

Cowardice of the Hero

Matt Knicl

From set *Born of the Gods*

I hate the man who married my mother.

My father died in an accident when I was too young to remember him. My mother always shied away from telling me what happened and I believe she instructed the farmhands not to relate the story. But even as a child I knew he'd had an accident with a load of grain, or more likely rocks cleared from a new field. I remember once she screamed at me when I played near some of the wagons that were full after a harvest, pulling me into her arms and running me away. She never told me what happened to my father, but I knew.

When I was a little older than eight years my mother remarried. I always wanted to believe it was not out of love, but duty to the farm. The children of the farmhands were twice as old as me. There were five of them, all male, and unlike their fathers, who knew my own, they owed no allegiance to my family. There were whispers among them about trying to take the farmland from my mother. I heard them speak of this one night; I had followed them behind the stables. They found me and beat me. I told my mother a lie, but even as I spoke about falling down the hill by the river my mother knew what had happened. Was my weakness why she invited that man into our home?

Vinack was not a hero throughout the entire land. In our region, where half a dozen villages lay on the border of Arkos and the wilds, he was a legend. When I was ten when my mother married him and, at the time, I didn't hate him. He was a living statue, strong and muscled with short black hair. He wore a necklace of various teeth and claws. He was even working on a bracelet to hang more trinkets. I wanted to be him. There were tavern songs about him; poets wrote of his exploits. Not good poetry, of course, but the atmosphere of worship compensated for the lack of rhyme.



Art by Kev Walker

The sons of the older farmhands never challenged my mother once Vinack was in the house. All but one left and we hired new workers. It wasn't as hard as my mother thought it would be for me to adapt to having a new person, especially a new father, in my life. I could tell she was worried when she had introduced us and when he moved into our home. At the age of ten I was still in awe of that necklace and the stories of harpies and bandits.

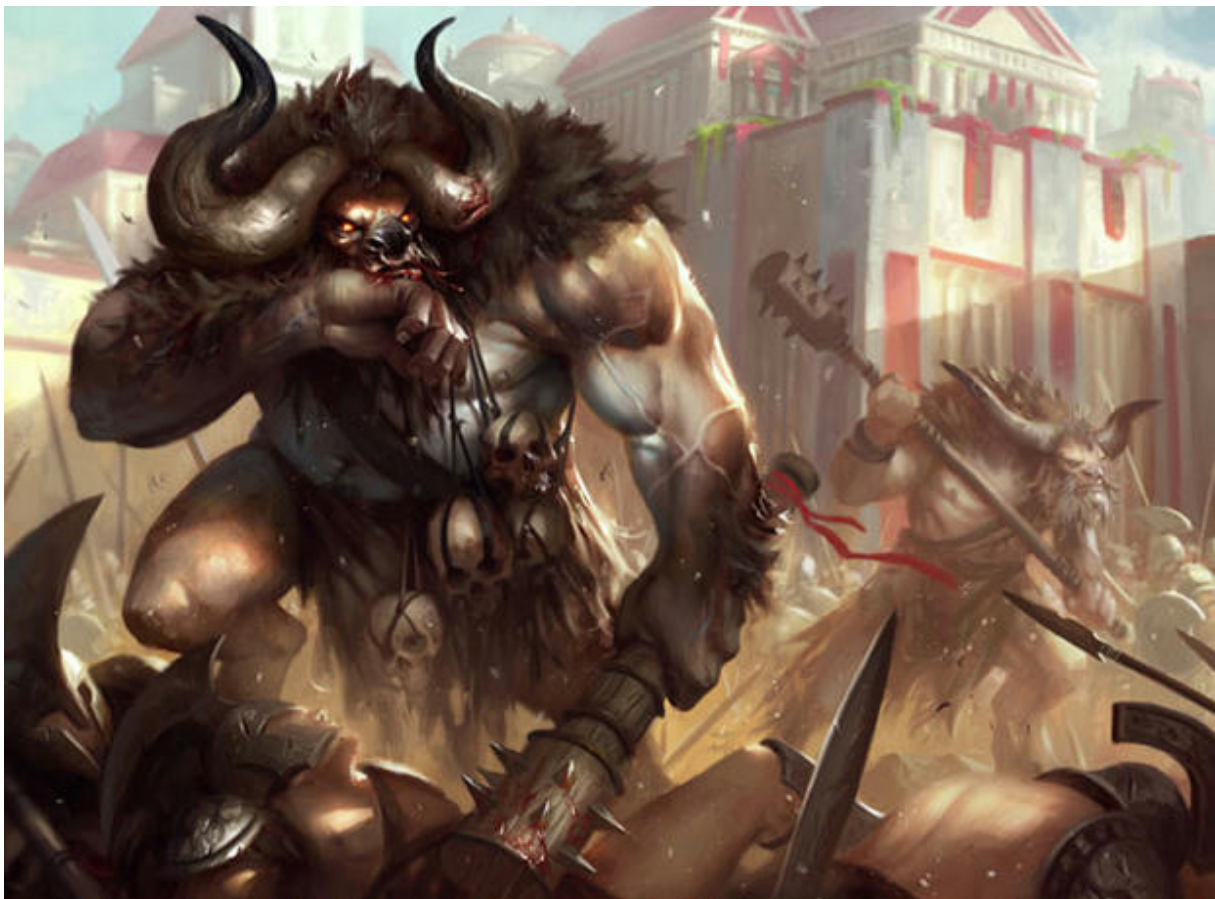
Just because one is heroic doesn't make him a hero. It didn't take long to see this. The true test of heroes should not be on battlefields or saving innocents, but in how they live their lives. Vinack tormented the farmhands. He once told a newer, younger hire to clear a field, only to then tell the farmhand he had cleared the wrong field. When I asked him why he did this, Vinack only smiled and talked about how the working man needed to stay busy lest they would forget their place. He had a short temper as well, and while I was removed from the arguing between my mother and him I could hear his shouting. I had thought she married him to protect the farm, for the necessity, but I soon realized she loved him. She did not want him to go on his adventures slaying monsters. That is what they argued about. She wanted him at home. But I don't think he wanted to listen to her. For my mother, this was marriage; for him, it was a necessity, a place where he could get free home and food while he wasn't fighting monsters. Years passed with him in and out of the farm.

