

Daedalus and Icarus

Beating his wings harder and harder, Icarus soared up into the sky and out over the Aegean Sea. It was hard to believe it, but the plan had worked. For here he was now, flying alongside his father, Daedalus, as they left the island of Crete behind them and travelled on towards their freedom. Icarus glanced over at his father and grinned. "Come along, Father," he shouted over the sound of the wind rushing past them. "Smile, we've done it, we've escaped and we're free."

"When my feet are back on solid ground and that island is many, many miles behind us, then you will see me smile," Daedalus yelled back. "Now, keep your mind on what we have to do and remember, not too high, not too close to the sun."

Daedalus thought back to the moment, a few days before, when he had thought up the plan that would help them escape - not only from the labyrinth but from the kingdom of King Minos as well. He cast his mind back even further, to the day when he realized that his own life and that of his son were in great danger. How had they come to this moment?

Only a short time ago Daedalus was being hailed as the great architect, the skilled inventor, the master craftsman. His incredible inventions and constructions were known and admired throughout many lands and when he arrived in Crete, many years earlier, King Minos was happy to welcome him to his land and quickly began to make use of his talents.

One of his first tasks was to construct a huge labyrinth, a vast underground maze of tunnels which twisted and turned in every possible direction, so that, on entering the labyrinth, a person would very quickly become lost and would be unable to find their way out again.

This giant maze served one simple purpose. It was to contain the Minotaur, a huge beast, half man, half bull. Standing twice as high as any man, the Minotaur had horns, as long as a man's arm, with sharp points, on which it skewered its victims. It had almost unbelievable strength and was constantly hungry – hungry for the flesh of humans.

King Minos had come up with his own special way of satisfying the Minotaur's hunger. Every year, he demanded that Athens send him a tribute of seven young men and seven young women, and these would be sacrificed to satisfy the creature's hunger.

One by one they would be forced to enter the labyrinth. They would then wander, sometimes only for hours but sometimes for many days before, somewhere in the pitch-black tunnels, they would encounter the Minotaur.

It goes without saying that none of them was ever seen again. Well, that's not quite true actually, as one of the young men, not only found and killed the Minotaur, but also found his way out again.

This superhuman was Theseus, the son of King Aegeus of Athens. He had forced his father to agree to let him be sent as one of the seven young men, swearing that he would somehow kill the Minotaur and return home safely.

As their ship docked in the harbor below the mighty palace of Knossos, and the youths were dragged from the ship, Ariadne, the daughter of King Minos, was watching.

She saw Theseus and found herself falling in love with him there and then. She vowed to herself that somehow, she would help him when it was his turn to enter the maze. And this was the moment when Daedalus found himself involved, in a way which he knew would not end well for him and his young son. Ariadne went to him and asked him to help her save Theseus from the jaws of the Minotaur. He gave her a great ball of flaxen thread.

"Somehow you must get this thread to Theseus. Tell him to tie one end to the door of the labyrinth and hang on to the other end. He can then use it to find his way back out again. But you must be ready to flee the moment he escapes, for, when your father finds out what you have done, your life will be in great danger."
And so will mine, he thought to himself, so will mine.

Their plan worked well. Theseus found the Minotaur and, after a long battle in the dark passages of the maze, he killed the beast. Using the thread, he made his way back to the door and to Ariadne. Making their way quickly to his ship, they set sail for Athens.

Daedalus was left behind to face the consequences and it took very little time for Minos to find him. The King was angrier than anyone could remember (and this was a man who was noted for his evil temper). He blamed Daedalus for the whole thing and dragged both him and Icarus to the door of the labyrinth.

"This is where you two will end your days," he screamed. "In there, in the dark, along with the rats." With that the guards threw them inside and swung the heavy door shut.

Immediately they were plunged into total darkness. They could not see their hands in front of their faces, let alone the tunnels and passages in which they now found themselves. But all was not lost, for, of all the people who had ever entered the labyrinth, these two were the only ones who knew its secrets.

They had designed it, they had taken charge of its construction and Daedalus knew the layout of the labyrinth like the back of his hand. It took them little or no time to find their

way out of the labyrinth but that was only the first hurdle. They still needed to escape from Crete, if they wanted to survive for more than a few days.

Daedalus knew there was no way to escape by sea, as Minos controlled all the seas around the island. So, Daedalus, the great inventor, the master craftsman, drew on all his skills and made, for each of them, a pair of huge wings. These wings were made from hundreds of feathers they collected from the birds around the island and were held together with a strong wax.

“These wings will take us away from this place and to freedom,” he told his son. “However, there is one thing you must not forget. These wings are held together by wax. If it gets too hot, it will melt, and the wings will fall apart. So do not fly too close to the sun. Stay low and we will be safe.”

So here they were now, gliding across the brilliant blue sky, the sun shining above them and the Aegean Sea glinting beautifully far below them. Daedalus glanced back nervously over his shoulder again, to see the island of Crete getting smaller and smaller as they flew away from their prison. But Icarus could not contain his excitement a moment longer. “We’re free,” he yelled to the empty sky around him. “Free and we’re flying, we’re flying with the birds.”

With a whoop of excitement, he soared up and up, gliding around the sky, zooming back down towards his father and then up again, up, up, up towards the dazzling sun.

“Icarus, not too high, not too close to the sun,” his father screamed in desperation. “The wax on your wings will melt. Stay close to me and stay low.”

But his words fell on deaf ears. The boy continued to soar up into the bright blue sky, edging nearer and nearer to the sun and, as Daedalus flew along below him, he saw a bright white feather flutter through the sky and, looking up, watched in horror as more and more feathers detached themselves from his son’s wings.

He watched in despair as his son began to lose height and his despair turned to total anguish as he heard the terrified cry from his son, as he tumbled and spun past him towards the sea below.

It took only seconds, but it seemed like a lifetime, as Daedalus saw his son plummet through the sky with increasing speed to hit the waters below with a resounding splash.

Daedalus flew low in the hope of seeing the boy appear on the surface of the churning waters but he knew that nobody could have survived such a fall and that all hope was lost.

With a heavy heart, and almost exhausted, Daedalus regained the height he needed and, without looking back, set his course for the island of Sicily. There he hoped that he

would be welcomed and be allowed to live a trouble-free life for the rest of his days.

But however long he lived, he would never be able to forget the sound of his son's final cry as he sped towards the water. It was only the briefest of sounds, but he heard it clearly, even above the sound of the foaming waves and crying gulls – "Father, help me".

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