Crystalline turquoise water splashed lazily against the barnacle ridden bulkhead that stretched out below Silas from where he leaned over the railing at the prow of a sleek galley. Despite the dappled orange light dancing across the surface of the water Silas could just make out his grimy reflection staring back at him. He ran his fingers through his unwashed brown hair and scratched at the faint beard that had crawled its way into existence over the past few weeks. Silas could feel the evening sun rake across his already sunburnt back and noticed a large indistinguishable shadow pass beneath the ship before a shout pulled his attention from the glistening mirage.

“Silas! Captain needs you.”

A portly sailor bellowed from the stern of the lengthy vessel, his voice exploding from his chest with unnatural volume. Silas nearly winced from the eruption of noise before clambering towards the rear of the ship. He had to weave through throngs of sailors lounging on the deck or in their benches while they tossed dice and gargled on rancid rum. A beefy leg shot out from one group as he passed in an attempt to trip him but he evaded the extended limb and came down hard on the attached toes. An angry yell trailed after him as he quickly skipped past two more throngs and left the disgruntled sailor in his wake. A few more dirty stares met his gaze as he passed more of the seemingly infinite crewmen. Silas consoled himself with the fact that they were nearly finished with this whole ordeal, two months on this godforsaken pirate ship was already two more than he desired.

The sparsely crowded rear of the vessel was blanketed in shade cast by the rigid cliff faces that ensconced the bay they hid in. Operating a ship this close to the south-eastern coast of Tyrin was by all accounts a death sentence, but they hadn’t spotted any movement on shore since passing Vatra Gora almost a week earlier. A close call had left the entire crew shaken after a dragon flew by overhead while they sheltered in a bay not unlike the one they found themselves in now.

Silas couldn’t help but wonder if the captain’s thoughts mirrored his own when he found him at the stern of the ship, gazing intently at the stark ridgeline around them. The captain was a tall, deeply tanned man by the name of Hakeem, though his men knew him only as the captain. A comically wide pirate hat covered his sun bleached hair and twisted beard. With three flintlock pistols attached to each hip of a ragged billowing coat the man looked every bit a scoundrel of the high seas. The captain turned and met Silas’ gaze with his own piercing eyes before motioning with a jerk of his head to follow him into the single enclosed cabin on the entire hundred and fifty-foot vessel. The small space was dominated by one central desk littered with countless maps and a pair of gilded calipers, in the far right corner a small hammock hung above a hoard of books neatly stacked into squat towers. To the right was a fat chest and across the left wall hung a wide mirror. The captain made his way behind the desk and flattened a large map that depicted the entirety of Tyrin before pulling out a smaller, roughly drawn map of a small expanse of coast. Silas leaned against the table opposite the captain and waited for him to start.

“You can’t go in alone.”

Silas scrunched his brow in confusion, “What!? I thought we agreed I would go in to scout the fort before sending the rest in, I’ll be in and out in no time, you don’t need to worry about me.”

“I don’t give a rat’s ass what happens to you, but my boys don’t trust you.”

Silas scowled at Hakeem, “This crap again? What do you think I’m going to do!? Cart wagonloads of treasure through the broken lands all by myself?”

Hakeem held up his hands in a placating gesture, “Listen, I trust you on this but the men are convinced you’re trying to con the entire crew. They’ve demanded that we send a party in with you for initial scouting.”

“No offense Hakeem, but your men are idiots. We have no idea what’s in there after fifteen years. Your men would go storming in like a pissed off hive of bees and damn the consequences. There could be a goddam dragon nesting in there for all we know!”

Silas paced before the gathered maps as he shook his head before continuing. “Look, I can move quick and quiet, if there is anything in there we should know about it before we storm in… Just give me a few hours.”

“Like I said Silas, I trust you on this, but the men won’t have it. This isn’t up for debate.”

“What do you mean this isn’t up for debate, if you trust me then let me go alone!”

“It isn’t so simple.”

“How is it not simple? They’re your men, order them to stand down!”

“We haven’t brought in a single take for two months Silas! If I don’t play my hand well here I won’t be captain any longer!”

