

Growing Brave: A Feminist Short Story Inspired by Myth, Folklore, and Fairy Tales

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Abstract

Fairy tales are often deemed as nothing more than “children’s stories” or “old wives’ tales.” With this ideology, stories that are seen as “childlike” or “feminine” are somehow labeled as unimportant or silly. However, these tales, as well as their adaptations, are anything but frivolous and trivial. Fairy tales have the unique power to reflect or change the cultural values of a people and era through their morals and lessons. With this project, I will examine this genre of creative writing and rework classic stories from a feminist perspective to reflect the issues and values of the 21st century. I will be writing a short story inspired by myth and fairy tales that feature strong female characters figuring out their own solutions to their problems and becoming their own fairy godmothers. The story focuses on the themes of resilience and courage, individuality, and finding a voice.

Artist’s Statement

When one hears the term “fairy tale,” fantastical or magical ideas such as talking animals, magic mirrors, and fairy godmothers immediately come to mind. As a result, fairy tales are often seen as nothing more than “children’s stories” or “old wives’ tales.” Stories that are seen as “childlike” or “feminine” are then degraded as trivial, unimportant, or even silly. However, fairy tales and myths, like literature and high art, have a magic all their own: they possess a unique power to both reflect and shape culture and the world around us. Fairy tales then become the bearers of a significant cultural weight, and as a result reflect the serious values, anxieties, and lessons of its age. However, even the best-loved fairy tales in our society often portray deeply troubling or outdated moral lessons, especially when it comes to the female characters in their stories. With this project, I wanted to rework classic fairy tales and myths from a feminist

perspective and explore the lesson of what it means to be a young woman in a world where there are no fairy godmothers to solve every problem with a flick of a magic wand.

My story for this project draws mostly from fairy tales and mythology in both structure and content. Fairy tales, sometimes called wonder tales, are a sub-genre of folktales that involve magical events, places, or characters (“Fairy Tales”). Often set in timeless, unspecified places or settings, the presence of magic is a defining feature of the genre. Fairy tales “recruit the extraordinary to help us understand the ordinary and what lies beneath it” (Tatar xi). In other words, these stories explore cultural themes and ideas and produce lessons or morals, but in a fantastic and strange world of make believe. Fairy tales also originated as part of an oral tradition. Much like ghost stories today, fairytales were “once told around the fireside or at the hearth, with adults and children sharing the storytelling space” and the “play of light and shadow” from the fire created special effects that highlighted elements of the story (Tatar xi). The paradigmatic function or story structures of fairy tales are often very similar, making it easier for storytellers to recall and remember (“Fairy Tales”). Vladimir Propp, in his structuralist study of folklore and fairy tales, outlines thirty-one steps in the story structure of the fairy tale. He suggests that all tales follow a similar sequence, even if they do not follow all thirty-one steps. To summarize, all fairy tales have protagonists, antagonists, and supporting characters, and the protagonist is confronted with a problem that sets them on the same track as the antagonist. The protagonist faces a series of trials and tasks, and is often aided by supporting characters and gifts, magical or otherwise. The story usually ends in success, which can include success in marriage, survival, money, or wisdom. In the end, as a whole these steps form the transformation, which is the overall focus and goal of the tale (“Fairy Tales”). Some transformations may be literal, like the prince’s transformation from slimy frog to handsome

prince in the story of *The Frog Prince*. Other transformations are figurative, demonstrated by the tale of *Cinderella* where the heroine marries the prince and makes a socio-economic transformation.

Myth, while still in the family of an oral narrative, differs slightly from folk and fairy tales. The word myth derives from the Greek word *mythos*, meaning story or word (“What is Myth?”). Myths are “symbolic tales of the distant past (often primordial times) that concern cosmogony and cosmology (the origin and nature of the universe), may be connected to belief systems or rituals, and may serve to direct social action and values” (“What is Myth?”). For example, the myth of Persephone and her travels to and from the Underworld explains the changing of the seasons in Greek mythology. The characters found in myths are often non-human, such as gods and goddesses, or feature heroes performing difficult or impossible tasks. Characters often receive valuable gifts, go on long voyages, or outwit or slay terrible monsters, (“What is Myth?”).

For this project, I wanted to write my own story based on myth and fairy tale. Like many other girls my age, I was fascinated by fairy tales and their Disney equivalents when I was growing up. I loved to listen to stories featuring supernatural creatures like mermaids and dragons, of epic journeys and heroic deeds, and of course, of princesses finding true love. Today, I still love fairytales and children’s and young adult literature, and I will be attending graduate school next year to study Library Science and focus on Children’s and Young Adult Literature. However, some of the stories that I loved so much as a child now fill me with a lingering sense of unease. While fairy tales often have positive morals and lessons imbued in them, such as the lessons to be kind, cultivate inner beauty, don’t judge a book by its cover, etc., there are also frightening or troubling messages to be found. I find it disturbing that the little mermaid in Hans

Christian Anderson's tale sells her individual voice to the sea-witch to pursue a prince that she barely knows, as well as the suggestion that one can only find love after a magical physical transformation like in the stories of *Cinderella* and *Beauty and the Beast*. Yet these cultural stories and the messages that they convey can be unsettled through the act of rewriting and retelling. These retellings draw from the very best parts of a fairy tale and make it new. For example, the basic underlying plot of *Cinderella* where a girl survives and overcomes domestic abuse and finds love can be easily transferrable to a new story of female agency. One of my childhood favorites, *Dinorella* (1997) by Pamela Duncan Edwards with illustrations by Henry Cole, achieves this goal. The story imagines *Cinderella* as a dinosaur that saves the Duke from being eaten by the dreaded deinonychus at the Dinosaur Dance. *The Paper Bag Princess* (1981) by Robert Munsch with illustrations by Michael Marchenko takes the classic fairy tale plot of a prince rescuing a princess from a dragon and reverses it: the princess, while wearing a dress made out of a paper bag, rescues her prince who has been taken captive by a dragon after a fiery attack. The princess outwits the dragon in order to accomplish this, and when she discovers the shallowness of the prince, who cares more about what she looks like than who she is or what she's done, she leaves to find her own happily ever after.

