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THE LABYRINTH

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The story I present here is designed to give an impression of what it's like to be trans in 2021, and what 'succeeding' means to people like me. The conclusion reached here is that the current environment is so overwhelmingly hostile towards trans people that just staying alive and being able to help others to do the same is a success, and that this is in large part due to the way that we're deliberately isolated from people who aren't trans. It also examines the way that the attacks levelled against trans people are simply the grisly remains of other long-debunked excuses to attack different minorities, reheated and given a different spin to appear relevant again.

The Labyrinth

Panting, Cassie pulled her sword from the creature's neck with a wet *shnik*, splattering hot blood against the stone floor. She looked over her shoulder.

"You alright back there?"

Slowly, a face emerged from behind a piece of scorched rubble on the other side of the chamber, pale and shaking.

"I... I think so..." The other woman got to her feet, supporting herself on the piece of stone.

"Is it... dead?" she asked, nodding at the slumped mass on the ground. Cassie turned back, examined the cyclops, and then kicked it in the ribs as hard as she could. There was a meaty thud, and it didn't move. Cassie thought it'd look cool to check that way, but apparently kicking a 400-pound slab of immobile muscle wasn't any different to kicking 400 pounds of anything else (that is to say, quite sore).

"Ahaaaowww... Yes, I think he's dead," Cassie replied, hopping over to a pile of rubble to sit down. She snapped her fingers, producing a small ball of flame. For a few seconds, she fed it her magic, growing it to around the size of her fist, then drew back her hand, letting it hang in the air. The warm, orange glow, and quiet crackle of the flames helped calm her after a fight, and she pulled out a rag so that she could start cleaning her sword.

"Th-thank you for stepping in like that, Miss...?" the other woman called across the chamber.

"Cassie, thanks."

"Pleasure to meet you, Cassie. I'm Efrosyni."

Efrosyni made her way over to the pool of orange light that Cassie was sat in. Up close, Cassie saw that Efrosyni was wearing a toga, with a golden clasp at the shoulder. The material would probably have seemed pretty in other circumstances.

“Hi, Efrosyni. Sorry about your toga.” Cassie gestured at the blackened hem of the garment as Efrosyni sat down next to her.

“Oh, please, don’t worry about it. Sorry about your foot.”

Cassie wiggled her toes in her boot and winced, before wiping the last of the cyclops’ blood off her sword.

“At least now,” Efrosyni sighed, “this creature is dealt with for good. This part of the Labyrinth will be a little safer.”

Cassie held up her hand and wagged it noncommittally, making an *ehhhh* noise.

“You say that, but I’ve killed that fucking thing at least three times before now.”

“You’ve killed three—sorry, four—cyclopes? That’s... rather impressive.”

“No no, not four separate ones. This one. Same cyclops each time.”

“Oh... that’s... bizarre.”

“Not really. Our dear hosts only have a limited supply of monsters to set on us, so rather than creating something new, it’s much cheaper to scrape up the corpses of the old ones, gussy them up a little with a new twist or power, and then give them a shot of magic to switch them back on again. Then they shamle off, back into the Labyrinth. Almost as if you never killed it to begin with.”

“That sounds rather frustrating.”

“Try soul-destroying. Still, at least after a while, you get a handle on what you’re dealing with every time. For example, next time *you’ll* know not to walk straight into this thing’s lair! How did that end up happening, anyway?”

Efrosyni shrugged, looking around helplessly.

“I... got put in here a few days ago, and I’ve just been wandering ever since. It was so dark, and there was no food, no water, no...” Her breath caught.

“That’s weird. Aren’t peoples’ families supposed to give them some supplies before they’re thrown in?” Cassie asked, and then immediately wished she hadn’t. Efrosyni’s shoulders started shaking, and she looked like she was about to cry.

Nice one, Cassie—very sensitive.

“Listen, I... I’m sorry, I...” Cassie floundered and then trailed off, while Efrosyni slumped.

“What are we even supposed to do? Is this it? Just hiding in the dark forever? What’s the point?”

