

The Fifth Adventure

The Center of the Maze

Thimble stood in the maze. For several moments in a row he only listened. The first, and loudest things he could hear came from his own body. His breath. Filling his lungs and releasing. There had been so much commotion and now everything was stopped still. He was breathing fast and loud, but as he listened, it went slower, and slower, and calmer and calmer.

Soon he could hear things outside himself again. Beyond the towering walls of this great maze, the sound of the animal uprising was still throbbing, but from inside the maze it felt distant, it echoed chaotically far above his head. He strained his ears to pick out the voice of Calixto, or Peony, or the tortoise, but all that could be heard was a general symphonic cacophony.

At first he moved only a little. He touched the ground with his paw in front of him, he knew it was solid, but something in him made him just want to test it a bit. As if to say, *here is the floor. I know very little, but I do know where the floor is.*

In front of him was a hallway. It was all white. Tall white walls, white floors. And off the hallway, jutted other hallways, and Thimble presumed they looked identical to the one he was standing in.

The next noise he heard was his stomach. It rumbled. Thimble thought about his day. His last opportunity to eat had been before meeting Cashel under the Morning Glories. The sun had been rising, and Thimble had been anxious.

"Have a few more seeds than that," he remembered Ladle saying, "you don't know how long it will be before you eat again."

Thimble had been unable to force anything down. He remembered his stomach had felt full already, full of excitement. Now he turned his thoughts to what the source of that excitement had been. His beautiful Chickpea. How happy he had been this morning, thinking he would see her soon. Thimble shut his eyes. He imagined the soft tufts of fur in Chickpea's ears, the way her whiskers wiggled when she laughed. Her laugh! The way it jangled like a bell.

Then he tasted something salty and wet rolling down his nose. Tears, how unhelpful, but once they had begun, they would not cease. Thimble put his paws to his eyes, and the tears flowed down his face. For the first time, he felt simply overcome, totally helpless. He was not like the mice in this place, he had not learned the maze. He was a garden mouse! And, oh how very much he missed his garden.

Tears were making his whiskers and his paws all wet, and still Thimble could not stop. He was hungry, and thirsty. He was tired. This place was only made of hard, white surfaces. Nothing was warm and colorful. He longed for some moss to curl up

on. He wondered to himself if he would ever see the garden again, if he would ever see Ladle again. He thought of the hug Ladle had wrapped him in before he and the frogs had executed their scheme that morning. Would that be the last time he was ever in the arms of his brother?

He thought of Chickpea, and how much he wanted to save her. He recounted his words to Ladle aloud to himself, “I’d go anywhere to find her. I would follow her to the very end of the earth.”

And then he thought something that he had not thought all that long, difficult day. Maybe this task was just too big, for such a small mouse.

“Has it occurred to you,” Ladle said one hot day in early September while he begrudgingly followed Thimble through the garden toward the sunflowers, “that your affinity for this mouse, could get you into real trouble someday?”

Thimble did not answer. Instead he lifted his nose to smell the late summer breeze. Fresh cut grass, dust, dandelions, sunflowers. Yes, they were headed in the right direction.

“Take this instance,” Ladle elaborated, “she already adores you. You spend hours everyday on that table top with her, which, don’t get me wrong, is absolutely trouble enough. At any point the Todds may see you, and then Mrs. Todd will scream, ‘Oh my word, John, it’s a disgusting little piece of vermin! On the table no less! Where we serve food! Smash it!’ And then Mr. Todd will crush you with a book, and you’ll be a mouse pancake.”

Here Ladle paused having tripped over a root. He groaned in frustration and shook out the stubbed toe on his front paw. A nearby grasshopper chirped his laughter at Ladle’s mishap.

“Oh, what are you laughing at,” grumbled Ladle.



Still, Thimble did not turn around, he was quite determined. He pressed forward in search of the base of the sunflowers.

"What I mean to say is," Ladle limped a little, but caught up to his brother, and winced as he spoke (the wince being primarily for Thimble's benefit, as his brother seemed so currently consumed by his task that were a piece of hail to fall suddenly out of the sky and strike Ladle dead, Thimble would not be bothered even to glance backward), "She is already yours, but now, you want to risk your neck. Climbing all the way to the top of a sunflower, to pluck out some seeds for her, and why did you say?"

