

## A Fairy Tale for Lem

A long, long time ago, in a cottage not far from the forest lived a group of siblings, seven brothers and their sister, Maria. They never had much money, but led a happy life, loving and helping one another.

One day, while Maria stayed home to prepare a meal for her brothers, they left to cut down timber for the fireplace. After a long time however, they still had not returned, and so Maria put on her shawl and went out to search for them. She became more worried, when she couldn't hear any sounds coming from their favorite spot in the whole forest. Suddenly, nearby a huge berry bush, she spotted their clothes and became overcome with emotion. She lifted her teary eyes and saw seven wild swans, peeking out from behind the bush. The birds surrounded her, squawking as if to get Maria's attention. She had realized those were her brothers. She broke off a branch from a bush of poisonous berries, and ran as fast as she could to an old lady living deeper in the foliage. Some called her a witch doctor, others just a witch. With a heavy heart, Maria stepped into the dark hut, bowed and presented the sorceress with the berries her brothers had no doubt eaten. The old lady looked down on the fruit and muttered:

"I'm afraid I don't have good news for you dear- these aren't just regular poisonous berries. They're bewitched fruit, hexed by the Queen of Darkness herself."

- Help me please – begged the girl – they're all I have left. I'll give my life to save my brothers.

Breathing a sigh, the witch walked up to her huge cauldron. She beckoned Maria forward, and together, they looked upon the sheet of warm water. Instead of their own reflection, they saw seven wild swans, flying above an old tree. The sorceress took from behind the furnace three pairs of wooden shoes, a spool of wool, and said:

"Let the string of the spool unwind, and follow it wherever it takes you. Your journey will last however long it takes the three pairs of wooden shoes to break apart from travelling. Once the third breaks, you will arrive where your brothers

are kept. Whether you'll be able to remove their curse depends entirely on your determination and purity of heart. Now go."

The girl ran off from the witch's home almost immediately. She put on the first pair of wooden shoes, unwound the red spool of string, and ventured into the unknown. She walked for days, and slept only for a few hours each night when the spool stopped unwinding. When the first pair of shoes began to break apart, the string suddenly stopped unwinding in front of a small home, from which Maria could hear the crying of a baby. She calmly walked into the hut, and after seeing a child crying in their crib, she slowly rocked it while singing the most beautiful nursery rhyme she sang to her seven brothers. The baby fell back to sleep, and when Maria stepped outside, before her stood a tall, mysterious specter. She handed her a small pouch of emerald dust, and said:

"Your heart is pure, Maria. Take from me this magical powder. When you scatter it into the air, the cloud it forms will hide you from the eyes of evil, which you will no doubt meet on your journey."

The girl bowed in thanks, and after putting on her second pair of wooden shoes, she rushed after the unraveling spool of red thread. By the time her shoes once again started to fall apart, the string stopped in front of an old castle. The gates swung open invitingly, and so Maria reluctantly stepped inside of the fort. The corners of the chamber were lit with candles, and in its center was an old man. He gestured her forward with his hand, and whispered:

"All those close to me have left me, I grew poor, and I haven't had a warm meal touch my lips for many days. Help me, child, and soon I will rise on my feet again."

The girl, without much thought, got straight to work. Over the next three days, she fed the old man warm chicken stock, herbal teas and other meals, until he was able to stand on his own two feet once more. As a farewell gift, he handed Maria a piece of white silk cloth, and said:

"Your heart is pure, girl. Please, take with you this magical tablecloth, and use it where you see war and famine."

The girl bowed in thanks, put on her last pair of wooden shoes, and marched on after the spool. This time, the string stopped unwinding at the gates of a small town. From beyond the walls, she heard terrible screams and cries for help. When

Maria stepped through the gate, she saw the air full of ash, and people feeling in terror. The town was raided by a group of barbarians, and the citizens had lost all their food, water, animals and shelter. Without a second thought, the girl took out her magical tablecloth, and yelled as loud as she could:

“Everyone! Don’t lose hope! Today you live, and tomorrow is a new day!”

She grasped the tablecloth firmly and unraveled it before her feet. Like a flag, the white material fluttered in the wind, and when it came down to the ground, she realized on it was now a feast for a king. In shock, the people came up slowly to Maria and examined the heaps of food and water before their eyes. Once the townsfolk all had their portion, their spirits rose along with their strength. Someone in the crowd began gathering men to rebuild the houses. Another group decided to patch the holes in the town’s walls, while the rest tended to the wounds many people had suffered.

Maria had noticed then, that her spool of string was much smaller than it was at the start of her journey.

“I must be getting close.” She thought to herself.

Before she could step through the gates back on her journey, the mayor of the town managed to catch up to her. He handed her a small bag filled with what looked like walnuts, and said:

“Please, accept this humble gift from us to you. These are magical nuts, which will help you fight off tiredness and pain when the time is right.”

Maria smiled in thanks, and ran after the spool once again. By sunrise, when her last pair of wooden shoes fell apart, she stood before a tall boulder, the top of which had a throne carved into the stone. There was a woman with hair as black as crows sitting on that throne, who looked down on Maria. The girl immediately realized her travels had reached their end, and she stood before the Queen of Darkness. The empress looked at Maria with a cold glare, and said:

“You’ve done well, to make it this far. The first step to saving your brothers is behind you. However, this is not the end of your travels. Two more challenges await you.”

“I’ll do whatever you wish” replied Maria “but return my brothers to me”.

“Do you see that patch of stinging nettle?” asked the queen “You have exactly one day to sew seven shirts for your siblings using it. Once you’ve thrown all of them at the swans’ wings, they will return to their original human form.”

Maria got to work immediately. Without caring about the state of her delicate hands, the girl began to sew frantically for hours, her hands becoming progressively sorer and redder. After 15 hours of constant sewing, Maria felt herself passing out, despite the fact only three shirts had been made. Suddenly, she remembered about the magical nuts given to her by the mayor, and ate them all in hopes of a miracle. Right away, she fell asleep, but only for five minutes. When she awoke, her body and mind were completely energized, as though she had slept through an entire winter night.

The shirts were all ready before 24 hours had even passed. Maria showed them to the Queen of Darkness, who while sitting on her stone throne did her best to not show any signs of irritation. Just then, she called out:

“You’ve sewn seven shirts, and so leave and throw them onto your brothers. However, I should mention there is a dragon, lurking around the tree where you left your seven siblings.”

The empress got up from her stone throne and began laughing maniacally.

“What dragon? Where is it hiding? How am I supposed to defeat it?!”

Thousands of thoughts raced through Maria’s mind like an avalanche. Then, as the wind blew away the clouds of the starry night sky, the girl could make out the horrifying silhouette of the monster in the moonlight. A terrible screech rang out as the beast began to fly towards Maria, which is when she remembered the emerald dust she was given by the old woman’s apparition. With all her remaining strength, she threw the whole pouch of it at the foul beast, whose eyes became covered with the power. For the dragon, Maria disappeared into thin air, and as it began to search more carefully, the girl was able to pass through unnoticed. After making it to the tree where her seven brothers stayed behind, all it took was for Maria to call out their names. Seven beautiful, wild swans flew out from the crown of the tree, and as each of them was given a shirt by their sister, they transformed back to their human form. Back together again, the siblings all embraced in a hug, while Maria couldn’t help but cry tears of relief and

happiness. And so, it was the girl's pure heart which allowed them all to return to their home, where they lived happily ever after.