


I. The hall opens onto an underground forest, where torchlight glitters off of dozens of petrified trunks. They rise in orderly rows, their bark is shiny and smooth, their shape perfectly round. Branchless, they taper off into the darkness of the vault. In the stifling silence I hear them writhe. Screech. Scream. The trees around me sigh in pain, begging to be set free. I cannot bear to hear it. So I strike them down, to free from slavery to the Children of Man. I strike until their stone turns brittle and crumbles. I strike until the effort leaves me numb, until the voice of my companions finally reaches my ears: There is no sap in these trees, only stone beneath stone. But my rage has cleared our path.

*Left: I must sacrifice the Talisman that allowed me to carry the torch. I am finally free of its bindings.*

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II. A new smell fills our nostrils, different from that of stale air. A stench of warmth, of life and death. A truth our eyes only discover many steps later: The hall is littered with beastly bones and rotten wood. What predator could have slaughtered an entire herd? There is no trace of the cloying smell of blood, but we all prepare to spill our enemies'. The echoes of our march boom around the chamber. After ten steps, we are a troop; after a hundred, we are a legion. Then comes a different sound: Wood clatters to the ground, raising dust in the darkness before us. I look at my companions and see how this place is already wearing them down. But I must lead the way. I raise the torch until it sheds light on a rotten board, laying next to a ribcage. From behind the bones peek the dark eyes of a mouse. It scurries away, and I follow it to an exit.

*Left: I must sacrifice the Talisman that allowed me to carry the torch. I am finally free of its bindings.*






III. With each step the path becomes narrower, the dark vault presses in to crush us. The ground itself becomes treacherous: The torch no longer shines on smooth stone, every inch is covered in arid dust. As if a river of sand had invaded the hall. We make our way upstream, until we reach the crack it stemmed from. It opens like a gash on the surface of a curved wall, leading into an half-buried chamber. It somehow resembles a giant well, or the inverse of one. I raise the torch, and the sand glitters. Waiting behind the crack I see long, black shadows. Children of Man, betrayed by the flames. I jolt back and leave the torch with my companions, to charge alone in the darkness. The sand grasps at my feet, my blood runs slower. My will to fight is almost overcome by the need to flee... But there are no enemies lying in ambush. Just a vanishing mirage, and behind it another hall.

*Left: I must sacrifice the Talisman that allowed me to carry the torch. I am finally free of its bindings.*

IV. There is no longer sand or dust under our feet, only narrow steps. The hall twists into a stairway and we descend, almost without noticing. The echo of our steps fills the air, our light glides off impossibly smooth walls. There is no rubble here, no stench of death. The Labyrinth feels alive, now more than ever, like a snake after shedding its old skin. We descend, ramp after ramp, without ever coming to an end. I hear the others whisper behind me, saying that the steps are beginning to climb upwards, and I cannot tell whether they are right. Someone halts, positive that we are walking in loops. But I hold the torch, and by advancing I force them to follow. Doubt gnaws at me: Are we really the mice in the belly of this great serpent? I stumble when my foot tries to find a step that is not there. We have hit rock bottom.

*Left: I must sacrifice the Talisman that allowed me to carry the torch. I am finally free of its bindings.*






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V. Still we descend. Ever further from the touch of sunlight and the taste of water. As if reading our thoughts, the Labyrinth lures us further in with a burbling sound that promises to quench our thirst. An underground river? We quicken our step, force ourselves to be cautious as we turn a corner and there is the spring, right before us: A row of stone mouths, wide open as if frozen mid-song. Their music is icy water, babbling from a deep pool. We share a brief look, then our eyes dive into the dark waters. The roaring streams obscure the reflection of the sculpted faces, yet their call only grows stronger. I feel my head bowing of its own will. I am thirsty. In the statues' reflection, their stone teeth look sharper: They are thirsty too. With an effort of will I step back, throwing out my arms. Pulling my companions away from the water is pure agony. But I know we must leave now.


*Left: I must sacrifice the Talisman that allowed me to carry the torch. I am finally free of its bindings.*



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VI. The walls of the corridor suddenly stop, leaving our flanks exposed. We move to the side, our steps light, trying to get our bearings. Suddenly there's another light, so very close: Spells rise to our lips, our muscles tense. I lower the torch and the other flame follows suit. I move mine left and right. Still it chases. I step forward and I am upon it. The twin torches reveal a face, and finally I recognise it. It is my own. For a moment I feel like I am looking at another pool of water, but this reflection is clearer. Merciless. I stand still, bewitched by that face, by the marks of hunger and cold and too many days away from sunlight. Until I see something moving behind my reflection: I turn and strike, my fear warped into fury. But the voice that curses at me, choking back pain, does not belong to an enemy. What have I done? I snap out of the spell and rush to support my wounded companion, leading the group to a passage past the chamber of a thousand reflections.

*Left: Sacrificing my own Talisman is not enough. I must gesture for one of the others to step forward, then tear another Talisman away from them after taking mine off. We are finally free of their bindings.*



VII. We recognise it from afar, in spite of the countless twists and turns. Light. None of us have any strength left to fear it, when we finally step into the great chamber. Torches hang from every wall, their flames high and lively even as our own threatens to die out. At the centre we see an altar, with no one gathered to pray around it. The Children of Man still elude us, but at least we understand the nature of this place. A Temple. Many arches open in the walls beside the one we entered through. Next to each lies a jar, or a chest, or a bowl of offerings. The treasures of the Children of Man. The others no longer need to follow my light. One suggests this could be the heart of the Labyrinth. The other whispers that the offerings look fresh. But one glance at the altar is all I need to understand. This is not a place of secrets. I will not fall to yet another trick. I raise my torch again: We must choose a path and move on.

*Left: I must sacrifice the Talisman that allowed me to carry the torch. I am finally free of its bindings.*

ENDING. The heart of the Labyrinth is close, I can feel it. Just beyond the next turn, or perhaps the one after that. The torch is fresh, its flame high. We can find more water. And more food, I hope. As the halls twist and blur together, my mind wanders back to the Temple of Torchlight. That is the name I gave it. I wonder what gods it was built to worship, what sacrifices they demand of the Children of Man in exchange for their power. Perhaps this is not the first time three Prodigies enter the Labyrinth to free the world of evil. Perhaps the Children of Man are listening to us inside their walls of stone. The ritual is long, and in the end we fall, and not a drop of our blood sullies their hands. Perhaps Prodigies are left to rest right where they have fallen, and their bones help the next group of warriors tell the halls apart. For if the Labyrinth has no heart, it will certainly demand ours in sacrifice.

*Left: I must turn off the torch and stop the soundtrack, if we chose to use one. The game is over.*