wharves—piers along the shore

upswept—lined; the cypresses' branches "curl" upward

rank—row

omen—sign

manling—young man

Theseus and the Minotaur

Gavin O. Rahilly

King Minos of Crete demands a tribute from Athens. Each year, seven young men and seven young women sail to Crete to be fed to the Minotaur. Theseus is determined to bring an end to the sacrifices—and to the Minotaur. As he boards his black-sailed ship, Theseus promises his father that if he is successful, he will return in a ship with white sails.

lowly, the bright-eyed ship pulled out onto the rolling sea, the sailors straining at their oars until a steady breeze came up, and the sunlit headlands fell behind.

Standing at the ship's prow, Theseus offered up a prayer to his divine father. "Oh great Poseidon, lord of the dark sea and the dark places under the earth where the bright sun never looks, if you are indeed my father give me victory in the darkness of the Labyrinth." So he prayed to great Poseidon, and the god sent up dolphins from the depths to play around the ship as darkness fell.

On they sailed to Crete, to the harbor city where King Minos ruled. Terrace after terrace of white-walled houses rose up the hills, to heights roofed over with bright gold. On the broad-planked **wharves** the armored soldiers of the king were waiting, to lead the hero and his companions through the streets. With cries and weeping, the Cretans crowding round threw flowers at the young people doomed to die.

Theseus and his followers were led along a pathway **upswept** with cypresses, until past the pillars of the palace gates a **rank** of women greeted them. One above all stood out, a girl in her first womanhood, full of grace and swiftness, clad in simple white. As she looked upon the captives, Theseus met her eyes, until she blushed and looked away. Some god made him call out "Hail, princess!" and drop upon one knee, before the guards led them into the place where grim Minos sat. The arms of his gold throne were shaped like dolphins, and Theseus smiled at the **omen**.

"Why is it that you smile, you whom the gods have already given up to death?" asked Minos.

"Because, oh king, I know the deathless gods give victory to those they wish to honor," Theseus replied.

Minos gave the slight suggestion of a nod. "As great Zeus is my father, why will the gods honor you, **manling**?"

"Because Poseidon the Earthshaker is my father, and he has sent me here to sacrifice this dark thing you keep underground." As Theseus said this, there was a stir about the throne, and the priestess he had hailed slipped through the guards to take her place beside Minos.

"Sister's daughter Ariadne," said the king, "whom do you name first to go to meet the Dweller in the Labyrinth?"

"This one, lord," the princess said, pointing to Theseus. And again she turned her face away.

"So be it," said the king. "Let the others stay under guard, and send this one into the Labyrinth."

They took Theseus to the temple, to wash him and paint him with strange

guttering—flickering

straitly—narrowly

Dionysus—god of wine

In **guttering** red torchglow Theseus could scarcely see the magic ball of twine as it unwound before him down the steep incline into the earth. Holding the torch low to light the ground before his feet, he started down and ever down into the darkness, gripping his sword.

A few steps into the maze, he could not tell which way led down, or—save for the thread—which way he'd come. Around him pressed the darkness, oppressing him with dread and emptiness, so that he was afraid to go on.

Theseus shook off these thoughts, stilling his mind to listen for the monster's presence. The Minotaur was at home in the darkness—it might be waiting on the path ahead of him, might be listening to his footfalls now, might burst upon him from any of the passages that ran ghostly off to either side of the track marked by the dim unrolling thread.

Never level, never straight, the path twisted on. Once bones almost stopped his feet at where the passage narrowed so **straitly** that he had to wind and stretch his way through sideways; yet in that place the dark cold rock was smoothed, as if by constant passage of some enormous body.

Once past, another long stretch wound down and round, until the wall fell away from his outstretched hand. This unseen cavern must be the earth's womb, at the center of the Labyrinth. He saw the ball of twine had stopped at last.

All was darkness, and silence, while Theseus listened with all his powers. Was there a sound of something breathing in the dark? At the edge of the dim torchlight a shadowed shape suggested itself, humped like a bull, but stretched out like a man. The monster was asleep, betrayed to him by the god, lying on the naked rock beside a bed of bones.

With a cry to great Poseidon, Theseus leapt across the monster's back. He grasped a horn, twisting the grotesque head to one side to expose the throat to his keen blade. The dark shape roared as it tried to rise up under him. Then it sank back, and black blood poured over his hand holding the sword. Giving thanks to the immortal gods, Theseus wiped clean his blade, before he caught up the end of Ariadne's thread and started up again from that place to daylight.

Ariadne was waiting at the door. She washed off from him the monster's blood, and then led him down to where the other young Athenians waited by the black-sailed ship. So they left Crete before King Minos could pursue.

The victorious hero sailed back to Athens, with his companions and Cretan bride. But Theseus left Ariadne on the island of Naxos, where some say the god **Dionysus** claimed her as his bride. Theseus continued to Athens, but whether distracted by mourning Ariadne or by rejoicing for his homecoming, he forgot to hoist the white sail that would give his father hope of his return. Aegeus saw the black sail from the cliff on which he watched, and despairing that his son was dead, he leapt into the sea. Ever since it has been called the Aegean Sea.

Theseus returned to Athens and ruled as king. ❖

designs. They gave him rich foods and wines, which he refused to eat, fearing they were drugged; and in the night the priestess Ariadne, sister's daughter of the king, came to him.

"Stranger, who are you?" she whispered when she stood before him.

"My mother named me Theseus. My father is **Aegeus**, King of Athens, but by my mother's oath I truly am the son of great Poseidon."

Ariadne bowed her head. "Then by the Goddess I serve, you are the one foretold. The **oracles** said this dark one of the earth could never die, until one of the gods sent one to kill him." She took his hand a moment.

Then she opened out the bundle hid beneath her **mantle** and gave Theseus a sword, wrought with patterns and designs on blade and hilt. He held the cold blade a moment close against his forehead.

"This you'll need more," she said, and she gave him a wound ball of woolen twine. "Tie the end upon the door when you go in and let this roll out in front of you. It will lead you to the maze's heart and leave a track for you to follow out, a track you'd never find unaided. For those who enter in the Labyrinth have never yet come out." Theseus took the slight ball in his hand.

"Come," she said, and by the altar fire she lit a torch. Black-hooded priestesses waited at the Labyrinth's bronze-plated door, and silently they swung it back, revealing darkness. On the threshold Ariadne handed him the torch, and behind him swung shut the heavy gate.

Aegeus—pronounced ee-JEE-us

oracles—persons through whom the gods make their wishes known

mantle—cloak