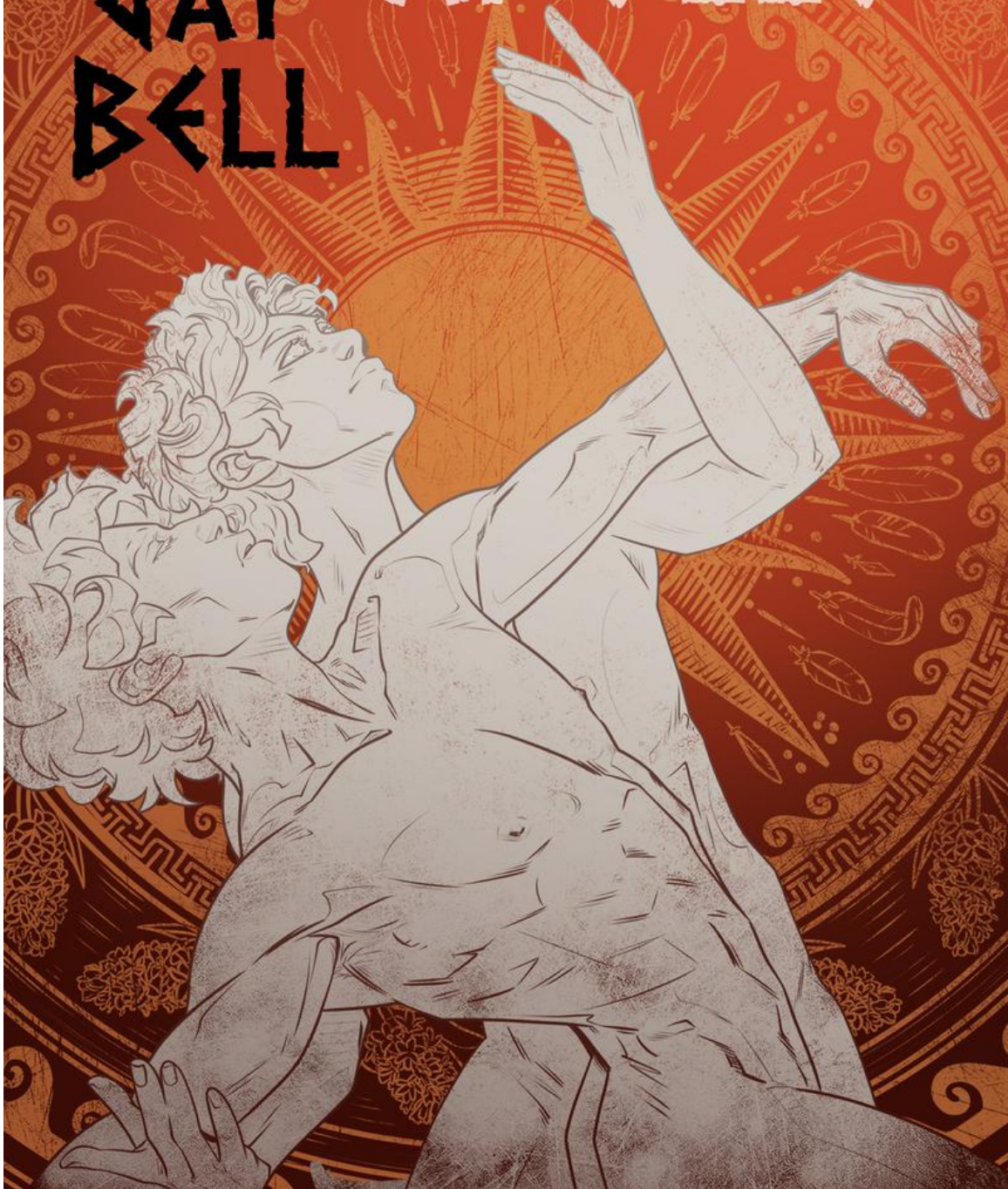


IKARUS AND JAY APOLLO BELL



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Icarus and Apollo

by Jay Bell

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“Your name shall live forever, my son, heralded not only in legend, but etched into the very stars themselves. Icarus, the boy—no, the *man* who... Well, that’s what we’re here to figure out.”

I observe, impassive, as Daedalus bounds around his workshop, spry despite his many years. He gestures at countless inventions, most of them wooden and sculpted by his own hand, reminding me what a great man my father is. At my age he was already a world-renowned carpenter, the first artisan of his kind—if the stories are to be believed. He has since become a master of his craft, and like the gods themselves, is capable of turning dreams into reality. I once watched him carve a miniature horse out of wood and make it walk, and yet, he still insists that no magic was involved.

“Perhaps this is what you seek,” Daedalus says, gesturing at a contraption the height and width of an ox.

The confusing jumble of parts looks as though two wooden carts collided and became inseparable. When my father starts cranking the handle attached to one wheel, another begins spinning, and the contraption no longer resembles a wreck. The whirring sound and rhythmic motion is like nothing I’ve seen before. I doubt anyone has. Precious few are allowed to enter Daedalus’s workshop. Not even the king himself. That was one of the many stipulations my father insisted upon when fleeing to Crete. Impenetrable privacy. King Minos was happy to grant these wishes, in exchange for access to my father’s genius, of course. He even allowed Daedalus to design a new workshop when we arrived on the island. I was just a boy when I watched the crew of workers build what would become my new home, certain the pain in my heart would never cease. I missed Athens dearly, but we had no other choice but to leave.

On occasion, I still long to return there, although at the moment I’d settle for retreating to my private chambers. In particular the window with a view of the sea. From there—when ignoring the cliffs below—all I can see are two different shades of blue separated by a thin line where water meets sky. I’ve often stood there dreaming of what might lie beyond the horizon. Too often perhaps, which is why my father is now glaring at me.

“Well?” Daedalus insists, still cranking the wheel. “Aren’t you impressed?”

“I struggle to comprehend what my eyes are witnessing,” I admit.

“Because nothing like it has existed before. With this you can plant seeds faster than even the most seasoned farmer. You’ve noticed the curved spades? They penetrate the ground, leaving a hole behind, which is then filled by a seed poured from the receptacle here. The plow attached to the back pushes soil over each hole again, all in a matter of seconds.” Daedalus finally stops cranking the handle, wiping his hands on the linen chiton he wears. I feel the weight of his expectations, each of which I have repeatedly failed to meet. Or even guess.

“You want me to become a farmer?”

“By the Furies, no!” Daedalus says, shaking his head. “I do wish you would pay attention, Icarus. I am willing to *give* this invention to you, by which I mean more than mere possession. Your only task is to figure out how to automatically water the soil once the seeds are planted. A trivial conundrum. I would have solved it myself had I not grown bored.”

I stare at him blankly, still lost. “And once your creation can water seeds as well as plant them? What then?”

Daedalus sighs. “Your creation, not mine. Think of your reputation, Icarus. I’ve already secured the king’s favor. I no longer need to impress the public. You have no reputation of your own, but once you do, success will seek you out rather than the other way around.”

“I know nothing of farming, Father. How much water will be needed? What sort of animal will pull this cart? What happens when the seeds run out?”

“Good!” Daedalus says, his fists clenching in excitement. “The solution to every problem begins with inquiries. Venture out into the fields and observe the farmers at work. Ask them of their needs. Take what I have designed and search for its shortcomings. Make each problem your foe and vanquish it with your intellect!”

I approach the machine and try to decipher its inner workings, but I fail to comprehend why some of the wheels are sideways and notched, as though rodents mistook them for cheese and gnawed

around the edges. I crank the wheel as my father did, no more enlightened when the motion slows to a crawl. My father's eyes are shining optimistically as he watches me, but it's hopeless. I shake my head, having failed him once again.

To his credit, Daedalus hides his disappointment by turning away as if searching. "There must be something here to inspire you," he murmurs. "Cast your gaze over a lifetime of work. What intrigues you? The chair with no legs? The chest that can only be unlocked by pressing on a hidden panel? Or here, perhaps this! Wood that will not burn and is much too heavy to float. Surely together we can find a purpose for it. Doesn't the riddle stimulate your mind? Imagine the possibilities!"

I can't give him what he wants. My father yearns for an intellect equal to his own or, if the accusations are true, one that is slightly inferior. Meeting him even halfway is beyond my abilities. I've never been a creature of thought. My eyes move toward the back of the workshop, where heavy cotton sheets are draped over a collection of wooden statues the same height as me. I've yearned to see them again. One in particular. Occasions such as these are rare though. There are few exceptions to my father's demand for privacy. I might live above the workshop, and occasionally set foot in it, but never have I been allowed to explore it freely. He must be truly desperate to invite me in like this, but I understand why. In my twenty years of life, I have failed to discover my purpose, and despite my father's wishes, I am unlikely to find it today. Daedalus isn't being cruel by bringing me here. To him this is an act of kindness. He's presenting his achievements to me—those that he has no use for, true, but they are still impressive accomplishments. Despite his generosity, I am unable to please him or make his talent my own. Even he is doomed to fail in this quest. I focus instead on my own needs, so the day won't be a complete waste.

"What about these?" I ask, moving to the covered statues.

"You've shown no inclination for the arts," Daedalus says doubtfully. "An appreciation, yes, but—"

"I was younger when you tried teaching me," I say, worried that I'll be forced to look instead at another of his inventions. "Why are these

hidden away? The statues you made of Minos and his family are on public display. And what about those in The Hall of Heroes? People flock from all around to view them. Why not these too?"

"Because some feel they are disrespectful to the gods," Daedalus mutters. "My detractors insist that divine beings should be immortalized only in a material as timeless as they are, but marble cannot capture the same level of detail, and I refuse to limit my capabilities."

"That would indeed be a shame," I reply, my mouth dry. I know he won't let me uncover them all. His patience will exhaust itself first. I have one chance, two at best. The cloth draped over each statue reaches the floor, obscuring even the feet. I attempt to draw from memory, remembering how, as a boy, I repeatedly snuck into my father's workshop. That was back in Athens, before he became so paranoid. My father had been more open then, in both his social interactions and his work. He had shared his knowledge freely, attempting to pass on much of it to me, but I was too distracted to focus on any one thing for long.

Except for *him*. Not my father, but a nameless lover. I had wanted nothing more than for us to be together. I didn't truly comprehend what that meant at the time, but I was compelled nonetheless. I know my father considers me to be without motivation. He likely fears that I am empty inside. That couldn't be further from the truth. Ideas and innovation don't occupy my mind. Thoughts have never guided me. Feelings, on the other hand...

At times I picture myself as a vessel, a cauldron filled to the brim with raw emotion. This has often motivated me to leave the protective walls of my home, but not to seek out problems to solve like my father does, or people to help like my brother made a career of. Love is my true calling. I have so much of it to give, and give I have, many times over. My lovers are rarely casual, each relationship becoming my sole focus. Perhaps to my detriment. I shower the men I adore with endless attention, my affection knowing no bounds. Most try to love me in return, and they succeed to some degree, but never with the same intensity. I felt rejected the first few times my devotion wasn't reciprocated in full, but I've come to realize

that they weren't to blame. Just as I am incapable of meeting my father's expectations, my lovers simply aren't able to feel as passionately as I do. Instead they seem confused by my behavior, almost uncomfortable, until the inevitable end sets them free again.

As for me, I remain a prisoner of my own heart. Am I built differently perhaps? Or am I deluding myself? If I loved any of those men so deeply, how could I ever abandon them? But I always have, with one embarrassing exception:

I've been enamored with a statue since I was a boy.

I realize how ridiculous that sounds, but it's true. And without being alive or capable of wrapping his arms around me, this lover still managed to touch my heart. I'm relieved to learn that he is divine in nature. No wonder mere mortals haven't been able to compete. Who is he though? Eros? Or another of Aphrodite's children? I walk along the row of statues, unable to tell them apart, so I search inside myself for the answer, my pulse quickening when I stand before one in particular. My hand trembles as I reach for dusty cotton and pull. A gasp escapes my throat as the cloth tumbles to the ground. My heart didn't lead me astray. I found him! After all these years, we are reunited. I've been told that memory is the greatest of deceivers, but my own has served me well. I remembered him being the embodiment of perfection, and he remains so. Locks of wavy hair drape themselves fondly across his forehead and over his ears, no doubt honored to frame a face so delicate and serene. I stare hungrily at intimately familiar lips before letting my attention move over his naked body, the pale wood so similar in tone to skin that it's as if I'm standing before another living creature. My fingers twitch, wanting to caress the curve of his rounded shoulders before pressing my palms against the strong chest. My gaze races across the gentle hillocks of his stomach to the tuft of hair between his perfectly formed hips, my mouth salivating at the thought of tasting him intimately. I want to fall to my knees so I can run my hand up a thigh or bow so I can kiss his feet in admiration, because he is everything I have sought since reaching maturity. An impossible ideal and an unlikely dream. But at least my affections won't scare him away like they did the others.

"I never did get the nose quite right," my father says, bending over to peer up it.

I ignore him and continue to stare, convinced that there is only one flaw. The eyes are lifeless. My father did a commendable job of making them appear otherwise, but as I stare into them now, I don't sense them looking back at me. They are devoid of emotion. Perhaps that is my destiny, to pour my limitless fervor into this creation. Would that animate him, allowing us to finally be together?

"What's his name?" I ask.

"Apollo," my father answers. "God of music, prophecy, archery, and of course—"

"The sun," I whisper in awe. A thousand moments spent in the rays of his light flash through my mind, and I feel joy, because he's been with me all this time. Years haven't separated us. Only the night can do that, and even then, Apollo always leaves his mark upon me, my tanned skin covered in his kisses until our dance can resume the next morning.

"This is what I want," I tell my father.

"If you had a gift for sculpting," Daedalus says, shaking his head, "we would have discovered it when you were still young."

"Apollo calls to me." I turn to my father, needing him to recognize my sincerity. "Perhaps I am meant to serve as his priest. Or I could build a temple in his honor."

"He already has a temple, lad."

"Then I'll build another that's grander, one that reflects the light of the sun, even on a cloudy day, so that people a hundred miles away can still witness his majesty."

"That *would* present quite the challenge," Daedalus says, tugging at his beard. "I'm pleased you are finally showing initiative, but perhaps you should begin with something more easily achieved. A model of the temple, for instance, to demonstrate your ideas on a smaller scale."

"A model," I repeat, my shoulders slumping, because I can already imagine what this will entail. Months and months locked away in this workshop, when all I really want is to bask in Apollo's

glory. "Maybe I should become a farmer." At least then I would be out in the field, under the warmth of his gaze.

"You certainly have the build," my father says, placing a hand on my muscled shoulder. "But you are destined for greater things than laboring the soil. You've been touched by Zeus himself, I know it."

He reaches up to tousle my hair, which has been stark white since the day I was born. I have often cursed it, since it only fuels my father's delusion that I will become more than I already am.

