

Labyrinth

Part 1: the death of Talos

[begins at 0 min 0 sec]

Imagine a tyrant. Imagine a king so powerful, so vicious that other kings from all over the world sent him ships laden with treasures and tributes each month to appease his anger. Imagine King Minos of Crete. One of the kings who sent him treasure was the king of a city far away to the north, King Aegeus of Athens.

Owl-eyed Athene, the goddess of war and wisdom, loved the city of Athens. She loved the people of Athens. Most of all she loved those people who are like herself: quick, clever, crafty and cunning. She was very, very fond of an inventor called Daedalus. He had made a sword so sharp that it never struck in battle without slaying its victim. He had made a room in the root of a volcano that was warm even in the coldest of winters. He had made a golden honeycomb that was so lifelike that even the bees would crawl across it searching for sweetness.

But the one she loved the most of all was Daedalus' nephew, a boy called Talos. He was only twelve years old but he was the cleverest of them all. When he was eight he had invented the first maze, a labyrinth for his pet rat. When he was ten he had invented the first kite, made from the feathers of a bird. And now the boy was twelve and he was sitting with his uncle eating fish stew. He was spooning the meat into his mouth and spitting out the bones. When the stew was finished, he reached into his bowl and pulled out a fish's jaw bone. He felt the row of sharp teeth with the tip of his finger. And suddenly the boy smiled to himself and dropped the bone. Daedalus watched him. He wondered what was running through the boy's mind.

And the next morning Daedalus was walking past the Acropolis, the great temple to Athene that stands on a cliff top high above the city of Athens. And suddenly he heard a strange sound, a strange rasping sound, coming from the other side of the wall. He peered round a corner and he saw his nephew. Talos had fashioned the very first saw with a row of bronze teeth like the teeth of a fish, and he was cutting through a piece of wood. Daedalus was filled with jealous rage, a bitter yellow bubbling seething rage in the pit of his belly that he couldn't control. 'Why didn't I think of it myself? Why didn't I think of it myself?' He grabbed the boy by the scruff of the neck and hurled him over the edge of the cliff. And Talos fell, flailing, plunging, tumbling through the air.

But nothing was hidden from the eyes of the mighty gods and goddesses. Owl-eyed Athene saw her favourite falling to his death. And straightaway Talos felt feathers pushing out of his arms. He felt feathers pushing out of his body. He felt his mouth hardening into a beak. He felt a plume of feathers bursting out of the top of his head. The goddess had turned him into a bird, a lapwing, the very first lapwing. Talos beat his feathered arms against the air, and he flew, a strange, lifting, tumbling flight, never very far from the ground. For the lapwing is the only bird afraid of heights. Talos has never forgotten his awful fall.

Part 2: at the court of King Minos

[begins at 4 min 14 sec]

When King Aegeus, the king of Athens, heard that Daedalus had tried to murder his nephew he sent soldiers to seize him so that he could be punished for his crime. But Daedalus was quick and crafty and clever. He'd climbed on to a boat that was sailing southwards and southwards again to the island of Crete. King Minos and his queen Pasiphae welcomed the famous inventor. He brought them gifts. To Minos he gave a bronze map of his island kingdom. Every hill, every river was etched into the shining surface. To Queen Pasiphae he gave a jointed statue of a woman that could be bent and turned into every posture. To their daughter, to Princess Ariadne, he gave a golden crown. With a single spark from stone against stone it could be set aflame and fill even the darkest of nights with brightness. Very quickly Daedalus became the favourite of King Minos.

One night Daedalus was summoned to the king's private rooms. 'I'm sure' said the king 'it seems to you

that I want for nothing. I am rich. I have a fleet of ships that strikes terror into the hearts of countless kings. But the gods are cruel. What is the point of an empire without a son? You, above all other mortals, are the maker of solutions. Make me a solution. Make me a son, and in return I will make you rich.'

Daedalus bowed his head and set to work. He made a solution, a potion that Queen Pasiphae had to drink on a night when the moon was in the constellation of the Bull. Queen Pasiphae became pregnant. Minos was overjoyed. He showered gifts on Daedalus. A nursery was prepared, the walls painted with pictures and patterns. Queen Pasiphae's belly grew and grew. 'It's a son!' said the king. 'I know it is a son that is growing inside you. What name shall we give him?' 'It is thanks to the stars that he came to us' said the queen, 'We should thank the stars for him.' So they agreed the child would be called 'Asterius' which means 'of the stars'.

