“Welcome back,” calls Dr. Deng from across the Neikotic Safety floor. Which is odd, because she’s the one who’s been away. One conference after another — I’ve barely seen her all summer. “Let’s take a walk?”

Dr. Deng and I have begun every semester for the past three years by making each other our priority. We agree that we meet Mondays at nine sharp and take the week from there. And every semester, nine becomes ten thirty, ten thirty becomes *after lunch*, which gradually, torturously becomes *try and find me in the building, I dare you*. By December we’ll be lucky if we’re on speaking terms. But today is September 3 and she’s smiling, holding a coffee with my name on it. I’ll take it.

“Let’s take a walk,” I concur. And again to Deng’s credit, she says nothing about the little voxelite shard she caught me fidgeting with. Neikotic debris from Mbetethi, freshly printed and still uncategorized. We take Deng’s way, out of the Safety wing and through the little basement annex of the Neikotic Theory department, and I find we’re not the only ones getting an early start. You can *smell* these guys breaking loop-lock into its constituent parts, with their dry-erase markers and little mothball hits of DMT. In the oblique, dusty silence they keep, you can hear its shell crack gently. At a whiteboard covered in commutative diagrams, a chain-smoking postdoc cusses reverently under his breath.

“So, Busan?” I venture, once we’re in the elevator. I hiss inwardly at the glorious morning sunshine.

“Busan,” Deng concurs. Behind her severe ponytail and ovoid rimless glasses, I imagine gears whirring, even in the most casual of conversations, trying to find the...crispest thing to say. “They’ve invested a frightening sum into neikotics. A second hub for the field, Shanghai without all the *interesting* bits, that’s what they imply. A bloodless twin on the operating table. You should have come.”

“And what do you think of it?” I ask, biting my tongue. I would have come, with more than four hours’ notice.

“I think it’s good to be home.”

Out of the elevator, into another glassy mainsail of a building, past a cafeteria churning with undergrads — still an introduced species here, still clambering for a niche. Three years ago — hell, three months ago — the Yangtze Institute for Neikotic Studies was under construction. It was a freakshow of acidheads and gremlins and category theorists converging timidly from Fudan and Tsinghua and Hong Kong University, blinking in the LED track lighting. Now it sells hoodies. *My Son Is A (Provisional) Neikonaut.* It’s a school*.*

Despite all that’s gone down between us, it’s nice to see Dr. Deng. Next week she starts teaching for the first time since we left Stanford together, and the woman — thirty years my senior and a titan of neikotics — is nervous. *What if they hate me,* she wants to know, and I brush that off as impossible. As a lecturer, she’s magnetic. I tell her this; she smiles. Our last conversation of any length, on my boneheaded failure to grasp Lam fibration, feels distant now. But it’s like this every year: fall semester, new prospects, a fresh start. By the spring, our relationship is in tatters.

Then we round a corner into Building 2 and —

“Mona, should we...”

I realize what’s in the corridor. Or should I say *on*, on the just-installed floor-to-ceiling displays?

“No,” I mutter, stealing just a tiny glance before fixing my eyes straight ahead. “It’s okay.”

This hallway is long and narrow, newly reoopened last week. It’s walled by two floor-to-ceiling displays which bathe us in white and blue light as we pass through. In my peripheral vision I try not to notice details: the soap-bubble sheen of the crystaline cavern walls, the stoplight pinwheels and traffic-cone snailshells, the honeycomb maze of *their* world refracting through. It’s daytime in Shanghai, and so it’s daytime in the Mirror Sea: it blooms languidly with the shapefeel of taxis and snack carts and great magnolia trees, though I know close inspection would reveal a shifting tapestry of suggestion and no discrete objects whatsoever. To our right, a Ripple wriggles along at roughly our speed, but I react not at all. Not by changing pace, and especially not with a tiny, sharp intake of breath.

On the other side, Deng tuts: “They really shouldn’t be putting more of these up. People are sensitive.”

She’s sticking up for me, but it rankles. “It’s on a time delay. Totally Weather Bureau-compliant. I’m fine.”

“You’re doing your belief modulation exercises?”

“Every day.”

She steers us on a long meander through YINS’ hexagonal quad, keeping to the shade and primly ignoring stares from the more well-read freshmen: *that’s Deng Jinghan! And some ratty grad student!* But she can’t fool me. I know what day it is, and I know the general direction we’re heading. I play along through the small talk, all the way into drafty Building 5, where echoes rise and our voices drop. She slows near some enormous mahogany doors, inlaid with wink-nudge stained glass mandalas. *What are the odds?* say her eyebrows. *Should we have a peek?*

It’s time for my yearly lecture in the Hall of Eggs. I roll my eyes hard and follow her inside.

