But they don’t.

I camped out in a YINS sleep pod. I treated myself to a long shower and a change of clothes from a bottom drawer. Daybreak brings me back downstairs, to disinfectant-scented anticlimax. I pass the cafeteria on the way: it’s packed with researchers coming down off all-nighters, trays loaded down, conversation low and scattered. But the clinic is emptier than it’s been in weeks. Sure, a few neikonauts have already burned themselves on the Sunflower Sieve. They arrive with ruffled hair and that thousand-yard stare, unable to pin two words together. Lucky them, that we’ve already perfected the inversion.

“What were you using the Sieve for?” we ask, reading from the intake form.

Everything. They were using it for everything. Simplifying proofs and reactor designs. Rifling through the back catalog, straightening out old formulations with clean lines and simple strokes. Later in the morning they arrive from beyond YINS: actuaries and seawall engineers. Political lackeys charged with untangling the net of rivalries and alliances holding the Ward Council together. Some of their work has already borne new, gold-flecked eggs. We have open scanner bays all day, and capacity to spare. Still, every so often comes that piercing *zwoop!* sound from down the hall. The birth and death of a diving-bell in the blink of an eye. Maybe it hadn’t bothered me much before, but now I have to try hard not to think about it.

With our morning freed up, the Safety floor crowds around monitors to bash refresh on the Soup: the open-access archive for the field of neikotics. It’s flooded with papers announcing applications of the Sunflower Sieve to fluid dynamics and circuit layout and game theory. Some are written by people, but gradually more of them are synthetics. These provide admirable summaries, but the actual synthesis tends to be a little gooey in the middle, and the figures are often nonsensical. We print out and paste up all the silliest ones.

That doesn’t stop anyone from setting up a script to fire thousands of synthetic papers into the Soup, and why should it? Some of the great guidestones of neikotic theory were produced in this rock-tumbler. Waldmann’s Folding Lemma was a synthetic paper, an offhand mathematician’s footnote about choice of sign that bounced blindly and abrasively off all the nonsense in the archive until its contours were clear. The computers are great at sifting these diamonds from the silt, and a synthetic paper that racks up ten thousand or so citations is usually worth at least a glance by a human being.

Yao finds me, watches these scroll by for a minute or two, and then asks me whether I have a second.

“Sure.” I slam my laptop shut, happy to be useful. “What’s up?”

“Sit with me in the waiting room.”

He picks an inconspicuous spot, behind a curtain of potted jungle plants. The neon tangle of calligraphy on the wall shifts fluidly from *water droplets can penetrate a stone* to *three people make a tiger.* I page through a pamphlet. No one’s here.

“What are we doing here, man?”

Yao clicks his pen, seemingly on edge.

Within ten minutes, though, a student arrives, clutching his head and gritting his teeth. He doesn’t see us back here. I stand to greet him; Yao hisses: “*wait.”*

“No one’s at the desk! Who’s front desk right now, anyway?”

“I am.”

“Well — what the *fuck*, Yao?”

To his credit he does look ashamed, to be pulling this shit. “Just hang back here. Five minutes. Please.” Then he preoccupies himself with his rollscroll. Our would-be patient has spotted us: he shoots us pained glances through waxy leaves, which make me wonder what he’s feeling. Maybe *painful golden light at center of being*? It’s very nearly the end of Yao’s allotted five minutes — I’m counting — when the doors slide open and a second neikonaut enters the room. Yao nudges my arm.

“*Watch*,” he whispers.

The new patient settles in on the other side of the waiting area, facing the first. They ignore each other for a few minutes, but eventually one glances at the other, then at Yao and I lounging in our scrubs. His expression is an quizzical and unmistakable *what the fuck*, which mirrors my feelings exactly. The other patient looks up and smiles back. They have a rather information-laden and utterly silent exchange. The thrust of which is, why aren’t these assholes checking us in?

Fuck this. I stand halfway up to apologize, and then it hits me, a tilt-shift tidal wave pushing me back into my seat. It appears to me neither in my visual field nor my mind’s eye, but a third space which is cavernous, alien; and yet comforting, familiar. *I have a name for this place*, I realize. *We all do*. In it, I see two maze-like, almost cochlear fields of Sunflower Sieve debris. Their bumpy surfaces at close remove, their spiral arms extending and contracting at random. I see their probing roots make contact, and how others whip outward blind-quick to join them. I see a handshake, a protocol, an exchange, a relaxation of enormous coils of tension. All that in just an instant, and then defensive instinct kicks in. I nest blurry matryoshka domes against the vision, stemming the quadratic inrush. *I don’t believe it, I don’t...*

*Are you seeing this?* Yao swipes out a message for me on his rollscroll.

This is a real setback; this is what I sat all last night on that cushion to contain. If you’re getting flashes of the Mirror Sea sober, indoors, you’re probably pretty far gone. And that’s what it was. It was the debris, to be sure, but it was made of stoplights and umbrellas and taxis and mottled, backlit plastic signs that once said PHONE CARDS, all of that and none of it, flashing warm gold and sleek black.

“No,” I insist. I don’t know what Yao is making of these deep, regulated breaths I’m forcing myself to take, but I hope he’s getting the wrong idea.

*One of them is about to leave,* he types back.

I shoot to my feet, infuriated, and beeline for the clinicians’ lounge. Yao stands to follow me, and from the corner of my eye I see that, indeed, one of our patients is leaving. I expect the other will follow shortly.

Yao shuts the door behind him. All trace of anxiety or embarrassment is gone from his face; he looks utterly vindicated. “Tell me you didn’t see what just happened.”

“Oh, I saw what happened!” I snap back. Yao and I have never been anything but friendly. This is weird. “I just saw our on-duty clinician silently watch someone suffer in the waiting room until they gave up on getting treatment.”

“They don’t *need* treatment,” he insists. “Mona, everyone who’s coming down to the clinic today has been working in isolation for too long. What they need is a little human contact with someone else carrying the debris and then —”

*And then it uncoils, relaxes, writhes pleasurably for having found more of itself. I saw! I saw!*

“I’m going to write you up. I swear I will.”

“Mona, come look at these scans. Please. I’m not fucking with you.”

“I have to go. I’m meeting with Deng.” Maybe I let a drop of apology slip in there. *I’m sorry, I really am, I just can’t let myself believe this.* But also: “Get your shit together.”