His hand squeezes my shoulder before pulling away again. "Don't allow yourself to get discouraged so easily, Icarus. Discipline will be your most valuable companion on the road to success. Come along. I have all the materials you'll need right over here."

I follow him to one of his workbenches. I know the names of the tools, and the intended purpose of each. He managed to impart that much. Only the skill required to wield them eludes me.

"It's quite simple," Daedalus says, grabbing wood that has already been shaved of its bark. "Let's begin with the shape. When you say the sun will be reflected for others to see, what exactly do you imagine?"

"I don't know," I say, my mind too filled with dreams of Apollo to have room for anything else. "It would work in the same way that light reflects off water."

"Good! But where will that light be reflected? At a single destination? A neighboring village perhaps. Or in all directions?"

"I'm not sure," I mumble. "Maybe we shouldn't start with that." I look back over my shoulder longingly. "There would have to be a statue of him, of course. Can I have that one?"

"I'll make you another ten times its size," Daedalus replies.

I don't want it. Apollo is already outside my reach. I imagine craning my neck to see his face, only for it to be lost in the shadowy roof of a temple. "Have you ever met him?" I ask.

"Apollo?" Daedalus shakes his head. "Never. I've seen enough of the gods' handiwork to wisely steer clear of them." He winces before his head whips around to consider the statues warily. "Out of respect, of course," he adds. "Although I admit it would be fascinating to meet a deity, if only to examine them up close."

"You haven't met *any* of the gods?"

"Correct."

I'm not pleased by this news. Was I in love with nothing more than an image my father invented? "Then how do you know what they look like?"

"Inspiration. Although when it comes to Apollo, I consulted with your brother on the details."

"Iapyx?" I snort, thinking of a younger version of my father, who spent most of his formative years poring over scrolls. Little has changed. What could he know of a sun god when he rarely ventures outside?

"Yes," Daedalus confirms. "I believe he encountered Apollo during his studies. Did he never tell you?"

"No," I say through gritted teeth, jealousy already stirring inside my chest. "Somehow he failed to mention that." Then again, my brother and I only speak to each other when strictly necessary. "When did this occur?"

"At the beginning of his studies. Apollo was quite smitten with him."

"*Smitten*?" I repeat in disbelief.

"Indeed. We're lucky he didn't turn Iapyx into a tree or something worse. You know how the gods can be." Daedalus grimaces and addresses the statues again. "Their methods are often too enlightened for us mere mortals to comprehend."

Now I see why he had the statues covered up. I've only heard him express reverence to the gods in fearful tones. I don't blame him, considering the stories that surround them, but like most gossip, I'm certain that fabrication plays a greater role than fact. After all, the world itself is beautiful, as is life itself, and both are generous gifts from the gods. They must be capable of great kindness as well as fearsome judgment.

"On to more important subjects," Daedalus says. "Pay close attention, Icarus. Many have sought my guidance as a teacher, and I have turned them all away, but not you, my child."

I try to listen as he lectures, but it's difficult when destiny is calling to me from the other side of the room. I have also been sought out

by many, even if my father doesn't value the reason why. I too have also served in the role of teacher and felt frustrated that none of my students were capable of mastering my lessons. Now I understand why. The depth of affection I seek can only be found in the heart of a divine lover.

* * * * *

"So you see, a circular design in this instance will not only allow for the equal distribution of light, but also create uniformity no matter which angle the temple is viewed from. The correlation between the central dome and the shape of the sun will act as a much-needed reminder of—"

"My apologies, Master Daedalus."

I look up from the workbench to see Dion, my father's oldest and most dedicated servant who, for reasons I've never been able to determine, doesn't have a single hair on his head. Not even an eyelash. I hope he's here to tell us that a hydra has set fire to the island and that we must sail away immediately. Anything to escape the monotony of the past two hours. It's just as well that my father never teaches, since his methods consist primarily of a "move over and let me show you how it's done" mentality. He's already gone through four different temple designs before settling on the current one, using blocks of wood and whatever materials were handy to construct a miniature temple that will, admittedly, be a fitting tribute to Apollo once fully realized.

"I said no interruptions," my father snaps, and without missing a beat, his lecture resumes. "—the magnificence of geometry that most choose to overlook in their daily lives. Now then, we can reassert this theme by arranging the outermost columns so they—"

"I'm terribly sorry," Dion tries again, "I beg your forgiveness, but it truly is important."

"—fall within the line of the outer perimeter," Daedalus continues unabashedly, "so when viewed from above, they will create an unbroken circle. Do you see? The dome itself is round, as are the pillars. I wonder if I should design a circular door as well. It would be impractical, but challenging. What do you think?"

My attention is still on our servant, whose expression is pleading with me to intervene. I think. The lack of eyebrows makes it hard to be certain. "Father," I say. "Dion has been with us for as long as I can remember, and he's never interrupted your work like this before. He would only do so if he had information crucial to your wellbeing."

"Hmm?" Daedalus says, picking up a chisel and hammer. "Oh very well. What is it?"

"The king's daughter insists on seeing you immediately."

"Is that so?" My father perks up at this news. "Which one?"

Dion squirms beneath the demands of his inquiry. "I believe it's... That is... The king has so many children."

"Did she make you blush?" I ask. Dion's flushing cheeks are all the answer I need. "Then it's Ariadne."

"How can you be so certain?" Daedalus asks me.

"We played together as children, didn't we?" Those had been innocent times. We also played together when older, in another way, until I realized that I preferred the company of men and Ariadne realized that she couldn't keep me. A shame, because she truly is something special. I once saw her drink a demigod under the table. And she kept going afterwards too, as if to prove her point.

"By all means," Daedalus said, addressing Dion. "Show her in!"

Once we're alone, my father busies himself with covering the rough model he constructed. "You've often questioned my need for secrecy," he says, noticing my disapproval, "but someday you'll learn how elusive ideas can be, and how contagious they are once unleashed."

He's moving to cover the statue of Apollo when the door to the workshop bursts open. Ariadne normally has a subtle smirk permanently etched upon her face, which only makes her current distress the more shocking. Her cheeks are wet with tears. She barely spares a glance for me, but when she notices my father...

"May the gods smile upon you for seeing me so quickly, Daedalus," Ariadne says. "You already have my eternal gratitude, for I have great need of your wisdom. Please, help me as you once did my mother, and I swear to you that I will grant any wish that is in my power to fulfill."

Her emotional plea has me willing to surrender all of my worldly possessions to her, along with any assistance I'm capable of offering, but I already feel relief. If it's wisdom she seeks, my father—despite his flaws—is precisely the man she needs.

"What's this about?" I ask her.

"Oh, my darling Icarus," Ariadne turns to me, her green eyes seeking forgiveness. "Each soul I confide in only increases the peril. I dare not tell even you, but please know that love has driven me to seek out your father."

"My goodness," Daedalus says, clearing his throat while attempting to straighten his posture. "I'm no longer a young man, and I doubt your mother would approve, but I'm flattered regardless."

"She doesn't mean you," I say, my attention still on my childhood friend. "It's someone else, isn't it?"

Ariadne nods. My father knows a great many things, but the inner workings of the heart remain a mystery to him.

"If you help her," I tell my father, "I promise to pursue my destiny, as you've so desired. I won't let anything, even exhaustion, dissuade me from finding my purpose."

Daedalus weighs the sincerity of my words and nods. "Then today has been a success after all. Go forth with a keen eye, my son, and may inspiration fill your mind."

"Thank you, Father."

I clasp hands with him, and when I attempt to say goodbye to Ariadne, she embraces me with such desperation that I feel frightened for her. I pull back to search her eyes for answers and discover that they are filled with tears. I brush a lock of hair away from her cheek. She raises a hand to grip my wrist before moving to stroke the precious stone that hangs around her neck—a small vivid green garnet held in place by a necklace wrought of gold. Her mother had gifted it to her years ago, promising that it would bring good fortune when needed most. Ariadne only worried the stone in such a manner when truly distraught.

"There must be a way I can ease your sorrows," I murmur. "Anything. I will act blind to the circumstances, if that will allow me to be of service to you."

“You’ve already advocated on my behalf,” she replies. “Only your father can help me now. And the gods themselves, if they feel so inclined. But your friendship will comfort me during the darkness I must face.”

She turns her head toward Daedalus with grave concern, as if fearing that he might change his mind. I release her so that she may find the answer she came here for.

My heart is so heavy for her as I leave the room that I forget to look back at the object of my infatuation. It’s unlikely I’ll have another chance to. No matter. I’m determined now. When I do see Apollo again, it won’t be a mere statue I gaze upon. The next time I stare into those eyes, they will be filled with life.

* * * * *

I’m in bed that night and drifting off to sleep, but it isn’t Morpheus who comes to spirit me away to the land of dreams. Cronus, master of time, claims me instead, transporting me into my own past. I’m a boy again, not more than ten years old. My bare feet walk across cold wet grass to my father’s workshop, which appears sinister at night. The moon is absent from the sky, leaving unhindered shadows to blanket themselves over the world. I venture deeper into their realm and use a borrowed key to unlock the workshop door and slip inside. In the dark, my father’s creations have become twisted silhouettes. I try not to think of all the monsters that Iapetus takes great pleasure in describing to me. I much preferred my mother’s stories. I’d do anything to hear her voice now, even though the ache in my chest from her loss has grown dull. I hardly ever cry myself to sleep anymore. I feel bad about that. I’m worried that if I stop missing her, she might mistakenly think that I no longer love her. That’s why I’m here. I need to speak to Hades and explain that we still have need of my mother. Of all the departed souls who have journeyed to his realm, surely he can spare just one.

I’m shaking as I approach the row of gods and heroes. They’ve always frightened me, even in broad daylight, which is why I haven’t done this sooner. The idea hadn’t occurred to me until a few months ago. That’s how long I needed to work up the courage. Now my hand has been forced. Father mentioned that a temple offered to buy

some of the statues. I don't know which. This might be the last chance to send my prayer. I'm not allowed to travel into the city on my own, even to a temple. Father says that his name attracts too much attention, and that people might use me to coerce him into sharing his secrets. I'm not actually sure what that means. Whenever we travel through Athens, everyone is so kind to me. They always rub my hair and tell me how special I am. I don't feel that way, but some of them—the women in particular—remind me of my mother. I need to do this. Even if the statue comes to life, even if the mouth opens to swallow me whole, I must be brave, because the world hasn't been as bright since she departed it, and if I'm honest, I don't want the love I felt for her to die.

A sound causes me to freeze. I'm not sure where it comes from. When I hear it again, the noise is closer. I feel something brush against my foot and leap into the air with a yelp. A small furry creature darts away from me. Just a mouse. I can't help but laugh. I'm here to beg a favor from the most terrifying of gods, and already I've been bested by a rodent. And yet, my amusement seems to have pushed the fear away. I march over to where the statues are displayed in a row, skipping the heroes until I'm walking beneath the stern gazes of gods. Poseidon, lord of the sea. Athena, goddess of wisdom. Ares, the master of war. Hermes, a friend to both merchants and thieves. Artemis, the mistress of the moon. And finally... I stop and stare. Hades is gone. I waited too long.

Unless the statue had been moved to elsewhere in the shop, maybe in preparation of it being picked up. I approach my father's workbench, squinting in the dark and feeling along its surface until I find what I seek. A flint and steel. I use them to light a candle, needing only a few minutes to do so. Then I resume my search, but a sculpture the size of a man is difficult to miss. It isn't here. The hope drains from my heart. I'm about to leave with my head hung in defeat when something catches my eye. The twisted trunk of a tree surrounded by shavings. Another of my father's creations. I doubt this one will be a god. He hasn't sculpted another of those while I've been alive. There is too much demand from the rich and powerful who want images in their own likeness. I've never seen this person

though. I'm not even sure it's a man. Little work has been done. The round shape of a head is roughly hewn, along with the hint of a neck. Only the mouth, nose, and eyes have been refined. I take joy in touching these features, knowing my father would never allow such a thing, and find myself drawn to the lips. I press the tip of one finger against the indentation just beneath the nose and think about how I miss my mother's kisses. Father doesn't show affection like she did. I'm not sure he's capable. I sometimes wish he was. If he can't give her back to me, and if Hades won't answer my prayers, then couldn't my father carve a new mother for me and bring her to life like he does my toys? That would be better than nothing.

An idea occurs to me, so I close my eyes to enact it. Then, worried that Iapix is secretly watching and will mock me, I open them again and blow out the candle. The shadows close in, but I don't fear them, because I'm not alone. I reach for the wooden face, pretending it is hers as I lean forward and press my mouth against the lips. This brings me comfort. But not the kind I was hoping for. It's different somehow. I don't understand why. All I know, as I turn away from the carving and carefully make my way to the door, is that I'll be back again.

* * * * *

With my eyes shut, the world is reduced to an orange glow, my naked body bathed in warmth. I begin most days by standing before the window of my chamber as a fiery orb slowly begins its ascent. In this manner, and despite my ignorance, Apollo and I continued the intimacy that was forged in Athens. How ironic that we should meet in the night when his twin sister watches over the world instead. I've never felt drawn to the moon. Poets and musicians have paid it endless tribute, but my heart has always belonged to the sun. Now I know why.

I think back to those covert visits to my father's workshop, how new details were slowly revealed as he continued working on the statue. The ears and hair had come next. The shape of the neck was made graceful, leading down to an immaculate chest. I would often talk with Apollo, my loneliness ebbing away with each word. These sessions would always end with a kiss. I convinced myself that I was

working a special kind of magic, freeing my lover from his wooden prison with each touch of my lips. I wasn't yet a man then. Strange desires were stirring inside of me, but I failed to comprehend them. Had those mysteries been revealed to me, it isn't difficult to imagine what else I would have done—how good his body would have felt pressed against mine, and all the many places I would have let my mouth explore.

I open my eyes and smile. As a boy, I kissed a fallen tree. As a man, I shall kiss a god. But first I face a much more arduous task. I must speak with my brother.

* * * * *

I pause in the market square, the mouth-watering scent of roasted meats tempting me to delay my quest. Scanning the row of white marble buildings on the northern side, I search for the one belonging to my brother's practice. I've only visited it a few times. We aren't exactly close. Civil—more often than not—but never affectionate. Iapyx inherited more from my father than I did, including a mind so hungry that little was left to feed his heart. I hope he possesses enough love to aid me in my pursuit. Or perhaps he will gloat about his great success to remind me what a disappointment I've always been.

"Son of Daedalus!" a fisherman cries out as he and another man haul dripping baskets toward a booth. "Tell your father to invent a whistle that calls the fish to shore. I spend more time with the sea than I do my own wife."

"I'll be sure to convey the urgency of your needs," I say with good humor.

These men don't know my name, only recognizing me by my stark white hair. Others are more familiar to me. I stop and talk with them, asking for the latest news and sharing my own. Some are former lovers or have known me since I was a boy, although this isn't the kind of fame my father wants for me. I have no doubt that the centuries will forget who I am, and that's fine. All I ask, before I'm reduced to dust by the winds of time, is to feel complete.

