

The Insignia
By Edison Siow Xiong

"You seem highly qualified for this position, *miss.*" His voice saccharine, a set of perfect teeth smirking at me. He flung my academic portfolio onto the desk between us, having scarcely skimmed through it.

My heart pounded mercilessly in my chest. "My family would also like to give you this." I fished out the envelope from my sling bag leaning against the wicker chair I was seated on, and handed it to him.

He wasted no time in tearing off the carefully applied tape sealing the envelope and procuring the large bankroll of dollar-notes from its interior. He held the notes to the light, verifying their legitimacy. After he concluded this 'test', his smirk widened. "That's quite a sizable amount here."

"My family is very grateful for the opportunity you're giving me." I said, perfectly rehearsed. "It's all of their savings." Father had insisted I add the latter phrase, because they would sometimes try to extort more from richer families.

"It's alright," He said sweetly. "I can feel your dedication to this school." He shoved the notes back into the envelope and put it aside. He then pulled out a sheet of matte paper from under the desk, and laid it on the desk between us.

I almost stopped breathing. Sitting in front of me was the one document that any other girl my age would kill to receive. My fingers trembled like mad as I reached out my hand to touch it. Oh my god. It was real. "*Dear Applicant, we are pleased to inform you...*"

I was so giddy my eyes glazed to the bottom of the page, where the insignia of the school was printed in full colour. Inside a gold bounded circle, the face of the campus, which was designed in the style of a domed pantheon, towered in front of 3 students with their backs to the viewer and their arms reaching towards the campus. At the tip of the dome, partially covered, was a circle representing the sun, with rays shooting out in all directions.

How many times have I gazed upon this insignia, dreaming one day of entering the walls of that hallowed building? And now the keys sit right at my doorstep, waiting to be picked up. My gaze slid towards the empty space for recipient's signature. Once I sign here, all the work will be worth it...

I must have daydreamed for some time, because he poked my hand and brought me back to Earth. "This must be a huge moment for you, isn't it?" He asked sympathetically.

"Y-yes." I forced a lump down my throat. *Don't cry, don't cry...*

Suddenly he clasped my hand with both of his. "Miss Leong, you're such a pretty and bright girl. I'm sure you will have a bright future here."

That was it. The dam burst, and suddenly I was a mature teenager, almost a woman, sobbing like a baby in front of a complete stranger. "Thank you," I murmured. "You don't know how much this means to me..."

I looked up at his face. Though he wasn't handsome, his eyes were gentle and kind. Suddenly he simpered, and that all vanished. He peeled a hand off mine and used it to slide the certificate closer to him. "You're such a model student, Miss Leong, it would be a shame if you couldn't enter our academy..."

My heart collapsed like a house of cards as I realized what was happening. I was a fool to have not been more on guard, especially after hearing all the things that happened to other girls. I had even dirtied my face with makeup this morning to make myself look more plain. But fifteen minutes into the interview, I had thought I was safe...

I stared again at the insignia on the certificate, now in his hands. The artist hadn't drawn it accurately; judging by the students' proximity to the campus, the building would block out the sun's light, bathing them in shadow. It epitomized everything I knew growing up – small people whose lives were consumed in darkness, desperately grasping for a light that only the powerful possessed.

"Well *miss?*" He squeezed my hand. For a moment I considered knocking him unconscious and escaping with my family's money. But I remembered my father's words. *If you don't get in, you're done.*

That's right, if I failed this interview, my future was ruined. Lightless. I had to get in, so I would do anything he wanted me to. No one could stop him.

"Alright." I say quietly. The smirk crept up to his cheeks. He walked over to my side and pulled me up by the arm, and I didn't resist in standing. He led me to an inconspicuous side door and opened it. I stepped into darkness.

(800 words)