Lovereading.co.uk
Helping you choose your next book

You loved your last book...but what are you going to read next?

Using our unique guidance tools, Love**reading** will help you find new books to keep you inspired and entertained.

---

**Opening Extract from...**

# The Best British Fantasy 2014

Edited by Steve Haynes

Published by Salt Publishing

Please note that this extract is taken from an uncorrected proof

All text is copyright © of the author

This Opening Extract is exclusive to Love**reading**.
Please print off and read at your leisure.

# THE BEST BRITISH FANTASY 2014

SERIES EDITOR

STEVE HAYNES




CROMER

PUBLISHED BY SALT PUBLISHING
12 Norwich Road, Cromer, Norfolk NR27 0AX

All rights reserved

Selection and introduction © Steve Haynes, 2014
Individual contributions © the contributors, 2014

The right of Steve Haynes to be identified as the editor of this work has been asserted by him in accordance with Section 77 of the Copyright, Designs and Patents Act 1988.

This book is in copyright. Subject to statutory exception and to provisions of relevant collective licensing agreements, no reproduction of any part may take place without the written permission of Salt Publishing.

First published by Salt Publishing, 2014

Printed in Great Britain by Clays Ltd, St Ives plc

Typeset in Paperback 9/12

*This book is sold subject to the conditions that it shall not, by way of trade or otherwise, be lent, re-sold, hired out, or otherwise circulated without the publisher's prior consent in any form of binding or cover other than that in which it is published and without a similar condition including this condition being imposed on the subsequent purchaser.*

ISBN 978 1 907773 66 2 paperback

1 3 5 7 9 8 6 4 2

# CONTENTS


STEVE HAYNES
*Introduction* vii

PRIYA SHARMA
**Thesea and Astaurius** 1

JESS HYSLOP
**Triolet** 19

GEORGINA BRUCE
**Cat World** 35

TIM MAUGHAN
**Zero Hours** 50

DAVID TURNBULL
**Aspects of Aries** 57

HELEN JACKSON
**Build Guide** 74

E.J. SWIFT
**Saga's Children** 96

CAROLE JOHNSTONE
**Ad Astra** 110

JIM HAWKINS
**Sky Leap – Earth Flame** 132

GUY HALEY
**iRobot** 165

CHRIS BUTLER
**The Animator** 169

V. H. LESLIE
**The Cloud Cartographer** 198

SARAH BROOKS
**Trans-Siberia:**
**An Account of a Journey** 223

NINA ALLAN
**Higher Up** 237

*Contributors' Biographies* 271
*Acknowledgements* 275



STEVE HAYNES

# INTRODUCTION

Those of you who read my introduction to Salt's previous *Best of British Fantasy* . . . collection will know that I have a fluid definition of my favourite genre. British writers inherit a tradition that sees a blurring of the boundaries between rigid definitions of Sci-Fi and Fantasy, and that's the approach I have continued to take with *Best of British Fantasy 2014*. You will find in these pages an eclectic collection of Sci-Fi and Fantasy as well as stories that could sit in either, or both, camps.

I make no apology for this. In the year in which all these stories were published, there was a cultural event for an institution recognised by the wider public as very British Fantasy. I refer, of course, to the fiftieth anniversary of *Doctor Who*. For me, this Saturday evening TV programme, watched by millions around the world, is the inheritor of a particularly British approach to Fantasy and Sci-Fi. Make no mistake, I know the programme has its limitations, but I salute two separate dramatic scenes in the two TV specials commissioned to celebrate this show's half-century.

Towards the end of 'An Adventure in Space and Time', David Bradley's William Hartnell (as the Doctor) looks across his central console for the last time and sees Matt Smith (also as the Doctor). In 'The Day of the Doctor', Matt Smith's Doctor

meets Tom Baker's Curator. In these two beautifully balanced moments, we have an elegant meta-collision that subverts traditional 'realistic drama' and reflects the on-going meeting of Sci-Fi and Fantasy pervading our genre traditions.

My recognition of this vibrant mix of Fantasy and Sci-Fi influences this anthology. I've purposely grouped stories into particular traditions, but my definition of the two genres is more complex than a simple 'half-and-half' division.

While one story might explore a mythical fantasy from a very particular perspective, another mixes a contemporary setting with poetry spouting flowers. Another takes us into a fantasy world and yet explores a very current real danger that many young girls face. (As I write this the news is full of international condemnation at the kidnapping of over 200 girls in a crime that is as old as humanity.)

