

Dhrithi K.

“Without a Trace”

The scream was loud in the quiet solemnity of the maze. Celeste walked towards the source briskly, footsteps echoing off the stone walls around her. As she turned a corner, she watched a young boy tumble out of the dark opening, cursing as the fissure closed behind him.

He opened his mouth, catching sight of her, and feelings of hopelessness overwhelmed her. She cut him off immediately, beginning to speak. “There is no escape,” she said, gesturing vaguely to the stone walls behind her. “The Labyrinth is a never-ending maze and being sent here is essentially a death sentence.”

Instead of being disparaged, he stood up, narrowing his eyes at her. “Then why aren’t you dead?”

Momentarily affronted, she hesitated, and he took the opportunity to barrel on. “And don’t lie to me. I know there’s a way to get out.”

It was her turn to peer suspiciously at him. “What do you mean you ‘know there’s a way out?’”

He scoffed, intelligent eyes piercing through her. “There’s *always* a way out.” He pushed his dark curls out of his face. “You still haven’t answered my question. Why aren’t you dead?”

Celeste shrugged nonchalantly at him, though her whole body tensed at the thought of revealing information about herself. “I don’t actually know. Luck, maybe?”

The boy eyed her disbelievingly. “Luck.” It wasn’t a question.

“Yes,” Celeste answered anyway, trying not to squirm under his gaze. “But enough pleasantries. We need to get to my shelter before we both die.”

He scoffed again. “And why should I trust you? I don’t even know your name!”

“It’s Celeste,” she said quickly. “And you don’t have to trust me, but you aren’t going to make it even one night if you don’t have a shelter,” she finished, not checking to make sure he was following her as she walked away.

“Fine. I’ll follow you,” the ravenette muttered, obviously trying to sound nonchalant, though his fast-paced footsteps gave him away. “And by the way, my name’s Leonidas, but people call me Daz.”

“Alright then, *Daz*,” Celeste said, tasting the name on her tongue, “Follow me, and you might just survive the night.”

When they finally reached her shelter, Daz collapsed on the ground panting. Celeste raised an eyebrow at him. Defensively, he remarked, “Not all of us have been walking in this maze for years!”

She snickered quietly, and followed him into the small, cave-like house. As she entered, she closely inspected the walls, looking for any trace of a change. Carved into the mud-caked stone was ancient writing, and though she knew she had written it, she couldn’t recall where it had been learned, or how many years ago it had been scrawled.

Leonidas followed her gaze. “Is that your writing?” he asked. She nodded, still inspecting it. Some rusty part of her brain was translating it, figuring out what the scripture meant. Daz

seemed to understand that he shouldn't ask any other questions and fell silent. It wasn't long before he spoke again.

"How do we get out of here?" he asked, the darkness of the cave shrouding his eyes.

Celeste avoided his gaze, trying to look at anything but him. "I already told you. There's no escape."

Daz regarded her warily. "And I already told *you*. I *know* you're lying."

She blew out a breath. "Fine. Perhaps there is a way out. But many other souls have died trying."

He raised an eyebrow at her. "I think you might be surprised at what I can do."

She sighed, though her heart ached at the thought of watching someone else die. Even someone she had only met hours ago.

She made her way to the other side of the cave, making herself comfortable on the floor. "We leave at first light," she said, though she wouldn't be sleeping that night.

First light came much too soon. They set off on foot, Celeste leading them, moving quick and fast with no belongings to weigh them down. As they turned corner after corner, Celeste could feel her heartbeat thrumming faster and louder. Idly, she wondered if Daz could hear it.

Finally, they reached an arena-like room. Two doors loomed over them. Just as Leonidas was about open one, Celeste stopped him, forcing him to face her. "Inside this room is a Minotaur. Behind it is a door. Defeat the Minotaur and we can leave. If you don't, well... I think you know what happens."

He glanced at her. "I'll take that risk."

“No!” She nearly shouted, her voice echoing off the stone barriers. “You don’t understand. The Minotaur is a monstrous creature with the body of a man, yet the head of a bull. He has blood-red eyes and razor-sharp horns protruding from his head. The only words to describe him are wicked and dangerous. Perhaps blood-thirsty as well.”

Daz shook his head. “It doesn’t matter. I still have to try.”

“Wait.” She grabbed his arm as a last-ditch attempt. “Once you go in, those doors lock. They’ll stay locked until someone is killed, whether that be you or the Minotaur. If you go in, you can’t come out. Not until blood is shed.”

He didn’t give her a response this time. Instead, he yanked the doors open and marched inside, to what Celeste hoped wasn’t his doom. And for some cursed reason, Celeste followed.

The resulting fight was gruesome. It was fast and brutal, as Daz fought; the vicious battle flecking her with gore. Finally, Daz ripped the Minotaur apart, coating the room with blood. A door appeared, and Celeste approached it cautiously. Together, she and Daz prepared to step through, when suddenly, Celeste caught sight of ancient text carved into the door. Fingers tracing it, she read aloud.

“Only one can leave.” She turned to Daz, and suddenly, she knew what she had to do.

“Go,” she said, shoving him through. “This is your only chance.”

He held out his hand to her. “Come with me.”

She shook her head. “That would jeopardize both our chances.”

Silent tears slipped out of their eyes, and carefully, she pushed him through the doorway.

“Just remember me, okay? Now go.”

And with one last mournful glance, he slipped out the door, and she watched as it faded away behind him.