There are a smattering of tourists in here, and several rows of glass shelves, and thousands of volts of electricity between us and their contents. Deng falls museum-silent as we pass under a body scanner, and we contemplate in silence. Neikotic eggs are intricate, vaguely spherical little gizmos, printed in all the colors and refractivities that voxelite can be coaxed to take on. Their puzzle-box mechanisms and bizarre unfurlings are messages from a neikonaut in loop-lock to their future self. Stuck with a breakthrough too immense to lug back to consensus reality, this is the first line of defense: printing an object that, pondered or fidgeted with, will lead the sober mind to the same insight. Textbook-wise, they’re TSPs, tangible soberspace projections. But everyone just calls them eggs.

“Mona,” Dr. Deng mutters eventually, eyes fixed on a little rhomboid of cerulean voxelite labeled *A low-cost manufacturing technique for strontium-alloy superconductors*. “We need to start thinking about your dissertation.”

I expected her to meander further to this point, loudly admiring the PhD-worthy eggs of former colleagues or students. In past years, this had been her way of reminding me whose company I was in.

I sort of gulp, sort of sigh. “I know.”

“This is your fourth year at YINS. Now that doesn’t put you *behind*, exactly. But I look at what you’ve been spending your time on here, and I worry about your prospects for graduating...not just on time. At all. Now,” she rushes to add, “I don’t put this all on you. There was no real neikotics department at Stanford, and I considered their cognitive science curriculum an unhelpful distraction. You’ve had plenty to catch up on. The language, the culture, too. I think we can chalk up your incident last year as a kind of acclimation sickness to Shanghai.”

I catch her eye in the glass and she pauses to let me add to this list. And in years past I would have let her have it: I would have told her straight up that she may be a magnetic lecturer, but she could be an absentee, forgetful, and even condescending advisor. That she had a way of dangling the mathematics I needed to know just out of reach. That I may not know much, but even *I* could tell her research program was a garden path to nowhere, a maze of distractions and abstractions tolerated only because she might one day snap to her senses and resume work on what everyone really wants from her, the thing she dangles above the whole field of neikotics: a fully operational Deng Bridge.

“I want this to work,” I tell her instead. All those older feelings, they roll harmlessly in my gut, their sharpness smoothed by time and combat. “I really do. But I’m starting to think I’m never going to find it in me to care about the Loop-Lock Virtual Machine, about compiler invariants and higher-order fragment lifetimes, about...y’know...”

“About my research,” Dr. Deng finishes, with a sheen of amusement. “I think you’ve made this very clear by now, one way or another. And Mona...” She loves to buy herself another second by drawing out these two syllables. “I ought to say that I might have picked up on this sooner. I wasted *your* time, wondering why I had to chase you down, year after year, for every paragraph or diagram or line of code. Perhaps I was asking the wrong question.”

I almost can’t believe what I’m hearing.

“But you could have *just told me!*” she insists. “Just said once, ’I’m not interested in compilers.’ So easy!”

“I...” I feel myself going red, grasping for the right words, never finding them on the spot. This is how all of our fights start. Deng follows up something mild and reasonable with some left hook, something she just couldn’t keep to herself, and then...*what happens next, Mona? You say the first stupid thing that comes to mind.*

So I just let it echo until, improbably, she backs off. “I’m sorry. That wasn’t right to say.”

I must look incredulous. Deng crinkles her eyes as if to say: *you think you’re tired of fighting? I’m twice your age.*

Let me see if I can do this quick. See, Deng *discovered* neikotic debris, back in the bad old days at Fudan University or the People’s Liberation Navy or whatever. She came up with the mathematics that wipes it from our minds. And, one day, she decided it was a lost cause. She abandoned years of research and declared that her new goal was to prevent the Loop-Lock Virtual Machine from generating any debris to begin with. This would be a simple matter of unfurling an endless toolbelt of category theory and applying it to the most complicatedcomputer program in existence.

On her invitation, without a degree, I left Stanford! To come and help!

“I am interested in compilers,” I finally conclude out loud. “Just not in a, five years plus the rest of my life kind of way. And I wanted to contribute. Because you’re right. Obviously it’s better to prevent neikotic debris in the first place, instead of inverting it away later. And admitting that I still want to do that, that I still like the clinical side, well, it felt stupid to say. It felt like you’d be disappointed in me.”

Deng smiles wistfully, and it occurs to me that, although I’ve played this conversation out a hundred times in the shower, she’s hearing this for the first time. This moment feels so raw, so real, that I want to shake her and insist, *don’t you see what you’ve done to me?* *Don’t you understand how low you’ve made me feel, for so many years, for struggling up this impossibly steep trail you think you’ve blazed?* For a moment I swear we’re right there together. But now she composes herself and says what she prepared to say, probably also in the shower.