The collection shifts suddenly into near-future political comment on a very current trend, while another story takes us into a British dystopia based on the most arcane of human divisions and prejudice. There are stories that explore 'classic' sci-fi territory (yes, you will find spaceships and robots in these pages), but through a lens of psychological complexity.

Finally, the anthology again moves into an uncertain territory, where politics and technology mix with fantasy worlds; where spores represent emotions and the adventurer can literally be lost in the clouds.

The collection finishes with two stories that challenge our assumptions of genre, one exploring an experience of something alien, on several levels, and another that grounds us in the fears and politics of the modern age while weaving a disturbing fantasy thread through both personal and world events.

Finally, for all my praising of *Doctor Who*, I recognise that there is a disturbing lack of women writers represented in

**such a major genre TV programme. It's a situation that has been recognised in the wider world of Fantasy and Sci-Fi publishing, and debated in some length during the last twelve months. I'd just like to point out that nobody could ever say that about the *Best of British Fantasy 2014*.**



PRIYA SHARMA

# THESEA AND ASTAURIUS

'Daddy, you're telling it wrong.'

'Am I?'

Thesea looks up at her husband and daughter.

'You tell it then,' he says to the child.

'King Minos prayed to Poseidon, who sent him a magic bull but Minos didn't sacrifice it like he was supposed to, so Aphrodite made Minos' wife fall in love with it.'

Only the gods inflict love as a punishment, Thesea thinks.

'The bull and the queen made a baby called the Minotaur.' Thesea's glad that she's too young to be concerned with the details. She bares her teeth and draws her fingers into claws. 'It was a monster.'

'The Minotaur had a bull's head on a man's body.' Their son; older, placid, lacking his sibling's drama.

'I'm telling it. Minos made Daedalus, his inventor, build the labyrinth to hold the Minotaur. He fed it human sacrifices sent from Athens.'

'Really?' her father asks.

'Yes, then Athens sent a prince called Theseus who was so handsome that Ariadne, Minos' daughter, gave him a sword to kill the Minotaur and string to find his way out of the maze.'

The girl has no interest in being Ariadne. She leaps about pretending to be Theseus, imaginary sword in hand.

‘Calm down,’ Thesea puts an arm around her and draws her in. ‘You’ve all got it wrong. Listen and I’ll tell you what really happened.’

Athens. Thesea is eleven. The other children are paddling in the shallows, splashing one another. The fisherman’s son follows her along the shore. He won’t leave her alone.

‘My mother said you’re going to be sent to Crete to die.’ He tries to grab her hand to stop her walking away.

Thesea runs into the sea and dives into the advancing wave. She holds her breath and twists about so that she can look at the churning surf from underneath.

So what she’s heard is true. She’s not meant for this world. Perhaps that’s why she’s always felt outside it. There are only these moments then. She resolves to make them last.

Thesea at seventeen. She stands apart from the cargo of weeping foundlings, looking ahead. As they approach Crete, blue is divided by yellow sand into sea and sky. The ship navigates the coast to where Minos and his men have gathered on the dock to greet the fresh meat.

The boat’s close enough for Thesea to see their faces. They look like salivating dogs. She can read Minos with a glance; his smile is a yawning hole that could swallow her.

He wants the entire world. Greedy bastard.

The group shuffle down the gangplank. The Athenian crew can’t look at them. Sailors on other ships stand and stare.

A girl greets them. She wears purple silk, and gold shimmers at her ears and throat.

‘I’m Ariadne, daughter of Minos, princess of Crete.’ She takes a garland from a slave’s arms and puts it around the neck of the first Athenian and kisses the boy’s cheek. ‘We thank you for your great sacrifice.’

Thesea’s the final one in line. Ariadne stares as if trying

to get the measure of her. The garland tickles Thesea's neck. Then she feels cold metal slipping down the front of her gown.

Ariadne kisses her and whispers, 'Run. Run into the labyrinth.' She steps back and smiles, the dimple in her cheek revealed. 'Come, we've prepared a feast for you.'

They're mad. Thesea follows them to the tables. Every single one of them.

Thesea's spent her life expecting death at the Minotaur's hands, teeth or trampled underfoot.

The rest of the Athenian's have been sacrificed and there's not a monster in sight. Only Minos and his men. Thesea's witnessed it. Sex and blood, all at once.

'Your turn.'

