Lovereading4kids.co.uk

Helping you choose books for children

0-5 5-7 7-9 9-12 12+

Opening extract from

Shadow of the Minotaur

Written by

Alan Gibbons

Published by

Orion

All text is copyright of the author and illustrator

Please print off and read at your leisure.

1

The first of the beast's roars almost tore the flesh from his bones. The second, a nerve-splitting bellow that crashed inside his brain, very nearly made him give in before he'd even begun his challenge. He glanced back at the hatch in the door through which he'd just walked and saw the reassuring smile of the dark-eyed girl on the other side. Mustering his own thin smile, he knelt down and picked up the things he'd dropped, a sword with a finely-wrought handle and a ball of strong, thick string.

'You can do this,' he told himself. 'You really can do this.'

But he hadn't convinced his body he could do it. His first attempt at tying the string to the door failed. He was so nervous his fingers just wouldn't work. It was like wearing mittens and trying to knot raw sausages. Taking a deep, shuddering breath he finally managed to pass the string through the hatch and secure it to one of the little bars in the opening. Weighing the sword uncertainly in his hand and letting the string play out behind him, he took his first faltering steps down the dark passageway. The blackness clung to him, trying to crawl inside his skin. The maze of tunnels was everything he'd been expecting – and more. They had the mystery of night, the terror of loneliness. They lay deep beneath the earth, where the sun never shone and the fresh wind never blew, and the silence there was heavy. The air was clogged with a choking animal musk. The walls of the tunnel by the entrance were smooth and regular, built from huge blocks of stone. But as he penetrated deeper into the gloom, he noticed a change. The walls were worn and they were slippery with something thick

and slimy. Blood maybe. He flinched then walked on, his feet thudding dully in the cold, still air. Those echoing footsteps shook the close, uncomfortable blackness that clutched at him like a hand. No more than fifty paces from the door the tunnel branched in half a dozen different directions.

He moved forward, unrolling the ball of thread as he went, and stopped. He was still considering his options when he heard the beast again. This time the sound was a low, throaty growl. It was closer, and moving purposefully towards him.

'It's stalking me.'

In the darkness he stumbled and reached out to steady himself. The moment his hand came into contact with the cold stone surface, he recoiled in horror. It was blood all right. There was no mistaking its greasy slide. The walls were slippery with the stuff. The stone floor too. That wasn't all; there were splintered bones, matted hair, gobbets of torn flesh. The tunnels were a slaughterhouse.

'Ugh!'

He immediately wished he hadn't given in so readily to his feeling of disgust. His voice resounded loudly through the tunnels, inviting the beast to attack.

'Now it knows,' he murmured. 'It knows where I am.'

As if to confirm the fact, the beast bellowed through the passageways, mad with rage and hunger. This time the noise was so loud and so shattering that everything around him seemed on the verge of coming apart. The dust began to fall in fine spirals from the ceiling. It was out there in the darkness, snorting and panting, preparing to charge.

'What are you waiting for? Why don't you just do it?'

His breath was coming in troubled gasps. He gripped the sword tightly and edged forward. That's when he noticed a change in the lighting of the tunnel. A shaft of hazy light slanted onto him from above. He looked up and saw a face gazing down at him, the sympathetic face of the girl who had handed him the sword and the ball of string.

'The beast is coming,' she said.

'I know.'

He felt the urge to crouch down, his arms wrapped round himself in a feeble attempt at protection. Now the blackness had a voice.

'Keep down,' it was saying. 'Be small, boy.'

He needed little encouragement. He would have crawled inside himself if that was possible.

But forward he went. And still he played out the thread, marking his route back to the door. Whatever else, he knew he had to hold on to the ball of string. It was his lifeline.

'Where are you?' he whispered under his breath, but there was no answer. The beast wasn't about to give itself away that easily.

Several minutes passed and in that time the beast didn't so much as take a heavy breath. It knew its game, and the game was cat and mouse.

He passed on glancing first ahead, then behind, unsure from which direction the onslaught would come. And the deeper he went into the tunnels the more confused he became. The blackness was tickling his skin, teasing him. Or was that just fear? Where was he? Had he started his approach from the left or the right? Was he moving towards the entrance or away from it? Every one of the passages had the same stone construction and every one of them was worn. Perhaps by the beast, rubbing its horns, or its brawny shoulders against the slippery walls. On he went, bits of bone occasionally crunching under his feet. Once he even kicked a skull, sending it rolling ahead of him. He imagined the bleached, gaping grin and the eye sockets looking up at him, staring their darkness into his soul and sending a rush of fright down his spine.

