



Daedalus and Icarus

In the land of ancient Athens there lived a master craftsman known as Daedalus. His talent as an inventor, sculptor and artist knew no equal. It was Daedalus who invented the art of carpentry and devised the tools of this trade. Such was his genius, that any man who now crafts from stone, wood or metal follows in the path Daedalus forged.

Daedalus' art had long shaped the land of Athens for the better, for he had devised its first bathhouses and its first dance floors. In moments of quieter reflection, Daedalus had made sculptures from stone, so lifelike that the hero Hercules had once mistakenly challenged one to a fight.

Whilst Daedalus' skills were great, so too were his vanity and pride. Throughout the land, he was famed for his genius and Daedalus' greatest fear was that, one day, there might arise a man whose talents would rival his own. These thoughts lurked at the corners of Daedalus' mind, and the more that his fame spread throughout the land, the more these fears grew.

Sure enough, there soon came a time when it seemed that a true rival for Daedalus had arisen. Daedalus' sister had placed her son, Perdix, under Daedalus' charge to learn the mechanical arts. The boy had shown himself to be a dutiful and talented pupil with striking ingenuity. For example, it was Perdix who first connected two pieces of iron together to make a pair of compasses.

One day, the pair were working on the Acropolis - a monumental building standing on a rocky outcrop and overlooking the city of Athens. As Daedalus watched the boy at work, he was suddenly taken by a terrible fear. His nephew was displaying a rare gift as he shaped wood and stone; could his name one day be more famed than Daedalus' own? It took a moment of jealousy to blind Daedalus to the consequences of actions and he lunged at the boy. Taken by surprise, Perdix was sent toppling over the cliff edge.





Reading Sheet

The goddess Athena had seen these events play out and, before Perdix could be dashed upon the rocks, she used her powers to suddenly transform the boy into a partridge. In this form, Perdix was able to avoid his death, flying up into the sky. On Daedalus' shoulder, Athena left a scar, shaped like a partridge, to remind him of his terrible crime.

To the people of Athens, it seemed as if Daedalus had indeed murdered Perdix and the boy's broken body had been washed away in the ocean waters. Ashamed of his actions and fearful for his life, Daedalus left Athens for new lands.

When Daedalus found himself in the land of Crete, he learnt that his fame preceded him. King Minos was only too pleased to greet him.

"You are most welcome to our lands, Daedalus," Minos proclaimed. "We shall provide you with the finest house and ensure that your great talents are put to use."

Daedalus soon made these strange lands his own. As an inventor, he proved his skill by crafting many wonders which delighted his new countrymen. These included mechanical toy horses which mimicked the actions of real horses. Daedalus also found a wife, and together they had a son, Icarus.

Some time passed before a most terrible curse befell King Minos. Earlier, the king had angered the gods - and the gods were not known for their mercy. When his wife, Pasiphae, bore Minos a son they discovered, to their horror, that she had begat a monster. The tiny infant was human in body but with the head of a great bull. Pasiphae named her child Asterion but, in time, the fearsome creature would become known as the Minotaur.

As the king's new son grew, it became a creature of awful rage and great appetites. When it took a taste for human flesh, King Minos knew that he could keep his son within the palace no longer.

Minos sent for his master craftsman and instructed Daedalus to construct a prison to keep his son hidden from the eyes of the world. Daedalus did as he was told and, with characteristic ingenuity, devised a prison the like of which had never been seen before: the Labyrinth. The Labyrinth was a vast stone maze. Such was Daedalus' cunning, that the twists and turns of the maze seemed without end; a



Reading Sheet

man could wander its corridors without ever finding the way out. Into the Labyrinth, the Minotaur was cast, never to emerge from its depths.

The Minotaur was a secret which shamed King Minos. He did not want his people to learn of his monstrous son. As the monster's existence was now known to Daedalus, the king ordered that the craftsman be jailed away from the eyes and ears of his public. Knowing of Daedalus' genius, Minos was aware that the craftsman might easily devise a means of escape from most jails. Because of this, Daedalus and his son Icarus were imprisoned at the top of a mighty tower, built on a great cliff top, towering above the ocean.

To most, the prison would have seemed inescapable. To Daedalus, it presented a challenge to be savoured. As he gazed in thought out of a window, he was inspired to create his greatest invention yet. Outside, the birds soared, swooping from great heights to the safety of the land below. If he and his son could fly like the birds, he mused, escape from the prison would be simple.



When a bird would perch by the window of their cell, Daedalus or Icarus would be quick to relieve it of a feather. With melted wax taken from candles, Daedalus was able to carefully fashion two pairs of feathery wings which would take him and his son to freedom.

Before they took the air, Daedalus warned his son of the dangers they faced. If they flew too low, the spray of the sea would cling to their wings, adding weight. Such heavy wings would make flight impossible and they would surely fall beneath the ocean's waters. Flying too high would be equally dangerous. Were they to fly too close to the sun, the heat would melt the wax and the wings would disintegrate,

Certain that his son understood the risks, Daedalus dove out the window and took flight. Icarus followed after. There they flew: the first mortal men to move through the currents of the air like a bird or a god.





Reading Sheet

As the two flew, they felt great joy at racing through the air. This feeling encouraged Icarus to soar to greater heights. To any man who watched, he would have seemed like a god. But the lines which divide god from man are clear boundaries and the gods do not take kindly to any who would seek to give themselves godly powers. As Icarus flew higher, his doom was sealed.

“Icarus, don’t - !” Daedalus screamed.

But if his father’s voice carried far enough to reach his son, it was too late. Daedalus could only watch in horror as his son’s wings fell apart, scattering on the winds. Flightless, Icarus fell from the sky like a great stone.

The ocean had claimed his son, and Daedalus could do no more than fly onwards, alone. For daring to set themselves as equals to the gods, Icarus and Daedalus had paid a terrible price. Icarus had lost his life and Daedalus’ own life was now weighed down with grief for his son and the knowledge that his own actions had led to Icarus’ death.