Tethi talks about the Chalk in terms of tides. I already knew about the way it pulls people in — I’d heard less about the symmetrical way it pushes people out, sometimes just as violently, sometimes after taking years. And I can only take him at his word that the triple points are the shallows, that the locals from adjacent wards even come to their night market. You tend to imagine Chalkers living hand-to-mouth on stolen mangoes and penicillin. But you also hear of hospitals and riverbed submarines. Stories of the eerie effortlessness with which they feed and clothe the all-comers who fall through the cracks beneath the cracks. That takes money, which takes hustlers slumming it at the event horizon, like Tethi and Min.

I like Min. She never says much, but I like the incense she burns, the way she dusts, the cable bouquets she makes out of compulsion. I like watching her and Tethi exchange their quiet affection. But I wonder about her.

On a Thursday, two days before the Mid-Autumn Festival, I arrive a little earlier than usual, mid-afternoon, and find the grate down. I wander, a little aimlessly, a little not, towards the center of Triple Point. Its stillness is eerier in the daytime, I decide. The flutter of tarps. Black-clad, retroactively visible blurs of motion. Were I more perceptive, more in the moment, I might be able to resolve these into individual Chalkers.

I feel a hand on my back.

“What are you doing here?” hisses Tethi. “We said five sharp.”

He pulls me through his door, the one that’s very hard to see, and slams it.

“Jesus,” I hiss back. “What’s gotten into you? I — I have something. We should talk.”

“I have something too.” He locks as many doors as he can and, finally safe in his little scanner sanctuary, he elaborates. “The Bureau. They’re closing in, I saw them wandering around the mall this morning. We’re moving our operation in here.”

Actually, he already has. His entire workstation: the printers and etchers and annealers, the scopes and soldering irons, the dozen deep drawers of diodes and dielectrics. We get to work immediately. This is one of the most poorly ventilated spaces you can imagine, and I’m thoroughly lightheaded by the time Tethi speaks, chewily, as he’s halfway through a sachima. “I’m sorry. I’m just on edge.”

“It’s fine. I get it.”

The etcher drops another circuit board for him to inspect. “You said you had something?”

“Oh, fuck, that’s right.” I slide my swivel chair over to his desktop computer. “Can I use this? I have zero bars in here.”

This turns into a snack break. While he dispenses boiling water into cup noodles, I follow nested onion links to a Mirror Sea message board that I pretend not to know about. I scroll quickly past *Pinned: Chalker Theories*, past two pages of quadratically motivated nonsense:

{.mail} **New Hyperlagmites?**  
<0x3ad..7e1> | 17 posts | Rank: flayling  
*3 days ago*  
Sorry to keep this going but…  
  
Yellow/golden streaks far in the background, visible on flats and quasis. Kind of a web structure. Easiest to glimpse at night which of course makes me think of the title of everyone’s favorite.  
  
Caught these in SJG, XTD, HKE. Basically all over the Universal Access zones.  
  
Anyone else able to see this?

The first response is almost immediate:

{.mail} **Re: New Hyperlagmites?**  
<0x621..bd6> | 2,731 posts | Rank: choir-bubble  
*3 days ago*That’s all the sunflower banners moron

Fair enough! But that’s hardly the last word. We both tally as we scroll, breathing hard, saying nothing. Probably one in ten posters can see it.

{.mail} **Re: New Hyperlagmites?**  
<0xe21..0b3> | 232 posts | Rank: wavelet  
*4 hours ago*I can see it too and that’s not all. My husband is a neikonaut (won’t say where he works but let’s just say he’s been busy). He has been having bad dreams about specific shapes, but that is not unusual, it’s part of his job! My job is to keep his mind off that but he’s been describing them so vividly that I have been starting to see the same shapes in-sea (HKS, XUH). I drew some pictures, it’s hard to get it exactly right and I’m afraid to show him in case it makes it worse.  
  
The really weird thing is that it’s a teeny tiny bit reflective. That’s not the right word for it at all but it’s as if when I move or even when I think about moving, it moves too...  
  
I was relieved to log on and see so many regulars+friends here who have noticed the same thing. I don’t want to be seeing this but it’s also not exactly \*bad\* like other things I’ve seen in-sea, it just makes me sad that it’s hurting him :(  
  
<Attachment: Photo from 0923...56:04.png>

I glance at the scanner bed. “I gotta go back in.”

Tethi stops blowing on his noodles and grabs my arm. “Mona, *no.*”

“The thing about it being reflective.” I pause, my mind catching up to my mouth. “I remember something about that from loop-lock. If I go in again, *try* to remember, I could print an egg…”

“That’s a trap.” He hasn’t let go. “It’s *the* trap. You are the scientist here, Mona. You need to stay objective about this. Once we’re at YINS we can use Observatory hardware, and we can get a better view of this from soberspace. We’ll have resources. A safety net.”

I don’t have the heart to tell him otherwise.