Hakeem slammed his fist into the table to punctuate his point before continuing. “Twenty men are going with you to Tyr Fjara.”

“Ten.”

“Fifteen, and we’re done talking about it.”

“But…”

“Nope, this is the way it is. Anchor’s getting pulled as soon as the rest of this light is gone, tonight’s the night kid.”

Silas grumbled under his breath as he turned on his heals and made his way into the soft gray of dawn just before the remaining rays of light slid beyond the cliff edges. As full darkness engulfed the secluded bay hundreds of sailors rose in unison and set about preparing the ship for travel. In moments, the anchor was pulled and rowers began settling into long rowing benches, four men for each massive oar.

The sailors heaved into their oars as one and the massive ship lurched into motion. Four more powerful heaves and the wind began whipping at Silas’ overgrown hair, sending it lashing across his face and neck. Despite all the discomfort of the journey, there was nothing quite like feeling the ship slice through waves under the power of over three hundred men. Once the galley breached the protective cliffs of the bay, salty spray crashed over the prow of the ship as it broke the waves in its path. Silas stood atop a raised platform above the captain’s quarters, tapping his feet as he gazed out at the rows of sailors wrestling with their oars. His thoughts and eyes drifted to the sky as they picked up pace, nobody knew how far south dragons nested but his eyes had been peeled the entire journey and that wasn’t about to change now. Dark cliffs and moonlit waters raced past for a good while before the arrival of the fat bosun shook him from his concentration. Evil, beady eyes bored into him from atop a fat red nose and bushy black mustache. The bald man spit at Silas’ feet while continuing to stare, daring Silas to react. Silas stood his ground but didn’t speak, simply met his gaze without a word. This seemed to irritate the man and he stepped in closer, the rank smell of alcohol oozed from his mouth filled with crumbling yellow-brown teeth.

“This is my fucking spot kid!”

The drunken bosun spit the words at Silas with equal parts saliva and volume before stumbling into him with a clumsy shove. Silas let the blow roll over him as he sidestepped and gave a slight push to the man’s waist, sending him crashing into the deck where he stirred only slightly. Not wanting to see what the man would do if he got up, Silas quickly descended the short steps and turned to rap on the captain’s door. A muffled reply admitted him into the small space and he slid the door shut behind him before turning to face the captain seated behind his maps.

“I need to grab my gear.” Silas said.

Hakeem leaned back and raised an arm towards a stocky chest to Silas’ right.

“Everything’s right where you left it.”

Silas crouched down before the chest and snapped the lid open with a small sense of giddiness. He lowered his arms into the chest and for the first time in weeks, caressed the smooth, dark wood of his bow. The rounded arcs of the wood creaked back into shape as he carefully levered the bowstring over the tip of each wing. He set the bow against the wall and set his quiver beside it, thirty arrows neatly packed into rows inside. Silas turned his attention back to the chest and gathered a hard leather vest, vambraces and leg-guards before strapping them into place and slinging his bow and quiver across his back. From the bottom of the trunk he gathered two curved daggers and attached one to each hip. Finally, he fished a small leather satchel from the depths of the vestibule and carefully examined it’s contents. The satchel held two small stylus fastened into smaller leather pouches beside a brass compass and a handful of smooth stones just slightly smaller than the width of a palm. In a side compartment three more of the strange stones sat neatly stacked, coated in some kind of oil. The three oily stones had simple runes carved into their faces that glowed with a faint light. After setting the strap of the satchel over his shoulders, Silas checked his gear one last time and straightened himself, feeling whole for the first time in weeks. With the constant salt and spray of the ship, Silas had hidden his armaments from the elements in the captain’s chest. Hakeem remained lounging in his chair as Silas threw on his gear and appraised Silas with a raised eyebrow as he swiveled to face him.

“If you walked around looking like that the men might not believe you’re such a pushover eh?”

Hakeem grinned at Silas before motioning him over to the mirror with a wave. Silas obliged and looked at his own reflection for the first time in months. His brown hair was down to the base of his neck and matted on one side, sharp blue eyes stared back at him from a soft face turned hard by wind and salt. A small scar twisted down his chin from the bottom of his lips, barely more than a silver trail. Silas had always been on the small side, but his slight frame was aided by the hard leather pads strapped across wiry muscles. As he stared at himself Silas could feel his frustration from earlier boil over once more and he turned back to Hakeem.

