

The Reign of Monsters

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1

It begins with the boy. It ends with the boy too. This is how it ends:

He had been able to retrieve the body, to bury it on a shore that will soon be named for him - Icaria. Doing so was a work of ingenuity. He circled around in the exact spot where he believed he saw the boy come down. He looked at the sun – high in the sky, over Crete – and determines it is two in the afternoon. In order to mark the place in his head when there are few outward markers - islands a long way in the distance - he invents a numerical system to calculate the exact location. It is as if he puts a grid over the sea in his mind's eye. He assumes Athens is the centre of the world. He knows it isn't, but he needs a point from which to calculate. He has one number to indicate how far east of Athens it is; another to indicate how far north. He enlists fishermen to help him. He takes a pig bladder, and fills it with the exact amount of air he needs to breathe under water until he finds the body. He crafts a glass mask with which to cover only his eyes, so that he can see under water. And so he finds the boy. A weighted net is lowered to the bottom of the sea. Swimming down, with his pig's bladder tied to his back – his arms still tired from flapping his wings – he wraps his son's body in the net, and releases the weights, so that it can be tacked to the surface. There had been a feeling of panic, of urgency, in the early moments, when, having calculated boy's location, something irrational in him tells him the boy might yet survive, even though he knows that this is impossible: he has calculated how quickly a human being drowns, and knows that the boy has been submerged too long.

He looks at the boy and has a moment of unfamiliar reflection. Reflection is strange to him, period. He has never stopped to think – instead, thinking has always been an instantaneous process for him. He has never stepped back and considered a problem. Whenever he saw a problem, he would start to solve it, without ever wondering what the scope of the problem was, what its implications were, what the obstacles might be. Under the water, the boy's eyes were open. It is that difference. The difference between the contorted face with the open eyes he saw under the water – the sensation of the inhuman deadness of his son – and now his son with his eyes closed, looking asleep, if only more pale than he had ever been, but perhaps more tender than ever. He knows for certain that it wasn't him who closed the boy's eyes. He looks back at the fishermen, busy undoing his contraption, readying their boat to set sail again and fish for fish rather than a boy. They don't look in his direction. Death by drowning must be ordinary for them.

The things he has invented: Automatons, a Labyrinth, wings a man can fly on, and more. He has always come up with solutions to every problem that was ever posed to him. Instinctively, step by step, he has known the answers. His boy lies in front of him. Would this not be a perfect moment to invent a solution to the secret of life? Solve the riddle? Fix the boy?

But he can't. He knows the laws of nature; he must work within them.

2

And as for the beginning.

The boy had never been on a ship, and looked at everything with a curiosity that was markedly distinct from his own curiosity. The boy looked at the waves, the sails, the dolphins swimming alongside – and crowed with pleasure. Not the way he himself looked at the world at all.

On that ship carrying them over to Crete, there was a young virgin too. Beautiful – the most beautiful in Athens, it was claimed, and he could well believe it. He understands anatomy,

understands what a woman's body must be; understands the extent to which a female body can answer to male fantasy while still being able to breathe and walk, and she, she must have come close to meeting that ideal. The sailors didn't pay much attention to her. There were rumours going about they found far more titillating. But Daedalus looked at her and understood her beauty. She and him – the first two instalments of the Athenian tribute to King Minos.

The palace in Crete, resting on its heavy red pillars, did impress, azure dolphins and crimson bulls adorning the walls. The military presence, he notes, is light. Guards that are armed but not armoured. It is bright throughout except for the throne room, which is a strange heart of darkness in such an edifice of light. The throne room in Athens is cramped with petitioners, who show no deference but make demands, the king patiently, kindly listening to all of them. Light floods in through doors and windows. Here, in Minos' throne room, thick dark curtains keep out the light. The hall is empty. Is it always? The throne is massive, designed for a bigger man. Minos does not impress sitting on it, which might be why the room is not lighted – and why he is ushered in here alone.

Minos gestures for him to come forward, across the empty hall. The guards have stepped out. His eyes are drawn to a girl, ten years old or thereabouts, only a little older than his boy, standing on the side of the hall – the only other person in here. It must be Minos' daughter. The king and his daughter do not look at each other, but only at him. They look at the world in a rather similar way. Narrow eyes. Taxing, weighing.

"I am glad, Daedalus," the king says, "that the Athenians sent you also. They didn't think you worth much. They value beauty over ingenuity, didn't understand why you should be part of the tribute. To me, you are worth everything."

"I am grateful, Your Majesty. It is for my son. My son cannot thrive where his father enjoys no esteem."

Minos is a shrewd man, measured, capable of making judgment. Squints when he looks at people, to estimate what their value is, much as he himself squints at the materials of which he makes his contraptions, to estimate what the materials can and will do for him. It is that same look. He knows it well enough, but he only looks that way at lifeless matters, whereas Minos looks that way at human beings.