“You’re the first student I ever took on, and I thought...I thought...” She hardens herself. “To be honest, when I returned to Shanghai, after all those years, I thought it should have been obvious. I thought that a city brimming with neikonauts, in a way that I used to dream about, would want to hear that neikotic debris is not inevitable. I had heard the horror stories, from a distance, and I thought that neikotic safety would be a major concern. I *am* disappointed, Mona, but not in you. I’m disappointed that all of *this”* — she gestures vaguely at the shelves of eggs — “comes with so much needless pain.”

“I feel it too.”

“And I know that’s why you spend much time in the Neikotic Safety clinic. Whatever I said.” Whatever she said, in the last weeks of last April, had been biting. Venomous. *If all you want to be in this life is a clinician*, it began, and I drowned the rest in booze and tryptamines and the tiles, parked right at the ledge that so many of the city’s neikonauts find themselves tumbling over. And now, unbelievably, I hear my own insistences in her voice. “And there’s something very selfless about that.”

“You said it’s a waste of my time.” I don’t quite mean to throw her words back at her; my voice is soft, hesitant. “A waste of my *mind*, a waste of *rare neikotic instinct.*”

“I meant your use of the prototype. It’s dangerous. It’s not a toy.” It’s never *the Bridge*, and never ever *the Deng Bridge* with her. Always *the prototype.* “And I stand by some of what I said. What you do in the clinic helps one person, once, at incredible risk to yourself each time. And I worry that instead of tools, or replicable protocols, you’re looking for a thrill. I worry that it makes you a little too interested in the debris itself.”

I laugh ruefully, feeling the voxelite shard in my pocket, the husk of the thing I found writhing in Mbetethi’s mind. “I don’t see where you’d get that idea.”

Deng smiles a little, but she folds her arms and drums her fingers. “I can’t keep fighting you on how much neikotic debris you print from your own budget. But others in the Neikotic Safety department find it perverse. And they talk. You should know that.” By the end of this, her tone is loud and insistent enough to produce hissing echoes around the high ceiling of the Hall of Eggs. She glares daggers at a pair of rubbernecking, Polaroid-wielding Japanese tourists, but modulates her voice. “I’m sorry. I don’t want to turn this into another of our fights.”

I regard her a little sadly. “So what’s different this time?”

Deng is so ready for this one that she starts counting on her fingers. “*I* am going to stop insisting that you share my own interest in compiler-level safety guarantees. I will stop insinuating to you that neikotic debris removal is a *tu lao wu gong* dead-end research avenue, and if that’s what you want to focus on, I will remove every obstacle in your path. I will be rooting for you to prove me wrong.”

I simply cannot believe what I’m hearing. The sudden, unmetered warmth in Deng’s face illuminates her features in a way I’ve never seen. God! Maybe she had a particularly good psilocybin freetrip in Busan, or some spa there finally cracked her upper back into alignment. But her usual stern, weary, vaguely quizzical expression returns just as suddenly, the warmth receding to its fringes. She begins to count on her other hand.

“And, for your part, it’s time for you to start treating what you do in the clinic as the seeds of a serious research program. Whatever you choose to do with your time at YINS...well, it needs to start building to something. It’s not for me to tell you exactly what that means, but...”

“Less time working with the Bridge?” I surmise.

“Is what I would suggest. Take a step back, if you can, from the problems of individual patients. You don’t need to save every single person who walks in. Start looking for patterns, start seeing trends...”

It irks me a little that this is just what I’ve been doing with my collection of neikotic debris, a project that Deng has decried over and over as wasteful, childish, and even profane. But our one endless argument is made of tiny loops, smaller, interlocking bickerings. She’s trying to break some. I can break others. *Let it go.*

“...and I think you could stand to spend more time in the Soup, staying abreast of the literature. They *are* doing a lot of interesting work in Busan these days. I ran into an old colleague from Goettingen there, she works on encapsulation theory, I think you two should get on a call...”

Suddenly the dim, reverent silence of the Hall of Eggs is broken by an obnoxious *bee-dee-deep! Bee-dee-deep!* I look up, down, left, and right before I realize that the target of a few nasty glances is me. I’m getting paged.

“...I had a note to mention. I’d like you to pick up Kasibar and Kuang and work through some of the exercises in the last three chapters this semester...”

She’s starting to run out of fingers.

“Dr. Deng!” I insist, finally interrupting her spiel, waving my blinking card in her face. “That...I agree with everything you’ve said. Truly. But they need me down in the clinic!”

“Oh. Oh!” She smiles widely, intentionally, to reinforce the freshness of this particular fresh start. *That’s a good thing now.* “Right. Go do your thing.”