'Come on,' he hissed. 'Show yourself, for goodness' sake.'

But the sound just hung in the heavy black void, then died away. Savage and untamed as it was, the beast was no dumb animal. It was part-human, and its thinking half was proving both wily and calculating.

It was a dangerous thing, this monster that thought.

'Where are you?'

Leaving the stinking closeness of one of the smaller tunnels,

he found himself at a junction in the maze. Then, as he looked around, his heart lurched. He had just tripped over the thread that marked his own path. The string lay criss-crossed over itself.

'I'm going round in circles,' he said in dismay, and his voice rebounded in the chill tunnels. He peered into each of the passageways that led off from the junction. Ignoring the one where the thread lay accusingly on the floor, he made his way down a second tunnel. This one sloped gradually downward.

It was getting colder and the stone floor was oily with puddles of foul water. Dimly shining globs of something unspeakable floated on their dull surfaces. Touching the walls earlier had turned his stomach. He had no intention of making the same mistake with the floor.

Something stirred. A rat? He had never dreamed that he would ever wish for a rat, but just then he would have taken a hundred of the things, rather than the lumbering form waiting for him in the darkness. Hooves scraped on the floor. The sound was made by something big and powerful. This was no rat.

Then he heard the breathing. Slow and steady, calculated and unhurried, a predator's breathing. It had hunted before, yes, and killed too. The thought made his legs weak and rubbery. He turned a corner and found himself at yet another junction, from which more passageways spread like the spokes of a wheel.

'This could go on forever.'

Perhaps the beast shared his feeling that the pursuit had gone on long enough, because it chose that moment to make its move. There was a scraping sound in the gloom, the loudest yet.

He spun round. Framed in the half-light of one opening, the beast was pawing the ground.

'I'm not scared.'

It wasn't true. What's more, the beast knew. His quavering voice settled on the air, painting a picture of his mounting fear. He was clutching the sword's hilt the way a drowning man

clings to a piece of driftwood. For comfort. For survival. And, for the first time, he felt its weight. It made his arm shake. His strength was draining away. He tried to grip the hilt with both hands, steadying his weapon.

'Come on then, what are you waiting for?'

But still the beast stood in the archway, pawing at the floor. It was bigger than a man. It stood almost three metres tall and was massively built with slabs of muscle on its chest and shoulders. Below the waist it was bull-like. It had a swinging tail and mud-splattered hooves. Or was it mud? Above the waist it was a man except, that is, for the head. And what a head! The muzzle was huge and when it opened it revealed the sharp, curved teeth, not of a bull but of a big cat. They were the fangs of a lion or tiger, made for ripping flesh. Its eyes were yellow and blazed unflinchingly through the murk. Then there were the great horns, glinting and sharp, curving from its monstrous brow. Thick and muscular as the neck was, it seemed barely able to support such a fearsome head, and strained visibly under the impossible weight.

'Oh my—'

The beast stepped out from the tunnel, and the boy actually took a few steps back. It was as if his soul had crept out of his body and was tugging at him, begging him to get away. In the sparse light shed from the gratings in the ceiling, the beast looked even more hideous. There was the sweat for a start, standing out in gleaming beads on that enormous neck and shoulders.

But that wasn't all. The creature was smeared from head to foot with filth and dried blood. It was every inch a killer. The beast began to stamp forward, its hooves clashing on the stone floor. It raised its head, the horns scraping on the ceiling, and gave a bellow that seemed to crush the air.

'I can't do this . . .'

He fell back, scrambling over obstacles on the floor, and fled. That's when he realized he'd dropped the ball of string. His lifeline had gone.

'Oh no!'

The beast was charging head down.

Got to get out of here!

In his mind's eye, he could see himself impaled on the points of those evil-looking horns, his legs pedalling feebly in the air, his head snapped back, his eyes growing pale and lifeless.

Suddenly, he was running for his life, skidding on the slimy floor.

'Help me!'

He saw the startled brown eyes of the girl above the grating.

'Don't run!' she cried. 'Fight. You must fight.'

He was almost dying of shame. This wasn't supposed to happen. He wasn't meant to lose and there weren't meant to be witnesses to his defeat.

'Fight,' she repeated. 'It's the way of things.'

The way of things. That's right, he was meant to stand and fight. It was in his nature as a hero. But he couldn't. Not against *that.*

'Please,' he begged, turning his face away from the girl in shame, 'somebody help me.'

The beast was careering through the tunnels, crashing, bellowing thundering through the maze. Its charge was hot, furious, unstoppable. It was almost on him.

Get me out of here!

'That's it,' he cried, throwing down his sword, 'I've had enough. Game over!'

