Deng’s making a show of it. As I pull up a cafeteria chair, she slides me a heavy sheet of paper marked up in her own hand, in tight blue ink — even her handwriting has good posture. It’s the same set of nine equations she showed me earlier. Or very nearly so. She smiles.

“The Sunflower Sieve has appeared. It’s time to write the paper on its inversion, or you’ll soon be scooped.”

Deng is narrating the world. I know not to interject, even when she takes a long sip of chamomile and bites into a pastry. Of course I’m worried about getting scooped, I insist to myself. Even though any mentions of the Sieve’s danger in the new literature are vague and performative. Even though the part of me that cares about any of that feels scotch-taped together right at this moment. My sense of normalcy is so fragile that every blink and twitch and saccade sends me back to that vision of interlocking debris.

She pats her face with a napkin. “Now, I know you were hoping to work with Dr. Rui, but you might have noticed that he’s taken to spearheading the Safety department’s response to the new egg. He’s become awfully preoccupied with his memos and whatnot.” She sniffs. “So that leaves you with me.”

“You want to co-author my paper?”

“Yes. It’s...past time.” She stumbles on that, tapping at the sheet of paper. “And I would like to do it in a particular way. A purely mathematical formulation. A clean sheet.”

I read between the lines. I wonder where she might take this if I happen to push back.

“You don’t want to mention that I used the Bridge. At all.”

“I want a work that is as objective and useful as possible.”

In early days I clung to hope that Deng and I would submit a paper together. But my ideas were soggy paper-mâché next to an honest-to-god volcano, a force of nature. She didn’t know how to nurture what little I could give her. It never played out quite like this, in those long-curdled fantasies. But here and now, I have something that Deng wants, for whichever of her amorphous reasons. This is the approval I craved. So maybe it’s not high summer sunshine on my face.

“Okay,” I hear myself say. “Let’s not mention the prototype.”

A whole cloud of unease dissolves pleasantly at this: about the diving-bell and the debris and the Sea. All of that’s just math, isn’t it? Just equations playing out in predictable ways?

Then it hits me again, in a different light, genuinely warm: *I’m submitting with Dr. Deng Jinghan!* Oh, god, the citations! I try not to salivate, imagining them stack up.

“First author, though, right?” I ask, feeling faintly craven.

She smiles, crosses her legs, and takes another bite. “First author.”