

The Sea God's Labyrinth, Part 1

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From set *Theros*

Diary of Solon—Scholar, Athlete, and Champion of Oxus

I have travelled seven days south of my home, a small city on the outskirts of Meletis, at first following the coastline of the Siren Sea, but gradually veering inland for the past two days. I left the last remains of civilization yesterday, when the road ended at the small village of Phaela. I traded four pieces of copper for a bag of dried meat and two loaves of dense black bread. From there, I walked a footpath southwest into the hills. As the sun set, I crested a grassy hill and came upon the great labyrinth.



Plains | Art by Steven Belledin

The maze stands arrayed before me, completely filling the dell to the south, and stretching across the plains as far as my eyes can make out. An ancient road leads to the entrance of the labyrinth, laid unerringly straight, stretching to the west. The entrance itself is a stone arch of fine work, well maintained, but by whom, I could not say. The roadway is broken in places, with grasses growing up between the stones. A high hedge stretches both north and south of the stone entranceway. As it approaches the base of the hill it turns to the east and follows the line of hills to the horizon.

It is my duty, as the chosen champion of Oxus, to venture inside, find the wondrous treasure hidden within, and return, victorious. The sages say that Thassa's Dekella lies at the center of the labyrinth. I intend to find out.

I have trained seven years for this journey—as a scholar and an athlete. I am prepared for the task ahead, armed with knowledge, training, and—most importantly—faith in the gods. My pack holds a parchment map of the maze—at least as far as anyone from my polis has ever dared to venture and make it back out alive.

I have made my camp beneath a tree halfway down the hillside, out of the wind. In the morning, I shall enter the labyrinth and begin the ultimate test of my life's work.

Below is an inventory of my belongings:

- Leather pack
- Flint
- Small knife
- Ox wool blanket
- Beeswax candle
- Parchment scroll with map of the known maze
- Leather-bound book of parchments for my diary
- Oiled sealskin pouch to keep my parchments dry
- Quill
- Two glass vials of blue ink
- One glass vial of silver dye for marking my path
- A pearl, to offer up to Thassa in an hour of need
- Small hammer
- Two skins of water
- Long knife in a leather scabbard
- Yew recurve bow
- One score of arrows in a woven grass quiver
- Long walking pole
- Sack of dried meat
- Sack of dried fruit
- Wheel of waxed cheese
- Two loaves of dense black bread

I wear a heavy cloth skirt, tunic and leather sandals.

Over my skirt and tunic I wear light armor of leather with bronze buckles.

With these provisions, I can survive, fight, record my journey, and—gods willing—return to my polis with invaluable treasure and a tale for the ages.

Day One

I entered the labyrinth today, shortly after dawn. The sun was out, making my travels not unpleasant. I followed my map the entire day. It has proven to be accurate so far.

The labyrinth is composed of thick hedges, as high as two tall men. The path between them is wide enough to walk three abreast. The ground is mostly green grass. Since I have encountered no one all day, I can only assume it is maintained by the gods themselves, or some sort of magic.

I passed signs of explorers who came before me—a pile of stones to mark the way, the ashes of an old fire, silver dye on the corner of a hedge, or lengths of string denoting a path.

The sun is setting. Already the entire maze is cast in shadow and soon it will be too dark to continue writing. I will eat my supper and make my bed. There is no shelter in the maze, nor any place to hide. I will curl up as far as I can manage beneath the hedge and pray I remain alone all night.

Day Two

Last night passed fitfully, as if I slept not at all. Thank Thassa for the dawn. Lying exposed on the ground a full day into the maze turned sleep into nothing but fear. The merest fluttering of an owl overhead or rustling of hedge in the breeze caused instant panic and wakefulness. I held my long knife in my hand all night and tried to breathe silently.

Now I must continue on. It is still mostly dark inside the canyon walls of the labyrinth, but sleep is useless.

I have followed my map the entire day. It led me past a stream of sweet water that cut across the path. I drank with abandon and refilled my water skins. I startled a hare as I turned a corner and thought to have it for my dinner, but it squeezed under the hedge and was gone before I could draw my bow. So tonight, again, I eat bread, cheese, and a bit of dried meat and fruit. I will be more alert in the future. Supplementing my rations could be the difference between life and death. Once I reach the end of my map, the going will be much slower.



Surveyor's Scope | Art by Daniel Ljunggren

Once again I face the terror of trying to sleep, exposed on the ground. This night, I have found a dead end off of a side path where I will camp. I am not sure if this is a good strategy. I may be less likely to be found by anything nefarious, but if I am, I will have nowhere to run.

Day Three

The labyrinth is becoming rougher, less manicured. As the day wore on, the grass grew higher and the hedge wilder. Some paths were almost blocked by tangled branches growing outwards, while I waded through grasses that grew as high as my waist in places. Several times, I noticed flattened patches of grass where an animal, or person, had made a nest for the night, although I saw no signs of what the creatures may have been.