With these stories in mind, I wanted to accomplish two things with this project. First, I wanted to show that though fairy tales have been dismissed as a "domestic art" (Tatar xvi) or "old wives' tales" or "children's stories," there is a distinct power in these tales, especially through their ability to display complex thought and reflect and shape a culture. There is nothing "frivolous" or "trivial" about these stories and the messages that they convey. Secondly, I wanted to draw on the themes and distinct flavor of the fairy tale retellings previously discussed and create a story based off of ideas in third-wave feminism that a person can be both feminine and a

feminist. With these ideas in mind, I wrote my own version of a fairy tale that is mostly based on Greek myth that featured a heroine who was both heroic and traditionally “feminine” and who used her own unique strengths and weaknesses to figure out her own solutions to her problems.

My story follows the basic structure of a fairy tale, but functions as a myth. My main character, Maia, named after the Roman goddess of spring, undergoes a quest and has to accomplish tasks and trials in order to achieve her goal. My story follows the similar plot structure of a fairy tale, and it also incorporates the fairy tale use of magic and the theme of transformation in the end. While Maia uses her own personal gifts to achieve her goal, she also receives magical help from supporting characters. Since “magic implies metamorphoses” (Tatar xii), a major transformation also happens to Maia. She may not turn into a frog or receive a magical makeover, but she does learn a very important life lesson and transforms into a better version of herself. The story may draw from elements of a fairy tale, but it also functions as a myth through its “explanation” of the origin of the ruler of the Underworld. It offers an explanation for the origin and nature of the universe, and in a sense serves to direct social values through the lesson that Maia learns on her journey. My story also makes a reference to the ancient oral tradition of fairy tales and myths through the presence of weekly stories told by a wrinkled, silver-haired storyteller around a bonfire.

The characters, plot, and the lesson of the story are all based off of my own personal experiences in life. The loving and fun relationship between Maia and her little sister Inara mirrors the very same relationship that I have with my little sister. Maia’s insecurities about herself are also loosely based on my own insecurities, and like Maia, it took a challenging journey to a far off land to learn how to overcome these insecurities and fears. In the spring of 2017 I studied abroad in London, England. I always tell everyone the common study abroad

cliché that the journey was “a life changing experience.” For me, the cliché was true. During that semester, not only did I take physical journeys to beautiful places that I had only ever seen in pictures on a screensaver on a computer, but I also underwent an emotional or metaphorical journey in the process. I have always wanted to study abroad, and I worked hard to make it happen during my undergraduate career. However, when I got to London, I woke up in the middle of the night due to jetlag and thought, “What have I done?” England may not be the most exotic location, but everything in the country was just different enough from what I was used to that I felt displaced and very lost. However, I rallied quicker than I expected to and learned how to adapt and roll with the punches. I learned how to figure out the solutions to my own problems while abroad, and as a result became more confident and capable in my own abilities. Most importantly, like Maia, I learned how to be brave.

Like all fairy tales, there was a major transformation and lesson in both my study abroad experience and in Maia’s story. I hope to convey that we all have the resources within ourselves to accomplish anything, even when there is no fairy godmother or magic to be found. Sometimes all it takes is a little bit of bravery, and a little bit of practice.

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Growing Brave

In the year after the Great War, the Spring Wind blew from village to village, bringing rain to nourish the crops and playfully whisper in the ears of warriors and villagers alike. In that spring a daughter was born to the fiercest warrior in the smallest village. She looked at her daughter for the first time and loved her, and knew she was destined for greatness. She named her Maia after the spring rain and prayed that she would be swift and strong.

In the next year, the Summer Wind tore through the country with a vengeance, bringing summer rain and thunder and lightning. It was in that summer that another daughter was born to the same warrior in the smallest village. The warrior loved her, and knew she was destined for greatness. She named her Inara after the winds that brought her forth and prayed that she would be swift and strong.

The years passed, and Inara grew in strength and beauty, and was indeed as swift and powerful as the Summer Wind. She began training amongst the young boys and girls to become a warrior. One summer when she was just a child, she raced her fellow warriors-in-training to the cliffs near the foamy turquoise sea and won. In her thirteenth year, she raced the village's fastest horse across the steppes to the distant mountains and won. Inara mastered the bow and arrow, sword, battle-axe, and throwing knives with the ease of a warrior three times her age. Inara had raven black hair and skin the color of the bronze sea cliffs, and her beauty was known throughout the land. Inara was also as kind as she was strong, and her parents beamed with pride as she won tournament after tournament. All of the men and women in the village believed that Inara would one day become a famous warrior.

It soon became clear that Maia was as different from Inara as night was from day. She was not strong, or fast, or beautiful like her sister. Try as she might, she could not master the bow and arrow, and she wasn't strong enough to wield a sword or battle-axe. Where Inara had a clear, booming voice like the crack of thunder, Maia's was as soft and as tentative as the first buds of spring. She much preferred the shovel and spade to the bow and arrow, and could make anything grow if she wished, even in the driest and hottest of summers in the steppes. She grew fruits and vegetables to feed her people, and cliff roses and crocuses for their festivals and celebrations. During the day when the other girls and boys her age were training to become

warriors, she could often be found in her garden, covering her curly brown hair with a wide-brimmed sunhat and working with her hands. Despite her lack of strength and beauty, Maia was clever and kind. She often fed the crows that came to visit her garden and told them stories. While she worked in her garden, she studied the plants for their secrets and learned how to find use for things that nobody found useful. Maia's family believed that one day she would become a great healer.

