

Tales from Ancient Greece

3. THESEUS AND THE MINOTAUR

HERMES

Wee! I love to fly like this over the Aegean, the rolling sea between Greece and the isle of Crete. I can see a ship down there with a great white sail, carving its way through the waves...and whenever I see a ship headed for Crete it reminds me of another that made that same journey, only that ship had a black sail...

I'll tell you why. Crete was once the mightiest island in the sea – and all because of a great inventor. His name was Daedalus and his speciality was instruments of war. He made machines to fling rocks at cities and wreck their walls...

MINOS

Loose the catapults!!!

HERMES

...and others to hurl fire and set every roof ablaze...

MINOS

And give them flame!!!

HERMES

And thanks to Daedalus's terrible inventions, Crete and its king, Minos by name, were soon masters of all the surrounding lands. But you couldn't call Minos or his people happy. Because, well, they had a bit of a problem...

It was called the Minotaur. It was a man from the feet as far up as the waist, but from the waist up...it was a huge, black, massive-horned bull. No one knew where it had come from, but it rampaged through King Minos's palace, smashing down the walls and doors and eating anyone it caught.

Obviously it couldn't go on, so King Minos called for his inventor...

MINOS

Daedalus! Surely he'll come up with something.

DAEDALUS

I've had an idea, my lord.

MINOS

It had better be good!

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- DAEDALUS I'm going to build a labyrinth!
- MINOS A what?
- DAEDALUS A maze!
- MINOS Not with you.
- DAEDALUS A baffling web of winding tunnels, deep down in the palace vaults, full of dead ends.
- MINOS Go on.
- DAEDALUS We'll lure the Minotaur into the labyrinth and it'll never find its way out! It'll be trapped inside forever!
- MINOS Brilliant, Daedalus – get to work!
- HERMES So Daedalus got to work. And when this 'labyrinth' was finished they lured the Minotaur deep into the maze...and soon it was completely baffled...and it could never find its way back to the entrance! But there was a snag. The beast got hungry - of course it did. And being hungry made it madder than ever...and the roaring and bellowing in the vaults made the pillars tremble and the palace shake. It went on day after day...
- MINOS The noise! I can't sleep, I can't eat, I can't live like this! Daedalus, what can we do?
- DAEDALUS I've had another idea.
- HERMES But this idea had nothing to do with inventions.
- DAEDALUS The Minotaur needs feeding.
- MINOS Ye-e-es...
- DAEDALUS And it only eats human flesh.
- MINOS Ye-e-es...
- DAEDALUS And thanks to my weapons you have mastery of all the surrounding lands.
- MINOS Ye-e-es...



- DAEDALUS You can demand tribute, taxes in whatever form you like.
- MINOS Ye-e-es...
- DAEDALUS So?
- MINOS Not with you.
- HERMES Minos wasn't the brightest king you've ever met. He was powerful and rich and looked the part...but he hadn't got a lot up top.
- DAEDALUS So ask for payment from those other lands...in the form of food. Food for the Minotaur.
- MINOS But it only eats humans.
- DAEDALUS Yes.
- MINOS So what do we ask for?
- HERMES What was he like? But eventually he got it.
- MINOS Ha, ha, ha. Oh yes, Daeadalus well done. What a very good idea!
- HERMES Every year each one of his conquered cities was to pay a tribute in the form of - you've guessed it - people. Young men and women, all of them to be sent to Minos's palace and into the labyrinth to feed the Minotaur. I remember the scene in Athens, as the young people gathered to draw lots to see which of them were to be sent...
- MINOS From Athens you must send fourteen – seven young men and seven girls.
- HERMES Imagine your name going into a bag knowing that if it was pulled out you were going to be eaten!



