

The Sixth Adventure

A Moonlit Sonata

There are times that the simplicity of a plan is its greatest asset. To Thimble the maze seemed an impossible fortress, tall and impregnable in every way. So imagine his surprise when the white mice led him unceremoniously to an unassuming, crack. A simple error in construction, a place where the base of one of the walls came away from the edge of the floor.

Could it actually be that this massive problem of a place, this cavernous white labyrinth, where but minutes ago, Thimble had been ready to give up for exhaustion was, in reality, rather haphazardly *pasted* together?

Each mouse, without much concern or consideration really, squeezed through the crack at the base of the maze and hung gingerly along the edge. For the maze, big as it was, sat upon a table. A table like any Thimble had found himself on top of before. So, letting their bodies hang, tails pointed toward the floor, they moved their front paws along the table's edge. Right, left, right, left, right, left, until each, in their turn, approached the table leg and slid down to the floor with a plop.

Una, Secundus, Tertius, Athervan, Quintus, Sextilius, Septimus, Octavia, Nona, Decimus, Undecimus, Dozeni, Treize, Chickpea, and Thimble, all stood on the floor of the Terrarium Lab and Research Center for the Preservation of our Global Ecosphere.

Unlike an hour before when Thimble had been placed in the maze amidst absolute chaos and mayhem... the room stood now completely and utterly silent.

The mice waited. Were there any scientists about to accidentally step on them? Or scoop them right back up into the maze? No. The scent of human hung vaguely in the air, but no footsteps could be heard. No voices.

Were there any animals, longing desperately to escape? No. An eeriness hung over the empty room as Thimble gazed about. The cage doors sat wide open, the inhabitants of the cages having flown. He closed his eyes. He remembered the screaming, the rushing, the monkeys standing like sentries, the spotted rat who he had helped to her feet, the terror at not being able to see Chickpea.

He reached for her paw. She clasped her own in his. She was right here. Besides the fifteen mice, however, there was not a soul in sight.

"Let's get out of here," said Thimble, and the white mice all turned to look at him. It was in this moment, with fourteen pairs of eyes and fourteen sets of whiskers turned toward him, that Thimble realized something about himself and his comrades. A fundamental difference between them so stark, it could not go without note. Like Chickpea, none of the white mice had ever lived outside a cage.

Throughout each of their lives there had been a bowl of food, an apparatus for drinking water, and warm wood chips to sleep in. If they had seen a flower, it had been through a window.

Now, at the suggestion of escape, each mouse looked at Thimble with concern and even fear. Though they did not speak, Thimble could see the same question on each little face. Where would they go?

Thimble kept hold of Chickpea's paw, and stepped closer to his fellow mice.

"Perhaps Chickpea has told you," he said, "I have lived my life in a garden. It gets cold in winter, and wet in spring. It's not always pleasant. But it is my home, and I would like to share it with you."

"Are there other mice?" asked Quintus in his timid voice.

"Oh yes."

"Will it be hard to find food?" asked Octavia.

"Sometimes," said Thimble.

"So we will be hungry and cold," Decimus said.

"Yes," said Thimble, "sometimes."

All the mice fell silent. Chickpea let go of Thimble's paw and looked to her companions, "I have seen the garden. I've seen flowers that grow ten feet tall. It is green and lovely, and teeming with creatures. There are mice, yes, and Thimble speaks of frogs, and squirrels, and rabbits. Animals living without the help of humans. We will be happy there."

The mice did not speak as they plodded down the hall along the white tile floor. Here and there was scattered evidence of a struggle taking place, a great battle, if you will. A clipboard lay face down on the floor, its papers flung across the hall. A chair in the corner was overturned, and down the hallway, at the farthest end, a door stood ajar, and above that door was a glowing red sign.

Chickpea, who walked next to Thimble, looked up and sounded out the word. She did this aloud, somewhat to herself, but Thimble understood perfectly when he heard her murmur, "Exit."

Through the vast, humid lobby, the fifteen mice paraded one by one and two by two. The place was devoid of human beings, but still above them echoed the woman's voice:

Welcome to the Terrarium Lab and Research Center for the Preservation of our Global Ecosphere. Unfortunately, an emergency situation has occurred on the premises. Please remain calm, and exit the facility in an orderly fashion.

The glass sliding doors opened, they gaped for a moment, and slid shut again. Then they opened, gaped for a moment and slid shut.

