The store’s back rooms are where it *really* gets miscellaneous. We pick our way through boxes crammed with feather boas, lewd and dusty DVDs, and all kinds of electronic refuse: *Optical-Rubidium Adapters (broken)*; *Phased array drivers (fixable)*; *USB cables (2.0).* Tethi leads me past storeroom after storeroom. One amounts to a kitchen, full of tabletop induction burners and cube fridges, fed by daisy-chained power strips. The last door on the right bleeds blue light and bass-heavy Ulanbataar prog-shag. He lets me inside what I take to be his room.

“So she has you reading her mail? Is that it?”

It’s not that he doesn’t look happy to see me. He just doesn’t look happy. The last week has not been kind to Tethi, and I only have a faint outline of why. Still, this is his hello?

“Hell no. Yours is *so much* weirder,” I insist. The adrenaline of the Nine-Eyes’ visit, the humor of the double-catfish, are melting off, leaving a weird and mirthless grin on my face that I struggle to wipe away. “You know her awfully well. The bit about SNB-9, the fucking chamomile tea — who *are* you, man?”

“You know your advisor is famous all the world over, yes?” He points to a stack of books. “One of the great scientists of our time. I have a biography, it’s all in there.”

“And you fumbled the Sieve, and now you want credit. Your day in the sun.”

“It’s not anywhere near that simple.” It looks like he’s been drinking straight from this one bottle of baijiu, but now he fetches and fills two little cups, clinks his to mine. “I suppose she doesn’t know you’re here.”

I drink, the sting a welcome distraction. “No,” I tell him, from the bottom of the glass. “You’re stuck with me.”

He stops to consider that. Nods. “I can work with that.”

“You could have just messaged me to begin with.”

“I considered it. It was your footnote, after all. She told me not to.”

I give myself a few weary breaths to process it all. I — oh, fuck it, I reach for the bottle, but Tethi puts his hand over it. Twirls his index finger, a neikonaut’s sign for *loop-lock.* Okay then. “So you have something to show her. Or me.” I piece it together. “You’re telling me that the Sieve has something to do with the hyperlagmites in the Sea.”

“That’s what *you’re* telling *me.*” He looks perplexed. “Isn’t it?”