"It's a gift, Ladle, I know you've heard of gifts," Thimble did not look at his brother, but continued to press forward, "she said she was admiring the sunflowers from her window, I'd like her to taste them. Anyway, you'll get to eat some seeds, too."

"I will eat sunflower seeds when they drop and fall, like every other time I have eaten sunflower seeds. My point is that *you*, Thimble, the smallest mouse in all of the garden, *you* are going to climb the biggest flower, hoping, by providence, you do not fall off and crack your wee head, because a mouse, who already adores you, once looked at a flower through a window!"

"And here we are," exclaimed Thimble in delight. True enough, the two brothers had made the journey all the way across the garden to where the copse of sunflowers grew. They stretched into the sky, so far above the mice they towered. Ladle didn't even like to look up at them. It gave him something akin to vertigo, and he grew dizzy.

"So," said Thimble, "I'll just climb up there, and--"

"I know, I know," Ladle sighed, he knew when he was beaten, "my job is to sit down here and wait for the food to drop from the sky."

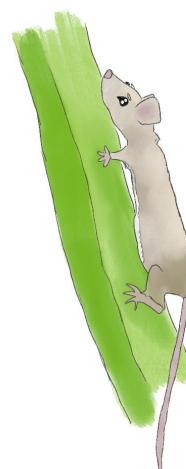
Thimble wrapped his four feet around the sunflower stem, at least, as far around as he could get them, and began the process of shimmying upward. He compressed, and lengthened his body, each time, gaining a little more purchase up the stem. Hence, little by little, he climbed into the air.

This was tiring work, and Thimble's legs ached with exertion in no time at all, but up Thimble went. To pass the time he began making up a little song for himself and it went something like this:

*Oh I like fuzzy dandelions, And
Marigolds they're nice, too,*

*And daffodils, and daisies, tru la loo,
But what, Oh what? Is a mouse to
do? When his favorite flower of all,*

Is standing ten feet tall,



*And he simply is too
small, boo-hoo...*

In time Thimble found himself stretched out, taking a rest on the first expansive sunflower leaf. He looked up and judged he was about halfway up the stem. A ladybug shared the leaf with him, and he watched her wandering here and there, eating aphids.

"You don't mind being small," Thimble said so to the ladybug (who did not answer back as the smaller insects feel little need to converse with mice), "no, you do not."

Thimble smiled to himself in the sunshine, and some time later, when he had climbed right to the tip top of the sunflower and dropped the seeds for Ladle, and Chickpea, and himself to eat, when he had scaled down the stem, and given Ladle a smug smile, he knew he must never feel too little for anything again. *The true stature*, thought Thimble, *is the height of a mouse's bravery, and not his body.*

Thimble stood in the maze. He willed himself to calm down. For surely, as Thimble saw it, if he stood still and cried, that would be a way to ensure with certainty that he would not get out of his predicament. No, he had to try.

Thimble touched the wall next to him. It was the wall on his right side. He held his paw there. *This is the wall to my right*, thought Thimble, *wherever I go, this wall will be there*. Thimble began to walk. Every few paces he would touch his paw to the wall on his right. The wall was the closest thing Thimble had to a friend and guide in this place, and he wanted to know it was there.

As he moved forwards he came to his first crossroads. The maze stretched out before him in four different directions. He lifted his head and smelled the air.

Mice do have a very good sense of smell, and are often able to take in scents of all sorts of things. Back in the garden, Thimble could lift his nose. If the breeze was just right he could smell anything. He would sit sometimes, just smelling. He knew what droplets of water falling off of melting icicles smelled like. He knew what a butterfly on a lilac bush smelled like. He knew what muddy puddles after a rainy day smelled like. He knew the scent of Mrs. Todd baking a cake. He knew the scent of birdseed freshly placed in the feeder. He knew what the summer squashes smelled like when they grew ripe, and the cherries, and the plums, and the apples, and the grapes. He knew the



way Tuppy smelled when she had been running through freshly cut grass. He knew the way Chickpea smelled when she lied down for a nap in her wood chips.

Here at the crossroads, Thimble closed his eyes. He could smell white paint. He could smell dust. He could smell...