She's untied. A hand clamps her wrist. She's not agreed to this. This isn't sacrifice for the greater good. It's rape and murder. She pulls the knife from her dress and plants it in the man's neck. He has a soldier's reflexes. His sword bites her arm.

Ariadne's plan doesn't seem so stupid now. Run. Whatever is in the labyrinth can't be worse than this.

'Get her.'

'No,' Minos calls from the heart of the carnage, 'leave her. She'll starve in there. Or he'll find her. Let him have a live one. Poor sod deserves a bit of fun.'

There's laughter. She runs faster in case they change their minds. When she looks back over her shoulder the soldiers are dragging the bodies towards the maze's mouth.

Let him have a live one.

The novelty of a warm, writhing body instead of a cold, already ill used carcass. She pictures the bull headed giant sitting on a throne of bleached bones, tearing the flesh from a human leg with his teeth.

Thesea feels like a bucket of hot water has been poured down her arm. It's slick down to her wrist. There's a relentless drip from her fingertips. Her heart thumps to compensate. A contrary feeling, making her weak and energised all at once. She tears the hem from her gown and binds her arm.

The labyrinth's endless corridors of white marble. Blind endings. Steps and turns. Arches and pillars. It's baffling. Thesea turns a corner to find a fountain, the water making music. In a courtyard there's an altar laid with roses. Elsewhere a lyre nailed to a wall. Smells without source – jasmine, fire and cooking fish. These anomalies don't help her to orienteer.

Thesea remembers being lost in the forest as a child. The trees pretence of familiarity. The maze is the same. Alive. When she leans against a wall it moves beneath her skin as if breathing her in.

I'm going mad.

I'm going to die.

She lays down, head on the ground. Stone shifts beneath her cheek, like something exhaling. Her skull trembles. Vibrations announce the Minotaur's approach.

There's a roar that could shatter rock.

She pulls herself up to a sitting position.

Let him come. I was bred for death.

The Minotaur's an abomination. Union of earthly woman and divine bull. His outline fills the corridor. His horns throw long javelin shadows on the floor. He lowers his head and breaks into a run.

The Minotaur halts beside her. Thesea tries to be calm as he picks her up. She's cradled in his arms. He smells, she thinks, like the summer rain on warm earth.



She's being carried along a corridor. Its proportions are less grand than the rest of the labyrinth. The Minotaur's bellowing is no longer just sound, it's becoming speech.

'Daedalus! I've found one. She's alive!'

The workshop's around the next corner. Daedalus looks up from his bench. Thesea sees a frowning mouth, crooked nose, a pair of goggles and a flash of grey hair. He sheds the goggles to reveal blue eyes.

'Quick, on here.'

Daedalus clears the bench with a single sweep of his arm, his tools shrapnel flying to the floor. Thesea's laid down, a body on a slab. She's heard of this Daedalus, dubbed the cunning worker. His constructions are wonders. He's so complicated that his king is his patron and enemy and he's ended up imprisoned with a beast in the jail that he was commissioned to make.

Will he convert her into a terrible machine or will the pair of them sit down to feast on her?

'Fetch my medicine chest.'

The Minotaur looks about in panic. The workshop's a mess of prototypes and parts. It smells of grease and metal. Boxes spill maps, sketches, cogs and wires. Others are sealed with triple padlocks.

'The leather one, there.'

Thesea feels a cold ring of metal on her chest. It's connected to tubes that Daedalus puts in his ears. He tells her the name later. Stethoscope. Daedalus checks the integrity of her bones. Lays a flat hand on her abdomen. Then he unwraps the binding on her arm.

'It's just a flesh wound. She's lost some blood though. Get me the Glenrothes.'

The Minotaur holds out a bottle of amber liquid but Daedalus is too busy with needle, syringe and vial. He nods to the Minotaur, 'Pour me a glass.'

~

'It's not to clean her wound?'

'Single malt? Are you joking? That's for me. We'll use the cheap stuff on her arm.'

The Minotaur fusses over her so much that Daedalus sends him away.

'Can you feel this?' He prods at the edges of the wound with a needle. 'No? Then we'll begin. Look away.'

Thesea refuses. She watches the needle pierce numb skin.

'What's your name?'

'Thesea.'

'Greek?'

'Yes.' Of course Greek. Where else? 'Minos. I didn't know . . .' Her sentence collapses.

'He's as crazy as a sack of snakes.'

