

The Sea God's Labyrinth,

Part 2

Diary of Solon—Scholar, Athlete, and Champion of Oxus (Read Part 1.)

Day Ten

The labyrinth seems to be decomposing around me. The ground has become muddy and bog-like. I have had to wade through standing water in places and the going has been both slow and tense. The bogs are full of poisonous and venomous creatures. The sound of frogs has been my constant companion all day, and I narrowly escaped what would surely have been a painful death at the fangs of a large serpent as I waded through a knee-deep swamp. Having my long knife already in hand was my only saving grace.



Erebos's Emissary | Art by Sam Burley

The labyrinth itself has become overgrown and broken, with many holes in the wall left by fallen, rotting trees. Obstacles are everywhere. I have had to step carefully to avoid quicksand, poisonous plants, and snakes. I am thankful for my pole.

Unfortunately, my food rations are almost gone. I am weary from hunger. I tried to eat some berries but they were bitter with poison. I was afraid to eat the snake I killed for fear of poison as well, so foul was its entire visage. I saw a large water rat, but have no arrows, so I was unable to hunt it. Without more food, I will die in this maze, and without arrows, my chances of a successful hunt are small.

I am soaked from head to toe and shivering as the sun passes behind the walls. I have found a dry mound of grass in the middle of the bog and tonight I am going to have a fire to dry my clothes and armor.

I also plan to forge an arrowhead from the tip of the enchanted dagger I recovered from the body of Praxitelius. I have collected a straight length of hard wood for a shaft, cut from a black ash tree, and the feather of a waterfowl I found on the ground.

From the gods' voice to my ears I pray the fire will not attract snakes, beasts or worse.

Day Eleven

Thank Thassa for the enchanted dagger I used to forge my arrowhead! The arrow I crafted last night has saved me, at least for a while longer. It has brought me sustenance.

Today, after eating the last of my cheese and bread, I turned the corner of the maze, and there before me stood a hart, grazing on leaves. I nocked my homemade arrow and shot without hesitation. My shot was true. I followed the blood trail of the wounded animal for a few minutes until I found it laying in the path, breathing rapidly, eyes glazed. I killed it with my knife and field dressed it.



Burnished Hart | Art by Yeong-Hao Han

It is far too big to take with me, so I butchered as much as I could carry and moved on quickly, for fear of the carcass attracting unwanted attention. Luckily, I was able to retrieve my arrow as well. This arrow is a blessing. One that I am deeply thankful for.

Tonight, I will again have a fire to cook the meat, in the hopes of preserving it for as long as I can. Death has been thwarted once more. The closer I get to my goal, the more I intend to live to see it through.

Day Twelve

My strength restored, I have pressed on. This journey has taken far longer than I had anticipated. Even if I find the center, I know not how I am to make it back alive. The task seems impossible, but I have trained both physically and mentally, and I will proceed one day at a time.

The labyrinth has once again changed its form. As I wandered through the day, the maze became drier and rockier. I have left the wetlands behind and entered an area more desert than grassland. The vegetation morphed from deciduous to coniferous and then—a surprise—I came upon walls of ancient rockwork. The ground is rocky and sandy, the climate arid.

The stone walls rise well above my head and are composed of finely cut stone blocks and sealed with cunning mortar work, such that I can find no purchase with which to climb them. I am truly inside a canyon. Although I no longer have to fear wading through a bog of venomous creatures, I am now experiencing claustrophobia such as I have not felt so far.

Although I have nothing left to eat except a few strips of decomposing meat, at least my pack lies spry on my back. If only I could rid myself of the foul reek of clothing soaked in sweat and bog water.

Day Thirteen

Eureka! I have come across a section of wall that has crumbled from disrepair. I was able to climb to the top. From that vantage, I have mapped my way to what I believe is the center of the labyrinth. I am so close I can hardly believe it. I should be able to breach the center within hours. I surveyed the entirety of the maze from atop the wall. I am astounded at how vast it truly is.

To the east, it is shrouded in mist, presumably from the sea. Should I find the center, and the prize that I pray awaits me there, I will attempt to exit the labyrinth from the west, the way I have come.