“It is good of Athens to hold to its agreement,” Minos says. “I have not deigned to see the virgin that has come over. I believe you have, and from what I have heard, I can trust your judgment on any matter. Tell me, is she, indeed, a virgin?”

It’s in the way she walked, and held herself; yes, a virgin, no doubt.

“Yes she is, Your Majesty,” Daedalus says.

“And is she beautiful?”

As near to perfection as a woman could be.

“She is.”

“No man will ever enjoy her.”

“She is pledged to a life of chastity?”

“She is pledged to no life whatever. Unlike you, who are not here for your beauty. Tell me, Daedalus, what is the essence of your craft?”

“I harness the power of nature. Deflect it from destruction. Nature is harsh, it knows no mercy. That’s what I do. I teach nature to have mercy.”

“I fear I could not explain your assignment. It defies explanation. Description, too. Walk with me.”

The king descends from the throne and Daedalus follows to a balcony, shocked by the suddenness of the light. As he gets accustomed to it, something gruesome takes shape in the plain below. Does it defy description? No. Minos simply preferred not to describe it. Daedalus had heard the rumours - but it was not merely a man's body with a bull's head. No. It was a bull in a man's body. It was his understanding of human anatomy as a machine – he could see that, if you were to design a male body to have the strength of a bull, this would be it. Every muscle in the male body, from the neck down, distended to an extent where the body assumes unconquerable force, at the price, undoubtedly, of immense and unpassing pain. Immense strength, coupled to a pain that makes it impossible to imagine the pain of another: the girl would die under its touch in a matter of heartbeats. She would barely suffer.

“I show you the Minotaur,” says Minos. “Now, what would it take to kill it?”

He considers it. It was a new creature, unseen; it could be that it would one day simply fall over, that some part of its anatomy would turn out not to have been designed for supporting life. This creature was untested by the succession of the generations. Alternatively, it could be unconquerable.

“I can't tell you just by looking at it. Has it been attempted?”

“Somewhat.”

Daedalus looks at the king to read on his face what the word 'somewhat' might mean, but the king has eyes only for the beast.

“It is magnificent, is it not? The evidence of my cuckolding, forever out there. I was cuckolded, and the child born of it was a monster. A beautiful, beautiful monster – because I could not satisfy my wife.”

The sailors had been talking about that. The Queen of Crete Pasiphae, satisfying her boundless lust with a bull.

“I would never have it killed,” Minos continues. “Not just that I want to remember my cuckolding. No. I want to make Crete feared. Only in fear is there security. Tell me, Daedalus – are you afraid?”

It is always difficult for him to answer questions about the state of his feelings. Emotions do not offer clear definitions, but he has a procedure. His bodily responses offer answers. He puts his thumb and two fingers against his jugular artery, and establishes that his heartbeat is moderately elevated. Then he goes with his hand over his forehead: the sweat of fear is cooler than the sweat that purges the heat. He tastes it.

“Yes, Your Majesty,” he says. “I can report that I am mortified.”

Minos finally meets his gaze. “You should be. The beast is terrifying. And I should simply kill it? No. Such a frightful monster, named for me, when I was merely the cuckold. What a gift the gods have made me! The monster is feared, and my name is feared with it. Even if I can’t harness its power, even if I can’t make it fight for me, the world will fear me, because I have it. Your countrymen, the Athenians, have agreed to send me their prettiest maidens, because I have the beast. You must invent a way I can control the beast. Keep it without killing it; only let it kill those I choose to die. And then there’s another thing. You understand the human body, like you do other phenomena in nature?”

“The human body is not distinct from nature. I understand it well.”

True. Everything in the human body has a function. Everything is logical. It holds no secrets for him.

“I have spoken to my wife,” the king says. “She was untrue to me, we had to speak on it, but she has not heard a word of reproach from me. I consider the beast to be a gift. Her gift, and the gift of the gods. But I have asked her to subject herself to an examination. By you. My question: can I breed an army of Minotaurs?”

The queen, Pasiphae, had been the talk of the ship. What got the sailors excited was not that there was a beast out there. No. It was how the beast was conceived: A woman became so maddened with sexual desire, that she would let a bull take her. The sailors were beyond themselves with the idea. He wondered if he should shield Icarus from hearing it, but the boy did not seem inclined to listen to anything. The workings of the ship – the water speeding by, the motion as if of a seesaw – filled him up, and whatever anybody said about the queen of Crete went past him. To Daedalus, it was more an analytical issue. How could it be that a woman and a bull could conceive? Why would the child have a human body and a bull's head? And could it happen again? He does note that his member hardens when considering the act between bull and queen, but the riddle of it is more interesting to him.

