In the scant years that such a thing has been possible, Double Descent has accreted a reputation as a neikonaut bar. It did so by pioneering the benzodiazepine soda, an oh-what-the-hell last resort for candlestick cadets who had spent all day in loop-lock with a Bloomberg terminal and desperately needed the walls to stop moving. And for those who want the walls to *start* moving, tourists one step off the Bund seeking a righteously authentic place to try their first psychedelic, there are taps of guangpanand qingting nestled among the IPAs. Doled out stingily unless you know how to ask.

An hour later, this is where I start my search. At the end of a long, gently-sloping service alleyway, Double Descent is both in the middle of Pudong’s dazzling finance district and conspicuously nowhere at all. It would be almost anticlimactic to find Mbetethi here, I figure. When oddly well-lit photos of Double Descent started to appear in Must-See Shanghai listicles, some of the old crowd scattered elsewhere. But others quite literally dug in. The venue is now at least five stories deep and counting; those who know best how many floors there are, are least likely to say.

“Two,” the bouncer decrees, after looking me over for a moment.

“*Two?”* All of my cool detachment disappears in an indignant puff. But I played it exactly right! From the back of the line I let a corner of my N-1 license show, betraying just a flash of its iridescence. This large man saw it and crooked his finger, summoning me past North Korean kids in spotless basketball springs, Ukranians with phosphograft prison tattoos, and garden-variety local Ripplechasers. I felt, honestly, kind of cool. Until now.

“Two,” he confirms indifferently. “And I’m going to need to see your bag.” *This* I had not thought through, and I tense up as he unzips my backpack. “*Kai shenme wan xiao?”* he yelps when he sees what’s inside. “You trying to hurt someone with that?”

“It’s for my research. At YINS. That’s not a crime, is it?”

He zips it up with a sigh, but I sort of think I’ve gained a modicum of his respect. “Any trouble and you’re gone.” He breaks off a length of glo-band and wraps it once — twice around my arm. Not enough respect to let me down to the third floor, I suppose.

Just through the doors is the Double Descent you see in the listicles: the curving mahogany bartop, the qualia-resonance wall, the triangular pool tables. *This is where they invented loop-lock,* someone at the bar explains earnestly to their date. *Guan Zhumi, the Suowei guy? He got the idea from the pattern of tiles in the men’s room.* I make my way to the second level, past another bouncer and down a narrow stairwell. Here, at least, it’s mostly neikonauts. A few of them are grooving and spiralizing on the trance floor, creating a kind of glitchy beat that makes me want to check them for debris. Many more are quietly enjoying a benzo soda — in fact, I recognize a few of them from the clinic.

“Yo...*yo,* it’s, it’s her from YINS.”

“Mona.”

“*Mona!*”

“You shouldn’t be drinking that,” I cup my hands and shout back. “You should be resting at home!”

They smile languidly and point to their ears. *Too loud!*

I make a quick sweep of the second floor. No line for the tile wars machine, or the zilla harness, or darts. The energy among the vest types seems a little low tonight. I have to admit, Mbetethi wouldn’t be caught dead in a place like this. If he were, he’d probably flop himself across the trance floor into the dumpster.

*But what about the third floor?*

There’s no stairwell. The way down is a circular elevator in the dead center of the room.

“Do I look that stupid to you?” asks the elevator bouncer when I approach, glaring down at my two-loop band. “I mean, I know your type thinks I’m dumb. But do you really think I’m a *one, two, many* kind of guy?”

I try the direct approach, and show the man Mbetethi’s N-1 lanyard. “I’m sorry. I’m looking for him. Is he here? You ever see him around? I actually just need to return this license.”

He just glares at me, but I saw what I was looking for in the first tenth of a second, and decide to wait him out. Over at the bar I order a five-spot microdose of guangpanand a lime: bright, airy, no cross-tolerance with the work stuff.

“Nobody I know knows.” A neikonaut in the stool next to mine is confiding to a friend. “I’m terrified.”

“I hear someone over at Fudan found an inversion for the debris, at least.”

I grit my teeth through this blatant YINS disrespect, and watch the bouncer go about his business. Within ten minutes a crowd arrives at the elevator and, as one of their number makes an overt show of his friendliness with the staff, I simply cram myself invisibly into the elevator.

“Sneaking downstairs?” someone asks me as it lurches away. She’s wearing a garment covered in orange traffic-cone snailshells, with hair and nails to match. “Cool.” I smile back but have to turn away; the fixpoint pattern on her dress or robe or whatever is painful to look at. No doubt she’s hoping to get picked up on the cameras tonight.

The third floor is where Double Descent really starts to get picky about their clientele. I was hoping to get a good look at who they let down here, but the space is low and maze-like, the walls lit only with waves of subtly off-white LED pinpricks. I poke my head into mirror rooms, foam rooms, scent rooms, and eventually stumble into the part that’s actually a bar. Faces in booths flash behind thick copper screens. I try casually poking my head into a few of them and hit the blank, disbelieving stares of the wealthy and influential. This works about three times before I wheel around and find two men standing right behind me.

Now, my rule for Chalkers is this: if you think a person looks like a Chalker, they’re probably not. Imagine, for instance, someone in billowing black robes and white face paint steps forward to offer you a blessing, pressing an amulet into your hands. That’s not an artifact washed from the shores of another causality — it’s got an RF entropy sponge in it, and it’s going to empty your wallet. This is sound advice on the Bund, in broad daylight. Down here, I’m a little less sure.

“You looking for something?”

The tall one is so thin, his face stretched so tightly against his skull, that he simply looks dead.

“I’m...I, uh....”

The short one, I would not generally find threatening, except for the distinct, chilling sense that his friend is the only person in the world he feels accountable to. He orbits the first man like a moon, like a bad dog on a short leash. And he barks, too, when he speaks. “We can get you so close you can taste it. *Lick* it. And we can leave you there if you want...” He only stops because the tall one puts a skeletal hand over his mouth.

“You’re not supposed to be down here.” The dead man points at the obvious, at my double-looped wrist. “But you came down here. What do you want?”

Suddenly it’s very clear what I’m supposed to say. “Trying to buy parts.”

“Buy parts.”

“I need a new beamformer. And some softmax arrays, and other shit.”

“You try Taobao?”

The first wave of guangpan hits, and it’s nice and shallow and wide, like there’s plenty of room to maneuver. Plenty of room for my new friends here. I hear the echo of fear in my voice, and the echo means it’s gone, and I’m smooth and symmetrical and all right. “I heard prices are reasonable here.”

The second one seems to object, seems to want to bite me, but the first one gives him a brick wall of a look. *If she wants parts she wants parts.* It’s not like bluelights, or redlights, or the fucking Weather Bureau care about *parts*. “C’mon,” he says. And he gestures at my wrist: “and lose that.”

I don’t know where I expected to be taken, but it wasn’t into the bright halogen light of the kitchen, of this utterly mundane workplace embedded behind another mysterious door. The two men — I still can’t decide if they’re Chalkers or not — greet the cooks with disarming smiles. We pass through another door, down another stairwell, into a storeroom. Just well-lit enough to read serial numbers. Twenty or thirty people are here, scattered around card tables. Mostly what they’re doing is unloading secondhand or stolen scanner components.

One of them is Mbetethi.