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Praise for *Ariadne*:

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Waterstones.com

'Saint's immersive novel thrusts the reader straight into the heart of Greek mythology with this wonderful reimagining of the story of Ariadne.'

iPaper

'In a world ruled by temperamental, petulant gods, Ariadne is a shining beacon of female strength and courage – making this a story that's impossible to forget.'

Culturefly

'Saint expertly highlights how often the women of this world pay the price for the actions of the men around them. Lovers of mythology should snap this up.'

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'Jennifer Saint's *Ariadne* is a shimmering tapestry of two sisters bound by deceit and the shadows of family history. . . With a fresh voice and keen insight, Saint adds flesh and bone to an ancient myth, drawing the reader into an uneasy world of ever-afters.'

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'An ancient story of love and sisterhood reimagined, Jennifer Saint's *Ariadne* is a truly masterful debut – compulsive, absorbing and lyrical. Saint breathes new life into the forgotten women of Greek mythology with a novel that's both incredibly absorbing and full of heart.'

Katie Lowe, author of *The Furies*

ARIADNE

JENNIFER
SAINT



1

I am Ariadne, Princess of Crete, though my story takes us a long way from the rocky shores of my home. My father, Minos, liked to tell me that story of how his unimpeachable moral conduct won him Megara, the subservience of Athens and the chance to set a shining example of his impeccable judgement.

Stories told that, at the moment of her drowning, Scylla was transformed into a seabird. Far from giving her release from her cruel fate, she was immediately set upon in an endless chase by the crimson-streaked eagle bent upon eternal vengeance. I could well believe the truth of it, for the gods did enjoy a prolonged spectacle of pain.

But when I thought of Scylla, I thought of the foolish and all too human girl, gasping for breath amidst the froth of waves churning in the wake of my father's boat. I saw her weighed down in the tumultuous water not just by the iron chains in which my father had bound her but also by the terrible truth that she had sacrificed everything she knew for a love as ephemeral and transient as the rainbows that glimmered through the sea spray.

My father's bloody travails were not limited to Scylla or Nisus, I know. He exacted a terrible price for peace from Athens. Zeus, the all-powerful and ferocious ruler of the gods, enjoyed strength in mortals and granted his favoured Minos the boon of a terrible plague that rolled across Athens in a storm of disease, agony, death and grief. The wails must have filled the air as mothers watched their children sicken and die before their eyes, soldiers slumped across the battlefields, and the mighty city – which found that it was, like all cities, made strong only by weak, human flesh – began to sink beneath the piled-up corpses of the plague my father had brought. They had no choice but to accede to his demands.

It wasn't wealth or power that Minos sought from Athens, however. It was a tribute – seven Athenian youths and seven Athenian maidens brought every year across the waves to Crete to sate the appetite of the monstrosity that had threatened to shatter my family with shame but instead had elevated us to the status of legends. The creature whose bellows would make the floors of our palace rumble and shake as the time grew near for his annual feeding despite his burial far below the ground in the centre of a twilight labyrinth so dizzying that no one who entered could ever find their way back to daylight again.

A labyrinth to which only I held the key.

A labyrinth which housed what was at once Minos' greatest humiliation and greatest asset.

My brother, the Minotaur.

As a child, the twists and turns of the palace at Knossos were endlessly fascinating to me. I would loop through the bewildering multitude of rooms, skating my palm across the smooth,

red walls as I drifted through snaking passageways. My fingers traced the outline of the labrys – the double-headed axe engraved into stone after stone. Later, I learned that to Minos the labrys represented the power of Zeus, used to summon the thunder – a mighty display of dominance. To me, running through the maze of my home, it looked like a butterfly. And it was the butterfly I would imagine as I emerged from the dim cocoon of the palace interior to the glorious expanse of the sun-drenched courtyard. At the centre gleamed a huge, polished circle and this was where I spent the happiest hours of my youth. Spinning and weaving a dizzying dance, creating an invisible tapestry with my feet across the dancing-floor: a miracle carved from wood, a superb accomplishment of the renowned craftsman Daedalus. Though, of course, it would not be his most famous creation.