"Best stay away from high places," a woman sneers as she brushes past me. Her dialect is Athenian, the same as my own,

reminding me of how stories can travel without hoof, fin, or wing. I've heard every version of the accusation, but I can't separate them into fact and fiction. All I'm certain of is that I once had a cousin who is now dead. My father is capable of many things, but murder? Did he truly push his own nephew from the top of the Acropolis in a fit of jealousy? I've never dared to ask him. I'm too afraid that, if he is guilty, I'll lose the only parent I have left. Not to a trial. That already ended with our banishment from Athens. I can forgive my father for being so inept with his love, but to foster such cruelty in his heart?

I shake the concern from my mind and buy a pear from a vendor. After eating it, I suck the juices from my fingers while walking toward the familiar symbol of two snakes wrapped around a staff. I know it's the correct place when I see a line of people waiting outside the door, each with their own affliction. Some cough and retch, others twitch and groan. A few are simply old. I notice one man who is missing half an arm. Growing it back is surely beyond even my brother's capabilities, although I wouldn't place a wager against the possibility.

Disgruntled murmurs accompany me as I push my way to the front of the line. "Sorry," I say with a wave. "Family business. I won't be long."

"Not yet!" a voice shouts from inside as I open the door. "You must wait until I'm done with— Oh. It's you."

"Always a pleasure to see you too, brother."

Iapyx doesn't return the smile. Instead he tosses more herbs into a mortar before grinding them down with a pestle. I nod in greeting at the woman who is seated nearby and waiting for a cure. Her head keeps pivoting between Iapyx and me, probably in an attempt to detect any family resemblance. I wish her luck in finding it. Iapyx is thin, like my father, although his shoulder-length hair is black rather than gray. He has grown an impressive beard since I saw him last, reminding me that Iapyx is ten years my senior. I don't believe the difference in age is to blame for the distance between us. We're simply too different in our ways.

"Take this," Iapyx says, transferring the contents of the mortar to the center of a grape leaf before folding it closed and binding it with

string. He brings this to the woman, helping her stand before placing it in her hands. "Coat your feet with a thin layer every night until the next moon, and the problem should disappear. On your way out, please tell the next patient in line to wait a moment." Dark eyes turn to consider me. "I have a problem I must deal with first."

I wait until the woman is gone before retorting. "I'm not a problem. I'm your brother."

"I see little difference," Iapyx grumps as he begins tidying his work area. "What is it this time? Did another of your lovers leave you with an unexpected surprise?"

"No," I shoot back, resisting the urge to scratch myself down below. Iapyx is a talented healer. He had cured that particular affliction long ago, but the memory alone still makes me itch. Which is probably why he wasted no time in reminding me. I'm certain Iapyx would be smiling now, if he was capable. "I only came to talk."

His eyebrows rise at this. "Father is faring well, I hope?"

"He'll outlive us both," I reply.

"Good." Iapyx looks meaningfully to the door.

He isn't implying I should go. He simply has business that he considers more important. This doesn't come as a revelation. Nor does it hurt. There are places I would rather be too, so I make haste to conclude my business.

"Father claims that you once met Apollo."

"Oh. That." Iapyx says this as if the subject is of little interest. "Has he been commissioned to create another statue? I've already told him every detail I could remember."

"Yes, but you haven't told me."

My brother studies me for a moment before he shakes his head. "You're as transparent as ever, Icarus. What's the matter? Have you exhausted all the options this island has to offer?"

"I could travel the world over and still not be satisfied," I say truthfully. "No other can compare to him."

Only one eyebrow is raised now. "I disagree."

"Then it's true?" I ask as I approach. "Apollo wanted you as his lover?"

"Yes," Iapyx says through gritted teeth.

"Tell me everything," I plead. "I need to know it all!"

My brother sighs. "Then make yourself useful. Clear away the cuttings and wash out those bowls."

I'd lick his floors clean if that's what it would take. I join him behind the counter and do as he instructed. "How did you find him?"

"He found me," Iapyx says, neatly folding bandages into a stack. "I have no interest in the gods. I know Father fears them, but at least he agrees there is nothing they can achieve that a determined mind cannot."

"Yes, fine. Where did all of this happen?"

"On a hill outside of Athens."

My shoulders slump. "But we're forbidden to return there."

"You might be. I've done all I can to separate my name from the reputation of our family. And besides, what makes you think location has anything to do with it? The gods appear wherever they can find amusement, and never where they are needed."

"That's blasphemy!"

"It's a fact."

I sigh, in no mood for a debate. Especially with my brother. I'm guaranteed to lose. "If this happened before we came to Crete, you must have been my age."

"A bit younger," Iapyx says, looking me over as if needing to be reminded of how old I am. "I wasn't impressed. Apollo kept finding excuses to touch me, like a child manipulating a doll. That's all we are to them. Playthings. When I refused to cooperate, he began making offers."

"Marriage?" I ask.

Iapyx scoffs. "Certainly not! He promised to grant me the gift of prophecy, to teach me mastery of the lyre, and to shoot arrows straighter than any other mortal. As if any of these things would be useful to a student of medicine. To be honest, I found the entire incident an embarrassment."

"You should have been proud to be chosen!"

Iapyx looks at me like I've lost my mind. "Embarrassing for *him*. I was indifferent."

"Why?"

“Because I had greater concerns on my mind. Besides, I felt unable to pay the price he was asking. You know I prefer the company of women.”

Enough to marry one who, like him, had few interests outside the realm of medicine. If it wasn't for the recent birth of their child, she would be here working alongside her husband, no matter what anyone thought of it. “But he's a god! Weren't you at least curious?”

To my surprise, my brother nods. “I asked if he bleeds, if he ever grows sick, if the gods have need of healing. Do they grow old and die? I still don't know. He didn't have patience for my inquiries. In fact, he attempted to silence me with a kiss.”

My knees practically buckle at the thought. “Did you let him?”

“Of course not! Time was of greater concern. I was searching for a cure. In a moment of weakness, I offered to do what Apollo asked, but only if he could give the answer to me.”

“And?”

“He told me what plants to pick. I promised to return to the hill if the cure worked.”

“Did it?”

Iapyx clears his throat. He concentrates on his tasks rather than offering a reply. At first I'm convinced that he slept with Apollo and is merely too discreet to admit it, although he would surely lord that over me, now that he knows what I desire. Then I notice the combination of a frown and a scowl, which was a frequent sight after our mother died.

“You were trying to cure her.”

“Yes. I did as Apollo instructed. You know the rest.”

My stomach sinks. I don't want to believe what he says is true. “Apollo would have saved her, had he been able to.”

Iapyx meets my eye, and for once, his tone is gentle. “Then I ask you again, what use are gods if they can't liberate us from the pitfalls that they themselves have created?”

I fight against the sorrow in my chest and jut out my chin. “I'll ask him that myself.”

“You do so, brother.”

Iapyx sounds weary. I never thought to wonder what drives him, but it would seem, like me, that he's still trying to fill the space she left behind. I do so by seeking the love I lost, and he does so by searching for cures, even though it's too late for our mother. "You must have adored her."

"She was a slave," Iapyx says dismissively.

"No, she was Father's servant."

Iapyx shakes his head. "You were always more interested in fantasies than reality. That won't serve you well. Truth is the only comfort to be found in the madness of this world. Our mother was a slave."

"Fine. But I know that she loved Father."

"She did, but not nearly as much as she loved you."

"Really?"

My brother nods. "You were her favorite, Icarus. Now if you'll excuse me, I have much to do."

"But I haven't finished washing these," I say, hurriedly grabbing a bowl. "And you haven't told me where to find Apollo."

"It was a long time ago. I doubt I could find that hill again, even if we were allowed entry into Athens. I don't believe it held any special significance."

"Then what were you doing while there?" I ask, continuing to work so he won't throw me out.

"Picking flowers." Iapyx raises a hand. "For medicinal purposes. I don't want to hear any of your romantic ideas."

"What kind of flower? Maybe they are the key."

"Hyacinth, and if summoning Apollo was so easy, his days would be full indeed."

I chew my bottom lip, knowing he's right. There has to be more to it than plucking a common flower. "What else? Was it the solstice? Had you spilled any blood in tribute that day?"

"I believe I had porridge for breakfast. That must have been it."

"Very funny," I say. "Please. Try to remember. There must be something."

I remain silent while continuing to wash up, giving him time to think. I've moved on to another chore when he finally shakes his

head.

"I'm sorry."

"I appreciate that you tried." I wipe my hands dry and prepare to leave. I'm reaching for the door when his voice startles me.

"I was singing."

"Singing?" I say in disbelief.

My brother's expression warns me not to make a joke.

"Do you remember what you sang?"

Iapyx nods. "The Song of Seikilos."

"Mother used to sing that to us!"

"She did, and you're right, Icarus. I loved her dearly. I wish you luck in your search."

I pause before leaving, wondering if the love I seek has been here all along. My family must care about me, or else my father wouldn't be so concerned for my future. My brother could have withheld the truth from me out of spite, but he didn't. He might tease me like older siblings often do, but ultimately, we've been on the same quest since our mother died. Others might have seen her as nothing more than a slave, but to us, she was the center of a world that stopped making sense once she had departed from it.

* * * * *

Clouds blow in to cover the sky shortly after I leave my brother's practice. I take this as a bad omen, or at the very least, confirmation that the time is not yet right. I'm reluctant to return home, fearing my father will escort me into his workshop and make me stand there while he continues to design a temple in my name. He doesn't need my input. My destiny is to be found elsewhere. When the first drops of rain wet my skin, I decide I have little other choice.

I don't see my father when entering our home. Guilt alone drives me to check his workshop. That's where I find him. Daedalus barely acknowledges me. He seems to have something else on his mind. Another project, perhaps, such as the problem that Ariadne approached him with. When I ask about her, my father shakes his head.

"I dare not speak of the events I have set in motion. Pray for her, my boy. Pray for us all!"

His unsettling words make me wish the statue of Apollo hadn't been covered again. I would welcome his comfort. And his help, so I will indeed pray, but not when visiting a temple or by making a sacrifice. I shall seek out his favor personally.

* * * * *

The next morning I repeat my ritual of basking in the sun. After breakfast, I bathe and make myself presentable, as I would for any lover, although I don't have a plan or feel the need for one. I feel as though a path has been laid out before me and all I must do is move along it. That means going outside, where I won't be hidden from Apollo's gaze. I leave the house and notice our cook bent over her herb garden as she plucks seasonings for the evening meal. I ask where I might find the largest gathering of hyacinths. She points inland, providing me with simple directions that I immediately follow.

When I reach my destination by cresting a hill, I rejoice that I am even closer to Apollo. I only hope he'll meet me halfway. I wade into a field of pink and lavender flowers, the tips of my fingers caressing the petals as their rich perfume intoxicates me. I'm tempted to strip off my clothes and lie among them, presenting myself to my lover, but I know now that he is not so easily lured. I begin to sing softly, the words and melody ingrained in my memory, whisking back to my childhood. I remember being nestled in the crook of my mother's arm as she hummed the tune, and how she would brush the hair from my forehead to place a kiss there.

"I cannot bring her back to you."

I spin around and raise my arm to shield my eyes, the breath catching in my throat, because he is even more beautiful than I imagined. And he's glowing! The light is gentler now. I can see him clearly and almost despair, because he is so much more than me. I feel the scalding heat of a thousand fires, the same raw energy that can turn acorns into trees and entire forests to ash. The shadows around me wither and dissipate, powerless in the wake of his light. He is the living embodiment of the sun in the sky, eternal and impossibly distant, and yet, irrevocably bound to this world and its rules. Even the day must give into night, just as summer must always cede its throne to winter.

“Apollo,” I manage to breathe. “How long I have awaited this moment, without even knowing your name.”

“We have met before,” the god says. His face is both pretty and handsome—feminine and masculine—framed by hair the color of ripened wheat. The skin of his lithe body is golden, laid bare to see, for he is naked and walking toward me. My father, a master of his craft, failed to capture the majesty of this divine being. My brother must have been unable to adequately explain what he saw, for even now, with my gaze locked upon him and incapable of wavering, I struggle to comprehend his beauty. The amber edge of a cloud, the glimmer of a rainbow, the flicker of a candle in a long dark night... Apollo is all of these, for he is light, and I know that I will find no peace until I can bask forever in his presence. Words escape me, too limited to express these desires. All I can do is stand before him, the adoration in my heart expressing itself through the more amorous urges of the body. Apollo notices, golden irises moving downward. “Or perhaps we are strangers, for I would have remembered such a tribute.”

“You *do* know me,” I say, my voice sounding weak until I put my convictions behind it. “I’ve kissed your likeness a hundred times. We were lovers before I understood what that meant. I have always belonged to you, even when I tried to give myself to others.”

“And yet you did not return to the hill.” Apollo tilts his head, attention upon my hair, and for once I am happy that it distinguishes me so. “No. You are not him.”

“Iapix is my brother. I don’t know why you chose him, unless, like me, you were drawn to a facsimile of what you truly sought. Our names were kept from us, but I now know yours. Do you know mine?”

Apollo’s eyes lock on to mine and my insides catch fire. Not with desire. I’ve been burning with that since I became a man. Instead he fills me with his thoughts. I don’t try to resist, even though I find myself nearly overwhelmed.

“Icarus,” he says at last.

A cry escapes my throat and I rush to him, but he turns away, and it’s like a cloud crossing the sun. I drop the hand that was reaching

for him and shiver. "Do you not want me?" I ask. "What was it that made my brother so special to you? Tell me, and I shall best him in every way. There is nothing I wouldn't do for you."

"He had so much to give," Apollo murmurs. "The hunger of his mind, the ambition to reshape the world, but not through destructive means as men so often choose. Iapetus sought to accomplish his needs through careful study. He recognized the secrets that Gaia left here and had already made good use of their benefits, but I wanted to help him do so much more, to rise above his limitations and take a seat among us. And yet, for a mortal man, he showed surprisingly little interest in the act of taking."

"I am skilled at both giving and taking," I tell him, my smile anything but subtle, "and while Gaia's mysteries are indeed intriguing, the universe wouldn't exist without the influence of her brother Eros, for he is the one who brought the earth and sky together."

Apollo looks over his shoulder, and I once again feel the promise of summer. "Is that what you seek to do by calling me here?"

"Yes!" I say, unable to contain my laughter, for I never thought something so obvious should elude the gods themselves. "I have watched you traveling the length of the sky while alone, day in and day out. Why else would you do so if not in search of someone? I know that quest well. I have pursued it my entire life until it led me here. Now I want to be of service. You have shone so much joy upon this world without asking anything in return, but I'd like to express my gratitude nonetheless. I have little to offer a god aside from constant companionship and limitless adoration. Let me show you how love can burn almost as bright as your rays."

