Min turns to me. “Watch the counter?”

She pulls on a coat and leaves. When, exactly, did *this* happen? Maybe it was last night, when she pulled us out of Tethi’s room, away from our little assembly line, and served us heaping portions of fish soaked with lemon and ginger. Maybe it was the day before that, when I helped them disassemble a busted trash collector to extract one pricey little coil. Or the day before that, when Min and Tethi together listed twelve songs containing the word *California* — in English, Mando, and Korean all three, as my face went darker and darker red. It has been…exactly how many days?

All I know is I don’t mind it here. It’s quiet in a way that YINS can never manage, its walls always humming with current and coolant. The lack of Mirror Sea displays and their constant jump-scares is relief I didn’t know I needed. The assembly we’re doing is grueling, yeah. My fingers are burnt with hot plastic and solder and the shock of stray couplings. Tethi is a maestro; there are layers and layers to even the simplest neikotic devices that I will never again take for granted. He would do well at YINS — no, he *will* do well. Only he may have to convince me to go back with him.

Ghost-white faces in the window now. All that calm gone. I reach for the remote, faster than Min was, and the door makes a magnetic *whump*. Three Chalkers are banging frantically, menacingly, on the door. Nine-Eyes — maybe? Can’t tell in the twilight. I press another button, step two, the outer grate descends slowly…

“Wait,” Tethi shouts, emerging from the back. “They’re okay. Let them in.”

My mouth makes a kind of *what?* shape, but he gives me a look, and I give him the remote. The grate stops, the door opens, and now there are Chalkers in the building, for fuck’s sake. Foreheads with two, four, and five eyes. Don’t know what to make of that.

*“Did you fix it?”*

With that voice, with the indoor lighting, a certain illusion dissipates. These are teenagers, young ones. Just about that age where the Weather Bureau stops trying to snatch you out of the Chalk, reasoning that you’ve made your choice. All in layers of old athletic wickwear, secondhand tentcloaks, gecko gloves with only a little stick left in ‘em. I realize, quite belatedly, that this is the trio I watched jump the Fengzhen wardgates. They greet Tethi — here my mind does some triangulating — like a cool older cousin.

“I didn’t think you guys were ever coming back,” he tells them, overly morose. “I traded it for a pallet of telomerase smoothies.”

“We *said* we were coming back,” the shortest one insists. Her Chinese comes with a thick North Korean accent.

“We got into a choir-bubble across the river is all.” The tallest of them I’d wager is Nigerian. He already towers over Tethi, deep-voiced but reed-skinny. “Felt into some clusters south-ways. Hard to leave once you’re in it. You know how it is.”

“You *know* how it is,” echoes the third one indignantly. Neither short or tall, and that’s all I can say about them. That particular Chalker vagueness hasn’t worn off in the few minutes they’ve been out of view of the cameras. My gaze slides off what amounts to a silhouette.

“Nah, I’m fucking with you. Of course I fixed it.” Tethi grins and leads them to the back. I linger by the door. In a darkened storeroom, he stands on his toes to reach a clamshell case. “Refilled the fog, too,” he grunts. Inside the foam-lined box is a neatly spherical children’s quasigram projector.

*“OUR SOLAR SYSTEM,”* booms the speaker, when he flicks the switch.

“I’ve *seen* this one,” the smallest one complains. She picks up a small controller and flips through some presets:

“*THE MILKY WAY GALAXY —”*

*“THE AMAZON RAINFOREST —”*

*“THE GOBI DESERT —”*

*“THE PACIFIC REEF BUILDERS —”*

*“THE MIRROR SEA OF SHANGHAI —”*

I learn a lot from the way they all react in the next few seconds. The one with the controller drops it and instinctually averts her eyes. The tall one flinches, but then flinches from the flinch. He seems to make a point of staring, entranced, at the projected Ripples, until Tethi blocks his view bodily. *“You know why,”* is all I can hear from their low, tense exchange.

And this melts neatly into a moment some hours later, the way things at Triple Point do. My tongue is between my teeth, my steady hand running liquid metal over tiny pins.

“You’re going to need a résumé,” I say too loudly, too suddenly. “For YINS.”

Tethi nods approvingly at my soldering work. Hands me the next board in exchange. “What?” He processes this a moment later. “Oh, that’s true. Thanks.”

“You’re going to need to account for the years,” I go on, head in the fumes again. “You say you’re not a Chalker. Fine. I believe you. But just how much time have you spent in there?”

He flicks a switch and the visor-screen in his hands goes dark. He turns the music down, hears Min puttering around just outside, and then turns it up even louder. “I don’t like talking about it.”

“I understand.”

“I *can’t* talk about it. It is categorically and precisely not possible to talk about.”

“If this is going to work, I need more than that.”

He sighs, but he knows I’m right. He scoots his chair, cracks his knuckles. “I told you why I came to Shanghai?”

“Yeah,” I reply, softly. I mean, only kind of. Only in broad strokes, only through tears. His father was one of the architects of the Gabonese Fork, and he fled for his life. The details fill themselves in, and they aren’t pretty.

“I wanted to train as a neikonaut. And I was stupid enough to think that Suowei owed me something. That they’d have any idea who I was. None of that worked out.” He holds up a freshly assembled headset now: “This. I thought of this for a reason. *This* was the work I was able to find, selling rave gizmos outside clubs and parties. People would fuck with you. Mostly they were harmless, but out there you’re always on someone else’s turf. In this case it was Chalkers. They took my pushcart and left me in a very bad state. Left me to die.”

I stow the soldering iron.

“But the thing is,” Tethi goes on, “I had no home ward. And when you have no ward alignment — you know which hospitals are going to take you in? Without a fuss, without getting the bluelights involved? Chalker hospitals. You couldn’t tell from the outside, but there was one three blocks away. I recovered, and then made myself useful in exchange. I stayed. I...*god.* I wish I could put it into words, I really do. Five floors and a thousand eyes. The way the wind blew through the whole building at once, how that felt...” He falls silent, looking happy about something distant. It makes me glad to see him like this. “People like to say the Chalk *steals* people, because they won’t admit that their friends and family made the choice. You always make the choice.”

“I thought you said Min took you in?”

“That was later.” A pause. “Like I said, there are layers to it.”