Although I hope to find a way around the dreaded underground...

My hand is shaking so much I can hardly keep ink on my quill. I believe I have passed the labyrinth's ultimate test—I have slayed a minotaur.



Minotaur Skullcleaver | Art by Phill Simmer

I came upon it, or rather, it came upon me, in a particularly twisted section of walls. The beast was horrible. Gigantic. Braying and snorting. Wielding a great axe—such that the weight of it alone could have cleaved my entire body. It was so close; I instinctively drew my long knife, although by all rights I should have been paralyzed with fear.

When it hefted its axe in the air to destroy me, I quickly slashed its forearm, hoping to disarm it. The wound, however, was like a scratch to the beast, and I narrowly dodged the fall of the axe, which broke a stone in two.

I turned and ran the way I had come but quickly ascertained that I could not outrun the monster. It was born into the labyrinth, and I am a stranger here. So I latched onto my only hope.

I dropped my knife and drew my bow, the thunderous footfalls of the minotaur closing behind me. I nocked my arrow, my one true arrow, and turned to shoot.

The monster was only steps away and I stumbled backwards, my heel catching on a bit of stone jutting from the ground. I fell backwards. My gods, I thought I was doomed for certain. As the monster loomed over me to finish the deed, I held my breath and loosed the arrow.

It sank straight into the monster's neck, cutting its braying short with a violent silence. The minotaur dropped its axe and grabbed at the wound, blood spraying from between its massive fingers. It fell to its knees, barely an arm's length away. I could smell its hot breath. Its glassy, bulbous eyes rolled into its head and it fell over, gurgling, until it died, its blood soaking the sand between the rocks.

I feel triumphant, yet somehow sad at the felling of this mighty creature. Once I catch my breath I will press on to the center, with anticipation for what I will find there.

At last. I have reached the center of the labyrinth. It is a large, open square chamber with an arched doorway on each side leading back out to the maze. In the center is a large round well. I was elated to find water, but quickly discovered that it is not fresh water, but salt. I believe it is a blue hole, leading to an underground sea that connects with the ocean to the east.

Far down under the water I can see something shimmering in the depths. I believe it is the artifact I have been sent here to retrieve. I believe it is Thassa's bident, Dekella.

I have also seen creatures swimming in the depths of the hole, and they are calling to me. I am certain they are naiads, emissaries of Thassa herself. I must go to them, for they will help me retrieve what I have come for.

I have dropped my pearl into the watery hole and offered a prayer. I have doffed my armor, clothes, and backpack. I wear only a belt with my knife and waterproof pouch that protects my diary. I am prepared mentally, physically, and spiritually.

I cannot say what will happen next, but I know I must dive into the depths—a final test of my faith.



Island | Art by Raoul Vitale

I know not the day, nor my whereabouts. I awoke on a beach this morning, washed up from somewhere beneath the depths. My body is covered in glowing geometric patterns.

I dove into the blue hole, headfirst, and swam down, down, farther than I have ever dared, yet what I thought to be the bident always remained a little farther still. As I ran out of breath, and knew that I was too far down to make it back up alive, I chose to embrace my fate instead of fear it. It was then that the naiads emerged from their hiding places and surrounded me with sweet voices that formed a bubble filled with air around my entire body.

