

Theseus and the Minotaur

Minos, king of Crete, had lost his only son, Androgeus, while the young man was visiting the Athenian King, Aegeus. King Aegeus had done what no host should do; he had sent Androgeus on an expedition full of peril—to kill a dangerous bull. Instead, the bull killed the young son of Minos. Saddened and enraged, Minos invaded the country and its kingdoms and declared he would raze them to the ground unless every nine years the people sent him a tribute of seven maidens and seven young men. A horrible fate awaited these young people. When they reached Crete, they were given to the Minotaur to devour.

The Minotaur was a monster—half bull, half man. The creature would only eat human flesh. It was the offspring of Minos' wife, Pasiphae and a wonderfully beautiful bull. Poseidon had given this bull to Minos in order that he should sacrifice it to him, but Minos could not bear to slay it and kept it for himself. To punish him, Poseidon had made Pasiphae fall madly in love with it.

When the Minotaur was born, Minos did not kill it. He had Daedalus, a great architect and inventor, construct a place of confinement for him from which escape was impossible. Daedalus built the Labyrinth, famous throughout the world. Once inside, one would go endlessly along its twisting paths without ever finding the exit. To this place the young people were each time taken and left to the Minotaur. There was no possible way to escape. In whatever direction they ran they might be running straight to the monster. If they stood still, the Minotaur might at any moment emerge from the maze.

Rumors travelled from Crete with trading ships, rumors of a flesh-eating beast beneath Minos' palace. When the turn of Athens came to pay tribute, the city's king couldn't bring himself to send young Athenians to a horrible death. He delayed and delayed. Eventually King Minos, furious, set sail himself with a fleet of ships and, when the people of Athens saw the ships of King Minos slicing through the waves, every man woman and child shuddered. They'd heard stories about Minos' monstrous son and the word 'Minotaur' had been whispered from mouth to ear. What was more, the last time Minos had visited the city he had taken the inventor, Daedalus, and the boy, Icarus. As soon as the ships reached the quayside, King Minos and his soldiers leapt ashore. They marched through the streets and, wherever the king saw a young man of noble bearing, he would shout 'Seize him!' Six young men had been taken when they reached the palace of King Aegeus, the king of Athens.

Standing behind the king's throne there was a beautiful young man with a crown of laurel leaves on his head. He looked like a god. He could almost have been Ares, the beautiful god of war. King Minos lifted his arm and pointed: 'He will be the seventh.' King Aegeus fell to the ground at Minos' feet. 'Please, he is my own son, my only son, Theseus. I beg you, spare his life!' Minos kicked the king aside. 'Seize him.' The seven Athenian youths were bundled aboard a Cretan ship. But prior to being captured, Theseus had told his father he would offer himself as one of the victims and kill the Minotaur. All loved Theseus for his goodness and admired him for his nobility. He promised his father that if he succeeded, he would have the black sail which the ship with its cargo of misery always carried changed to a white one, so that Aegeus could know long before it came to the land that his son was safe.

For three days and nights they sailed. When the young victims arrived in Crete they were paraded before the inhabitants on their way to the Labyrinth. Minos' daughter, Ariadne, was among the spectators and she fell in love with Theseus at first sight as he marched past her. She sent for Daedalus and told him he must show her a way to get out of the Labyrinth, and she sent for Theseus and told him she would bring about his escape if he would promise to take her back to Athens and marry her. Theseus made no difficulty about that and she gave him the clue that she got from Daedalus—a ball of thread which he was to fasten at one end of the inside of the door and unwind as he entered the maze.

The next morning King Minos was amazed. Theseus came out of his bedroom of his own free will – no need to drag him screaming. Surely by now he understood his fate? He was cracking jokes with the guards! Down to the maze they went. The darkness swallowed him and there was silence. Theseus felt among the shadows. He began to make his way into the labyrinth, unravelling the thread as he went. He

wound to the left and to the right. Above his head, the shadows danced. Below his feet, there were shreds of rag and splinters of bone, picked clean.

Then suddenly, he could hear it, grunting and snorting. And then he could smell it, the sour smell of stale sweat and the sickly sweet stench of rotten flesh. Then he rounded a bend and saw it – the human body, the great bull head: the Minotaur. He came upon him asleep and fell upon him, pinning him to the ground, and with his fists—he had no other weapon—battered the monster to death.

When Theseus lifted himself up from the terrific struggle, the ball of thread lay where he had dropped it. With it in his hands, the way out was clear. At last he saw the entrance. He crouched and waited until the night came. Ariadne was waiting outside. When the stars were shining, Theseus came out of the labyrinth. He seized Ariadne's hand and they ran to the harbour. They jumped onto the deck of a ship; they cut the ropes and sailed away. But before they left the harbour they set fire to the fleet of Cretan ships so that a black pall of smoke rose into the sky, extinguishing the lights of the stars. Ariadne had never been so happy.

But as they sailed for Athens, the ship suffered damage and Theseus had to go ashore to make repairs. Then a violent wind pulled him out to sea and Ariadne was left on the island. He was adrift for a long time. When he returned to the island, Ariadne was dead, and he was deeply afflicted. So Theseus set sail again for Athens, his home. Either his joy at the success of his voyage or his grief for Ariadne put every other thought out of his head, and he forgot to raise the white sail as he had promised his father. King Aegeus saw the black sail from the Acropolis, where for days he had watched for his son's return. Upon seeing the black sail, Aegeus took it as a sign of the death of Theseus and threw himself down from a rocky height into the sea and was killed.

So Theseus became King of Athens, a most wise and disinterested king. He declared to the people that he did not wish to rule over them; he wanted a people's government where all would be equal. He resigned his royal power and organized a commonwealth based on democracy. Thus Athens became free and prosperous and the only true home of liberty where people were happy and governed themselves.