My most interesting discovery of the day was the body of Praxitelius, a former champion of Oxus. When he did not return to the polis two years ago, we presumed him dead, and now I can verify that fact. I found his remains leaning against the hedge. The grass was grown so high I almost walked right past him.

I could not determine the cause of death from his bones, although he was still fully armored in rotting leather. He had nothing of use left on his person except an intriguing dagger. When I pulled it from its decaying scabbard, it still shone bright as new. The blade is etched with faint patterns and I am certain it is blessed by a god.

I have almost reached the end of my map. Tomorrow I walk into unknown territory, where my real trial will begin. Tonight, I hope to have restful sleep, hidden in the deep grass.

Day Four

Disaster. I ventured beyond my map by late morning so I began marking my turns with silver dye on the corners of the hedges, always turning in the same direction, as I have been trained.

I attempted to climb the hedge in order to gain a vantage point. Unfortunately, the branches of the hedges are not strong enough to hold me up, although they are too dense and tangled to penetrate. As I stopped for a rest and my lunch, I heard a shuffling sound in the hedge and then a deep growl, as if from a predator. I quickly gathered my belongings and snuck away as silently as I was able. But the creature stalked me for the next several hours. Always I could hear its snuffling and growling, sometimes from the other side of the hedge and sometimes from somewhere behind me. Eventually it caught up to me and I heard it begin earnest pursuit.

Although I never saw the beast, I knew that I was unlikely to outrun it in a footrace. Several times I shot an arrow at it, blindly, through the corner of the maze. In a panic, I ran through turn after turn, all the while hearing the beast in close pursuit. Wild branches of the hedge whipped at my face and body. Suddenly I found myself confronted with a dead end. As I was about to turn and fight, fearing my journey had been cut short, I noticed that part of the hedge had collapsed and I caught a glimpse of daylight from the other side.

I scrambled through the collapsed hedge, worming my way to the other side, branches and thorns tearing at my clothing and skin. My backpack caught on a branch and nearly kept me from exiting the far side, but with all my strength I pushed through and ran. After many more turns of the maze I stopped to listen for the beast. All I could hear for a time was my own heavy breathing, but eventually... nothing.

I had lost the creature, whatever it was. Perhaps it was too large to fit through the collapsed hedge.



Nylea's Emissary | Art by Sam Burley

After calming down I took stock of myself and that's when I discovered that I had not only lost the beast, I had also lost my quiver of arrows and bags of dried fruit and meat.

I am afraid to go back to try and find them. Not only am I thoroughly lost, but the beast is still out there. Any backtracking will only bring me closer to it. I am tired and sore and scraped, but not injured, although none of that will matter if I starve to death, lost in the labyrinth.

I would go on lamenting, but I must save some ink and parchment for later.

Day Six

Wandering lost for two days. The sun has been beating and I am nearly out of water. Am down to half a wheel of cheese, one loaf of bread. Trying to keep to the shady side of the maze. Exposed skin is burned. Soaked in sweat. Roasting under armor.

This section of labyrinth is a mixed hedge of tall, thick, leafy bushes, and thorny brambles. Varied height, but all overhead.

I have walked for half a day, turning this way and that, without encountering a single outlet or side passage. Feeling exposed and claustrophobic.

Worse, at the end of this horrendous path, with no way out but half a day's walk back, sits a door, mounted in stone. The hedge grows right up to the doorway, with no way around. Inside the door, a stone staircase leads down, into the dark.