He had asked some of those sailors what the queen was like. None of them had seen the queen, but this was no obstacle. They took a view of what she was. She was large-breasted, according to them, and large-hipped. Her eyes were not quite enchanting. The phrase they used was 'eyes that ask for semen'. According to them, she had slept with all the men in the palace, with every soldier, with every foreign dignitary, ripped their clothes clean off their bodies, and when none could ultimately satisfy her, she had stooped to bestiality.

The king had not said much. He referred to his cuckolding, but unlike with other men, other husbands, this invoked little emotion in him. That facial expression – the corners of his lips turned slightly upwards – suggested a wry amusement, as if of a man stepping out of the way of an arrow, laughing at the fact that his assailant missed him. As if Pasiphae had cheated on her husband to make him angry – and had failed.

The king insists Daedalus must meet her and examine her, but when he does, he is somewhat surprised. The queen, wearing a plain woollen dress that hides the shape of her body, does not come across as someone who would have engaged in an act of unnatural lust. She calls to mind Hera or Demeter, not Aphrodite.

“Daedalus.” Her voice is filled with reassurance, not desire. “I hear you brought your son to Crete. Icarus, is it not? Tell me, is Icarus happy in Crete?”

“Happiness, Your Majesty, is the definition of my boy’s nature.”

“We should all have such children. Has he found friends here?”

All the children of the palace and the town, it seems, are Icarus’ friends.

“He has, Your Majesty.”

She puts a finger to her lips, pensively.

“My daughter Ariadne is his age, almost. Maybe a year older. Have you seen her?”

Daedalus nods. “She is not unlike her father,” he says.

And not like her mother at all. He had received the teachings of Asklepios as a younger man. Asklepios held that near-everything of the child comes from the father. The father’s seed is the kernel of grain; the mother merely the soil. For himself, he had dismissed the idea. There was a beautiful carelessness to Naucratis, and Icarus had that, and not a thing of his father. Asklepios had any number of foolish notions that could be disproven by anyone looking at any human body, and this, he believed, was one of them. But looking at Ariadne, he saw the father, and only the father. There was a distrust that crept into her face, the same he saw with Minos. Pasiphae had none of that. There was a gleaming quality to her, on account of her eyes always being wide open. There was a trick that Minos and Ariadne both had, where they looked at someone’s face without engaging the

other's eyes. They read your face – whereas Pasiphae spoke to you, and listened to you, through her eyes. Was this what the sailors meant when they talked about eyes that ask for semen?

“Your son Icarus, is he like his father?”

“No, milady. The gods be blessed, he is not like me. He takes delight in the world. He laughs, and he plays, and the people take a delight in him.”

He cannot hear her sigh, but the movement at her throat tells him she must have, inaudibly.

“Ariadne is shy. She does not make friends. Could Icarus not befriend her?”

Shyness? Is that what it is? Her leering, the way she weighs you as she watches you, is that shyness? Her remaining in the throne room when all courtiers have been dismissed, is that shyness? But Icarus must thrive in his new land, and in Athens, he could not have hoped to have the daughter of the king as his playmate.

“My son would be honoured.”

“Now for what we need to speak on,” she says.

“There are some questions I must ask you, Your Majesty. Much as I rather wouldn't. We should talk about your family. It has been given out that you are a daughter of the Sun, of the god Helios, that is.”

“You have the trust of my husband, do you not, and you would not spill the secrets of the kingdom?”

“Under no circumstances.”

“I am not a daughter of the sun. My descent is considered too humble to be the Queen of Crete. My husband, wanting to elevate his kingdom, cannot be seen to make an heiress with the daughter of a minor king. I am the eighth daughter of King Rustau of Eastern Colchis.”

“The land of gold?”

“The land of gold is Western Colchis. Eastern Colchis had gold once too. It has been dug up, and it has been spent, we could not hoard it. Our downfall has been the fecundity of our my family. Generation after generation, we had too many children. Our kings outbred the peasantry.”

“You said you were the eighth sibling. How many siblings did you have?”

“I was the eighth daughter. I was the twelfth sibling over all. I have sixteen siblings.”

“Do your siblings have many children?”

“My oldest brother has fourteen. My second brother has nineteen. My oldest sister has twenty-four.”

“What is the lowest number any of them have?”

“My sixth sister has a mere nine children. My youngest sister has only five, but she is still breeding. All their children are alive, and in good health.”

“And yourself?”

“You know how many children I have. I have Ariadne and the Minotaur.”

“It is strange that he would have chosen you, the eighth daughter of an impoverished king far to the east. I do not mean to insult you, but it was hardly because of your beauty, was it?”

Not that queen Pasiphae is ugly. She is attractive, due to her dignified bearing, and her eyes that betray kindness. But if anything, she is dumpy. Her posture adds inches, but she has flesh in the wrong places.