In short, Inara was a warrior, and Maia was not.

Despite their differences, the two sisters loved each other fiercely. They confided in each other and relied upon one another. Despite being the elder sister, Maia often relied on Inara for her wisdom and strength when facing tough situations. Whenever Inara was injured, Maia was ready with the needle and thread to stitch her back together again. At night, when they were supposed to be sleeping, the girls would stay up and tell each other stories and gossip, whispering and giggling while the firelight danced on the walls of their home.

There was one thing that the two sisters loved more than their gardens and bows and arrows: the weekly stories around the fire from the village storyteller. Maia was fond of ghost stories, and loved to hear the tales from the Underworld. One night, the wrinkled storyteller stroked her silver braids and began to weave a story about a forest at the base of the Black Mountains. Those that step foot into that forest never return, and they say that great and terrible beasts roam between its ancient trees. Only the strongest of heroes have ever braved its shadowy boughs and lived to tell the tale. At the end of the tale, the storyteller gave her final warning.

“They say that even Death itself lurks in that forest, silencing the birds and draping shadows on the trees before she eventually returns to the Door to the Underworld hidden somewhere in the darkest part of the forest.” The younger children, wide-eyed and alert, began to

look very afraid and the storyteller spoke again. “Don’t worry little ones. It’s only a story, nothing to be afraid of.”

The storyteller said this with a wrinkled smile on her face, but Maia noticed a solemn gleam in her eye that made her wonder if it was really just a story after all.

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As the years passed, Maia often wished that she could be more like her sister. Although she loved to garden, she secretly wished that she could be brave and strong and as swift as Inara. She often voiced her thoughts to her thoughts to her parents, and her mother, in all her infinite, motherly wisdom, always replied, “You may be different from your sister, but your differences are your strengths. You already have all the resources you need inside of you. Sometimes they just need a little water and sunlight in order to grow, just like the beautiful plants in your garden.” Maia nodded along and hugged her mother tight, and always felt better for a little while.

One day, while Inara helped Maia gather medicinal flowers and roots from the sea cliffs, Inara told her sister stories from her training session that day. She had gotten into a skirmish with one of the boys who still held onto the views of the old world regarding women and battle. Maia wished that she could be as brave as her sister, and tentatively voiced her thoughts aloud. Inara simply laughed and replied, “Bravery is not some special gift that is only given to a few worthy people. It is something that you work towards. Bravery is practiced.” Maia nodded along, but secretly doubted the truth of her sister’s words.

In Inara’s sixteenth year, the day came when she and the other trainees became full-fledged warriors. Inara was gifted with a new set of crocodile skin armor and bronze leg greaves. A large celebration was planned, and garlands from Maia’s flower garden were made and strung between the buildings, and the villagers prepared a feast with roast lamb and traditional sun

cakes with honey. Inara made her oath at the temple by the sea, and Maia shone with pride and just a touch of envy. The celebration lasted until dawn and Maia and Inara ate sun cakes until they felt they would burst. Maia could not remember feeling so happy.

Yet this happiness would not last. Months later, during a battle with a neighboring village, Inara was grazed on the shoulder by a bronze spear. When the warriors returned, the healer cleaned Inara's wound to the best of her ability and Maia stitched her back together with neat and even stitches. Maia stayed with her sister as she healed, anxiously watching over Inara and keeping her entertained with stories and laughter. But instead of improving, Inara's condition grew worse and worse as the days passed, and her smiles became weaker and weaker, until none graced her features. She soon fell into a death-like sleep and could not be woken. Maia called for the healer, but there was nothing that she could do. They realized too late that the spear had been coated with venom.

The healer said, "I'm sorry my dear. While she sleeps, Inara is preparing to pass to the world of the spirits to sit amongst her ancestors. We must do what we can to prepare her for her journey."

Frantic, Maia consulted her notes and searched her garden for herbs or flowers that would heal her sister, but nothing worked. A day later, her sister finally began her journey to the Underworld, and had left the land of the living forever. Even with all her speed and all of her strength, Inara was unable to outrun her fate.

Their parents wept bitter tears, and Maia's grief was so dark, and so intense, that the plants in her garden started to wilt. People from the village brought food and weapons to their home as tribute to Inara and her bravery, and offered their sympathies at every possible moment. Unable to stand it for a moment longer, Maia left her home and ran to her now wilting garden.

Maia knelt onto the soft earth and wept until there were no tears left. “*How could this have happened?*” she thought to herself. “*How can she be gone?*” A part of her refused to accept that this was true, and that Inara would be waiting for her at home, telling jokes to her mother while polishing her favorite bronze dagger. But Maia knew that this wasn’t true, and that Inara was gone forever. She knew that she had been gone too long, and so she stood and brushed the mud off her mourning linen dress, and went to grieve with her mother.

Weeks passed, and in an effort to distract herself from her sorrow, Maia attended the weekly storytelling. It was a somber affair, and Maia was keenly aware of the empty space next to her where Inara always sat. The ancient storyteller arrived, her silver hair gleaming in the light from the fire. She locked eyes with Maia for one moment, but it was enough to grab her attention. Tonight she spun a tale of a great hero of renowned strength and courage, who despite all odds travelled to the Underworld to rescue his wife from Death herself, and succeeded. Maia was riveted by the tale, and as the storyteller finished, Maia’s gaze turned towards the north, where the deadly forest sat at the base of the Black Mountains. She began to think, and she began to wonder.

