There he is, in a makeshift corner booth, among spooled miles of fiber-optic cable. I spy him in the half-half-light behind black tarpaulin curtains, hunched in a too-small folding chair opposite a wiry neikonaut sporting a half-hood and pneumatic Rolex. An upended spool between them serves as a low table and is covered — as I suspect all surfaces in Mbetethi’s presence quickly are — with all kinds of neikological miscellany. My general impression is of a kind of loading-dock fortune teller’s booth, which is greatly enhanced by the fact that both men are hunched over a tiny, gleaming orb.

I don’t know how to knock on a tarp. I give it a little tug instead, and that’s when I realize there’s a third guy, must be six eight and on a diet of Russian hypertrophics, lurking behind it. He’s bald as a rock, a theme here, but somehow I doubt he’s a neikonaut. Somehow I doubt he’d fit in our scanner chair.

“Hey,” he growls, arresting me by the shoulder and pushing me a full three feet backwards along the linoleum.“Don’t you know how to knock?”

The wiry neikonaut, who is gazing at the orb in a kind of trance, doesn’t react. Mbetethi looks up and squints into the dim light, sounding utterly bored. “He’s still got ten minutes.” Signals the numeral with his hand. So I post up nearby, watching two people slice open a styrolite crate of coolant tanks and offer wildly different appraisals of its contents. And not five minutes later, the big guy gives me a gentle tap on the shoulder. “He’s ready for you.”

“Ten thousand,” Mbetethi says to the bottom of his glass when I enter. “For thirty minutes. If you are unable to hatch it in that time, go home and read Chapter 8 of K&K, and we’ll try again, half off.”

His Mandarin has a pleasant Afro-French twinge to it. Though this is the most I’ve heard him speak, I recognize a certain three-four musicality from his tiles.

“Let me see it,” I tell him. And to my surprise, still not really seeing me, he dips into a jacket pocket and tosses a grapefruit-sized orb of voxelite into the air. As it spins I get only the briefest glimpse of what’s inside — brilliant yellow jets like the sun’s rays, emanating from a black and beady core. In the same fluid motion, he catches the neikotic egg and it disappears with his hand beneath the table.

“Ten thousand ping,” he repeats. “Half an hour.”

I reach into my own bag, which our muscular friend does not like one bit, and produce Mbetethi’s N-1 license. “I was hoping we could arrange something?” I’m going for *listen, pal* but it comes out more *could I get an extension on this paper?*

“I have dozens of these,” he laughs. “I —” Finally, he recognizes me. His face takes a round trip from mild surprise to pallid shock, and back again. “Dr. Xu — how did you — why —?”

“I’m not a doctor,” I grumble. “And I have something else for you, too.” I unzip my backpack and turn the contents onto the table with an extended, plasticky clatter. I imagine the scene through Mbetethi’s eyes, through any neikonaut’s eyes. First he catches the glint of voxelite, of a neikotic egg, a whole pile. That alpha, that new shit. Then he realizes it’s not an egg at all, but a perversion of the concept: hundreds of shards of neikotic debris. He recoils in horror, squeaks, even. I find myself pressed against the table with the whir of a vialgun at my neck.

“It’s *fine*, Big Fish. It’s just voxelite. It’s fine.” But he can’t quite keep his eyes on the pile, nor look away from it. “Could you give us the room?”

The hired muscle, who I tardily realize must be Big Fish, shrugs and wanders out. I scoot forward again, my pride scraped but not dented. At this point Mbetethi turns and folds his arms, conjuring detached amusement. “What kind of stupid are you, exactly? You realize this isn’t one of your poster sessions? No one is here handing out stress balls, and little clicky clicky pens with the names of benzodiazepines?”

I regard the egg, which Mbetethi is now sort of sitting on. “That thing of yours has made my life a living hell over the last week.” Not strictly true. It’s made it more interesting. But I pronounce this so with dramatic effect. “Do you have any idea how many people you’ve sent to my clinic? This is how you repay me for pulling that shit out of you?”

“Thank you for saving me.” He says this quite seriously, and lets it hang in the air for a moment. “How many?”

“I...*I* don’t know! More than a hundred at this point.” I jab at the table. “Count ‘em.”

That number seems to surprise him. “And I suppose one of them led you here,” he ventures, sounding a tiny bit betrayed.

“*One of them* had a grand mal seizure! Ruptures in his cranial arteries! Plus — it’s Double Descent, dude.” I wave my arm around vaguely, as if totally unimpressed with Shanghai’s neikological black market. “It’s actually kind of lame.”

“Just one of them?”

“*Just* one of them?”

“Well, look at the numbers.” He says this so earnestly, so evenly, that I have no choice but to direct my attention to the numbers. “This class of algorithm is known to produce bad neikotic debris. Comes with the territory. I even make them sign a little release form, just like you.”

“Really?”

“Of course not. The point is that probably one in a hundred really serious bits of debris has a nasty neurological complication. You said you’ve seen a hundred patients, so I’m right in the money! Am I not?”

I fold my arms.

“I am making them *rich*...” He waves his hand lazily, clearly forgetting something.

“Mona. Like the painting.”

“I am making them *rich*, Mona. They are going out there and tearing holes in the polyquasal derivatives market, in counterfactuals, in forex. Some of them will probably retire. They understand the risks! A little brain hemorrhage...bing, bang, *et voilà.* A giant vacation home in Bali.”