I'd watched him construct the dancing-floor; an eager girl, hovering over him impatient for it to be done, not appreciating that I was watching an inventor at work whose fame would ring through the whole of Greece. Perhaps even the world beyond, though I knew little of that – indeed, I knew little of what lay beyond our palace walls. Although more than ten years have passed since then, when I remember Daedalus, I see a young man full of energy and the fire of creativity. Whilst I watched him work, he told me how he had learned his craft travelling from place to place until his extraordinary skill attracted the eye of my father, who made it worth his while to stay in one place. Daedalus had been everywhere, it seemed to me, and I hung on his every word when he described the scorching sandy deserts of Egypt and the impossibly distant kingdoms of Illyria and Nubia. I could watch the ships sail from Cretan shores, their masts and sails

built under Daedalus' skilled supervision, but I could only imagine what it felt like to cross the ocean on one and feel the boards creaking beneath my feet whilst the waves hissed and crashed against the sides.

Our palace was filled with Daedalus' creations. The statues he carved seemed so full of life that they were tethered to the walls by a length of chain lest they should stride away of their own accord. His exquisite ropes of slender golden chains shone at my mother's neck and wrists. One day, having noticed my covetous gaze, he presented me with a tiny golden pendant of my own – two bees entwined together around a tiny piece of honeycomb. It glistened in the sunlight, so rich and burnished that I thought the minute drops of honey would melt and slide away in the heat.

'For you, Ariadne.' He always spoke to me seriously, which I liked.

I did not feel like an annoying child, a daughter who would never command a fleet of ships or conquer a kingdom and so was of little use or interest to Minos. If Daedalus simply humoured me, I never knew it, for I always felt like we were two equals conversing.

I took the pendant, wonderingly, turning it over in my fingers and marvelling at its beauty. 'Why bees?' I asked him.

He turned his palms to the sky and shrugged his shoulders, smiling. 'Why not bees?' he asked. 'Bees are beloved by all the gods. It was bees who fed the infant Zeus on honey in his hidden cave whilst he grew strong enough to overthrow the mighty Titans. Bees produce the honey that Dionysus mixes with his wine to sweeten it and make it irresistible. Indeed, it is said that even the monstrous Cerberus who guards the Underworld can be tamed with a honey cake! If you wear

this pendant around your neck, you can soften anyone's will to yours.'

I did not need to ask whose will might need to be softened. The whole of Crete was in thrall to Minos' inexorable judgement. I knew it would take more than the mightiest swarm of bees to sway him an inch, but I was still enchanted by the gift and wore it always. It shone proudly on my neck when we attended Daedalus' wedding, a mighty feast hosted by my father, who was delighted that Daedalus made his alliance with a daughter of Crete. Another tie holding him here, allowing Minos to boast about his exalted inventor. Although his wife died giving birth to their son before they'd been married a year, Daedalus took comfort in the baby Icarus and I loved to see him walking about with the infant dandled in his arms, showing the oblivious child the flowers and the birds and the many wonders of the palace. My younger sister, Phaedra, toddled enraptured in his wake and when I grew tired of steering her away from every danger she could find, I would leave Daedalus with them both and steal back to the wide circle of my dancing-floor.

In the very early days, my mother, Pasiphae, would dance with me; indeed, it was she who had taught me. Not formal, set patterns of steps; rather, she gave me the gift of making fluid, sinuous shapes out of crazy, chaotic movements. I watched how she flung herself into the music and transformed it into a graceful frenzy, and I followed suit. She would make a game of it for me, calling out constellations for me to trace with my feet on the floor, star formations that she would weave stories of, as well as dances. 'Orion!' she'd say, and I would hop frantically from space to space, imagining the points of light that made the doomed hunter in the sky. 'Artemis placed him

there so she could look upon him every night,' she had told me, confidingly, when we'd flopped together to regain our breath.

'Artemis was a virgin goddess, fervently protective of her chastity,' Pasiphae had explained. 'But she favoured Orion, a mortal man, as a hunting companion who could almost rival her skill.' A precarious position for a human to be in. Gods might enjoy mortal skill in hunting or music or weaving, but they were always alert to hubris – and woe betide a human whose skills came close to those of the divine. Something that immortals could not tolerate was to be inferior to anyone in any respect.

