“And this is a friend of yours?”

It all happened so fast. Maybe it’s the residuals of the Triple Point night market, blurring these few days into an ever-lingering present. I didn’t tell Tethi that I went inside. I know I was very lucky to have walked out. And now here we are, in the indifferent blast of YINS air conditioning, across from Deng and Rui. Neither Tethi or I have slept. I was running the numbers; he was watching for official word on what happened during the Mid-Autumn festival.

Tethi is not dressed for the job he wants. The YINS researchers walking past us are in athleisure and graphic tees, struggling to manage even half a hairdo. He is in bootleg Docs, subtly iridescent dress slacks, a spotless white shirt and collarless jacket bought en route. The coils of his hair are tamed back, still damp. The rhombus gemstone from his forehead is gone; I wonder what to make of this. “Tethi Okeme,” he tells Deng and Rui, sounding spritely. Maybe manic, with the lack of sleep. They take his offered hand, bewilderment leaking through.

“And you are a researcher?”

“Yes,” Tethi replies.

“A colleague,” I offer, uselessly, at the same time. There’s so much we haven’t gone over. *Do they know who he is?* Did they look at the Sieve case files? I scheduled this meeting at four in the morning, once our data took shape. Rui and Deng had the same hour open, which was crucial: I wanted to see them react simultaneously. *What is this??* Deng asked via email a little past five. I’d ignored her for more than a week. But they both showed. We’re all here. It’s time.

“Esteemed professors,” Tethi begins, layering on the honorifics, starting the slideshow. “Thank you for the opportunity to share our work. I hope our results will shed timely light on something which has attracted the city’s urgent interest since last night.”

Here’s what he doesn’t tell them. He skips the moment I arrived at Triple Point for the last time and burst out laughing at the sight of him. It was utterly endearing, the way he had it all ready to go: the pushcart, the sorted piles of rave paraphernalia, a forged vendor’s permit to boot. He doesn’t mention Min, but she was there too. She came out to see us off, faintly skeptical of the whole thing.

“So *this* is how you’re going to spend the festival! Why not just enjoy things, Teth? Why be like this?”

“It’s fish in a barrel, *Min ayi*. We need the money.”

“No, good! Go, go on, take it out. None of it sells in the shop.” She turned to me with a sly smile. “This is how I found him, you know. Selling this absolute junk on the streets.”

Something passed between them then, broadband and narrowbeam, that I wasn’t privy to. I had questions about the story they couldn’t quite keep straight. And surely *she* had questions about Tethi’s backpack, big enough to live out of for some indefinite future. But they kept up the charade ’til he was outside. Then he turned on his heel, just as the door chimed open, and they embraced in the warm light of the shopfront. I watched from under the concrete as she wiped away his tears, held back her own. *I will, I will,* I thought I heard him say.

He doesn’t mention any of this. He discusses empathetic baselines, neikotic transference, soberware. We decided it was best to start in Deng and Rui’s world before ramping slowly to the Ripples, their hidden city, their technology. But what he’s already told them is shock enough.

“You *what?*” Deng ignores Tethi. Addresses me. Her face begins to ice over.

“You showed me that video. You said that this transference could never work.” Trying to keep my voice level. Keep the focus on our data. I don’t want a blowout. “But it does. We’re telling you now that it does.”

“We’ll see about that,” she mutters. Rui offers her a subtle gesture: *careful, calm.*

I nod Tethi on. I suppose he’s seen worse. Now he produces some sleek eyewear from his jacket pocket, slides it across the table. “Do you both know what these are?”

I’m sure they do. Introspecs were red-hot a few years ago and popular ever since. What might be sunglasses, every edge a curve, a hi-res screen conjoining the outer lenses. The stems have very simple UTMS sensors, used to divine the wearer’s emotion and splash it in color across their eyes. We spent a hellish, weird, wonderful week cracking them open and rewiring them into Sunflower Sieve debris detectors. Tethi skips most of that. And he has no interest in recounting what it’s like to sell Introspecs from a pushcart in Tianzifang. But that’s what will stick with me.

“You gotta put the emphasis on the first syllable. Listen. *In*-tro-speeeecs!” He cupped his hands, and his voice carried halfway down the low brick alleyway, swallowed quickly in music and footfall and the cries of other hawkers.

“No. C’mon. You sound like you’re selling hot dogs at a baseball game. In Mandarin, you gotta get a patter going. Take everything we have and string it all together, a little too fast.” Then, bringing my voice up into my nose: “Genzhe globes — Introspecs — Flower crowns — Quasi wands — Genzhe globes...” I rifled through the pushcart, layers of cheap plastic treasures and horrors pilfered from Min’s storeroom. “Christ, what else do we have in here?”

He gave me the stink eye. “Hey, who’s done this before?”

Now Deng gives me the same look, turning the glasses distastefully. “You were *selling* these?”

