“What’s going to happen to him?”

The back office of the Observatory is a maze of narrow halls ending constantly and unpredictably walls of frosted glass. Dr. Rui doesn’t answer, but he looks back constantly to make sure I’m keeping up with his lanky stride. I have a whole cascade of questions, actually, all stemming from visceral half-memory, all with the slippery sheen of antipattern sedative: of white walls, the smell of paint drying, and especially of the deep-field speckles of the linoleum; these had entertained me with hours of galactic wobbling between my debriefs and linearization sessions. *Was it here? Is this where you took me?* Rui keys open a dark room, and with all my knotted-up depths I expect to see that visored woman sitting on the floor, ready for a rematch. But inside there’s only dim track lighting and long rows of heavy metal cabinets.

The Weather Bureau’s treatment of the blameless is unpleasant. soberware work when they get their hooks into an element of the Chalk is invasive, gruesomely legendary. Above all I need Rui to swear to me that they’re going to keep Tethi in one piece. I led him here, I led him right into this…and now what? I move to block Rui bodily, the same question on my lips.

*“What is going to happen to him?”*

“Come now, Mona, what do you think?” Rui loses his temper with a little *pop*, furious then flustered then calm again by the end of the sentence. He tenses, relaxes, wipes his brow. “Just at this moment I have zero time for this. I’m sorry, I really am, that this is how you find out. We’d have brought you in years ago, only Deng insisted…”

*Don’t even say that name,* I want to shout back. Too raw. There’s a long, gasping sob just under the surface, but that competes with thoughts of Tethi, and of the recurring nightmare I’ve just walked back into, and the gripping fascination that the Weather Bureau has been lurking at YINS this whole time, just under my nose, and they *wanted* me*.* *They* wanted me, only Deng…only *Deng*. It all pinwheels this way, smelling of burning rubber, leaving me numb.

“I’ll be back in ten minutes,” he offers, almost as afterthought. “*Don’t* touch anything.”

So of course I start opening drawers. To my surprise and horror and undeniable delight, the cabinets are full of neikotic eggs. Their little printed labels recall those in the Hall of Eggs, with discoverers, dates, and descriptions. Only these have a fourth row: locations, in a variety of haphazard coordinate systems, in the Mirror Sea. Ordered chronologically, the first eggs are rough-hewn, asymmetrical, things. But I know it when I see it. I could spend twenty minutes, an hour, pondering one of these and…what? These early eggs have whimsically obscure descriptions. *Muffled wingbeats. A way to see the same thing twice.* But down the line of cabinets, left to right, top to bottom, they begin to offer concrete utility. *Point-free annealing* or *convex-hull generation* or sometimes just *CNOT??* I see names I recognize: Cai Yuhui, Rui Zhang, Yue Fang, and I keep expecting to find more. What I don’t expect is an algorithm that needs no introduction. My heart skips. In the final cabinet, top drawer, I find Tenfold Gate.

The egg is sharply geometric, red-orange, concentrically reflective. I never hatched it, but there’s a feeling, recalled only in my fingertips, the satisfaction of pulling its barbed shards from a human mind. Cai had been here — at the Observatory, certainly, and probably at the Bureau — and she had come to me. *They wanted me*. The pinwheel spirals, but catches on something now, and sparks fly in my mind…

“That was a nasty one.”

Rui returns, with company, and his smile makes it clear that I’ve saved him ten minutes by rifling through these cabinets myself. “You remember it, right? We thought it was the way things were heading. Worse debris, more side effects, a battle in the clinic. In truth, we were lucky. The Sunflower Sieve debris is, for all intents and purposes, true soberware. It’s harder to fight because it doesn’t hurt.”

The man next to Dr. Rui is a plainclothes bluelight. No badge, no uniform as such, but you can tell. I can tell from the interface flashing on his thick, age-old spectacles. And from the particular cut of heavy boot they all seem to favor. He offers me a stinging handshake.

“Do you know who I am, Mona?”

“No,” I tell him. Amused by the question, despite myself.

He laughs. Fulsome, only a bit raspy. “Good. Good. The name’s Ma Zhuming.”

