

Theseus and the Minotaur

retold by Stephanie Paris

In ancient times, there was a city called Crete. It went to war with Athens. Crete won. As tribute after the war, every nine years, Athens had to send seven young men and seven young women to Crete on a boat. They were to be sacrificed to the Minotaur. The Minotaur was half bull and half man. He was kept in a maze under the city. He was the guardian of Crete. But he was bloodthirsty. Crete did not wish to feed him with its own children. So they used Athenian blood instead!

“Father,” said Theseus, the prince of Athens, “soon you will send the sacrifices to Crete for the Minotaur. I will be one of them.”

“No, my son! I could not bear to lose you!” cried the frightened king. But Theseus was sure. He told his father, “Fear not, I shall not be away for long. I will kill the Minotaur! I will put an end to this terrible outrage for all time!”

The king was still afraid. But he saw that Theseus had his mind made up. The 14 Athenians went to Crete with Prince Theseus among them.

The Cretan king also had a child. Her name was Ariadne. She was both smart and kind. She hated the Minotaur! She did not wish to have anything to do with a city that would keep such an awful monster! Ariadne saw Theseus with the youths. She thought up a clever plan.

“Psst, come with me!” she whispered. They were not being watched. Ariadne pulled Theseus away from the group. Quickly, she told him what she had in mind. “I can help you to kill the Minotaur,” she said. “But, you must promise to take me with you when you leave!”

Theseus agreed. Ariadne handed him a spool of thread, a candle, and his sword. Then she led him to the maze. “Tie the end of the string to the door. That way, you will be able to find your way out,” she told him softly. “Use the candle to light your way. Go always downward. Do not turn left or right. It is still daylight. The creature will be sleeping. You can catch him in his room. He will not have the advantage. You will be able to defeat him! Good luck!”



Down into the dark maze went Theseus. He strayed neither left nor right. He followed always the path that led down. He moved toward the center of the maze. The walls and floor were cut into solid rock. Hall after hall led in every direction. But Theseus kept to his goal. The air grew cooler. He began to hear the drip of water. It echoed in the tunnels. Every once in a while he would hear a sound of something moving. These were the sounds of small animals that lived in the maze. Once or twice he nearly tripped over bones. They had been left scattered in the passages. Theseus shuddered. But he kept going.

Time passed. Then the prince felt that he was coming close to the monster. It smelled like sweat. It smelled like damp fur. But all was quiet. There was a door that was half open. He crept around it. There was the creature. It was huge! Fur lined its body. Deadly horns topped its head. The prince pushed into the room. He was ready to pounce. It awoke! It leapt up onto its powerful human legs! The beast stood eight feet tall!



Theseus swung his sword. But he was blocked! The Minotaur had a weapon, too. The monster roared. Then it attacked! The two of them struggled. Theseus was forced back into unknown rooms. He was afraid he might lose his way. But he held on to the string Ariadne had given him. He knew where he was.

Up and down they fought! But in the end, Theseus won. He cut the head from the beast. Then he followed the string back to where Ariadne was waiting. Theseus was surprised to find that the princess had gathered all the Athenian youths! She also had her sister with her. Theseus took the helm of their ship. They escaped back to Athens. Ariadne and Theseus were married. And Crete never again needed sacrifices.

Element Focus: Setting

How is the setting important to the story?

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In ancient times, Crete went to war with Athens. Crete won. As tribute after the war, every nine years Athens had to send seven young men and seven young women to Crete on a boat. These youths were to be sacrificed to the Minotaur. Half bull and half man, the fearsome Minotaur was kept in a labyrinth. He was the guardian of Crete. But he was a bloodthirsty guardian. Crete did not wish to feed him with its own children. So they used Athenian blood instead!

“Father,” declared Theseus, the prince of Athens, “when you next send the sacrifices to Crete for the Minotaur, I shall be among them.”

“No, my son! I could not bear to lose you!” cried the frightened king. But Theseus was determined. He reassured his father, saying, “Fear not, I shall not be away for long. I will kill the Minotaur! I will put an end to this outrage for all time!”

The king was still afraid. He saw that Theseus could not be dissuaded. And so it was that the 14 sacrificial Athenians arrived in Crete with Prince Theseus.

The Cretan king also had a child. Her name was Ariadne. She was known for being both intelligent and kind. She hated the horrors of the Minotaur! She did not wish to have anything to do with a city that would keep such a monster! Ariadne saw Theseus with the youths. She began to think up a plan.

“Psst, come with me!” she whispered. They were not being observed. Ariadne pulled Theseus away from the group. Quickly, she told him what she had in mind. “I can help you to defeat the Minotaur,” she said. “But if I do, you must promise to take me with you when you leave!”

