

Exam World  
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The grey man deposited a tray on the desk in front of me. I tried to make eye contact, but his eyes, set into the flabby skin of his head as though there were no skull inside it, were cold, dim and lifeless. If he saw me, he saw only a shadow, or a speck of dust.

The boy sitting next to me watched the Invigilator walk away, then turned to face me. "What exam do you have next?" he whispered. The boy was perhaps only nine or ten years old. He must have done well to get here. I looked at him and saw the same face, the same black hair, plastered to his scalp by sweat, exactly as it was yesterday, as when he had greeted me briefly with a sad smile on his face yesterday evening. As he ate, his hands twitched.

"Economics," I said.

"I haven't done that one yet. What is it?"

Having only read through the course introduction last night, I was not in a good position to talk about the subject, but I could do well enough for a ten-year-old. "It's about the mechanisms behind an exchange system – a standardised exchange system called money – and how it's linked to... products and services and stuff like that."

"God, that sounds hard."

"Have you done Mathematics II yet?" I asked.

He slid a brown book towards me: the Mathematics II course-book. Yeah, I remembered my copy of that book. I left my tears and blood in it.

"Good luck," was all I could manage, and we continued to eat, side by side in silence.

After eating, I turned to the first chapter of Introduction to Economics by Rhydia A57 Schall and began to read. The boy – Candidate 221 C0 589, as I gleaned from the name plate that one of the Invigilators had accidentally knocked over on his way past – had got out a thick pad of paper and was already scribbling down equations in response to the Mathematics II textbook. As I read, I could hear his pencil scratching against the paper, and his furious erasing and correcting. It must be tough for him, I thought. He's obviously only just reached the C hall, and he's already faced with Mathematics II.

At lunch time, a different Invigilator came around and gave us our trays. The boy had the staple diet – an orange, spinach and carrot – while I had a hillock of greens and two oranges. The Invigilator leaned on the front of the desk and looked at me. "Hey," he said in a low, husky voice. "I 'eard you did good in your Chemistry III. Very good. You keep that up and you'll be in B hall before you can say Phenomenology."

"Thank you, sir."

"Yeah, an' I also 'ear that they *are* talking about you, you know."

"Who are talking about me, sir?"

"The Examiners are. They know talent when they sense it." The man nodded, a silly grin on his face. I gulped. The Examiners? Talking about *me*? "We're keeping an eye on you, we are." He turned to the boy, who had been staring at me throughout the conversation. The Invigilator picked up the boy's orange and smashed it on his head. "Oi – look sharp! You've got work to do!"

With a final nod in my direction, the Invigilator stalked off. I was left in shock. I couldn't quite believe that I – a mere C Candidate – could be a topic of discussion among Examiners. The boy next to me could scarcely believe it either. "Whoa," he said to me. "You must be really good. What was this... Kellistry thing he was talking about?"

"Chemistry. It's about... substances – substances which react to make new substances. I basically had to remember a lot of different reactions, types of reactions and – you know – how they worked and why they happened."

"It sounds great. The Examiners... Wow. I don't think that could ever happen to me. I only managed to get out of E hall because of my Art Criticism paper. I like art."

"Yeah? Well maybe if you get another paper like that, the Examiners might be talking about you too."

“Nah, don't be silly. If I fail this one, I'll be back down to D. Oh God, I hope that doesn't happen. I don't think I can stand any more of that gruel.”

I flinched at the thought of it. “Still, you've done really well so far,” I said, trying to keep his spirits up.

“Hey,” he said suddenly in a quieter voice, “do you think these 'substances' might actually exist? That we might find them somewhere? What do you think? Wouldn't you love to try some of those reaction things?”

“What, for real?”

“Yeah, for real. You know, although I've only done a few Art papers, I've been really, really wanting to get some paints. Instead of writing equations, notes, doodles, I could actually paint things, like the painters I've studied did.” There was a note of optimism in his whisperings. “Hey, that gives me another idea! Maybe there are some substances you can react to make paints!” An Invigilator in the distance turned around and bellowed at the boy to keep his voice down. The boy flushed red, and then whispered to me, “What do you think?”