Ma and Rui are both very tall, but otherwise they make quite a contrast. Rui: rail-skinny, terminally indoors — though he’s dropped his usual expression of mild surprise for something more lucidly calculating. Ma: ambiguously muscular beneath a sweeping trench coat; long, sleek hair tied back. Smiling with thick lips, thick skin, sunburnt and windbitten. There is a good-cop bad-cop routine working just under the hood here, although I can’t quite decide which man is which. They sit across from me at a narrow conference table — *“not an interrogation,”* Rui whispers thinly, which raises its own questions.

“Tell us what you’ve got on this Mbetethi,” Ma begins, casting off pretense, fishing in his coat for a toothpick.

Something nasty dances across my face, and I decide it’s for Rui. “You don’t know him. He was trying to help.”

“No, *you* don’t know him. Do you have any idea how dangerous that man is?”

“*Dangerous?*”

“Mona, he is Nine-Eyes.”

“He is not!” All my knuckles crack as I spider my hands across the table, leaning towards Rui. I’ve only just noticed that Tethi’s rollscroll pokes out of his bag, and in the noticing I lose control of my voice. “He’s...an engineer, a neikonaut. That’s *his* data, for chrissakes.”

Dr. Rui folds his arms. “Did you get a good look at his forehead?”

Ma gnaws his toothpick. “We want to trust your friend, Ms. Xu. Unsavory past or no. So give us a reason to.”

Tethi would be mortified by the portrait I conjure, of a contrite racketeer turning over a new leaf with starry-eyed dreams of YINS. None of it is *wrong*, exactly, but it makes me sick to sell him this way, painting him in this bright light, denying him his shadow. I make sure to dwell on the fact that he lives with an older woman, helping her with odd jobs — but, *fuck*, I mentioned her by name, the name that’s right on the storefront. Good going, Mona.

“Min?” The toothpick falls out. “Min what?”

“I don’t know.” This at least is true. “It was only ever Min.”

They exchange glances. Ma scribbles shorthand on a rollscroll of his own, and in its turned corners I see dispatch calls flashing by. Afternoon is becoming evening, and the Glimpse is still bouncing from eye to eye, mind to mind, with unfortunate persistence. The Weather Bureau will be working harder than ever to contain it. I see a map, too, and from it I glean how spread thin their operation really is. I understand with new fullness the way the Bureau makes itself look bigger than it really is, peacock-like, dazzling Shanghai with its iridescence. I’m less afraid.

*Where?* Ma asks this over and over, and I dodge, deflect, act like I don’t know where I’ve been all week. I try insinuating that Tethi spirited me half-blind through the tunnels but, shit, no, I can’t say *that*. Ma rolls his eyes, threatens to pull my ward-trail. I fold my arms, smug. I never did tap into Fengzhen Ward.

“We have a lot to get to tonight, Mona.” Rui rakes his long fingers over his eyes. “If you won’t tell us, we’ll go to him. I remind you that we have him in custody.”

But that sparks guilt, which kindles ire. “What you people do to Chalkers...”

“Will be no worse than what we did to you,” Ma finishes. Rui gives him a look: *why would you say that?* But Ma holds my gaze. “Which I, personally, don’t apologize for. What we do saves lives. You were one weird night from wandering into the Chalk, forever, maybe. And that would have been very upsetting for the good doctor Deng.” He angles for a laugh from Rui and, not getting one, goes for a fresh toothpick. I want to hate Ma Zhuming, I really do. But he might be the most honest person in the building. I stare him down; he casts hopeful glances at his partner: *you talk, she’ll listen to you.*

So Rui sighs and speaks up. “The Weather Bureau has a short memory; it considers grudges and detainees a liability. Blue Delta holds the leash, but it’s in everyone’s best interest not to find out how long it is.” He glances at Ma here. “Mr. Okeme has been...a handful, yes. But we cannot hold him solely responsible for the Sunflower Sieve. If he cooperates, shows us the Mirror Sea ingress *which we know he has*, he could walk free tonight.”

“And if he doesn’t?” If he doesn’t want to bring the Bureau down, on Min, on Triple Point?

“Then we may lose the city tonight.”

I keep looking away and then back at Dr. Rui. Hoping each time, on first instant, to finally pierce the image of the mild-mannered professor. To rearrange those dark circles and worry lines and nerve-set jaw some other way. To see the hardness in the face of this man who speaks like we’re at war.

