

It has been an absolute delight to work with Amanda this semester. She is truly a gifted writer with an especial talent for vivid descriptions and plot-driven narratives. The following is an excerpt from her gripping science fiction novella, which centers on a teenage boy's revelations in a seemingly perfect world.

~Nicole Kruger, Master Tutor

OtherWorld
Chapter 1
By Amanda Hoerter

We walked through the trees slowly, looking for our escape. Jaden was standing close to Mother, hoping that it would all be over soon, his dark hair falling into his eyes. He stumbled over a root, and looked frantically around as he straightened up, seemingly afraid a predator would take advantage of his moment of weakness.

"Oh, don't worry so much, Jaden," I laughed at him. "They wouldn't let us out into OtherWorld if they didn't think we'd be safely returned home."

He glared up at me for noticing his paranoia. I suppose 12 year old boys hate having 17 year old brothers see how scared they are. I wondered to myself what he'd look like when he was older. He had all the features I had when I was younger that I had managed to retain; dark hair, wan complexion, and a constant thoughtful expression on my face, from the way my eyes are set. Jaden was tall for his age, indicating another similarity between us: I loom over most people, and I'm extremely gangly.

I looked over to Kaylin, and she was walking along with us, eyes wide, taking in everything she could. She was only 8, and this trip into OtherWorld was also her first. She, however, was welcoming the expedition into the unknown with open arms and an open mind. When they lowered the age limit, she danced around the house for a week.

This foray into OtherWorld was more for fun than an actual project, but that doesn't mean we didn't have work to do. The people of OtherWorld are incapable of taking care of themselves, so we occasionally step in, unnoticed, and help them out, whether by introducing a new invention to their culture, or trying to introduce them to elements from our culture to make them less barbaric. Tonight, however, all we had done was observe, try to find something that needed fixing. Once we compiled a decent list, we headed to the retrieval point.

The trees were fairly thick where we were, but not so thick that we couldn't see the last bits of the sunset to the west. It was truly a beautiful night, purplish pink strips to one side and a clear, starry sky to the other. Not too far in front of us, the trees opened up into a large clearing, where many of the children started running around and playing. I simply looked up and watched the stars form above me.

Finally, Father pointed.

"Here we are, kids," he grinned at us. "The only fun way to travel between worlds."

There was a giant, circular aircraft lowering down hundreds of ropes with blades on the ends. I've never quite understood why they had the blades at the end, because as the aircraft lowered itself, it always spun, making it impossible to get to a rope and grab on quickly. I suppose it was a way of making sure that people didn't rush forward if they were frightened and cause a riot.

As the aircraft slowed, we all approached the ropes cautiously. It didn't take a genius to figure out what would happen to you if you got too close too soon. Father hailed a person I assumed to be someone he worked with; I didn't know, because Father never talked about work or what he did there. We only knew he worked for the government, and was high up in the Final Examination department.

Don't think about the Final Examination, I sternly told myself, before I got nervous.

"Hey there Rodger!" Father called.

"Bill! Enjoying a night out on the town?" Rodger laughed. "I was coming over to ask you how things are at work. The Final Examination is next week, isn't it?"

"Yes, and we're more swamped than ever," my father said tiredly. "Chancellor Iago wants to personally be involved this year, what with his rumored successor testing this year." He winked at me.

The butterflies that had flared into being in my stomach at the mention of the Final Examination proceeded to spread to the rest of my body, from head to fingers and toes. It was true that I had exceeded every expectation as far as my Examinations had gone for years now. My first examination, when I was six, was everyone's first shock. I got a perfect score, when most children my age got perhaps sixty or seventy percent. We weren't expected to know or observe much beyond ourselves at that age, but I was an exceptionally curious child. When my parents couldn't answer my questions, I asked them to teach me to read so that I could find the answers in the Archives. I learned to read when I was three years old.