“I was the healthiest of all my sisters. And the strongest. I had the best hips.”

“That is why you were chosen ahead of them?” Daedalus asks.

“Yes.”

“How did you conceive?”

“It took us years to conceive Ariadne. It was an indifferent. My husband did what he had to do, seemingly, but it took us a long time – she’s Minos daughter, that I promise you – and I thought he would be immensely disappointed to have a daughter, but he wasn’t. He said that a woman could rule Crete, continue his work. Make it the most powerful kingdom. A woman with his blood, he said, would be better than any man.”

“Did you try for a male heir after?”

She looks away. A sigh that sounds like a sob pushed downwards into her throat; then her face hardens

“My husband will rarely tell the whole truth. He says lying is necessary for a king.”

“I have not heard him say so.”

“But you have heard him say he was cuckolded?”

Daedalus nods.

“He wanted me to have intercourse with the bull. He himself had prayed to Poseidon for the bull to appear. He said I should do it. Poseidon is the god of the sea, Crete can’t thrive without him. I should make myself a sacrifice; have intercourse with the bull.”

“Were you lustful?”

Silence. But he must know. He must know how easy it is for women to have intercourse with a bull. Only then will he know what hope there is of breeding more Minotaurs.

“I have to know everything. For the king’s assignment, I must know whether you felt desire.”

“I had been pregnant for nine months. I’d had only lain with one man, and it was the king. My sisters had been excited about it. They would give birth, and couldn’t wait to get back to their

husbands for more. With my husband, I never had that. So yes, I desired the bull. And I know what you will ask next, so I will say it: Yes, it was good. That one time, it was very good. It hurt, but it was good too. And I was pregnant immediately. The pregnancy was hard though. And giving birth. Giving birth to Ariadne was like nothing. Like having it with her father – something you could hardly feel. But the Minotaur.... All through the pregnancy, it was as if he was ripping at my guts.”

He – not it, Daedalus notices. But it is ‘the Minotaur’.

“Do you have a mother’s feeling for the Minotaur, like you have for Ariadne?”

“I worry about Ariadne, wandering the palace all on her own. And I worry about the Minotaur, out there, alone, in the cold and heat.”

Daedalus is already thinking how to think that. In his head, the hallways of the Labyrinth are already twisting away, and the Minotaur will not see the light of day again, will now neither cold nor heat, but will be tested all the more sorely.

“I know how you feel,” he says. “I worry about Icarus. Always.”

3

The playdate was no great success. The boy has a habit of talking about what he sees and does. Never in much depth, never with much understanding, but he’s a talker. Always. But he does not have a great deal to say about Ariadne. “Was she nice?” Daedalus asks. Shrug of the shoulders.

“Did you have fun?”

“What did you do?” Shrug shrug shrug, and off he is again, playing with other children. Ariadne, it seems, has passed him by. She is, however, the heir apparent. It is hardly going to be her bastard brother the Minotaur who will rule Crete. There cannot be a terocracy – a reign of monsters. Monsters must be controlled by a cunning human being, like the king, or his daughter, and they will want the assistance of the likes of Daedalus. As long as there are monsters in the world, he will always be needed. The existence of the beast underwrites his existence, here, in Crete, but Ariadne will be queen one day, and he must win her favour.

He dares not raise it with either the king or queen – your daughter is off-putting, weird, indifferent, dull – and lives in fear that it will be brought up by the king. But it isn’t. Icarus is never asked back, but neither does anybody comment on the event. The king is concerned with his might, not with his daughter. Unfortunately, there is bad news on that score as well.

He had examined Pasiphae, and observed the Minotaur. The Minotaur, in particular, was fascinating: it was a pleasant sensation to be baffled by nature, because usually nature wasn’t nearly that resilient. Nature would genuflect in front of Orpheus, rejoice or weep, depending on whether he would strike a major or minor key on his harp. Nature was nearly as obedient to Daedalus. It would surrender its secrets; as soon as he turned his attention to any matter, he would understand it. It was a curse too; he could not hope to share his understanding. Laws of nature revealed themselves to him on every side; the time it would take him to scratch all of this into clay in the Linear-A of Crete, or the Linear-B of his homeland! He would have to invent an artificial wrist for himself, or some sort of writing machine, to get it all down. But the sheer number of phenomena in nature he could turn his attention to was a consolation. The mysteries were abundant like fish in the sea or birds in the sky, and he solved them all day, by the dozens. And then, every so often, he encountered mysteries he could not solve.

It was impressive, what carrying the Minotaur had wrought inside of Pasiphae. Everything had been torn, damaged beyond repair. She would suffer pains for the rest of her life, and never be able to give birth. He understood the fatal exception to the laws of procreation that allowed her to conceive from a bull. He surmised that all creatures carry a code with them, a code that can be combined with that of another creature, normally only of the same species. But an exception could occur. It was a chance of one in thousands. An army of Minotaurs, as King Minos wanted? You would need thousands of human women to breed with thousands of bulls. How about men breeding with cows?