When the fire was nothing left but embers and everyone had gone home, Maia snuck through the village to the home of the storyteller, who was waiting for her when she entered. The single room was covered in silks and rugs of every color, and mirrors of varying sizes hung from the wall. Maia could see her reflection from every corner of the room. The old storyteller was smoking from her pipe.

“Why have you come here?” she asked with a puff of smoke.

Maia suppressed the urge to cough and said, “The stories you tell are true, aren’t they? The Door to the Underworld is in that forest?”

“Yes,” the old woman said simply.

“And the story you told tonight, is it true that someone can travel to the Underworld to rescue someone they love from Death herself?”

The old woman was silent for several long moments.

“It might very well be true. But it is an old story, and I do not know how he succeeded. Cheating Death is no easy task,” she finally said.

Maia’s heart started to pound. It *was* possible to rescue someone from the Underworld. It wouldn’t be easy, but it was possible.

“I know what you are thinking, child,” the storyteller said. “And it is not a wise choice. You are no warrior, and you cannot defend yourself. If the heroic stories are true, then so are the scary ones. Who knows what stalks those trees and what you would face in the Underworld.”

Maia knew that the old woman was right. Who was she to save her sister? She couldn’t wield any sort of weapon, and she wasn’t brave enough. Even now at the thought of this journey she felt twinges of fear take hold of her heart. But Maia thought of her sister, and the love she had for her. She thought of her sister’s lesson of how bravery is practiced. Maia had never really believed her when she said this, but now seemed a good a time as any to start practicing.

The old woman saw steely resolve settle into Maia’s eyes, and offered advice in between puffs of smoke. “Remember to come back the way you came, and do not deviate from your path. Once lost in that forest it is no easy task to find your course again.”

Maia thanked the storyteller and returned home to gather supplies and fill her skein of water before she could talk herself out of the idea. She tried to get as much sleep as she could that evening, and awoke early the next morning to set out on her journey. She kissed her parents

on their sleeping foreheads, armed herself with her sunhat, spade, and her sister's bronze dagger, and walked out of the village where she had spent her whole life.

Maia walked for three days and three nights towards the forest at the base of the Black Mountains in the north. The scorching sun beat down relentlessly, and after the first day Maia's feet hurt and she wondered what exactly she had gotten herself in to. The journey grew more and more difficult each day as the landscape changed from sea cliffs, to barren, scorched earth, to grassy flat lands. To pass the time, she whispered stories to herself and sucked on pomegranate seeds while she walked.

After the third day, she finally came upon the forest. Tall, dark trees stood watch over the entrance, and the trees were so dense that she could see nothing of what lay beyond them. Maia felt small and afraid at the sight of it. She did not want to think of what sort of horrors likely awaited her in the forest. She thought of her sister however, and wrapped the warmth of her sister's love around her like a blanket. Maia said to herself, "Bravery is practiced," drew a deep breath, and stepped foot into the wild forest.

Heart hammering the whole time, Maia walked slowly through the forest, jumping at any noise and clutching her spade in her hands. It seemed as if she had walked straight into another world. Patches of sunlight littered the forest floor, and the familiar sounds of birds and crickets filled the air. She could hear the sound of running water somewhere to her right. She walked until she saw a copse of trees with vibrant leaves. Several birds nested in their ancient boughs.

"Excuse me," Maia said to the birds, "Do you know the path to the Underworld?"

The eagle ruffled his golden feathers and replied, "Why would a girl like you want to go to the Underworld? You are no warrior. You will never survive."

Maia didn't think that this was very helpful and moved on to the next tree, where a family of doves nested.

"Do you know the path to the Underworld? I need to save my sister," She said.

The dove closest to her replied, "No dear one. You cannot go there. You will never survive. If you like, you can stay with us for the night and we will feed you and keep you company before your journey home."

Maia thought that this was a nice gesture, but she was getting tired of these birds telling her what she could and could not do, so she thanked them and moved on to the last tree. Crows nested in its branches.

"Do you know the path to the Underworld?" she asked the crows.

The crows recognized her face and her kind eyes. She was the girl with the wonderful garden who always fed them when they came to visit.

"Why do you wish to travel to the Land of the Dead?" asked the crow with the darkest feathers.

"I need to save my sister," Maia replied.

"Most people that step foot into the Underworld never return. Sometimes souls leave us for a reason," said the crow as he ruffled his feathers. Maia noticed that iridescent shades of green and blue shimmered on his night-dark feathers.

Maia huffed in frustration and was about to turn away when the crow spoke again.

"Follow the path of the stream, and do not stray from it. It will take you to where you need to go."

Maia almost wept from gratitude, from the relief of receiving help when she needed it. "Thank you," she breathed.

The crow plucked a beautiful midnight feather from his nest. “Take this – keep it safe. When you have need of it, whisper to it, and you will be able to walk through the Land of the Dead unseen.”

Maia thanked him, stashed the feather away in her pack, and began to turn away when the crow spoke again.

“You will need to give something to the Boatman of the Underworld in exchange for safe transport. There is no other way to cross the River of Sighs lest you want to lose all of your memories.”

Maia started to panic. “I have nothing to give! I have no money, no food, nothing of value.”

“There is a tree in your path that holds golden pomegranates in its boughs that the Boatman will take in exchange for safe passage. He is particularly fond of them. But a great serpent guards this tree, and not even the crows dare to fly over his domain. Take care, be swift and silent when taking a fruit from the tree, and leave no trace behind. Remember what I said: stay close to the stream. Do not stray from it, no matter what obstacles lay in your path. It is not wise to get lost in this forest. Most importantly, do not lose heart – what you seek will be found.”

Maia nodded solemnly, much more nervous than she had been a minute before, and walked towards the stream to continue her journey.

