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NATIONAL
QUALIFICATIONS
2009FRIDAY, 8 MAY
1.00 PM – 1.50 PMENGLISH
STANDARD GRADE
General Level
Reading
Text

Read carefully the passage overleaf. It will help if you read it twice. When you have done so, answer the questions. Use the spaces provided in the Question/Answer booklet.



In the following passage, Alice, the main character, is spending the summer working in France.

- 1 Alice notices a fly on the underside of her arm.
- 2 Insects are an occupational hazard at a dig, and for some reason there are more flies higher up the mountain where she is working than at the main excavation site lower down.
- 3 Her concentration broken, Alice stands up and stretches. She unscrews the top of her water bottle. It's warm, but she's too thirsty to care and drinks it down in great gulps. Below, the heat haze shimmers above the dented tarmac of the road. Above her, the sky is an endless blue.
- 4 It's her first time in the Pyrenees, although she feels very much at home. In the main camp on the lower slopes, Alice can see her colleagues standing under the big canvas awning. She's surprised they've stopped already. It's early in the day to be taking a break, but then the whole team is a bit demoralised. It's hard work: the digging, scraping, cataloguing, recording, and so far they've turned up little to justify their efforts. They've come across only a few fragments of early medieval pots and bowls, and a couple of arrowheads.
- 5 Alice is tempted to go down and join her colleagues. Her calves are already aching from squatting. The muscles in her shoulders are tense. But she knows that if she stops now, she'll lose her momentum.
- 6 Hopefully, her luck's about to change. Earlier, she'd noticed something glinting beneath a large boulder, propped against the side of the mountain, almost as if it had been placed there by a giant hand. Although she can't make out what the object is, even how big it is, she's been digging all morning and she doesn't think it will be much longer before she can reach it.
- 7 She knows she should fetch someone. Alice is not a trained archaeologist, just a volunteer. But it's her last day on site and she wants to prove herself. If she goes back down to the main camp now and admits she's on to something, everybody will want to be involved, and it will no longer be her discovery.
- 8 In the days and weeks to come, Alice will look back to this moment. She will wonder at how different things might have been had she made the choice to go and not to stay. If she had played by the rules.
- 9 She drains the last drop of water from the bottle and tosses it into her rucksack. For the next hour or so, as the sun climbs higher in the sky and the temperature rises, Alice carries on working. The only sounds are the scrape of metal on rock, the whine of insects and the occasional buzz of a light aircraft in the distance.
- 10 Alice kneels down on the ground and leans her cheek and shoulder against the rock for support. Then, with a flutter of excitement, she pushes her fingers deep into the dark earth. Straight away, she knows she's got something worth finding. It is smooth to the touch, metal not stone. Grasping it firmly and telling herself not to expect too much, slowly, slowly she eases the object out into the light.
- 11 The rich, cloying smell of wet soil fills her nose and throat, although she barely notices. She is already lost in the past, captivated by the piece of history she cradles in the palms of her hands. It is a heavy, round buckle, speckled black and green with age and from its long burial.

- 12 Alice is so absorbed that she doesn't notice the boulder shifting on its base. Then something makes her look up. For a split second, the world seems to hang suspended, out of space, out of time. She is mesmerised by the ancient slab of stone as it sways and tilts, and then gracefully begins to fall towards her. At the very last moment, the light fractures. The spell is broken. Alice throws herself out of the way, half tumbling, half slithering sideways, just in time to avoid being crushed. The boulder hits the ground with a dull thud, sending up a cloud of pale brown dust, then rolls over and over, as if in slow motion, until it comes to rest further down the mountain.
- 13 Alice clutches desperately at the bushes and scrub to stop herself slipping any further. For a moment she lies sprawled in the dirt, dizzy and disorientated. As it sinks in how very close she came to being crushed, she turns cold. Takes a deep breath. Waits for the world to stop spinning.
- 14 Gradually, the pounding in her head dies away. The sickness in her stomach settles and everything starts to return to normal, enough for her to sit up and take stock. Her knees are grazed and streaked with blood and she's knocked her wrist where she landed awkwardly, still clutching the buckle in her hand to protect it, but basically she's escaped with no more than a few cuts and bruises.
- 15 She gets to her feet and dusts herself down. She raises her hand, is about to call out to attract someone's attention when she notices that there's a narrow opening visible in the side of the mountain where the boulder had been standing. Like a doorway cut into the rock.
- 16 She hesitates. Alice knows she should get somebody to come with her. It is stupid, possibly even dangerous, to go in on her own without any sort of back-up. She knows all the things that can go wrong. But something is drawing her in. It feels personal. It's her discovery.
- 17 She climbs back up. There is a dip in the ground at the mouth of the cave, where the stone had stood guard. The damp earth is alive with the frantic writhing of worms and beetles exposed suddenly to the light and heat after so long. Her cap lies on the ground where it fell. Her trowel is there too, just where she left it.
- 18 Alice peers into the darkness. The opening is no more than five feet high and about three feet wide and the edges are irregular and rough. It seems to be natural rather than man-made.
- 19 Slowly, her eyes become accustomed to the gloom. Velvet black gives way to charcoal grey and she sees that she is looking into a long, narrow tunnel.
- 20 Squeezing the buckle tightly in her hand, she takes a deep breath and steps forward into the passageway. Straight away, the smell of long-hidden, underground air surrounds her, filling her mouth and throat and lungs. It's cool and damp, not the dry, poisonous gases of a sealed cave she's been warned about, so she guesses there must be some source of fresh air.
- 21 Feeling nervous and slightly guilty, Alice wraps the buckle in a handkerchief and pushes it into her pocket, then cautiously steps forward.
- 22 As she moves further in, she feels the chill air curl around her bare legs and arms like a cat. She is walking downhill. She can feel the ground sloping away beneath her feet, uneven and gritty. The scrunch of the stones and gravel is loud in the confined, hushed space. She is aware of the daylight getting fainter and fainter at her back, the further and deeper she goes.
- 23 Abruptly, she does not want to go on.

Adapted from the novel "Labyrinth" by Kate Mosse

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