"The mechanism that operates these must be stuck in some way," said Nona,

and she put her paw to her chin. Of the mice, Nona obtained the best mind for mechanical ingenuity, "Look, each time they stay open for the same interval."

"Long enough for all of us to get through at once?" asked Treize.

"Only if we hop through all together," replied Nona with a laugh, for this was almost a game, a game called *Don't Get Smashed into Mice Goo*.

All fifteen of them lined up along the door's edge. They all took paws. They all inhaled sharply and held their breath. The doors slid open. The outside air hit their whiskers, the whooshing sound of the doors hit their ears. They all jumped into the outside world. The doors slid closed behind them.

The parking lot lay in expanse before them. Behind them the woman was speaking, but now she was being strangely interrupted by the closing and opening of the doors:

Welcome to the Terrarium Lab

...

*our Global Ecosphere. Unfortunately... Please remain calm,
and exit the facility in an orderly fashion.*

"Look at that," said Decimus staring at the empty landscape, "we exited, alright, but everyone else has gone on without us."

The mice stared into the desolate distance. Concrete and emptiness lay before them. To Thimble's surprise, the sky had an orange tinge, it was early, but unmistakable. The sun had slowly begun to set. Which meant soon it would be twilight, and then soon it would be night. He shuddered. Soon they would be fifteen mice alone in the night.

They all looked at the orange sky. Thimble, being the only wild mouse in the party wondered if he was the most afraid. Surely the others had heard stories, but being that they had lived their lives in warm cages, he imagined they had never experienced night, and the night thing that hunted them. Thimble, however, had seen it with his own eyes, only once when he had been outside too late. The grass had grown too big at the edge of the garden fence near the lane, and had begun to sprout delicious seeds that a mouse could pop off the stalk with very little trouble and then pop right into his mouth. Grass seeds were juicy and delicious, and Thimble was eating so many he lost track of the time. The sun had set, and all about him the grass and the trees grew bluer and bluer and darker and darker. *Better get home*, he thought.

A great moon was rising in the evening sky and Thimble turned toward it, just a glance, just to see its beauty. This glance, however, proved serendipitous. For just as Thimble turned his gaze to the moon, a silhouette passed in front of it. Thimble saw the shape of a creature, ever so much more frightening than Tuppy. A creature that flew in silence. With a hooked beak, and great, gleaming hooked talons on its feet.

"Thimble," Chickpea was saying, "we should go."

The mice began to scurry along the sidewalk along the edge of the empty parking lot. Chickpea and Thimble had both been driven to the Terrarium Center in Mr. Todd's car. Without that option and without anyone else around, they had no choice but to walk.

"Chickpea," Decimus called back from the front of the line, "you can navigate us towards the garden?"

"Yes," Chickpea called.

"How can you do that?" Thimble whispered as they scampered along.

"I drove here with Mr. Todd," Chickpea answered.

"Well, well yes," Thimble whispered, "so did I, but I cannot tell you how to get back."

At this Chickpea looked at him. Her eyes were grave, "Thimble, you must understand. I remember everything."

"But surely-- that would mean that you remembered every turn the car took, and how far you drove."

Chickpea kept her eyes locked with Thimble's and repeated, "I remember everything."

She proved herself when the party of mice approached the end of the parking lot and Chickpea suddenly called out, "Right!" and away they all turned, down the sidewalk now flanked by a street and a grassy knoll which led down into a watery ditch, and beyond that was a bit of woodland.

At this particular moment, apropos of nothing, Secundus paused and squinted into the ditch. The light was glowing in the sky, a burnt orange, but the sun had not set yet, so Secundus should have been perfectly capable of seeing. No, it stood to reason that he had stopped and was now squinting down the grassy way for another reason entirely. The mice halted and stared at their companion.

"What is it?" asked Una.

"An animal," said Secundus, pointing downward toward the ditch. The mice peered over the edge toward the water.

"Why," exclaimed Thimble, "that is an acquaintance of mine! Come along!"

With that, Thimble was off down the grassy slope. For the creature Secundus had spotted, blended in placidly with his surroundings, and would surely have gone unnoticed with a less scrupulous eye. Thimble bounded up behind none other than the awfully slow tortoise he had liberated from his cage earlier that day.

"Hello there, Tortoise," Thimble cried.

"Why... hello..." and here he took a large breath, "mouse."

