Deng’s still sending me five or so papers every day with no context or subject line. This is how I know she’s not upset with me for taking the week off. I needed a break, I told her, and it’s not exactly a lie. But of course she has no idea what I’m doing, or who with. So I’m careful, snooping around YINS late at night. Tethi’s parts list takes me through the engineering floors, where no one recognizes me. But he also wants Yao’s voxelite debris-skeleton. *Him??* Tethi was shocked when I told him the story over text. *He was so nice to me.* Sad face.

Combing the Safety floor now, my own footsteps put me on edge. *Label Your Voxelite Or It Will Be Recycled,* reads a sign by the wastebins, and that sends me digging through a bucket of sharp, clattering pieces. Interspersed, thankfully rarely, with the odd teabag or banana peel. An unexpected voice stops me cold. “If you people just marked your eggs, you wouldn’t be having these problems.”

The man’s name is either Pan or Pang and I feel awful that I can never remember. He’s one of the cleaners that work their way through Building 1, usually getting to the basement well past midnight. I describe what I’m looking for.

“That’s a hot item,” he replies, getting a well-deserved chuckle out of this. “You’re a few days late to the scramble.”

“You’ve seen it?”

“I was just about to toss it the other night, and then two gals showed up. Both wanted it. One was a professor from this floor. The other, I’d never seen before.”

My spine shoots up. “Tall? Blonde, basically white hair? Real glamorous type?”

*Pfff,* he goes. “At YINS? Would’ve remembered that. She looked kinda nondescript.” He shakes a trash bag open. “If that helps.”

“And who took it?”

“I left them to their business. Got business of my own.”

So that puts me in the voxelite fab at three in the morning, still re-printing the debris samples, periodically sticking my head out the window for fresh air. And *that* puts me hours behind on sleep when I return to Triple Point. Tethi was up late, too; he already has breadboard sketches of the circuitry. He leads me back to the scanner room. From his monitors we watch the *wider* Sea, the *lower* Sea, the *outer* Sea — we taste different names for the part that’s visible from soberspace, where the Ripples still appear wild and unthinking. We point out traces of the golden scaffolding. Furtively, because sometimes we hear footsteps from passageways just below us. It stops us both cold.

“Look at that,” I gasp. A Ripple coils itself lazily around a faint golden streak. Brushes it with obvious curiosity. The streak arcs for what seems like forever until it strikes another stellar node of their structure, an echo of their sunflower sphere.

“No, look at *that*,” Tethi mutters. In another corner, a second Ripple is doing the same thing. The motions match imperfectly, but they’re eerily synchronous.

“Is this what it’s all for, then? Teleportation? Communication?”

But Tethi snorts, and raps the convolution coprocessor. “I think we’re seeing the same Ripple twice. And that this thing is a piece of junk.”

There are no wrong answers, hot-gluing the debris together. It fits together in a million different ways, a puzzle that’s no puzzle at all. No matter how we arrange it, it converges to match the skeletal hyperstructure the Mirror Sea. *What’s happening out there is happening in here.* The thought comes staccato between heartbeats. *The loop is closing, tightening, quickening.* The implications are obscure but nooselike, with the acrid smell of unhappy coincidence, the foreclosure of possibility into claustrophobic grooves. Tethi hums tunelessly as we work. He seems fascinated but fundamentally unbothered. But then, this tight intertwine of *out there* and *in here* is the core delusion on which the Chalk is built. He eats this stuff for breakfast.

“You must have *some* idea of what it is,” I finally exclaim.

He doesn’t stop gluing. “And why would you say that?”

“Well, you want to go to YINS with this,” I press. “But if I found a mind-spanning megastructure with a twin in the Mirror Sea — if I thought the Ripples were building something, I wouldn’t go to YINS for answers. I’d go to a Chalker.”

“I’m not a Chalker,” he replies evenly. I cringe inwardly as he works a tricky joint with hot glue. But his tone remains mild. “I don’t blame you. It’s what I’d think, too. But if YINS is going to take me seriously, I need *you* to take me seriously. I am choosing to leave this place.”

“I’m sorry. I’m just panicking a little, is all.”

“It’s fine.”

“Really, Teth, I’m —”

“It’s fine.”

The descending silence is comfortable, all things considered. But the structure almost doubles in size before he speaks again. “For what it’s worth, if I did know what it was, I wouldn’t be able to verbalize it. That’s the tradeoff. *That’s* the Chalk.”