“Maybe. Maybe it's possible. But some of the substances – well, I suppose most of them – are actually very dangerous, in various ways. I doubt that we'd find any, and if we did, it could easily back-fire if we didn't know what we were doing.”

“Hmm. Well, maybe when you've done Chemistry IV or something, you'll know how to do it.”

“Maybe. It would be great.” I can't say my heart was in it at that point. As fun as it must be to do some of the many experiments with substances that I had learnt about in my chemistry courses – see those fabulous colour changes, heat things until they bubbled, or even disappeared completely – all I could really think about was mastering this Economics course and keeping myself in favour with the Examiners. Because if I did that... well, the results I'd achieve... the possible consequences were so fragile, so unthinkable, that trying to imagine them might just make them burst.

In the late afternoon, after a few more hours of studying, we had a talk from Lesacha A29 Greenton. She was probably in her mid-fifties, and she was reasonably short; her wiry black hair, though, actually came down to half her full height. She came up onto the platform, rubbing and squeezing her hands together as though she were trying to wring them dry of water.

“The power of examination,” she said, in a scratchy, and also somehow very small voice, “is all around us. It is the power to open doors, yes, the power to advance, to be able to absorb new knowledge that has come down to us from the Great Examiners – but it is also a creative power. It is the power of examination that grows our world, quite literally. Examination is the manifestation and also the consummation of knowledge, which brings together the forces of the mind and the spirit to create new realities. You lot know of only a limited reality. But the reality of the hall, the desk, the pen and the paper which we have all experienced as part of our journey of examination, is but a small part of the greater cosmos. You cannot conceive of the wondrous realities that would open up to you – which *can* open up to you, as freely as the pages of a book – through excellence in examination.

“Indeed, it is through the focusing of our powers of knowledge, developed through decades of examination and transferred to us by the very *energy* of that examination, that the Examiners are able to examine our world – to learn about it and to manage it, to grow its food, to create its possibilities, to create *you*. And it is also these powers which we transfer to *you* in the creation of new examinations. It is the cycle of energy, mediated by examination, which gives you your life, for we, as Examiners, pass down to you our excellence in the form of your course-books and your tests. However, you do not absorb that energy just by taking the exams. Only the industrious – only those that have opened their own mind to the force of our tests – can truly assimilate the power of the examination, the knowledge that it brings forth, and thereby the creativity that it gives rise.

“Through the efforts of the Markers, the Examiners are always with us. They will always know those whose minds are open to their power. They know your successes, and your failures. Through the distribution of their examinations, their insight becomes ubiquitous. Their eyes are everywhere. Where there are exams, the eyes of the Examiners are shining out at you, ready to accept you into the echelons of true knowledge and creativity, ready also to pity you should your mind be

closed and your failures send you back.

“I started as you started. I sat my exams in this very hall, then moved further up and up, until I had fully accepted the light of knowledge. I believe the turning point for me was my extensive and detailed answers to a History paper in the form of a dissertation, ten years ago. I had intuited a variety of sources, and I had drawn together knowledge acquired from prior examination. The energy of this was what propelled me forward to where I am today. However, you must realise as I do that one success is not enough. My success in History was but one of many that I had to achieve in my lifetime before my Naming. Make your success consistent, and you will join us. The energy of the examination will carry you through to us.

“Thank you. And on behalf of the Examiners, I wish you good state of mind in tomorrow's test.”

The whole hall stood and bowed. Lesacha A29 Greenton bowed back to us and left the platform. Most people took the opportunity to move their legs up and down. It's not unusual, after all, for the pressure of study to be so great that we stay rooted to our desks all day and night. The boy next to me sat down and continued working, but I stretched my limbs for a while, finding myself thinking about the Examiner's words. I remember another lecture where we heard about the skill of drawing together knowledge from many previous examinations – perhaps even all of them – and the idea that we could never be very successful without this skill. It just made me more nervous about the coming test, though, thinking of all the things I had to remember from my maths papers. As they say, once you've done an exam, you never get it again. You never see the same course-book twice.