The tortoise, who's name was Gazpacho, in case that's interesting

information, slowly but surely relayed the events of the animal uprising *after* Thimble's place in the malay had been incidentally interrupted by his predicament in the maze.

The humans had lost all control of the creatures, so enormous was their desire to escape. The scientists would get a rabbit back in its cage only to have the monkeys free it again a second later. For what is a small group of scientists in response to a troop of monkeys? What is anyone in response to a troop of monkeys? In this wide world of disruptive forces, a troop of monkeys may be the most dangerous. Monkeys are already agile, wise, and above all mischievous. Here Gazpacho took a moment to question the intelligence of doing experiments on such a creature knowing that the experiments would make it all the *more* wise and mischievous, and then expect it to stay quietly in a cage.

Thimble thought of Calixto, and smiled to himself.

Throughout the chaos, Gazpacho had run as fast as he could, which naturally meant he was ten to twenty paces behind the other animals at any given moment, and was generally ignored. So when he made it through the exit door to the lobby, the horrific scene had already unfolded.

Imagine being on an afternoon outing to see the plants and animals at the Terrarium Lab and Research Center for the Preservation of our Global Ecosphere and having a wave of uncontrollable animals suddenly breaking upon you. Gazpacho described one mother screaming when a monkey leapt onto her head and became tangled in her wavy hair, then in an effort to remove said monkey, the mother looked down only to find upwards of five rats scuttling over her shoes.

A little girl of four or five became enamored with a big white rabbit, and stretched her arms out to pick up the floppy friend. The rabbit was not accustomed to being handled by children, and so as he hopped in circles, the little girl chased after him.

A scientist who was failing miserably to manage the scene cried, "No, let me catch him!" and took chase after the child. So round and round the room went the rabbit, followed by the girl, followed by the scientist, all to no avail.

The parrots were creating a ruckus from the sky. Their wings beat loudly about the room, raining down feathers in swirls of wind, and they were squawking loudly enough that one little boy was covering his ears and looking upward. A chinchilla squeaked at his feet having had his toe stepped on, and looking down the boy cried out,

"Oh, I do beg your pardon," to which (and here Gazpacho was very happy the boy could not understand chinchilla) he received such a squeaky telling off that Gazpacho blushed in shock.

Above the fray, the swirl of white lab coats, and fuzzy animals, and feathers, and tails, Gazpacho could hear a woman's voice and she kept saying:

Please remain calm, and exit the facility in an orderly fashion.

So that's just what he did. He walked steadily through the madness of the lobby. The mother, for whom the monkey had thankfully left her hair, was standing wide-eyed and completely still as a seemingly endless stream of rats ran over her shoes. As Gazpacho passed her, we watched as she tipped just a little, and then fainted. The doors were opening and closing, with so much activity they didn't seem to know what to do, and Gazpacho thought they may break.

Out flowed the river of animals, into the wild world. They were followed by the panicked Terrarium Center visitors. They, in turn, were followed by the helpless pod of scientists. Finally, bringing up the rear, Gazpacho made his way through the doors. The crowd was far ahead of him by the time he'd reached the parking lot, and in the distance, police sirens and the whir of animal control vehicles made their way toward the problem a little too late.

"What happened to your head?" asked Thimble, for the tortoise's left eye was bruised and puffy.

"Oh..." Gazpacho said, "I got kicked on the way out. It's not so bad."

"Poor thing," cried Octavia, and she put her paw up to Gazpacho's nose and licked gingerly at his wounds.

"We're going to my garden, Gazpacho," said Thimble, "come with us."

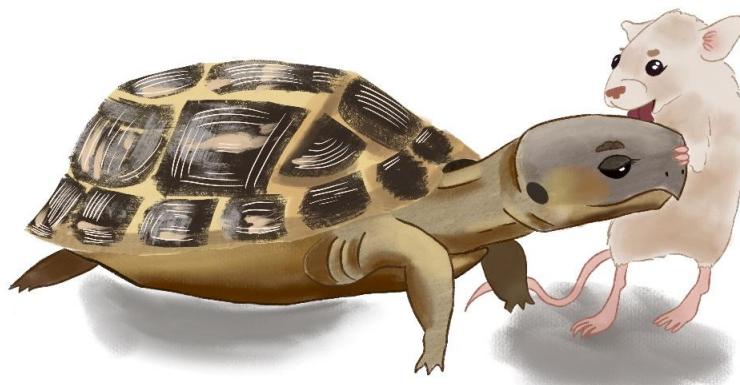
"Oh...thank you, but I'm happy with these little woods."

