Deng is not impressed.

“Mona, I don’t think this proves what you think it proves.”

“Well, what’s *your* theory?” It’s grating to me how she barely even acknowledges that Tethi’s in the room. “We come to you immediately with this, and *that’s* your reaction? Don’t you think a teeny, tiny bit of speculation is in order here?”

She tries not to, but she sneers back. “Listen carefully, because I don’t want to explain it twice. You have some neikotic readings, questionably acquired, of a mass panic event. There was a malfunction on those displays. I note that drug use was most likely involved. There are some pretty pictures here, some nasty collages of neikotic debris. But it doesn’t add up to anything coherent. You have to see that.”

I find the slide that, to me, shows the Ripples’ city most clearly. I try to see it afresh, without bias or preconception. I can’t, of course. But you *have* to see the spires, the dwellings — even, if you know how to look, wispy hints of the Ripples themselves. “What does this look like to you?”

“I don’t know,” Deng replies, her voice meticulously, vacuously calm. “What does it look like to you?” I open my mouth and she cuts me off, fishes for a stylus. “Wait! Let me write this down. I’d like to include it in my report to the ethics board.”

It’s going to be a blowout. Last week of September, right on schedule. And this time we have an audience.

Oh, fuck it, I might as well.

“Level with me for once,” I match that iciness. I reach for my bag. “What, exactly, is *this*?”

Deng and Rui glance at the Sunflower-I patch, then at each other, then at me. And now Deng is on her feet, not exactly looming over the table, but terrifying all the same. Something in her face, a deep-set stability to those wrinkles and lines, has broken. “*How dare you,*” she snarls. “After everything I’ve done for you? After I plucked you from a miserable life in your sad, senescent excuse for a country? After I put up with *years* of your laziness, your antics, your childish inability to focus? After I delicately *hold your little hand* and walk you to publication? *This is how you repay me?*”

She grips the table so hard that her fingers are shaking. I cast around for Rui, for Tethi —

“The Ripples have a city,” Tethi interjects. Quickly, but calmly, all things considered. “They have material culture, in the deeper correlations, in a hidden corner of the Sea. It’s built from neikotic debris. The Sunflower Sieve is one of their experiments. Take us to the Observatory and we’ll show you.”

Deng finally turns to face him with a prim smile. “And just who the fuck are you?”

“I think we should go up there,” Rui offers mildly. He was actually on his tablet a moment before, reading the fucking news or something, but I guess he was paying attention after all. “There’s a simple solution to this.”

Deng tightens her grin. “The Observatory has a rather high bar for research proposals, Dr. Rui.”

Rui smiles back. “You have to admit, Dr. Deng, that they’d be fascinated by the hypothesis.”

And somehow, it’s settled. We ride the elevator wordlessly up one floor. Rui leads, Deng follows, we trail. He gives us one long glance backwards which I decide to read as approving, and then keeps his eyes dead ahead. Deng is fixated on something in the middle distance. *I’m sorry,* I mouth to Tethi. My arms are shaking. *That was insane.* He raises his eyebrows, but barely seems flustered. His eyes are on the prize.

We push through the lobby and cross the leafy zigzag trails of the quad for Building 6. On the ride to the top floor, I consider that I might see Cai. How unhinged I’ll look, marching back in with a whole team to validate my delusion. *But it’s not a delusion.* The parabola realigns. *I know what I saw in there, and I’m not afraid of the knowing.* And surely the Observatory must, at least, have their own suspicions. Surely, in all those tight timetables, on all those scanner beds, they must have noticed *something*?

And then it all clicks. It hurts, badly, how I had all the pieces. How I could have put them together at any time but I never did, not until the elevator doors open on the right visual cue. These blank white walls.

“I think it’s just to the left,” Rui suggests hoarsely.

“Teth,” I whisper. “*Run.*”

He’s already running. He’s too slow. There’s a joke about how you never see more than two Weather Bureau agents at the same time. Like there’s only a few of them flitting around. Four burst now from an unmarked door, in their visors and grey bulletproof silk. It doesn’t take that many to subdue Tethi.

*“By the authority of the Special Provision for Psychological Safety, Ward Council Edict 131, you are hereby under arrest.”* Do they really need four? Two to pin him down, the third to draw a vialgun and inject him with antipattern sedative, and the fourth to read him the conditions of his detainment? The voice from their visors is artificially high, somehow reflective in its own right. *“You will be held until such time as your own psychological safety, and that of those you truck with, can be assured according to the mechanisms and evaluation guidelines of Edict 131, section six, paragraph two...”*

He’s already out. My stomach sinks through the floor.

“You’d better take me too,” I hiss. At Deng? At Rui? They both look unsurprised, vaguely dismayed, as Tethi is dragged back through the door. “I was every bit as involved. That experiment was my idea.”

“But you didn’t sell the Sunflower Sieve,” Rui tells me flatly. “Which, as he himself pointed out, is Ripple technology.” He leads us through swinging double doors into the Observatory’s dim, domed theater.

“Rui —”

“I can’t do this anymore, Deng. She’s already at the very center of it. It’s time she knows.”

It takes a skipped beat of the heart to be sure they’re talking about me. It takes the courage of one last breath to step into their crossfire and interrupt them. I’m shaking all over now, vibrating with nerves and adrenaline and now, rage, preemptive rage at Dr. Deng. “It’s time she knows *what*?”

“Well, where to begin?” Rui runs his hand over his head, through phantom hair. “That your advisor was a close confidant of Xia Zitian? A consultant, for years, training neikonauts within the Mirror Sea project? That we brought her back to Shanghai on condition that she tell us what she knows? Help us manage the second system?”

“You didn’t *bring* me anywhere,” Deng insists.

“That she *won’t*?” Rui ignores her, raising his voice. His echo crashes back down from the dome. “That she’s been stonewalling on anything related to the Mirror Sea? Pretending her work under Xia never existed? Fussing with the LLVM as the Ripples regain their —”

“*Turn the cameras off!”* She roars. “The Bureau wants my advice? *Here’s my advice:* you’re worse than the Ripplechasers, the Chalkers, the fucking Nine-Eyes. You’ve gone as quadratic as any of them, and they couldn’t do it without you. You sick freaks just can’t stop *peering* into it, *looking* harder, *daring* it...” She runs out of breath for a long moment. Venom, too. That anger is fear now. A pleading, nearly whispered fear. “Turn — the — cameras — off.”

Rui, calmly, sadly: “You know we would if we could.”

“I don’t believe that for a second,” she snaps back. “Not for a damn second. Mona, let’s go.”

But Rui has unlocked a door in the back of the Observatory, and he’s holding it open. The offer takes shape in long, silent glances between the three of us. From me, devastated and confused, hungry for something just out of sight. From Rui, flatly irritated, hurried by an unseen drumbeat, but obviously curious for my reaction. From Deng, wild, desperate, and drowning…

“Mona, I never wanted this for you, I wanted —”

I don’t look back. I close the door and follow him inside.