I was drowsing at the desk, my brain idly swilling thoughts of economic theory. The partition was up. It was dark. I was brought out of my half-slumber by a whispering.

“Hey. Are you awake?”

I opened my eyes and saw the boy looking at me. His head was down on his arms like mine, but he seemed quite alert. Then I realised that his pad of mathematical scribblings was still beneath his arms, and a pen was clutched in his fingers.

“Yeah,” I said.

“What is it all about?” he whispered. A pleasant, innocent smile was on his small face. “Where does it come from?”

“What?”

“The stuff we learn about. My painters. Your 'substances'. This mathematics. And the people you read about in the History papers, and all the places they lived in. Where are they all? Where did they go?”

“I don't know,” I said to him in earnest. “I really don't know.”

“Haven't you ever thought about it?” I smiled back at him. I used to think about it a lot when I was younger too. There was a time, in the early days of D hall, when I asked every guy and girl I ever sat next to where it all came from, and why we were doing what we were doing. I gave up. There comes a time when you realise you have to focus on your advancement. Think too much about it, and you'll find yourself stumbling in your tests.

“There are lots of ideas,” I said. “Some people say that the Examiners simply make it up. That it's only the examination that matters. Others think there is another world that the Examiners can see, and we can't – a world of painters and chemists and mathematicians, and a whole load of other people. A magical world.”

“Maybe that's what Lesacha was talking about,” the boy said. “She talked about doors opening. About your mind opening up to things. Maybe she meant that it would open up... open up to the world of magic. D'you reckon that's true?”

“I don't know. I think she was talking more about the door to the Examiners opening – not a door to another world.”

“But what if the Examiners *live* in that other world?”

“I doubt it. I think it's more likely that they get their knowledge from course-books like ours – but really, really old course-books that only they can understand. Because I know for sure that if I

lived in that world of magic, I wouldn't be constantly writing tests for people. Would you?"

He shrugged. "I guess that's the creative power she was talking about. Examiners creating tests. But you're right. If the magic world existed, I'd be making paintings – not more tests."

"Try not to think about it too much. You want to concentrate on your Mathematics II."

"I guess so."

"Good luck for tomorrow."

"Yeah, you too."

He carried on reading and scribbling even as I fell asleep.

Results time. Despite hundreds and hundreds of similar times, the moment of the results *never* fails to churn up the stomach. It sends a flush of heat through your body that makes you feel as though your heart will burst and the air around you catch fire. Although the economics paper seemed to go reasonably well, I still worried that maybe I'd got certain calculations wrong, and the extended answer bit at the end of the paper was a little unexpected; I just hoped that I'd managed to include all the relevant points – all the points they wanted you to put down.

The boy was breathing very shallowly. I've no doubt that everyone experiences roughly the same thing when it comes to results time: all that varies is how well we hide it. The boy wasn't making much of an effort in that regard. Sweat was dripping down his face ever since the exam's end – probably during the exam too. We had eaten lunch and had read through the Post Examinations Skills Primer (mine was about how to draw and analyse pie charts), and he had scarcely stopped shaking. He'd told me about when he was in E hall and a girl next to him had been sent back a hall. He was so scared for her, because he'd heard the rumour – the rumour everyone's heard – that there are no Invigilators in F hall. It's a scary rumour, especially since nobody I've spoken to has ever been to F hall; nobody's even sure it exists. The boy told me that he gets especially scared at results time because he's worried about the person sitting next to him, as well as himself. But then he said that he was sure I'd be fine.

Finally, after an agonising silence, the Chief Marker came into the hall. It was the bald, plump man again. Unlike some Chief Markers, he stands on the floor in front of the platform, instead of getting onto it and addressing us from above.