Thimble opened his eyes. Was it true? He shut them again and breathed in the air. Yes, yes it was true. Oh, so very faintly, and far away, he could smell Chickpea.

Now normally, Thimble would simply run in a straight line toward the scent. For example, were he to smell a big, ripe raspberry in the garden, he would run headlong toward it. He would hop over roots, and scurry over rocks, and around trees, yes, but he would move, more or less, in a continuous direction. Here in the labyrinth, however, Thimble could not be sure what direction to move in.

The scent of Chickpea seemed to be vaguely in front of him, although it was distributed finely, and he could not be sure. Again, Thimble touched the right wall. *I had better stick with you, my friend*, thought Thimble, and with his paw on the wall he turned to the right.

Here he was met with a hallway just like the one he had left. White floor, white walls, no one in sight.

“Chickpea!” Thimble’s voice echoed down the hallways and through the corridors, and Thimble listened. He waited to hear her voice answer his, but all that came back to him was his own saying. “Chickpea, Chickpea, Chickpea...”

Still he pressed on. Down the hallway he went, touching the wall to his right. He was so very, very hungry, and thirsty now. His tongue was papery. It smacked the roof of his mouth, and he began to develop a little headache.

He turned another corner. Before him, as expected, stretched an identical white hallway. He lifted his nose into the air. He could still smell her. It was faint, but maybe, maybe the scent of her was getting just a little brighter. Chickpea smelled of wood chips, she smelled of Summer days when the fluff of Cottonwood trees came down like snow, she smelled of the soft, downy white fur that grew under her chin.

“Oh, my love, my love, you are so close, and still so much further away than you should be,” said Thimble aloud to himself.

Thimble felt tired. He felt so very tired. He had never felt so tired in all his life. His feet took extra effort to lift, so weighted were they, so inclined to stay on the floor. Indeed, Thimble’s whole body seemed to be saying, *please stay here, lay down*.

Still on he went. He touched the right wall. It was still there. Thimble sang his song to himself as he walked. It dripped through his exhaustion, but it kept him awake, at least.

Oh I like fuzzy dandelions...

*And Marigolds they're nice, too... And
daffodils, and daisies, tru la loo...*

*But what, Oh what? Is a
mouse to do? When his
favorite flower of all... Is
standing ten feet tall...*

*And he simply is too
small... ...boo-hoo...*

"Chickpea!" Thimble listened, but again, all he heard back was himself, "Chickpea... Chickpea... Chickpea..."

Thimble stood in the maze. He stretched his paw to touch the right wall. Still there. He could not tell if he was going in circles. Everything just looked the same. It's extremely disorienting, you see, when everything looks the same, not knowing if you've never been down this particular white hallway, or if you've been down it once before, or if you've been down it ten times before.

Thimble turned a corner, his feet dragged. A dead end. Again. How big was this place?

His tummy grumbled. He tried to focus on the maze, but it seemed all his thoughts continually returned to water. He remembered the pond in the garden, the damp rocks, the frogs. How lovely it would be to swim in the pond right now. To dive in, or do a cannonball. To feel the cool water rushing over his body. To drink big gulps of it. He thought of rain. The way it drips off leaves in the garden making a *patter, patter, pat* sound over his head. He thought of sticking his tongue out in the rain and catching droplets in his mouth. So cool, so wet.

He held the right wall. He turned his nose to the air. He smelled Chickpea. He was transported, in his mind, to napping beside her. Her in her cage, snuggled in wood chips, him just outside the bars, on the table top. How warm the sun had felt on his fur. How comforting.

Though he was very, very tired, Thimble took a deep breath and again cried through the maze, "Chickpea?"

Again, all that came back to him was the echo of his own voice off the walls. All the surfaces here were hard, and cold, but the wall to his right had been his true friend, and so he pressed his body into it. He snuggled (as best a mouse can snuggle with a wall) all the way down to the floor. He put his head in his paws.

"I'm sorry, Chickpea," he said, very quietly, he knew she could not hear, and he fell into a deep sleep.

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In his dreams, Chickpea was with him in the garden. They were laying in the grass on a Summer day. Wild strawberries were growing here and there, and when Chickpea bit into them, the red juice would dribble through her white fur.

“Are you happy here?” he asked her.