He finally turns to face me again, my skin so hot that I taste sweat when I lick my lips.

"Then I owe you an apology, my would-be suitor, for while I believe you are capable of delivering what you promise, I have sworn to never love another mortal again."

His words are a knife plunged into my heart, but I make no attempt to pull it loose, for at least it belongs to him. My faith is not so easily shaken. "I may not be divine—" I begin.

Apollo shakes his head. "I do not seek one of my own. We are locked in a constant battle, each of us a force that must remain in balance by countering the other. I am not the first of my kind. I will not be the last. I need someone who can hold me in their heart for eternity, even when all others have forgotten my name."

"I am that person, I swear to you."

"You are not," Apollo says, wounding me yet again, "for your body, beautiful as it might be, can only weather the passage of time for a brief moment before it wilts and crumbles into dust."

"Then shield me with your love," I plead with him. "Together we can make anything possible."

Apollo shakes his head, eyes downturned. "That too is beyond my ability. Look around, Icarus. Do you not recognize the significance of where we stand? Or the song you sang to me? I loved him so, my sweet Spartan prince, and like you he had many admirers, but only one whom he desired. We explored the world together, and I saw the beauty of it like never before. That is the treasure all mortals possess. You know nothing of the endless centuries. Seen through the eyes of a child, everything becomes wondrous and new. Even I felt reborn. We laughed and played, my lover and I, seeking one game after another. It was during one of them that jealousy reared its ugly head and stole him from me. My lover died in my arms. Ambrosia couldn't save him. I pleaded with my uncle, Hades, but he was as unyielding as ever, for the ultimate journey of every mortal must end in his realm. All I could do was create a new flower from the blood flowing over my lap. I named it after him. He shall, in that way at least, never be forgotten."

"Hyacinth," I say, understanding at last. The dagger has withdrawn, but my heart continues to bleed. For him. "Then take me from here. Hide me away deep within your lands, or anywhere that Hades will be unable to find us. There must be such a place. The story of your birth proves that. Hera, in her rage at Zeus's infidelity, forbade your mother to give birth on solid ground."

"And so she found a floating island and clung to the branch of a tree while in the throes of labor." Apollo smiles, but his amusement is fleeting. "There are so many places I would take you that no mortal

can go. Worlds made of music and light, but your body is a part of the earth beneath your feet and will return there. I would be your lover, Icarus, if my heart still had the strength. Death brings relief in many forms, but I am allowed none of them. I pleaded to be made mortal so I could join Hyacinth, or at the very least, put an end to my own suffering, but I was denied. And so must you be. When your time comes, I shall weep over your body and mourn all that could have been. I swear this to you."

"No!" I cry. "There has to be another way!"

"If there were, I would have saved your mother, for you are right. What drew me to your brother was his promise as a student, but what I fell in love with was the shadow he cast on the ground."

Like a wooden sculpture that was the right shape and size. The mere hint of each other had stirred feelings in us that never faded. There must be a reason. What is the point in being meant for each other if we are never allowed to unite?

"Don't leave me," I croak. "If nothing else, give me a single day together so I can feast on the memories afterwards. I know they won't sustain me. I'll starve regardless, but at least when I do, I'll have the sweet taste of your kiss on my lips."

Apollo shakes his golden mane. "You ask me to add to my eternal heartache? I already buckle beneath its weight. To know your love and then lose it ... The sun won't have the strength to rise anymore."

I struggle inside myself, torn, because my heart demands that we be together but also wants to spare him further anguish. "Go then," I say. "Be free. Erase this meeting from your mind. I don't want you to suffer."

Apollo's smile is full of sorrow. "I'll never forget you, Icarus. I shall watch over you during each day and ask my sister to do the same when I am dreaming. My light shall always shine upon you, even in darkness."

I know he won't remain. I can feel Apollo withdrawing, taking all my happiness with him, but I won't let myself look away. I stare into eyes that have witnessed the passing of centuries and commit them to memory. I shall learn to sculpt like my father. I'll begin to paint, mastering it and whatever art forms are required to recreate the true

beauty of Apollo. The final result shall be placed in the center of a temple built in his honor. The work will take a lifetime of dedication and will likely kill me from exhaustion, but at least then I'll be able to say I spent each of my remaining days with him.

"Oh! Praise Hera! Young master Icarus, there you are at last!"

I turn, confused, just in time to see Dion trip and fall, his bald head gleaming with perspiration and reflected light. When I return my attention to its source, he's no longer there. I'm standing alone in a field. Apollo has gone.

"Please hurry!" Dion pleads as he reaches me and grabs my hand. "You must return home at once."

"Leave me be," I say, my throat tight. Already I can feel the sting of tears. I can't imagine they will ever stop.

"But it's your father! He's been arrested. By order of the king!"

* * * * *

We run toward home in spurts, Dion having to stop to catch his breath more often than I would like. He insists I go on without him, but in truth, I'm too frightened. The details he has shared with me so far are dire: King Minos himself had arrived at the workshop with a small platoon of soldiers, forcing his way inside and demanding to see my father. Dion was knocked aside when he tried to stop them and was denied reentry. All he could hear from then on was shouting, and the declaration that my father was under arrest. For treason.

"You must help him," Dion pants during a break, clutching at an ache in his side. "Please, Master Icarus!"

How? I'm not clever like my father, or studious like my brother. My entire life has been consumed by a quest for love, which might win the approval of poets, but has made me useless in any practical sense. Especially now that my ultimate destiny has been confirmed as an impossible dream.

"Come," Dion says, forcing himself to continue. "We must hurry. Almighty Zeus, please keep Master Daedalus safe until we can come to his aid!"

He's a kind man to worry about us so much. The noblest course of action would be to tell him the truth—that I can't protect him, and that

he should separate himself from my family until it becomes clear how all of this will play out. I can't bring myself to give these thoughts a voice. I don't want to face this emergency alone. Especially when the house comes into view and we see soldiers posted outside. They notice us too and stand at attention, but not out of respect. I have the impression that they're poised to give chase should we attempt to flee, so I continue marching forward, still without a plan. How can I come up with one when I don't yet understand what has unfolded? It must have something to do with the king's daughter, but what?

Soldiers meet us halfway across the yard and grab our arms, which Dion reacts to worse than me.

"Let him go! That's the master's son you're harassing! Show him respect."

When one of the guards raises a hand to silence Dion, I hold my tongue no more.

"Strike him and I'll see that the king not only cuts off that hand, but has it bronzed and displayed in the city square as a warning to those who act without thinking." The soldier isn't cowed. He's sneering at me, but at least his arm returns to his side. "Good. Now take me to my father so we can resolve this."

Brave words that are equally empty. The soldiers usher us into the house. I'm disturbed by what I see. My father's workshop has been ransacked. I've never witnessed such disarray. Soldiers continue to open cupboards and empty crates onto the ground. Even worse, many of the contraptions are being taken out the back, to my father's dismay. He's pleading with a man who towers over him, curls of black hair tinged with gray spilling down the purple fabric of his robe. King Minos is an intimidating man, both in status and stature. When a soldier approaches him with a potential discovery—a tool my father invented to trim hooves—Minos takes one look at it and shoves the soldier, who falls to the ground. That's when he notices my presence.

"You!" the king snarls, pointing a finger in my direction. "What knowledge do you have of this? Where is my daughter?"

"I don't know, your majesty," I say, my tones respectful as I raise my palms in surrender, but this does little to placate the man. "Nor

does my father or he would share the information with you. Ever since you took in our family—for which we are eternally grateful—he has dedicated himself entirely to serving you.”

“*And my family,*” Minos growls, turning on Daedalus again. “You repaid my hospitality by enabling my wife to have that disgusting affair, and now you’ve helped my daughter run off with Theseus, the son of my greatest enemy. This is how you repay my kindness?”

“I did no such thing!” my father says, indignant in the face of these accusations. “Ariadne only asked me how Theseus could escape the labyrinth, should he succeed in his quest.”

“And did he?” Minos demands, bringing his face so close that I see my father recoil from his spittle.

“How should I know?” Daedalus stammers. “I haven’t entered the labyrinth since its completion.”

“Because none who enter it will ever find the exit again,” Minos growls. “That was the promise you made when building it. So how then did Theseus escape?”

When Daedalus reaches for something on his workbench, the soldiers place their hands on the hilts of their swords. They relax again when my father holds up a spindle of twine. “With this.”

“You’re an insufferable old fool!” King Minos smacks the twine to the floor. “How do I know that my lovesick daughter didn’t rush in after Theseus? What if she’s in there now being devoured by that foul beast?”

“It’s entirely possible,” Daedalus says, stroking his beard. “How to know for sure though? Hmm. An interesting conundrum indeed. If you send in your soldiers, they won’t be able to find their way out again, unless...” He stoops to reach for the twine, which the king kicks out of reach.

“Surely the creator of the labyrinth has no need for such petty tricks,” Minos says, his voice dripping with animosity. “Yes, of course! Who would be more qualified to search for my daughter than you? Should you not return, I’ll assume that the Minotaur is alive and has carried out a most suitable punishment.”

“The Minotaur?” I ask, fear gripping my stomach. “Surely the stories can’t be real!”

I should have held my tongue.

The king turns narrowed eyes on me. "I won't be so cruel as to separate you from your child, as you have done to me. Icarus will join you in the labyrinth."

"That isn't necessary!" Daedalus cries.

This only seems to encourage the king. "You have another son. Isn't that right? The healer. You there!" He hooks a finger, beckoning one of the soldiers over. "Fetch the other boy and bring him to my palace."

The soldier nods, but doesn't move. Instead he clears his throat.

"Well?" Minos demands.

"It's just that..." the soldier begins before clearing his throat again.

"Spit it out!"

"He's very popular, your highness."

The king pulls back his lips to reveal his teeth. "Popular with whom?"

"Everyone, sire," the soldier says. "My wife was in terrible pain until he fixed her teeth."

"And my daughter," another soldier chimes in. "She was burning up. We almost lost her to the fever, but Iapyx came to us in the middle of the night. By dawn she was sleeping soundly and cool to the touch."

"Don't forget the plague a few years back," another soldier interjects.

"Oh yes, the one the fishermen brought with them from Athens," the first soldier says. "Touched the House of the Noble Boar from the servants all the way up to the lord and lady themselves. Iapyx saved nearly all of them."

"And don't forget," Daedalus says, beaming with pride, "that Iapyx oversaw the particularly difficult birth of your most recent child."

Normally I would feel jealous, but I understand. I'm merely a dreamer. Iapyx is actually useful, and while I'm still not entirely sure what has happened to anger the king, I know that it would be a great loss if the people of Crete could no longer rely on my brother's help. "I shall go to the labyrinth with my father," I say. "Ariadne and I were

childhood friends. I'm concerned for her wellbeing too. My brother might be a talented physician, but he has no heart for adventure."

"And you do?" Minos spits.

"Heart is all that I possess," I respond.

"Very well," the king says. "Two have gone missing, and so two shall take their place. But know this: If you return without my daughter, or the remains of her lover, then your own lives will be forfeit."

Daedalus bows his head. "As your majesty wishes."

I don't bother with such formalities. If I am to be sentenced to death, I will show no respect to my executioner.

* * * * *

I'm in the back of a cart pulled by a donkey, my wrists and ankles bound. My father has been subjected to the same treatment. It's an undignified way to travel, but then, I suppose that's the point. No effort is taken to hide us from the public. Instead the route ensures that we will be seen by as many people as possible.

"I'm afraid you are paying the price of my sins," Daedalus says with a sigh.

"I'm paying for my own," I tell him. "I should have trained as a soldier or honed my mind through studies. I won't be much use to you in the labyrinth, and for that, I am sorry."

"You are my spark of inspiration," my father says, placing bound hands over mine. "Just as your mother was. I see her light in you. She brought so much joy to everyone who knew her. Such a gift cannot be taught. You are more like her than me, that is true, but I've never found that a disappointment. I may worry about your future, and what will become of you when I'm gone, but I've always taken pride in you, my beautiful boy. And your brother too, even if you are as different as sand and snow. If I don't survive this, please assure him of my love."

"I will," I say, swallowing against rising emotion. "I just wish I could do something of consequence."

"You already have." Daedalus nods toward a woman as we pass by. Her clasped hands are pressed over her heart in prayer, tear-filled eyes never leaving mine until we round a corner. "Minos

expected us to be pelted with stones and rotten fruit. Were I alone, his wish would have come true. People don't care for an old man who thinks he has all the answers. The results of my labor are often appreciated, but I myself have never been popular."

"Icarus!" The husky voice calling my name is familiar. The raven black hair, the rough hands of a farmer, the thick lips that once babbled clumsy words of affection. We had cared deeply for each other until I broke his heart, and my own, by ending the relationship. I couldn't help it. As much as I tried with him and the others, I always felt myself called elsewhere. "What has happened?" he asks, walking alongside the cart. "What can I do?"

"Pray for us," I tell him.

"To who?"

"Any god who will listen. Now go." I don't want him or anyone else getting heroic ideas. They'll only end up hurt.

"You see?" Daedalus says softly. "No matter what becomes of us, Minos won't be completely victorious. He won't ever win the hearts of his people. Now his grandfather, *that* Minos was a king!"

I look in concern at the man driving the cart, but he's a grizzled old soldier, and I catch him nodding his agreement.

"What?" Daedalus says when he sees my expression. "I've already been accused of treason. I won't censor myself in my final hours."

"You don't think we'll find Ariadne?"

My father is silent. "I should at least tell you how all of this began, so you can better understand what it is we face. As you know, Minos possesses the most powerful armada of ships in the surrounding seas, making him a mighty ruler. But some years back, he was still locked in a lengthy battle with his brothers over the throne. Minos wisely decided to seek Poseidon's favor, praying for a white bull to be sent as a sign of the ocean god's support. He got his wish, a proud ivory specimen appearing that was meant to be sacrificed in honor of Poseidon. Minos was so taken by the bull's appearance that he decided to keep it and slaughter one of his own stock instead. This enraged Poseidon, who decided that if Minos was so in love with the bull, his wife Pasiphae should be too. So the sea god

worked his magic, and it wasn't mere admiration that overtook the queen, but infatuation instead."

"For the bull?" I ask.

"Yes," Daedalus replies grimly. "She lusted after the beast and wanted nothing more than to consummate that love."

I don't hide my revulsion. "How would one even go about that without being trampled to death?"

"With help," my father says, turning his head away.

It takes me a moment to realize that he's done so in shame. "You *helped* her?"

"She begged me to!" Daedalus says. "I was her last resort, not the first. The greatest enchanters were summoned to break the curse, with no success. Your own brother examined her and hoped to find a medical solution but was unable to. Further sacrifices to Poseidon, and even a hundred priests begging forgiveness in the name of the king, failed to soothe the injured pride of the sea god. Pasiphae refused to eat or drink unless forced, her mind feverish with one desire only. A madness of the heart or of the body? I still don't know. All I saw was a good woman in a wretched state and I..." Daedalus shakes his head, voice strained when he continues. "I wanted to help her, yes, but my ego demanded I find the solution that had eluded all others."