Needless to say, I was watched from that day forward. Every child receives his/her Ring after the First Examination, but there were rumors going around that I had received a special Ring for my perfect score. This wasn't true at all, of course, but it was hard to tell people as much when I scored yet another perfect score when I was 12. The Second Examination is for sorting purposes in the schools, and was incredibly important to all of my peers. By this point, I had really ostracized myself from them, because they believed I was cheating somehow. *As if I could,* I always thought angrily to myself.

It was hard staying calm as the Final Examination came. This is when we would receive our Diadem, what made us truly different from, superior to, the people from the OtherWorld. There were 4 types of Diadem. They were Iron, Bronze, Silver and Gold, and ranged in power as one would expect, from Iron, which was least powerful, to Gold, which was most powerful of all. Gold Diadem were incredibly rare; there were only a handful out at a time, because they required scores of 90% or better on the Final Examination. Chancellor Iago had one, along with two or three men and women in the government. Generally, many people had Silver, and the rest had Bronze. Iron hadn't been given to someone in over a century.

That didn't stop kids from panicking though. If you were caught goofing off in class, the instructor would tell you how you would be the first to get an Iron Diadem in years and you'd be a disgrace to our society. You'd think that, after a while, that threat wouldn't work on us. But you'd be wrong; it was enough to quiet even the rowdiest kid.

I was jolted from my somewhat panicked musings by everyone shoving past me to grab a rope; the aircraft had stopped spinning and was waiting for us to board. I reached out for my rope and shook my head. It didn't do to make myself unnecessarily nervous.

“Welcome,” the Examiner said to the room. “You have been learning and training for this day for many years now, and it is finally time to see how much your hard work has paid off. Welcome to your Final Examination.”

I shook in my desk. The past week had flown by indecently quickly. Our lessons had been ended officially, giving us time to study for the examination. What time I wasn't studying, I was out with friends or my family, ignoring the swarm of butterflies that seemed to be procreating at a faster-than-natural rate in my stomach. They skipped the caterpillar stage all together and sprung forth as fully-formed butterflies, making me constantly feel like if I coughed, twenty-some Monarchs would fly out of my mouth, enthralled to finally see daylight.

The room really should have made us all more comfortable, but I think we were all too distracted to notice the well-lit, wood paneled room. There were bookcases in the front, surrounding an inviting-looking fireplace. The windows were all along the sides of the room. Normally, this room was used for comfortable studying, packed with comfortable burgundy arm chairs, reading lamps, and coffee tables. Today, however, the chairs had been removed and replaced with a hundred or so individual desks for each of us. Up in front, on a desk, were all of our Rings, so as to make sure we could do absolutely no Sortilege. Though our Rings weren't powerful, they could still wear down a Barrier if the caster was preoccupied.

The examiners had developed an invisible, non-solid barrier which went around each desk and prevented us from seeing anything written on anyone else's exam. It took at least a Silver Diadem to uphold a Barrier and concentrate on keeping students quiet and attentive.

The Examiner in charge was clearly up to it. Her Silver Diadem shone in the light as she paced the front of the room. She stood out in her burgundy Examiner's robes among all of the gray shirts and black pants or skirts of the students. Her voice carried to every desk, and though she smiled out at us as she spoke, there was a strict briskness in her voice.

“The first part of the Examination, the written component, will consist of two hundred questions about many subjects, especially the use and history of the Diadem, and how we differ from the inferior beings in OtherWorld. Cheating is absolutely prohibited. Anyone caught cheating will be severely punished. The time limit is 2 hours.

Begin.”

I picked up my test sheet and turned it over, the pencil shaking in my hands.

Question 1. What would happen if one from OtherWorld were to wear a Diadem?

Nothing. They do not have the mental capacity to use the Diadem properly, not even an Iron Diadem. The most intelligent of the OtherWorlders cannot train his mind enough to use the Diadem the way we have learned, as was proven by the great Chancellor Austen over two hundred years ago.

Looking back on how easy it all seemed, it's hard to believe I failed so badly as to receive an Iron Diadem.

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