“Well, we weren’t going to give them away.” Tethi laughs nervously. I wish we’d thought this through.

It was the Mid-Autumn Festival, and hell: it was *fun*, munching mooncakes and slurping cuchaomian and watching children drag their parents on endless, circular hunts for quasigraphic rabbits. In the lantern-light, in the wash of six different kinds of music, it was easy to forget why we came. Except that the Mirror Sea was there, ever-present on walls and doors and the genzhe globes bouncing just above head-height, so turbulent with Ripples that the golden streaks were impossible to make out. Almost.

We posted up strategically, near a bar with a name so pretentious it doesn’t bear repeating. We sold a dozen pairs of regular, unmodified Introspecs before we reeled in our first neikonaut. “A pair each for me and my girl.” He was short with us, distracted, obviously on something. They were listing colors to each other, running out of obvious ones, delighting in this. His hard wallet opened with a *ka-click* worth more than my life.

“Two hundred for the both,” Tethi decided. I deliberated, handed over one pair marked with a sticker and one without. We grimaced as the marked pair went to the non-neikonaut.

“*Merde*. Okay. Pair number seven is a bust.”

But then a Chaoyue happy hour cleared out, and we managed to get thirty-one pairs on the heads of neikonauts. Tianzifang’s dense layout worked to our advantage. It trapped revelers for hours in a maze of boutiques and erhu trios and duck-hunt street games. The Introspecs formed a wireless mesh network, and we could tell roughly how far each pair was from the others. As it took shape, we began to peek at Tethi’s rollscroll, looking for correlations…

“You know this is a *massive* violation of the YINS research ethics code?” Deng leans across the table, her gaze boring into mine. Her voice is soft, steady, cold. “Do you know that I’m compelled by the bylaws of this institution to report you for running an experiment like this without the subjects’ consent?”

“*Please*. Let them finish.” Rui shoots me a laden glance. “Let’s see what they have to say.”

Tethi advances the slide. The tension is getting to him. “What we have to say is that it worked.”

It didn’t, for a while. From a corner we watched acrobats and puppeteers dazzle a crowd that was still families, still waiting around for the dragon dancers. When they came, we were reassured to catch the beat of their hand-drums on our neikotic readouts. The Introspecs have very low resolution, and had been giving us mostly noise.

After a respectful intermission came the parade of Ripple dances. An obvious conceit, but it made my hair stand up, watching the people beneath those sheets undulate with elsewhere’s choreography. It was strange to know that the Ripples represented were long-dead, brought out for a momentary afterlife by those who couldn’t let go. I knew it was coming, and I held my breath as it passed: its orange fans, yellow folds, purple smokestacks, unnameable, unforgettable. Later we watched a Ripple with gold-and-black sparkling accents march by. I wondered if Yao was under there.

The data Tethi is showing now is from the hour after that. The erhu players and acrobats packed up. The crowd thinned and thickened, took on a looser and rowdier tone. And, slowly, the Sunflower Sieve’s presence came to the foreground. Tethi doesn’t condescend to Rui and Deng: he tells the story with data, correlation matrices and impulse responses, but the implications are unmistakable. The kicker is the next slide. A short composite of all our sensor data. I spent hours on this one, and I’m pleased to hear Rui gasp when he sees it...

We were crouched in the corner by then, our legs failing us. We’d sold the rest of our wares to another hawker for a song. It was elation and it was deep unease, watching the rollscroll. The UTMS electrodes on the Introspecs were cheap, but in combination they worked like a telescope array tuned to a powerful frequency, clearly resolving that skeletal network of Sieve debris. *Let me try something,* Tethi muttered, tuning our sensors. And then we saw gardens of hyperlagmites, high spires of debris, slow shapes moving among these that we didn’t dare name. It was low-res, monochrome, but chillingly clear. A familiar tug: I knew that I’d be able to look, look too hard, and make out precisely this on the displays.

Now Tethi clears his throat. “I wonder if a brief primer on the popular mythology of the Mirror Sea is in order. Have you both heard the term *hyperlagmites?*”

“Yes,” Rui replies. He’s leaning in to get a better look at the Ripples’ handiwork, at the world’s first real application of soberware. Half-awed, half-devastated, and totally transfixed.

Deng leans back in her chair, her voice brimming with contempt. “Just get on with it.”

There were fourteen pairs of Introspecs left in the crowd, and glinting Sieve debris-shapes circulating predictably between them. But through *what*, exactly? What medium, what ether? I was checking the individual readouts from the Introspecs — their batteries were starting to die — and suddenly I had my answer.

“Look,” I told Tethi. “Look at number seven.”

“What about it?” He leaned in, mouth full of mooncake. “*Wait.* She wasn’t a neikonaut.”