One time, after a night of shouting, I saw my mother's face was bruised. I confronted Vinack about this. He told me to know my place and struck me in the head. There were farmhands around, but who were they to stand up to Vinack? Who were we to get to help from? The village saw him as a savior. Here was the truth I found when I was younger. Saving an innocent in harm's way does not wash away your sins. A vile person can behave heroically, but Athreos will make the distinction when you are set to cross the river. Vinack was a weak man. He was a hero for years in the people's eyes, but why did he always need that adoration? Did he fight his first monster so he would be seen as a hero?

Instead of happening upon a monster in the wild, what can be said of those who seek out the monsters? Does their intent get outweighed by their actions? I couldn't help but see Vinack in the darkest light—a selfish, crude beast who made himself a hero so others would tell him he wasn't a horrible man.

I told him this. He bruised my face, chest, and arms. My mother threw him out. He tried to stay, but then the farmhands came behind him, at least a dozen who finally knew their place—against him. Vinack left in anger. The village would talk about how unfair my mother was to the hero, how she was in the wrong. I do not know Heliod's ways, for soon she became ill. The gossip and, although I don't understand it, love she had for Vinack left her with failing health. There was nothing I could do. I prayed for days, sought remedies from Pharika's disciples, but nothing seemed to help. My mother passed away when I was seventeen and I was then in charge of our farmland.

The minotaurs continued to ravage the land. They have always been a problem here on the borders, especially near the swamps. Five to six in a caravan are preferred for travelling between the villages. Those who travel with goods are even more open to attack. Satyr love getting their hands on food, especially if they didn't have to harvest it. There are occasional harpy attacks and a farmer three villages over claimed to have seen a hydra, but he's still alive so not much weight should be given to that account. Sending the grain of my farmlands to another town, or even north to a bigger city nearer the capital, is risky. At a recent village meeting, concerns were expressed. Minotaurs have been spotted on our roads in our lands.