She wandered through the forest, occasionally stopping to get a drink of water. As she walked, she heard the crows warning play again and again in her head. How on earth could she face such a beast when she was not a warrior? She could not fight or wield any sort of weapon, and she was not swift and strong as the summer wind like Inara had been.

The sun began to set in the west, and the forest became darker and darker. Maia was almost afraid, but she could see the stars through the trees lighting her way, more bright than they had ever been before. Fireflies performed their twilight dance through the trees, and Maia was delighted to see glowing moon-white flowers that bloomed in this evening light.

Sooner than she would have liked, Maia came upon a grassy break in the trees. A lone, gnarled tree stood at its center, and Maia could see the golden pomegranates faintly shining amongst the silvery branches from the light of the fireflies. She could not see any beast or serpent that guarded the tree, but the forest was more silent here than it had been before, and Maia's hair stood up on the back of her neck in warning. Her heart started to pound in fear, but she remembered what the crow said. She must be swift and silent, and leave no trace behind. She gathered the courage that she had been practicing on her journey, and stepped towards the tree with the soft tread of one who knows where to step and not to step in a garden full of growing things.

As she got close, the tree suddenly shuddered, and leaves began to fall as the beast made himself known. Maia started to quake in fear when she saw the serpent-like dragon that waited for her. As he slowly climbed down the tree, Maia could see jagged scars marring his dark silver scales. The worst of them all crossed over his eye, leaving it white and cloudy. The other eye met her terrified gaze, and it was as terrible and golden as the pomegranates that he guarded.

In a gravelly voice that thundered like a summer storm, the dragon spoke. "What's this? A mortal warrior? A thief?" The beast eagerly examined her with his great yellow eye and took in the sunhat and spade.

“Indeed you are no warrior. You must be a thief.” He smiled, and Maia paled at the sight of the rows of sharp, broken teeth that gleamed in the faint light of the forest. “And I don’t take kindly to thieves.”

Maia eventually found her voice and said, “It is true that I am not a warrior, but I am no thief. I am a gardener.”

The dragon laughed. “Gardeners, warriors, thieves – you’re all the same to me. You all have the same mortal greed. Why else are you here if not to have a taste of immortality?”

Maia’s awed gaze turned towards the pomegranate tree. “These are the Fruit of Life? From the legends?”

“Yes, child. I have guarded this tree for thousands of years, before many things walked the earth. Just one bite would grant you life for hundreds of years. One fruit would make you rich enough to be a queen.”

Maia wasn’t sure if she needed any of those things. Immortality sounded very lonely, and she didn’t need any gold or riches. She just needed Inara.

In a clear voice, Maia said, “I don’t need a fruit for eternal life or riches. I only need it to pay the Boatman for safe passage over the River of Sighs in the Underworld.”

The beast’s golden eye narrowed in concentration. “The Underworld? You would use the fruit as an exchange? To bargain?”

Maia nodded.

For a moment, the dragon looked thoughtful. “If you are no warrior, and you are no thief, then you have come to bargain. What shall you give me in exchange for the Fruit of Life?” he asked with a snap of his teeth.

Maia thought of the crow's feather tucked away, and pulled it out hesitantly. "This is all I have to offer."

"Interesting. A feather willingly given by a crow is a rare gift indeed," he said. "But I have no need for invisibility. I have no reason to hide, when my duty depends on being seen and being feared. What else do you have?"

"I have nothing else to give," Maia said.

The dragon was quiet for a long while. He started to pace in front of the golden tree, and his heavy footsteps were deafening in the silence. Suddenly, he stopped his prowling and looked Maia dead in the eyes.

"In exchange for the Fruit of Life, you must pay with your life," he said.

Maia's heart started to beat wildly, and she took several steps back in fear.

"I do not mean to kill you. What I require is your time, and your friendship. Each year, for three days and three nights of your choosing, you will come and visit me."

Maia was dumbfounded. "But... why?" she asked. If she didn't know any better, she would have said that the dragon looked almost...bashful.

"It has been a great long while since I have seen another living soul. All of the animals in the forest are too afraid to step foot into my domain, and it has been hundreds of years since another mortal has sought fruit from the Tree of Life. There have been no warriors to battle or thieves for me to punish," he grumbled. "Mortals just don't go on epic quests anymore."

Maia thought that hundreds of years was an awfully long time to be alone.

"Well?" he asked. "What is your answer?"

"Give me a minute to think about it. It's very rude to rush someone with life decisions you know," she replied. The dragon huffed in response but sat down patiently and waited.

Maia thought about his offer, and did not know what to make of it. It could be some sort of trick to get her to come back when he was hungry. But Maia knew compassion, and she considered that maybe the dragon really was just bored and lonely and in need of a friend. Besides, it was only three days each year of her life, right?

“What will I do when I come to visit?” Maia asked.

“Anything you wish,” the beast replied. “I only want someone to talk to and tell me about the world beyond the forest.”

She looked at him hesitantly. “If I agree to this, do you promise that you will not imprison me or... eat me?”

The dragon laughed again, a hissing sound like footsteps on gravel. “I promise. And vows made by dragons are binding. So are their bargains. They are forged from the old magic of this earth. They are unbreakable.”

Maia felt the full weight of that statement bear down on her shoulders. The message was clear: there would be no going back on her end of the bargain either. She took a deep, long breath, gathered her courage, and said, “I agree to your terms.”

The beast smiled, showing his jagged teeth once more, and stepped aside so that she may approach the tree. She gave him a wide berth and kept one eye on him as she passed, but made it to the lowest-hanging branch and snapped off a golden pomegranate. It shimmered iridescent in this low light, and Maia swore she could feel a low thrum of power when it touched her hands.