"Please stand and move in front of your desks," he said, and we all did so. "Candidate 112 C9 37 – move forward. Rise to 10." The candidate in question, on our left, did as instructed and stood behind her new desk, with everyone watching her. She exhaled deeply. "Candidate 341 C11 990 – move forward twice. Rise to 15." The boy in question, showing no emotion that I could perceive, moved to his new place and duly changed his name plate. The Chief Marker continued to go through all the Candidates in the room, with everyone moving to their new positions.

Long after two girls had taken the places that the boy and I had previously occupied, the Chief Marker called out my companion's result. "Candidate 221 C0 589 – please move to the exit. Drop to D19." I looked at him, tried to muster up an expression of comfort, but it was hard to convey anything without words. To my surprise, he smiled at me, weakly, before walking away from our desk towards the back of the room.

I was last to be called out.

"Candidate 894 C10 778 – come to the top of the class and rise to 25. Congratulations."

Almost numb – perhaps not with shock but with something like anticipation, but a bit less pleasant – I walked stiffly to the very front of the class, and rolled over the number on my name plate. The Chief Marker nodded his head at me, almost imperceptibly, as I assumed my new position, but his mouth and facial expression remained as stern as ever. "Please remain standing while we await the new course-books."

It was only a few minutes before they arrived. After an advancement, there was always a sense of excitement at this moment. For those who had regressed, however, there was always a sense of dread. I remember that feeling. I can't imagine how it must feel for the boy who had just had to leave the hall. I came close to it once, but I'd never had to move out of a hall once I'd got in.

The lady Invigilator moved through the hall methodically, throwing each Candidate's next

course-book in front of them. My new course was called Introduction to Geography. My new companion – a woman perhaps five years older than me – received Law I. In short order, everyone was seated and was starting to read their new subject matter.

When I opened my own book, I was in for a surprise. There was a small piece of paper stuck to the first page. A note was there, written in hasty script, headed with my own Candidate number.

*“I am now quite sure that it is you. Read this course with rapture and you will know of the world we once had. When you advance, you will surely move into B hall. I will be ready to escort you. Kristina A60 Proud.”*

I stared at the note for a long time. I re-read it and re-read it, trying to make sense of it. An Examiner – a named one – had inserted a note in my course-book. Had I heard of this woman before? Wasn't she the one who wrote my Plant Life Cycle course-book? I cursed myself for not being able to remember.

Eventually I realised that much time had passed and I hadn't even progressed beyond the title page. A wave of panic rushed through me. Trying to show no sign of alarm, I took a deep breath and began to read the course proper. I was greeted with a big diagram with shapes on it. The diagram had curved edges at the top; it had a blue background; and the shapes were green. The text said, “This is a map of the world.” I turned the page and was met with a series of spheres, each showing a different part of the map. It said, “Imagine that the map has been wrapped around a sphere. This is what the world, or the planet, really looks like.”

I read the course with fascination, learning about maps, but more importantly, the places on the maps. I learnt about places where there were mountains, deserts, rivers, lakes, fields, hills... all sharing land masses that were separated by vast oceans which were apparently incredibly deep and teeming with life-forms. I learnt the names of the places and the names of the longest rivers, largest lakes and so on. And the questions of the boy came back to me. Where were all of these places now? Where did they go? In the note, Kristina said it was “the world we once had”. Did that mean that people used to live on this planet that I was reading about? I tried to push the philosophical questions out of my mind, but I still found myself reading the course-book well into the night, and thinking about the issues for a good while longer before I could get to sleep.

I enjoyed the Geography examination so much that I would have been genuinely sad if I had moved backward, or even stayed in the same place. When the results time came, my heart was beating a lot faster than usual and my breathing was a lot more irregular. The woman next to me – who hadn't spoken to me all that much – stood up straight and breathed in deeply. It was results time again.

Candidate this and Candidate that were called to move forward, to move back, or to stay where they were. One Candidate also came into the hall from D. Surely that meant that at least one person would move up into B...

“Candidate 894 C25 778. Rise to 7. B7, that is. Please come to the exit at the front.”