2

Ripping off the mask and gloves, Phoenix bent double gulping down air like it had been rationed. The dank half-light of the tunnels was replaced by the welcome glow from an Anglepoise lamp in his father's study. He glanced at the score bracelet on his wrist. It registered total defeat: **000000**. For a few moments everything was spinning, the claws of the game digging into the flesh of the here and now. Then his surroundings became reassuringly familiar.

He was out.

*It **was** a game!*

'Well?' his dad asked, 'What do you think?'

'Mind-blowing,' Phoenix panted. 'It was all so real. It was like another world. I mean, I *was* Theseus. I went into the palace of the tyrant-king Minos. I could actually touch the stone columns, feel the heat of the braziers, smell the incense.'

He knew he was gushing, babbling like a little kid, but he didn't care. 'The king's daughter Ariadne helped me and she wasn't just an image on a screen. She was a real girl. Then I actually came face to face with the Minotaur. It was really happening. I believed it.' He shivered. 'Still do.'

'Oh, I could tell how convincing it was,' said Dad, enjoying the mixture of excitement and fear in his son's voice. 'You were screaming your silly head off by the end. I bet your mother thought I was killing you in here.'

Phoenix blushed then, beginning to control his breathing at last, he picked up the mask and gloves and traced the attached wires back to the computer where images of the labyrinth were still flashing away on the screen.

'It really was just a game?'

Dad pushed his seat back and gave a superior smile.

'That's all. Just a very sophisticated piece of software, hooked up to an even more sophisticated piece of hardware.'

Scared as he had been, Phoenix didn't want it to be a game. He wanted it to be real. Real and vibrant as the old legends had always seemed to him. He fingered the soft texture of the amazing gloves and mask that had created the illusion. 'And you get to play with all this great stuff for a living?'

'I certainly do. And there's a lot more to come. To quote my boss, Mr Glen Reede: *This is only stage one in the development of the ultimate game.*'

Phoenix stared at the screen and the figure of the Minotaur. Is that what he'd been afraid of? That ridiculous cartoon-strip monster blinking on the screen.

'Maybe now you'll quit complaining about moving to Brownleigh.'

That was asking a bit much. When Dad gave up his job at Compu-soft and accepted the lucrative offer from Magna-com, he'd fulfilled a lifelong dream. Only it was *his* lifelong dream. Phoenix and his mother had hated moving out of London, away from family and friends, especially when it meant re-settling in a one-eyed backwater halfway between Dullsville and Nowhere. Life's the game, thought Phoenix, a boring game of patience.

'We could have stayed in London,' Phoenix argued. 'After all, you're working from home. What was wrong with the house we had?'

'Where do you want to start?' Dad asked. 'The noise, the pollution, the rat race, the crime.'

Phoenix shook his head. The city had got Dad down, but he could keep his peace and quiet.

Brownleigh was a dump. No cinema, no sports centre, no railway station. There was nothing at all to do, and when it came to escaping the boredom, the buses to the nearest big town stopped at 10 o'clock. Phoenix was still trying to work out what people did round here. Maybe they took a chair out

onto the pavement so they could watch the traffic lights change!

He'd gone from a city that never sleeps to a town that never wakes up. That was why he couldn't forgive his dad. London was what Phoenix craved – something big and important – and Dad had taken him away from it. Dad hadn't just pulled out of the rat race, he'd just about pulled out of life.

'Anyway,' said Dad, unplugging the mask and gloves from the phone socket in the PC, 'We're here now so you'd better make the best of it.'

Phoenix watched Dad carefully wrapping the experimental game equipment.

'There is something I don't understand,' he said.

'And that is?'

'You've produced this game so quickly. I thought it took months to get something like this off the ground, years even.'

'It does,' Dad agreed, 'with the usual technology. But this is several steps beyond the norm. Half the work's been done for me already. *More* than half. The company has developed a basic computer environment. It's so flexible that you can program in each new story line for a game in weeks. I take the story line lines your mum comes up with and, with a bit of help from me, the software just seems to grow into it.'

Phoenix frowned at the mention of Mum's story lines. Mum and Phoenix were two of a kind. They both had dreams, they both had a sense of destiny. Her dream was to be a writer – any kind of writer. She'd been trying forever to get published. First a romantic novel, then some poems, finally a short story competition, but she never got anywhere. She actually kept the rejection slips, as if they were some sort of stepping stone to success! Writing was just another disappointment, along with Brownleigh – and Dad.

