

# MINOTAUR BOY

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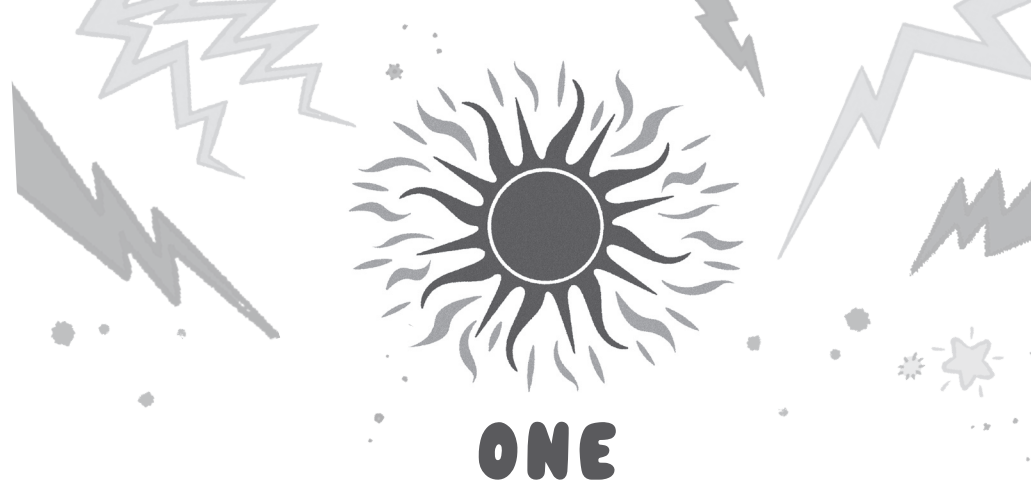
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**To every young reader  
who asks that I put  
them in my next book,  
this is for you**



**O**n a place both a million miles and a single step away from ours, the sun set behind a mountain so perfect that when a child draws one this is the very peak they imagine.

The liquid rim of the sun poured shimmering pink light through the valleys, infusing a calm lake whose only ripples came from the tiny tremor of insects skating across it and the gulping mouths of fish trying to catch them.

In the lush forest surrounding the lake, every tree was full of leaves and each branch heavy with ripe fruits and juicy berries. On the ground, a crimson butterfly drifted between flowers bursting with colour and overflowing with nectar.



Even the insect, its brain hardly bigger than a pinhead, understood that this place was quite perfect. Resting on a petal, it looked around to enjoy the beauty of this world only to be fried by a lightning bolt exploding on the forest floor.

Two figures sprinted through smoke and flaming debris.

A woman led the way, weaving and skipping through the dense forest, her swift steps measured and precise in the chaos. Dressed in a cloak, a golden aura clung to her and her eyes glowed like the first ray of morning sun.

She clutched to her chest a bundle wrapped in a shaggy goat-hair blanket, frayed and yellowed.

Crashing through the undergrowth behind her was a minotaur.

Part bull, his horns jutted from the sides of his head to turn sharply upwards at the ends. His legs were powerful, his chest and shoulders as hard as granite, and his beard thick from ears to neck. Aside from an unusually flat slab

of forehead, the face beneath that beard was human. His hands had fingers and his feet had toes. And this minotaur wore clothes. Trousers. A loose shirt.

He was as much man as he was beast. He was also the only minotaur in this world.

Now, anyone brought up on the many lies told about minotaurs might assume he was chasing the woman – and that she was running away. But no. As another flash and crack shattered the trees around them, he shielded her from the blizzard of debris.

They were in this together.

Her name was Pasiphae. His was Asterion. They had stolen something from the gods. And the gods wanted it back.

She jumped over a fallen tree. He smashed through it.

'That was too close!' Asterion shouted through the crackle of burning foliage.

'He missed on purpose,' said Pasiphae.

'He doesn't want to risk destroying something so precious.'

She pulled the bundle even tighter. It contained a power even greater than the gods chasing them.

Lightning struck the trees and ground, sparking fires that began to leap high all around them, black smoke spilling like ink across the sky.