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- HERMES So the drawing of lots began. And as each name was drawn well, some of the young Athenians tried to be brave but, well, you can imagine. But then, above the crowd, on the palace steps, I saw the king of Athens – Aegeus was his name – arguing with his son, young Theseus. So I flew over and listened in.
- AEGEUS Theseus, no! I won't allow it!
- THESEUS It's only right! Listen to your people's suffering!
- AEGEUS You're my only son! Heir to the throne! You mustn't go!
- THESEUS Only six young men shall be chosen by lot. I shall be the seventh.
- AEGEUS Theseus – !
- THESEUS I shall kill the Minotaur and bring our young people home with me – or die in the attempt.
- AEGEUS Theseus my son, I beg you!
- THESEUS No, father. I must do this.
- AEGEUS But how shall I bear waiting for the news?
- THESEUS You'll know as soon as our ship appears. We'll make the crossing to Crete under a black sail. But if I kill the monster and we return alive, the sail I hoist will be white.
- AEGEUS I'll watch the horizon every day, my brave, brave son and pray for a white sail, a white sail!
- HERMES So the fourteen young Athenians sailed across the Aegean Sea to Crete. King Minos's soldiers grabbed them when they arrived and led them up to his palace. And as soon as they got there they could hear it below them: the Minotaur in the labyrinth, its bellows shaking the floors. King Minos, though, was smiling...
- MINOS You'll be sent into the tunnels one by one. You might be able to elude him for a while – but eventually he'll hunt you down. And then I'm afraid he'll eat you!



- HERMES What a pickle, eh? Theseus was brave, for sure, but how was he ever going to save his people from a monster like the Minotaur? Theseus and the other young Athenians were taken to a dismal cell and locked up for the night. I was flitting around the palace, wishing I could help, when I saw a cloaked and hooded figure hurrying towards the cell, clearly not wanting to be seen. A young woman - and she had something in her hand. She unlocked the door and slipped inside...
- THESEUS Who are you? Another prisoner? Or have you come to mock us?
- ARIADNE Prisoners don't usually carry keys. And I've no wish to mock you. I may be King Minos's daughter, but I don't share his cruelty.
- THESEUS Minos's daughter?!
- ARIADNE My name is Ariadne. And I've come to help you escape.
- THESEUS Why so?
- ARIADNE I can't bear this savagery. Whatever has caused the Minotaur to terrorise us here, it's no fault of yours.
- THESEUS Then how will the beast be fed?
- ARIADNE It won't be. It must be killed. And you're the one to do it. And when you leave here, take me with you! Take me away from this terrible place - take me back to Athens - and marry me!
- HERMES Well...understandably Theseus was a bit surprised by that...but he managed to say:
- THESEUS Er - yes! Yes I will! But - how exactly do you mean to help me?
- ARIADNE With this.
- HERMES And that's when I saw what she had in her hand.
- THESEUS A ball of thread.
- ARIADNE Yes! And this.
- THESEUS Ah! A sword!



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- ARIADNE The Minotaur is a terrible beast, but he moves slowly. If you're quick you can kill him with the sword.
- THESEUS I'll do my best!
- ARIADNE You're wondering about the thread.
- THESEUS Well, er – yes.
- ARIADNE No one who enters the labyrinth can ever find the way out again. Use the thread. Unwind it behind you through the tunnels, then follow it back to the entrance once you've killed the Minotaur.
- HERMES Nifty, eh? Anyway, next morning the guards came to the cell at the crack of dawn and asked which of the fourteen was going first. Theseus strode straight out, head held high, and was led to the entrance of the labyrinth. I guessed he'd have hidden the sword somewhere – up his tunic, probably – but I knew, I just knew, he'd forget the thread!
- I flew up the tunnel after him, and – sure enough – the ball of thread was still stuck in his pocket! Honestly! So I yanked the end out and let it dangle so he could see it...
- THESEUS Ah, the thread!
- HERMES And then he started into the tunnel and I followed behind.
- *****
- HERMES So, Theseus started to spool out the thread behind him as he wound down the pitch-dark tunnels, groping his way along the slimy walls. And then...
- THESEUS What's that noise?
- HERMES Only one thing it could be.
- THESEUS The Minotaur!
- HERMES Yes. And it had caught his scent.
- THESEUS Where are you, monster?



