

Alloria

Labyrinth of Labyrinths

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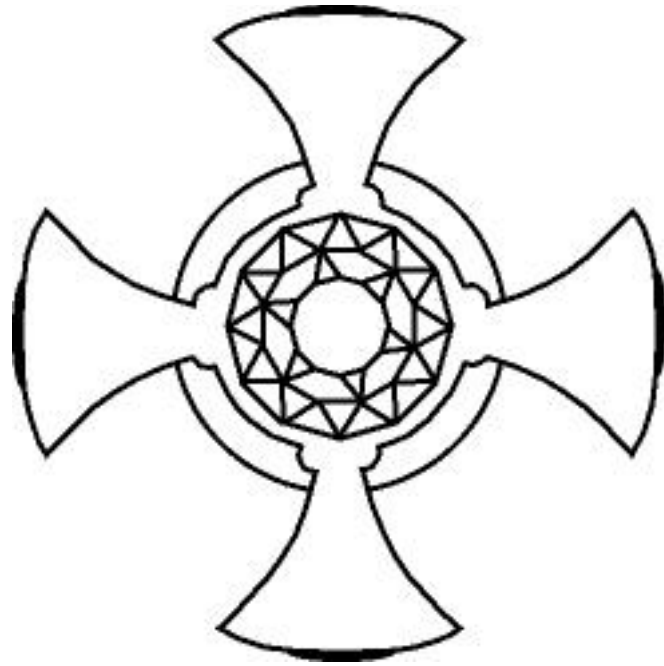
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I thought of a labyrinth of labyrinths,
of one sinuous spreading labyrinth that would encompass
the past and the future and in some way involve the stars.

- Jorge Luis Borges



CHAPTER

1

Blinded by darkness, struggling to breathe past the foul stench, Alloria turned to Nathan following her through the cellar wall. “Careful you don’t trip,” she said, realising Mama or Papa must have closed the cellar door.

“I can take care of myself,” Nathan said, with a brusqueness Alloria found amusing.

“Really?” Typical of Nathan to belittle her efforts. “I did just save your life,” she mocked. “*Twice!* For real too, not pretend like you. Them creatures would have eaten you for sure if I’d not—”

“I don’t think so...” Nathan’s words faded into the darkness, and then he complained, “what’s that stink?”

The cellar did smell putrid. Really awful. Eye-stingingly bad. Alloria shivered and realised the cellar was much colder than any cellar had a right to be. Strange, certainly, the stench and the chill, but Alloria had no intention of letting Nathan change the subject. “They would have,” she argued. “You didn’t climb up to the top; you didn’t see the nests. There were bones in ’em.” She heard Nathan’s movement, knew he was likely gesticulating in some way, and tried desperately, without success, to see his reaction.

“If you say so,” Nathan finally said, with an obvious tone of *whatever* thrown in.

“*Human bones*, Nat.”

“Really?”

Alloria ignored the sarcasm in Nathan’s voice and, in doing so, felt more than a little surprised at the maturity that had come to her upon reaching ten years of age. Nathan, she decided, being a boy, despite being almost three years older, had not yet reached such level-headedness. She edged to the right, searching with her foot for the dished stone steps that led up to the kitchen. She heard Nathan’s

feet shuffle behind her then heard him grunt as he stumbled. She felt his hand brush her back and feeling a little devilish, quickly stepped aside, allowing him to fall.

“Oh, did you trip?” she mocked, before giggling into her hand.

“Shut up, Ally. Why’s the floor all slimy? Ugh! Something crawled over my hand.”

“Shush... Papa will hear.”

The floor squelched under her feet like washday-mud, which made no sense. The cellar had always been dry and clean. And, it was never this cold: cool, yes, but not cold. Missing too was the aroma of peaches and apples and pears and the yeasty-belch of Papa’s brew. Maybe the cesspit had sprung a leak and had seeped through the soil. Disgusting. Throat-squeezingly, disgusting. The wet squirmy feel of it had now penetrated the delicate slippers Mama insisted she wore for the party nobody other than Nathan had turned up for. Well there was no disguising she had been down here now, but wouldn’t they be surprised to learn of her discovery.