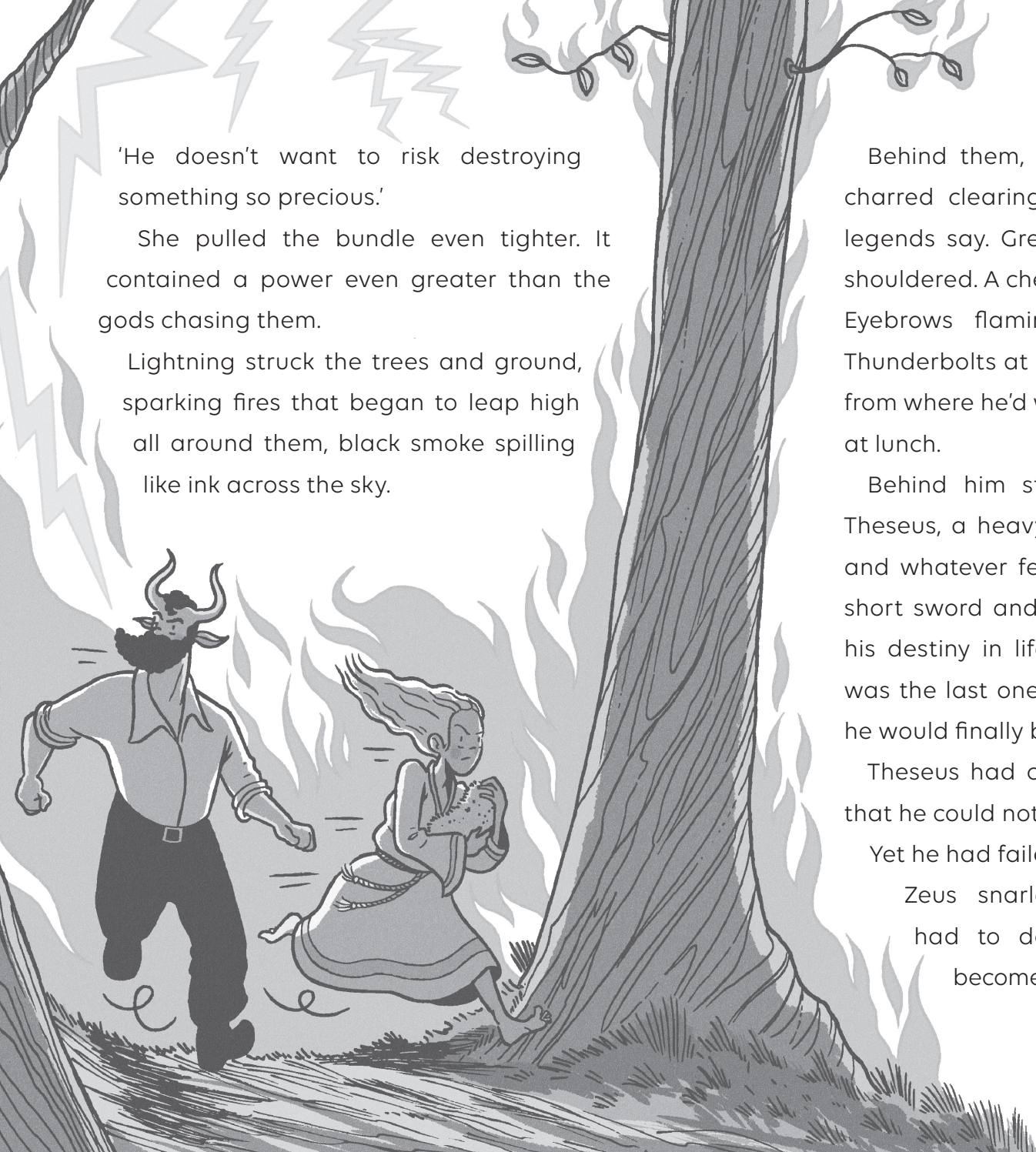
Behind them, the god Zeus stepped into the charred clearing. He was more or less as the legends say. Grey flowing hair. Bearded. Broad-shouldered. A chest like he'd swallowed a boulder. Eyebrows flaming. Eyes burning with anger. Thunderbolts at his command. A tunic with stains from where he'd wiped his chicken-stained fingers at lunch.

Behind him stood a young demigod called Theseus, a heavy golden helmet hiding his eyes and whatever fear he might have. He carried a short sword and a net of sparkling silver. It was his destiny in life to catch a minotaur. Asterion was the last one left. If he could hunt him down, he would finally become a full god.

Theseus had come up with a plan so brilliant that he could not fail.

Yet he had failed. Very badly.

Zeus snarled at him. 'Nephew, all you had to do was catch a minotaur and become another glorious tale to be told.'



His booming voice quaked in Theseus's ribcage. 'Gods slay beasts, that is how it has been since the dawn of eternity and always should be. I trained you. I prepared you. You let me down. And now I not only have to rescue you but also get back the priceless property *they* have stolen.'

The angered god of storms sent another thunderbolt to explode over the canopy of the trees, lighting them up enough that he could see where the branches were being disturbed by the fleeing Pasiphae and Asterion.

'There!' said Theseus, but Zeus was already charging ahead.

Deep in the forest, Pasiphae and Asterion were not just running from their hunters but *towards* something. They came to a halt in a small hollow, where the trees bent in towards each other like a canopy.

Crouching as she carefully held the bundle, Pasiphae ran her fingers along the roots of a tree, where they twisted and coiled to form a basin of

leaves, until she found what she was looking for.

'This *must* be it,' she said, hurriedly scooping away fallen leaves.

'Are you sure?' asked Asterion, watching for the hunting gods, his fists clenched tight, feet dug into the ground in readiness for what was to come.