Cassie sighed, and leaned back, rolling her ankle, sucking in a breath through clenched teeth as she felt a stab of pain. It might not have just been the kick; she was beginning to suspect she’d landed on her foot funny during the fight. Efrosyni looked around, and her expression became concerned.

“Lords, are you sure that’s ok? Let me look...” She crouched, pulling Cassie’s worn boot off.

“Oooww... Thanks, Efrosyni. And, if you want me to be honest, well, any lofty goals like escaping or whatever...” Cassie leaned back and shook her head ruefully, “they’d be nice. But for now, surviving in here really is the best we can do. This place wants to fucking kill us. Every minute we’re breathing, we’re fighting back. Take that cyclops, for example. Anything strike you as weird about it? Not like the cyclopes you hear about in legends?”

“Well... it could fire that beam from its eye.”

“I... w-well, I mean, yes, certainly, the eye-beam was new, and that *did* make it quite formidable. But you know what else was new?”

Cassie gestured at her right arm, and then at the cyclops’ mangled limb. Efrosyni followed her gaze and frowned. The large, grey appendage, thick with corded muscle, was twisted at a sickening angle.

“Brittle bones in its right arm. Sure, they improve these things every time, but they’ve taped that thing back together so often that the foundations can be broken with a few whacks from the flat of a sword. As long as we keep killing those things, as long as we keep protecting each other from them, they get weaker. Stronger too, but they can’t stop the rot from setting in.” She smiled down at Efrosyni, as she ripped part of her toga off to start binding Cassie’s sprained ankle.

“And hey, maybe it’s not enough. Maybe by the time the scars of attrition start to tell, we’ll all be long dead. But it’s the best we can do in the short term. This place wants to kill us. So, we don’t let it. We roll with the punches and do whatever it takes to help each other to stay alive. And we smash these things apart as many times as it takes. It’s the best we can do for each other.”

Cassie stood, and Efrosyni got up with her, her expression still troubled.

“I mean, that sounds like it makes sense, but won’t I just be dead weight? I can’t swing a sword, or shoot fire out of my hands...” Efrosyni said, one hand clutching her arm.

Cassie gave her a smile, and looked down at her ankle, rolling it back and forth a few times.

“Well, you patched up my ankle pretty good. You seem to know what you’re doing there.”

“Ah, w-well, I was top of my class at the medical college...” she replied, blushing.

Cassie laughed, and gave Efrosyni a clap on the shoulder.

“See? We can help each other survive down here. I can fuck up monsters, you can patch me up when I do that badly. As long as we stick to that... well, we should be ok.”

And with that, Cassie turned, striding off into the darkness... with the sound of Efrosyni’s footsteps echoing behind her.

Academic Commentary

One of the biggest challenges to overcome with this project was defining what long and short-term success mean to me. I struggled to think of anything concrete that I could latch onto, and a friend of mine suggested that this inability to conceptualize ‘success’ may be worth addressing. I used the metaphor of a Labyrinth full of rotting, undead monsters as a metaphor for the confinement, confusion, and repeated attacks that encapsulate the experience of being trans in the UK today. This led me to the conclusion that success in an environment where your legal protections are being actively rolled back and legislated against is surviving, plain and simple. Anything else is a bonus. A connected idea I explored was how these attacks are based in long-debunked claims about other minority groups which are simply repurposed in a manner which, as commentator Cody Johnston puts it, is “repeating itself, forever, on a loop, like an Ouroboros made out of s****” (Johnston, 2021). For example, the modern moral panic about trans people using bathrooms to sexually prey on cis women has its roots in similar Civil Rights-era moral panic about black students sharing bathrooms with white students (Ratcliffe, 2017; Godfrey, 2003). This carried similarly fabricated connotations of sexual menace, “part of a wider protectionist politics around (cis) women’s bodies that function to protect idealised notions of white female vulnerability” (Pearce et al., 2020). While I wish I had been able to address the perspective of what universities can do more explicitly, I do still feel that the implicit advice is clear: do not help resurrect the monsters. Do not accept thinly veiled hate speech as a legitimate concern. Push back against it by emphasizing that the concerns raised are nothing but opportunistic fearmongering by people peddling the same old lies as always. That will help to turn back the tide of this extremely bleak period of history for trans people.

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