They lapse into silence. Behind Daedalus there's a lit candle in a niche. It illuminates a painting of a young man lying on a rock, his complexion ashen. The sky behind him is red, the horizon a dark line. White nymphs reach for him with pale hands.

A pair of enormous wings are strapped to his arms.

'What's that?' she asks.

'A gift from the Minotaur.'

'He's an artist?'

'No. He just thought I should see it. It's called 'The Fall of Icarus'.'

'I don't understand.'

Daedalus finishes his embroidery. Flesh is reunited.

'We'll talk later.' He drops the needle into the bowl. 'You should get some rest.'

Thesea's mouth is dry when she wakes. Daedalus dozes in a chair. She looks at his sketches but can't fathom their purpose.

She helps herself to water from the jug. Slices cheese onto bread.

She looks into an alcove, then realises it's a balcony. The Minotaur's below her, in a vast field. He waves.

'Feeling better?'

'Much.'

She recognises now that the stretched mouth is a smile.

There are bodies laid out in a row. Ariadne's flowers are tangled with torn clothes. She recognises a wave of black hair. A scarf. A necklace. They remind her that mauled flesh was someone she once knew.

The Minotaur's stripped to the waist, shovel in hand, knee deep in a hole. Behind him markers stretch down the hill and out of sight.

He's burying them, she thinks. Each in their own grave.

'I'm going for a walk.' Thesea stretches, trying to lengthen her muscles.

'Sure,' Daedalus rummages in a box, 'you're not a prisoner. Take this string and use it to find your way back.'

'Call if you get lost. I'll come.' Then the Minotaur adds, 'If you feel faint put your head between your knees.'

'How will you find me?'

'I will.'

Daedalus follows her down the corridor and whispers in her ear. 'Be careful. He's different, depending where he is in the maze.'

'He can't always speak, can he?'

'Not just that. He's not always so affable.'

'How will I know?'

'You'll know.'

Her walk exhausts her. The Minotaur lays a blanket over her knee when she returns and fetches extra cushions. She

watches him work the bellows for Daedalus and together they shape metal. Flames and fatigue bring sleep but not for long. Thesea sits upright, wet faced, choking on a scream.

'You're safe.' The Minotaur kneels before her, clutching her hand.

'You've no idea.'

'I do.'

'I'm sorry, of course you do.' He dignifies the dead with burial.

The Minotaur reaches into his pocket and brings out a brass ring. 'Minos gave me this when I was a boy. His captain held me down while he put it through my nose. Daedalus was kind enough to remove it.'

Daedalus tells her everything later. How Minos sniggered as he threatened to castrate the Minotaur when he reached manhood. How they branded the delicate flesh of his inner thigh.

'I'm not an animal,' the Minotaur tells her.

'No, I know you're not.'

Thesea is holding his hand now.

Thesea cries less in her sleep. She walks further each day using her string as a guide. Daedalus won't let her chalk arrows on the floor. Just in case we get unwanted visitors.

The Minotaur accompanies her when he can.

'What's your favourite place?'

'The beach near where I grew up. Not far from Athens.'

'Why?'

'Because I've never been anywhere else.'

'I want to show you something.'

She follows him deep into the maze on a bewildering journey from which she'd never return without him.

'Here.' He puts his palms against a wall in a tentative gesture. 'Yes, here will be perfect.'

The Minotaur prises at the stone with his fingertips, pulls out a few blocks and lays them carefully on the floor. He peeks through and once satisfied, he enlarges the hole. The blocks become a stack. Thesea tries to put her hand through but she can't. It's as if there's a hidden barrier. The Minotaur reaches in with ease.

'Why can't I?'

'I don't know,' he shrugs. 'Daedalus can't either. It frustrates him too, knowing I can wander around out there. Now, take a look.'

There's a room on the other side. What stuns her is the view from the window on the far wall. She knows by instinct the slow turning jewel out there is home, even though she's ignorant of astronomy. That the blue is ocean after ocean. Brown is the ground that should be beneath her feet. She can't reconcile this paradox. That labyrinth is down there and up here.

'Daedalus says that's the moon,' the Minotaur points to a silvery ball, part in shadow.

The moon. She can't see Diana, goddess, huntress and lunar mistress. It's just a ball of rock.

'Is Daedalus a god?'

'No. He says this is a place where men are gods.'

'The gods don't exist?'

'Not always. I don't know if this is before or after.'

'Is that natural?'