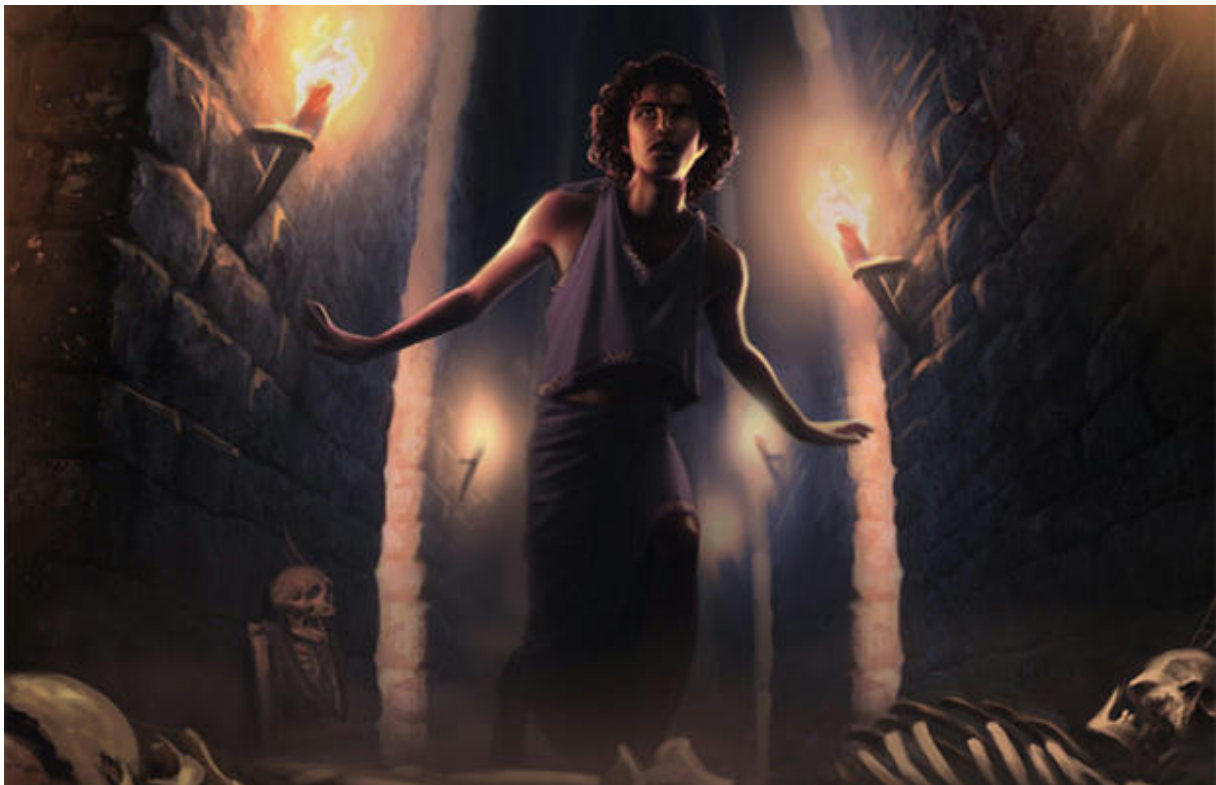
As horrific as the idea of taking that staircase is, the idea of trudging back the way I have come, in the blazing heat, risking death by exposure, actually seems more horrific to me right now.

After a much-needed sleep, I am going to light my candle and brave the dark. I hope the citizens of my polis are praying for me, and Thassa will show me mercy, or all is lost.

Day Seven or Eight

Sunlight! Praise the gods. I'm still alive. Sweet fresh air, sweet smell of green life.

My hand shakes at the thought of recounting the horrors of that underground maze. The smell was death itself. The masonry walls dripped with slimy water. Cobwebs, and worse, covered my hands and face, dripped down my back, entered my nose and mouth. Skeletal corpses of men, beasts, and strange creatures littered the horrific tomb. Rats, centipedes, worms and every kind of creeping thing covered the floors, skittering and oozing over my feet. How I wished I had high boots instead of these sandals down there in the dark. The only light, the fragile, tiny flame of my candle, hoarded like the most precious jewel. Every minute of light like a clock counting down to my doom as the candle burned lower and lower. And when I blew it out to rest, even worse, as all the foul creatures of darkness brushed against me, and crawled all over me in the infinite blackness. I could do naught but wave my long knife in front of my body hoping to keep them at bay.



Lost in a Labyrinth | Art by Winona Nelson

At times I prayed for the gods to take me. I even considered doing the deed myself. Yet I pressed on and eventually came to another stone staircase leading up and, finally, outside. I was afraid I had become turned around in the dark and had exited the same way I entered, but once outside, I knew that was not true. I am unsure how many days I was underground, but judging by the amount I ate and drank it was one or two.

Here the maze looks different again. Vines wind and twist around more substantial branches and trunks of hedge. Trees grow through the walls in places. The path ahead of me is completely overhung with willows, shading out the sun. The ground is soft and more muddy than grassy.

Hopefully this is a sign of water, as I grow lightheaded from thirst. No water, no arrows, little food, sleep deprived, and weary, I am still doomed. But at least I will die above ground, and not in that dark hell beneath my feet.

Day Nine

The gods have sent a storm. Never have I seen such a tempest. Hail pelts me so hard I am afraid I will break a bone. I have taken what passes for shelter in this endless maze and covered my head with my wool blanket to soften the blows of ice being thrown from the sky, as well as provide a dry lap in which to write. Lightning forks everywhere, followed by cracks of thunder so powerful they shake the water off the trees. Water runs down the paths of the maze in rivers. My armor has soaked up so much moisture I can barely wear it. I am shivering. My stomach is so empty it is eating itself. At least, finally, I am able to quench my thirst.

But I am not afraid. I am elated. With each rip of lightning I can actually see the gods themselves in the black sky, wrestling among the clouds. They are fighting over me! They know that I am on the right path. Erebus and Nylea contrive to end my journey here, while Thassa herself defends me.

When this storm ends, I will continue forward, on the path that I now know brings me closer to the center of the labyrinth.