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*The Standard*

Boys and girls alike, ranging between the ages of 13 and 18, stand in rows waiting to enter their designated classrooms. Blank expressions dominate their faces as they each stare into the distance, each one facing the back of another's head. Hands and faces are scrubbed clean but undereye circles cut deep into their skin, their eyes rimmed with red and their skin gaunt and pertaining a green tint.

At a rhythmic beat they bow their heads into the classrooms, the sound of footsteps reverberating through the halls. They're all wearing muted colors, variations of gray, black, and burgundy.

Proctors, older men and women wearing nurse-like scrubs, also stand before them monitoring the corridors, filing paperwork, and rolling carts around. Similar to the adolescents, who seem to have lost the innocence and naivety once associated with children, they're all sporting the same haircuts. The men have buzzcuts meanwhile the women have their hair slicked back into a ponytail.

In one of the lines, one of the younger boys pressed his back against a wall and nervously fiddled the timecard in his fingers. It is Lucas, restless and darty-eyed, the only person seemingly out of rhythm, the only person craning his neck towards the front of the line. As he gets closer to the doors of the classroom he notices a table propped at it's entrance. One of the proctors, a woman with an impatient frown sculpted onto her face, sits behind it. Observant, Lucas strains to overhear the students standing in front of him as they sign in.

"Name." The proctor says, monotone.

The students reply with a number.

The proctor nods, entering their name into an online system, her hands effortlessly moving across the keyboard. As soon as she looks up the students hand her their timecards and the proctor stamps them with the date, handing the students a brand new pencil and a fat stack of papers. The students then make their way to their seats.

Lucas looks down at his time card. Alongside his name and his ID number, the card species his age, weight, height, race, economic background, and a jumble of other statistics. In a faint attempt to memorize his ID number before reaching the proctor he mutters it under his breath. 16547. 16547. 16547.

As the line moves forward the girl standing before him makes her way to the proctor. A few years older than Lucas, her hair falls in wisps framing her face. She's chewing powder pink gum, which she smacks.

"Name," the proctor demands in the same neutral tone.

"Annie," the girl replies firmly. There's a burning sense of determination behind her eyes.

Lucas turns to her, his eyes weary and mouth gaping open as he fails to conceal his intrigue.

The proctor looks up, irritated. Her eyes bore into Annie unblinkingly. There's a long pause, but she reluctantly stamps the timecard. Annie looks satisfied with herself. Lucas watches her walk away.

The proctor clears her throat. Lucas is slowing down the checking in process. Disoriented, he steps up, trying to keep his eyes on the girl as she takes her seat.

As the proctor demands his name, Lucas replies “16547”. Absentminded, he manages to save himself from embarrassment.

Given the testing material, Lucas then follows to seat himself next to Annie, who revels in mystery.

As the room reaches its maximum capacity, the door is closed and the proctor writes on the board ‘12:00PM’, the end time of the test they were handed coming in. At 8 o’clock a screen is lowered at the front of the classroom producing the steady buzzing sound of an overheated projector. A man dressed in white appears before them, pacing around a sterile office space. He clears his throat, a smile pasted onto his face.

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As the man finishes up his soothing dictation and the screen is raised, Lucas is forced out of the trance. Before he has the time to register its contents a bell rings, emitting a shrill monstrosity of a sound, and everybody furiously starts filling out their tests. Without putting further thought into it, Lucas follows, his eyes flitting from page to page, solving puzzles and answering questions.

As 12 o’clock fast approaches, Lucas finishes up, emitting a sigh of relief. To his left another boy, probably a first year, struggles to finish his test. Following his every move Lucas

prays he finishes on time, hoping to put the boy out of his misery. His attempts prove to be fruitless as the bell rings and the boy is still writing.

“Pencils down,” the proctor calls out, scanning the room.

Her eyes rest on the boy who was rushing to finish. He’s still trying to bubble in his last set of answers. With eyes boring into his skull, the student quickly drops his pencil, anxiety and disappointment in himself drain his face of color.

As everybody starts standing up and leaving the classroom the boy who didn’t finish his test remains seated. Looking back, Lucas sees the proctor claw at the boy’s arm, tearing him away. The doors close behind him before he sees what happens next.

Standing before the classroom door in disbelief, unable to move, Lucas tries to grasp the occurrence of events. Everybody seems oblivious to the fact of what’s happening behind closed doors except Annie, who also pauses before leaving, tempted to go to the boy’s rescue. She meets eyes with Lucas, but she rushes off tearing herself away from the view.

Her reaction sparking more interest, Lucas follows her down the hallways. With students continuously pouring out of their classrooms, he almost loses her his view is obscured. Pushing his way through their heavy bodies he calls out, but Annie doesn’t seem to hear him.

“Excuse me?” He continues desperately.

“Annie!” He finally cries, directly addressing her.

Annie abruptly stops and looks around, facing him. Students seem to have dispersed this far away from the classroom.

“You said your name. In the room,” Lucas haphazardly tries to explain himself in partially formed sentences.

“And that guy. The one who didn’t finish—” he takes a deep breath.

“Look, what’s your name?” Annie interrupts him.

“165—”

“No shrimpy.” Annie interrupts. “Your real name.”

There’s a pause.

“Lucas.” He finally replies, cautious.

“Okay. Lucas. You’re new here, right?”

He nods.

“There are two ways to live your life. Either you don’t ask questions and you’re happy, blissful even, or you ask questions that you consequently hate the answers to.”

Depleted, Lucas thinks back to the boy who stayed behind. The look of pure guilt and terror he saw flash before the boy’s eyes scared him all the while rooting in him a profound sense of curiosity. He wanted answers.

“I need to know,” he replied simply. And that was enough. Taking pity on him, Annie’s features soften up.

“I’ll tell you what,” she tells him. “Come with me. You’ll find that you’re not alone seeking the truth. We have a meeting starting in two minutes, but you have to hurry. I’m already running late and Hunter hates it when people interrupt him.”

Annie takes Lucas by the hand, guiding him through several winding hallways, going through multiple doorways, and walking up different sets of stairs. He didn’t even know this building *had* multiple floors! Had he tried to retrace his steps he would’ve been lost within minutes.

Although they're rushing, none of the students in the nearby vicinity seem to notice or care. Finally Annie stops in front of a door, slowly turning the doorknob and pressing her fingers against her lips signaling Lucas to quiet down. The classroom is decorated, unlike the testing classroom, and full of people, their elbows propped against wooden tables that are stained with paint blotches. Some are even sat on the floor in bean bags, purple, pink, and blue.

A boy stands before everybody. Although he's probably in his late teens, he looks haggard, his expression all knowing. His forehead is worn with wrinkles and the bags under his eyes are so pronounced they look almost permanent, but a light shines behind his eyes, a youthful glow. With broad shoulders, expansive gestures, and authoritative voice, he addresses his audience of misfits. Meanwhile doing so, Annie and Lucas try to sneak into the back of the classroom, but as soon as they take their seats the boy clears his throat.

"Annie. You made it," he says. His voice is stern, scolding even, but a look of relief washes over his face.

The boy turns to Lucas. "And you must be—" he looks down at a list, "Lucas. 16547. From the new batch. It looks like you found your way to us without much trouble."

The others nod in approval, throwing Lucas a few warm welcomes.

His heart rate soaring, its brisk rhythm shakes him to the core. Hit unexpectedly by the recognition, Lucas feels seen, cared for even. Gnawing on the insides of his cheeks, he tries to hide a smile.

Annie, sensing the stress, squeezes his hand. Almost simultaneously, his tension eases, a weight being lifted off his shoulders. Wary yet unafraid, he knows he's in the right place.