'Driven to keep up with Artemis' prodigious skill, Orion became desperate to impress,' continued my mother. She cast a glance over to where Phaedra and Icarus played at the edge of the wooden floor. They were inseparable most of the time, Phaedra exalting in the thrill of being the elder and being able to give orders to someone smaller than her for once. Seeing they were intent upon their game and not listening to us, Pasiphae took up the story again. 'Perhaps he hoped he would win over her vow of celibacy if he could slaughter enough living creatures to earn her admiration. So the two came here, to Crete, to engage in a mighty hunt. Day after day, they cut through the animals of the island and piled them high as mountains as testament to their prowess. But Gaia, the mother of all things, was awoken from her quiet dreams by the blood soaking her soil and she was horrified by the carnage that Orion was hell-bent on creating beside his adored goddess. Gaia feared he would indeed annihilate all that was living, as he boasted to Artemis that he would in his intoxicated frenzy. So Gaia reached into her hidden underground chambers and summoned forth one of her creations: the colossal scorpion,

which she unleashed upon the boastful Orion. Such a thing had never been seen before. Its armour gleamed like polished obsidian. Its tremendous pincers each stretched the length of a full-grown man and its terrible tail arched into the cloudless skies, blotting out Helios' light and casting a dark and monstrous shadow before it.'

I would shudder at her description of the legendary beast, squeezing my eyes shut as I saw it rise in front of me, unimaginably hideous and cruel.

'Orion was not afraid,' Pasiphae continued. 'Or he would not show fear. Either way, he was no match and Artemis did not intervene to pluck him from the mighty scorpion's clutches . . .' Here she would pause, her silence painting a more vivid picture of Orion's pitiful struggles than her words ever could. She picked up the tale after a moment in which I saw the life squeezed from him, his human weakness exposed at last as he submitted, exhausted from trying to keep up with the gods for so long in his mortal frame. 'And Artemis grieved for her companion, so she gathered up the remnants of his body, which were strewn across Crete, and she placed them in the sky where they would burn in the darkness and she could look upon him each night as she set out with her silver bow, alone, her supremacy and her virtue both unchallenged.'

There were many such stories. It seemed the night skies were littered with mortals who had encountered the gods and now stood as blazing examples to the world below of what the immortals could do. Back then, my mother would fling herself into these stories as she would her dancing, with wild abandon, before she knew her innocent pleasures would be taken as evidence of her uncontrolled excesses. No one then was looking to call her unwomanly or to accuse her of wanton

and unnatural feelings so she would dance with me, unconstrained, whilst Phaedra and Icarus played together, always absorbed in another game, another world of their own creation. The only judgement we were to fear was the chill of my father's emotionless rationality. Together, we could dance away the dread as mother and child.

As a young woman, however, I danced alone. The tapping of my feet across the shining wood created a rhythm in which I could lose myself, a whirling dance that could consume me. Even without music it could muffle the distant rumble that groaned beneath our feet and the skitter of tremendous hooves far below the ground at the heart of the construction that had truly cemented Daedalus' fame. I would stretch my arms out, reaching upwards to the peaceful sky, forgetting for the duration of the dance the horrors that dwelt underneath us.

This leads us to another story, one that Minos didn't like to tell. A time when he was still newly King of Crete and, as one of three rival brothers, he was desperate to prove his worth. He prayed to Poseidon to send a magnificent bull and swore steadfastly that he would sacrifice the animal to bring great honour to the god of the sea, thus securing Poseidon's favour and the kingship of Crete in one.

Poseidon sent the bull, the divine endorsement of Minos' right to rule Crete, but its beauty was so great that my father believed he could trick the god and sacrifice another, inferior creature and keep the Cretan bull for himself. Insulted and enraged by this defiance, the sea god devised his revenge.

My mother, Pasiphae, is a daughter of Helios, the great god of the sun. Unlike the searing blaze of my grandfather, she shimmered with a gentle golden radiance. I remember the soft beams of her strange, bronze-tinged eyes, the warmth

of summer in her embrace and the molten sunshine in her laughter. In the days of my childhood when she looked at me, not through me. She infused the world with her light; before she became a translucent pane of glass through which the light was refracted but never poured forth its precious streams of brightness again. Before she paid the price of her husband's deception.