Art by Daarken

A young scholar named Zerili wished to speak to the minotaurs. He gave a passionate speech among the villagers, stating that the minotaurs were no different than us. He believed they opposed us because we had pushed them out of civilized society. They acted like bandits and marauders because we saw them only as that. He was met with laughter, but Zerili continued. He made the case that they were

intelligent and would therefore be open to discourse and arranging a treaty. Since they had tribes, Zerili argued, they had culture—although they made weapons out of the bones of their victims, the mere act of imagining the use of a bone as a club showed their potential for intelligence. Zerili's claims were called naive. The scholar did not heed their warnings and the young man's mutilated corpse was found later that week, arms torn from his torso with the palms toward the sky, Zerili's head resting on his own hands. An Akroan soldier on deployment in the area made a joke about how Zerili would have appreciated the minotaurs' cultural expressions.

I was twenty-seven when I saw Vinack again. It had been a decade since I had seen Vinack, although I admit I thought about the swine every day. He arrived at the farm in the afternoon one day during our late harvest season, and I was surprised he still recognized me. I was no longer the scrawny child he beat. In those days, I joined the farmhands in the fields just as I'm told my father had. I was taller than him, although he did have more muscles than me. He still wore that necklace with his trinkets, and three bracelets filled with teeth. There were a few more scars, too. I was pleased to see the age in his face, the whitening and thinning of his hair. I would not have struck him if he hadn't said, "I need your help, Son."

He quickly reacted, most likely thanks to the years of combat, and knocked me to the ground.

"I'm sorry," he said. He kneeled to help me up. "I came because I... sorry, everybody needs your help."

He did not make eye contact with me as he spoke.

"Get out of my home."

"Listen, you know the minotaurs are growing in number. I need help."

"You need to be the hero, same as always."

"What? No. That's not it. If we don't halt the minotaurs now they will continue this course."

"Get the militia, petition the king."

"The king doesn't send help," he said, his face reddening. "He only send troops after people have already died. The two soldiers in town couldn't care less and, even if they did, they'd not be able to stand up against their numbers."



Art by James Ryman

I knew this to be true.

“I know you hate me. I know I wronged you and your mother. I’ve never been a great man, but I know what it means to be a hero. Despite what you think of me I do help people.” He paused. “Do not do this for me, do this for your farmhands. If the roads become too dangerous...”

“Fine,” I said. “I will help.”

I had already been thinking of fighting back against the minotaurs. My farmhands have families and if we can’t ship what we sow they and I will go hungry.

Vinack told me a plan to strike at the heart of the minotaurs. A cruel seer that was rumored to have the ear of Mogis directed the feral beasts, made them raid in groups and push farther into human lands. Vinack’s plan was to go into their territory and strike down their oracle.

As Vinack put it, “I’ve only fought beasts, one against myself. And in case you haven’t noticed, I do not wear the horn or teeth of a minotaur.”

In the morning, we were to set out. I had two beds to spare, but that night I had Vinack sleep in the stable.

While the hero slept for the first time on the farm, without the stupor of spirits, I set out to Zerili’s home. I did not trust Vinack. I am not a good choice for this type of feat. There are others in town who know and like the cur, those who would love to help him. I wanted to learn about the minotaurs. The scholar, although dead, did leave a small house in the center of the village. His family must have paid well for his education and home, because he did not seem to add anything practical to the village other than talking about books. Of course, I never met him except in passing, and this was the gossip of the town. His landlord agreed to let me “look through Zerili’s possessions to see if I found something I’d

lent him” at a late hour for a few coin. When I got inside the home I could see the landlord had given similar agreements to others—most of the apartment looked ransacked of valuables. The books were still there, as were the scholar’s notes.

There was nothing there I had not heard before, and the research was tainted by Zerili’s idealistic eyes. After only an hour or so I came across what I was looking for, proof that Zerili used to justify the notion of treaties. There were records in the town ledger going back decades that the minotaurs would take gold and crops in exchange for lessened aggression. The scholar thought a treaty would be possible because one existed before. What the poor academic missed was that the last account of a transaction occurred over thirty years before, when, as the leader at that time wrote, “They have asked for a price too high for our safety.”

As far as I could recall, there hadn’t been any incursions since I’d been alive. The ledger showed that the escalation in demands went from crops and coin, to chickens, then to cattle. The obvious conclusion was that the minotaur demanded men, possibly children, as their dark tribute. The village had continued to make these tributes in secret. I knew what the “hero” needed me for. Vinack meant for me to die.