There was a collective gasp. It was not altogether *too* rare for someone to advance into B hall - but it was usually the old timers, people who had been in a C hall for many years. I had only been there three years, and to get to 7 straight away was a very good result – a very promising start. My elation was tempered somewhat, though, by the thought of Kristina's note. I was to move to B hall, which meant that she should be coming to meet me. Why would she do that, though? Examiners *never* talk to the Candidates except in lectures – at least, I'd never heard any different.

As my heart was still thumping in my chest, the Chief Marker – the same bald man – touched my shoulder briefly and then opened the big door at the front of the hall before directing me through. We stepped through the antechamber in silence, and then into a long corridor. He opened another door, and we stepped out into that familiar between-space. The walls behind us were rocky, and if it were anything like my previous advancements of hall, the wall of the next hall ahead would be made of stone too. But to the left and right there were no walls to see – it was just black. The floor and ceiling were metallic, and naked light bulbs hung from the latter, illuminating only the path from one hall to the other. As we moved along the path, our footsteps created the clanging noise that echoed around a larger space that I could not see – a strange experience that I had not had for three years.

Just when the door to the next hall came into view, my ears picked up something else. More clanging. More echoes. The texture of the air had changed. As we continued on, I realised that there must be someone else there. Someone else was walking on the metal. Towards us. From the darkness.

When she appeared, I jumped back in fright. She wore a dress that was lighter than the shade of the sky that I had seen when studying courses like Ornithology and Aviation, and she also wore a furry coat over the top, which obscured her figure somewhat. I couldn't really guess how old she was, but all that mattered at that point was that the face framed by her wavy brown hair was decidedly friendly.

The Chief Marker did not seem at all perturbed by her sudden appearance. He received a nod from her, at which he began walking back to the C hall. When he was quite distant from us, the woman spoke.

“Hold my hand. I will lead the way.”

She took my hand, and took me then straight into the darkness. I had never experienced anything like it – being escorted by someone I didn't know through somewhere I couldn't see. I could only feel her hand, hear the echoing of our footsteps and the soft noises of her clothes brushing against each other as she walked.

“This is a staircase,” she said after perhaps ten minutes of walking through nothing. I could no longer see the pathway that was lit. Still holding her hand, all I could do was guide my feet onto the metal steps. After a while, we stopped, I heard a loud clanging sound, and light flooded down from above. She had opened a trapdoor in the ceiling. We emerged, and I saw a room that was neither an exam hall, nor a corridor, nor an antechamber. It had a... a long thing with blankets over it. It had a seat, but not a boxy wooden thing like the seats in the halls: it had sides to it, and it had a fabric covering of some sort. There were other things in the room too, but at that moment the woman shut the trapdoor and looked at me – very intently.

She turned her head from side to side, regarding me closely. “This is my private chamber – typical of those afforded to the minor Examiners like me.”

“Why have you brought me here?”

“Let me explain, but I must be brief. I could be punished if they found out. I had an experience perhaps similar to your own. I worked my way from E to D, and just when I was moving into C, someone came and got me. I was told that I would not be continuing with my studies in the normal way, and that I was to work with a group of others in studying old documents. I joined the group, and together we read ancient works, expanding our knowledge about particular topics enormously. We were also trained to create course material about those topics. I was given a name and promoted to A status as soon as I had written my first course. I was an Examiner, living with the others in a kind of luxury I had never experienced before. But I soon learned that there were Examiners more powerful than we were. We received orders from them periodically, brought by messengers – Invigilators, in fact.

“I also learnt that some of my colleagues had been Examiners all their life – brought up from the beginning to digest arcane facts and devise course-books and the examinations to go with them. I knew it wasn't right that they should be born into a luxury that most Candidates never get, and I became suspicious of the Examiners higher up. Eventually, one of the researchers I lived with – Lyndon Sawyer – was offered a place above the B hall. We speculated that if one could advance as far as the A hall then you'd be where the overlord Examiners lived, or at least closer to them. It was an opportunity we didn't want him to miss, and I knew his curiosity would also get the better of him. But he had to go alone. I haven't seen him for ten years. Maybe he made it above the A hall. Maybe he's one of the top Examiners now – but I doubt it. It was always our intention to find out what was going on with the highest Examiners and to get some justice back in the world. As you may have noticed, none has been forthcoming.”