Dad had no idea what was going on in Phoenix's head, and carried on regardless. 'I don't even need to come up with half the graphics. The images have already been stored in the computer's memory. I'm little more than a scene-shifter. I bring ready-made images and story lines into focus. Money for

old rope, really. Glen Reede's the one who created this, he's the genius. I tell you, when this comes out at the end of next month, Reede's going to change the face of computer games.'

'Did you say the end of next month?'

'That's right,' said Dad. 'The advertising and marketing is already done. That's why I'm working all the hours God sends. It's one heck of a deadline, but Reede will make sure it's met. You can bet your bottom dollar on it. He's a giant. I just can't understand why I haven't come across his name before. No articles in *Computers and Computing*, no reputation to speak of. I'm guessing he's American, but there's no biog. on the Internet. He's come out of nowhere. Still, who cares so long as he's ready to have me on board.'

Phoenix smiled as Dad locked the game gear away. There was something very odd about Dad of all people creating games about heroes. Anybody less like a hero would be hard to imagine. He looked like the original computer geek, complete with untidy red hair, patchy, unkempt beard, corduroy trousers and a lumberjack shirt that strained to contain his thickening waist. There had been a time, in his early twenties, when he'd been a promising tennis player, but that seemed an awfully long time ago. Phoenix wasn't sure whether the old man tried to look like a nerd, or whether it just came naturally. Whatever his intentions, he managed to drive Mum mad with his eccentric, slobbish behaviour. He could have featured in a sitcom – Dads Behaving Madly. But he must have something going for him. He'd been head-hunted by this Glen Reede character, the multi-millionaire boss of Magna-com who had offered him a small fortune to join the company as a creator of mass-market computer games.

They'd done up the cottage with the 'golden hello' Dad had got from Magna-com.

That's it. He was a computer hero!

'So tell me,' Dad continued, 'as a fourteen-year old, you're a member of our target audience. Will it sell?'

'Sell! It'll go like hot cakes. A game you can actually get into—'

'Hey, that'd make a good advertising line: *The computer game you can **really** get into.*' Dad scribbled it down on a spiral-bound notepad. 'What about the mask and the gloves? Not too sweaty?'

'Not at all,' Phoenix replied. 'They're dead comfortable. The material is really soft. It's almost like a second skin.'

'That's the idea,' Dad explained. 'It's got to be comfortable and easy to get on and off, or the kids will think it's just too much trouble and stick with their old games.'

'Not much chance of that,' said Phoenix, still unable to take his eyes off the monitor screen. 'I mean, it felt like I was really moving around. The graphics were amazing.'

'As good as reality?'

'Better.' Phoenix blushed as he realized what he had said. 'You know, it's true. Stories can be better than real life.' He paused then, unable to resist the temptation to have a dig. 'Especially when real life means Brownleigh.'

Dad ignored the last remark. 'I'm not sure all kids are like you, mind. How many teenagers have their noses in a book of Greek myths half the evening? But a computer game on the other hand – this time they won't have their *noses* in a book, they'll have their whole selves in the story. That's what's been wrong with all these computer games so far. No matter how good the graphics are, you always know that you're in a game. But if you can convince your player that he is actually inside it, *living it*, then you're onto a winner.'

'I guess so,' said Phoenix, wilting slightly under Dad's tidal wave of enthusiasm. 'But it's got to be as good as the one I've just played. It's got to be a match for the real world.'

'Exactly,' Dad interrupted. 'Not so much virtual reality as *parallel reality*. That's what I'm doing now, getting rid of any fuzziness, any sense that this is an electronic entertainment. You can't get most kids off their Playstations now. But when this comes out, forget life. Everybody will have one in their living room. The game will be everything. In six weeks it will be a household name. It'll make us a fortune.'

'You're right there,' said Phoenix. 'It's an amazing

experience. I didn't just *see* the labyrinth, I was there. I could feel it, I could smell it. That's what made it so scary. How did you do that?'

Dad scratched his chin.

'To tell you the truth, I don't really know. You've got to remember, I'm only one part of a team. I play with the jigsaw. Other people provide most of the pieces.'

'Funny sort of team if you never get together,' said Phoenix. 'You've really never met anybody else from the company?'

'No, I haven't,' said Dad. 'Reede contracts everything out to people like me working from home. Maybe he doesn't want anybody getting a complete picture of the game. Whatever his reasons, I've only been given the top two levels, nine and ten, to do. I don't even know the names of the people doing the lower levels. It doesn't really matter. I just take the story lines, match them with the animated action I get and send them in. Magna-com does the rest, and does it at astonishing speed. These Greek myths seemed as good a place to start as any.'

