

door, but it was an enormous
high and wider than a room, made of a dull, bronzelike
material.

"Do we just knock?" Meg giggled.

Calvin studied the door. "There isn't any handle or knob or latch or anything. Maybe there's another way to get in."

"Let's try knocking anyhow," Charles said. He raised his hand, but before he touched the door it slid up from the top and to each side, splitting into three sections that had been completely invisible a moment before. The startled children looked into a great entrance hall of dull, greeny marble. Marble benches lined three of the walls. People were sitting there like statues. The green of the marble reflecting on their faces made them look bilious. They turned their heads as the door opened, saw the children, looked away again.

"Come on," Charles said, and, still holding hands, they stepped in. As they crossed the threshold the door shut silently behind them. Meg looked at Calvin and Charles and they, like the waiting people, were a sickly green.

The children went up to the blank fourth wall. It seemed unsubstantial, as though one might almost be able to walk through it. Charles put out his hand. "It's solid, and icy cold."

Calvin touched it, too. "Ugh."

Meg's left hand was held by Charles, her right by

Calvin, and she had no desire to let go either of them to touch the wall.

"Let's ask somebody something." Charles led them over to one of the benches. "Er, could you tell us what's the procedure around here?" he asked one of the men. The men all wore nondescript business suits, and though their features were as different one from the other as the features of men on earth, there was also a sameness to them.

—Like the sameness of people riding in a subway, Meg thought.—Only on a subway every once in a while there's somebody different and here there isn't.

The man looked at the children warily. "The procedure for what?"

"How do we see whoever's in authority?" Charles asked.

"You present your papers to the A machine. You ought to know that," the man said severely.

"Where is the A machine?" Calvin asked.

The man pointed to the blank wall.

"But there isn't a door or anything," Calvin said.

"How do we get in?"

"You put your S papers in the B slot," the man said.)

"Why are you asking me these stupid questions? Do you think I don't know the answers? You'd better not play any games around here or you'll have to go through the Process machine again and you don't want to do that."

thought, looking anxiously at Charles and holding his hand more and more tightly until he wriggled his fingers in protest. That's what Mrs Whatsit said he had to watch, being proud.—Don't, please don't, she thought hard at Charles Wallace. She wondered if Calvin realized that a lot of the arrogance was bravado.

The man stood up, moving jerkily as though he had been sitting for a long time. "I hope he isn't too hard on you," he murmured as he led the children toward the empty fourth wall. "But I've been reprocessed once and that was more than enough. And I don't want to get sent to IT. I've never been sent to IT and I can't risk having that happen."

There was IT again. What was this IT?

The man took from his pocket a folder filled with papers of every color. He shuffled through them carefully, finally withdrawing one. "I've had several reports to make lately. I shall have to ask for a requisition for more A-21 cards." He took the card and put it against the wall. It slid through the marble, as though it were being sucked in, and disappeared. "You may be detained for a few days," the man said, "but I'm sure they won't be too hard on you because of your youth. Just relax and don't fight and it will all be much easier for you." He went back to his seat, leaving the children standing and staring at the blank wall.

And suddenly the wall was no longer there and

they were looking into an enormous room lined with machines. They were not unlike the great computing machines Meg had seen in her science books and that she knew her father sometimes worked with. Some did not seem to be in use; in others lights were flickering on and off. In one machine a long tape was being eaten; in another a series of dot-dashes were being punched. Several white-robed attendants were moving about, tending the machines. If they saw the children they gave no sign.

Calvin muttered something.

"What?" Meg asked him.

"There is nothing to fear except fear itself," Calvin said. "I'm quoting. Like Mrs Who. Meg, I'm scared stiff."

"So 'm I." Meg held his hand more tightly. "Come on."

They stepped into the room with the machines. In spite of the enormous width of the room it was even longer than it was wide. Perspective made the long rows of machines seem almost to meet. The children walked down the center of the room, keeping as far from the machines as possible.

"Though I don't suppose they're radioactive or anything," Charles Wallace said, "or that they're going to reach out and grab us and chew us up."

After they had walked for what seemed like miles, they could see that the enormous room did have an end, and that at the end there was something.

Charles Wallace said suddenly, and his voice held panic, "Don't let go my hands! Hold me tight! He's trying to get at me!"

"Who?" Meg squeaked.

"I don't know. But he's trying to get in at me! I can feel him!"

"Let's go back." Calvin started to pull away.

"No," Charles Wallace said. "I have to go on. We have to make decisions, and we can't make them if they're based on fear." His voice sounded old and strange and remote. Meg, clasping his small hand tightly, could feel it sweating in hers.

As they approached the end of the room their steps slowed. Before them was a platform. On the platform was a chair, and on the chair was a man.

What was there about him that seemed to contain all the coldness and darkness they had felt as they plunged through the Black Thing on their way to this planet?

"I have been waiting for you, my dears," the man said. His voice was kind and gentle, not at all the cold and frightening voice Meg had expected. It took her a moment to realize that though the voice came from the man, he had not opened his mouth or moved his lips at all, that no real words had been spoken to fall upon her ears, that he had somehow communicated directly into their