FLYING HIGH (AND ITS DANGERS):
THE STORY OF DAEDALUS AND ICARUS

In this myth we learn about Daedalus and Icarus, the legendary father-son team who first tested human flight with homemade wings. Daedalus, the great inventor and caring father, hadn't always been so caring. Or do all heroes have their faults?

Characters (in order of appearance)

Narrator 1
Narrator 2
Polycasta (polly-CAST-uh), Daedalus' sister
Daedalus (DED-ul-us), an inventor
Carpenter
Talos (TAL-us), Daedalus' nephew

Athena (uh-THEE-nuh), goddess of wisdom
Minos (MY-nos), king of Crete
Guard
Icarus (IK-uh-rus), his son
Fisherman
Shepherd

Words to Watch For
Sicily (SIS-uh-lee), Italian island west of Greece
Introduction

Narrator 1: Once a man named Daedalus lived in Athens—the Greek city whose protector was Athena, the goddess of wisdom. One day Daedalus was making a statue of Athena, and the goddess liked it so much she decided to give him special powers. Thanks to her he became Athens' top inventor and builder. Everyone admired his cleverness at making gadgets, and his ability to solve problems that had baffled people for years. Even Aegeus, the king of Athens at the time, counted on Daedalus for advice about new buildings and special projects.

Narrator 2: But it wasn’t enough for Daedalus to be the greatest inventor in Athens. He wanted to be the only inventor in Athens. He couldn’t stand anyone else getting recognition. The great inventor even became worried that his own nephew, his apprentice, would steal some of his glory.

Scene One: The Fall

Narrator 1: In Athens, Daedalus’ reputation as a wise man and clever inventor was growing. He soaked up praise from others, especially his family members.

Polycasta: (looking at building plans her brother made) Who would have thought it? I hate to admit it—after all those fights we had as kids—but my own brother is a genius.

Daedalus: Sister, you look like you ate something that didn’t agree with you.

Polycasta: No, brother, it’s not my lunch. I’m just remembering that mother always spoiled you. And then Athena sharpened your brain like a pencil. Some people get all the luck.

Daedalus: Now don’t get upset, just because I’m famous and you’re not. My ideas will help our whole city. And if I can ever do you a favor, please let me know.

Polycasta: I was hoping you’d say that! My son, Talos, loves to build things around the house. He built a doghouse that is so comfortable, the dog refuses to come out. Then he made a mousetrap that’s so attractive, mice have been lining up to try it out. Please, take him on as your apprentice. Teach him something useful and keep him out of my hair.

Daedalus: I don’t really need anyone right now...  

Polycasta: He’ll work for free. You must need someone to clean up around here. Someone to take out the garbage? Surely Athena didn’t give you a special talent for that!
Daedalus: All right, all right. Having a kid like him around will allow me more time for my important work. He can start tomorrow. But he must remember that I’m very busy with very important people, so he needs to stay out of my way.

Narrator 2: So Talos, a youth about twelve years old, came to stay with his uncle Daedalus. At first, he quietly went about his chores in the inventor’s shop. He cleaned up the tools, washed all the dishes and took out the rubbish.

Narrator 1: One day, an Athenian came to the shop to ask Daedalus’ help. Talos was sweeping up in the corner.

Carpenter: I need a tool that can cut through wood quickly and neatly. Chopping wood with an ax is too messy and takes too long. Can you help?

Daedalus: Maybe if you used a bigger ax, or a spear. . .Hmm. . .Let me think about it. Come back in a day or two and I’ll have something for you.

Narrator 2: When the man left, Talos spoke up.

Talos: Uncle, look at this drawing I made. It’s a plan for a tool I call a “saw.” It will cut through wood more easily than an ax.

Daedalus: Hmm. . .How does it work?

Talos: See these sharp parts here that look like teeth? They cut right through the wood when you move the teeth back and forth across the wood. I came up with the idea one day when I was emptying the garbage. I saw a fish skeleton and it made me think . . .

Daedalus: Shhh! Didn’t I tell you not to disturb my thinking? Give me that silly drawing and go back to your chores!

Narrator 1: But Daedalus didn’t throw away the “silly drawing.” He used Talos’ idea to make a saw out of metal. Then he brought it to the carpenter.