I could barely take it in. It was clear that just becoming an Examiner was not quite the end. It would not reveal the answers to all the mysteries. A hundred questions went through my head, but chief among them was the question of why she had taken *me*. Was it just because of my academic performance?

“You speak of justice,” I said, “but... but aren't the exams supposed to be a measure of our success? Didn't you deserve to become an Examiner?”

“I'm sorry, but it is not so simple as that. I deserve this luxury no more and no less than anyone else in the world. The purpose of the exams is not to advance you. It's not to give you power; it's to keep you powerless. The top Examiners orchestrate everything in a way I'm only just beginning to comprehend. I was not good at my tests, back when I was a Candidate. I knew I wasn't understanding much about the courses. But I kept advancing. The results were a surprise every single time without fail. Once, I left half of the paper blank, just to see what would happen. I advanced four desks. My desk partner, a clever young lady who had studied hard and completed her own paper, was devastated when she was sent back three.”

“So what's going on?” I said. “I've always felt I deserved my results. The more I study, the better I do.”

“Yes. You do deserve your success. But it will get you nowhere. At the end, there is no point. No goal. But some people are treated differently. The Markers do not always mark fairly. It is my belief that the top Examiners compel the Markers to mark certain people up, and others down. They control our fates in more ways than you can imagine.

“But that is not what I wanted to tell you about. My studies have led me to a discovery that has consumed all of my time and my passion ever since. Look at this.” She moved over to the wall of her chamber and indicated a big picture of the planet, as I had first seen only two days ago – a blue ball, with the shapes of land partially covered by irregular white clouds. “The planet Earth. Beautiful, isn't it? Humans did once live on the surface that your geography course described. They once had all the opportunities of its vast and varied landscape. But instead, we have this. Examination hall after examination hall. It's not right, is it? Can't you see that we've ruined our world? That it could be so much better?”

Kristina's sudden change of tone surprised me. Instead of her measured, pragmatic speech – the tone you'd expect of an accomplished Examiner – she was now passionate, almost desperate. All of my ideas, beliefs and aspirations were overturned at that moment; I saw what *she* saw. I understood her, and a deeply suppressed longing for a better life – a longing I had thought I abandoned years back – came surging to the fore.

“We have to do something about it,” she said. “We have to find the Examiners – the ones who really wield the power.”

“Seriously? We're going to do it? Get rid of the tests? The halls?”

“We must.”

I nodded. I never thought I'd get the chance. But I guess if you get the chance, you have to take it.

Whatever we might have done next, wherever it might have led me, was shattered in an instant when a door crashed open. I barely had time to turn around before someone's hands seized me roughly and pinned my arms behind my back. Kristina cried out just as a thin man in a black jumpsuit gave her the same treatment. My own captor began to drag me out of the room.

“No!” Kristina shouted. “Don't take him away from me again! No!”

She writhed in the grip of the black-clad goon, tears streaming down her face. The man who had dragged me out of the room kicked the door shut behind us. That was the last I saw of Kristina Proud.

I was shoved into my seat in a B hall. A big man with a chubby face pushed the palms of my hands down onto the desk in front of me and looked hard into my eyes. “This is your proper place,” he said, surprisingly softly. “And if you work hard, you will have a new place. Remember that.”

In the beginning I thought about it a lot. I thought about how Kristina might reach me now. I trembled with anticipation whenever I opened a new course-book, in case there might be a new note inside. Eventually, these hopes and excitements faded into my imagination – “what if?” scenarios that I played out in my head when I wasn't working. I went back several places because of my distraction. Soon, the hopes dissolved completely into dreams, and there they stayed.