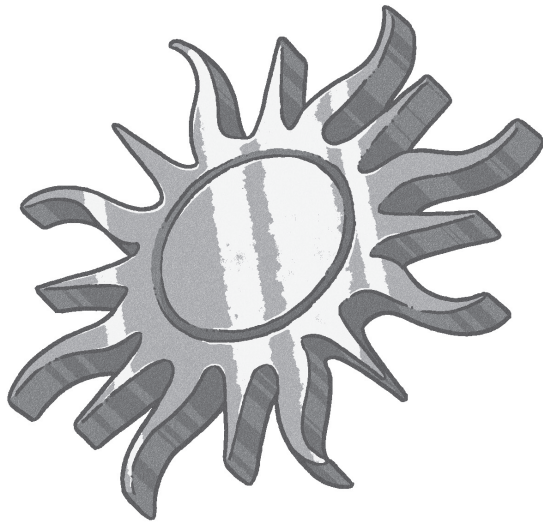
Pasiphae's digging exposed a thick root in which a small disc had been carved into the fleshy wood, six thin curling scratches radiating from it.

'It *has* to be,' she said.

The forest crackled with the energy of an approaching storm. Zeus and Theseus were very close.

Pasiphae placed the ragged blanket gently on the forest floor. A baby boy squirmed within. He gurgled and smiled, unbothered by the chaos all around him.

Rummaging in the blanket's folds, Pasiphae pulled free a medallion, a golden sun with filaments of flame curling from its edges. The same shape as the disc cut into the root.



With mumbled words of a prayer, or magic, she placed the medallion neatly into the indented wood. With a clockwise push, it moved like a lock on a safe. The bark moved too, swirling gently around the medallion with increasing speed until a whirlpool formed around it.

The air along the trunk stirred and shimmered, spreading up and then outwards until it made a shape as tall and wide as a human. A doorway.

Pasiphae lifted the boy from the ground.

'I wish I knew where this led to.' She sighed softly.

'To safety,' said Asterion. 'To a place where we won't be hunted. Where there are others like us. Where our child will be safe. That is all we know. And right now that is enough.'

Thunder rolled through the forest towards them, trees splintering with its force.

'You need to go,' said Asterion. 'I'll follow once I know you're both safe.'

He turned to face the oncoming storm, stamping at the ground, like a bull ready to charge. A crack of lightning lit his wide dark eyes.

Pasiphae pulled the blanket tight over the baby, took a deep breath and stepped into the rippling air. She felt a sucking sensation at her leg, as if stepping into a current that would pull them downstream to whatever lay on the other side.

Turning one last time, she saw lightning strike Asterion, long fizzing tendrils of electricity gripping the top of his horns as he writhed and fought its power.

Zeus arrived in a burst of thunder and lightning,

the ground at his feet smouldering under a rain of sparks. Behind him, Theseus appeared in the clearing, wielding the short blade and silver net.

Pasiphae hesitated, caught between saving herself and the child and not leaving Asterion to fight alone. She stepped back out of the portal, crouched to pull the medallion from the root and pushed it deep inside the blanket.

The portal glitched. She gave the baby boy a kiss on the forehead, whispering gentle words. 'Find your light.'

She placed the child into the portal and with every molecule flooding with sadness at being parted from her child, she released the baby into the rippling current of the closing portal.

He was gone. But he was safe.

Asterion finally pushed the lightning from his horns and, smoke rising from his singed hair, faced Theseus and Zeus. Striding to his side, Pasiphae's golden aura pulsed and erupted like a supernova.

If the baby had been able to remember

anything of this, his final memory would have been of his parents charging into a blazing storm of white-hot thunderbolts.





## TWO

**W**orldsend was a town as faded and crumbling as the run-down shops on its main street. On its western side was a vast dark lake crowded with islands, as if the land had been shredded and left in tatters. There were twelve of them – one, they said, for every month of the year.

To the east of the town were low lumpy mountains that were once mighty but had long ago been worn down by wind and ice and the tiredness even mountains feel when they get very old.

There was no other town for an hour in any direction. It was the kind of place someone would go if they didn't want to be found.



On this grey morning, following the night's heavy rain, and with a chill mist gnawing at his bones, a fruit seller came to open his shop that was next door to the long-closed market.

Stopping at the steps of the Old Market, he balanced a box of apples on his knee and held a half-eaten apple in his teeth while fishing in his pocket for his key. It was pure luck he didn't tread on the baby gurgling and wriggling on the step, wrapped in a soft, hairy blanket.

He lifted the boy and placed him on the apples to carry him into the warmth of the shop. A picture was taken and shared far and wide.

WHO IS THE APPLE BABY? asked the newspaper headlines.

There was a search, of course. The police called at every house, talked to everyone young and old, checked every CCTV camera and then checked them again. For a week at least the people of Worldsend talked about hardly anything else.

Yet no one stepped forward to shed light on how this baby had ended up on the steps of the market. It was as if he had arrived out of thin air.

So the boy was named Alex after the hospital he was taken to – Alexandra's. For a birthday they wrote down the date he was found.

A young couple offered to look after him and later adopted him. And while Alex grew up with a birthday that wasn't truly his, he had parents as real and loving as any.

Still, in the years that followed, every now and again he would be in a shop or sitting in school and he would hear someone whisper the words 'apple baby'. That was enough for him to want to

shrink into the background forever.

But we don't always get what we want. Which is why, twelve years later, Alex stared at his reflection in the golden brass bell of a trombone and wondered why today, of all days, he had to get a spot the size of Mars on his forehead.