The Minotaur continues to stare out of the window. 'I'm not the person to ask about what's natural and what isn't.'

Thesea's giddy. A place where the fates and gods have no sway. They're insignificant, or will be, or were. So is she.

It's terrifying. It's liberating.

'It's that time.' Daedalus looks at the calendar and shakes his head.

The Minotaur's digging again. Thesea takes him a jug of

water. The bodies laid out on the ground are black skinned. The flower of Ethiopian youth.

Thesea makes an approximate count of the markers. The Athenian tribute would only occupy a corner of the graveyard.

'So many?'

'From all over the world. And more than you think. There are mass graves in the corner. It's the work of more than one man. The slaughter of innocents is a family tradition.' A dynasty of psychopaths. 'Luckily Ariadne's not like that, although Minos doesn't know it.'

'Ariadne?' Thesea's forgotten her. The sudden warmth in his voice makes her feel jealous.

My sister. Half sister, really.'

'Were you close?'

'We still are. I talk to her through the wall, although it's hard to catch her alone. Minos watches her all the time. He went even crazier after his wife fell in love with my father.'

'What happened to your father?'

'Minos ate him.'

'Oh, I'm sorry.' There's not much she can say to that.

The Minotaur nods, his eyes lowered.

'Why doesn't Ariadne hide in here with you?'

'Is that what I'm doing? Hiding?' He digs as they talk. A consummate sexton.

'I'm saying all the wrongs things. I'm sorry.'

'No. You're right. Minos would rip this place up looking for her. And she stays to make sure Minos treats his prisoner well.'

'Who?'

'Icarus. Daedalus' son. She's in love with him.'

'Icarus.' The outstretched wings.

Thesea happens upon the wrong part of the maze. The Minotaur sits and seethes, his eyes embers in the gloom. Steam rises from his nostrils. He could erupt at any moment.

She backs away, afraid.

'Daedalus, which is the real Minotaur?'

'We're all made of different parts. One's not less real than the rest.' He shrugs, seemingly less concerned with the semantics of the soul than she is.

'You're lying.'

'I'm not.' He doesn't look up from the machine that whirs in his hands.

'An omission's as bad as a lie.'

'I've missed this,' he smiles.

'What?'

'You remind me of my wife. She saw through me like I was water, too.'

'Don't change the subject.'

'That's exactly what I mean.'

'Tell me or you won't get a moment of peace.'

He sighs.

'She did that as well. If there's anywhere that all his parts are united it's the heart of the labyrinth.'

The heart of the labyrinth is the heart of the Minotaur. Daedalus shakes a finger at her when she demands a blueprint.

'I burnt it. What do you think would happen if Minos got hold of it?'

Yet here she is, due to string and intuition. Here is the Minotaur laid bare.

Thesea's disappointed when he snorts at her but from his embarrassed look she can tell he's speechless, not dumb. There's no doubt that he's more man than animal. His body's beautiful. A giant construct of muscle slabs laid on bone. His tail, a curl of a thing, sits above his buttocks.

Thesea holds out her arms to him. His black eyes are liquid in this light. He buries his face in her palm. His nose is wet, his tongue large and rasping.

He can't kiss me, not like a man kisses a woman.

He lays his immense head in her lap. His physiognomy defies her fingers. She touches the curve of his horns.

'Your neck must hurt.'

He snorts again, tilts his head one way, then the other as she rubs his neck and shoulders. She massages the knots until they soften. His bones click under her hands. He grunts, grateful.

When he pulls her down beside him, she stiffens. Brutality is all she's seen of sex. The Minotaur undoes the memory with a torrent of tenderness.

There are only these moments, Thesea thinks, I must make them last. But he draws her on to the next moment and then the one after.

Thesea's dream's a riot. She can see each bead of blood, each gash, each contortion. It's a churning sea of screams. A man's voice carries above it. Sweat pricks her forehead. She opens her eyes. Daedalus is shaking her awake. She can still hear the man, shouting. He's close.

'It's Minos. Hide.'

'What about the Minotaur?'

'He'll know already.' Daedalus shoves her in a cupboard.

Thesea kneels and peeps through the keyhole. Minos comes in, followed by a line of men. A line of human string.

'Daedalus,' Minos folds his arms, 'make it obey me.'

'It's him, not it. And what do you want to do?'

'His duty.'

'As what?'

'A weapon. I want him to march at the head of my army. I'm going to remind my dissenters who I am.'

'The Minotaur's no killer.'