The days turned to weeks, the weeks into months. After five months she was enormous. Six... Seven... Eight... She could no longer walk; she took to her bed. After another month she went into labour. Minos was fetched. He sent away the nurses. He wanted to be the first to lay eyes on his son. But when the child was born King Minos' face fell. The boy had the head, the horns, of a bull. 'Fetch Daedalus!' The inventor was brought. 'Look at it! Look what you've done! Get rid of it!' 'No!' said Pasiphae. 'You cannot kill my only child.' Daedalus looked from raving king to sobbing queen. Somehow he had to please them both. 'Great king, I'll make a prison for you, a prison from which he will never escape.' He turned to the queen. 'Always he will be near you and he will want for nothing.' 'At once! You will begin at once!' (7:39)

Daedalus remembered the maze his nephew Talos had made for his pet rat. In the caves beneath the palace Daedalus made a marvellous matrix of corridors and chambers, a labyrinth of such complexity that if any human being – apart from its maker – took three steps into the dark they'd be utterly lost. In the centre of the maze he hollowed out a chamber. A chute was dug from the palace above, a chute down which food and drink could be lowered. Everything from the child's bedroom, the cot, the clothes, the toys, were placed in the chamber below. One night, while horn-headed Asterius was fast asleep, Daedalus took the child in his arms and carried him into the maze. He placed him in the cot in the central chamber and then he slipped away.

Up above Queen Pasiphae stood at the top of the chute. She heard her son wake and cry for his mother. He cried and cried but he didn't die. He found the food and drink that had been left for him. He grew bigger and stronger. In a way, what Daedalus had said was true: the child wanted for nothing. He had food, clothes, toys. But he never knew the touch of the sun on his skin. His only company were the bats and rats and birds who made the maze their home.

The days turned to weeks. The weeks turned to months. The months became years. Fifteen years went by. Queen Pasiphae went to her husband. 'It is so long since we've heard any sound from ... I'm afraid. I think he is dead.' Minos sent a human chain into the labyrinth, a chain of servants holding hands. King and queen stood at the top of the chute. They heard sniffing, shouts of alarm, bellowing, shouting, ripping, screaming, tearing, chewing, and then snoring. Daedalus crept into the maze. When returned he said, 'He ate them. Why shouldn't he? He's been given the flesh of cows to eat. No one has told him it is wrong to eat the flesh of men and women.'

From then on Asterius refused all other food. He threw himself against the walls of his prison. He snorted and bellowed. There was no peace in the palace. Daedalus was sent for. 'What should we do?' said Minos. 'You have a choice,' said Daedalus. 'Give him what he wants or let him starve to death.' Not even King Minos could listen to the sound of his own son wasting away. So he sent seven young men into the maze, and then another seven, and then another. Only young men, because Minos hated the sight of them. Whenever he saw a young man of princely and noble bearing he was reminded of his own son, that thing of shame skulking in the shadows.

Daedalus shuddered. He had a secret son, whom he'd had by a slave woman. He was a beautiful, golden-

haired boy called Icarus. Daedalus knew that, if Minos heard of the boy's existence, he would be filled with jealousy, and Minos would send the boy to a terrible death. So Daedalus had hidden Icarus in a secret chamber in his private palace. Daedalus went to Minos and said, 'Many nations fear you. What if you were to demand that each nation send seven young men a year to join your army?' And so it was. Each nation sent seven young men, seven young men who would never be heard of again. Rumours travelled from Crete with trading ships, rumours of a flesh-eating beast beneath Minos' palace.

Part 3: Theseus arrives in Crete

[begins at 12 min 6 sec]

The turn of Athens came around and King Aegeus could not bring himself to send seven young Athenians to such a horrible death. Across the sea Minos waited. Eventually, furious, he sent a fleet of ships towards Athens. The people of Athens saw the ships of King Minos slicing through the waves. Every man and woman and child shuddered. They'd heard stories about Minos' monstrous son and the word 'Minotaur' had been whispered from mouth to ear. As soon as the ships reached the quayside King Minos and his soldiers leapt ashore. They marched through the streets of Athens and wherever they saw a young man of noble or princely bearing Minos would shout 'Seize him!'