- HERMES He was seriously brave. You could tell he was scared but he drew his sword and marched straight off towards the bellow. But as he made his way to where he thought the noise was coming from, it suddenly went dead quiet.
- THESEUS Where are you? Come and face me!
- HERMES You couldn't see a thing in the darkness.
- THESEUS Keep it together. You can do this.
- HERMES Theseus groped his way along a wall. I hoped he was still spinning out the thread, or he'd never find his way back. Come to think of it, neither would I! He carried on groping...
- THESEUS It must be this way. But what's this I can feel? No!
- HERMES He'd run into another dead end – the labyrinth was full of them. He'd have to turn back. Where on earth was the Minotaur? And why was it so quiet?
- THESEUS Ahhh!!!
- HERMES Don't ask me what happened next – I couldn't see a thing – but it was like being in the shop of some mad butcher who'd lost control of his chopper. Then suddenly there was a deafening roar – a terrible crash - a shout from Theseus –
- THESEUS Aaahhh!
- HERMES - and a squelchy chopping sound - and I knew its head was off! I knew this because (a) no more snorting and (b) – and this was the clincher – Theseus was yelling:
- THESEUS I have the creature's head! I've slain the Minotaur!
- HERMES But then - suddenly - Theseus didn't sound so cheerful.
- THESEUS The thread. Where's Ariadne's thread?
- HERMES Oh, great, I thought! Now we're stuck here!
- THESEUS Ah, here, I have it!
- HERMES I took it all back. I could have kissed him.



3: Theseus and the Minotaur

- THESEUS Bless you, Ariadne: you've saved me.
- HERMES Yes, Ariadne deserved some credit too. And Theseus followed the trailing thread, winding it all back up again, retracing his steps through the labyrinth till he found himself back at the entrance.
- THESEUS Ariadne! Princess! Are you there?
- ARIADNE Theseus! You're alive! And the monster?
- THESEUS Dead!
- ARIADNE Oh, Theseus! Come quickly! Back to your ship! Run – before my father knows I'm gone!
- HERMES And all the Athenians, saved from death, raced down to the harbour where their ship was anchored, hoisted the sail, the black sail, and pulled away from the shore.
- ARIADNE Oh, Theseus! You've rescued your people!
- HERMES 'No problémo', I hear you say. 'Sorted.' Mnn. 'Fraid not. First off, it was a long way back to Athens. So Theseus stops half-way, at an isle called Naxos, to get fresh water. And oh dear: Naxos is a favourite haunt of the god Dionysus – and he's a bit of a wild one is Dionysus. He sees Ariadne while she's having a swim and...
- ARIADNE Oh! Help! Help!
- HERMES ...the next thing she knows she's on Mount Olympus...in the palace of the gods, marrying Dionysus, who's fallen head over heels with her. Meanwhile, back on Naxos, Theseus can't find her anywhere of course...
- THESEUS Ariadne! My princess! Ariadne!
- HERMES So back to Athens he has to sail without her. And he's so cut up that well, disaster number two. Remember this from earlier?
- AEGEUS *But how shall I bear waiting for the news?*



- THESEUS** *You'll know as soon as our ship appears. We'll make the crossing to Crete under a black sail. But if I kill the monster and we return alive, the sail I hoist will be white.*
- HERMES** A neat idea. Only problem is, Theseus is so upset at losing Ariadne...
- THESEUS** How will I live without her?
- HERMES** ...that he forgets what he's meant to do. So there's his father, Aegeus, up on the cliff, looking out to sea, waiting for the ship, and what does he see coming over the horizon?
- AEGEUS** A black sail! Black! Oh, Theseus! My beloved son is dead!
- HERMES** He's devastated. And what does he do?
- AEGEUS** Aa-a-a-h!!!
- HERMES** He throws himself off the cliff...kerbloosh, straight in the sea. Which is why it's called the Aegean. The Aegean Sea – after Aegeus. So there we are: Theseus kills the Minotaur...but he loses Princess Ariadne and he loses his father. Well, I suppose you can't always have a happy ending!