'Then he's no use to me. Persuade him. We march at the next full moon. If he's not with me then the first place I'll come

is here. There'll be nowhere to hide. I'll pull this place down brick by brick. Oh, and I'll execute your precious Icarus.'

'Someone should put a knife in him.'

'I've tried to persuade the Minotaur to do it while he's visiting his sister but he won't. He says it would be murder.'

'Then we have to leave.'

'Not without Icarus and Ariadne.' Daedalus fiddles with a set of cogs. 'And I don't know if the Minotaur can.'

She snatches them from him.

'Explain.'

'This isn't a prison. I just wanted somewhere to keep him safe.'

'What have you done?'

Thesea's already guessed. It's why the Minotaur knows who's where. Why the walls breathe and the floor sighs.

'He's like his father. The stuff of gods. He can punch holes in time and space. He is the labyrinth. It's made from him. Don't look at me like that. This way he'd never be lost or trapped.'

'And being able to travel outside?'

'An unforeseen consequence, but he can't stay away for long. I don't know what it would mean if he tried to leave for good. Part of him is in here. In the fabric of this place.'

The Minotaur's out of breathe from running. 'I got here as fast as I could.' He stands so close to Thesea that she can feel his relief and body heat. He looks from her face to Daedalus'. 'What did Minos want?'

Thesea puts her head next to his.

'I'm not trying to fight with you but we have to stop Minos.'

'We can stay in here. Forever if we have to. He won't find us.'

'What about Icarus and Ariadne? What about all those people?' She remembers diving beneath the surf and breaking through on the other side. From then on each moment

catalogued, her life finite. She's defied fate. She's seen a future where even divinity is expendable. 'We can stop him.'

'How?'

'We'll need Ariadne's help.'

Daedalus has kept them out of the workshop until it's ready. Thesea glances at the Minotaur. His mouth hangs open.

A copy of the Minotaur's head is on Daedalus' workbench. It's perfect, down to its eyelashes and moist nose.

'Did you find it?' Daedalus asks.

Thesea nudges the Minotaur who's still staring.

'Right, yes.' The Minotaur hands him a tube. 'The shopkeeper said this will glue anything together.'

They all turn back to the head that's watching them.

'There are a couple of things missing.'

Thesea knows right away what Daedalus means.

'Your horns.' The old man nods at him. 'I'll get the hacksaw.'

'I'll need them in a fight.' The Minotaur backs away.

'You're not going to fight.'

It's only when Thesea puts a hand on his arm that the Minotaur relents. She stays but has to turn away. There's the rasping see saw sound of metal on horn.

Afterwards she uses his forelocks to cover the stumps.

'How does it feel?' Thesea asks later.

'Strange. My head's lighter.'

'Will this work?'

'It has to.' He curls a strand of her hair around his finger. 'I feel like I was asleep before I met you.'

'And before you I thought my life was forfeit and I didn't care because I had nothing to fight for.'

'Thesea, if it doesn't work . . .'

'Don't say it.'

'If it doesn't work, don't wait for me.'

'It'll work.'

'It would be all right. I don't want you to be alone.'

'Shut up and kiss me.'

'You should know my name. It's Astaurius.'

Sword, shield and helmet have transformed Thesea into Theseus. Girl into boy. She carries the fake head in a bag. It's heavy.

As she and Daedalus leave, the labyrinth walls dull as if a light's going out. She pauses and presses her lips to the stone but it's devoid of life. It's as they planned. The Minotaur's reversing Daedalus' design. Taking the god given power of Olympus back within himself. If he's got it right, he'll use it to make one final door and come out somewhere else, nothing remaining of him in the stone to tether him there.

The ground shakes beneath their feet, a subtle tremor spreading out from deep within the maze.

Astaurius.

Daedalus is as encumbered as Thesea. He looks hunchbacked because he's wearing a folded set of wings beneath his cloak. He hefts the second pair in a sack.

There's another rumble. Behind them there's the distant sound of collapsing masonry. The maze is a construct that can't withstand the world without the Minotaur.

'Hurry.' Thesea takes the spare wings from Daedalus.

Ariadne's waiting for them. The watchman lies at her feet. Blood stains his tunic. Ariadne is Minos' daughter after all. Thesea tries to hide her shock with a question.

'Is that what you're wearing?'

'It would look a bit odd if I was dressed to travel rather than for a party, wouldn't it?' She looks at Thesea like she's a simpleton. She's planned revels to distract the court. 'At least this way I'll be able to take some things of value for us to live on.'