“There would be more volunteers, Your Majesty. Plenty of men would serve their king in this way, whereas women would have to be coerced. The queen, with her appetite for a bull’s member, is an exception. Most women would refuse if not forced to. But the likelihood of a man and a cow conceiving a Minotaur is even lower. I have made the calculations. You would have to import more cows and bulls than there is grass for on the isle of Crete (import hay too – hay would become more expensive than gold) and people, both men and women, would have to engage in prodigious breeding with cows and bulls, diminishing their appetite for each other. You must reckon that for every Minotaur born in Crete, there would be 25,000 fewer human babies.”

“Could Minotaurs breed amongst themselves? Once you’d have males and females?”

“Mules can’t breed, can they? Minotaurs couldn’t either.”

“And you cannot change this?”

“I must work within the laws of nature.”

“I will pardon you for refusing to make me Minotaurs,” Minos says. “But you will lie for me. You will say you have invented a way for a woman to conceive from a bull. There is a brew you feed them. It’s what you fed the queen.”

“I wasn’t even in Crete then.”

“You will say you were. You built the contraption the queen used, and you gave her the potion that could make her conceive. We could have thousands of Minotaurs on Crete, enough to bash down the gates of all cities, enough to lay waste to the world. You know why we’re not doing it?”

“No,” Daedalus says.

“It is out of *my* prudence. It is out of the kindness of *my* heart.”

4

And so he got to work for Minos. The Labyrinth is the ultimate product of his mind. There is no theory underlying the Labyrinth. He has heard what people imagine the Labyrinth to be like. They conceive it as a single hallway that runs in a spiral. Of course it isn’t that. There would be only two directions, in and out, and aside from the Minotaur, the only enemy one would have to conquer is one’s own dizziness. No. There is no logic to the Labyrinth. Every turn in the Labyrinth is the mathematically least logical. He knows what logic is. He knows the absence of logic too; that’s the Labyrinth.

Before the Labyrinth was presented, before the Minotaur was chased into it, he wanted to test its effectiveness. He decided he would take Icarus, lest anyone else should learn of the lay of the Labyrinth. “It’s going to be a game,” he said. “It’s going to be a fun game.” He believed it would be. Icarus took delight in the world, and so the Labyrinth would delight him too. It was part of the world, or so Daedalus thought.

And in the beginning, it seemed true. Icarus, with his father at his back, could not see a hallway without wanting to run to its end, could not see a corner without wanting to turn it, could not see a threshold without wanting to cross it. But it became wearying. Observing the boy, Daedalus

felt more keenly than ever how different the boy was from him. The boy saw doors, corners, hallways; he did not see a pattern, did not pick up on the subtle distinctions between one place and another. He became tired first; then angry; started to kick at doors he had walked through too many times. And broke down weeping. The boy had never wept much; but now he did. For once, Daedalus did not need to feel his member to know he was aroused, or taste his sweat to know he was frightened. He felt remorse. Felt it all through his body. His boy was beautiful; his boy was unlike him; and he would never again test his inventions on his boy.

In the back of his head he noted that, to a normal mind, the architecture of the Labyrinth was impenetrable.

He has always told himself that he has acted within the laws of nature. He looks at nature, and possibilities present themselves. He understands the laws governing nature, and what those laws allow him to do. If nature allows him to do something, then it must be right that he does it. It wasn't him who made the Minotaur. It was nature. But looking at Icarus, in that dungeon, he is beginning to wonder. Icarus is happy in nature. Everything in the world delights him. Icarus is the finest instrument to determine what the laws of nature are. If Icarus finds joy in it, it must be right. It is therefore concerning how much anger and how much tears come out of his son while in the Labyrinth.

His son does not mention the Labyrinth ever again. When it is brought up, he walks away, to play at or with something else, as he does when someone mentions the name 'Ariadne'.

Daedalus had drawn the Labyrinth on segmented tablets for the master-builders to work from, and then he had the tablets destroyed, so no one could ever find their way again.

“The master-builders could,” the king said.

“No.”

“It’s a danger. The master-builders could find their way. What we need is certainty. A wise king – a wise king.” Minos says it slowly, wearily, with deliberation “..... would kill them.”

“I have employed the best builders in Crete. The best craftsmen. We can’t afford to lose them if we ever want to build anything else. Furthermore, if you want to be certain, why don’t you kill me?”

“You are worth too much alive.”

“I know my way through the labyrinth. I promise you, the master-builders do not. They have built it, going step by step. They have no concept of the whole.”

Distrust in the eyes of the king. A squint like a knife being sharpened.