Carpenter: How did you think of this. . .this “saw,” as you call it? You really are clever!

Daedalus: Oh, it just came to me one night. . .as I was taking out the garbage.

Narrator 2: Daedalus took the all credit but Talos wasn’t discouraged. He felt that someday his uncle would recognize his talent.

Talos: Look at what I’ve made, Uncle. I call it a “compass.” You can use it to draw perfect diagrams and to measure things exactly.
Daedalus: Give me that, and stop fooling around! You’ve got work to do! (to himself) I’ve got to do something about this boy before I become the “second-best” inventor in Athens.

Narrator 1: That night Daedalus couldn’t sleep, he was so angry and jealous. Finally he thought up a plan that made him feel better. He jumped out of bed and rushed over to Talos’ room.

Daedalus: Talos, I was too harsh with you today. Forgive me. Come with me now, though. I’d like you to help me on a project right now. It’s very important—on top of Athena’s temple. I could use your advice.

Talos: Wow, that would be great! But...way up there? Right now, in the middle of the night, when it’s so dark?

Daedalus: This shouldn’t take long.

Narrator 2: When they got to the roof of the temple, Daedalus carried out his evil plot.

Daedalus: I’ve been asked to build a statue for that side of the tower. Lean over the edge and tell me if you think it’s possible.

Talos: Well, it sure looks dangerous, but if you say so...

Narrator 1: As Talos leaned over, Daedalus gave him a swift push which sent the youth hurtling toward the paving stones. But before he hit the ground he quickly flapped his arms and miraculously began to move skyward.

Narrator 2: You see, Athena had watched the plot unfold and stepped in. In a flash, she turned Talos into a bird—a partridge, to be exact—and so spared his life. Then she had a few words with her former favorite.

Athena: You are a very sick man, Daedalus. I’m tempted to take back all the powers I’ve given you, but I won’t. Instead, I’m going to banish you from Athens. You must wander through the world, praying that someone will take you in. Fate will have other punishments in store for you.

Scene Two: Rise and Downfall

Narrator 1: Daedalus wandered about, sailing from country to country, until he came to the island of Crete, where the evil king Minos was looking for a great inventor. Daedalus was hired on the spot and he soon settled down, married and had a son. The boy’s name was Icarus, and Daedalus loved him very, very much.
Narrator 2: Now after years of working for Minos, Daedalus was given the job of designing the Labyrinth that would house Minos' meanest pet, the Minotaur. (For those of you who don't know, the Labyrinth is a maze and the Minotaur was a powerful creature that was killed by an Athenian named Theseus in the story before this one.) But when Theseus escaped from the Labyrinth, taking Minos' daughter Ariadne with him, someone was going to have to take the heat from Minos. That person was Daedalus.

Minos: Guards, bring the inventor to me.

Narrator 1: The palace guards brought in Daedalus, his hands bound behind him. A few steps behind the inventor, also bound, stood his son, Icarus.

Minos: What should I do with you? Theseus killed the Minotaur and escaped from the Labyrinth. Only you could have helped him do that. To make matters worse, he's run off with dear Ariadne.

Guard: Should we execute them now, your highness?

Minos: No! I've just thought of a fit punishment. Take the inventor and his son to the center of the maze and leave them there, without food or water. We'll let the inventor be trapped by his own invention!

Narrator 2: Daedalus' face became a mask of terror. When he had made the Labyrinth, even he got lost in the maze unless he had his master plans with him.

Daedalus: (thinking only about his son) I have one request, your highness. My son is afraid of the dark. Can we please have a supply of candles to take with us, so at least his last hours will be a little less frightening.

Minos: Very well, have your candles. That way, you'll be able to see each other starve.

Scene Three: In the Maze

Narrator 1: Daedalus and Icarus were blindfolded, brought to the center of the maze and set free. The guards retraced their steps, keeping the inventor and his son in their place by threatening them with arrows and spears.

Icarus: Father, what will we do? I'm already hungry. You must think of some way out of this.

Daedalus: I'm thinking as fast as I can, son. But even if we escape from this maze, Minos' army will catch us. If we make it to the sea, the king's navy will capture our ship before we're a mile from shore.
Narrator 2: Daedalus stayed awake all that night. He had just about given up hope when the chirping of birds signaled that the sun was about to rise.