“Let me go alone.”

Hakeem grimaced and shook his head before replying, “Kid, I can’t argue this anymore. Stop beating a dead horse.”

“Thumos recommended you and your crew because you are, according to him “efficient and reliable.” One job in with me and you’re already compromising the mission because your men can’t be controlled.”

Hakeem ground his teeth in frustration before replying, “Your brother recommended myself and my crew because we get the job done and we don’t talk after, we’re goddam pirates not mercenaries… You’ve gotta understand, these boys sign on because they want freedom, a life where they don’t answer to orders. We give em the next best thing. They sure as hell don’t fancy taking orders from children who can’t yet muster a beard!”

Hakeem threw a pen down onto the table to emphasize his point before Silas replied.

“Orthus was the same age as I am now when you lot embarked on your first expedition, how am I so different?”

“HA!” Hakeem exploded in an exclamation of sarcasm. “If you wanna get treated like your brother you should’ve acted more like him. El Diablo they called him, fucking killed two of my men before they left him alone, then when we got raided by those Torgaru, killed thirty of them at least. Lost half my damn men in that raid.”

“Thirty Torgaru?” Silas asked incredulously, a single eyebrow extended into the sky.

“Ah, well, you know how the numbers go after a fight, he killed a lot of em. But the sight of him after is what got my boys calling him that, dripping blood head to toe without a cut on him.”

Hakeem gazed out the small porthole as he reminisced before shaking his head and turning back to Silas.

“Anyways, my men feared Orthus like he was the wrath of Anur incarnate. No offense kid, but you aint your brother.”

“So I should just start killing your men then? That what you want?”

Hakeem delivered Silas a sarcastic grin, “Do your worst kid, see what happens.”

The pair stared daggers into each other for another moment before Hakeem shook his head and threw his arms to the side in an exasperated gesture.

“Look kid, it’s too late to change things now, just run this op with my guys and they’ll start giving you your due. These boys respect action.”

Silas looked down for a moment before starting to reply, “Fine, we can run…”

A sharp rap on the wooden door shattered his train of thought before Hakeem acknowledged the intrusion. “What is it?”

“We’ve just rounded the cape sir, fifteen minutes east and we’ll be there.”

“Understood, assemble the scouting party.”

A muffled affirmative filtered back through the wood and Hakeem looked up at Silas from his maps. “You heard the man, be ready in fifteen. Watch your back out there.”

