The seventh draft still has madness around the fringes, little throwaway references to the Mirror Sea that I snip out as I see them. Otherwise it’s rather coherent. After forty minutes of trial and error, I crack open the scanner room door, feeling gross but intact. Dr. Deng is sitting where I left her, hands folded and lost in thought; she makes some effort to look busy with her laptop as I emerge. I wave a hard copy of the paper at her triumphantly. For a brief moment it seems like she’s going to give me a hug.

“This is *exciting*,” she’s muttering to herself an hour or so later, hands flying at the lab server’s keyboard. Deng is corresponding author, which means that it’s her job to fill out the various declarations and disclaimers of the Soup’s submission process. My job is to pace uncertainly around her office, swigging from a water bottle. I watch her compose a two-paragraph abstract without hitting the backspace key once.

“Jesus Christ,” I exclaim, looking over her shoulder.

“I’ve written a lot of these, you know, in my time.”

“No, I mean — your inbox. Do you ever clear that out?”

Deng has “99+”unread messages on the Soup. She smirks, clicks and scrolls lazily through them. “When you’re one of the…” she begins, and stops when she can’t find a self-effacing way to finish the thought. “I mean to say, a person in my position attracts a lot of crackpots with their crackpot theories. It’s not really a good way to get ahold of me.”

Later on, she lets me click the button. Submitting to the Soup is a pretty visual affair; I watch my paper drop into the citation graph, losing track of that single star in a spiderwebbed milky-way. Within a minute, there’s a flash of activity as the synthesizers get ahold of it and deem it worthy, tying *A Generalized Inversion for Sunflower Sieve debris* in silken strands to the rest of the field. No doubt Deng Jinghan’s name has a lot to do with that. A relieved exhale, almost a sob, as the citation count ticks into the hundreds, and my work is woven into the story of the Sunflower Sieve. *I’m published. I finally did it.*

Behind Deng’s big stack of tea boxes she’s apparently been stashing several pricey blue bottles of Yanghe. She twists one open with some difficulty and sloshes some into her teacups, and then we drink, laughing and coughing as the baijiu stings our throats. It feels like there’s nothing left to say. I sigh contentedly and cast lazy glances around her office, which is half-illuminated by a stolen salt lamp. There’s a gunmetal-grey piece of a Navy loop-lock rig. A wall of degrees and certificates and commendations. Only one photograph: Deng’s mother, who died the year we moved here.

Maybe there is more to say here, between us. Maybe the drinking accelerates just a little as we both try to figure out what it is. After my third cup I pick up the hard copy of the paper, put it down, and then after some hesitation pick it up again. “Is this *useful?*” I ask, breaking another silence. “I mean, I get that it describes the inversion accurately. But is it enough to reconstruct it?”

“Is it enough to reconstruct it…” Deng mutters to herself. “No. It’s not. For a motivated reader, it would be a good leg up. For someone else it might be the starting point for a new inversion entirely. That’s the beauty of math, isn’t it? You cast an idea in a shared language, and then it’s the world’s to interpret.”

She looks pleased with this thought, but I must look crestfallen.

“Oh, Mona, don’t —“

“I want to be able to do what you do.”

She shifts in her chair, leans forward, and eventually puts a tentative hand on my shoulder. “Please don’t get it wrong,” she offers, after a while. “What I do — on paper with symbols — maybe it’s happening too slowly to see just yet, but that’s a dying art. You *did* do this, in loop-lock, because you’re a neikonaut. *Math is what happens in the moment.* I knew someone who always liked to say that.”

Deng knew Adrianna Lam.

“I’m worried about Yao.” I blurt it out, and hope that Deng will see this as a non sequitur. “Yao Tongduan, the undergrad. He’s…got some ideas about the Sunflower Sieve debris. He seems to think that it’s computing something in…” it’s hard to separate what he said from what I saw. “In…I dunno, the space between our minds? Does that make any sense?”

“In the Mirror Sea,” Deng concludes.

“I…” My face goes cold. “*I* didn’t say that.”

“Oh, for heaven’s sake, Mona, it’s okay! Don’t give me that dreadful look. I suppose you’ll be shocked to hear this, but I look at the Mirror Sea too. I struggle, sometimes, with what I see in it. And I know, in the limit, that what happens on those screens and what happens in our minds, well…” At loss for words, she slowly and portentously enmeshes the fingers of both hands. I nod.

Deng was off at a conference, a year ago in spring, when my Ripple crashed and I snapped and the Weather Bureau brought me in. I had moved to Xietu South by the time she returned. This, now — this is us talking about it.

“In that case, I have something you should see.” Then, quickly: “I mean, that Yao should see.” She’s at her keyboard again, digging through directories. She pulls up a video with a timestamp nearly two decades past. She fast-forwards through most of it. And, wow — that’s her on camera, wearing a chunky necklace in saturated primary colors. And now there’s Dr. Rui in a threadbare Fudan University crew neck, with a full head of hair. In their accelerated bustle, they’re wiring up two test subjects with primitive electrodes.

“An empathetic baseline was established between two subjects.”

The readouts from the electrodes appear: low-res neikotic manifolds, barely clear enough to see anything. The lights go out, but there’s a candle on the table between N.001 LI WENHAI (he’s saying something) and N.014 QIU MIN (she’s smiling, and now she’s responding). Gradually, painstakingly, some correlations appear in their ‘folds. There’s something else in there, too.

“Debris,” I mutter.

“Soberware,” Deng corrects, a little warily. “Or at least debris constructed with a certain amount of intention. Which was, in this experiment, to transmit just a handful of bytes from one skilled neikonaut to the other.”

I find I’m biting down on my tongue, and I don’t know why. “You mean, like, telepathically?”

“Well, it sounds rather stupid when you put it like that, doesn’t it?”

She lets the video play at true speed, silent and dim and nearly greyscale, for a minute or so. The hoped-for transference doesn’t materialize and, after a while, the correlations in their manifolds disappear. The video is affecting Deng more than she realizes. I can see her getting lost in faces that, quite likely, she hasn’t seen in a long time. When it ends, though, she closes it briskly and blinks that all away. “It’s not possible, Mona. We wasted too many months believing that it was — and we did believe, we really did.”

“So you’d never consider running it again?” This sloshes out of me before I can consider it. “I mean, with modern hardware, surely, there’s a possibility that you’d pick up a signal you missed last time?”

“No,” she says, quite firmly. “Thankfully this was never declassified. Now, let’s just say, I prefer this to be an embarrassing little secret for Rui and I. It’s…good…though, that you brought this up about Yao Tongduan…” Right. Yao. “Perhaps it’ll help him to see this.”

It’s time to call it a night. I toss back the last of my baijiu and Deng really does hug me now, squeezing me loosely with her arms and tightly with her hands.

“Talk to your patients, before you draw conclusions.” She says this to me just before the door clicks, her feet up on the desk. She sounds a little drunk. “You and Yao. That’s what good clinicians do.”