Another rainy morning finds me knocking on Dr. Rui’s office door.

“If it’s broken again, I’m not signing for it.” His reedy voice comes, muffled, through the door. There’s a two-beat pause and the clatter of glassware. Then: “Oh! Xu! Yes. I am sorry, really, do please come in.”

Rui’s office is just down the hall from Deng’s, but I’ve never had so much as a peek inside. The shelves ringing the room are loaded down with glassware, in shocking amounts, so many flasks and beakers and tubes that it’s not even funny, so many more that it’s funny again. Some I can half-name from chem lab. Many more are of singular shape and inscrutable purpose, the whiff of neikotics about them.

“Just drop that in there.” Dr. Rui gestures to a large transparent vase of umbrellas. “Come, come.”

Neikotics is a young person’s game, and in his stilted way Rui tends to play it so. He shoots around on the quad with guys half his age. He intersperses his lecture slides with k-hop gifs. But now I see him in his element — dark wood, warm lighting, puttering around in suspenders — and his element makes him look comfortable in old age. He was Deng’s supervisor at Fudan, maybe? Which would make him, what, sixty, sixty-five?

They’re only finding out now what half a lifetime of loop-lock will do to a person.

“Can I get you anything? Let me guess, Deng has you hooked on her chamomile?”

“I’d take an espresso.”

“*Two espressos,*” he shouts to a little machine on his back shelf. And he looks expectantly at me, but my eyes keep wandering to the shelves. In hundreds of reflections, his twin floor lamps gleam back like a pair of tiny golden eyes. Rui doesn’t seem to mind that I’m distracted by it all; to the contrary, so is he. “Some good, smooth shapes in those,” he notes enthusiastically. “That’s most of the trick of soberware, you know. Just a nicely-shaped container.”

I nod politely, wondering just what it is that Rui Zhang does here all day. Progress on soberware has been, to put it politely, slow. State of the art is still that one viral video from a few years back, of a postdoc factoring huge numbers in his head as he sips on a tryptamine pen. *That’s* what really throws people off. It’s right there in the name: it’s supposed to stick around after loop-lock and work while you’re dead sober. But they’re not there yet, not even close.

The machine behind us quits whirring.

“Sasha Shulgin’s.” He nods at a particular dusty burette as he hands me a steaming doodad of espresso. “Here, sit. You may not know this, Mona, and I doubt you’ll like it, but you’ve been the talk of the faculty lounge all week. Everybody and their mother wants to know when we can expect a paper on this incredible new inversion of yours.”

I sip. “That’s...actually kind of why I’m here.”

Rui doesn’t say anything, but his face contracts in soft surprise. *Oh?*

And I relay to him what Deng told me. “Dr. Deng isn’t going to put her name on this.” In fact, I wonder whether Rui might have heard our discussion yesterday afternoon, echoing through the basement ductwork.

“Well, I don’t see why not. She, quite literally, wrote the book on neikotic inversion.” Sudden understanding hits him, and more than anything he looks a little sad. “Ah. Right. You did it with the Bridge.”

“This isn’t the first time she and I have had this discussion. I’ve been using it for more than a year now, and I always thought it’d be good to do a little write-up. But she wants nothing to do with it. She says it’s not *replicable* since we have the only prototype, and it’s too dangerous to use. And now...”

“Push comes to shove.” Rui nods thoughtfully. “And you, rightfully, want the paper out.”

“Yeah. I was hoping you could help.”

“And why me?”

“Well...” I have to try not to phrase this as a joke at Rui’s expense. “There’s something interesting about this class of neikotic debris.” I have to remember not to say *Material #110.* “It’s got a degree of structure that you rarely see. Even in the sober mind it’s not just sitting there. It’s doing something. Trying, at least.”

“You’re saying that this has applications to soberware.” He chuckles. “No, don’t apologize. It’s fine! It’s validating, in fact. Of course you know that the study of soberware was born from the discovery of neikotic debris. If such constructs can linger in the sober mind, surely we can put them to good use! It excited us all greatly, in the start.”

Rui offers me a knowing look, like it’s me and him who really *get* it. “In the start,” I offer back uncertainly.

“But that was decades ago, and progress is slow, and...well, it remains to be seen who will be right in the end. They haven’t shuffled me offstage yet. But in truth, neikotic debris has become our template for what not to do. It’s unpredictable, uncontrollable, and unsafe.” He pauses to flick some lint from his jacket.

“Let me ask you something else,” he continues, slowly. “Do you know why Dr. Deng is so reticent about the Bridge?”

“No. She hates talking about it.” I blink. “Do you?”

“I have a sense. And I’ll tell you what I can. She and I were both at Fudan, on that original loop-lock grant, with a single UTMS rig the size of a tank. Deng was fresh out of the Navy, nosing around for military applications, and don’t doubt me when I say she worked out about half of the fundamentals with her right hand, and the other half with her left. People say she came back to rest on her laurels at YINS, and that’d be a real shame. But they also say she’s earned it. Do you know who coined the term *neikongren*?”

He smiles, raises his eyebrows, and accelerates past the question.

“It was secretive, back then, so secretive. Students were earning doctorates on the project who didn’t even know that psychedelic drugs were involved, and don’t give me that look! You couldn’t exactly get tryptamine pods at Easy Joy in those days. Circles within circles. Deng had the money, and the connections, and the mandate — and she sat in a circle of her own, at the dead center, building her Bridge. It wasn’t clear that anyone *could* help, not that she was offering. We got promises of a demonstration, then half-hearted memos, then glimpses through frosted glass. She turned farther and farther inward. She stopped coming to department meetings. We lost track of her entirely in the chaos with Xia and Blue Delta. Months later we learned she’d slipped overseas.”

I can’t even remember the full sequence of Deng’s subsequent stints: Tokyo, Oxford, Goettingen, mumble mumble mumble, and eventually Stanford. But there’s something completely unsatisfiyng about Rui’s explanation: basically, I knew all this already.

“So what do you think happened with the Bridge?” I ask, a little frustrated, a little amused, trying to read the answer off his expression. “What, she hurt herself somehow? Is this why she won’t go into loop-lock anymore?”

“Well, nobody doubted that Deng would test the machine on herself. But the thing about the Deng Bridge, the irony of the whole ordeal, is that you can’t truly test it alone.”

Dr. Rui has apparently been waiting for his espresso to cool to this precise temperature; he downs it now in an extended slurp. “We may use them every day, but DMT and its variants are dangerous drugs, in endless and subtle ways.” Drugs: *du-pin*, poison-product, instead of *mihuan-yao*, fantasy-medicine. “I think you understand that better than most. Some people came out of those early days unscathed, and plenty more didn’t. Most of those names aren’t in textbooks.”

“That’s the whole story?”

“No.” Rui meets my eyes with a little smile. “God, no. There are names and details that I know for certain Deng would not have me divulge. But it’s enough for you to understand.” There’s a knock at the door, and Rui stands to see me out. “You know, she speaks highly of you among faculty. Calls you persistent. Maybe it was *obstinate*, which would be her highest compliment, but anyway, she thinks you can write this paper yourself. Do what you can, pull in some models, bash something out. And then find me if you need a second pair of eyes. How’s that?”

“Sure thing. Thanks, Dr. Rui.”