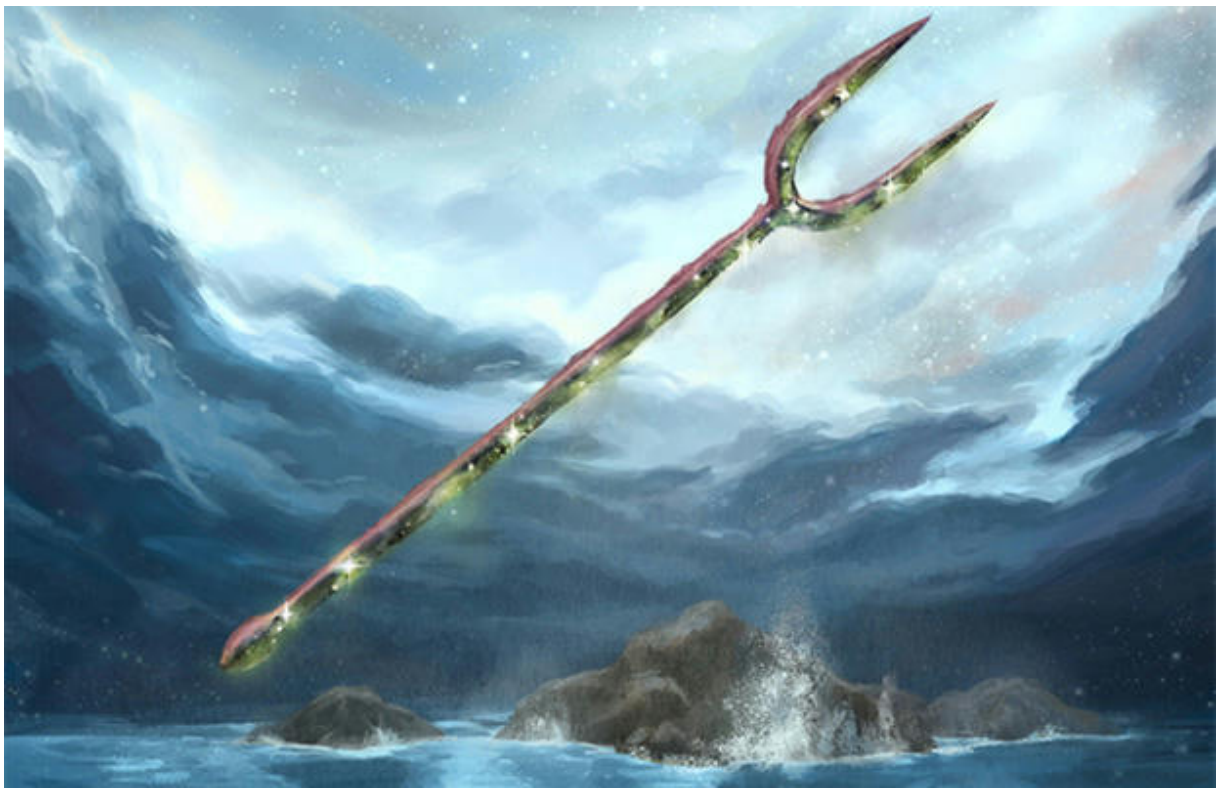
It all seems like a dream now. I am not certain I can even recount it in truth. The water nymphs towed me through the darkness of the underground sea; the only light the cool blue glow of their

magic. Eventually, after I know not how long, we entered the Siren Sea, and they took me down into the depths, where only the faintest light could penetrate. Strange and mighty creatures passed by on our way out into the sea, but none molested my procession.

In time, again I know not after how long, Thassa herself approached. Her spindly fins rippled to and fro majestically. The naiads gave way and left me alone before her. She parted the bubble and swam inside, facing me eye to eye. She spoke! Her tongue I could not understand, but the meaning seemed to penetrate my mind—time is long, and the lives of men are but a shadow passing in the night. What came yesterday is soon to be lost, like a mote of dust in the sun. What comes tomorrow is the only mission of our fragile lives.

She reached out to me with a spindly finger and drew a pattern of light over my entire body, etching it into my skin with the sharp tip of her fingernail. And suddenly, she withdrew into the black depths and disappeared as if a dream. That is the last thing I remember.

I have parlayed with Thassa herself, and she has spat me back on dry land, naked and renewed.



Bident of Thassa | Art by Yeong-Hao Han

I now realize that retrieving Dekella was always a fool's errand. Who were we to think we could possess it? How did we imagine we could wield it? Why did we put our hope in an object when it is we, ourselves, who must shape our fates?

The crucible of the labyrinth has changed me forever. I have been blessed by a god. I will return to my polis and be hailed as a great warrior, but my true gift will be the wisdom to shape a greater future for ourselves—to contribute to our edifice of knowledge.