

Icarus

Once upon a time there was a boy who tried to fly. He flew with his father, soaring over the shining, sun-dappled sea. His father, who had created the wings which enabled them to fly, was the most brilliant, the most cunning, the most inventive designer who ever lived. But in his past was a dark secret, and a labyrinth and a monster so terrible it could not be spoken of.

The boy's name was Icarus. His father, Daedalus, had escaped from Athens after his nephew, Talos, had died under very peculiar and suspicious circumstances. Daedalus never spoke to Icarus about what had happened – about how it was that Talos had fallen, spiralling down from the roof of the highest tower in Athens. But he knew that he and his father had been on the run ever since, moving from city to city. Daedalus designed and made moving toys of intricate detail and extraordinary complexity, and sold them in the markets as they travelled. The greatest designer and inventor in Greece was reduced to pedalling toys like a common salesman!

Finally they found themselves in Crete, in the city of Knossos, where Minos the king had his palace. Soon the rumour spread around the capital that Daedalus was making amazing toys, and that these could be bought in the market. The richest and most important families in Knossos flocked to ensure that their children became the proud owners of a set of toy soldiers that marched up a hill, or a wooden bird that flapped its brightly feathered wings and opened its beak to catch a fish. In due course, the fame of these wonderful toys spread to the palace, and Daedalus was summoned by the king himself.

Minos was not a nice man. He had tried to cheat Poseidon, the god of the sea, and, as a result, had ended up with a terrible and dark secret. His wife had given birth to a monster – half gigantic bull and half man – named the Minotaur. This was a beast so huge and so horrible that no one could look on it without fainting. It devoured human flesh, and the king was terribly afraid that, if the Minotaur escaped, his country would live in fear forever, and his kingship would be destroyed. Minos wanted Daedalus to design and build a huge cage for the Minotaur – one

that would keep it safe forever, a cage from which it could never, ever escape.

Daedalus took up the king's challenge. He built a labyrinth beneath the palace; a labyrinth so complicated that anyone entering the maze would be caught in its web of passages, and would never be able to find their way out again. The Minotaur was released into the labyrinth and, every year, each of the countries ruled by Minos was forced to send seven young men and seven maidens to the labyrinth to feed the monster's foul appetites. But, despite the fact that his terrible secret was at last safely imprisoned in the labyrinth beneath his palace, Minos was not a happy man. For Daedalus now knew of his secret. And Daedalus, alone amongst men, also knew the secret ways and paths of the labyrinth itself. Minos could not stand the thought of Daedalus having this knowledge and so, one night, as Daedalus and his son slept, he had them rounded up and thrown, without any warning, into the labyrinth itself.

Icarus was terrified but Daedalus calmed him. 'Fear not,' he reminded him, 'for I built this prison, and by that knowledge we shall escape.' As the Minotaur's roars got nearer and nearer, Daedalus and Icarus ran through the maze of passages, Daedalus counting the twists and turns. Just as the Minotaur was about to turn the last corner and devour them, Daedalus touched a rock and opened a secret doorway which led to the cliff wall at the edge of the sea. Pushing Icarus through first, he hurled himself out just as the door slammed shut, keeping the Minotaur in its labyrinthine gaol.

But now, Icarus and Daedalus were really scared. Wherever they went on the island, they would be captured and killed by the king's soldiers. They spent the day miserably crouching in a small cave at the foot of the cliff on the edge of the shore. The sea gulls flew screeching in and out of their cave, bringing fish to the baby birds, who leant screaming over the sides of their nests, balanced precariously on ledges along the cliff face. Daedalus watched the swooping of the gulls as they skimmed the water's surface before flying gracefully round and back to their young, he watched

as feathers fell from their nests and fluttered gently downwards, and, as he watched, Daedalus, ever inventive, had an idea. 'We'll fly!' he exclaimed suddenly to his startled son. 'We'll fly away. That's how we'll escape. We'll fly!'

At dawn the next morning, Daedalus tracked down a bee's nest and robbed it of its wax. He sent Icarus to gather the driftwood from along the seashore, and he cut down long, straight, pliable branches from the willows growing along the edge of the river which cascaded into the sea. Gently he worked, designing the wings, sticking on the feathers with the wax, and adapting the beating mechanism which he created out of meticulously carved pieces of wood, levers fashioned from driftwood and notches carved in the swathes of willow.

Finally they were ready – two pairs of strong, sturdy wings, covered in the broad, long feathers of flight. Daedalus and Icarus dragged themselves to the top of the cliff, and stood, as the sun rose, looking out over the sea. 'We shall fly', Daedalus told his son. 'We shall

fly to freedom. Follow me. Fly neither too low, where the sea spray will dampen your wings and they will become heavy with water, nor too high, for the wax will be melted by the hot sun. Follow me.' And so saying, Daedalus broke into a clumsy run toward the edge of the cliff and then, wings creaking as they beat, flapped slowly out over the glistening sea.

Icarus followed, making his own terrified run, and then out, out, out over the water shining in the sunlight below. As he flapped his large, unwieldy wings, and felt the air rush beneath him and the wind in his hair and face, he dared to look down. He was flying, he was gliding, he was swooping on the currents and floating on the breeze! He felt free. He understood the power and the fearlessness of flight. He was a bird on the wing. He had left his feet behind and he was no longer attached to the earth with its troubles and weights, its heaviness and its depressions. He was at one with the sky. He gazed up. Above him was only blue, a deep, drowning blue. He tipped his wings and soared down and then up, a long slow incline, reaching new heights. And now the tiny, fluffy clouds were beneath him, and the sea was but a glistening haze in the distance below. He soared again, down and then up, up, up. Now he

was surrounded by blue. Far below he could hear the cries of the gulls as they swooped and quarrelled over the water. Mingled with them he could hear his father's warning shouts. But he cared not. Again he soared, and again, and again, climbing higher and higher into the deep blueness above.

Daedalus saw feathers floating past him, floating in ones and twos, then in dozens and scores, floating down on the sea breeze. Then, as he gazed in horror, almost forgetting to beat his own wings, he saw Icarus, plummeting downwards, falling out of the blue sky and into the mirror of the sea below. Daedalus watched helplessly as his son's body sank beneath the waves, then he flapped his own weary way to safety.

(Available as a Hamilton Trust – Oral Story and in The Hamilton Book of Traditional Tales)

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