We take him to Medical on the upper floors, trying to prop him up and then resorting to a stretcher. The autovial of sedative, a squishy and translucent blue thing, adheres firmly to his limp forearm. YINS’ real medics are largely not neikonauts, and thank the depths for that, because I can’t interact with anyone else carrying Sieve debris right now. They receive us with the generally unsurprised demeanor of *this again, huh.*

“I showed him the video,” Deng informs me, nasally, as we stand over his hospital bed. She’s holding a cotton ball to her nose. “I thought that would help.”

A nurse knocks on the half-ajar door, holding a big fucking syringe. “It’s either this,” he explains, “or you can hotwire him when he comes to.” He begins clipping up Yao with all sorts of things, I imagine, to make him feel stupid when he wakes up.

We sit with Yao for an appropriate span, and I try not to notice the look that Rui is giving Deng, or the way she’s avoiding it. I don’t react much when they both rise to go. Instead I wait one minute, two, and follow them. They’re talking, animated and unhappy, in a little nook down the hall. I can’t make out what they’re saying — that is, until I take some quiet paces forward, and duck behind a large cart of linens. I begin the long process of untying and re-tying my shoe.

“...should’ve taken a page out of Peter’s book,” Deng is whispering, low and insistent. “I should have taken a sledgehammer to that thing the moment I arrived.”

“It’s university property.” Rui is not speaking quite so quietly, but he casts glances around. “She’s an enormously skilled neikonaut, and she has every right to be using it.”

“I *know* she’s a skilled neikonaut, Rui. That’s why I brought her to Shanghai.”

Oh, I hate when she says that. You didn’t *bring* me anywhere, old woman.

“This is all beside the point.” Dr. Rui sighs, low and frustrated, like he’s struggling to open a jar. “All the faculty are ready to proceed except you. We can do it a few different ways...”

“It’s not beside the point...”

“We can make the inversion mandatory. At least at YINS. Or — and this is what I’d prefer — we can bake it into the loop-lock virtual machine. Build it into the tile-out process. Isn’t that your entire godforsaken *thing*, Deng?”

“It’s her!” Deng erupts. “The inversion is *her*, more of her than anyone should be comfortable with. Fifty thousand neikonauts in this city. Call it two hundred loop-lock sessions a year. That’s ten million times it’s run!” They pause while the doctor shuffles awkwardly by, and Deng catches her breath. “I’m deriving a clean version from scratch. Her paper gets us most of the way there. I need a week. Maybe two.”

“The last thing — the very last thing — that we want to do is cause a panic. And the longer we wait...”

Their voices fade around a corner. I stride to follow them, hear nothing, then round the bend ever so casually. I catch Rui closing a balcony door. Blood thumping, I find a circular pillar to crouch behind and press myself against the exterior window, peeking out through a sunshade. The two are bathed in dim multicolored light from the library windows above, the wind whipping Deng’s hair. Rui gestures wildly: at her, himself, the school, the distant skyline. Deng keeps her arms folded, still gripping a bloody tissue.

Rui pulls a manila envelope from his jacket, seems to weigh it for a moment, and hands it to Deng.

She gives him a foul look, tearing it open. She finds something soft and circular inside. Deng examines it for a second and then positively snarls, raising the object and using it to smack Rui back and forth across the face. Then she tries to rip it in half, gives up, and leaves it in a trash can. She storms inside. The door swings in her wake.

After Rui spends a dejected moment scrolling his wanji, after he sighs and wanders away, I creep back down the hall and onto the balcony. I scrunch my nose, fishing through orange peels and surgical masks until I find whatever it is that made Deng angry. No, furious, in a way that even I have never seen. It’s a machine-stitched patch, a round and innocuous iron-on thing that you’d expect to see on a fighter pilot’s flight suit.

It depicts a flower, in full yellow bloom around the edges and beady-black in the center.

Four characters crest the bottom edge: *kui hua yi hao.*

Sunflower-I. *Sunflower One.*

On my way out, I stop by the Mirror Sea display in the lobby, pondering the faint golden streaks in the background. Someone passes, a neikonaut, and gives me a concerned look. I want to shake her and shout: *how are you not seeing this?* Instead, I keep my eyes fixed on the pixels. Willing, no, daring the diving-bell to appear.

*If you’re really in there* — I find the thought low in my throat, soft on my tongue — *I’m sorry*.