Maia backed away from the tree, and the dragon spoke. “Now that you have what you need, do not forget your promise. You must return for three days and three nights each year.”

Maia nodded and thanked him, tucked the fruit into her knapsack, and was about to turn away when she stopped. She faced the beast once more and asked, “If I am to be your friend for the rest of my life? What should I call you? Do you have a name?”

The dragon blinked in surprise. “My name has not been spoken in so long, I have almost forgotten it.” He paused for a moment, and then said, “My name is Hesperos.”

“My name is Maia,” she said simply, and turned to leave once more.

As Maia followed the stream, the sound of birds gradually grew louder. It was fully dark now, but the light from the fireflies guided her way. Maia was exhausted, and wandered along the stream until she found a grassy patch of land beneath strange-looking trees with thorns. She thought it looked safe and protected enough, and set up camp. She was asleep before her head hit the ground.

The next morning, a little more rested, Maia continued along the path. She soon discovered that the stream flowed directly into the mouth of a cave, and she realized that this must be the entrance to the Underworld. As she looked at the dark mouth of the cave, doubt and fear once again circled her mind like vultures. Did she really think that she could just waltz into the Underworld and ask for her sister back?

She took a sip of water from her canteen and collected her thoughts. It wasn’t too late. She could always turn back. “*And then face a lifetime without your sister?*” she thought to herself.

It was too late to turn back. She survived the journey through the forest, received help from the crows, and faced a dragon and made it out alive. She made it this far, and she owed it to her sister, and to herself, to try. She could almost hear her sister whispering to her, *Bravery is practiced. You have to always get back up and try again.*

Maia stood and found a dry branch to make a torch, hands shaking all the while. She would not face whatever was to come in complete darkness. With one hand holding the torch, and one hand on her sister's bronze dagger at her waist, she followed the stream and entered the mouth of the cave.

The sound of the stream echoed along the cave walls, and in the light from her torch Maia could see ancient carvings on the wall cracked and faded with age. The carvings depicted familiar stories and legends, but as she walked further into the cave, they became unrecognizable. The stone here was ancient and worn smooth, as if people had run their fingers over the images for a millennia. Maia saw images of beasts that she had never seen before, and had the eerie feeling that she was stepping through time. These carvings were much older than the ones at the mouth of the cave. Maybe they were even as old as the very creation of the world.

The stream suddenly flowed downwards over a cliff face, creating a waterfall. A stone stairway carved into the black rock fell to its right. The noise of the rushing water hid the sound of her footsteps as she descended further and further into the blackness. After what seemed like hours, Maia at last reached the bottom of the stairs. She was in the Underworld.

She was surprised to find that it was not as dark as she imagined. She looked up to find the source of light, and found bright lights scattered over the ceiling. On closer inspection, Maia found that they were glowing gemstones, and that they mimicked the same pattern of the stars and constellations in the night sky. She saw the Huntress with her pack of dogs, and the Great Bear of the North with her young cub.

Maia looked to her left and saw that the waterfall from the world above fed directly into a mighty silver river that eddied and swirled. She stepped closer to get a good look at it. The river looked like liquid moonlight, and forgetting where she was, reached out a hand to touch it.

“I would not touch the River of Sighs if you want to keep all of your memories,” said a raspy voice to her left. Next to her stood a small dock made of rotting wood, and a gondola stood at its end. In the boat stood a cloaked figure, clutching a rowing oar in his hands. She was so distracted by the river that she didn’t see the Boatman.

She carefully stepped onto the dock and approached the Boatman. She could see nothing under his dark hood, but decided that maybe that was for the best. In a shaky voice she said, “I wish for safe passage across the river to the Land of the Dead.”

The Boatman leaned forward to inspect her. “You are from the Land of the Living. Why would you want to go to the Land of the Dead?” He sniffed the air as if he could smell the life emanating from her. “It is not yet your time to join us.”

Maia ignored his question and said, “I wish for safe passage. I can pay you.” She pulled out the golden pomegranate, still shining.

The Boatman stood up straight, and eagerly started to reach for the pomegranate, but Maia kept it out of his reach. “I will give you half of the fruit now for transport, and half later as payment for when I need to return to the Land of the Living with my sister.”

The Boatman was silent for a moment, considering. He squared his shoulders and said, “The payment is accepted.”

Maia quickly sliced the fruit in half with her dagger, and put the second half in her pack. She was delighted to find that the seeds on the inside were just as golden as the exterior. She stepped into the boat, and handed the fruit to the Boatman. He lifted it to his lips, and ate some of the seeds. He sighed in contentment, and pushed the boat away from the dock.

He silently rowed them across the river, and when Maia saw the shore on the other side, she took out the crow’s feather and whispered her wish as the crow instructed. Immediately, it

transformed into a lovely black-feathered cloak. She put it on and raised the hood, but didn't feel any different. She hoped that it worked.

They reached the other side, and Maia thanked the Boatman. Up ahead she saw guards bedecked in obsidian armor with impressive-looking spears and shields guarding an ancient stone archway. Holding her breath and keeping her footsteps light, she walked straight towards the guards, and passed right through the archway unnoticed and unheard.

Maia found herself in a withered garden. She could tell that at one point it had once been carefully and lovingly tended. Everything was planted in neat rows, and a dry creek bed had once been used to water its fellow growing inhabitants. Now the garden had been left to rot. Maia looked up, and saw a great palace waiting for her at the end of the large expanse of garden. She knew that this place was where she was meant to go, and swiftly walked towards it.

