

Theseus and the Minotaur

"Why do we send tributes to Crete every year?" Prince Theseus asked his father, the King of Athens.

"To keep King Minos from making war on us," said King Aegeus.

"And what do we send?"

"Seven men and seven women to feed the monster in his labyrinth, the Minotaur!"

"How revolting! Never again!" Theseus vowed. "This year I'll go as one of the fourteen, and kill this Minotaur!"

As the tribute-ship set sail, the old man called from the dockside, "Good luck, Son! I shall keep watch on the clifftop every day. If you succeed, raise a new white sail. If you fail, raise this black one."

"I shall succeed!" called Theseus, the sea breeze licking his face.

King Minos laughed to see the prisoners arrive from Athens. "Who'll be first into the Minotaur's den?" he asked.

"I shall," said Theseus, stepping forward. "I, Prince Theseus of Athens, claim that honour!"

"You boasting young puppy," snarled Minos. "My Minotaur will make short work of you!" Behind the throne, the king's plain little daughter, Ariadne, sat listening. Down went Theseus, into the dark. "Prince Theseus!" It was Ariadne. "Here. Take this." She dropped down to him a ball of string. "Even if you can kill the Minotaur, you won't ever find your way back to the entrance unless you use this." He tied one end to the entrance and set off, unwinding the string as he went.

Theseus felt his way in the dark. Suddenly, his fingers brushed warm, wiry hair, then the bony curve of a horn. The Minotaur stamped on him with sharp hooves. Unfortunately, the string – his guiding hand – was knocked out of his grasp. They fought in utter darkness. The monster, half-man, half-bull, crushed him between hairy arms and lashed him with its tail. But Theseus took hold of the horns and twisted them first one way, then the other. He kicked and butted and struggled, and at last the beast gave a gurgling gasp and fell dead. Filled with panic, the prince scabbled around for the ball of string. There! No, that was the Minotaur's ear. There! Yes! Now he had only to wind it in and retrace his steps. At the door of

the Labyrinth, Ariadne stood waiting. "You're alive! You escaped!" she cried, and she took him by the hand and hurried him away.

After that, they freed the other thirteen prisoners and ran to the harbour. "You must take me with you, or my father will kill me!" said the princess. "Of course! Come aboard!" said Theseus, raising the old black sail. The sun shone and they were at sea before anyone knew they had escaped. They stopped at an island called Naxos, where Ariadne fell asleep. Theseus decided to leave without her, but forgot to change the sail from black to white!

Finally, Theseus's ship appeared on the horizon. King Aegeus, standing by the cliff face, thought his son was dead so he jumped to his doom as the clouds overhead blackened!