What happens to me next?

Your guess is nearly as good as mine. I found my way out of my own surprise party sometime before it died down. I found myself out on the street, doing what it took minute-by-minute effort to avoid this morning: looking at the displays. There’s something in there, all right. The goldenrod rays in the Sea — which, surely, must be caused by all that sunflower memorabilia — they’re always far in the background, extending in streaks that want to be straight, but can’t quite manage. They shine like crayon scrawl made of nighttime skylines, and they intersect at distant, twinkling nodal points. A structure is forming in there. No single display could show the smallest fraction of it. But I’m carrying around mental machinery that makes it impossible to miss: I draw connections, fill gaps, extrapolate.

I haven’t felt this way, not really, since those last few good nights with Cai. But the logic that we saw in the Sea back then was gooey and silty. It explained the quiet and ephemeral things, the fine texture of the world. This is different. The thing emerging in the Sea is rigid and discrete. Its structure mirrors the ward network’s: it almost seems to play it forward in stuttering half-steps. It echoes what little I understand of Shanghai’s network of L2 chains that control the parallel yuan and the court of minor currencies it keeps. The metro system, the traffic cycles, it’s all in there, it’s all far more interconnected, and yet far simpler, than we ever imagined. You just have to see these sunflower-yellow nodes and edges, you really do, glinting unseen but not quite, mapping hidden causalities...

Late afternoon in Hongkou East I see a man drop to his knees and put his hands behind his back, eyes averted from a particularly vibrant Mirror Sea display wrapped around a bank branch. Within minutes, faster than you’d expect, there are Weather Bureau agents storming out of a veetle with their visors and synthvox to sedate him. You can call 1-1-4 to sic the Bureau on yourself, see. That way they’ll go easy on you. I wanted to see if he’s a neikonaut, to ask if he’s seeing what I’m seeing. But it could so easily be something else entirely — the Sea is wide and deep enough to hold dozens, even hundreds of jostling delusions.

Night falls in what feels like a blink. I’m back in Beiwan, regaining a grip. All my stuff is still here at YINS. And the Safety floor is quiet, half-dark. I stride towards my desk, hoping to see no one.

“*Mo*-na,” someone whispers behind me.

I almost throw my back out, wheeling around that way. “*Fucking* hell, Yao!”

“Mona.” He peeks out of a frosted conference room, gesturing for me. “C’mere. You’re really going to like this.”

I’m not so sure about that. I smell hot glue in there.

I step inside and see about three hundred pieces of printed Sunflower Sieve debris on the table. He’s been assembling it. It’s — oh, Jesus, it really looks different now. All the same colors and surface textures, only far less gnarled and coiled. These new shards, they offer extended, jointed notchways. There’s no way Yao could have started with a plan; most likely he just found two matching surfaces and started gluing, until he ended up with this hollow network of scraggly spindles, a triangle-mesh self-scaffold, the endoskeleton of something ravenous and rotund, armspan-wide and growing. I have the uneasy sense it could expand forever in any direction.

“I saw it out there,” he explains. There’s a deeply quadratic twang to his voice, and I can’t make myself look him in the eye. “But it’s not the same structure, exactly. It’s not the mirror image, either. It’s the *dual* —”

“Out...where?” I ask. Not altogether sure why I’m playing it dumb, except that Yao’s presence in this room feels like a whirlpool. Instinct tells me to struggle away with all possible might, lest I get sucked into some dark vortex, some final calm.

“Oh, *come on*.” This is not his usual tone of voice, so languid and heavy-lidded. “I don’t mean to be weird about it, but we all know what happened to you last year. It’s okay though!” His usual brightness peeks through, pitched just too high. “I look at it too. Sometimes I’ll have a tough p-set, and I go and take a long walk, and the answers just *come* to me.” He angles around to meet my eyes, and smiles through me. “I can tell you’re using it too. It’s *okay*.”

Our debris clicks and chatters and interlocks, and I can tell he’s manipulating it in a way that I don’t understand, that I don’t want to understand. It feels like losing that game at the Weather Bureau, only the light is warm and gold instead of cold and white. Something tightens and flexes inside me, far too quickly. I want to be sick.

“Yao, you need to take the inversion.”

“That makes two of us.” He laughs like I’m in on the joke.

“I’m serious, dude. I’m gonna go warm up a scanner.”

“No*.*” He grasps my arms. “*I’m* serious. You can’t. While I was out there...I...it was the most wonderful coincidences, everywhere. Couples. Dogs. Buses.” There are whole stories brewing behind each of these words, which is why it takes him so long to force them out. “It’s all falling into place out there. And I’m *causing* it, Mona. I can keep doing this for people...”

“You better come with me or I’m going to call in a four-oh-eight.” Dangerously uncooperative patient.

“Please — no.” His mouth moves in fishy little o’s. “*Please*, would you please just go in there with the Bridge? There are some little snags in there, some, some, some little bits I know aren’t working right. If you get those, I can do the whole city.”

The four-oh-eight is both faster and more violent than I expected. I take two steps back and flex my wrist in a particular way until my wanji buzzes three times. I imagine some unfortunate grad student grumbling out of bed and pulling on pants — but within a minute Deng, Rui, and two others burst out from behind closed doors. Yao sees what’s happening and panics too late; I mouth *sorry* as we restrain him by the wrists.

“Mona, are you totally sure?” Deng asks, hovering over Yao with a sedative. He’s wiggling to get an arm free, and then he does, and then he clips her in the nose with a flailing hand.

Rui looks white in the face as they pin him back onto the table. “God’s sake, Jinghan, just do it!”