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The Minotaur

Written by [Matias Travieso-Diaz](#) | 👁 Hits: 11



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The bull came up and had intercourse with [Pasiphae], as if with a real cow.

Pasiphae gave birth to Asterios (Asterius), who was called Minotauros.

He had the face of a bull, but was otherwise human.

Pseudo-Apollodorus, *Bibliotheca* 3. 8 - 11

Princess Ariadne was trembling like a windswept leaf when she embraced Theseus as he made ready to enter the labyrinth. “The guards posted by my father dare not prevent me from waiting at this gate, but they would seize me at once if I tried to go in with you” lamented the girl. “I would not let you come in either,” he replied. “It is my fate and I must face it alone.”

The gate led to a vast circular complex, an enclosure dotted by passages that crisscrossed at irregular intervals. From the entrance, only a few feet of the corridor could be seen, as the view ahead of it was interrupted by the first of numerous stone walls erected within the structure. Theseus was about to step into the path when Ariadne seized his arm. “Wait” she alerted. “Master Daedalus gave me something that may help. It is not a weapon for you to use in fighting my brother, as those are forbidden. However, afterwards you must be able to find your way back out of the maze so you do not wander around for hours or days.” She reached inside her cloak and extracted a large ball of red yarn. Untwisting one end, she proffered it to Theseus. “Carry the end of this ball in one hand and unbundle it behind you wherever you walk, and then follow the thread back to get out. I will wait here, holding the rest of the ball. I hope the strand will be long enough.”

“I am more concerned about fighting that bull with just my bare fists than getting lost on the way back.”

“I have told you already” chided Ariadne. “Even though commonly dubbed ‘the Minotaur,’ Asterios is not a bull. He is huge and very dark and ugly, and his physical appearance is the reason he is imprisoned. My mother was unfaithful with some black man from abroad and the child they produced looks like him, not at all like my father. Asterios is being kept alive only as a punishment to his mother for her sin.”

“Well, I know King Midas is vindictive; that is why I am here. But has he not sired scores of children out of wedlock? Why punish Queen Pasiphae for a single indiscretion, one perhaps prompted by his own wanton behavior?”

“My father is powerful, but is not known for being fair. He is hiding Asterios in this maze so people will not laugh at his wearing horns.”

“Well, be that as it may, will you see that I get a proper funeral if I am slain?”

Ariadne burst into tears. “I would not be able to tend to your corpse. Asterios has been taught to feast on his victims.”

Theseus had asked to be the first member of this year’s batch of youths and maidens that Minos had demanded that Athens dispatch to Crete to be sacrificed by being offered to Asterios. Due to his high birth and early arrival in Knossos, Theseus had been held in a guest house while waiting for the others to come in and had been shown the courtesies due to a visiting head of state. Minos had ordered his daughter Ariadne to tend to Theseus’ needs, and their frequent contact had led to increased intimacy between the two. Now Ariadne stood at the maze’s entrance already weeping for her new lover, likely to be gone forever.

Once inside the complex, Theseus became lost in countless interconnected rooms, set at multiple levels, joined by staircases and narrow corridors, holding bedrooms and meeting and worshipping areas, reception halls, cisterns full of turbid waters, and irregularly shaped courtyards. Many a time he ran into a blind corner and had to retrace his steps, often finding himself in a different, unfamiliar spot. Every room was empty, and everything was covered by the dust of years of disuse. The sound of his own steps was the

only thing that broke the silence of the enclosure, and Theseus started to wonder whether the tale of a minotaur inhabiting these forsaken halls was a fantasy; but then, a faraway noise that resembled a loud growl disabused him of that hope. There was somebody or something nearby, waiting for him.

Instead of retreating, he forced himself to follow the sound and finally entered a room somewhat larger than the others: a columned hall that was littered with piles of straw and mounds of unspeakable filth, including human remains. At the far corner crouched a black figure that emitted a vile animal stench. It was human in general proportions but bestial in appearance: long, crinkly hair and beard; powerful arms ending in huge, clawed-fingered hands; a face contorted into a grimace, and eyes that glowered with hatred. The creature opened and closed his mouth and let a purple tongue protrude, perhaps evidencing hunger.

A pulse of fear traveled up and down Theseus’ spine, but he managed to hold himself in check as he addressed the monster: “Hail, Asterios, your sister Ariadne sends you her best regards.” At the mention of Ariadne’s name, the creature’s growls changed into a yelp. A twinkle of emotion shone in his eyes, and he uttered an incomprehensible string of sounds that might have been words. Encouraged, Theseus continued: “She asked me to tell you that we will try to rescue you from imprisonment and set you free, so you can roam the world again.”

There was a long pause, as if Asterios was trying to digest the promise contained in the visitor’s words. At large, however, the creature uttered a piercing howl and lunged at Theseus, seizing him by the waist and raising him off the floor and flinging him away with great force.

Theseus felt himself losing consciousness and fought to regain his senses before it was too late. On his knees on the ground, Theseus sought to prepare himself for battle and removed his chlamys by unfastening the fibula (cloak pin) that secured the cloak on his right shoulder. As the chlamys dropped from his body, Theseus was left holding the fibula, a silver brooch backed by a long needle, and he realized that he actually had a weapon of last resort.

Theseus was getting on his feet when Asterios got hold of him again, bringing his hands around Theseus’ neck, intending to choke him. Desperately, Theseus kicked him repeatedly, and succeeded in connecting with the giant’s groin. Asterios howled in pain and, for a moment, loosened his grip; this allowed Theseus to drive the sharp pin of the fibula across Asterios’ face and deep into his right eye.

Asterios writhed in agony, alternatively banging his massive hands against the sides of his body and trying to nurse his bleeding eye. Before his opponent could recover, Theseus plunged the fibula’s needle into Asterios’ chest and drove it in with all the force he could muster, piercing Asterios time and again until his arm dropped from exhaustion.

Theseus never knew whether it was increased weariness or a sudden death wish that prevented Asterios from striking him again. Whatever the reason, the giant fell to the ground and folded onto himself. Theseus towered over Asterios for a few moments and then grasped the neck of his unresisting enemy, squeezing it for what seemed like an eternity until all motions ceased.

Much, much later, Theseus followed the yarn’s trail back to the arms of his lover. Haltingly, he related his ordeal to Ariadne, who led him away to safety.

As he lay on a cot seeking to regain his strength, Theseus recalled a key moment from his ordeal: “Your brother seemed to have fond memories of you. He softened quite a bit at the mere mention of your name.”

Ariadne replied: “I was his keeper for a long time and we became very close. My poor brother!”

And she sighed longingly.

THE END

Bio:

Born in Cuba, Matias Travieso-Diaz migrated to the United States as a young man. He became an engineer and lawyer and practiced for nearly fifty years. After retirement, he took up creative writing. Over two hundred and eighty of his short stories have been published or accepted for publication in anthologies, magazines, blogs, audio books, and podcasts. One of his four novels, an autobiography entitled “Cuban Transplant,” and four anthologies of his stories have also been published.



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