The name of the game is Mona Is The Big Hero. There’s a banner over the whiteboard that says this, more or less. There are streamers (YINS-colored), some kind of sunflower cakes (store-bought), and summerpop playing on Dr. Ku’s bluetooth speaker. I note with discomfort that some of the balloons have been printed in the shape of the diving-bell. I don’t like that anyone’s examined it so closely.

“Oh, good, you’re here.” Deng greets me briskly, as though this really were an emergency meeting. “I sent Yao to fetch you half an hour ago. Have you seen him?”

My fingers trace lines in my forehead. It’s awfully bright in here. “Not at all.”

She puckers her face disapprovingly. “Well. Have a cake!”

The room is lousy with Sieve debris. There’s a noisy, feverish tingling at the edge of everything. It’s just a little extra something — a filmy lens that bobs in and out of my awareness, showing me the words behind the words, the colors behind the colors. If it wasn’t so terrifying, it would be sort of funny, clocking which of the department’s biggest Sieve whistleblowers are using the algorithm themselves. As it stands, I feel it sloshing and between us, filling up the space between the pleasantries and the paper-cup toasts. The Sieve seems to want to gently copilot my words — and for a while, I let it, tuning out my own mouth-sounds and wondering, *is anyone else seeing this?* And also, *where’s Yao?*

Dr. Qin stands up and gives a nicely parceled speech about how my inversion is going to make the Sunflower Sieve safe to use, for now. “This is only the first step,” he concedes. “YINS must redouble its efforts to derive a version that produces no debris.” He nods graciously to Deng, who has been looking awfully flustered. The secret behind my paper is no secret, really — people keep muttering about *the Bridge*, *the Deng Bridge*, and she roves around white-knuckling a plastic fork like a prison shiv. She and Rui are doing this binary-star thing where they’re on opposite sides of the room at all times.

The real, unpleasant surprise is that someone from the YINS press office is here to profile me.

“Tell me about your childhood,” she says, over the whir of the camball.

So I tell her about cable cars and a flock of stray parrots. Dim sum on Sundays with men in vests and women in blazers, my parents and their friends always talking about *building* this or that, me staring out the half-fogged window wondering where it could possibly be. Geriatric beach-fossil San Francisco given six months a hundred times, her sweets and stories for me, the sickness glimpsed early through car windows between soccer and robotics. Tents. Fire. Asthma.

“We need a few hundred seconds of facial movement,” she says when I pause for breath, peeking up from her tablet. “Just keep talking.”

My first acid trip too early, the whole city hanging by the thread of the Bay Bridge. The long running joke about how California should go it alone. The conspiracy, from left and right, from within and without, that made it real. The President calling it a Mexican colony, a Chinese colony, old snarls on new lips, the last few rungs of that awful ladder rusting and snapping off. A mayor walks into a drone tipped with carfentanyl, and no one in her office carries narcan. Smoke. Tremors. Waves.

"Tell me about Stanford?"

Men in uncertain uniform watching who gets off at Palo Alto station. Ha, not redlights, but you get the idea. Hills of quiet flax, my world shrinking. My parents in deep Marin with solar panels and a sheepdog and a gun, more train rides in the other direction. Los Angeles, vibrant and present with its own decay and regeneration. Ayahuasca work with fortunate sons and poverty's daughters. The fog I was born in lifted briefly from my mind, a repressed urge to engage rather than observe, wondering if I should change majors, change schools, on the return trip north. Right, Stanford...

"When you met Dr. Deng, did you realize who she *was* at the time?"

Another bad semester, another summer break with a near-stranger in Venice Beach. In October, an oddly formal email to the *plant-medicines* mailing list. A ten-minute conversation in Deng's pompous English and my underbaked Mandarin, a half-finished machine and her inside it with a soldering iron. A stack of papers in Chinese filled with words my translator app didn’t even know yet, laying out the field of neikotics. And suddenly, a reason to stay enrolled and keep my GPA above water: I was a barnacle on this group building something called a UTMS scanner, one of the first of its kind Stateside. When it was done, I would sit inside and — in a way that I could hardly imagine — speak directly to a computer in its own language.

And no. I didn't realize who she was at the time.