Daedalus: You would have to be a bird to escape from Minos. . .That's it! Wake up, my son. We've got work to do!

Icarus: What? Father, have you gone crazy?

Daedalus: Just listen to me. Remember those bird calls I taught you? Use them now. Call down as many birds as you can. Quickly!

Narrator 1: Icarus made sounds that imitated the calls of blackbirds, seagulls and other birds. Hearing the calls, the birds swooped down toward the inventor and his son in the maze. The two quickly snatched as many feathers as they could. The lucky birds lost only a few feathers each.

Daedalus: Now, if we use the wax from the candles to hold the feathers like this. . .

Icarus: Father, please tell me what you're making.

Daedalus: I'm making wings! With these feathers and wax, I'm making wings that will carry us out of this maze and away from this island. Minos may control the land and the sea, but he doesn't rule the sky. We'll fly away!

Narrator 2: In just a day, Daedalus made sets of wings for himself and his son. Then they practiced with the wings until they knew they could fly.

Daedalus: Before we go, pay attention to my words, Icarus. Fly right behind me, do you hear? Don't fly too low, or the spray from the sea will wet your wings and pull you down. But don't fly too high either. If you fly too close to the sun, the wax that keeps the wings together will melt and you'll fall into the sea.

Icarus: Father, I promise I'll obey you.

Narrator 1: The two set out at the break of day. They flapped above the walls of the Labyrinth, and out over Minos' kingdom. The people below didn't know what to think about what they saw in the early morning sky.

Fisherman: That's the strangest pair of birds I've ever seen.

Shepherd: No, it must be two gods, visiting Earth.

Fisherman: I think I'd better go back to sleep.
Narrator 2: Once they were away from Minos’ island, Daedalus and his son whooped and shouted.

Icarus: We’re free as birds!

Daedalus: Just remember what I told you. Be careful!

Icarus: It feels great to fly! Gliding, soaring. Look at this dive I can do—and look how high I can go!

Daedalus: (alarmed) This is no time for fooling around, son. Stay close behind me. We’ve got to get to land as soon as we can.

Narrator 1: When his father’s back was turned, Icarus spread his wings and soared as high as he could. He felt the rays of the sun warming his body. He let the currents of air take him even higher, just as a the tide will sometimes carry a swimmer deeper and deeper.

Icarus: (to himself) I’ll catch up with my father in a second. After being in that cold Labyrinth, it’s great to be flying. The sun feels so good.

Narrator 2: But something began to go terribly wrong. Icarus’ wings began to get heavier and heavier. He started to feel melting wax warming his arms. When the boy turned to look to see what was happening, he saw a feather drop from his wings. Now he remembered what his father had said.

Icarus: Oh, no! Father, help me!

Narrator 1: But the boy was far behind and his voice could not reach his father’s ears.

Narrator 2: Before long, hundreds of feathers were falling from the wings and Icarus was dropping fast to the blue sea below. He waved his arms frantically but it did no good.

Narrator 1: Flying ahead, Daedalus was lost in thought.

Daedalus: Now, if I could build wings for an entire army, that would be something. We could fly back to Crete and surprise Minos. I could be king. Icarus, how long do you think it would take me to...?

Narrator 2: Turning around, he saw that he was alone in the beautiful cloudless sky. His heart pounded as he circled back, then saw what he feared most: Icarus floating lifeless in the sea.

Narrator 1: Daedalus landed on the first island he saw and convinced the fishermen there to bring back the body of his son. He buried Icarus on that island.
Narrator 2: As he said goodbye to his son, he noticed a bird sitting on a branch of the tree overlooking the grave. It was a partridge—the kind of bird his nephew Talos had become when Daedalus pushed him off the temple of Athena so many years before. At last, Daedalus understood how wrong and cruel that plan had been, now that his own son’s life had been taken from him.

Narrator 1: For the rest of his life, it is said, Daedalus lived quietly on the island of Sicily, making toys for the children there. He easily could have won fame and fortune if he had built on his flying ideas, but the death of his son caused the inventor to hang up his wings—and his desire for fame—forever.

The End