Briny and barnacled, from the depths of the ocean Poseidon rose in a mighty spray of salt and fury. He did not level his sleek, silver vengeance directly at Minos, the man who had sought to betray him and dishonour him, but turned instead upon my mother, the Queen of Crete, and riled her to insanity with passion for the bull. Incensed with an animalistic lust, the desire made her conniving and clever and she persuaded the unsuspecting Daedalus to create a wooden cow so convincing that the bull was fooled into mounting both it and the mad-dened queen, hidden within.

The union was the forbidden subject of gossip in Crete, but whispers of it reached me, snaking around me in tendrils of malice and mockery. It was a gift to resentful nobles, laughing merchants, brooding slaves, girls riven with fascinated, ghoulish horror, young men entranced with the daring freakishness of it – the mutterings and murmurings and disapproving hisses and sniggering jeers were carried on the wind into every corner of the palace itself. Poseidon, whilst seeming to miss his target, had struck with deadly accuracy. Leaving Minos untouched but disgracing his wife in so grotesque a fashion humbled the man – cuckolded by a dumb beast and wedded to a woman frenzied with unnatural desires.

Pasiphae was beautiful and her divine heritage had made her a magnificent prize to Minos in marriage. It was her very

delicacy, her refinement and her sweetness that had made her his boast and must have made her degradation seem so very delectable to Poseidon. If you had anything that made you proud, that elevated you above your mortal fellows, it seemed to me that the gods would find delight in smashing it to smithereens. One morning, not long after Pasiphae's ruin, I reflected on this. As I was combing through my little sister's silken tresses, a gift we shared from our radiant mother, I began to weep; fearfully regarding each golden curl as bait to those divine colossi that strode the heavens and could snatch up our tiny triumphs and rub them into dust between their immortal fingers.

My handmaiden, Eirene, found me sobbing into a bemused Phaedra's hair. 'Ariadne,' she crooned. She must have pitied me and the particularly grotesque way in which the innocence of my childhood had been so shaken. 'What's the matter?'

No doubt she thought I cried for my mother's shame, but I had a child's self-absorption and I was worried now for me. 'What if the gods—' I gulped through my tears. 'What if they take my hair and leave me bald and ugly?'

Perhaps Eirene suppressed a smile, but she did not let me see. Instead, she gently shifted me away from Phaedra and took up the comb herself. 'And why would they do such a thing?'

'If Father makes them angry again!' I cried. 'Maybe they will take my hair so he is shamed by a hideous daughter.'

Phaedra wrinkled her nose. 'Princesses can't be bald,' she said decisively.

A bald princess would be useless. Minos had always spoken of the marriage I would make one day; a glorious union that would heap honour upon Crete. He should not have boasted. The creeping realisation chilled my bones. How could I defend

myself against his wrongdoing? If the gods were offended by him and struck down his wife, then why not his daughter?

I could feel a change in Eirene as she sat beside me. My words had surprised her. She had no doubt expected that I was distraught over a trifle, a wisp that she could swipe away like mist dissolving in the rosy fingers of the dawn. What I did not know was that I had hit upon a truth of womanhood: however blameless a life we led, the passions and the greed of men could bring us to ruin, and there was nothing we could do.

Eirene could not deny that truth. So she told us a story. A worthy hero, Perseus, born from the golden rain of Zeus who visited the lonely, lovely Danae sealed in her roofless bronze chamber with only the sky to look upon. He grew to be a worthy son of his shining father and, as all heroes must do, he conquered a terrible monster and relieved the world of her ravages. We'd heard the story of how he had cut off the head of the Gorgon, Medusa, and thrilled to hear how the snakes that grew from her dreadful head writhed and spat and hissed as he swung his wondrous sword. News of this deed had only recently reached our court and we'd all marvelled over his courage and shivered to imagine his shield which now bore the Gorgon head and turned all who looked upon it immediately into stone.

But Eirene did not tell us of Perseus today. Instead, she told us how Medusa had gained her crown of serpents and her petrifying gaze. It was a story I might have come of late to expect. No longer was my world one of brave heroes; I was learning all too swiftly the women's pain that throbbed unspoken through the tales of their feats.

'Medusa was beautiful,' Eirene told us. She had put down the comb now and Phaedra climbed up on to her lap to listen.