

Lida Dijkstra, *Het beest met de kracht van tien paarden* ('The Beast with the Strength of Ten Horses') 1/4  
Luitingh-Sijthoff, 2019  
165 pp.  
Translated by Emma Rault ([emmarault@gmail.com](mailto:emmarault@gmail.com))

## PREDECESSORS

This lower floor felt cooler than the previous one, which was not unpleasant. I noticed that there were more drawings on the wall here. Not those huge tableaux that told a story, but colored borders with flowers, dolphins, little axes or meanders—some angular, some wavy like the sea. It occurred to me that anyone who went to the trouble of decorating these walls must be looking at them all the time. They had to be living, eating and sleeping nearby.

I pointed, and with a slight nod Aristos indicated that he understood me. There was no doubt about it—we were headed straight toward the Minotaur's living quarters. Weirdly, it was starting to smell different too. The heavy smell of wet soil and rot gave way to a different scent: fresh, like herbs, lightly perfumed. The scent of a tidy living room.

A left turn. A long, straight hallway. Another left turn. A long hallway. A right turn. Hallway. Right. Hallway. We zigzagged to the center of the labyrinth, only to find ourselves in a large, circular room with a domed ceiling, higher than the hallways we'd seen up until then. Almost like a throne room. The room was suffused with a soft light—I couldn't tell where it was coming from. Our attention was drawn to some figures along the walls.

'Are those statues?' Petra asked.

We walked up to the nearest one. And then we discovered the horrible truth. Along the wall of the bright, round room, on a series of low pedestals there was a row of skeletons, standing bolt upright like sentries. Some were short, others were taller. One held a spear in his hand, another was carrying a tray with a bowl. I saw a skeleton that was holding a coat rack with

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coats hanging on it. Others were holding up scrolls or torches. Their bones had been joined together in the exactly the right places, with the greatest possible precision, using iron wire. Like jigsaw puzzles, or like the components of the model ships that old sailors spent the winter cobbling together with their worn hands. We were eye to eye with dead people who had become pieces of furniture. Karsten wanted to say something, but ended up making a retching noise and ran away, tripping on his long women's dress. We heard the sickening sound of him throwing up the contents of his stomach and, worse, we smelled it. I cursed King Minos who, consumed by the longing to avenge his son Androgeos, had forced my father into the absurd agreement that he would let fourteen young people loose in this labyrinth every nine years.

Two groups had preceded us. Twenty-eight young people. Innocent girls like Chloe, funny troublemakers like Demis.

'Were these real people?' asked Sofia in a tiny voice—off she went again...

Mak didn't sugarcoat it. Holding the torch high above his head, he walked from one skeleton to the next and said: 'Meet our predecessors.'

We stared at them. Their empty eye sockets stared back. (*Do you guys seriously think you're going to make it? That's what we thought, too. We had smarts too, strength, speed. And look at us now...*)

My heart was pounding so hard in my chest that it hurt. Anger and panic erupted around me. I think we only now began to understand just how deeply we were in trouble and how terribly this expedition could end. Demis howled like a wounded animal. Stefanos dropped down to his haunches and rocked back and forth, cradling his head in his hands. Xander punched the rock wall with both his fists, until Ilana grabbed hold of his bloody knuckles and gently talked

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him out of it. 'You're no use to us if you're hurt,' I heard her say. 'The best and greatest of all triumphs is the one you achieve over yourself.'

It took a long time before everyone had regained their composure. After Rodante had managed to calm Sofia down somewhat we started plotting our next move. Waiting around here didn't seem like a good idea. It looked like the Minotaur came here often.

'But I don't understand,' Sofia whined. 'Is this the Minotaur's work? Surely monsters don't paint or do crafts?'

'This one does,' said Jorgos, pointing out a skeleton that was holding a painter's palette and a jar filled with brushes.

'We have to get out of here,' Xander urged. 'We have to find him, ambush him from behind and kill him. The sooner the better.'

Stab him in the back? Did I want to do that? I wondered. Could I do that, as a man of honor? Even on the battlefield there were rules.

When I said that to Xander, he replied 'To hell with honor. We have to do everything in our power to take him out. And if playing dirty is the best way...' He grabbed my shoulders and said forcefully: 'Survival, Theseus, that's what it's about. That agreement with Minos has hung over Athens like a curse far too long. Minos lost his son, but aren't we all sons and daughters? My mother was so crazed with grief when I had to leave that she shaved all her hair off, did you know that? And I'm sure *your* father wasn't happy when you announced you wanted to come on the ship. Am I right?'

I thought about it. My father and I... that was complicated. We weren't very close because he hadn't been around when I was growing up. We didn't know each other that well. I

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think he was more relieved than sad when I'd offered to come on the ship. He'd made a half-hearted protest. He needed a hero in that moment. And that hero having been his son would go down well in the history books.

We had a choice of three ways out of the domed room. Aristos seemed confused for a moment.

Rodante glanced down each hallway and called out to us that we had to take the left one.

'Why?' we demanded.

She pointed at a fresco at eye level. 'The story shows the way, you see? Look, this is where Minos goes to visit King Aegeus to ask for a sacrifice every nine years.'

Most of the others nodded—they knew the story. That's how we had gotten into this mess in the first place, wasn't it?

I read the word *Αἰγέως*. My throat went dry. Aegeus was my father. The story came frighteningly close now. Was I about to find myself painted on this wall, a little further along? Surely not... Surely history couldn't catch up with reality that quickly? Or were the past, the present and the future already written, in the thread that the Moirae spun, measured and cut?

In this musty warren of hallways I was slowly losing my sense of what was real or imagined, natural or supernatural, sane or crazy. I felt like one of the players in a Greek drama. A puppet at the mercy of kings and gods, who didn't do what he wanted—who didn't even *know* what he wanted—so did whatever was expected of him.