

Theseus and the Minotaur

King Minos of Crete was a powerful man, feared by the rulers of the lands around him. When he demanded goods or men for his great armies, they felt they had to agree. When he demanded they send tributes to honour him, they sent them without question. It was the only way they could stop him going to war with them. But his demands on Athens became too much for them to bear.

King Minos had a great palace built for himself. Inside this palace, Minos had built a giant maze, a Labyrinth, and, at the centre of the maze, he kept a terrifying creature, – the Minotaur. Now this was no ordinary animal. The Minotaur's mother was Pasipha. Having upset Poseidon, she was made to fall in love with a bull. Therefore, the Minotaur was a monster, half man and half bull. It was powerful, and savage and it loved to eat the flesh of the humans who had been shut into the labyrinth by King Minos. They would wander through the maze, completely lost, until at last they came face to face with the Minotaur. Not a great way to die really.

As for Athens, Minos demanded that every year the King send him seven young men and seven young women.

"Why do we send these young people to Crete every year?" Theseus asked his father, the King of Athens. "And why is it that none of them ever return?"

"Because if we did not send them, Minos would wage war on us and it is a war that we would not win," said King Aegeus. "And they do not return because they do not go to Crete as slaves. They go as food for the Minotaur."

"Father, this is terrible," shouted Theseus, "we cannot let this go on. We cannot sacrifice any more of our young citizens to this tyrant. When it is time to send the next tribute, I will go as one of them and I vow that it is the last time the Minotaur will be fed with the flesh of any of our people."

Try as he might, his father could not persuade him to change his mind. Aegeus reminded him that every year, other young men had sworn to slay this terrible beast and they had never been seen again.

Theseus insisted that he understood the dangers but would succeed. "I will return to you, father," cried Theseus, as the ship left the harbour wall, "and you will be proud of your son."

"Then I wish you good luck, my son," cried his father, "I shall keep watch for you every day."

As the ship docked in Crete, King Minos himself came down to inspect the prisoners from Athens. He enjoyed the chance to taunt the Athenians and to humiliate them even further.

"Is this all your king has to offer this year?" he jeered. "Such puny creatures. Hardly even a snack for the mighty creature within the labyrinth. Anyway, let's get on with it. I am not a hard-hearted man, so I will let you choose which one goes first into the Minotaur's den. Who is it to be?"

Theseus stepped forward.

"I will go first. I am Theseus, Prince of Athens and I do not fear what is within the walls of your maze."

"Those are brave words for one so young and so feeble. But the Minotaur will soon have you between its horns. Guards, open the labyrinth and send him in."

Standing behind the king, listening, was his daughter, Ariadne. From the moment she set eyes on Theseus, Ariadne fell in love with him. As she listened to her father goading and taunting the young prince, she decided that she would help him. As he entered the labyrinth and the guards walked away, she called softly to him.

"Theseus, take this," she whispered. "Even if you kill the Minotaur, you will never find your way out again."

She threw him a great ball of string and he tied one end of it to the entrance. He smiled at her, turned and began to make his way into the maze, the string playing out behind him as he went.

Theseus walked carefully through the dark, foul-smelling passages of the labyrinth, expecting at any moment to come face-to-face with the creature. He did not have long to wait. Turning a corner, with his hands held out in front of him feeling his way, he suddenly touched what felt like a huge bony horn.

In an instant his world turned upside-down, quite literally. He was picked up between the Minotaur's horns and tossed high into the air. When he landed on the hard cold stone, he felt the animal's huge hooves come down on his chest. Every last breath seemed to be knocked out of him and he struggled to stay alive in the darkness.

But Theseus was no ordinary man. He was the son of the King, he was brave and he was stubborn. As the Minotaur bellowed in his ear and grabbed at him with its hairy arms, Theseus found a strength which he did not know he possessed.

He grabbed the animal's huge horns, and kept on twisting the great head from side to side. As the animal grew weak, Theseus gave one almighty tug on the head, turning it almost right around. The creature's neck snapped, it gurgled its last breath and fell to the floor with an enormous thud.

It was over, he had done it. The Minotaur was dead. All he had to do was make his way out of...and then he realised the awful truth. In the struggle, he had let go of the string, his lifeline. Theseus felt all over the floor in the pitch darkness and kept thinking he had found it, only to realise that he all he had was a long wiry hair from the Minotaur.

Despair set in and Theseus wondered if this was where his life would end, down in the dark, all alone, next to the stinking body. Then, his hand brushed a piece of string and, with a whoop of delight, he knew he had found the thread which would lead him back out. As he neared the entrance of the labyrinth, the darkness began to fade and he made out the figure of Ariadne, waiting for his return.

"You must take me back to Athens with you," she cried, "My father will kill me when he finds out that I have helped you."

"But of course you must come with us," said Theseus, "it would be cruel to leave you here." Quickly and quietly, they unfurled the great black sails of their ship and headed for home.

"I cannot believe how my life has changed," said Ariadne, as they sailed across the calm seas towards Athens. "To think that I am free of my cruel father and that I will soon be married to a great prince."

"Married?" said Theseus, "Oh, yes, that will be...er... wonderful." But in truth, Theseus did not really find her attractive. So, when their ship docked at an island on their way home, to collect fresh water, Theseus sent Ariadne off to find bread and fruit. The moment she was gone, he set sail and left her on the island. Now, you might think that this was a bad way to reward someone who had helped him and had saved him from certain death!