The sky had grown an even deeper orange and began to tinge blue and purple in places now. The sun was dipping lower. Somewhere, out there in the evening, faintly, the animals could hear a soft question being called into the night. A question that asked, *Who? Who? Who?*

Gazpacho listened to the question on the air and then turned to the mice, "and I fear I would slow you down, and you, my friends, should travel fast tonight."

A cold fear ran through Thimble from his whiskers to the end of his tail, "Chickpea," he said looking at the sky, "we have to move faster."

"How about this?" Nona interrupted. She was standing by the stream that flowed at the bottom of the ditch.



The water was moving at a pace, and Thimble remembered snatching the bit of newspaper from the lane just yesterday before it blew into a puddle. Of course! Puddles! It had rained recently and what would normally be a trickle of nearly stagnant water was, to a mouse, a raging river.

"It is certainly moving the length of the road faster than we could do on foot," replied Thimble.

"Can you help us?" Decimus asked Gazpacho.

To which he replied with an indignant harrumph, "I am a tortoise, not a turtle. I cannot swim you downstream."

"If only we could get across the way, where those woods are," said Nona, "even from here I can see bark and twigs that would work nicely as rafts."

"Gazpacho, my friend," said Thimble, "I believe you *can* help with something."

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The fourteen white mice looked on as Gazpacho placed himself at the river's edge. He bent his knees to give himself optimal tortoise springboard potential.

Thimble was smiling to himself several paces back. He wished Ladle were here to tell him he was being mad.

"Are you ready?" he called to the tortoise.

Who in turn called back, "Ready!"

Thimble took off through the grass. It was dewy and sweet, and whipped past his whiskers. He ran as hard as he could, making himself as long as he could. His front paws hit the ground, and his back feet sprung forward. He was at a full gallop. He let out a yell of effort as he reached Gazpacho's shell, he had to go as fast as he absolutely could, his hind legs had to push as hard as they absolutely could.

"Here... I... come," he cried, launching himself onto the tortoise shell.

Gazpacho straightened his knees and Thimble jumped, sending the mouse into the air, far above the rushing water below. He heard Chickpea scream, and felt the exhilaration of flying freely through the night.

This was the second moment he missed Ladle. It was terrifying watching the surface of the water move closer and closer, there was nothing he could do to stop it, it was almost funny. *Ladle would absolutely kill me for this if I survived*, thought Thimble as he waved his paws helplessly out in front of him.

He flew over the center of the river, that was good, but he was falling faster and faster toward the water. Thimble instinctively held his breath, and shut his eyes and.... *Whoosh!*

The water slapped Thimble's body, and as he sank beneath the current, all he could feel was the sting of the impact on his tiny body. Then, almost without him, his

feet began to kick. He sputtered above the waves, and on the other shore he could hear the mice cheering, Chickpea's voice was loudest.

Thimble coughed, the water was in his nose and his throat, but he kept paddling toward the shore. The current threatened to sweep him away, but he kept kicking. He could see the other side. The water was cold, but he kept kicking, kept kicking, kept kicking, until...he was pulling himself up onto the bank.

The fourteen white mice let out an uproarious cheer. Thimble looked to the sky. It was a lilac shade. Still quite light, but he could see the sun had set. He had to move fast, or the night thing would be upon them soon.

"A flat piece of bark with a notch in the back," Thimble muttered to himself, recounting Nona's instructions.

He sifted through the bramble at the bottom of the wood. Searching through bits of twig and bark. Too heavy, too small, too round, ha! A flat bit of bark with a notch in the back. Not big enough for fifteen mice, but big enough for three or four. He drug the makeshift raft to the water's edge and held one end of it up above his head, hoping the other mice could see.

"Will this do?" Thimble cried across the water.

"It's a start," Treize called back.

"Now find a twig that you can hook into that knot, to steer yourself back across," Nona instructed.

Thimble did as he was told, musing to himself that Nona and Treize seemed to be a team all to themselves. He quickly found a stick that fit somewhat, and he pushed himself and the little raft into the river.

The current pulled him downstream, but he steadily made his way across. Steering the craft took a little getting used to, and water sloshed onto the deck now and then as the raft tipped one way and then the other. Thimble smiled with the spray in his nose, *I suppose I am the first mouse to captain a ship*, he thought.