A tide goes out, leaving me five or six flavors of numb. For a moment my big question is, *can I have a snack?* But even that recedes. Rui rejects call after call coming into his wanji and I come to understand that this conversation is the priority of a very busy man. So I choose careful words, wishing with bitter clarity to be seen as an adult by *my professors*, Rui and Deng and all the rest.“What, exactly, is at stake here?”

And Rui rewards me with clarity in turn. Tries. Maybe. “We understand Chalkers as those who, voluntarily or no, offer some of their cognition to the Ripples. There is a symbiosis; the Chalk provides for them in turn. The Nine-Eyes are well-known as a particularly brutal breed of the same. There is a particular madness about them. In the popular imagination, they are carriers of cruel, destructive Ripples. In reality, they...”

He seems to struggle with the rest. “They’re *neikonauts,*” Ma finishes. And there’s that rhotic curl of disdain in his softened Beijing accent, the way you hear the word spoken outside of YINS. “They’re connoisseurs of neikotic debris. They fill their minds with the stuff and get the Ripples all tangled up in it. Then they get back in their scanners and let the damn things play around with it some more. I hardly understand this shit, but Professor Brain here is too afraid to speak it into further existence, so there you go.”

“Basically, yes.” Professor Brain confirms.

“And they all report back to Dr. Deng Jinghan,” Ma adds indulgently.

“*No*,” Rui snaps back, taking the bait utterly.

“*What?*” I shout at the same time.

“You *completely* misunderstand her position.” Rui straightens himself, snapping to the defense of his academic colleague. “She may not be cooperating with *us*, but — Mona, this is unfounded speculation —”

Ma Zhuming laughs, watches Rui flounder, and then lets him off the hook. “What we know for certain is that the Nine-Eye lineage can be traced back to the survivors of your advisor’s great project under the great Xia Zitian. Her involvement with the cell as it stands is, I admit, speculative.”

*The survivors...*

I find myself rising to leave, too light-headed, gripping my swivel chair. “I have *had it!*” I shout. “You people are crazy. Maybe she was right to keep me away from this.” The awfulness of that stings. Opens a new pit in the acid of my stomach, churning widdershins, swallowing me parabolically. Is this all it is? Even now, do I have the choice to look away, disbelieve it, simply move on? “Maybe you should try listening to her. Just turn the damn cameras off.”

“We can’t.” The awful flatness of that in Rui’s voice stops me dead. “The Lam-Waldmann Hash is public knowledge. Those cameras cost ten ping on Taobao. The Bureau controls a tiny fraction of the Mirror Sea, and we can’t afford to show the city just how small it is.” He’s right. And he’s sensible enough to leave the last part unsaid, a horrible, unspoken riptide of an idea: imagine we *did* turn the entire system off, and the Ripples were still there?

“They’ve got us on the back foot,” Ma offers. With his chewy esprit-du-corps, he sounds like he might be coaching a losing volleyball team. “They’ve got their shit in our minds, their debris —”

“Soberware,” Rui interjects, horribly lucid. “Genuine soberware.”

“They’ve got the mud of their world, and they’ve figured out how to smear it across the minds of the *laobaixing*. Not just the Ripplechasers, the good, sober, working people of Shanghai. If the data you and your Chalker friend collected is any good.”

That whole, clawing collection of foam-nestled neikotic eggs whirls through my mind. Step by step, year by year, the Ripples showing neikonauts from YINS and the Big Three glints of their alien, Sea-born neikotic technologies, sending them wild-eyed into the Chalk. The hyperlagmite-flashed logic: *I remember it*, at least for a fraction of a second. I see their design honed and honed again, nearly perfected in Tenfold Gate, and finally it pays off in the Sunflower Sieve, the instrument by which they will terraform our minds, starting — *starting last night.*

“So what do we do?” I ask, feeling leagues away from this dim little room, save for the chill of its aircon.

“You’ll see. Stick around for tonight,” Rui tells me, and this time a wry smile does pass between him and Ma.

“Oh, would you *fuck off*?” *I can’t believe I just said that! He’s got tenure!* And yet it’s becoming hard to imagine him ever shaking my hand at some impossibly distant thesis defense. “What do we do?”

“You of all people should know.” And finally someone at this damn university looks at me in the eyes like their equal. “We have the inversion.”