Six young men had been taken when they reached the palace of King Aegeus. They climbed the steps and entered the throne room. And standing behind the king's throne there was a beautiful young man. With a crown of laurel leaves on his head he looked like a god. He could almost have been Ares, the beautiful god of war. King Minos lifted his arm and pointed. 'He will be the seventh!' King Aegeus threw himself on to the ground at Minos' feet. 'Please! He is my own son, my only son, Theseus. I beg you, spare his life!' Minos kicked the king aside. 'Seize him!' But before the soldiers could grab him Theseus walked forwards of his own free will, with a strange half-smile, half-sneer flickering between his nose and his chin. 'No need to bind my arms. I come happily of my own free will. You know what they say: like father, like son. I look forward to meeting your Minotaur.'

The seven Athenian youths were put in an Athenian ship, a ship with black sails because everybody knew that they were sailing to their deaths. The next morning, King Aegeus and a beautiful Athenian woman called Aigle went down to the quayside. Aigle saw Theseus leaning over the rail of the ship and she threw her arms around his neck. 'Theseus, you will not forget me, will you?' 'Aigle, I will never forget you and when I return, my sword sticky with the monster's blood, I will make you a queen of Athens.' And then King Aegeus spoke to his son, 'Theseus, if you die it will break my heart. But if by the grace of the mighty gods you return safely home to Athens, then please, I beg you, swap these black sails for white sails, so that I may know the best or the worst before any word is spoken.' Theseus bowed his head. 'Father, I promise.' And then the ropes were untied and the black-sailed ship left the harbour, surrounded by the white-sailed ships of King Minos of Crete.

For three days and nights they sailed. And when at last they reached the island of Crete, there was a blaring of horns and trumpets. The seven Athenian youths were led to the palace by a glittering procession. They were invited to sit down to a feast. But as they tasted the savoury meats and sipped the sweet wines they could hear the sound of keys turning in locks and they knew that they were trapped. That night they slept on silken sheets under purple blankets, but the next morning there were only six of them at the breakfast table. As they ate they heard the distant sound of terrible screaming from somewhere far, far below. Five pushed their plates away. But Theseus chewed his food and listened, that strange half-smile, half-sneer playing across his face, while King Minos entertained his guests. The finest Cretan runners and leapers and wrestlers and archers were invited to compete with them, and Theseus defeated every one of them.

And in the evenings Princess Ariadne would dance for them, her blazing crown on her head making the shadows of the hall dance with her. And then one morning there were five of them at the breakfast table. And then there were four. And Ariadne couldn't take her eyes off Theseus. When he was running or

wrestling she would be watching him. When she was dancing her eyes were fixed on him. And Theseus felt the weight of her gaze and he smiled to himself. And then there were three of them at the breakfast table. And then one morning, two. When no one was watching Theseus seized Ariadne's hand. 'Ariadne, from the moment I first saw you I have loved you. I could have made you so happy. I could have taken you to Athens. I could have made you a queen.' She looked at him and tears trickled down her cheeks. Then she shook her head, pulled her hand away and ran out of the hall.

Part 4: Theseus kills the Minotaur

[begins at 18 min 4 sec]

And then one morning Theseus found that he was alone at the breakfast table. He waited for his chance and then approached Ariadne again. He whispered, 'Ariadne, is there nobody who could help me? If I could escape, I would take you with me.' And Ariadne couldn't help herself. She melted into his arms. She pressed her lips to his lips. And she said, 'Yes, yes, there is someone.' She broke from his embrace and she ran out of the hall, straight to the chambers of Daedalus. 'I want you to help this Theseus defeat my brother.' 'I cannot, your father would be furious with me.' 'You must. If you don't, I will tell my father about your secret son. Oh yes, I have seen what my parents have not, I've seen little Icarus. And when my father lays eyes on your boy, I know as well as you what will happen: Icarus will be sent into the maze to be devoured. So I say again: you will help Theseus.'

Daedalus bowed his head and set to work. That night he crept out of the palace and placed just inside the maze, to the left, the things Theseus would need to kill the monster. And that night Ariadne crept into Theseus' bed chamber. She leaned over the bed. 'My love, when they take you to the labyrinth feel among the shadows to your left. You will find my crown to light your way. You will find a ball of golden thread so that you won't get lost, and you will find a bronze sword for my brother. I will be waiting for you outside. She kissed him and slipped away.