“You have a son,” Minos says. “Icarus. As long as you have a son, I need not fear you.”

5

In the years that follow, he does not speak to Pasiphae. He has no desire to explain his actions, and she turns away from him whenever she sees him. He does attempt to win the approval of Ariadne. He makes her toys. Her father doesn’t smile, but Daedalus figures that Ariadne is just a girl. But he is mistaken. The world is delighted with his Automaton, but she looks at them in that same way. Eyes narrow, taxing, weighing, where it is as if looking at something is a great effort in itself. She looks like her father. Her father is king, not because he is strong, but because he is

cunning, and because the cunning is written on his face, and it frightens people. Ariadne would make a perfect successor.

It pleases Daedalus that Icarus is not in the least like him. He looks at something, maybe tries to understand it, and when he can't – and he almost never can – he laughs out loud. Icarus laughs at absolutely anything. That's the difference. Icarus laughs when he does not understand something; Daedalus laughs when he works something out, and not before.

Ariadne and Minos, on the other hand, never laugh. Minos at least has a way with words. Daedalus has seen Ariadne, observing him, but he has never heard her speak; has never seen her speak to anyone. She partakes in the life of her family, but always grudgingly. Mostly, she stands, in dark corners, against walls, looking at the world, not participating. Or is she at her spinning wheel, looking at her thread rather than the world.

And then one day, as he makes his way through a deserted hallway in the palace, she comes straight at him. Walks imperiously, like an armoured warrior on the field of battle. Has he ever seen her walk, has he ever heard talk? There is something in her eyes. Where there was mistrust, there is now anger.

"You were on that ship," she says. "You saw her."

No greeting. No context. She must be talking about the virgin, on the ship from Athens.

"I did."

"More have come. Seven more, in seven years. From your city."

"I never saw any of them," he says. "After the first."

"The king hasn't seen them either. None of them."

He nods. He was aware of that.

"That's what he told me," she continues, "when I asked him. That he hadn't seen them."

“He’s spoken the truth,” Daedalus says. “He hasn’t.”

“Seeing doesn’t matter. Knowing matters. You knew what was to happen to them.”

“I only serve.”

“And why?”

“Huh?”

“Why do you serve?”

“Oh.” He takes a half a moment to consider his answer. “Because he is the king. Yes. Because he is the king.”

“So why should there be kings?”

He had not considered the mechanics of power. He had not considered human nature much, period. It is that physical nature has too much purchase on his mind. The barrage of problems coming at him is too overwhelming. Why is there something, rather than nothing? And why, if there should be anything, should it be one way, and not another way? The question comes at him in thousands of different forms: how can fish breathe under water? If fish can breathe under water, how is it that anyone can breathe in the air? Do the fish breathe water, or do they breathe a substance that is present in water as in air? And on, and on, and he keeps solving them.

But here is a question that he has never asked: why is Minos king, rather than a different man, or a woman? It is with astonishment that he realises he hasn’t asked it, because it is so clearly a question. It is no more self-evident that Minos should be king, than that fish should breathe in water, or men should breathe in air. He has obeyed a man called king; and he never wondered about it. It never occurred to him that this might be a problem, and therefore it did not occur to him that he could or should solve it.

Why are there kings? Why should Minos be king, and not someone else? There does not appear to be a solution.

“I don’t know why he is king.”

“I will splice the question for you,” she says. “Why did he become king? And why is he still king today?”

That helps, normally; splitting up the question into smaller questions. It’s what he is: a question-splicer. It is as if the big mysteries of the world are always falling apart into smaller mysteries all around him, until there are finally mysteries that are small enough to solve, and then he can solve the larger mysteries too.

Why did Minos become king? Why is he still king?

“There is a question that’s more important than either,” she says. “What if he stays king?”

He shakes his head. He can’t answer that question either.

“You came here, and you made toys for us. I thank you for them, but toys isn’t all you made. The Minotaur is not a toy, nor is the Labyrinth. My father could rule the world. As long as the Minotaur is somewhere underneath, in the darkness where nobody knows, the world will tremble for my father.”

There is something disturbing about how tight her lips are around her teeth.

“If you can’t answer any of the other questions, answer me this.”

“Yes,” he asks, “what?”

“How do I kill the beast?”

The observation of birds, particularly towards the evening, has a peculiar effect on the human soul. All the more so if the sky is clear, the horizon visible, the sea nearby, and the birds fly high and in only one direction. It inspires a feeling of loss; the irrational sense that the birds will not return, because they have no need to, they go to where it's better, and man, bound to the ground, cannot follow. It's a feeling of envy. But while this is a pervasive jealousy, few have ever thought how to emulate the flight of birds.

