Down.

I mean, c’mon.

There’s no change to the utter darkness, but there’s a tactile shift after three flights: the stairways are no longer concrete and standpipe, but rough-hewn narrow things, mineral-damp, railing-free. I keep my hands in front of my face, warding off dangling conduit, imagining spiderweb and live wires. Of course I have a light on me, but I’m terrified of drawing any attention to myself. Just above the Weather Bureau manages to violently unseal that door — the fucking *Weather Bureau,* Mona! W*hat are you doing here?* So I creep downward, my choice made, letting the guangpan draw subtle constellations of purple across my darkness, trying to keep footsteps within earshot. But they’re already dampening and fanning out. The tunnels level out and are already branching, and I’ve made how many unknowing choices? Three? Four? I hold one hand out against the darkness, and the other traces the wall. The slimy, chalky texture accumulating on my fingers confirms what I already know.

The silence becomes the darkness, and finally, inevitably, I am alone.

But, God, isn’t this what I had always wanted?

It’s called Ripplechasing, not Chalker-chasing. But back in that brief and brilliant period of my life, we all understood tacitly that finding one involved seeking the other. The Chalkers were where the Ripples were. They moved with them at night, or they moved them at night — the language of causality fails here, and that’s just how they like it. Cai Yuhui chased for a firebug, scattershot kind of fame, a knack for finding and being found, for showing up one minute before the Ripple with legions watching through her eyes. I wanted the opposite. I wanted to feel the adoring gaze of the city and not refract it one bit. I wanted to be made of glass. We orbited it, on a high ecliptic, all for our own reasons, for togetherness, for bounties, for cardio. But the Chalkers operated inside of it, and we watched their operations from a safe distance, warped and distorted and lensed, always feeling nervously for an event horizon.

Of course we knew about the tunnels.

We knew that they were everywhere, and that they were no one’s idea. We knew that, in Xia’s day, they had been the first whispered sign in the halls of power that something was askance in the daily, rolling five-year plans produced by the language models that were to interpret the Mirror Sea. *We’re building how many new subway lines?* someone finally thought to ask. *How many sewer mains?* But by the time they found the Ripples lurking in the system’s hidden layers, legions of tunnel-boring machines were in the ground. By the time Xia Zitian took to that podium to confess, some of those tunnels had tracks, and some of them periodically flooded. And now they’re all covered in chalk.

I’m afraid to look, and I’m afraid not to.

Lining the ceiling at luxuriously close intervals are bulbous teardrop cameras, clustered in fours, infrared sensors trained on the walls. They see — *they* see, Mona — chalk dripping imperceptibly slowly down the wet walls. And yet I know this, and I see it too. Flashes, jet-gnostic, more blindsight: hallucinatory scribbles in knots and hooks and whorls, for what feels like infinity in both directions. It’s the color of nothing, the same one I so faintly perceive from the LEDs ringing the cameras, infrared leaking into the visible spectrum. But is the chalk really that reflective? Or...or something else?

It only grows clearer in my mind’s eye. My stumbling becomes something more confident. With a lurch I realize that I’ve stopped feeling the wall: I’ve been relying on this unsight, this delusion, that I can see the contours of the tunnel. *But I can.* The chalk picks up definite form. *You’re just imagining it.* But it’s losing its wobbly stochast. It radiates with a brightness that is simply not here, in subtle and prismatic separations. I see it, and navigate by it, with hundred-watt surety that only makes it clearer. A familiar loop tightens.

I’m afraid not to look: *You need to turn your camera flash on. Just see that you’re just hallucinating this. This is the parabola, Mona, you don’t want this, not now, not here...*

I’m afraid to look: *Mona, do you or do you not still believe that the Chalker tunnels are a sacred space, a quiet place, where the Ripples go at night to dream?*

A wedge in my throat. Just a peek. I ignite the flash.

And I just barely suppress a scream (*of horror? of loosening delight?*) when I see that the chalk on the walls matches my unsight precisely. That down here I do not need light to see. A flaring realization that this bright light trained on such sensitive cameras is as a weapon to the Ripples — *you’re blinding them!* But no. Not blinding them. *Burning* them, more like, with an LED-singed hole in their foundational rhythms.

