

## **The Bull in the Garden**

*The strange man creeps forwards, muscles coiled in preparation to strike. He is at the end of the hallway. Asterion senses death and deceit as it flows off the man and floods the hallway with its stench. It mixes with another scent, warm and familiar to Asterion. It makes him remember a girl. The man is still far away; Asterion has time, so he closes his eyes and searches for the source of the memory.*

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Asterion was a clumsy young boy with bright, eager eyes. He toddled around the cavernous rooms of the palace he called home, staring curiously at the other people who lived there, sometimes reaching out a chubby hand to say hello. The other people would meet his gaze with an expression of disgust, often mixed with horror or confusion. The kids his age would run away in tears when he tried to play with them. Asterion learned quickly not to look at strangers.

Asterion never met his mother. He'd asked about her before. His father went very still and in a tone laden with venom muttered that she'd died when Asterion was born. The words drove like a spear through Asterion's heart, leaving the poison to fester there. He did not ask about his mother again.

The space left by Asterion's mother was soon filled by his sister. She was older than Asterion and she didn't find him scary like the other people in the palace did. When Asterion longed for a gentle touch she was there to hold him just as a mother would. She

would sing him songs about the fierce heroes of distant shores to help him fall asleep at night. She quickly became Asterion's best and only friend.

Asterion often stumbled and crashed into the countless treasures which his father collected. He fell palms first into shattered clay and left blood on the polished floors. Holding stinging hands to his chest he tried so hard to apologize. The words got stuck in his throat and then scrambled in his mouth until they tumbled out as a desperate *hhymssrrrr*. His father would yell, shouting that he didn't understand how Asterion could be so destructive. Surely you can try to speak, he would say. At least try to be a normal boy. Asterion didn't understand either, but he was pretty sure it was a different kind of not understanding than the kind his father was doing.

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*The strange man is closer now, but the memory remains. Asterion remembers the sea, a bursting garden, a perfectly ripe peach. He remembers a game played by children who didn't yet understand how the world would break them. The dream is so sweet that Asterion doesn't want to open his eyes just yet.*

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Asterion's father had poisonous eyes. If he looked at them his father would yell and hit him. To escape his anger Asterion would go to the garden. There were trees that overflowed with the tastiest peaches and baskets laden with fragrant flowers. A great marble bull leaped over nothing in the center of the courtyard. Asterion wanted to ask it what it was jumping over, but he was pulled away by his sister, who was holding up a

pair of gleaming bronze swords that were really just dull sticks. Today they played Heroes. The fountain in the courtyard was the ocean and the marble bull was the great sea monster that must be defeated. They played joyously for hours and hours. Asterion cannot smile, but he always thought this is what a smile would feel like.

As the bugs began to sing their twilight tune and the sun settled in the horizon they collapsed in the grass under the blossoming peach trees. His sister had far away eyes, and after a moment she whispered her wish into the evening air. A Prince will come for me one day, she murmured. He'll be strong, a *real* hero. The kind that kills monsters. He'll take me away and make me his Princess. She looked so happy. Asterion wished she was happier here. He wished they could brandish sticks at pretend enemies forever.

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*Asterion smells his sister on the man. He is confused. Was this man sent here by his sister to rescue him from the hallways? Or did she- no, that can't be right. His lovely sister, who sang to him about the stars and played with him in the garden, would never do anything that would hurt him. The man's face, now visible in the dim light, is twisted in a terrifyingly murderous grin. Asterion wants to cry, or scream, or beg, but no sounds come out. Instead he is trapped with the memories of a life stolen from him.*

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The years passed slowly. Asterion and his sister grew older. Instead of playing, his sister would spend her time weaving in the palace. One day she showed Asterion her art. She had woven a lush mountain draped in moss and dotted with leopards and snakes. A

crown of stars framed a woman dancing with a shimmering figure atop the peak. Asterion loved it. He hoped his sister would dance among those stars with her Prince someday. She looked at him with glowing eyes and asked what he thought. There were a million things he wanted to say, but Asterion could not speak. The words simply wouldn't come out. *Aggrhhh*, he tried. Her eyes dimmed and she walked away. Asterion couldn't shake the feeling that he had done something wrong.

That evening Asterion sat alone in the garden watching a beetle lose a doomed battle against a raven. The trees no longer bore sweet peaches and the flower boxes, once bursting with a thousand blooms that filled the air with perfume, had withered in the absence of the summer heat. The bull in the courtyard remained proudly leaping over empty air, white marble silhouetted brilliantly against a gradually darkening sky. His sister was still inside. It had been so long since they had played. He wanted to play again, but his sister was different now. It seemed as though she understood Asterion less and less each day.

The sound of heavy footsteps reverberated through the otherwise quiet courtyard. Asterion looked up and saw his father standing over him. He stared at Asterion with a strange expression on his face: anger, Asterion assumed. But no, it was something more like... triumph? Asterion did not have time to be confused before a gauntlet came down on his neck from behind and he buckled at the waist.

His father said, you're the reason your mother died in that bed. A pair of guards began to wrap heavy chains around Asterion's arms and torso. He didn't struggle, didn't speak. His father hurled boulders and spears that reeked like beer at Asterion, but still

Asterion did not speak. He didn't he didn't he didn't. He couldn't even if he tried. His father told Asterion, it should have been you. You and your silence, your wrongness, your *monstrousness*. His sister appeared behind his father. Asterion looked at her with pleading eyes. She turned away, silent. Before Asterion could feel the betrayal a heavy club was brought upon his head, sending the world into blissfully silent darkness.

Asterion awoke in a hallway. He felt sore and tired, but curiosity forced him to stand and explore. He found hallway after hallway, seemingly never ending, with not another soul in sight. He began to run, desperate to find the garden again. His sister was there. She could help him. He ran and ran but all he found were hallways, one after the other, forever.

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*The man is directly in front of him now. He closes his hands around Asterion's throat and it's too late. Asterion thinks of his sister and feels a familiar hurt from years long past. He feels so alone, and so betrayed. This is the man his sister was dreaming about, all those years ago in the garden. This is the hero who will kill the horrible monsters, the prince who will whisk her away from the palace. Away from Asterion.*

*The hands grip tighter but Asterion cannot speak, cannot beg. He falls to the floor without a fight. Is this my punishment, he thinks, for being so monstrous? In a world of men and bulls, why was there never room for someone who is both?*

*The visitor tightens his grip and Asterion sees in his eyes death.*

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A bull leaps over nothing in the grand garden of the Palace of Minos. Below it stands a foreign Prince with bloodied hands and a girl with tears in her eyes. Ariadne looks out at the people of her home one final time, unable to cheer with them as they celebrate. Theseus smiles proudly at the crowd, hoisting his trophy high for all to see.

“Rejoice, all, for the dreadful monster has been vanquished!” he proclaims, grinning as red blood drips from the sugar-white fur of the minotaur’s mangled corpse.