

A Gift in Darkness

By Clarissa Wong Wern Ting

I knew I deserved it. In fact, everyone probably knew I was the best candidate out there. To enter the Young Science Talents Programme had been my dream since ten. More than anything else, I longed to shine light into the murky depths of quantum physics, virology, and other fields that kept me awake at night. As the winner of numerous Science accolades, this prestigious three-year mentorship research programme should be within my reach, shouldn't it? However, there was another murky factor I had forgotten about. How silly of me.

"Hi, Jane! Any news of your application?" my mother chirped, furiously kneading the bread dough of expired flour. This substandard ingredient was not a choice, given my father was a technician. No, only the most deserving in society, the politicians and the rich businessmen, could afford to lay their hands on proper flour. Rather, they were the cheating brats, the bribers, those whose overflowing dough came from shady dealings. "Ever since that crooked Mr Kwan became prime minister, whatever dough those at the top have stays there, and just rises," my mother always said, chanting a gloomy rule of what life had become. "But as more and more immoral people follow them into dishonour, it's not an excuse for us to follow them and throw our morals away" she reminded. Greed, corruption, dishonesty, these traits were definitely immoral, but why did it always seem that those who personified these characteristics rose above the rest? Could it be that everyone had been overcome by vices, and that values no longer had weight or place in society? I shuddered to imagine that all hope might be lost.

"Jane?" my mother prodded.

"No news," I answered resignedly, for what seemed like the umpteenth time.

I had thought hard on the way back from school. What did it mean to be deserving? Jackie, the worst student in class, had gone on to Harvard University two years early. He probably wouldn't understand anything there, I thought, but it doesn't matter, because all his ridiculously wealthy family cares about is the label. How could my cherished opportunity be lost to someone with the money to purchase the bragging rights?

You are thinking on a tangent again, Jane, I chided myself. Think purposefully. In order to enter the Young Science Talents Programme, what must I do? If I stick to my values, I would have an empty conscience, but an empty dream as well. If I crossed over to their side, to the dark side, well... that is impossible. I couldn't burden my family for money, for we have little. I had gone to the office to enquire about my application countless times, but was met with snooty ignorance. With registration closing in a week, this could be my last chance.

This wasn't noble, but it was the best option I could think of... Scraping the sides of my savings-box, I counted my total life savings – a measly hundred dollars. When I become successful, maybe an influential scientist, I would do more to make society right again. Maybe, I could gather a force of like-minded revolutionaries and change society for the better! We would disentangle the metal wreck the corrupt had

wrapped around all the institutions. Yes, I could hope towards that future, but first, it was necessary to rise up society's rungs to gain that power. A scrawny student would never be heard.

Thus, with a beating heart, I walked to the National Science Institute, dressed in my best clothes. Spotting the officer who had previously ignored my pleas behind the registration counter, I fished around in my pocket to make sure the impeccably-wrapped bundle of notes and coins was still there. "Dear sir," I started, "I am a servant of Ms Jane Lee, who won both the Annual Science Quiz and the National Science Olympiad. She really wants to join the programme, please." He had not looked up. "Here's something for you," I continued, my wavering voice betraying my nerves. The coins jingled enthusiastically, their noise foreign to someone used to receiving wads of notes. He must have recognised me, for there was a flash in his eyes. Oh no, he's seen through my disguise and will reject me again, I despaired. He remained silent for a long while. Taking this as a cue to leave after another futile attempt, I turned around.

"Dear Miss, tell your master she can be confirmed as the forty-ninth applicant," he suddenly muttered. I faced him in disbelief, bowing deeply in the only way I could express my thanks. "You can take this with you," he continued, holding out my money package. I beamed at him, exuberant and grateful, but he was looking down, as if afraid to meet my gaze.

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