Who would have thought it, she considered, practising already how the narrative of her telling would unfold. *That amulet you gave me for my birthday, Papa.* That’s how Papa would tell it, like as if it were a tale in a book. *The very one you took from me, seven years ago, when you found me in the cellar... It opens up the wall, and you can go through, and go to another place.* Of course, she reasoned, Papa will think it a made-up tale, until I show him, but then he will be surprised.

“My hand stinks,” Nathan complained.

“Don’t be such a baby.”

“Baby? I’m older than you.”

“Exactly. Think yourself lucky you’re wearing boots.” Not wishing to fall as Nathan had, Alloria took small careful steps, grimacing as the stinking damp oozed between her toes.

Out of nowhere, stirring a stench of ammonia, came a flutter of leathery wings. A scream snagged in Alloria’s throat, and with the panic of a falling-nightmare, she grasped for purchase in the surrounding darkness. Finding Nathan’s arm, she gripped for all she was worth.

“This isn’t the cellar,” she gasped.

“You’re pinching,” Nathan complained, but rather than struggle to break free he held onto Alloria with equal fervour. “We must have gone through the wrong one.”

“How? We went... One to the left, you said.”

“Yeh...” Nathan eased himself from Alloria’s grip. “Er... Left is the hand I whittle with... isn’t it?”

“NO! Idiot. Left is the one that *you* pick your nose with.”

“Shut up.”

“You shut up,” Alloria commanded. “This is your fault. We should have gone right. That’s whittle, Nat. Not Bogey.”

“Very funny. Can we just get out of here? It reeks.”

Alloria moved close to Nathan, linked her arm through his, and together they blindly shuffled, shrinking from every bat-wing flutter. Alloria held out the pendant, as back and forth they went, tracing the rock's surface with their fingertips. She held her pendant high and low, but failed to find the point where a fog of light might wash over the rock and let them through. Despite trying over and over, stumbling through the darkness, the white gossamer did not materialise, and the jewel in the amulet did not illuminate it with brilliant green magic.

"Where's...?" Alloria cut short her question rather than have Nathan know she teetered on the edge of tears. Standing silent she felt his hand slide into hers and guessed he already knew.

"Come on," he said, as she felt his hand tighten. "There's a light over there. Might be a way out."

It was hardly a glimmer, but in the suffocating blackness it beckoned like a beacon of hope. They exited to see a sumptuous purple sky erasing the slumber of night with yawning strands of pink. Below stretched the canvas of an expansive forest: its dense canopy painting over summer with daubs of red and gold and bronze. And yet, only hours ago, playing out back of the cottage, the forest had been as green and lush as any forest in late summer could be.

A slope of loose shingle dropped steeply from cave mouth to tree line. Nathan went to the edge and looked in all directions. Alloria too was hoping to spot something familiar that would lead them back to the cottage. His brow drew down as he looked at her. "Might be our forest," he said, bottom lip turned and sounding as uncertain as she felt. "Further north, maybe. Winter comes earlier up north. Hear the water?"

She did. It was far louder and far less comforting than the brook that skirted the front of the cottage. Alloria glanced back at the cave, its mouth a gaping black maw within a face of pinkish reflected light. "Those trees look strange," she said, turning back and pointing beyond the elms and oaks, over the chestnuts and beech, to a distant hillside where familiar looking trees gave way to strange-looking dark green columns. Defying the onset of winter, they stood tall and straight, pointing high into the sky like a congregation of church steeples.

Nathan slapped the chill from his bare arms.

"This isn't home, is it?" she said, her tremble as much from the fear of his answer as from the cold cutting into her skin.

The look Nathan gave was answer enough.

"What are we going to do, Nat? What if we can't get back?"

Alloria shrank from the cold as a spiteful gust tugged at her dress. She looked down at the once white slippers. Not the best choice for such weather. Mama's fault: washing her woodland clothes while she was dressed for the stupid party. Every single stitch. Stink, indeed. Stand up on their own, pah! Mama was to blame if she got the flu.

"Let's make a fire," Nathan suggested, already sliding down the gravel slope. "When the sun gets a little higher," he said, looking back, "we should be able to see where we entered the cave."

