

Read the story of the Greek hero Theseus.

*Theseus's father Aegeus, King of Athens, had to send seven youths and seven maidens as a tribute to King Minos of Crete so that Athens would not be attacked. The young people were to be fed to the Minotaur, a monster who was half man, half beast and who lived in the centre of a complicated maze known as the Labyrinth.*

When Theseus heard this he exclaimed, 'I will go myself as one of the young men, and meet the Minotaur!'

In vain Aegeus begged him not to be so foolhardy. 'If I slay the Minotaur,' said Theseus, 'it will surely save our country from further tribute – so I will.'

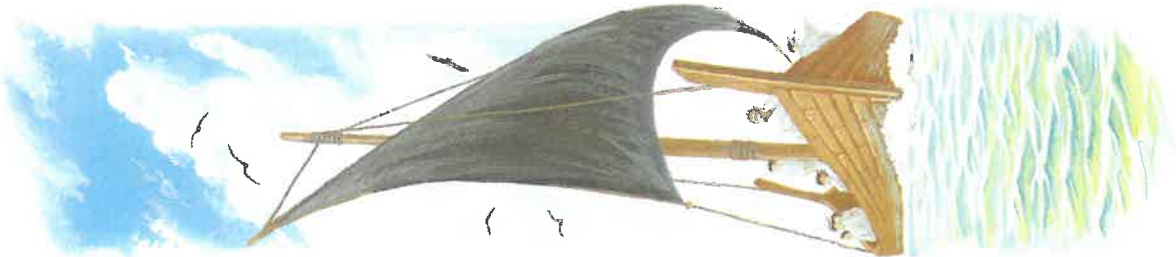
'Then promise me,' said Aegeus sadly, 'that if you return victorious you will hoist white sails on your ship: but if you do not, the black sails that waft the Athenian youths and maidens to their doom will tell me that you have perished with them.'

Promising this, Theseus set out for Crete, and in due time arrived at Knossos where the mighty Minos ruled. Here the victims were kindly entertained, and took part in racing and boxing contests before the king and his court. As Theseus stood panting at the winning post, the Princess Ariadne saw him and straightway loved him.