"You were curious."

"If there's one thing the men of this family have in common, it's our single-mindedness. I once thought it our greatest attribute. Now I fear that it will lead to our downfall. I contemplated the matter for three days and three nights before the answer came to me. I constructed a wooden cow that Pasiphae was able to insert herself into and manipulate enough to convince that bull that... Well, I'd ask you to use your imagination, but I recommend that you don't. I hadn't outwitted Poseidon completely. Pasiphae's mind became her own again, but not her body. We discovered soon after that she was pregnant. When the child was born, he looked like any other baby... except he had the head of a bull."

"The Minotaur!"

“Yes. Named mockingly after his unwilling stepfather. Minos wanted the child put to death. Pasiphae pleaded with him to be merciful. When her husband expressed his intent to slay the hapless creature anyway, Poseidon himself forbade it. The Minotaur was to remain a living reminder of the king’s arrogance. I had my own price to pay. Do you remember those early years on this island when I was scarcely around?”

“You were busy working for the king,” I say with a nod. “You wouldn’t say why.”

“Minos had me construct a labyrinth beneath his palace, one impossible to escape from. Upon its completion, he placed the Minotaur at its center, but I’m afraid matters soon became worse. I don’t suppose you ever met Androgeus?”

“Ariadne’s brother. He was murdered by Athenians after he won every prize in the Panathenaic Games.”

“That’s what Minos would have you believe. Poseidon’s white bull was still alive and well. The beast was ferociously laying waste to Crete, destroying crops and maiming innocent people. Hercules was sent to capture the bull as one of his twelve labors. He succeeded in removing it from the island, but once on the mainland, the animal broke free again. I don’t know why Androgeus went to confront it. Some say the Athenian king sent him after it, either out of need or spite. Others say the young man volunteered, still heady from his victories. The only certainty is that Androgeus didn’t survive his encounter with the bull. There was little warmth between the two kings before that happened. Imagine how they felt after Minos lost a son on his rival’s soil. I thanked the gods we had been exiled already, because Athens bore the brunt of the war that followed. When peace was finally negotiated, it came at a price that haunts me to this day.”

“You mean it gets worse?”

“I’m afraid so. Once every so many years, Athens must choose fourteen youths of noble blood, seven young men and seven young women. After arriving here on Crete, they are made to enter the labyrinth.”

“Why?”

Daedalus draws in a shuddering breath. "To provide nourishment for the Minotaur."

"That's horrific!"

"And a closely guarded secret." I notice how my father's eyes dart to the soldier and back again. That he's telling me this here and now is no coincidence. "Theseus was among the most recent group to enter the labyrinth. He volunteered, but out of honor rather than the pursuit of glory. As the prince of Athens, he already possesses all the fame he requires."

"But if he dies—"

"Precisely. There's a reason I never encouraged you to enter politics. It's a nasty and convoluted business. I had no choice but to aid Theseus. If he doesn't escape the labyrinth and return home, it could mean war."

"Even though he volunteered?"

Daedalus nods. "Keep in mind that all of this, the sacrifices, the Minotaur, our impending imprisonment... none of it would have happened had Minos fulfilled his initial promise to Poseidon. This is a story repeated throughout the ages. A bad ruler always finds someone else to blame. We are just the most recent victims of his infantile sense of justice, although I'm willing to pay the price of my misdeeds, since I am not completely innocent in these matters. My son is though. Let him go."

These final words are directed at the old soldier. I don't give him a chance to respond. The palace has come into view, the sight of it filling me with despair, but I won't stand by as another family member dies. Iapix had attempted to save our mother. I was too young to help at the time, and I may not be able to now, but I must try. "No," I say, clenching my jaw. "I've made my choice. The sons of two kings have attempted to correct the mistakes of their fathers. The least I can do is the same. Carry out your orders, soldier."

"Good lad," Daedalus says, and while his tone is proud, the smile he gives me is strained with sorrow.

* * * * *

Soldiers escort us into the lowest depths of the palace to a room dusty with disuse. Split wine barrels and broken vases litter the

corners. The only area not covered in grime is a mosaic square in the center of the room, the tiles depicting a white bull bleeding out over an altar. That isn't what happened, of course, but Minos wouldn't be the first monarch to rewrite history. I'm surprised to find the king already there and waiting for us.

"Open it," Minos says, his eyes locked on to my father, even though the command is for his men.

I think he expects Daedalus to cower and confess some hidden secret. My father seems oblivious to the king's intent. He watches as the soldiers insert metal poles into notches so they can pry the mosaic loose. Once they lift the massive slab enough to set it aside, a stone staircase is revealed. I only count five or six steps before darkness makes it impossible to see more.

"Do we at least get a torch?" I ask, still rubbing my wrists where they had been bound.

Minos snorts. "The others never did."

This gets my father's attention. "You sent children in there without so much as a light to see by?"

"No," Minos says, voice dripping with poison. "You did! You're the one who built the labyrinth. You're the one who enabled my wife to give birth to that disgusting abomination. The blood of his victims is on *your* hands, not mine."

"Is that so?" Daedalus replies. "I really should be more selective of my hobbies."

I admire his ability to remain defiant. I'm not feeling quite so flippant.

"If you want us to find your daughter," I point out, "then surely we'll have a greater chance of success if we can see."

"You desire fire?" Minos grabs a torch from one of his soldiers. "Extend your arm and I shall give it to you." The burning end is pointed at me. I've heard how cruel Minos can be. I wouldn't put it past him to set me aflame before shoving me into the hole. "That's what I thought," he sneers when I remain motionless. "Three days. If you do not return with Ariadne by then, I shall consider my daughter deceased, and should either of you surface again, you will share her fate. Who wants to go first?"

Not me, but I can't let my elderly father take the lead. I try to appear brave as I walk down the steps, knowing that this will likely be the last anyone sees of me. I catch the eye of one soldier as I descend and see sympathy there. I think we might have shared a night together, long ago. How I wish to be wrapped in the warm embrace of a lover now, drifting off to sleep on waves of fading euphoria. Such tranquility seems a million miles away. My father and I turn at the bottom of the stairs and watch as the mosaic slab is replaced, the light fading with it, like an eclipse suffocating the sun, before complete darkness closes around us. I can't see a thing, my body poised to flee the moment I hear a huffing bull.

"Do not despair, Icarus," Daedalus says, taking hold of my arm. "I'm sure that, together, we can find a way out of this mess."

I don't share his confidence. I gently shake my father off and stretch my hands toward the sky, the tips of my fingers brushing against damp stone.

"What are you doing?" Daedalus asks.

"Praying. We need the help of the gods."

"It'll take more than wishful thinking to solve our problems," he lectures.

I ignore him, wishing for privacy so I could speak my desires aloud. No matter. What I feel for him is true. He will hear me.

Apollo, jewel of the sky and the warmth in my veins, please come to my aid. You promised that your light would always shine upon me. I have great need of you now. My enemies have trapped me deep underground and I fear that I shall never bask in your glory again, even from a distance. Please do not allow my heart to starve in this way. I'd rather burn beneath your gaze.

I hear my father gasp from next to me. When I lower my arms and open my eyes, I can see! Lines of pale silvery light are racing along the walls, outlining each and every stone slab. As our eyes adjust, we can see a corridor stretching out before us.

"Magnificent!" Daedalus says, moving toward the wall to examine it. "Some sort of luminescent fungus perhaps. Although there aren't any insects to attract for—"

“Father. This is the work of Artemis, goddess of the moon. Don’t take her aid for granted.”

He looks at me incredulously. “The moonlight couldn’t possibly reach this deep!”

And yet there is no mistaking the gentle white light that now fills the tunnel. He must reach the same conclusion because he laughs and rubs my hair. “What have I always said? You’re touched by the gods!”

I only wish that were true. While I am elated that Apollo answered my call, I’d rather it was his golden warmth surrounding me instead. At least that seems possible again. But first we have to find our way out of this maze.

“There!” my father says, pointing at the ground. “Do you see?” He picks up the frayed end of a string. It’s a perfect match for the twine he keeps in his workshop.

“Does that mean Ariadne is down here?”

“I’m not certain. At the very least, we know that Theseus paid heed to the advice I gave her. Let’s follow this and see where it leads us.”

I’m surprised when he ties the loose end of the twine around a heavy stone.

“You don’t know the way?” I ask incredulously.

“I designed a maze that would confuse even me,” he replies. “The twine provides a small advantage. With it, we can avoid retracing our steps unintentionally. That way we might find the center.”

“What lies there?”

“The only exit. Beyond the lair of the Minotaur.”

I stare at my father with disbelief. “Your advice to my dearest friend was to seek out the monster at the center of the maze?”

“I armed her with my knowledge. There was no greater advantage I could bestow. Let us see how that now serves us.”

As we begin to walk, I wish it was possible to swat at the worries that flutter around my mind. A potential war with Athens, the fate of Ariadne and her lover, and what will become of us. All of it seems to hinge on one thing.

“Do you believe the Minotaur is still alive?” I ask.

"I'm uncertain," my father answers. "He was a resourceful boy, despite his unusual appearance, but being trapped down here for so long might have warped his mind."

"Did you know?" I ask as we begin to walk. "When building this place, did you realize it would be his prison?"

My father's silence is deafening.

"What about the young nobles who were sent here to be sacrificed? Did you know about them?"

"Never! Minos didn't tell me his intent until I had already completed the labyrinth."

"And you didn't do anything about it?"

"I hoped another might take action," Daedalus says. "I had reason to believe... No. No more excuses. I should have made sure."

I don't ask further questions as we venture deeper into the catacombs. There's little to see. The walls, floor, and ceiling are chiseled from the same dark stone, which seeps with moisture. The chill is already working its way into my bones. This is a miserable place. Nothing grows here. Even roots can't burst through the rock. I may not possess the knowledge of my father or my brother, but I do have an imagination, and I can't help wondering how the Minotaur could have survived so long with only the occasional sacrifice for sustenance. How many meals did fourteen people make? Did he kill them all at once, feasting on rotten meat and gnawing on bones as the years between tributes slowly passed? Or did he keep some of them alive like cattle, forcing them to feed on their fellow victims until it was their turn to become supper? The stench of his lair must be horrific, the Minotaur's eyes milky white from lack of sunlight.

The passageway continues to twist and turn, offering more options than can be memorized. As we round each corner, I'm certain that I'll feel a clawed hand grab my throat and feel hot rancid breath against my face before the beast sinks his teeth into my flesh. I try to be brave for my father, but I am very much afraid.

"Curses!" my father hisses after what feels like an eternity of walking. He holds up the frayed end of twine. There is no sign of the spool.

“What does that mean?” I ask. “That the Minotaur found Theseus and...” I can’t bring myself to finish the thought.

“It means we need help,” my father replies, “or we’ll never make it out of here.” I wince when he calls out in a voice much louder than before. “Asterion! It is I, Daedalus. Do you remember me? We mean you no harm!”

“The creature has a name?” I hiss.

“Of course he does! He wasn’t born a monster, you know. He nursed from his mother’s breast, just as you did.”

I try to picture that and instantly regret it. Minos could have at least given us a weapon! We have little else but the clothes on our backs and the twine that my father has begun looping between his hand and elbow. I wonder if I’d be able to choke the beast to death with it.

“How very curious,” Daedalus says as he works. He nods over my shoulder. “Another of your prayers?”

I turn and see sunlight flickering along the walls. Except the crimson glow doesn’t contain the same warmth of my precious Apollo. Instead there is almost something sinister about it. I’m reminded of the way that Dion walks through the house late at night while carrying a ceramic oil lamp, the shadows on the walls dancing with each step. More than once he spooked me as a child, although never by design. How I would cry out in relief if he was approaching us now! Instead I tense, a dark form having appeared from around the corner. I’ve often felt proud of my athletic build, but I am dwarfed by the massive creature who now fills the corridor. The flame from the torch it carries makes it difficult to see more, until it is lowered slightly, causing the shadows to sharpen and reveal the outline of two pointed horns.

The Minotaur is alive! And soon we will no longer be. I’ll be damned if I go out without a fight!

“Stay behind me,” I hiss at my father.

I see only one chance of surviving this encounter. Apollo’s light shall indeed be my salvation. But only if I can wrest the torch from the creature’s grasp and drive it back. Or better yet, set its fur aflame. My body tenses as I prepare to launch my attack.

The creature seems to sense my intent, speaking in a booming voice that both shocks and chills me to my core. “Do. Not.”

Dread propels me forward as a snarl escapes my throat. The creature braces itself for attack, not understanding that I don’t intend to do it harm. Not before I’ve armed myself. I manage to grab the torch and yank it free from its grip, the light shifting enough to truly allow me to see the Minotaur for the first time. The creature’s head is indeed that of a bull, but the eyes aren’t blinded from lack of sun. Instead they are black, seeming to glow red in the reflection of the fire. Its mouth is open in surprise—a strangely human expression for an animal to wear. The dark brown fur continues down its neck before giving way to meaty shoulder muscles, the bulging physique more powerful and toned than the most revered Olympic athletes. I get the impression that the beast could crush us to death in those mighty arms, but I won’t allow that to happen. Especially when I notice the gold necklace around its neck—a green stone in its center—that was once worn by Ariadne and has now become some sort of sick trophy. I shall avenge her!

“Fear!” the Minotaur booms as I wave the torch in front of it.

“Turn and flee if you are so afraid,” I cry out. “I’ll hunt you down. Prepare to burn for your transgressions!”

The Minotaur raises its hands and begins to back away. “Do. Not.”

“You brought this upon yourself!” I growl.

“Fear!” the creature repeats.

I’m about to lunge with the torch when my father pushes past me.

“Just a moment!” he’s saying while waving his arms around. “Listen to me! I believe this is all a misunderstanding.”

“Do. Not.” The creature says again.

“Fear,” my father replies. “Do not fear. Is that what you are trying to tell us?”

I can scarcely believe my eyes when the creature nods. It continues to take steps backward, as if intending to flee. I almost wish it would. That is, until it huffs out another word. “Help.”

I’m not sure if the creature is offering it or is in need, but it’s impossible to interpret that as a threat.

“Exactly!” Daedalus says, still moving forward. “I called out to you asking for help. Do you remember me, Asterion?”

The Minotaur breathes in before huffing again, and it sounds like, “Yes.”

“Oh thank goodness.” Daedalus turns his back to the Minotaur as if there is no longer a threat. “Do you see now, Icarus?”

I’ve heard that phrase often in my life, whenever my father wants to know if I’m keeping up with him. I don’t understand the situation entirely, but the creature makes no attempt to take my father hostage or do him harm.