I had to rewind three times to believe it. If I squinted, if I leaned into it just a little, I could see the spiral arms of the Sunflower Sieve coiling through the manifolds of an untrained mind. It was moving through crowd like wildfire. Like wildflowers. It’s hard to believe, I know. We have the recording of number seven’s ‘folds up on a slide now, and it’s hard to make out what I saw so clearly last night. But it’s the only explanation for what happened next, in dozens of gatherings across Shanghai, all at different times.

In Tianzifang, it came first as a low gasp working through the crowd. “The moon.” I nudged Tethi and pointed upward. A richly colored harvest moon crested the tiles of low-slung rooftops. “Teth, the *moon*.” It hung close, enormous, worth the wait by far…

“Would you look at that *gold*.” Whispers and shouts intermingled around us. “It’s huge! It’s so round!”

But not everyone was pointing at the moon. Half the crowd was pointing at the Mirror Sea, where something just as huge and round was emerging from the gold-flecked murk. It hung for a moment, silent and insistent. And in the moment of maximal confusion, it *fired*. I caught it off a stray glance, as I shifted my eyes from the sky to the displays. The moon-Sieve-thing latched and hung in the center of my vision, boring into my awareness. The intrusion was so three-dimensional as to flatten the rest of the world on distant walls. A terrified sick thrill, sour and metallic and momentary and inevitable, now drowned in golden light.

I was no longer merely seeing it. I was *harboring* it, *cradling* it, in the depths of my being.

And it was reflective.

I moved to inspect it, cool and bright and inert. Correspondences flashed between its motion and my own. A languid, liquidity of its surface that moved only when I moved, a muffled predictability, tentative, tentacular. I came closer; it spread twitch for twitch, flattening across my awareness. A sheer golden surface of microbially fluid motion, of *whose* motion, of mine, of *mine*, of *ours,* indistinguishable from a world. A moment of utterly arbitrary choice, a glance across the mirror, a magnetic reconfiguration. Then I was not a who but a where.

I was very near to the center of the center. I was a place no longer hidden, the hyperlagmitic scaffolding removed, their great creation revealed to the crystalline night. I was a medium disturbed by their flickers of tendril and cilia and sidebands. They danced easily now, in vortically interwoven ribbons of delight. Their intention propagated at micro-vibrant, grab-chattering speed, no longer bound to broad, coarse, sparse beams of daytime. I was their art perfected, the Sea’s inundation with waves of sheer motile force. I was a flooding of warm liquid gold. I was where they learned they’d succeeded, that they need no longer live hungry, blind, and lost. That it only remained to emerge from their hidden place, to fill the whole Sea with this new...thing.

*What is it?* They asked with precise prods, deliciously deep interferences. *What do we call it?*

*It’s called light,* the Sea itself answered. *In our world we call it light.*

Convexity, reconfiguration, imbalance. Then I was back, eyes locked with Tethi’s. My wanji was reading my heart rate and calling it a panic attack. Around us, a low explosion of deep-seated confusion about just where we’d been looking a few moments ago. If you were unlucky, about whether the moon had just exploded. But there was no aftermath. No wreckage to gawk at. The moon was where the moon goes, and the thing in the Sea receded as suddenly as it came. You could tell which small fraction of the Mirror Sea displays were sanctioned: those went offline, blinking the Weather Bureau’s insignia. A stunned silence gave way to low, uneasy chatter, and slow but certain movement home. The night came to an end.

In daylight, Shanghai grapples with what came over it. They’re calling it *The Glimpse.*

In Tianzifang and similar nucleation sites, the Glimpse was vivid and all-consuming, but it bounced for hours from gaze to gaze until it was only vague splotches of color behind closed eyes. Now it’s a memory, momentary and impossible to truly recall. Ripplechasers are elated: for the first time in a long time, something truly new is emerging from the Sea. The rest of us are terrified. Less by what we saw — for that had an elated, joyful quality to it — than by the ease by which we all slipped into it, as though it had been there all along, just out of focus. As though it threatens us even now from just behind some gauzy veil. Still no word from any authority. Only the momentary shutdown of some Mirror Sea displays told us that the Weather Bureau was watching, but even those began to blink back online by sunrise.

Completely by chance, Tethi and I have a unique vantage point. In a few frames stitched together from low-res Introspecs electrodes, you can see the pure, terrifying sphericality of the Ripples’ sunflower orb, drawn like a bead on golden vine into the center of collective awareness. With some sampling tricks you can make out the fibonacci-seed patterns writhing on its surface. And if you look in just the right way — and why not? Aren’t we already so far gone? — you can see the Ripples themselves. You can feel their ecstasy for yourself. In retrospect, perhaps, a PowerPoint was not the way to deliver this news.

Tethi stands awkwardly with the clicker, the words THANK YOU projected across his face.

And Rui’s brow furrows. “Could you go back to that last slide?”