Maia finally approached the great door, and pulled it open as it gave a great creak. Maia winced and looked around, but there were no guards to be seen. She stepped inside, and found herself in a great room decorated with sculptures and some more wilting potted plants. At the end of the great room stood a great golden throne, flanked by two stone archways. On the throne, with the languid power of a lioness, sat the most beautiful woman Maia had ever seen in her life. Her skin was the same shade as the night sky, and stars danced along its midnight surface. Her inky hair flowed weightless around her, and she was dressed in elegant robes and shimmering gold jewelry. Shadows emanated from her very being.

As soon as Maia had stepped inside the room, the woman's dark gaze snapped to hers, despite the cloak of feathers that Maia wore.

In a voice that was both young and old, beautiful and horrible, the woman spoke.

“Enchantments do not work once you step foot in my palace. Your clever trick with the crow’s feather has no power here.”

Maia took off the cloak, and faced the woman as she was. “Who are you?” she asked.

“I should think that it would be obvious,” the woman replied, and the hairs on the back of Maia’s neck stood on end at the power that suddenly emanated from the woman.

“Death,” Maia whispered, and the woman nodded.

“You are from the Land of the Living,” Death said. “Why have you come here?”

Maia nervously cleared her throat and said, “I have come for the soul of the one that I love most in the world. My sister Inara.”

Death cocked her head. “Ah, yes. The warrior girl. She passed her Judgment and has already made her way through the palace to her resting place. She is accepting of her fate. Why is it that you cannot? You cannot reverse death.”

Maia knew this. She knew that her sister was gone, and that a piece of Maia had left with her. But she could still feel the warmth and protection of her sister’s love, even in this dark place. She knew that her quest was most likely futile, that it might be for nothing. But she had travelled all this way, and she had grown so much, that she would ask once more.

“I know this to be true,” Maia said to Death. “I know that I cannot reverse death. But there must be something I can do to bring my sister back with me. Anything.”

Death was quiet for a long while. She looked around the room at the ancient statues and the wilting plants.

“There is only one way to cheat death, and it has only been offered to a few worthy souls in the last thousand years. To cheat death, you must become Death,” she said.

Maia’s brows furrowed in confusion. “What do you mean?”

“If you want to take your sister to the Land of the Living, you must take my position as Death. You must assume all of my responsibilities to maintain the Underworld. You will become the Judge of Souls and send spirits to their rightful resting places, and you must make sure that no soul leaves this place. You must exchange your life for your sister’s.”

The question bubbled up before Maia could stop it. “Is this how you became Death? You traded your life for another’s?”

“Yes. I traded my own life for the life of someone I loved dearly. After a thousand years I am weary, and I wish to join him and my family in their resting place. I have been waiting for another soul who would be willing to take up the position,” Death replied.

Maia paused. She did not know if she wanted to spend an eternity down here. It was dark and smelled musty, and she would need to become the Judge of Souls. Becoming Death sounded like a big responsibility, and one that she was not sure if she was ready for. But... there *was* a certain kind of beauty down here, with the River of Sighs and the ceiling of gemstone constellations. The rest of the Underworld could do with some cleaning up though, especially that garden. Suddenly the idea of reigning over the underworld and spending hundreds of years gardening did not sound so bad. She just didn’t want to take on the position now. She wanted to live and experience the world first, now that she was getting better and better at being brave with every day that passed.

A thought sprung into her head.

Maia looked Death directly in the eye, and said, “I agree to your terms, but on one condition. I agree to reign over the Underworld and become Death, but only when it is my time to make the final journey. I have obligations that I need to uphold in life.”

Death frowned. "I'm afraid that's not possible. In order to send your sister to the Land of the Living, you must stay in the Land of the Dead. A life for a life."

"Well, you see, on my journey here, I made a deal with Hesperos, the guardian of the Tree of Life. I promised him my company for three days and three nights of every year *for the rest of my life*. I cannot break my vow, for my deal with the dragon was forged with the old magic of the earth, and is binding and eternal. I don't know what the consequences would be if I were to break my promise," Maia said sweetly.

A sour look crossed Death's face, and thunder rumbled throughout the palace, causing chips of rock to fall from the sealing. It quickly abated, and Death said, "Very well. I agree to your terms. Mortal lives are fleeting. You'll be here soon enough."

She waved her hand through the air, and Inara appeared under the stone archway to the right. She looked the same as she did, bronze skin glowing, raven hair shining. But there was a distinct sparkle in her eye as she beheld Maia standing at the foot of the dais and ran to her. The two sisters embraced, tears of joy and relief falling from their faces.

Death looked at the two girls and said, "You are free to go. Do not forget your promise. On the day of your death, I will come for you, make no mistake."

Maia nodded and bowed, and gestured for her open-mouthed, dumbfounded sister to do the same. As soon as they straightened Maia dragged her sister from the room, through the garden, and out the front gates, waving at the stunned guards as they passed. Inara was in a state of disbelief, and she peppered Maia with questions. "How on earth did you find me? How long have I been gone? Are our parents okay? How are we going to get out of here?"

Maia hushed her in response and said, "Just wait. I will explain everything once we are safely out of the Underworld. I need to make sure that Death doesn't go back on our bargain."

Inara's eyes narrowed in suspicion. "What bargain?" she whispered, but Maia just waved her off. As they approached the River of Sighs and the Boatman's gondola, Maia reached into her pack and pulled out the second half of the golden pomegranate. Inara's eyes widened as Maia handed it to the Boatman, who helped them into his gondola.

Maia was silent for the whole boat ride, and clutched her sister's hand tightly. She wasn't sure if all of this was real, and if she was really allowed to leave the Underworld with her sister in tow. She wasn't taking any chances, and kept a vigilant watch over everything.

When they reached the other side of the river, she thanked the Boatman, and he bowed his head. They climbed their way up the staircase and into the cave, where sunlight and the Land of the Living awaited them both.