It had lasted only an hour – maybe not as long as that – and how could an event shorter than an hour affect me forever more? No: I told myself to consider it a mere anomaly. I told myself it might as well have been a dream itself. Everyone dreams of escape at some point. And so it faded back into the greater landscape of my childhood idealism. I focused my mind, studied hard, and found myself advancing in great strides.

Years passed. Years of study and examination. I completed Chemistry IV, V and VI with great success, and Geography I, II and III with even more success. I did courses in Medicine, Storage Devices, Piano Players, Violinists, Utilitarianism, Carpentry, Accounting, Biology... I even learnt new languages – new ways of communicating; one was called Spanish – I did about five papers in that – and another was Korean, which I did seven papers in. The latter was particularly interesting because I had to learn to write again – to write in a different script, almost like a code. I went through all sorts of courses – some fascinating, some fun, some boring, some tedious and lots more that were a mixture of everything. The food improved enormously. In A hall, the food is actually *hot*, and – depending on the Invigilator you get – you sometimes even get to choose what you want for your evening meal.

I met many new people. I made a lot of friends in A hall – intelligent people who were really hard-working. I found that we had done different selections of papers, and we were able to share our knowledge. That way, we found we advanced a little better when we came to do similar courses. Some of them I sat next to for more than one course.

Eventually, the time came. There were two people at the top of the class in A hall, and I was one of them. We stood up in front of the same desk, waiting for the results of our latest test – the test that could finally bring us beyond the top of the ladder. Where would it lead? What was next? My excitement could scarcely be contained. Decades of work. Decades of study, of testing, of results.

And it happened. The Chief Marker gave us the most agonising of delays I have ever known. My companion, a friendly and extremely diligent man, looked at me – his fists clenched, his eyes wild and bright. I was called out. Candidate 894 A25 778 – come to the exit at the front. That was it. I stepped to the front, and the Candidate next to me was called out too. He had the same result. Just come to the front. A rise in number was not mentioned. The Chief Marker escorted the two of us out into the antechamber. We were all silent. A door was unlocked, and we came through into another wood-panelled chamber. The man unlocked another door, and I thought back to the dull Locksmith papers that I'd done. That was over now.

We came out into a very long corridor. The walk was a walk of anguish, an anguish that surged around in a basin of pure delight. I patted my friend on the back to let him know how well he'd done, and he gave me a thumbs up. It was all the congratulating we got. We eventually emerged into the familiar stony openness. This time, the lit path meandered through the blackness and went up and down hills of varying size. The floor and ceiling were still of steel, though, and I thought about the geography of the Earth, trying to imagine this landscape with grass instead of metal. It was very cold in that area, which did a lot to dampen the excitement. I may have been moving up in the world – but what about the others? Stuck in their tests still. Locked away in the halls.

He unlocked a steel door and we descended a staircase. It was very dark, and there was an unpleasant smell coming from somewhere. I think I recognised it. But I couldn't understand how I could recognise a smell – a real smell, as distinct from what I'd read about in Olfaction courses. Down the stairs we went, and then through a stony corridor – dark, cold and damp. At the end was another big, locked metal door. I could hear voices on the other side – just faintly. The Chief Marker yet again produced his prodigious collection of keys and unlocked the door. It squealed as it swung open.

Familiar. Yes. I definitely knew this place. It had been right at the back of my mind, in the festering depths of memory. I looked at my companion, who had a look partly of confusion, partly of fear. He recognised it too. We had both been here before, and we knew it. It just took a little while for the memory to surface.

I looked around at the stone walls. My eyes passed over all the people, young and old. The door slammed shut behind us and the lock clicked. The Chief Marker was gone. My gaze swung over the desks and landed on the sign at the front of the room. There was a time when I could not read that sign, and I always wondered what it meant.

“You two are here,” said a stern, biting voice. Someone was indicating a desk.

When we sat down, we had a good view of the sign. *E Hall 319. Your advancement begins here.*