“Yes. I am always happy with you, Thimble, but I am most happy here,” she said, turning her smile toward him.

Then her eyes grew big, she looked at him as though something was wrong. Her pupils expanded and her mouth gaped. Thimble grew afraid, but found himself unable to speak. He stood motionless and dumb.

“Thimble, Thimble?” Chickpea was saying, and she was touching his face with her paws, “Thimble?”

Thimble couldn’t move, the touch of her paws felt so nice, her voice felt so real, and as the dream began to fade, as he could no longer see the summer day, the grass, the strawberries, the garden, all he heard was Chickpea’s voice saying, “Thimble? Thimble?”

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“Thimble?” His eyes opened slowly. The lids of them felt heavy, and they lifted like black, velvet curtains, letting light stream in. First, he saw white everywhere, then a face came into focus. Her face.

Chickpea’s beautiful face! There she was, right there in front of him. Her white fur, her whiskers, her lovely brown eyes. Chickpea. Thimble reached for her. He felt a little weak, but she helped pull him to sitting. Thimble ran his fingers through her fur. He caressed her ears. Chickpea smiled, and closed her eyes.

“Am I still dreaming?” Thimble said.

“No,” Chickpea said, and she took his paw in her own, and looked into his eyes, “you are not dreaming. I am here.”

“Can you tell us what is going on out there?”

Thimble started. The big voice had come from another mouse standing nearby. Thimble began to stumble to his feet.

“Be careful,” said Chickpea, helping him rise, “We think maybe you passed out.”



Thimble got himself to standing. He looked around, and noticed for the first time that he was surrounded by white mice. Of course, fourteen white mice. They all stood staring at him, each with a somber expression.

"We heard you calling for Chickpea," said one mouse with a kind voice, "and we found you unconscious against a wall at the southern end of the maze, so we brought you here."

"Here?" asked Thimble.

"The center of the maze," Chickpea answered. As if on cue, the mice parted so that, with Chickpea bracing him, Thimble could make his way to the treasure of water and food displayed in huge bowls in the center of an expansive room. Well, room is not really what it was. It was a place where several of the maze's white hallways converged in one spot. It was like a star, and the hallways spreading off of it were like rays of light.

Thimble cupped his paws and dipped them in the water, and he drank deeply, big mouthfuls. Water had never tasted so wonderful. He felt it rush down the back of his throat. Chickpea handed him a pellet like the ones she ate in her cage on the tabletop. He bit into it. It was awfully chewy.

Chickpea giggled, that lovely jangle of bell sounds she made, "I'm sorry it's not something delicious like sunflower seeds."

He touched her face, "I can't believe I'm really seeing you."

"I can't believe you found me," she said, and tears came to her eyes.

Thimble turned to the other mice. There were still faint sounds of the commotion outside the walls of the maze.

"It's an uprising," Thimble said.

"An uprising?" asked the mouse with the big voice.

"This is Ten," said Chickpea, "you can call him Ten or you can call him Decimus. We call him Decimus. The humans call him Ten."

Thimble surveyed Decimus. He was tall, strong, and young.

"An uprising of animals," said Thimble, "I arrived at this place in search of Chickpea, but I seemed to have created a chain reaction. The animals are escaping."

"Which Animals?" asked Decimus.

"All of them," said Thimble.

The white mice mumbled amongst themselves, and then one stepped forward. He was small, perhaps a little timid, "The humans call me Five, you may call me Quintus."

"Alright," Thimble said, "hello, Quintus."

"What do you mean, 'all of them?'" he asked.

"We're leaving. We're all leaving. It's time to escape. So I supposed we had better figure a way out of this maze."

Chickpea embraced Thimble around his waist.

A mouse stepped forward who Thimble later learned was named Nona. She said, "We know a way out."

The white mice waited patiently and silently for Thimble to eat and drink more of the bounty of food that decorated the center of the maze. He began to feel his strength and his senses return. Then they were off. All fifteen of them went marching down one of the identical hallways of the maze. The white mice knew where they were headed. Decimus walked in front.

Thimble and Chickpea were the last in the group, and they walked together often looking at one another. Thimble smiled, "you're still named Chickpea, right?"

A jangle of little bells, "I'll always be Chickpea, but the humans, they call me Fourteen."