“I think so,” I say, holding the torch to one side of me. “We’ve come seeking my friend, the king’s daughter. Have you seen a woman called Ariadne?”

The Minotaur’s dark eyes lock on to mine. “Yes.”

I wait for him to say more, but the creature remains still. “He’s not very talkative,” I murmur.

“It’s a wonder he can speak at all, given his physiology,” Daedalus replies. “Can you lead us to her, Asterion?”

The bull head nods, but only once. “Come.” And with that he turns and begins to lumber away.

The Minotaur seems to have no need of twine to find its way. He moves quickly, only pausing when we enter a junction that splits off into four ways, where the creature spins in a slow circle. I’m thinking it’s confused when something similar to laughter escapes its throat.

“Beauty,” he explains.

I’m not sure what that means until I look again and notice how many veins of moonlight fill the walls of this space. And he’s right. The effect is particularly striking here. I’ve been too on edge to appreciate the wonder of it all—how a deity’s love for me resulted in this miracle, and how that manifested in such a beautiful fashion.

The creature leads the way down another corridor, but I can no longer think of him in such simple terms. The laugh and the expression of wonder... There was something so gleeful in that moment. So human. He isn’t a simple beast or a terrifying monster. Like anyone, he was born into a complicated situation that wasn’t of his choosing. I’m curious to see what he’s made of his

circumstances, especially when he leads us to an arched doorway that is unlike the rest of the labyrinth.

“Home,” Asterion says before splaying a strong hand on the door’s surface and pushing.

I’m not sure what to expect inside. I had previously imagined piles of corpses with the creature crouched atop, drool dripping from its jowls as it gnawed a bone. Instead I am greeted by a rounded room. The light of Artemis doesn’t reach here. I raise the torch I still carry, confused when I see a harbor, a garden, a forest, and a marketplace full of dancers rather than carts of produce. None of these have any color. They are but drawings, etched onto the wall with charcoal. I’m peering at them in the gloomy light when the scraping of a flint from behind makes me turn. Asterion is walking around the room, lighting different lamps. My father is peering up at the walls with interest.

“I see you took my advice and kept practicing,” he says while inspecting the art.

“Beauty,” Asterion repeats.

“You made these etchings?” I ask as I turn in place. I notice a bed against the wall and a chair. There are other items: stubs of burnt-down candles, a bucket, a lute, and the shimmer of precious metals. I can’t help noticing a distinct lack of bones, and while there is a musky scent that I associate with animals of labor, I don’t detect the putrid stink of decaying flesh. But I do wonder how the Minotaur, no matter how civilized he’s turning out to be, would come by so many supplies. Some of them quite rare and valuable. “Where did you get these scrolls from?” I ask.

“Him,” Asterion answers, pointing a finger at my father.

“I feared for his sanity,” Daedalus says sheepishly. “Especially due to the lack of human contact. Although I’m beginning to think he’s had more than I realized.” He takes a chisel off a nearby table and inspects it. “Where did these tools come from, for instance?”

“Secret,” Asterion replies.

“No matter,” my father says, moving to the center of the room. “Now then, if I remember right...” He begins muttering to himself.

I ignore this, having seen it countless times before. Speaking to my father is useless when he’s deep in conversation with himself.

Besides, more of the art has caught my eye, most of it landscapes and horizons. Except near the bed, where there is a sketch of a human face. One that is strangely familiar to me.

I move closer to see. The sketch is of a young man with dark hair and gentle eyes. His smile is subtle. And vulnerable. It makes me remember, in my youth, how I would stay in the palace with Ariadne. Sometimes for an entire week or longer, depending on what schemes entertained us at the time. Her servants were often invited to join us in our games. One in particular caught my eye. A lanky young man with a tangle of raven black hair. We had been each other's first. I asked him afterwards if he loved me and received that same shy smile in response. I promised myself to never forget it, and I haven't. I just never expected to be confronted with it here, in such a strange place.

"Beauty," rumbles a deep voice from next to me.

Startled, I turn and notice Asterion at my side. Up close, the muscles of his large form are even more impressive. Warmth radiates off his body, which is surprising considering that he only wears a perizoma—a linen loincloth tied around his waist. The rest of him is bare, even his feet. I can only imagine what it must be like to cling to his body while in the throes of passion. I watch, fascinated, as Asterion touches the tips of his thick fingers to a charcoal cheek and says, "Love."

"You haven't been lonely then?" I ask.

"No," Asterion answers.

"Good," I reply. "I gravely misjudged you when we first met. I apologize. We have more in common than I ever would have dreamt."

"Lonely?" Asterion asks.

"Not entirely," I reply. "He is distant, but if anything, this night has proven that he does indeed love me."

Asterion places a hand on my shoulder and I nearly buckle from the weight. "Good," he huffs.

"Ah ha!" my father declares from the center of the room. "I'd almost forgotten which opening mechanism I'd chosen to use. Pure genius!"

“And some people find love within themselves,” I murmur. “Any idea what he’s excited about?”

“Exit.”

I turn in surprise. Daedalus is hopping from foot to foot in celebration. When I bring the torch near, I see another mosaic set into the floor, this one a perfectly round circle depicting a muscular man with the head of a bull.

“Do you see the gap?” my father asks. “It should be large enough for you to insert your hand. You’ll have to pull upward from that side.”

I furrow my brow before passing him the torch. I’ve always enjoyed sports. For the company it affords me mostly, but also for the way it tones my body. Even so, my muscles strain before the mosaic finally gives way, beginning to swing upward while still attached to the floor at two middle points.

“Like flipping a coin, isn’t it?” Daedalus says gleefully. “It took me ages to design this. You might think that standing on the opposite side and applying enough weight would have the same effect, but I came up with a clever mechanism that—”

“Ugh!”

I can’t hold it any longer. The slab is too heavy for me. My fingers slip off the edge and it closes again with a thud.

“Ah yes,” Daedalus says. “I also made sure that nobody would be able to enter this way.”

“Help,” I hear Asterion say before I feel his hand on my shoulder again, this time to move me aside. I’m astounded as he lifts and the slab swings open, his arms barely flexing with the effort.

“Friend,” Asterion says. “Gone.”

“She went in there?” I ask. “Wait, why was she here in the first place? I thought she was only supposed to tell Theseus what he needed to know.”

“Not. Alone.” Asterion explains, one huff at a time, how Ariadne disguised herself as one of the nobles who were to be sacrificed, so that she could join Theseus in the labyrinth. Asterion trailed them, calling out in the dark long enough to convince them he wasn’t a threat. Then he led the nobles, like he had so many others, into his home so that they could escape.

"You are a hero," Daedalus says, grabbing one of the meaty hands to shake it. "And my personal savior. I'll rest easier, knowing that the lives of those young people weren't lost due to my foolishness. Assuming I still have a head to rest on a pillow, after this mess."

"Danger?" Asterion asks.

"I'm afraid so. We cannot repay your hospitality by remaining any longer. Time is of the essence, I'm afraid." Daedalus lowers the torch to illuminate the half-moon hole in the floor. "In you go, Icarus."

I can see the glint of metal rungs in the stone. "What's in there?"

"Freedom," my father says. "Go now. I'll pass the torch to you once you're down."

I don't move. "What about you?" I ask Asterion. "If this is the way out, why stay here? You should escape with the man you love."

"Duty." His hand moves to the golden necklace around his neck. I've noticed a few other treasures while here. The sort of things a nobleman would give someone who had saved their life.

"You're a good man," I tell him. "I regret that I'll never know your touch. I would have been honored to lay with you. Although it sounds like you have little need of me."

"Love," Asterion confirms. "Happy."

"I'm glad to hear it." My eyes dart down to the impressive bulge in his loincloth. "You'll be a part of my fantasies regardless."

A deep rumble comes from inside Asterion's chest that sounds remarkably similar to a chuckle.

My father begins to tut impatiently, so after thanking our host again, I do as he says and begin to descend, using the metal rungs set into the stone as footholds and grips. When my feet touch bottom, I find myself in another tunnel, this one not much taller than me. It's damp, mushrooms shooting out of accumulated mud that sucks at my sandals as I turn around to make sure my father makes it down safely.

"What is this place?" I ask once he has.

"A drainage system. We wouldn't want the king's gardens to flood, now would we?" The circular entrance above us closes with a thud. "So many laborers were on hand for the construction of the labyrinth

that it seemed the ideal opportunity to fix some of the palace's other issues."

"And it needed to be this tall? Do the waters ever reach so high?"

"Go," Daedalus says, pushing on my back. "The way is straight and long. Watch your footing. Come along. We must hurry!"

I lead the way, only glancing back to make sure my father is keeping pace. I can tell he's getting winded. I'm about to suggest we slow down when we finally near the end. I spot another wall ahead, and a set of rungs leading up. My father grabs my arm before we reach it.

"Extinguish the torch," he says. "Trust me," he adds when seeing my expression.

I do as he says, noticing how strong the silvery light becomes up ahead, a beam illuminating the floor beneath our feet. When I creep closer and glance upward, I see the moon in the sky above surrounded by twinkling stars.

"Up you go," Daedalus says. "We'll soon have need of your strength. When you reach the grate, turn it left ninety degrees and push. It should swing open."

I'm not entirely sure what he means until I climb to the top. I find a circular iron frame with seven bars set into it, and beyond, fresh night air. I don't hesitate. The task is difficult while standing on two rungs, but I manage to open the hatch. After climbing out, I find myself standing in the middle of an orchard, and it all makes sense. By the time my father clambers out, he's wearing a sheepish expression. "I'm not entirely without sympathy," he says.

"This is how he survived," I say, plucking an apricot from a nearby tree. "This was his food."

"That was my intent," Daedalus says while dusting himself off. "I instructed the servants to leave a basket of food here each week as tribute to the dryads, so the orchard would always bear fruit."

One of those servants must have hidden himself, wanting to see the dryads. He must have been surprised to see such a hulking creature appear instead. I can only imagine that lust had helped him overcome his fear. That's how I would tell the story anyway.

“Ariadne and the others must be long gone by now.” My father glances around as if to be certain and sighs. “This is where it becomes difficult, Icarus.”

“More difficult than facing almost certain doom in an endless pitch-black maze?”

Daedalus nods. “We’re no longer safe here. I don’t just mean the palace, or this city. We cannot rest until we’ve found a way to escape the very island itself!”

* * * * *

For the first time in my existence, light has become my enemy. My father and I cling to the shadows, avoiding the city and even the farmhouses as we slowly make our way home. When we finally reach our destination, we discover a soldier posted outside the entrance. He’s more than either of us feel capable of dealing with. Our bodies are exhausted from walking, running, and weathering the endless tension that accompanies fearing for one’s life. Minos won’t give us a second chance. If he discovers that we escaped the labyrinth, especially without his daughter or news of her current whereabouts, he’ll surely conclude that we’ve outlived our usefulness.

After huddling in the dark and watching the house, we decide on a less direct approach. We retrace our steps, walking in a wide arc until we’re against the cliff edge. We follow this to the rear of the house, where we have more luck. No soldiers have been posted there. King Minos probably hadn’t considered the possibility of us using an entrance normally reserved for servants. This oversight allows us to reach the veranda, where a thin figure confronts us.

“Go away, you swine!” Dion shouts, a pitcher raised above his head. When we step out of the shadows and he sees our faces, Dion cries out in relief. “Master Daedalus! Master Icarus! Oh, how good it is to see you!”

“Quiet!” my father hisses. “Are there any soldiers in the house?”

“Just the one out front,” Dion says, puffing up his chest proudly. “I wouldn’t allow him to come inside.”

“Good,” Daedalus says. “Now get us something to drink. And eat.”

“Thank you, Dion,” I say, grabbing the servant’s arm before he can rush away. “We appreciate you taking care of the house in our absence. Don’t we, Father?”

“Hmm? Oh. Yes. Of course.”

Dion reacts to this faint praise with transparent emotion. Before he can begin weeping and potentially give us away, I let him go. Then I sit, amazed that my father has the energy left to not only remain standing, but to pace the length of the veranda.

“Do you think we’re safe?” I ask.

“No. We won’t be until we’re far away from here. Our prison has only grown larger, I’m afraid. We could steal a boat, or attempt to stow away on one, but Minos has the finest armada in the Mediterranean. He’ll launch every ship he possesses to find us, and when he does, they’ll overtake us effortlessly. Perhaps, given enough time, I could design one capable of outrunning even his fastest vessel. But no. The materials necessary, and the manpower —”

“For now,” I interrupt. “Are we safe here, in this house?”

“Enough to replenish ourselves. Minos won’t expect us to escape the labyrinth so soon. We’re unlikely to be heard over the waves here. Or within the walls of the house, but I’ll have Dion bring us weapons in case the soldier decides he’d rather sleep indoors tonight.”

I wonder if my father intends to kill the man, should it come to that. I’m no longer sure what he’s capable of. The day has been full of revelations, the night even more so. Too much has happened. I haven’t been able to process it all, but I decide it’s time to start. Dion returns with bread, cheese, boiled eggs, and wine. I’ve scarcely swallowed each bite before another is shoved in behind it, the taste lost on me as I’m hounded by my concerns. I think about what led us to this dire situation. The arrogance of a king, yes, but my father played his part too. I can forgive him for wanting to help the queen, although I wish he had found a better way of doing so. And while I am relieved that he felt some compassion for Asterion, he was also responsible for constructing the Minotaur’s prison, and perhaps worse, turning a blind eye when Minos forced innocent people into it.

The labyrinth had been harrowing enough, and I had the benefit of being with its creator. The young men and women would have had each other but not been able to see. How many had attacked each other, injuring and maybe even killing their companions while in the grip of terror? My father didn't seem to realize that any had been rescued until tonight. Didn't he feel any responsibility for their assumed deaths? Maybe he wasn't fazed. Especially if there truly was blood on his hands already.

"We could dig," Daedalus murmurs to himself. He's barely eaten, although his wine cup has been refilled twice already. "We'll build a new home that is completely underground. Sun will be required to grow food. A shaft to the surface perhaps, like a well without the water? No. Someone would happen upon it eventually. We would never be able to set foot in daylight again without risking our lives. We might as well ask Hades to welcome our souls into his realm now, rather than live like worms who fear the surface."

His appearance is unkempt. I'm sure mine is too, but with his hair in disarray, and the way he keeps muttering to himself—inventing plans and dismissing them again—I can't help but wonder if my father is mad, or at the very least, prone to moments of insanity.

"What happened in Athens?" I ask.

He doesn't seem to hear me, still pacing and plotting. I need an answer though. Recent events have intertwined our fates, and I want to know the sort of man that I'm entrusting with my life.

"Did you really kill Perdix?"

My father pivots to face me. "What?"

"Did you kill my cousin? They found you guilty at the trial, Father. We were banished from Athens because of the verdict. I never had the courage to ask you what the truth was, too scared that I would no longer be able to love you."