Sometimes they fly alone, in flocks, in formation, or in disarray. And then sometimes, you see two birds together, and you wonder how they relate to each other. They can be mates – at a certain angle from each other, with the female a little behind. In other cases, with the second bird further behind the first, they could be father and son. Is Crete where Icarus ought to be? Athens was a city of mobs, where every little man has a little bit to say, and because they are little, what they say is petty. It is a city where he, Daedalus, could not rise, and where Icarus must also be groundbound. But here, in Crete? The single leadership of Minos, soon to be contested by his daughter. And anyone at court, most particularly him, forced to gamble, like rolling a die, whose side to take. There isn't greatness in Crete. It is merely enlarged pettiness.

Minos claimed he did not understand why Daedalus wanted to leave.

"I should let you go, you say? You are not happy with the conditions I offer you? I demanded you as part of the blood tribute that I extracted from your city, and I saw the disbelief in the Athenians' eyes. "Why would I want him?" The Athenians never perceived your talents. They wouldn't, because amongst craftsmen, you are a king, and it takes a king – a true king – to recognise a king. I have given you more than Athens ever would. Why go back?"

“Somewhere else, maybe.”

“I have travelled the world. If there is a king like me, I have yet to meet him. What I offer you, nobody else will. You are destined to be at my side, to design my buildings, equip my armies. Granting your wish would be to transgress against the laws of the gods.”

“I could refuse to work.”

“No. An olive tree grows by my window. It stands there, rooted in place, feeding on the sun, and the little rain that falls here. I don’t need to tend it for it to just give fruit, and more fruit. If it were to have feet, and announce to me that it intended to walk away, I would not grant it permission. The tree does not need to be my friend to give me olives, because it is in its nature to *give*. You are the same. You will continue to observe the world, and you will continue to solve the world’s problems. If I pose you with a riddle – how do I make this work, how do I make that work? – you will tell me what the answer is.”

The king is right. He could not stop himself from solving problems. He thinks of potential problems that a king – this king – could ask him to solve. Has this king thought of them yet? “How do I hurt a man who keeps a secret so much that he says everything? How do I break the walls of any city? How do I bring my armies to the ends of the earth? How do I destroy anyone who opposes me?”

Daedalus’ understanding has not changed, it has ended. He has failed to see the one problem that really should have concerned him. He considers it from every angle. Kings! Kings! He tries to remember kings of years past, he tries to remember kings of different lands. Are they different from Minos? Are there lands that do not have kings? With every question he had ever asked, it was as if

everything he needed to know was right in front of him. He looks at anything, dead or alive, and he understands why it must be as it is. Kings? He does not have enough knowledge – for the first time ever – he does not have enough knowledge to answer the question! Are kings bad? Minos seems bad. But then, there are always kings, always and everywhere. Maybe it has to be. Maybe kings are needed because everything would be worse otherwise. And if there are going to be kings, maybe there should be as few as possible. Maybe Ariadne is wrong. Maybe he should help Minos to become king of the world.

A question with two opposed answers, and he cannot decide between them! It makes him angry, angry, this new situation of not knowing the answer to a question. Ariadne, that dumb, dumb girl, who should have persisted in not saying anything! And the gods! The gods, who have made a world in which there are kings, and for no obvious reason. The gods have failed him, not in making a world that is bad – that doesn't concern him – but in making a world that he cannot understand.

But at least it's easy to solve the final question she posed him. He finds her at her spinning wheel. She moves it nimbly; her eyes look at the thread with the same focussed coldness with which she looks at the world: as if the determination in her eyes is sufficient to stop it from fraying.

"I have solved the problem," he says.

Whirr-whirr. She does not look at him.

"The easy problem. How to kill the beast."

Whirr-whirr

He looks at the thread she's spinning. The quality is good enough, but it would not suffice for the purpose of killing the beast. The thread he himself has spun is both stronger and more flexible. There are ways in which he really is better than anybody.

Whirr-whirr

"I have made the tool which can be used to kill it," he says.

Whirr-whirr

"I couldn't do it, or you. A hero could. If you can find a hero."

Whirr-whirr

She doesn't take her eyes off the thread as she says: "I will."

Whirr-whirr

"Put it down next to me."

Whirr-whirr

He lays the spool down next to her pedalling foot. "Can I ask you one thing?" he says.

Whirr-whirr

She nods.

Whirr-whirr

"Why should there be kings?"

Whirr-whirr

She stops her whirring, and looks at him with what could be a smile, but isn't.

"I have never understood it."