The plan was simple, and like most simple things was bound to work. For now a fire sounded just what Alloria needed. Give Mama something to complain about when her dress smelled all smoky. Alloria followed Nathan, sliding down the gravel and into the treeline through a tangle of dry grass and bramble. She caught up with Nathan just ten paces in and found him staring at a clearing that looked as smooth and bright as Mama's split-pea soup. Thinking it looked quite out of place, Alloria looked around, expecting to see a goat like the one they kept back home.

In the centre stood not a goat, but a large pile of rocks: big boulders at the bottom covered in moss and silver lichen, smaller, clean stones balanced on top. Nathan shrugged and set to work, removing some of the boulders at the base, rolling them under his boot. A few of the small stones made a clattering escape and rolled like marbles across the plush grass. When it came to fire making they made a good team. Nathan arranged the boulders into a circle while Alloria scratched among bramble for dry twigs. By the time she returned with the third bundle, Nathan had a small fire under way and was packing his tinder and flint into its tin. Alloria introduced small twigs, and as they caught, Nathan overlaid slightly larger ones. For a few moments smoke overwhelmed flame and swirled lazily before the breeze carried it into the surrounding trees.

"I'm starving," Nathan said, his stomach grumbling in confirmation.

"So, what's new?"

Alloria drew her knees close to her chest and wrapped her arms around them. She inserted a thumbnail between her teeth and pushed her gaze through a parting in the weave of branches. "We will get back home, Nat, won't we?" Her thin sounding voice caught the quiver of her trembling chin.

She noticed Nathan wince at the small sharp cuts on her knuckles. "They don't hurt," she said, giving him a brave smile.

Smiling back, Nathan glanced up to the cave entrance. "Course we'll get home," he said. "Soon as the cave floor is light enough to show our footprints."

Hidden from view but sounding close by, running water gurgled and splashed. Alloria sighed. The sound was a reminder of home with none of the comfort. But her home wasn't home, not genuinely.

Not since yesterday.

Not since the parents she loved had told her how they had found her, in the cellar, seven years ago.

Thomas and Bessy Merryweather, Mama and Papa, were not who she thought they were.

Habalan, they'd told her, on her birthday of all days, after keeping the secret for so many years. *Your family name is Habalan*: at least that's what she'd told them, apparently.

Alloria Habalan.

Habalan didn't sound as pleasant as Merryweather.

Habalan.

She didn't like it; refused to accept it. She was Ally Rose Merryweather, and Thomas and Bessy were her mama and papa. She leaned against Nathan, wishing for all-the-world she had never discovered how the amulet they'd given her – given back to her, as she'd had it when they found her – allowed passage through the cellar wall.

“I'm sorry Nat,” she said feeling a whirl of heat float over her cheeks.

“Sorry for what?”

“For making you come with me.”

“Couldn't let you go alone.”

“I know, but... I wish I'd not even...”

“We'll be home soon,” he said, wrapping an arm around her shoulders. “You'll see.”



CHAPTER

2

The sound of sliding shingle pricked Bainberry's ears.

Just a rabbit.

He went back to cleaning the skinned hide of the guttwraith he'd killed two days back.

Probably a rabbit.

Moments later the roll of tumbling stones told him wolf.

He eyed his sword.

Clattering boulders yelled guttwraith.

He drew his sword closer then continued scraping flesh from the underside of the fur. For a moment Bainberry thought about the cave and reflected, just as he had done every day for the past seven years. A long wait, seven years. Later he would go and look. The morning frost had likely displaced a rock from the pile. Pay it no mind. Full of unexpected sounds this forest. Inspecting them all would give him not a moment's rest.

Then he smelled smoke.

Sounds he could ignore. Smoke on the breeze he could not.

Putting the skin to one side, he turned the roasting fowl a quarter turn and grabbed his sword. Rising slowly to his feet, he sloped towards the brook. Near the clearing he shrank into the undergrowth and continued at a crawling pace.

The unexpected sight shocked him.

Two children.

Young.

Alone?

He couldn't be certain.

Sitting in the clearing, their backs to him, they partially masked a dwindling fire. With a mix of dread and anger he noticed the fire was ringed with rocks taken from the base of the grave. His eyes switched from the children to the clearing's edge. He firmed his grip on the sword. The muscles in his arms flexed. "Sword be true," he said through clenched teeth, as he raised the huge weapon over his head and crashed into the clearing.