Today, I will focus on neikotic fundamentals. I will let someone else handle the clinic. At noon, I attend that seminar I signed up for and take scratchy, feverish, multicolored notes. At two, I visit the voxelite fab again, search the catalogue for *spectral sieve*, and walk out with an armful of seminal eggs in the field of dimensionality reduction. I ponder one for a while, managing to peel back the entire first layer, the shadow of an algorithm taking shape in my mind. Something else competes for space — the dim golden spikiness of last night’s misadventure with the debris. I wonder if I should go down and get an inversion. But that, Mona dear, is just an excuse to visit the clinic.

When Deng arrives for our check-in, I am conspicuously reading K&K on a couch in the department lounge, gritting my teeth against Kuang’s Identity. Deng seems more than ready to pretend last night didn’t happen; she greets me with a brisk smile and a terrifyingly businesslike crack of her knuckles.

“So what have you found out?”

Keep in mind that this is how she starts probably half of our meetings. Over time I’ve learned to come with an answer to this question, even if it’s just a tidbit from a distant subfield of neikotics.

“You said that the mystery algorithm leaving behind all this debris must be a spectral sieve. I think I understand why you think that. So there’s this bit in K&K...” It hurts a little to admit how illuminating my half-hour with a foundational textbook was. “A spectral sieve is going to take a complicated structure and spit out a simpler model of it. That model excludes parts of the original that don’t belong to what they call a full, uh...”

“A fully convex recurrence,” Deng offers, not unkindly.

“And those are expressed as spikes at relatively prime frequencies in the spectrum of the model. And that’s exactly what we see *here*, and *here*, and *here* in the debris that we’ve been collecting. In the spectra of the debris,” I hurry to add, flipping through a deck of spectrograms. In my ziplock cataloging system, I’ve numbered it in Sharpie: this new debris is Material #110. But I keep that to myself.

“All that in one day?” Caught off-guard, she looks impressed for exactly one second. Then: “So what’s next?”

This comment brings us right up to the edge of one of the great pits of disagreement pockmarking our relationship. But — you know — fresh start?

“Well,” I begin, drawing a diver’s breath. “I was hoping that this would help us, you know...reverse-engineer my inversion a little. And, you know, I think we could probably put a little paper out on this? Whatever the egg is that’s messing up all these Big Three traders, it’s already an open secret. It could hit the Soup soon, and we could be ready...”

Deng’s brow furrows in a particular way which is shorthand for hours and hours of exasperated pleading. I inflect my voice with a particular sympathetic insistence, looking for an opening: “I know your policy on publishing about the Bridge. And I get it — the inversions it produces are one-offs. They’re not replicable, they’re not quantifiable...and so writing about them...doesn’t...help...anyone.” I try not to audibly grit my teeth. “But this is different! It’s worked on more than a dozen patients with the same neikosis. Two dozen! If I’m going to have a research agenda —”

“You’re right,” Deng agrees simply. “It’ll make for a fine paper.”

For the second, third, fourth time this week I have to wonder, *what did they do with the old Deng?*

“But I’m not going to get involved,” she adds. *Ah. There she is.* “I’ve been trying to convince the world that neikotic safety means more than just computing inversions and extracting debris. That it can be proactive, and not just reactive. Forgive an old woman a little puffery, but I’m trying to be the standard-bearer for another way. So if I...now...*especially* with the...” She sighs. “It’ll be a damn good paper, Mona, and that’s exactly why I can’t put my name on it.”

Rain beats hard on Deng’s basement half-window as I consider this, and find, to my astonishment...

“That...you know, that actually makes a lot of sense.”

Deng beams at me. She leans over her desk a little. “This is growth, Mona. This is you finding your way as a neikologist. And there’s more than one person in this department who would love to help you with the analysis and slap their name on as corresponding author. I can set up a meeting with Dr. Qin, perhaps. Or Dr. Guo, he’s not in safety but he knows a thing or two about spectral sieves...”

“I was thinking Dr. Rui.”

I haven’t given it any thought, actually, but suddenly it seems right.

“Dr. Rui Zhang?” Deng sounds taken aback. “Why him? Any particular reason?”

“It could have applications to soberware,” I suggest with a smile. Deng snorts, but I can tell she doesn’t find the old joke particularly funny. “He was in the clinic the other day. He already had a few guesses about what my inversion is, mathematically speaking. And, y’know what? He was *nice* about it. He —”

Best to leave the rest unsaid.

“Then you should reach out to Dr. Rui,” Deng says evenly. “And soon, perhaps, because he can get very busy.”

I doubt this very much; the soberware group is not known to publish at a breakneck pace. Our conversation moves on, into discussions of a study plan and departmental goings-on. But Deng is suddenly very interested in polishing her glasses on her YINS fleece, and I can’t stop wondering whether I misspoke. I recall Deng steering away from Rui at department mixers. Their bizarrely stilted interaction with an old Fudan colleague at a poster session. I remember the airy, offhand way she once called him a *bridge troll*. I hope she doesn’t think I mentioned him to spite her.