I always found it hard to see another aspect of her that wasn’t just...this.

I think she takes that point only too well. “Don’t act like you’re here to see me. What’s on the drive?”

“What’s in the Mirror Sea?” I ask. Confusion blits over her Contecs. I press now, lightheaded, welcoming the thick of it: “No, I’m completely serious! Why is the entire Observatory holing up all of a sudden?”

“The ward —”

“The wards would tell you something. They’d be coming to you for answers.”

“The Ward Council,” she finishes flatly, “passed a flimsy paperwork barrier to keep live feeds out of the hands of *teenagers*. Who are coming from out-zone and getting a first exposure to loop-lock *and* DMT. Do you ever talk to the first-years? Do you see that their realities are getting broken this week? If, on top of that, we’re promoting the Mirror Sea all over campus some of them are going to snap.” Snap, Mona, like you did. “Of course we’re scaling back.”

Suddenly I don’t feel good, no, not at all. One moment I’m leaning on the balcony and the next I’m retching — dry-heaving, because what have even I eaten in the last day? And that becomes a loud, ugly sob, and then a train of silent ones, and now Cai grabs me by the wrist. “I fucked up bad,” I choke out. “I went chasing last night...”

For the one long awful second it takes her to process this, she continues to glare at me. Then she blinks her Contecs off so I can see her pupils. Her mouth forms a small, nearly silent *oh.* But if there’s any disbelief on her face, it’s probably that I held out this long.

”I didn’t mean to. I didn’t seek it out.” But didn’t I? Didn’t I skulk around for nights, hoping it would find me? And isn’t that exactly how it works — wait, *isn’t it?* “And now, I, I can’t tell what I saw in there...”

I am so, so embarrassed by how readily I fell to quadratic belief. One night! My mind feels so slippery, like I have perfect leeway to *choose* to the truth, not just myself but for the world, and I slip-slide dangerously down the parabola, gaining a tiny bit of traction only in admitting what had happened. Pathetic! Cai lives her life night and day on the razor’s edge of delusion, and never a hair out of place, and me — and *me* —

Tears seem to well up, but they don’t come. Cai remains still with me, grasping my arms, waiting me out. She stands fully upright; I’m doing enough slouching for the both of us.

“It’s not just you.” She’s suddenly much quieter, could pass for her own echo. “Who struggles with it, I mean. Remember the Ripple we rode together? Remember how we sat around and just *talked* about it? I mean, it was nothing, but it was everything, it was…” Words fail her. The coral sigil along her forearm pulses darker for a few beats of her heart. “It felt amazing, and so it felt even better to share it. But sometimes there’s something you don’t want to see in there, and it hurts to think about, and that’s the other side of it.”

I snort, amused. “You’re saying I’d better keep it to myself.”

“I’m not!” But Cai comes to a full stop and seems to really consider this. “Well, maybe I am, a little. It’s just — when quadratic belief gets bad, talking about it can make it worse. More real. For you, and for other people, too.”

Yeah. They said exactly this in Remedial Belief Modulation.

“But I’m glad you’re telling me about it. In the abstract. And Mona,” she goes on, with her usual quickness, “your incident last year was my own fault too. There were things that I thought wouldn’t go wrong that time. I should have prepared you.” For a moment, Cai Yuhui’s apparatus of psychological dazzle camouflage falters. Something besides pure poise cracks into her voice, her posture, and in the candelabraic flickering of her Contecs (this reminds me too much of the diving-bell, and I look away). I see a vessel with no lid, filled to the brim, trying with every careful motion not to spill. I cling to the idea that this glimpse under the skin, this dropped frame, was intentional. The next moment, it’s gone.

“I should have been with you that night. And I’m sorry.”

“You should have,” I agree. I don’t know why this comes out of me. Not for blame’s sake.

“And I wish I could do more for you right now, but you’re right, I’m inseparable from it. I’m a walking extension of the Mirror Sea.” *Had I said that out loud?*

“Just promise you won’t call the Weather Bureau on me?” I mean it as a joke, but the last thing I need is two more nights in custody, interchangeable men asking a battery of interchangeable questions, peering through the cracks in my sanity — in the worst moments, I recall, almost trying to pry them open...

Cai frowns. “You don’t think it was *me* whocalled them last time!”

“Well,” I sigh. “No. I don’t.” But in truth it crossed my mind once or twice, in the weeks and months afterwards. How closely behind her they arrived.

“Mona Xu.” She puts a hand on each of my shoulders. “I am your friend, and even if I wasn’t, I would never call the Weather Bureau on you. They’ll wall up every mind in the city if we let them. Maybe they’ll even find a way to take down the displays. But they’ll never ever take down the cameras, because they’re the real addicts, the ones who really can’t let it go. They have nothing else. You do.”

Another frame drops; Cai looks faintly sad and very tired.