He inspects the two pairs of wings he has made one final time. He goes over them, first with his eyes, looking intently at the structuring of the plumage. They will have to fly across a sea, and so he first tried to model the plumage on that of sea-gulls. They have no need to soar like eagles, nor to flit like sparrows. But then as he watched the shoreline, absently – as the waves came on and receded again, as questions presented themselves to him, and he solved them – he noticed the terns. The little jester birds, walking after the water as the wave recedes, walking away from the water as the next waves come in. As walkers, they did not impress, but Daedalus could see that he should model his wings on theirs. He does not know how far these birds travel – but based on their plumage, he knows they could go any distance. He manages to kill one – as it is focussed on the wave receding ahead of him, it cannot escape the slingshot coming in from behind – and studies the plumage in greater detail. This is his model. Wings that are white, sleek, long relative to the body, and not quite as wide, pointed at the end. These are the wings that should carry any man over any distance.

And yet.... He will have to jump off a tower, trusting those wings. His son will have to jump after him. He has told Icarus that he shouldn't worry. All the uncertainty is concentrated in his own jump. If he has fatally miscalculated, and a man can't fly after all, he will fall and die. There has been no chance of testing his wings. He couldn't risk Minos suspecting how he will escape. If he dies, Icarus will be free. The king is calculating; he is not vengeful. What he needs is his inventor. Avenging himself on the inventor's son is not as he would do. In the event, Daedalus has covered himself. If he dies, Icarus can make it seem as if it was not an escape plan, no. Daedalus intended to surprise the king with a weapon that would make him invincible, as an apology for not giving him an army of Minotaurs. He has left designs on papyrus. An army of flying men, to take any city by surprise, rain down small bronze balls from up high. A bronze bullet the size of a marble will go through any helmet and any skull, if dropped from high enough. He has made a drawing of a strange ship, with a raised and extended deck, from which flying men can jump off. The Cretan fleet will rule the seas like never before. He can pass on these designs without any risk. He is quite certain nobody will be able to reproduce the wings he has made, even when having the originals in front of him.

In his testament, he leaves everything to Icarus. He has written a letter to the king, saying that only his death ended his loyalty. And that he asks for Icarus to be allowed to leave Crete.

And now he searches the wings for any possible flaws. He can't find any, didn't expect to find any, but goes over them again with his eyes and then once more, turns them over, turns them over, then goes over them with his hands. He does not have a habit of making mistakes, but Ariadne's question has revealed to him that his mind is not flawless, so he must be careful.

As he is stroking the wings – a last bid to find those inconsistencies in the structure that will make the wings dissolve into their constituent parts – he hears a gentle footstep behind him. He looks around at Icarus, and although he has been present as the boy grew these past seven years, he still gasps at what he has become. Icarus has flowered. Take Ariadne, by comparison. She hasn't flowered. She has grown, but there has been no unfolding. The same distrustful, peering girl who stood in that throne room seven years ago, was sitting there at her spinning-wheel, looking at her thread, taller and with a hint of breasts underneath her garments, but unchanged otherwise. Icarus, on the other hand – baby fat has congealed into muscle; ill-matched child's limbs have grown to perfect proportions; skin like skimmed milk has sprouted perfectly distributed stubble. The Minotaur is a horror, the terror of nature; but his son is a freak too, because his two parents should not have produced such perfection. Icarus has not inherited Daedalus' mind, and he has not inherited Daedalus' body either. He cannot ascend to the heights of his father's intellect, but he is a great improvement on his old man's physique. It is once more, as with Pasiphae and the bull, a combination of two codes of inheritance leading to a result that is possible, but not plausible. His son is too good.

Icarus grasps at the wings. His hands go over them, as Daedalus' hands had gone over them not very long previously, but Daedalus looks at him and sees the difference. What he sees in Icarus is amazement, and not curiosity. Stroking the wings, he takes delight in feeling the texture. For

Daedalus, touching the feathers was a form of interrogation. Is this the feather that will give way? Will the wing unravel from here? Icarus is different. He strokes the wing, flips it, strokes the back side, the back side, flips it back, strokes it again, over and over, and all through it, he does not learn a thing. Everything that Icarus has learned has been spelled out to him by his father.

He stands behind his son – he is still slightly taller – and begins to guide the boy’s hands to the right grip. With his son’s arm, he simulates the flapping movement he must master. “Can you do it, son? Can you do it?” The boy himself, with musculature to put his father to shame, lets himself be guided, makes the movement, over and over, still guided by his father, until his father lets go, and yes, Icarus can repeat the exact movement needed, does not deviate from the example that has been set, and in this way, he will be able to fly, and he will be able to make it to the other side.

“The technique is the thing,” Daedalus says. “If you can make that motion, the rest is easy. Your arms must know what they need to do. Your head does not need to know very much. You follow me, and you keep making that motion, and you will make it.”

Daedalus for a moment considers if that really is everything. Make the motion – the simple motion – and follow the one who flies ahead of you. They are simple instructions, but simplicity can be deceptive. There are so many things, Daedalus finds, that are simple to him, and then unaccountably difficult for others. He tries to think. Is there anything else that is still important?

“There’s this,” he says. “You must not fly too close to the sun.”