Improbably, the room Cai is in has windows. They can’t all be stuffy and featureless, I suppose. But it’s strange to see how the twisting, whitewashed core of the Observatory spills into a single mechanical floor of vaulted concrete ceilings and cantilevered steel. Windows but no view: the sun sets over Puxi, diffracts through permanently frosted glass, and bathes us in orange fire. Cai is in loop-lock when I arrive. A single visored technician minds the monitor bank — I keep a distance. I tamp down invasive urges to peek at her ‘folds, and settle for her vitals. I try matching my thumping heart to her own.

Arms crossed? No. I don’t mean to *corner* her, only...

Like this, maybe? Clasped behind my back, like Deng? Fuck no...

So when the scanner whines down, when Cai paws for the hood and lifts it from her eyes, my arms are halfway between on-hips-like-this and thoughtfully-folded. She’s in a navy YINS neikosuit. That means she’s been in there for a long time, and those can feel like real eternities. I give her a minute to find her balance, leg-over-leg. To wake from raw geometry into the facts of the world.

*“Mona?”* Cai gasps, and turns to the technician with alarm. “Is she — is she *there*?”

“It’s me.” Hands up now, confused. “It’s just me.”

She stumbles forward and — doesn’t hug me, not exactly. Tests my substance, first with her fingertips, then her hands, and finally her arms. She lets go when she’s convinced I’m real. “What are you *doing* here?” She sounds positively moony, just as Rui warned me. Her pupils are ripe and dilated, and her Contecs ring them in languid standing waves. “I had no idea — no one told me we were — *they shot this down!*”

In my hand is a nearly transparent piece of voxelite: hollow and also, weirdly, not. I turn it in my hand to feel all the shapes that it is. I watch it make orange and purple zebra-stripes from the blurry twilight. By this I convey to Cai that I know about the soberware mechanism that Rui has devised to sit precariously inside her mind. A wafer-thin membrane separates two chambers. The first contains Sunflower Sieve debris, clawing uselessly against smooth, glassy manifold walls. The second holds the inversion. Cai takes a step forward, newly entranced by the voxelite. I see myself in her moony eyes, in more ways than one.

“Did they bring you in to help us tonight? Are you coming with?”

“I’m…it’s a long story. I think I’m just going to watch.”

“Oh.” She extends a spidery index finger to touch something that isn’t there. “That’s too bad. We had so much fun together last time.”

*Last time.* Last time, when we were chasing coral and angelfish, when we chased the absurd idea, *the entire city is a great coral reef*, until it became the very texture of our world. Well, Dr. Rui offered another casual betrayal as we walked the halls: that Ripple was a Weather Bureau plant. Even the memeticists who designed it felt it was a little on the nose. But it was nice to look at, easy to understand, and simple to spread. It was something, *anything*, to redirect attention from the hyperlagmites surfacing on the displays just as the city’s neikonauts were drowning in a high tide of Tenfold Gate debris. That had been no coincidence at all — or perhaps a coincidence that had sprouted into correlation, and then bloomed into causality.

Rui explained this all with a logician’s relish, oblivious to the stake he drove again and again into my heart. Oh, and by the way, did I by chance remember *Hyperlagmites: The Sea at Night?* Of course I fucking did. Well — and I groaned audibly here — the film had been Ma Zhuming’s idea. Hype up some subversive footage — manufacture a controversy with the Weather Bureau —and then give the Sea-gazing public nothing at all. Meanwhile Cai’s job was to spread their distraction by any means necessary. And, when the danger passed, to bring the decoy Ripple to a swift end. I had been, what, a stray casualty? Rui didn’t answer, and he told me sternly that he expected me not to bring this up now, *not* *with the state she’s in*.

So I don’t. The technician stands by the door, pointedly pretending not to listen to us, clearly upset to be falling off schedule. I content myself with wondering whether, if I slapped her hard across the face, it might be enough to trigger the precarious soberware mechanism. Whether, if I held eye contact, I might see the flash in her eyes.

“We used you.” Cai flinches gently, looks back reproachfully, but only a little. I might as well be made of glass. “The Weather Bureau is using you, right now. You should be upset.”

“I am,” I insist. Matching her low tone, but not her vacant calm. Even more upset, now that she’s telling me how to feel, and twice over that I’m letting her manipulate me in this additional way, and so on and so forth. But it comes out stupidly flat. “I *am* upset.”

So she leans in and offers a few words. After she saunters away, I’m left dumbstruck, wondering just what she meant by them. Was it a taunt? An invitation? The naive curiosity of her addled mind? But to be honest, I’m mostly thinking about how her lips brushed the side of my ear as she whispered: *“Then what are you going to do about it?”*