Silas lowered himself down a flimsy rope ladder to join the last five sailors rowing to shore and settled into a seat furthest from the gathered bodies before staring back up at the hundreds crowded along the railing, gawking at their miniature rowboat as it set off from the vast ship. Silas briefly locked eyes with Hakeem before the captain turned around and slid beneath the railing. The rowboat crawled over to the poor excuse for shore where the other ten sailors joining them stood hunched together. A sailor looped a heavy rope around the roots of a substantial mangrove tree while the men leapt onto the slender crescent of sand. With Silas and fifteen others crowded onto the miniscule beach half were standing knee deep in the salty waves while a few huddled against the intertwined roots of mangrove trees. It didn’t seem like any of the sailors would lead the way so Silas pushed his way through the gathered men until he reached the densely packed mangroves and pulled himself up onto the root structures. Perched atop a root Silas could see further into the dense foliage, Mangrove roots and shallow seawater extended as far as his eyes could penetrate through the thick cover. Silas glanced back briefly before weaving through the intertwined roots and branches. Silas had never been more thankful for his small stature as he wound his way below low hanging vines and danced across thin roots. A brief wave of panic washed over him as he landed atop an unsecured root and it gave way beneath him. Silas quickly grabbed an adjoining branch to swing himself away from danger only to find himself face to face with a Njoka viper, the serpent baring its fangs toward Silas as he got too close. The slender creature lay intertwined with a mangrove branch, spiked frills ranged down its spine in a defiant display of vibrant emerald and citrine. Glistening fangs sent Silas scrambling for another handhold but he found none, instead plunging into knee high water. The sailors gathered at the edge of the mangroves burst out with raucous laughter as Silas lifted himself back onto the precarious branches. With his footing restored Silas ignored the men and set of at a slightly more measured pace. After progressing another few sets of roots Silas turned back to watch the sailors as they endeavored across the fragmented footholds. After just a few meters of progress one of the sailors who had laughed loudest snapped a root and was sent plunging into the briny solution below. Raging laughter echoed through the assembled pirates once more and the commotion sent two more men spiraling into the drink, eliciting more laughter. Silas waited patiently for the cacophony to cease before moving on, the pirates skipping between branching roots in his wake. Another sailor crashed through the roots before long, sending his fellows into another bought of laughter, the ones who had already fallen seemed to be laughing the loudest for some odd reason. Silas cracked a small grin as the clumsy pirates continued to crash through the mangroves long after Silas had mastered weaving his way between the gnarled roots and branches. Unfortunately, his amusement didn’t last long as the knee high water turned to knee high mud and the sailors continued to tumble through the maze of roots. A heavy pirate with an axe strapped across his back jumped to a precarious position atop a crumbling root before tumbling into the omnipresent mud, on the way down he grabbed the ankle of another pirate who plunged into the rank mire along with the first man. The men exploded from the disgusting slime moments after plunging through, spitting globs of black mud as they wiped their eyes clean of the disgusting mixture. There was little laughter this time as the troop painstakingly endeavored through the mangroves, men plummeting into disgusting mud every ten minutes. Silas continued to trailblaze a path, finding avenues through the twisted vines and mangled roots. The truly dark depths of night gave way to faint morning light as the men meandered through intertwined vines. The party continued on for a few hours, stopping only when Silas found a small raise of land big enough to comfortably fit four people. The exhausted men jockeyed for space on the patch of solid ground before a slim, black haired pirate spoke up, “Thought you tol’ the cap’n ita less than day’s walk, eh?”

The rest of the pirates made an affirmative if exhausted acknowledgment as a few turned to face Silas.

Silas replied, “According to the maps it would be less than a day’s walk, a few hours at most. Obviously, things change if there are swamps surrounding the whole damn fort.”

“I thought you’s the only ones that know where these forts is?” Another pirate chimed in, “And you don knae how to get there?”

The rest of the pirates murmured and stared at Silas before he replied.

“My brothers and I know where the forts are, that’s why your captain gives us double shares to lead you lot to the treasure.” Silas stabbed a finger at the sailor. “At no point in the agreement do we say we have been there, I said it was a days march and I stand by that. It just isn’t a days trek through viper infested swamps.”

The assembled pirates grumbled among themselves and traded a few choice words among each other below their breath but not one pushed the topic.

After a minute spent gathering themselves the party resumed their venture inland, Silas briefly checking his compass every so often to verify their northerly course. The heat of the sun bore into his right shoulder despite the mangrove canopy and he could feel it scorch his skin as he plowed through the swamps. The raging heat had transitioned it’s fury to his left shoulder by the time the gang of pirates next called for a stop. As the mud streaked pirates gathered behind Silas he could just make out a break in the densely packed trees and called the rest of the gang forward. Silas quickly skipped along the gnarled branches towards the would be clearing before realizing the empty space ahead of him was actually a river that arced away from him on both sides. The wide swath of murky water cut lazily through the swamp and left Silas facing a ten yard span of empty space without a single mangrove to traverse over. As the remaining sailors gathered along the river’s edge a few began muttering among themselves, Silas could just make out a few fragments of conversation.

“…going in there, you crazy?”

