Theseus and the Minotaur

Athens had been at war with Crete. Although the war was over, Minos (King of Crete), ruled the seas and Athens had to pay an awful tribute as a condition for peace. Minos sought revenge for the death of his son and demanded that every nine years the Athenians send him fourteen of their children - 7 girls and 7 boys. Once in Crete, the young men and women were sent into the maze-like labyrinth to face the deadly Minotaur who was half man, half bull.

Each year the children were selected by lot, and as all of Athens mourned they set sail for Crete on a ship with black sails. Theseus, the son of Aegeus (King of Athens), was very brave and had had many adventures already. Theseus resolved to become one of the young men chosen, so that he might slay the Minotaur and put an end to the horrible sacrifice. Aegeus reluctantly agreed to let Theseus go, and asked that Theseus change the sails to white for the journey home if he was successful in his plan to kill the Minotaur.

When the fourteen arrived in Crete, they were entertained at the enormous and colourful palace of Minos (at Knossos). The next day, they were to be sent into the intricate mazes of the labyrinth, home of the deadly Minotaur, from which there was no escape.

That night at dinner, listening to the exploits and adventures of Theseus, Ariadne - daughter of King Minos - fell in love with him. Not wanting to see Theseus killed, Ariadne vowed to find a way to help him. The next morning, as they were being led to the labyrinth, Ariadne gave Theseus a ball of string. She told Theseus to tie the string to the inside of the door, and it would help him find his way back if he was able to kill the Minotaur. She also brought him a sword, which he hid underneath his cape.

After winding his way through twists and turns, Theseus came upon the lair of the Minotaur. In the narrow passageways, they battled until Theseus was triumphant. Theseus began to rewind the ball of string, retracing his steps until he found his way back to the entrance and the other young men and women. Ariadne was waiting for them on the other side. She hid them until nightfall, and in the dark helped them escape to their ship. In exchange for helping him, Ariadne asked that Theseus take her with him and make her his wife, and Theseus happily agreed.

On their return trip to Athens, the ship stopped at the island of Naxos for the night. What happened next, and why it happened is a bit unclear. Either through trickery, or too much frivolity (for Naxos was the island of Dionysus, after all) the group became forgetful. The next morning, Theseus set sail with the other Athenians leaving poor Ariadne asleep on the beach. At this point, there are two distinctly different versions of the tale. One version finds Ariadne so distraught that she takes her own life. The other version leaves Ariadne happy with Dionysus, living out her days on Naxos.

Away from Naxos, Theseus' forgetfulness remained, and despite his promise to his father, he neglected to change the sails on his ship from black to white. At Cape Sounion, Aegeus watched hopefully every day for the safe return of his son. Spotting the ship, with black sails flying, Aegeus presumed the worst and threw himself from the cliffs to his death and the water below. Today this water is known as the Aegean Sea.