Next day, King Minos was amazed: Theseus came out of his bedroom of his own free will. No need to drag him, screaming. Surely by now he understood his fate? And yet he was cracking jokes with the guards. Down to the maze they went. The darkness swallowed him, and there was silence. Theseus felt among the shadows. His fingers closed around Ariadne's crown. He lifted it on to his head. He felt for the two stones and struck them together and the crown blazed with light. Now he could see. He tied the end of the ball of golden thread to a snag of rock. He picked up the bronze sword. He began to make his way into the labyrinth, unravelling the thread as he went. He wound to the left and the right. Above his head the shadows danced. Below his feet there were shreds of rag and splinters of bone picked clean.

And then suddenly he could hear it grunting and snorting. And then he could smell it, the sour smell of stale sweat and the sickly sweet stench of rotten flesh. And then, as he rounded a bend, he saw it, the human body, the great bull head, the Minotaur. Asterius was filled with terror. His night sight had never endured such brightness before. It was as though pins were being thrust into his eyes. He lurched. He lost his balance, blinded. Theseus laughed. This was easy. He plunged his sword into the beast's belly. Asterius, on his hands and knees, felt something pierce his skin over and over. He wanted to beg for mercy but no one had taught him the words with which to speak, so he screamed. Up above King Minos heard the screaming. That was a human sound. A human was dying, not a monster. Theseus was dead. Again and again Theseus stabbed the Minotaur. He stabbed its neck, its arms, its knees, its chest. He opened up a constellation of wounds. It sank down, and Theseus seized one of the monster's horns and hacked off its head.

He wound in the golden thread and followed the tunnels to the right and the left, dragging the great head behind him. At last he saw the entrance. He crouched and waited until the night came. Ariadne was waiting outside. When the stars were shining Theseus came out and he lifted the great bull head, the head of her brother. He thrust it on to a stake and then he seized Ariadne's hand and they ran to the harbour. They jumped on to the deck of the Athenian ship, they cut the ropes and sailed away. But before they left

the harbour they set fire to all the Cretan ships so that a black pall of smoke rose into the sky, extinguishing the light of the stars.

'Your highnesses must come at once!' King Minos and Queen Pasiphae were woken by a servant. Minos and Pasiphae dressed themselves. They passed a window and saw smoke rising from the harbour. They went to their daughter's bedroom. Her bed had not been slept in. They rushed to the maze to find the dripping head of Asterius on a spike. Minos ground his teeth with fury. Queen Pasiphae cradled the head of her son and wept. Soldiers were sent to the chambers of Daedalus. They found him with a young man. So alike were they that the boy had to be Daedalus' son. Both of them were dragged to the king. 'Look where all your cleverness has brought us. My fleet is at the bottom of the harbour and my daughter has fled with Theseus.' 'Your highness,' said Daedalus 'I beg you, please don't put us in that dreadful place below.' King Minos grinned. 'So, you will rot in a maze of your own making.'

Daedalus and Icarus were slung into the labyrinth. Daedalus reached up to a secret ledge. He'd hidden candles there. He lit one and set to work. Nearby a pigeon was nesting in a crevice. He took it. He stretched out its left wing. He took the furthest feather between finger and thumb, and pulled. The bird shrieked and flew up. Daedalus snatched it from the air. He stretched out the right wing. He took the furthest feather between finger and thumb, and pulled. Each time he removed a feather he studied the bird's attempts at flight and he learned much. Little Icarus watched, fascinated. He saw a fluffy feather at his feet. He picked it up and blew. It lifted at the command of his breath, then fell.

Part 5: Theseus returns to Athens

[begins at 25 min 16 sec]

Meanwhile Ariadne and Theseus sailed from Crete. Ariadne had never been so happy. Every night Theseus would whisper promises into her ears: 'Such wealth, such happiness will be ours when you become a queen of Athens.' After two days they came to the island of Naxos. Theseus suggested they go ashore for fresh meat and fruit. And that night they lit a fire on the beach. They ate, they talked, they laughed, they danced in the firelight, and then they slept in the warmth of the embers.