They certainly were for Mum and Phoenix, who prided themselves on their Greek roots. Most of their relatives had settled in London, but they still exchanged Christmas cards with the odd uncle or aunt on some Aegean island. That was something else Dad had taken them away from when they left the capital – their past.

'Great plots, great monsters, great heroes,' Dad ran on, 'and in you and your mum I've got a couple of experts around if I need to pick anybody's brains. As for this feel-around technology, I don't know how Reede does it myself.'

Mum popped her head round the door. 'Are you two ready for something to eat? You've been stuck in here for two hours already.'

Phoenix glanced outside. It was true. Dusk was gathering over the ancient yew trees at the end of the lane. It was something he'd noticed about a good computer game. It seemed to be able to pull time out of shape, mould it and remake it the way a potter does a vase on the wheel. It could turn hours into minutes and minutes into hours. Phoenix

had been known to spend a whole day at the screen, even begrudging the time spent on meals. Like most kids, he'd perfected the *just-five-more-minutes* routine. As he got up from his chair, he found himself thinking how grateful he was that he'd taken after Mum when it came to looks. In sharp contrast to his red-haired, pear-shaped dad, she was tall, slim and dark.

Mediterranean-gorgeous, as one of his mates back in London used to say.

'Aren't you shutting down?' Mum asked.

'No need,' said Dad. 'I'll eat and come straight back on. Deadlines, Christina.'

'Oh, you're not going to be on it all night, are you?' asked Mum.

Dad shrugged.

'One of these days,' she said, leading the way into the kitchen. 'We'll have a life. Work, work, work, that's all you care about. Go on, shut down. Just for an hour.'

Dad gave way. As he shut down the screen was filled with a sequence of numbers.

'What's all that?' asked Phoenix. It intrigued him, like the first part of a puzzle. 'There's nothing wrong, is there?'

'Beats me,' Dad admitted. 'Some sort of encrypted message, though you'd have to be an expert to crack it. One of Glen Reede's little secrets.'

But wasn't Dad an expert? Phoenix frowned. Here was something he didn't understand and he was willing to just gloss over it.

'So, what about the characters?' Dad asked over the kitchen table a few minutes later. 'Do they work?'

'Yes, I think so,' said Phoenix. It was hard to take him seriously with strands of cheese sauce dangling from his beard. 'But I've only played one episode of the legend, remember. Theseus is right. And Princess Ariadne, she makes Lara Croft look like a bag lady!'

'Oh, by the way, Reede has just released the title—'

'*The Legendeer*,' Mum said absent-mindedly, her eyes on the road outside and her mind a world away.

'Now how did you know that?' gasped Dad.

Mum started, as if wrenched out of a magical dreamtime.

'I've no idea,' she said, troubled by her own intuition. 'You must have mentioned it sometime.'

'No, that's impossible. It was embargoed. I—'

'Oh, does it matter?' snapped Mum.

They exchanged hostile glares. For some reason it mattered a lot.

'Anyway,' Phoenix interrupted in an effort to prevent a row. '*The Legendeer* is great. You were lucky getting the Theseus and Perseus levels to do.'

'Why's that?'

'Well, they're both boy heroes, about my age. I reckon they'll appeal to that target audience you're always going on about, teenagers.'

Dad frowned. 'Boy heroes, eh? You don't think they look a bit too old, do you?'

Mum smiled. 'It's a bit late to think of it now. Honestly, they put you in charge of developing the story line for the game, and you don't even read the source books properly. You're such a philistine, John.'

'Oh, come off it,' Dad retorted, 'It's a computer game, not a novel. I skip all the boring stuff.'

Mum raised her eyes. 'Boring stuff indeed! This is my Greek heritage you're talking about; truths that speak to me down a hundred generations. These are some of the greatest stories ever told. They're about reaching manhood, about young men growing up and proving themselves, surviving in a hostile world. They're about great friendship and crushing betrayal—'

Noticing the look of amusement on Dad's face, she faltered. He never seemed to take her seriously. Not her writing, not her ancestry. Maybe that's what she resented so much. She believed in the magic and mystery of things, the spaces between what could be explained, whereas Dad reduced everything to a series of provable facts.

'Besides,' she said abruptly. 'They've got two of the best

monsters in the business, Medusa and the Minotaur. That's what got you hooked in the first place.'

'I'll make a few adjustments then,' said Dad. 'I take it you won't mind being my guinea pig, Phoenix. You'll be prepared to play both levels as we make the finishing touches?'

'Are you kidding?' cried Phoenix. 'I'd love it.'

That's when he remembered the yellow eyes of the Minotaur and its ferocious roar. He'd love it all right, just so long as it didn't get *too* real.