Once Inara stepped out of the cave, and into the familiar sounds of forest life, she turned to Maia with tears in her eyes, and said, "What is going on? How did you even know where to find the entrance to the Underworld? And what bargain did you make in order to set me free?"

Maia simply looped her arm through her sister's and started to tell her story as they walked back through the forest. "I figured it out from one of the storyteller's stories one evening. She confirmed it, and so I set out to find you, although I had a little help along the way. And I made a couple of bargains on this journey so you'll have to be more specific as to which one you are referring to" Maia said as she smiled.

Inara's face paled as Maia explained the deals she made with Hesperos and Death, and tried her best to talk her sister out of it. Maia sighed at her sister's stubbornness, and said, "There is no way to get out of these bargains. The old magic prevents me from doing so."

Inara huffed in response. "Well then, when the time comes for the bargains to be called in I am going with you. I will not leave you to face them alone."

Maia smiled at her sister's kindness. "Hesperos will be glad to have the company."

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The two sisters kept walking through the forest as Maia told her tale. Eventually they found Hesperos and Maia introduced him to her sister, who for the first time in her life was quaking with fear at the sight of him. They passed the crows in their tree, and Maia thanked them for their gift. The sisters replenished their food supply with help from the family of doves, and the eagle gave her a grudging nod as they walked by. Maia and Inara made their way out of the forest and across the grassy fields and scorched earth, which was much more enjoyable this time around with her sister's company and wry humor.

Soon their silent village came into view, as did the familiar bronze sea cliffs in the distance. Black flags were still raised in mourning as Maia and Inara made their way home, where Maia's garden and their grieving parents awaited them. Their mother heard their laughter outside the door, and she ran outside to greet them, almost doubting the truth of what she saw. The family embraced, weeping all the while, and their mother scolded Maia for being so foolish. However, she did have a spark of pride in her eyes, and her loving hug was full of anger, joy, and pride.

The village celebrated for seven days straight, and Maia told her story around the bonfire every night. She told them how they should always be kind to crows, and how she befriended a dragon. She told them that she cheated Death herself, although she left out the parts that were meant only for her.

Maia was true to her word and visited Hesperos for three days and three nights of each year, and Inara always insisted on going with her. Eventually they became good friends, and

when the time came Maia brought her children to meet him so that they could practice bravery, too.

As for Inara, she did in fact become a great warrior, possibly the greatest of all time, even if her name has been lost to the ages. But they say that when she wasn't fighting wars, she could be found at her sister's side laughing or learning how to garden. She was changed from her experience in the Underworld, as anyone who has faced Death would be, but she embraced life to its fullest, and Maia did too.

Maia travelled to new places with her sister whenever she had the opportunity, because she had developed a taste for exciting journeys. Her first journey had filled a hole left by her sister's death, but it had also filled in a hole that she didn't even realize she was missing. She practiced being brave every day, in ways big and small, and as a result grew stronger in courage and in love. She no longer faced her self-doubts and her weaknesses with fear and sorrow, but with compassion and a little bit of bravery, and every day when she looked at her reflection she always saw a woman of unwavering strength.

Sooner than she would have liked, Death came to take Maia to the Underworld. She tearfully wished her family and loved ones goodbye, but knew that she would see them again someday. Maia's goodbye to her sister was especially difficult, as she refused to let her sister go with her on this journey. It didn't take too long to convince Inara, since she was none too eager to go back to the Underworld. And so Maia and Death departed, but on their journey Maia stopped at Hesperos's tree, and offered him a position as a Guardian of the Underworld, which he gladly accepted. They say he delights in his job where he meets new souls every day, and he was never bored or lonely again.

Maia took the reigns of the Underworld and ruled over the land with a compassionate and steady hand. The garden outside the palace flourished under her care, and they say that the pathways of the Underworld were now strewn with flowers to guide wandering souls to their resting places. Inara soon returned to the Underworld for the second and final time, and stood by her sister's side in laughter and in love for evermore.

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Author's Note

The inspiration for this story is mostly drawn from various Greek myths. The idea for Maia to rescue her sister from the Underworld is based off of the myth of Orpheus and Eurydice. The story of Persephone inspired aspects of Maia's characterization as well as the decision to become the ruler of the Underworld at the end of the story. I have always liked the story of Persephone, (excluding the part where Hades, in a fit of lust, abducts her and drags her down to the Underworld). Yet I like the idea that a girl who loves flowers and who is a gentle grower of things can also be powerful as the Queen of the Underworld. One of Persephone's roles in the underworld was to line the pathways with flowers to guide the souls of worthy women to Elysium, and this idea became a part of Maia's duties as well. Instead of being forced into the position as the wife of Hades and goddess of the Underworld like in the original myth, I changed the narrative in order to make sure that Maia has the freedom of choice, a freedom that many women in the world are denied.

My story also features female warriors based off of the story of the Amazons, and the character Hesperos is based off of the dragon Ladon who guards the golden apples in the Garden of the Hesperides. The incorporation of a dragon is also reminiscent of the classic fairy tale plot where the dragon must be defeated in order to obtain success, although I may have changed this

idea just slightly. The golden pomegranates are also based off of the forbidden fruit in the story of Adam and Eve, but in Maia's story, instead of using the fruit as a marker for original sin and woman's "inferiority," the fruit is used as a tool for Maia to achieve her goals. Subtle mentions of the legends surrounding Hercules are also woven into the story. It is Hercules who outwits or defeats Ladon to fetch a golden apple, and Hercules is one of the heroes who travels to the Underworld and lives to tell the tale. In this story, it is Maia who accomplishes these tasks, and the last two of the Labors of Hercules are completed by a girl who wields a shovel and spade instead of swinging a sword. With this idea, I wanted to transform a girl who is not a traditional warrior into a Herculean figure.

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