But in the middle of the night Ariadne woke. She was alone. She sat up and looked about herself. By the light of the moon she could see the Athenian ship, she could see the anchor chain was being lifted, she could see the sails were being unfurled. She ran down to the water's edge. 'Theseus!' From the deck of the ship came the sound of laughter, cold, hard laughter. 'Sister of a bull, these were all you gave me that were worth anything. Take them back!' There was a thud behind her, then another, then a third. She turned and saw her crown, the ball of golden thread and the bronze sword lying on the sand. 'Sister of a bull, ponder this as you wander the coast of Naxos bellowing and blaring. I never loved you. I never, ever loved you. The only one I ever loved was Aigle and soon she will be in my arms, a queen of Athens.' The wind filled the sails, the prow of the ship sliced through the waves and Theseus was gone. Ariadne dropped to her knees. She buried her face in her hands and trembled with sobs.

But nothing is hidden from the mighty gods. Dionysus, the god of drinking and drunkenness, wild music and wild dancing, looked down from the high slopes of Mount Olympus and he saw her. And he felt pity stirring in his heart. He strode down from the heavens, and he lifted her to her feet. 'Ariadne,' he said 'Theseus might have made you a queen of Athens, but I will make you a queen of the heavens.' He picked up her crown and set it in the sky as a constellation, a constellation we can still see to this day. And then he led her up to the high slopes of Mount Olympus where she became his consort, his queen.

Meanwhile Theseus sailed homewards. All day he sailed and as the sun was sinking at last he saw the city of Athens ahead of him. He could see the cliffs, he could see there were people standing on the cliff tops. He sheltered his eyes from the setting sun. Was Aigle there? Was she waiting for him? And then suddenly he saw a figure falling, flailing, plunging from cliff to sea. Who could it be? He looked up above his head and suddenly his heart sank. He had forgotten to swap black sails for white sails. His father, King Aegeus, thinking his son was dead, had hurled himself down to his death. And soon Theseus could see his father's

broken body bobbing in the waves. With a boathook he lifted him on to the deck of the ship. He knelt beside the dripping corpse of Aegeus and for the first time Theseus knew sorrow. And from that day to this that body of water has been known as the 'Aegean Sea'.

Part 6: Daedalus escapes from Crete

[begins at 29 min 31 sec]

Once again Daedalus had bent nature to his will. With the bones of the dead and wax and feathers and linen thread Daedalus had made two pairs of wonderful wings. 'Listen to me, my son. Minos controls both land and sea, but he cannot control the air. You and I will fly to freedom. Day has not yet come. Follow me. If you fly too high, the heat of the sun will melt the wax that binds feather to bone. If you fly too low, the waves will splash against your wings and their sodden weight will drag you down. Ride the gusts I ride.' They went outside. No soldiers guarded the entrance; there was no need. Minos controlled both land and sea. The sky above was bright with stars. They made their way to a cliff. They strapped on the wings. They embraced. They ran to the cliff edge and jumped. They beat their feathered arms against the air. They rose.

They rose into the cool sky. Every surging gust of wind made Icarus cry out with joy. All through his life he'd hidden in dusty corners for fear of the anger of King Minos. Now, the broad sky above him and the dark sea beneath, he saw a band of red ahead: day was coming. Island after island passed by beneath, some no more than rocks jutting out of the sea, some peopled with farms and fields. Farmers and shepherds gazed and gaped. One man on his roof looked up, glimpsed Icarus, gasped and toppled from his perch. Icarus laughed at the little figures shouting, pointing far below.

A wave of wind lifted him higher. He lurched and a feather fell. He looked up to see the bird that had shed it, but above he saw only the fierce eye of the sun. A shower of feathers was falling now. Ahead Daedalus looked back to check on the progress of Icarus, to see his son tumbling, flailing, screaming and breaking against the surface of the sea. Daedalus flew to the nearest island and found a fisherman's boat. He rowed out across the water and retrieved the corpse of his son. Daedalus' hot tears splashed against the boy's face and for the first time Daedalus knew sorrow. And ever since then that body of water has been known as the 'Icarian Sea'.

And so it was that a son buried his father. And as Theseus walked away from the grave of old Aegeus he was aware of a strange light blazing high overhead. He looked up and there was a new constellation in the sky, a cirlet of mocking stars: Ariadne's shining crown.

And far away a father buried his son. As Daedalus dug the grave, from the corner of his eye he glimpsed something in the sky. He looked up to see a black and white bird rising and plunging. Every time the bird plummeted Daedalus thought of his son and sobbed. Then he remembered another falling boy. He remembered Talos whom he'd pushed off a cliff in Athens, Talos who had been transformed into a bird. Daedalus watched the lapwing mocking him, and he wept.