His bow hit the other shore, and Thimble ushered Treize, Nona and Decimus aboard, "alright now, quickly, quickly."

He ferried the mice back across the river, where the four of them gathered enough twigs and flat bits of bark, like those Thimble had gathered, in order to each create their own raft, and they captained their own little vessels back across.

Thimble kept a hand on his boat and dropped himself into the water where it was knee-high for a mouse. There were now four little vessels, each captained respectively by Thimble, Decimus, Treize and Nona. The remaining eleven mice would have to ride down the river on the decks, and they knew it might be a tight squeeze.

Thimble reached for Chickpea's paw first, and helped her into his raft, "you are staying with me," he said, and she kissed him on the ear.

Here it is somewhat unnecessary to say which mouse rode upon which boat.

Surely, however, the lives of the fourteen white mice inside the Terrarium Lab had been an intricate village society. The mice had, after all worked together to achieve various tasks. Finding the center of the maze being one example, and learning to read being another. But something far more elusive and lovely was happening with the mice during their time there. It happens when a group of individuals is faced with great fear, say huge scientists in white garb are poking them with needles regularly, they're not seeing the sun or smelling the outside, and in Chickpea's case, they are suddenly removed from the arms of the one they love. Sometimes, the only comfort that group of individuals can take, is the comfort they achieve with one another.

So, the fourteen white mice had learned to love each other. Through late night conversations about where they had been, what they had seen. Through holding each other when the days of fear had grown to be too much to bear. Some of them had even developed a deeper bond within the group. Thimble was right to note the closeness of Treize and Nona. The two had been inseparable for months.

All this is to say, it is no small thing, that the mice now faced having to climb aboard separate rafts, and while they chose the mice they were to ride with quickly, they also chose them carefully, as one may seat a difficult tapestry of guests at a dinner party. They chose who they rode with as if to say, "if I am going down here, at this watery point in our journey, I am going down with you." And the assignments were as follows:

Chickpea, Una and Dozeni climbed aboard Thimble's raft. Secundus, Undecimus, and Tertius all climbed aboard Treize's raft. While Athervan, Octavia and Quintus stepped aboard the raft captained by Decimus. Leaving Sextilius and Septimus to ride with Nona.

"Alright," Thimble called out once everyone was aboard, "here we go!"

At his command the four tiny captains pushed their rafts into the current, climbed up onto their imperfect steering mechanisms, and set sail.

"Goodbye, Gazpacho," Chickpea cried and waved toward shore, prompting waves and messages of goodbye and good luck from all the mice, and he watched them sail downstream. The light in the sky grew a darker shade of purple, and he heard somewhere in the night, someone asking *Who? Who? Who?*

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The stars had begun twinkling, one here, one there, in the deep lavender sky. Thimble had steered their boat out ahead of the others, but not far. The four tiny seafaring vessels glided over the water together, a miniature armada.

"We won't have to get off the water and head in another direction?" he asked Chickpea.

"Not for a while," she said.

For some time the passengers of the boats bobbed down the river in silence. They stared ahead, listening to the waves lapping against the hull, watching the reflection of the moon sparkle brighter against the darkening surface.

It was the first respite the mice had had that felt long enough to consider their situation. What do those who seek freedom imagine, on long treacherous nights? A warm place to sleep, warm food in their bellies? Perhaps. Tonight the mice, including Thimble, took these moments of calm floating down the

water, to feel thankful for where they were in that particular moment. Treize and Nona looked over the water at each other's rafts as they flowed downriver together. Thimble reached out and stroked Chickpea's fur. It was still a wonder to him that he could simply touch her.

Thimble thought perhaps it was Decimus who began making a bopping sound, and somewhere another mouse joined in making a rhythmic sound like a drum. The fourteen mice on deck began clapping together, then a few mice, perhaps three, perfectly joined in their voices singing the jovial melody.

Thimble looked around at his companions, what on earth was happening? The song carried them over the water with joy, and laughter, and always the constant clapping of tiny paws to the beat.

My goodness, thought Thimble, they really are extraordinary mice.

And down the river the four little rafts went. Into the moonlight, with song surrounding their travels.



And still somewhere on
the air, if you were to strain your
ears above the mice, someone
asked *Who? Who? Who?*