Theseus agreed. Ariadne handed him a spool of thread, a candle, and his sword. Then she led him to the entrance of the maze. “Tie the end of the string to the door so you will be able to find your way out,” she told him softly. “Use the candle to light your way. Go always downward, turning neither left nor right as you walk. It is still daylight, so the creature will be sleeping. If you can catch him in his room, he will not have the advantage. You will be able to defeat him! Good luck!”



Down into the Minotaur's dark lair went Theseus. He strayed neither left nor right. He followed always the path that led down toward the center of the maze. The walls and floor were cut into solid rock. Hall after hall led in every direction. But Theseus kept to his goal. The air grew cooler. He began to hear the drip of water echoing in the tunnels. Every once in a while he would hear a skitter or scrape. These were the sounds of small animals that lived in the maze. Once or twice he nearly tripped over bones that had been left scattered in the passages. Theseus shuddered. But he kept going.

After a great while, the prince felt that he was coming close to the monster. It smelled like sweat and damp fur. But all was quiet. Finally, he came upon a door that was half open. Creeping around it, he saw the creature. It was huge! Great tufts of fur lined its shoulders and body. Deadly horns topped its shaggy head. He pushed into the room, ready to pounce. It awoke! Leaping up onto its powerful human legs, the beast stood eight feet tall!



Undaunted, Theseus swung his sword. But he was blocked by the Minotaur's own weapon. The monster gave forth a deep bellow. Then it attacked! The two combatants struggled mightily. Forced to retreat into unknown chambers, Theseus feared that he might lose his way. But he held fast to the string Ariadne had given him and managed to keep his bearings.

Up and down they fought, but in the end, Theseus prevailed. He cut the head from the beast and then followed the string back to where Ariadne stood waiting. When he arrived, Theseus was surprised to find that the princess had gathered all the Athenian youths as well as her own younger sister. With Theseus at the helm, the triumphant group made their escape back to Athens by ship. Ariadne and Theseus were married. And Crete never again needed sacrifices to feed its bloodthirsty guardian!

Element Focus: Setting

Describe the Minotaur's labyrinth. If you were to create a home for such a beast, how might you do it differently?

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In ancient times, the city-state of Crete had gone to war with the city-state of Athens, and Crete had won. As tribute after the war, every nine years Athens was required to send seven young men and seven young women on a somber boat. These youths were to be sacrificed to the Minotaur. Half bull and half man, the fearsome Minotaur was kept in an intricate labyrinth as a guardian of Crete. But he was a bloodthirsty guardian. Crete did not wish to feed him with its own children, so they used Athenian blood instead!

“Father,” declared Theseus, the prince of Athens, “when you next send the sacrifices to Crete for the Minotaur, I shall be among them.”

“No, my son! I could not bear to lose you!” cried the frightened king. But Theseus was determined. He reassured his father, “Fear not, I shall not be taken from you for long. I intend to slay the Minotaur and put an end to this outrage!”

The king was still afraid, but he saw that Theseus could not be dissuaded. And so it was that the 14 sacrificial Athenians arrived in Crete with Prince Theseus.

The Cretan king also had a child. Her name was Ariadne, and she was known for being both intelligent and kind. She despised the horrors of the Minotaur and did not wish to have anything to do with a city that would keep such a monster! When Ariadne saw Theseus among the youths, she came up with a plan.

“Psst, come with me!” she whispered in a moment when they were not being observed. Ariadne pulled Theseus away from the group and quickly told him what she had in mind. “I can help you to defeat the Minotaur, but if I do, you must promise to take me with you when you leave!”

Theseus agreed. Ariadne handed him a spool of thread, a candle, and his sword. She led him to the entrance of the labyrinth. “Tie the end of the string to the door so you will be able to find your way out,” she told him softly. “Use the candle to light your way. Go downward, turning neither left nor right as you travel. It is still daylight, so the creature will be sleeping. Catch him in his chamber. He will not have the advantage, and you will defeat him! Good luck!”



Down into the Minotaur's dark lair went Theseus. He strayed neither left nor right. He followed always the path that led down toward the center of the maze. The walls and floor were cut into solid rock. Passage after passage led in every direction, but Theseus kept to his purpose. The air grew cooler, and he began to hear the drip of water echoing in the tunnels. Every once in a while he would hear the skitter or scrape of some small animal that had taken refuge in the maze. Once or twice he nearly tripped over bones that had been left scattered in the passages. Theseus shuddered but continued on.

After a great while, Theseus began to sense that he was coming close to the monster. It smelled like sweat and damp fur. But all was quiet. Finally, the prince came upon a door that was half ajar. Creeping around it, he spied the creature. It was massive! Great tufts of fur lined its shoulders and torso. Deadly horns topped its shaggy head. As he pushed into the room, ready to pounce, it suddenly awoke! Leaping up onto its powerful human legs, the beast stood eight feet tall!