He sounds so much like a proud scout leader that my original theory is going out of focus. Mbetethi — the name sounds Gabonese, and the accent sure sounds French. Was it so crazy to assume that it was a malicious act on his part, a poisoning of Suowei Financial’s best and brightest for the havoc they brought upon his home country?

“So let me learn it.” I lean across the table, look him square in the eyes. “Give me thirty minutes with it. Hell, give me fifteen for five thousand.” Do I even have five thousand ping? Maybe, kinda. “I’m a YINS neikologist, I’ve got a little guangpan in me, and I just read Chapter 8 of K&K.” I’m bluffing wildly, and Mbetethi is absolutely eating it up. But he shakes his head calmly.

“Not you.”

“Oh? Not me?” I keep my eyes steady on his. In fact, I’m having a hard time tearing them away, and it seems he is too. It seems that a tiny, jerking oscillation passes between us as he gauges my intent.

“Because you’re going to write a paper about it. Tell me you’re not.”

I can’t tell him I’m not. But I’m getting genuinely irked at this point, not just at those brilliant pearly whites, that amused indifference, but at the way something about our time in the Deng Bridge lingers in this conversation, in the faint xylophonic interplay of the tiles behind the words. Something *happened* while I was in the diving-bell, something neither of us can remember. I am made to feel as though, last we met, I yanked a tooth from him without warning or consent. He knows it, I know it, and he knows I know it, and it’s driving me crazy that I don’t know how to just bring it up.

“Well, I think it’s the least you could do,” I insist, tilted, my voice curling at the edges. “You’re *poisoning* all these people and sending them to me to fix. God knows I hate Suowei Financial as much as anyone else in Shanghai —”

“No you do not. But I am not so vengeful as you think.” Mbetethi’s speech is suddenly flat and guarded, and my stomach burbles with an admixture of phenethylamine and regret. Had I been aiming for that nerve? Just what had I even said aloud? “And if you’re going to —”

From far away in the building, perhaps on an upper floor, there’s a clatter, as though of cookware hitting folding chairs. To me it sounds like nothing of note, but for him, it’s more than enough. “They’re coming,” he says, in that same flattened voice. He’s scooping the contents of the table into a backpack, and briefly I get one last look at that brilliant golden orb.

“*Who’s* coming?” He doesn’t reply. “*Mbetethi!*”

I absolutely bungle the first consonant, and that’s what he responds to, snapping, zipping. “It’s just *Tethi.* Teth, if you like. I like to sprinkle...”

“Will you please just tell me...”

“...extra bits in there. Throws ‘em off. Is it me, *n’est-ce pas moi*, *wo ye bu zhidao*. Get your stuff, ‘cause in a second —”

There’s a *tink-tink-tink* as, above us, the lights go out. There’s a pneumatic hiss as, God, I dunno — the doors seal up? Behind me, Tethi rips down the curtain, and all I can see is an eye-level orange-red, dozens of pairs of Contecs bobbing in the dark. Muffled voices, shouting, more clash-clang-bang. The clamor that was so distant a minute ago is now a short distance away. I wouldn’t last a day here. I scoop as much debris as I can back into my backpack.

“Evacuating in sixty seconds,” someone shouts, but my Mandarin must be doing guangpan barrel rolls because it’s the wrong *evacuate*, it’s the one that has to do with test chambers and pressure differentials. On the far end of the pitch-black space, an even pitcher blacker space opens up, damp and cold and somehow a little windy. I stumble over spools and stools, trying to keep up. *How does everyone know where they’re going?*

“It’s *her!*” That barking voice, charged with amphetamines, and not the touchy-feely kind. Every hair on my body stands unit-normal jump-scare upright as I realize that its owner, who I cannot see, must be pointing at *me*. “She led them right here! We oughtta leave her inside for them to find!”

A few interested pairs of Contecs turn my way, but Tethi grabs my shoulder. “*Shenjing bing*, paranoid freaks,” he snarls. “*Gun kai*. Fuck all the way off.” And then, now leading me around a floor covered with abandonware, he growls, “It had better not be you.”

“Tethi. Teth. *What is going on?*”

“What do you think?” he whips back. And, hell, it’s a fair question. The clamor is close enough that I can pick out individual voices; I imagine a great katamari of riot armor and laser sights rolling our way.

“Evacuation in five.” The voice is close and unamplified. We straggle through what I reckon, proprioceptively, as a large door. “Four...three...”

“Listen to me.” He points up the contours of a stairwell. “This leads directly to the top of the building. They’ll be waiting outside, so you need to get above ground level, as many floors as you can. Wait ‘em out. Don’t be caught here.”

“You’re not serious.” There’s a another hiss behind us and I raise my voice to a shout. “I don’t even have Contecs!”

Tethi is a pair of blinking orange circles. And then he’s nothing at all. “Don’t find me,” he warns. He pushes through self-imposed darkness, through the damp and gathered human throng. I can tell he’s trying to hide it, but by some blindsight I also realize he’s going the opposite way: down the stairs. The crowd moves forward at an uncertain pace, but near its rear I feel no tempo, no pressure, and I stumble towards the walls. A few countervailing figures, total darknesses, brush past me. A few sets of descending footsteps echo Tethi’s — descending to where?

With another layer of doors between us the clamor of voices is more muffled than before, but I hear one last thing as I make my sudden and frantic choice, up or down, up or down: *“By order of the Weather Bureau, open up!”*