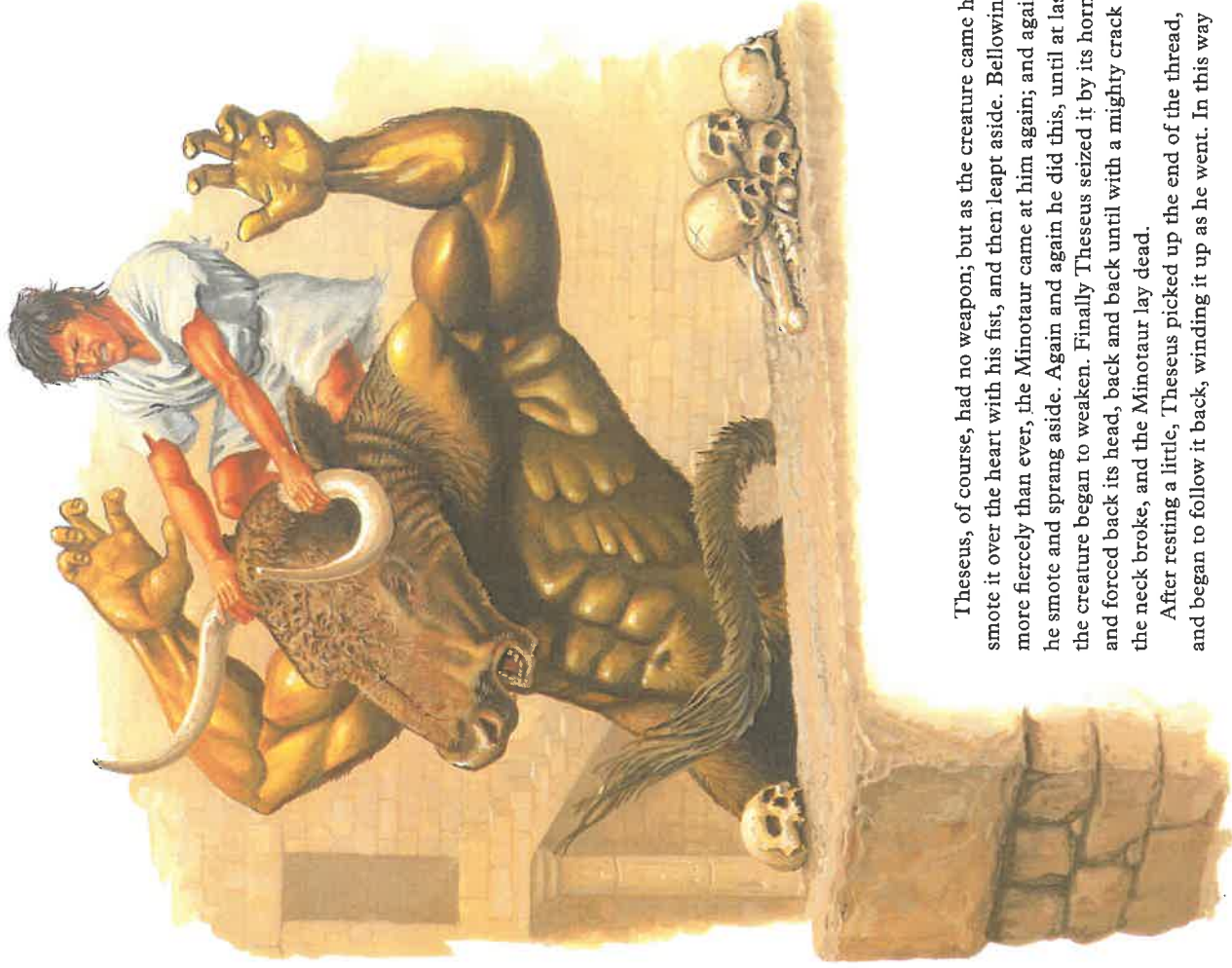
In great misery at the thought of the fate which awaited him, Ariadne at length thought of a scheme. That night she visited Theseus. 'Ask to go first into the Labyrinth tomorrow,' she instructed him. 'No one has ever found his way out again, but if you take with you this ball of thread, without it being discovered, and fasten one end to the door when it is closed after you, unrolling it as you go, you may find your way back by means of it. I will be at the door at midnight to let you out if you are successful; but you must take me with you in your flight, for it will not be safe here when it is known that I helped you.'

Theseus did exactly as he was told, and next day he entered the Labyrinth with the thread concealed in his hand. When alone, he attached one end to the lintel of the door, and unwound the thread behind him as he traced his way through the winding passages, leading up and down, hither and thither, until he came to the great chamber or cavern in the centre where the dim light from above showed the monster waiting for him.

The Minotaur was a fearsome creature with a great human body and the head and neck of a bull. Its skin was as tough as the toughest leather and a dull yellow colour like brass.



When it saw Theseus, it rushed upon him bellowing with rage and hunger.



Theseus, of course, had no weapon; but as the creature came he smote it over the heart with his fist, and then leapt aside. Bellowing more fiercely than ever, the Minotaur came at him again; and again he smote and sprang aside. Again and again he did this, until at last the creature began to weaken. Finally Theseus seized it by its horns and forced back its head, back and back until with a mighty crack the neck broke, and the Minotaur lay dead.

After resting a little, Theseus picked up the end of the thread, and began to follow it back, winding it up as he went. In this way

he at length reached the door, where Ariadne was waiting for him. Swiftly she led him and the other intended victims to their ship; and while it was still dark they crept on board, cut the cables and stole silently away.

Adapted from *Tales of the Greek Heroes* by Roger Lancelyn Green