Undaunted, Theseus swung his sword, only to be blocked by the Minotaur's own weapon. The monster gave forth a deep bellow and attacked! The two combatants struggled mightily. Forced to retreat into unknown chambers, Theseus feared that he might lose his way, but he held fast to the string Ariadne had given him and managed to keep his bearings.

Up and down they fought, but in the end, Theseus prevailed. He cut the head from the beast and then followed the string back to where Ariadne stood waiting. When he arrived, Theseus was surprised to find that the princess had gathered all the Athenian youths as well as her own younger sister. With Theseus at the helm, the triumphant group made their escape back to Athens by ship. Ariadne and Theseus were married. And of course, Crete never again needed sacrifices to feed its bloodthirsty guardian!

Element Focus: Setting

Why do you think this setting was selected?

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In ancient times, the city-state of Crete had vanquished the city-state of Athens in a great war. As tribute after their defeat, every nine years Athens was required to send seven young men and seven young women on a somber boat trip into Crete. These youths were to be sacrificed to the vicious Minotaur. Half bull and half man, the fearsome Minotaur was kept in an intricate labyrinth as a guardian of Crete, but he was a bloodthirsty guardian. Crete did not wish to feed him with its own children, so they used Athenian blood instead!

“Father,” declared Theseus, the prince of Athens, “when you next send the sacrifices to Crete for the Minotaur, I shall be among them.”

“No, my son, I could not bear to lose you!” cried the frightened king. But Theseus was determined, and he reassured his father, “Fear not, I shall not be taken from you for long. I intend to slay the Minotaur and put an end to this outrage!”

The king was still afraid, but he recognized that Theseus could not be dissuaded. And so it was that the 14 sacrificial Athenians arrived in Crete with Prince Theseus.

The Cretan king also had a child. Her name was Ariadne, and she had a well-earned reputation for being both intelligent and kind. She despised the horrors of the Minotaur and did not wish to have anything to do with a city with such a monster! When Ariadne saw Theseus, she came up with a plan.

“Psst, come with me!” she whispered when they were not being observed. Ariadne pulled Theseus aside and told him of the scheme she had devised. “I can help you defeat the Minotaur, but if I do, you must take me with you!”

Theseus agreed, and Ariadne handed him a spool of thread, a candle, and his sword. Then she led him to the entrance of the labyrinth. “Attach the end of the string to the door so you will be able to find your way out,” she told him softly. “Using the candle to light your way, go downward, turning neither left nor right. It is daylight, so the nocturnal creature will be sleeping. Catch him in his chamber, he will not have the advantage, and you will be able to defeat him! Good luck!”



Down into the Minotaur's dark lair went Theseus, straying neither left nor right. He followed always the path that led down toward the center of the maze. The walls and floor were cut into solid rock, and he observed passage after passage leading in every direction. But Theseus kept single-mindedly to his grim purpose. The air grew cooler, and he began to hear the drip of water echoing in the tunnels. Every once in a while he would notice the skitter or scrape of some small animal that had taken refuge in the labyrinth. Once or twice he nearly tripped over bones that had been left scattered in the passages. Theseus shuddered but continued on without pausing to reflect on the fate of those who had come into this maze before.

After a great while, Theseus began to sense that he was coming close to the monster. It smelled like sweat and damp fur, but all was quiet. Finally, the prince came upon a door that was half ajar. Creeping around it, he spied the creature. Its massive form was coated in tufts of thick fur along its shoulders and torso. Deadly horns topped its shaggy head. As Theseus pushed into the room, ready to pounce, it suddenly awoke! Leaping up onto its powerful human legs, the beast stood eight feet tall!



Undaunted, Theseus swung his sword with precision, only to be blocked by the Minotaur's own weapon. The monster gave forth a deep bellow and then countered the boy's attack! The two combatants struggled mightily, crashing through the tunnels. Forced to retreat into unknown chambers, Theseus feared that he might lose his way, but he held fast to the string Ariadne had given him and managed to keep his bearings.

Up and down they fought, but in the end, Theseus prevailed. He cut the head from the beast and then followed the string back to where Ariadne stood waiting. When he arrived, Theseus was surprised to find that the princess had gathered all the Athenian youths—as well as her own younger sister. With Theseus at the helm, the triumphant group made their escape back to Athens by ship. Ariadne and Theseus were married. And of course, Crete never again needed sacrifices to feed its bloodthirsty guardian!

Element Focus: Setting

If you were designing a setting that was meant to instill fear in the reader, how might you do it?