Blame it on the guangpan, if you want. Blame it on that dull golden spikiness, softened these few days but still lodged inside my logic. Blame it on my battery: eleven percent. I kill the flash. I still see the chalk.

An afterimage, sure, but an afterimage that moves as my head does, that doesn’t care if my eyes are open or closed. Here I float, at the Lagrange point between reason and madness. Here I strike the bedrock of Shanghai’s garden of delusion, that indifference to the difference between correlation and causation, between light and sight. And as I take my first steps forward — *what else am I supposed to do?* — the chalk begins to wiggle, to accumulate, to integrate into a dull red glow. It’s, it’s...*it’s not too late to turn your flash back on. There’s got to be a manhole, a ladder, a quick way out...*

But all uncertainty is subsumed now by this: *you’ve been so, so good.* *You’re been so good, for so long.* I walk faster, the walls clearly in sight, now positively crawling with texture, meaning thrumming in harp-struck primary colors behind my eyes*. It’s been more than a year now and you’ve barely, barely peeked. You upended your routines, you moved apartments, you holed yourself inside.* The red is starting to peel apart into other colors, unflattening into browns and greens. *You even made a friend here, and you gave that up too.* The color is peeling off the wall, into the tunnel itself, becoming the tunnel itself. *And for what, Mona?* I can still feel my legs breaking into a long stride and then a run, but only barely. I am the blurry fact of motion, a disturbance along an axis, an implementation detail. *You’re going out. You’re joining in.*

I burst out of the tunnel at breakneck speed, in a dozen different places, at a dozen different moments. It’s not that I don’t know where I am — quite the opposite. A footbridge across the trickling Zhangjiang, a wide and windy Century Avenue, a shed near a burbling fountain outside a great metro station. I recognize all these places, but they’re mere floaters in my eyes as I unfurl myself into the city to see and be seen, to decorate a hundred walls. A second sun erupts diode by diode to soak Shanghai’s streets in soap-bubble suchness for anyone who cares to simply stop and see. The rain has passed, and the dead of night is not dead at all.

I am a mossy maelstrom of butterflies and antlers and roots and cilia, in which nothing persists for longer than a moment before decaying elegantly into something new. Snail palm shells fronds. Periwinkle is not a color it's my whole circulatory system inhaling blooming exhaling decaying into the barnacular the tentacular, a recurring negative space in creation. Briefly, of all things, I am even *people*. In my selfishness, in my insistence of primacy, I see a hand in front of a face, but I simply let go of that miserly fool, who ever dared think a single atom or joule could ever belong to her. Velveteen cycles of creation and destruction, wing and bone, lit gently and obliquely from nowhere at all. A hawk, a mouse, and a mushroom are eating each other, and this strange loop is my shoulder? No, someone is shaking my shoulder...

“Hey, it’s *you*!”

I remember this woman...with the dress made of traffic-cone shells...from the elevator at Double Descent. These facts were never absent, not really, but a detail snaps into focus, and that detail is Mona Xu. *It never lasts, the way it lasts...*that’s my sad absurd little thought, but she’s beaming at me with a joy that says I know you, that says let’s go ’til morning, and maybe it’s not so bad, suddenly, to be a detail in such eyes, dark velvet wrapped in orange-red reassurance. Maybe there are hours to go.

“We think we know where it’s headed.” Her hand wraps, soft and a little clammy, around my wrist. “Let’s move.”

I manage to tear my eyes away from the gigantic quasigram along god-knows-what boulevard, feeling the awful kink in my neck, seeing outer tendrils of the Ripple flickering in the scan lines. It looks like — well, a little of everything. It’s a carnival of pareidolia: wings and bones and roots, always already dead. I see it reflected in her dress, in the the fixpoint snailshell shapes designed to tag the Ripple, to make it through the slice-and-dice of the Mirror Sea’s anonymization algorithm unscathed. I see it in the garments of the other Ripplechasers scattering down the street, and — what on earth is this? — in the wreath of dried flowers that someone’s plunked onto my head. Back in my day, we had been going for a coral reef look. But maybe that had been too on the nose.

The last wisp of the Ripple disappears. It’s fair to say that the next thing I know, I’m somewhere else entirely.