Silas stared at the grimy water for a moment before collecting himself with a deep breath and lowering himself calmly into the river. With his head just above the surface his feet found no purchase so instead he gave himself a quick push off the mangrove he clung to and began a measured sidestroke to the far bank. The chill of the water penetrated his clothing and he felt a small part of his mind panic as his leg brushed against a submerged branch. The second his hand closed around a mangrove on the far bank he was up and away from the water, scrambling for purchase in a frantic attempt to exit the river. Despite his racing pulse the river behind him reflected none of his turmoil, the water remained placid with only a few remaining ripples from his crossing. The assembled pirates stared at him from across the bank before exchanging glances at one another nervously. Two of the hardier sailors were the first to lower themselves into the water and crossed quickly despite the heavy equipment across their backs. Five more followed in quick succession before scrambling onto the northern bank. The eight remaining pirates seemed to be having an animated discussion though it was impossible to hear the whispered conversation from the far bank. One of the heavy pirates that had crossed just after Silas yelled across the river, “What’s the holdup ye pansies!”

A younger pirate from across the river that was clearly panicking yelled back, “Some of us can’t swim moron!”

The pirate in question was practically shaking as he stared at the murky river, rivulets of sweat cascading down his forehead. He had the likeness of a fanged serpent tattooed across the front of his scrunched up face and sported a red mohawk that hung limply to one side. Silas looked to the seven pirates already gathered alongside him before returning his attention to the stragglers who were in the midst of pairing the three sailors that couldn’t swim with the remainder who could. The pirates finally lowered themselves into the murk and began traversing to the far bank, the individuals who were unable to swim sat strung between two that could and kicked to help support themselves. Red mohawk was stuck with just one other sailor helping him cross and the competent pirate could be seen struggling beneath the panicked shaking of the extremely non buoyant man. Just as one group of three reached the north bank a blood curdling shriek flew from red mohawk’s mouth before being abruptly silenced as he was ripped beneath the now frothing water. The man that had just been holding him wasted no time and began furiously churning water in an attempt to flee whatever had just marauded red mohawk. Everyone that remained in the water flew into a similar state of panic as they heard and saw their comrade disappear. Before much progress could be made another pirate was sucked beneath the surface and the source of the destruction finally emerged into view. A mud brown carapace belonging to a crab but almost ten feet wide breached the surface a few yards downriver, two beady eyes propped up in front of it on lengthy stalks. Around the circumference of the carapace dozens of tentacles roiled against each other in a slimy mass as they shot out towards the crewmembers still in the river. The bulk of the creature was mostly hidden by the cloudy water but Silas caught a clear view of eight long spindly legs supporting the creature as it reared up to shove a pirate into an ovular mouth ringed by hundreds of smaller needle like limbs that pierced the poor sailor as he was shoveled down the creatures maw. Silas wasted no time in sprinting as far away from the thrashing tentacles and gnashing limbs as possible, stopping only once he was some hundred yards away. Every pirate that had made it to shore had shared similar sentiment and began catching up with Silas as he slowed. After a brief tally Silas counted nine besides himself, six men had been devoured by the creature in the river. Silas shook his head and steadied himself after finding that he shook ever so slightly following the close call. One of the pirates voiced the thought that no doubt many of them were contemplating, “What in Annah’s name was tha!?”

The sailor in question buried his face into his hands before raising it again and muttering to himself. “Oh Heinrich, you din deserve that. No more’n twenty tha boy was.”

Once the sailor voiced it Silas finally recalled the younger sailors name, Heinrich. The boy had been the same age as Silas was now.

“Let’s move, you can mourn later.” One of the beefy twins muttered before motioning for Silas to lead the way. Silas obliged and resumed his careful pathing among the gnarled roots. The journey continued on until the sun began drifting low in the sky when seemingly out of nowhere a squat stone wall emerged from the dense foliage. The eight foot wall was canted ever so slightly at an angle as half of it slid into the slimy mud but still stretched to either side of them as far as they could peer through the trees. Silas quickly clambered over the top of the wall and splashed into knee high water on the other side. Greeted by the crumbling exteriors of squat stone buildings Silas quickly continued forward until he found himself along a wide open cobblestone pathway surrounded on all sides with dilapidated and crumbling structures. The entire courtyard was submerged in knee high water and the crumbling stone was saturated with thick moss. At the far end of the sunken courtyard stood a tiered pyramid that towered over the many smaller buildings ominously, sending a small shiver down Silas’ spine.

“We’re here.”

Tyr Mocaz

God of Decay