Daedalus sighs, and when he answers, he sounds defeated. "I deserved my banishment."

"So it's true? You killed him?"

"I..." My father turns toward me, looking wounded when I recoil. He falls to his knees and takes my hands. "You can't possibly understand, but you will one day. When you are older. When

everyone begins to resemble a child, the advantages of their youth unearned. Imagine your words being ignored despite your experience, simply because your hair is gray. I dedicated my life to my work, Icarus. I sacrificed nearly everything and often felt the price was worth it, for I achieved many impressive feats. When your cousin asked me to teach him, I was thrilled. I found in Perdix an apt pupil, my equal in enthusiasm and perhaps even in talent. He learned in mere years what it had taken me decades to master. I was proud of him, but when he began to surpass me—when people began calling my name in the streets so they could praise him instead... ‘You must be proud of your nephew, Daedalus. He will continue your work when you are gone.’ What of my name? Was it only to be remembered when people asked who taught the greatest craftsman in history?” He squeezes my hands tight. “So yes, we had too much to drink one night and got into a terrible argument. Reason abandoned me, if only for the blink of an eye, but that’s all it took. I shoved him, and poor Perdix fell. As much as I want to, I can’t claim it was an accident. I had murder in my heart, but after getting its way, my fury abandoned me so I could experience the full pain of my folly.”

I yank my hands away from him. “You killed Perdix because of your stupid reputation?”

“Worse,” Daedalus says, his face a mask of agony. “I committed that horrible deed because of my pride. Athena saved me though. My goddess in all her compassionate wisdom, she transformed Perdix into a partridge so that he could flutter safely to the ground.”

“Perdix is still alive?”

“I cannot answer that with any authority. We are judged thrice for each transgression, first by ourselves, then by our fellows, and finally by the gods. My divine punishment was to never know of Perdix’s fate. I think of him daily and suffer endlessly in my ignorance, but I accept this penalty without resistance. I interrupted his career, his studies. For those such as he and I, that is a fate synonymous with death.”

“Why didn’t you tell me this sooner?”

“Do you remember when you were a child, and you broke your mother’s clay skillet?” Daedalus smiles at the memory. “It was her most prized possession, handed down through the family for generations. Rather than confess your crime, you hid in the neighboring olive grove for an entire day and night. You only came home again when it began to rain. Why is that?”

“I was ashamed,” I say, my cheeks burning.

“You may not realize it, but a parent can feel the same way when having to admit their shortcomings to a child. I dare say it’s even worse, because I don’t have the luxury of deciding that I no longer love you. A parent’s obligation is to forgive. A child’s inclination is to judge.”

“I don’t mean to—”

“It’s fine,” Daedalus says, patting my knee before standing again. “That is the course of progress. Each generation should hold the previous one accountable for their actions and strive not to make the same mistakes.”

“Fine, but I do love you, even still, and I doubt I would have been able to change that had I wanted to. But I am relieved to learn that Perdix is alive. I just hope he’s not stuck as a bird.”

“If he is, I am sure that he would at least enjoy...” My father trails off. He spins around to consider the sea. Then he turns to face me again, grabbing me by the wrists and yanking me to my feet. “Spread your arms wide. Good! Hold them there. The wingspan would have to be considerable, the structure reinforced somehow, but the construction shouldn’t take long. As for the journey... Hmm. That will indeed be difficult. But not impossible. Yes. Yes! It might just work!”

I shake my head, not understanding. “What’s going on?”

“You’ve given me the most wonderful idea,” Daedalus says, gripping me by the shoulders in his excitement. “We’ll fly ourselves to safety!”

* * * * *

We are each given our orders, Daedalus barking them out like a maddened general. “Dion! Refill that pitcher with wine and take it to the soldier. Make sure he drinks his fill. Don’t stop pouring until he can no longer stand.” The other servants—at least those who

haven't abandoned us yet—are given tasks even more bizarre. “I need feathers! Bring me every quill in the house. Empty the blankets. Seek out Rastus the gamekeeper and purchase from him every feather in his possession. Bring them all here. Quickly!”

Daedalus is so determined that he barely wavers when we enter his workshop and discover its condition. Most of the contraptions are gone. The rest have been smashed, including many of the sculptures. I kneel next to Apollo, the top of his head sheared off, but I don't have the luxury of weeping over him. My father's need of me is too great.

“At least they left my tools,” Daedalus says. “Come, Icarus. There is much to be done.”

He doesn't try to teach or inspire me this time. I become another of his instruments. “Hold this. Sand that down. Fetch me those clamps. Tell any servant you see to bring candles. All of them.”

When he runs out of tasks for me, I become a model, standing motionless with my arms spread wide while my father takes measurements, or later, holds a wooden frame to my back. I'm tired and long for sleep. Whenever I feel my eyelids drooping, I need only think of Minos, and how he will eventually send another soldier to replace the first. One who is sober and much more likely to notice the bustle of activity around the house, especially once the sun has risen.

Each time a servant returns with the requested materials, my father employs their help. Most have never stepped inside the workshop. Now we are working in unison, status and formalities forgotten as we focus on the same goal.

“Had I recognized the talent hiding under this roof,” my father says at one point, shaking his head in wonder. “Oh, the wonders I could have achieved!”

“We'll make sure you're all rewarded,” I say loudly, knowing that these people will need more to live off than praise. If we do manage to escape, that is. I'm increasingly unsure if we will. We've either been working toward our salvation or our suicide, although my faith increases when I take a step back to consider the finished result. My father has outdone himself, constructing two massive pairs of wings,

the mottled brown feathers a startling variety of sizes, all of them slick with a coat of milky wax.

"They're stunning," I breathe.

"They're untested," Daedalus replies, not sounding nearly as awed. "The principle is sound, but I would have preferred trying them under safe conditions."

"Can't we attempt a short flight first?"

"Dawn has broken," Daedalus says, sounding as tired as I feel. "We'd be seen by the fishermen, and by the time we returned to land, word would have gotten back to Minos. No, I'm afraid that..."

"Master Daedalus!" Dion says. "A soldier has been seen leaving the city. He's coming this way!"

My father sighs. "Then it is time to find out how much a lifetime of experience is truly worth. Come. We must carry these wings to the roof, so that they may carry us away from here."

On the way up, I urge my father to give permission for the servants to take whatever they need and flee at the earliest opportunity. Considering that they are helping us carry the wings—a task we couldn't quickly manage alone—it seems the ideal time to remind him of how supportive they've been.

"Better they have my possessions than Minos's men," my father concedes. "We dare not take more than the clothing we wear. Even coins could weigh us down. Dion, see that the household items are distributed evenly among the others, but take a larger share for yourself."

"Will you send for me?" Dion asks, eyes brimming with tears.

My father's answer is both vague and noncommittal. Understandably so, but I wish he had lied if only to spare Dion's feelings. We aren't deserving of the care he's given us over the years.

I blink against the morning light when the hatch to the roof is thrown open. We're lucky my father designed this building or we would be leaping off the cliffs instead.

"How often I have come up here to study the stars," Daedalus says, looking skyward while shielding his eyes. "Now I shall fly amongst them."

"Father! I can see the soldiers coming."

"Soldiers?" he asks, sounding panicked. "As in more than one?"

"I count ten."

Daedalus curses under his breath. "Minos has spent the night thinking. He must have realized that we would most likely return here, should we escape the labyrinth."

"That would explain the ships," I say, pointing toward the coast.

The vessels are large, the sails too grand to belong to fishing boats.

"No," Daedalus says. "This isn't a hunch. Someone must have told him of our plan."

"None of us would ever betray you!" Dion insists.

"The gamekeeper," I say. "We woke him up in the middle of the night for an obscene amount of feathers. Of course he mentioned that to someone. Who wouldn't?"

"It's of no consequence now," my father says. "Come. Let us don our wings."

He insists that I be dressed first. The servants hold my wings as I slip my arms into leather straps that end up resting on my shoulders. Two more loop around my wrists. A harness is tied tight around my torso. After mounting it, a wooden mechanism attached to the wings themselves is bound to my back, my father reminding me of its use.

"When you hold your arms out at ninety degrees, the frame will lock into place so you can glide. Try it. Good! Move the wings upward to unlock them again, and then down to flap when you need to gain altitude. How does that feel?"

Even moving the wings while standing makes my feet want to leave the ground. "This might work!"

"Pray that it does," Daedalus says as the servants help him into his own wings. "We both should. The only question is to whom?"

"Apollo," I say instantly.

"A curious choice."

"Not when you consider that he spends his every day suspended in the sky."

"True enough. You seek Apollo's favor, and I'll ask Athena for her aid. Events have come full circle. I once caused my nephew to fall.

Now I will take that leap myself while hoping to spare a life dear to me. This might be my moment of redemption. Please let it be, for my son's sake, if not my own."

I realize that he's no longer speaking to me. I have my own god to pray to. I turn my face to the sun and close my eyes, and perhaps it's my weariness, but I can almost pretend that it's a morning like any other, and that the events of the previous day were merely a dream. The encounter with Apollo in a field of hyacinths seems so distant now, a fevered fantasy from a life that is no longer my own. I don't expect it will be easy to feel that connection to him again, but as I soon discover, I need only search inside my heart.

Apollo, my god, my love, my desire that will never be... My life has been plunged into darkness since we parted ways, and I rejoice that the path to my salvation will lead me through the same skies that you travel across each day. I entrust myself into your care, from now until eternity, for while you will never belong to me, no matter what comes, I will always belong to you.

I open my eyes to find them wet with tears. After wiping my cheeks, I notice my father patiently watching me, and I nod my readiness.

"The fundamental strategy, Icarus, is to glide on the currents. We will surely fall after jumping. You must catch the wind in your wings and let them lift you back up again. Think of all the times you've watched the birds soar and copy their behavior. To go up, you must sometimes come down, but do not let yourself get too near the water or it will soak your clothes and wings with ruinous weight."

"Isn't that what the wax is for?" I ask.

"Yes, but we have many miles to fly, and the sun will be on us for most of the voyage. Should the wax melt—"

"The soldiers, Master Daedalus!" Dion says from the edge of the roof. "They're almost here!"

"Then we shall allow trial and error to guide us from here," Daedalus says. "I will go first. Watch me carefully, Icarus. Copy me if I succeed, and should I fail, learn what you can from it."

"May the fates be kind to us both," I tell him.

My heart is thudding as I watch him walk to the edge of the roof. My father looks down, shakes his head, and circles back. I'm thinking he's changed his mind when he turns again and breaks into a run. I hold my breath as he leaps into the air. Then he plummets, lost from view momentarily before I move forward to discover his fate. I've barely taken a few steps before I see my father rise up again, wings spread wide as the wind carries him up and out over the water.

"You had better hurry, Master Icarus," Dion says. "I'll rest easier if you stay together."

"Plead ignorance to all of this," I tell him. "Claim you played no part in it. Better yet, take whatever wealth you can from this house and start a new life elsewhere."

Dion shakes his head. "I will find you and your father. We will be reunited. Now please, don't wait any longer."

I nod. Whatever should happen, my life has been better than most. If I make it through this, I swear to never take that for granted again. I will work hard. Not to further my own name, but to help those good souls who time will forget. That Dion is able to find love and compassion for those who have taken away his freedom—surely that is more worthy of remembrance than any hero who has slain a monster. Legends should be written about people like him instead. As for my own fate...

My feet are already in motion, my instincts begging me to stop and preserve myself, but I don't. I send one more prayer to Apollo as I leap off the roof.

If I fall, promise that you'll catch me.

My legs pinwheel, trying to find ground that is no longer there. I begin to flap my wings, but it's not enough. I remember what my father told me and straighten my arms. I feel the wings lock and then —

Up! My arms are nearly yanked from their sockets, but I barely feel the pain, the exhilaration of flight filling me with so much joy that it bubbles out of me as laughter. The cliffs are left behind, the sea beneath me as I rise up... and begin to falter. I try not to panic. I can see my father dipping down before soaring up again, and I try to

mimic his actions. He makes it look so easy, and it probably is for him, his head full of calculations and probabilities. I don't understand the world in the same way he does. I'll never be able to. All I have is feeling, and that's what I focus on. My stomach sinks along with my altitude before I arch my back and soar up again, but not as high. That makes sense. I didn't let myself dip as far, so I try to be braver, going lower next time, and I'm rewarded with more lift.

Still not enough. My father is higher in the sky and becoming smaller. I'll never catch him. At this rate, I'm likely to lose him. I can't navigate on my own. I need him to guide my course, so I let go of my fear. I plunge toward the sea, getting so close that I can see the deck of a ship as soldiers loose bolts in my direction, but they are blinded by the sun, bested by arrows from an archer far more skilled than they will ever be. I sing my praises to Apollo as I rise again, delighting in the sensation that I am nearing his kingdom, and I imagine that I *am* one of his arrows, shot over the sea to strike land on the other side. I dip again, fearlessly this time, the speed exhilarating. On the way back up, I don't even notice my father—who is holding his position by flapping his wings—until I blow past him.

"Icarus!" my father shouts, giving chase. "Not so fast! You're putting too much strain on the wings!"

I flap in an attempt to slow myself and start to plummet before catching the wind again. This time at a more graceful angle, even though it doesn't come naturally to me. I'm shaky, and despite moving slower now, I no longer feel in control.

"That's it," my father says. "Restrain yourself."

"I'm trying," I say, the wind causing me to tilt back and forth.

"Gentle swoops. Like an owl driving a mouse out of hiding."

He keeps coaching me. His words make sense, and his technique must be the right one judging from its success, but I'm failing to master it. The further out to sea we fly, the closer I'm getting to the water.

"Higher!" my father yells. "You need to regain height!"

"I'm trying!" The start of this flight had been so strong. Why am I floundering now?

“Listen to me,” Daedalus shouts. “You’re not doing as I’ve instructed.”

“Because it’s not working for me!” I yell.

The swelling waters are close enough for me to smell the salt on the air. There’s only enough distance left for one last dive, and I know my father won’t approve, but my gut is screaming at me to take the risk. I angle my body as if intending to plunge into the water and pull up at the last second, the sea licking the toes of my right foot, but it can’t take hold of me. I’m soaring upward again, and once at the peak, I repeat the same careless dive, rewarded by even more altitude.

“That’s enough!” my father calls. “You’re high enough now. Take it easy. Follow my lead.”

“I will.”

For a while, this technique seems to be working. We’ve made incredible progress. Crete is nothing more than a bumpy line on the horizon behind us. I can’t yet see land ahead, but at least we are free. The ships have fallen behind. Not even fishermen are out this far. We are alone.

“Up again,” my father says. “Stop letting yourself drift so low.”

He’s above me. Always. No matter how hard I try to follow his guidance, I can never achieve the same result, but I try, over and over, until I realize that once again the sea is much too near.

“I can’t do it this way,” I shout over the wind. “I need to climb higher.”

