

Theseus and the Minotaur

There was no more evil king than King Minos of Crete - everyone was afraid of him. He had built a huge maze of passages underneath his palace. There he kept a large and terrifying monster: the Minotaur, who was half man and half bull. He fed this monster with humans.

Every year, the king of Athens had to send seven young men and seven young women to Crete to be fed to the monster. It was the only way to stop King Minos making war on Athens.

Now the king of Athens had a son called Theseus who was brave but foolhardy. One day he said to his father, "we have to stop the King of Crete feeding our young people to his monster. I'll go to Crete and kill the beast."

"Go then, with my blessing," said the King. He handed Theseus a white sail. "Take this with you. If you kill the Minotaur, hang the sail on the main mast of the ship. Then I'll know you are coming home alive."

When he arrived in Crete, the King's guards happily led Theseus down to the entrance of the maze. There they removed his sword and left him to wait for the monster. Theseus took a deep breath. He was a brave man but he was not terribly clever. Now he didn't even have his sword with him. And even if he did manage to kill the beast, how was he going to find his way back out of the maze?

Just then, Theseus heard someone whispering his name.

"I must be going mad," he said to himself. "No one would come here with an angry monster on the loose."

But then he heard it again. There, stood behind him was Ariadne, one of King Minos's daughters. She handed Theseus a sword and a ball of wool. Theseus was grateful for the sword, but what use was a ball of wool?

"You take the wool," said Ariadne. "And I'll hold the end of the wool. It will unravel as you walk around the maze. When you want to come out again, all you have to do is wind it up."

"But why do you want to help me?" said Theseus.

"I don't like living here," said Ariadne. "I was hoping that you would take me away to Athens with you. We could get married."

It sounded like a fair deal to Theseus, so he took the sword, hooked the ball of wool under his belt and made his way into the dark, winding maze.

"Good luck!" Ariadne called behind him.

Slowly, Theseus felt his way down the passages. He knew the Minotaur was close because he could hear its heavy breathing. Suddenly, a loud bellow made him jump. At the far end of a corridor a pair of glowing, red eyes were staring right at him. But instead of feeling scared, Theseus thought about all the people the monster had eaten. That made him brave and angry.

"Come on," he shouted. "Come and get your supper, you beast!"

The Minotaur roared, shook its horns and started running quickly towards him. Theseus waited until he was practically face to face with the monster then quickly stepped sideways. The Minotaur grunted angrily and lurched towards Theseus again. But the young man could move much quicker than the monster. All night long the two chased each other around the maze. At last, the monster started to get tired. Sweat poured down its face and into its red eyes.

"This is my chance!" said Theseus. He jumped forward and drove his sword straight into the Minotaur's heart. The monster roared the loudest roar you have ever heard and then crashed to the ground. Quickly, Theseus rolled up the wool and made his way out of the maze.

"Well done!" cried Ariadne. "Quick, follow me. My father will be furious when he discovers that the Minotaur is dead." She led him through a secret passage out of the palace and before long they were safely on board Theseus's ship.

On the way home to Athens, they stopped at an island. There, Theseus tricked Ariadne and sailed on without her. Now that he'd killed the Minotaur, he had no intention of marrying Ariadne. Theseus then ordered a feast for his men. During the celebration, the ship came within sight of Athens, but Theseus forgot to replace his old sail with his father's white one.

The king, watching from a cliff, saw his son's ship returning home with a black sail and thought his son was dead. Mad with grief, he threw himself into the deep sea.

Theseus was heartbroken. How he wished he had remembered to put up the white sail! But it was too late. His father was dead, gone forever.

A few days later, Theseus was crowned the new king of Athens. "From now on," he promised his people, "I shall never do anything rash or foolhardy again."

