There was no Neikotic Safety clinic at YINS until the year I arrived. So how it already seems so timelessly dingy downstairs beggars belief. *Someone* had to choose these low ceilings, this distressingly creamy paint color, these oddly faithful LED simulacra of fluorescent bulbs. It was presumably someone else who then decided to deck it out like a Palo Alto strip-mall spa, with bonsai plants, little self-contained waterfalls, and beaded curtains where in my opinion there should be doors. Dr. Deng has nicked half a dozen salt lamps from down here — first for her office and later, I suspect, as last-minute birthday gifts — and yet more continue to appear. Sunk deep into a fat couch in the lounge one day, Yao finally figured it out: the instructions had, naturally, been to decorate for a psychedelic therapy clinic.

On the wall of the waiting room is a faux-neon tangle of lines which can be lit individually to present a surprising variety of truisms in caoshucalligraphy. Today’s is, essentially, *count your blessings*. And underneath, each sulking in a different corner of the room, are three neikonauts — perhaps one more than we treat on an average day. I recognize that stare that can’t quite focus, the way their cheeks twitch involuntarily; I try to make eye contact and they can’t quite lock on. So I cast a not-so-subtle glance at their puffy vests, their lanyards, and their messenger bags. Each of them, somewhere, bears the stylized-lock insignia of Suowei Financial.

I wave tentatively as I weave between them — “Hello!” — and receive a disheartening chorus of low groans in response. Around the corner and through one of the damnable beaded curtains, is Yao Tongduan, tending to yet another Suowei employee. The tiles pulsing violently on the monitor show him repeatedly entering and exiting loop-lock. Yao is throwing every inversion in the book at him, and once every five seconds the scanner makes a delightful *zwoop!* These make the neikonaut’s legs dangle and dance, but are otherwise ineffective.

“Vest types,” I note mildly to Yao by way of a greeting. I’m starting to feel like I’ve been here before.

“Oh, *po ge dan*, Mona. Can you work another miracle?”

“You’re doing shifts yourself already?” I ask, impressed, and also deflecting the question of whether I’m ready to break out the Deng Bridge — ahem — *the prototype,* right this minute.

“Dr. Rui’s on the clock too. But you know how the profs are. They stop by, they sign the log, they leave.”

In fact, Dr. Deng has not even deigned to visit the Neikotic Safety clinic in several months, and there are empty grid squares where her name should be. I try to imagine what she’d say in this situation, aside from something about Suowei’s horrendously, acrobatically unsafe fork of the Loop-Lock Virtual Machine that does away with all of her patches.

“Well, okay. Have you done intake? What were they working with?”

“*I don’t know/decline to say.* All of ‘em.” Our most hated checkbox on the intake form. But retaining memories from loop-lock is so hard that this option is probably checked more than any other. I make a disappointed little *pfft* sound, but Yao looks oddly, almost conspiratorially, delighted.

“What?” I ask, suddenly very curious.

“Isn’t it obvious?” he says, in his isn’t-it-obvious voice. “For one thing, why do you suppose they’re not at Suowei’s own clinic? With the gold trim and the cucumber water? They could be in and out with a fire-cupping to boot, but they trekked up here instead. It’s not *I don’t know*, Xuxuejie, it’s *decline to say!*”

Annoyingly, it is obvious. “They’re using something way off the Suowei playbook, huh.” I lower my voice, though our patient couldn’t possibly hear us. “Something black-market, something their managers would never approve of.”

“They’re passing proprietary trades through some ten-ping egg from a Plaza 66 discount bin,” Yao snickers, his imagination running a little wild. “Look at them out there. They all look guilty as hell! Won’t even look at each other!”

This I had also noticed. Out there in the waiting room they’re spaced as far from each other as possible.

“So...” he intones, glancing at the closet where we keep the Bridge. “You wanna get in there?”

Yes, desperately. But not as badly as I want to stay on Deng’s good side.

“I dunno, man. I’m still a little loopy from last week.”

“You think *I*...” he begins, sounding overtly casual.

“Oh, hell no.” Even Fresh Start Deng will flay me alive if I start training undergrads on the Bridge. My thoughts linger on Mbetethi Okeme, who absconded without telling us anything about the algorithm that got him in hot water. I could totally see *him* trying out a mystery-box egg from Plaza 66. Maybe even selling them. I snap my gum thoughtfully. “Mind if I take the wheel here?”

Yao lends me his chair. I tap my card to retrieve an enigmatic folder in my home directory called *One-Offs.* Of its fifty-odd entries, the latest is just a few days old and bears Mbetethi’s name. I didn’t know what else to call it.

“These are...” Yao begins.

“One-offs, I know.” A loading bar grinds away. “But I’ve got a hunch.”

A recording of Mbetethi’s loop-lock session appears. I click through a cascade of beige dialog boxes. *Inspect. Isolate. Bandpass.* I slap my own Kasibar coefficients into a text box, and a considerable amount of color onscreen is filtered away. *Tools. Bicubic smoothing. Smooth (1-100).*

“No kidding,” Yao mutters.

“Pick a number,” I tell him.

He thinks for a second, and picks twenty-seven. “Wait, no! Twenty-three.”

The isolated, bandpassed, smoothed blob on screen is the diving-bell, the little bubble of tiles that I rode through the Deng bridge into Mbetethi’s mind. I try not to think about the fact that it’s also a Boltzmann brain, a chunk of myself that will burst into existence with a fully-formed, well, something. I frown and muck with the smoothing some more. What’s left looks passably like any of the other inversion capsules that Yao has been firing into our patient.

*File. Save. File. Import.* The *zwoop* sounds cease. A big green button appears, but for a while, I only stare at the white-hot tangle of debris on the UTMS readout. A hollow, broken, hyperspherical shell crawls all over itself, sending arc-whips into our patient’s ‘folds. There is a cheery *can’t hurt!* very much stuck in my throat.

“Doooo it,” Yao whispers behind me.

The inversion happens so fast, it’s only an afterimage. A tiny striped jet flashed twice in hair-thin orbits around the debris. Then it met one of its arc-whips and, starting from this extremum, simply ripped it apart. Literally, I blinked, and now it’s gone. In tilespace, a dozen frantic diagnosis threads rush into the jagged vacuum it leaves, stitching it with mauve. But my eyes are on the neikonaut in the chair: his entire body relaxes, and he lets out a groan of relief that’s frankly almost obscene.

“I think it worked,” Yao observes, poorly containing a snort of laughter.

“No kidding,” I mutter.

The debrief is not very informative for anyone. On the comedown, our patient beams at us — no, me specifically — like some kind of dorm-room freetripper. He’s got *that* look, head shaven, the sigils winding in tight loops down his arm, the black and billowy tentcloak I suspect he’d have trouble pitching if it came down to it. But by the time he climbs out of the chair, he’s sullen and reticent, unwilling to say anything about what neikotic techniques left this debris behind. Which is just as well, because I’m quite reluctant to say how we removed it.

“It’s *proprietary*,” he insists in a tone just brimming with apology and gratitude. “Am I cleared to go?”

Yao wipes down the scanner chair, and I know I should help out, but I’m almost frozen by the shock of what just happened. The inversions that the Deng Bridge produces are, as a rule, one-offs. I’ve tried this smoothing business before with no results — otherwise there’d be a paper out with my name on it, or at least a Mona-shaped hole in Deng’s wall.