I don’t wait for permission. I dive and swoop, laughing on the way up and shouting with pleasure on the way down, before repeating myself.

“Icarus! Enough!”

I don’t heed my father’s words, knowing they won’t serve me. I do my best to keep track of him, yelling for him to lead the way, but he’s too far below me now. I manage to spiral down to his level and glide alongside him. He doesn’t look pleased.

“You’re taking too many risks,” Daedalus scolds.

“This is the only way I know how to fly,” I respond. “You can show me your way once we’ve made it to land.”

“Are you insane? I never plan on wearing these wings again!”

I don’t know why. I find the experience intoxicating when allowed to use my own methods. Speaking of which, I’ve sunk too low again. “Trust me,” I shout. “I know what I’m doing!”

As I plunge this time, I think of the seagulls I’ve watched from our house—how they dive straight into the water, often surfacing again with a fish in their mouth. The thought makes me laugh. My father is a wise old owl. I’m an impulsive seagull. We each have our methods of flying.

I’m unchained now, embracing my nature fully. Each time I pass my father on the way up or down, his expression is fearful. I don’t understand this. I’m in the throes of euphoria. The sun is warming my skin, the wind carrying me closer to my lover with each new height that I reach. I once met Apollo in a field, surrounded by painful memories from his past. Now I reach for him in the sky, where there are no boundaries or reminders of failure. I can feel his gaze upon me, sense his approval as I do what none of his mortal lovers were capable of. I will fly to him directly. Apollo thought I couldn’t go all the places that he could, but look at me now! I will orbit him as the moon does the earth, a celestial suitor that he will no longer be able to ignore. I dive deeper than I ever have before, a stone that sprouts wings at the last second to become a shooting star across the sky, and I wonder how high I’ll have to go before I feel him embracing me. Once that happens, I’ll never let my feet touch the ground again.

My flesh catches fire. That’s how it feels. I look to my arms in confusion, not understanding why they are burning, and see a river of hot wax rolling over my biceps. I can feel it dripping down my back too. Instinct urges me to wipe it away, the wings unlocking the second I swipe at the wax, and I lose control. I’m tumbling through the air, my skin screaming as the wax flows over me. I force myself to ignore the pain and attempt to straighten my arms but fail to do so. I’m falling backwards. My body is facing the sky, the sun impossibly bright, but I still reach for it as I continue to tilt, my legs rising above the rest of my body. This isn’t good.

“Please,” I gasp, in need of a miracle.

A gust of wind hits me, but it isn't my salvation. I'm upside down now. I can see my father below me, his face a mask of horror. Then I pass him and realize it's a long way down. I can use that. This is who I am. I thrust my arms outward with renewed force and feel the wings lock, but they don't catch the wind. I don't understand why until I notice the trail of feathers above me, marking the path of my descent. Too much wax has melted. The wings are no longer strong enough to carry my weight. All I can do is close my eyes, the familiar orange glow beyond my eyelids transporting me back to my bedroom. Just another morning. One more opportunity to make those dreams come true. They were beautiful, while they lasted.

I hit the water, which doesn't yield to catch me. I hear a crack before plunging into the depths, thinking the wooden frame has broken, until I realize that I can no longer move my arms or legs. Something has broken inside of me instead. All I can do, as the air grows thin in my lungs, is open my eyes to see the dwindling light of the sun, somewhere on the opposite side of a watery mirror, but even this grows dim as my world slowly fades to black.

* * * * *

I hear the gentle plucking of a lyre, the song familiar to me since childhood. I no longer have breath to hold, but I try to anyway as I await the first verse. When the singing begins, the sound is distant, but the voice is unmistakable.

Mother.

I feel wet drops strike my face. When I open my eyes, expecting to see rain, I take in the sky above and feel the gentle swell of the water beneath me, but still I cannot move. Apollo is kneeling at my side, the water supporting him as if it were solid. He's plucking a golden lyre while weeping, his song so sad that I want to cry tears of my own. I cannot. I can't speak. I can't breathe. I can't even close my eyes, and I want to because my father is circling above, and I can hear his moans of anguish.

"Icarus! Oh please, *please* take me instead. I beg of you! Icarus!"

I want to call out to him, assure him that I'm fine, even though I know I'm not. I'm dead. Any doubt of that is vanquished when Apollo

is joined by another god. His curled hair is black and long, as are his robes, an aura of finality surrounding his divine presence.

"You come too soon, uncle," Apollo says, continuing to play. "I have not yet finished mourning my lover."

"You can mourn his memory," Hades replies. "You don't need his soul for that."

"I was never allowed to know him," Apollo retorts. "How many more must you take from me before you are satisfied?"

"All of them. And all of us. That is my nature."

"Even nature makes exceptions." Apollo's lyre disappears as he stands. "Icarus belongs to me."

"I could make the same claim," a new voice replies.

I hear the rushing of water, a white-bearded god rising up from the sea. He wears a crown of coral inlaid with barnacles and pearls.

"On what grounds, brother?" Hades asks him.

"I chose to punish Minos for his arrogance. This is the son of the mortal man who interfered with my judgment."

"Are we to blame for the sins of our fathers?" Apollo replies. "You waged war against your own father, Cronus, to end his reign of cruelty. Should you now be held accountable for his actions?"

Hades smirks at this. "Our nephew makes a compelling argument."

"I demand retribution," Poseidon snarls. "Trade this boy's life for that of his father, and I will be satisfied."

"Nature might make exceptions," Hades replied, "but death does not. His life is already over."

Poseidon furrows his brow. "Then why do we waste our time arguing?"

"His life isn't in question," Apollo replies. "Only his soul."

"That belongs to me too," Poseidon grumbles.

"I think you'll find it belongs to me," Hades says, his tone confident and calm.

"And yet, he promised himself to me," Apollo says, "in his final prayer. Does that hold no sway?"

Poseidon isn't moved by this argument. "Mortals often beg their gods to embrace them with their final breath. This is nothing new."

“Yes, but this one loved me, and I loved him.”

My heart swells with affection. Even if Hades whisks me away to his realm, I'll go cradling this welcome declaration to my chest.

“Love?” Poseidon challenges. “You knew each other's company for mere minutes!”

“The first moment of dawn still counts as day, despite being so young,” Apollo replies. “Love is no different.”

“And my seas are made up of countless raindrops,” Poseidon retorts, “but on their own, they are insignificant and evaporate into thin air.”

Apollo's face twists up, still beautiful despite his fury. “You dare compare my feelings to drops of rain? You shall feel the heat of my indignation! Perhaps when your seas have indeed evaporated, you will finally understand the sting of loss.”

Hades clears his throat. “I know the pain you speak of, nephew, and I too have sought to bend nature to my will in the name of love. But the fact remains that all mortal souls are to be collected and placed in my realm. Poseidon, you wanted to exact revenge on Daedalus. There can be no greater penalty than the loss of a child. Or do you claim that is not enough?” Hades points skyward.

Daedalus is no longer calling out. Nor is he praying. Instead he is sobbing.

“The life of Icarus is your payment. Make your peace with that or face the judgment of Zeus.”

“Very well,” Poseidon says. “I am satisfied.”

And with that, the sea swallows him again. I barely notice. My father has finally given up. I watch him fly away while shaking his head, and I want to apologize for failing him yet again.

“Don't give into despair,” Apollo says, looking down at me. “He cries because he adored you, not because you disappointed him.”

“You can speak to the dead,” Hades says, “but outside my realm, they cannot respond. You know this.”

Apollo looks up sharply. “I won't let you take him.”

“You must.”

“Are you saying that my request is beyond your power? If so, tell me now and I will surrender, but if you have any love in your heart for

me, you will only answer with the truth.”

Hades is quiet. Then he sighs. “It is not beyond my power.”

“Then name your price,” Apollo says. “How often have you seen a young life cut short by the Fates? Have you not raged against the injustice of it? I know you cannot return him to life, but please don’t allow his story to end here. Just this once. I beg of you. Whatever you ask of me, I will do it, so long as he and I can be together.”

Hades strokes his beard thoughtfully. “The souls in my care miss your warmth. And your light.”

“You are asking the sun to shine over your realm instead of this one?”

“You said I could name my price. I have.”

“That would plunge this world into darkness.”

“It would give my people what they desire.”

“A pity.” Apollo looks down at me, sorrow in his eyes. “I too have rules I cannot break.”

“Then return the favor and tell me what is possible.”

Apollo tilts his head, still staring down at me. The corner of his mouth twitches upward as his eyes sparkle. “I am asking for one soul out of many. What if I gave you one day out of many?”

“A soul lasts much longer than a day,” Hades replies.

“Many days then, spread out over the centuries. Twice every three years, I will leave the sky and travel to your realm to shine above it. That is the most I can offer.”

“Then I accept and give you more than I ever have to anyone before who has made this same plea.”

With the turn of a shadow, Hades is gone. The sun seems to grow brighter. The sea stops its lurching. I can no longer hear the wind whipping past my ears. The world is awash with an amber glow that carries with it the promise of life.

“Time to wake up, little Icarus,” Apollo says, reaching out to me.

To my surprise, I am able to lift my arm and take his hand. I feel reborn. My skin is healed where the wax burned me, the pain forgotten, and while I still ache for my father and his grief, I know now that the world I’ve left behind is temporary, and that we will one day be reunited.

“No longer a mortal,” Apollo says, “and yet, not a god either. What are we going to do with you?”

“I have a few ideas,” I say, relieved to be able to speak again. “You can start by kissing me.”

Apollo laughs. The sound brings back memories of the carefree summers of my youth. When he touches his lips to mine, it’s like I’ve been starving my entire life and he has just fed me the first bite of an endless feast.

“There are so many things I want to show you,” Apollo says. “Worlds that are impossible to see, even in dreams.”

“How will we get there?” I ask. “In the chariot that you pull across the sky? I hope so. I enjoyed flying.”

“And so you shall,” Apollo says, “but under your own power.”

He takes hold of both my hands. I feel a change. When he releases me, I hear a flutter from behind. I glance over my shoulder and see two strong wings unfurling from my back, the feathers as shimmering and white as the clouds in the sky.

“These wings will never disappoint you,” Apollo says. “They will be there when you need them and disappear when you do not. They shall wrap around you when you’re cold and provide you with infinite amusement when you are bored. They are a symbol of the very same promise I make to you, for I shall serve you in the same manner. Now then, Icarus, where should our story begin?”

“Right here,” I say, hugging myself to him. I rest my head on Apollo’s chest, feel his arms embrace me, and know that this is where I’ve always belonged. We shall carry each other across the sky, burning with a love borne on wings that will never fail.

Author's Note:

When retelling this myth, there was very little I needed to invent. Most of the events are recounted in legend, although the details often vary.

Daedalus was a recurring figure in mythology, a sort of Da Vinci who was mixed up in a number of notable stories. He did indeed face trial for pushing his nephew off the top of the Acropolis and was afterwards banished to Crete, where he got into the same trouble described in this story. Unlike his son, Daedalus completed his flight, arriving safely in Sicily, where he was welcomed by King Cocalus. Minos, still hungry for revenge, set a trap for the inventor by sending a riddle to all the kingdoms that offered a rich reward to any who could solve it. The challenge was to feed a single thread all the way through a spiral shell and back out again. Daedalus solved this by tying a thread to an ant and luring it into the shell with a drop of honey. The riddle solved, Minos now knew where the inventor was hiding, but when he went to Sicily and demanded that Daedalus be handed over, King Cocalus suggested that Minos recover from his journey with a nice relaxing bath. Minos accepted the offer, and once he was in the tub, the daughter of King Cocalus entered the room and poured boiling hot water over him, killing the cruel monarch. Good riddance. Daedalus continued to grieve the loss of his son while in Sicily. He built a temple to Apollo there and offered his wings to the god, some accounts claiming that he hung them on the temple door.

As for Icarus, the sea where he met his death was named the Icarian Sea in his memory. Hercules himself went to recover Icarus's body, swimming with it to a nearby island, which was called Icaria from then on. In gratitude for recovering his son, Daedalus carved one of his famous wooden statues of Hercules, poised in a fighting stance. When Hercules saw the statue, he was so convinced that it was real that he felt threatened and smashed it to pieces. The mighty hero was apparently embarrassed and apologetic for the

misunderstanding. I know the idea of a wooden statue sounds strange to modern ears, but if you'd like an example of just how beautiful and lifelike they can be, I highly recommend you [check out this breathtaking statue of Icarus](#). Be warned that tasteful nudity is involved.

If you're wondering what happened to Ariadne and the Minotaur, you can research that myth on your own, although I don't find it very satisfying. I'd love to write my own version of the story someday. In fact, quite a few myths owe their origins to the mistake Minos made with his white bull. I bet I could fill a book with my take on them all.

Apollo had many lovers according to mythology, both male and female, although Icarus has never been counted among them. His brother, Iapex, was unsuccessfully pursued by Apollo, according to legend. I find it interesting that both Iapex and Daedalus have recorded connections to Apollo, but that the other member of their family does not. Then again, Icarus sure seemed to have a thing for the sun, even though that isn't clearly explained. Until now.

The story of Icarus is most often cited as warning against having ambitions that are too great. I don't believe this was the original intent. Icarus is warned not to fly too high or too low, both being equally dangerous. So in my mind the original moral was intended to teach moderation. I put my own spin on the most famous part of his story, focusing more on the frustration between older and younger generations, and their failure to guide each other, due to their differing natures.

Myths often provide a reason for natural phenomena, most often as the resolution of the story. The cold part of the year is when Persephone (who represents thriving agriculture) travels into the underworld to be with Hades. I thought it would be fun to explain why a full solar eclipse occurs roughly every eighteen months or so.

The Song of Seikilos referenced in this story is an obvious choice, but it's also really neat if you aren't familiar with the history. This song is in fact the oldest surviving complete musical composition known to us. The lyrics and melody were discovered on a grave-marking pillar. Seikilos loved his wife so much that he wanted her to

be remembered... and she has been. [You can listen to the song here.](#)

While I did try to research certain aspects of Greek life, I'd be amazed if there aren't historical inaccuracies in this story. Feel free to gently enlighten me, or better yet, pick me up in a time machine and show me the error of my ways firsthand. There are a good number of minds that I would enjoy meeting there.

-Jay Bell

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The Cat in the Cradle is the first book in the Loka Legends series and features twenty-five original illustrations created by Andreas Bell, the author's husband.

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Who the hell is Jay Bell?



Jay Bell is a proud gay man and the award-winning author behind dozens of emotional and yet hopelessly optimistic stories. His best-selling book, *Something Like Summer*, spawned a series of heart-wrenching novels, a musically driven movie, and a lovingly drawn comic. When not crafting imaginary worlds, he occupies his free time with animals, art, action figures, and—most passionately—his husband Andreas. Jay is always dreaming up new stories about boys

in love. If that sounds like your cup of tea, you can get the kettle boiling at the following links:

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