That morning, we set out. I brought a sword that belonged to my father. I also brought a dagger I hid in my waistband, one I didn’t let Vinack see. If there needed to be a sacrifice, it would be him, not me, to meet Zerili’s fate. I was surprised to see he took off his necklaces and bracelets, but it made sense, as they could make too much noise. We walked in silence across the border into the marshy wetlands, where minotaurs were known to frequent.

I had only been in the swamp a few times and always with groups of people, either travelling through as a shortcut to some of the southern, foreign towns, or to look for missing villagers.

We did not need to travel too far before we could smell them. Their fur must have been caked with their own excrement. There was a horrifying realization that they were so short a distance from the village but chose not to attack. Vinack and I hid behind fallen trees and saw their camp. There were more than a dozen of the brutes, and around them the carcasses of now-unrecognizable animals that had been gouged and were missing organs, their bones strewn all around. The minotaurs sat and ate, some even sitting on the discarded bones, oblivious to the pain they should have felt. They sat around a central fire, which led to a cave.

“I brought you here under false pretenses,” Vinack said, still looking through branches.

My dagger was already pressed against his back. He turned slightly, and I saw tears in his eyes.

“What are you doing, Boy?”

“You mean to sacrifice me, Bastard.”

He tried to turn, but I pressed the dagger harder into his back, one thrust would pierce his flesh.

“I did not know you were privy to the village leaders’ plans,” he said, now looking again at the minotaurs. “If I had known I would not have used lies.”

“This is monstrous! I would not have come along to die even if you hadn’t tried to deceive me,” I said, trying to quiet my voice despite my anger.

“No, Son,” he said, shaking his head. “The sacrifice will be me.”

It was hard for me to understand how I felt. At first, I thought it could be another lie, some other deception. This was what I wanted to be true. I wanted him to die. When he told me this all I could say was, “Good.”

He was startled by this, but then nodded.

“This doesn’t make you a hero,” I said, coldly. “This doesn’t forgive what you’ve done.”

He nodded again. “I know.”

We stood for a few moments. We both looked toward the minotaur camp. Then Vinack started pushing his way through the branches. His sword was behind him on the ground.

I needed to stay and watch what happened.

He approached the minotaurs with his arms lifted, almost in supplication. They turned to Vinack and started to move toward him, some mid-chew, but he yelled, “Tribute!”

Instantly, the minotaurs shuffled back to where they had been sitting, all their eyes on Vinack. He walked and stood in front of the fire, near the cave entrance. I saw the oracle emerge. He was even bigger than the other minotaurs. Not just in size. I could tell this oracle received more food than he actually hunted. He moved more slowly than the other minotaurs had moved—I guessed he was older, but I had no way of knowing. He wore a necklace of human skulls and a bone, which was probably human as well, through his nose.



Oracle of Bones | Art by Greg Staples

“I offer myself as a sacrifice for the protection of the human villages of the Kendraki Provinces that lay north of your lands, in accordance with the old pacts,” Vinack said slowly, as though he had trouble remembering what he was to say.

The oracle began to laugh and the minotaurs around him growled. Without ceremony, the shaman slammed his fist downwards on Vinack's head, pushing it down into his body. I heard his spine break. The body fell to the ground and the oracle picked it back up, snapping it in half after some difficulty. A cloud of blood emerged, swirling around the minotaurs, who were then stomping their hoofs and roaring. The crimson mist began to swirl around each minotaur individually, until the blood mist entered their nostrils. They breathed deeply of the dark magic. I do not know if what I saw next happened, or if I was confused and can no longer remember the truth. I thought I saw behind the oracle the shape of a minotaur, but one made of the night's sky. I thought I saw Mogis, but only for a second.

And that was it. The oracle took the pieces of Vinack and threw them to the side, into a pile of animal carcasses. The minotaurs looked tired, but continued to eat and spar as they had before the ceremony. The oracle retreated back into his cave. I picked up Vinack's sword and returned to the village.

I was met with praise. Everyone was sad the great hero Vinack had fallen, but so happy his son had been there to stop the minotaur menace. It would seem the village leaders had spread some of their own lies before I had returned. I think Vinack wanted me to be a hero, to share whatever he would call a legacy with the closest person he could call a son or family.

I let that man walk to his death. It stopped the minotaurs, for now at least, and others would call that heroic, but despite the stories others will tell, I am no hero. I used to hate the man who married my mother more than anything in creation, but now the person I hate the most is myself.