Ariadne wears silks, too many layers considering the mild-

ness of the day. Her yellow hair's bound up in an elaborate coil, studded with gems. Gold bangles tinkle on her arms.

'Clever girl,' Daedalus laughs. 'Where's Icarus?'

'Here's a map. He's at the top of this tower. Father has the only key. I couldn't get it.'

'Leave that to me.' Daedalus, lover of locks, will tease out its secrets. 'What about the guard?'

'I took him a cup of wine.' Her smile makes Thesea shudder. 'Icarus knows where we're meeting Tell anyone who asks about the wings that you're part of the entertainment. Are you sure those things will work?'

'Certain.'

A shockwave escapes the labyrinth.

'What's that?' Ariadne asks.

'Your brother. We best go. He's going to attract a lot of attention.' Daedalus squeezes Thesea's hand. 'Goodbye dear.'

'We'll go this way.' Ariadne pulls Thesea away. She takes one last look at the maze. Another quake nearly floors them but Ariadne just laughs like it's an adventure. 'There's an Athenian ship in dock. I can play the distressed captive but can you be a convincing kidnapper?'

Crete gets smaller. Thesea's still holding up the Minotaur's head. The ships in port bear witness to the feat. The Minotaur's dead. The gods are no longer on Minos' side. The news will carry around the world on the tide.

Minos is a speck on the dock. Thesea can feel his eyes burning into her, even at this distance but he won't risk his darling girl. Ariadne's played her role so well that Thesea wonders at the upbringing necessitating that kind of skill.

Once they're safe on open sea, Thesea goes to the prow to be alone, cradling the Minotaur's head in her arms.



The sun's a red ball shrouded by fog. Thesea waits for Astaurius on the beach.

He'll come. Any day now.

She listens to news of Daedalus' escape and the nations refusing Minos' demands. He's forced into unwinnable wars on too many fronts.

Gulls' cries carry over the water. There's the lonely lap of waves. A figure walks up the shore towards her. He looks familiar.

'It's you,' he says.

Thesea takes up a fighting stance, sword in hand.

'Don't you know me?'

It's the fisherman's son, the one who used to plague her. She lowers the sword a fraction.

'I live up there, with my family. Remember?' He points to a house high on the cliff. 'These are for you.'

A generous gift of line and net. A loaf of bread. 'If you want to fish, come and ask. I needn't be the one to teach you. My mother or sisters can show you.'

When Thesea eventually knocks at the door it's his mother that answers. The promise holds true. The women cluck about her, teaching her to fish and forage, to cook delicacies in the embers of a fire.

She sits with his mother one evening, learning how to repair nets. She admires the older woman's dexterity.

'I was pregnant before I wed. By another man.'

Thesea looks up but her teacher's intent on her task.

'My husband knew. He was good to me. I came to love him very much. There's many who'd judge me, not knowing my story.' She sniffs. 'It's no one else's business. It's a hard thing bring up a child alone. How far gone are you?'

Thesea's startled. Her stomach only show's a slight fullness. She blushes.

**‘My boy didn’t eat for weeks after you were taken away. He’s loved you since he was a child. He loves you, no matter what.’**

**Thesea doesn’t want to listen. She feels like her reclaimed life is over without the Minotaur.**

**Astaurius, why don’t you come?**

**‘So that’s what happened. Come and kiss me goodnight.’**

**Helena comes first, still posturing and playing out the tale. Next, Astaurius, unusually tall and strong for his age. When they laid him on her belly she didn’t know if she was disappointed or relieved that he didn’t have horns and a tail.**

**‘Are you coming?’ her husband asks.**

**‘One minute. You go ahead.’ She tidies the platters away, folds up a pile of clothes.**

**When she’s sure she’ll be left alone she takes out a key. It unlocks the chest in the corner, which is hers alone. The Minotaur’s head looks up at her. She raises the lamp and light animates the liquid eyes. Daedalus’ work was a marvel built to last.**

**Her husband’s dozing. She blows out the lamp and lies down beside him. Her throat thickens and she tries to swallow the tears. He rolls over and a gentle hand wipes her face. She takes it and kisses it.**

**Her husband says, ‘I wonder what happened to Daedalus.’**

**Daedalus and Icarus. Flight is so much more certain with polyurethane resin than with wax.**

**The sun is dazzling. They soar.**