

# Maiara

By

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1.

Maiara soared over the upper peak, just inches above the snow which had long ago hardened into an icy crag making it difficult to clutch with her talons. But she had no intention of settling down right now. No, the air was crisp, the sun was shining, and she had the sky over Mt. Rainier to herself. No annoying crows to bother her up here.

She preferred to stay high above the peaks, gliding effortlessly in long flowing arcs. The cold crisp February air cooled her from below while the unfettered sun warmed her wide-stretched wings from above. This was her home, her place to soar but also her place to settle. The mountain was her dominion and her protector. She watched from above as if on guard, but the sheer size kept many predators away. She gained strength from its majesty, comfort from its serenity.

Maiara glided over the lower peak, the white blanket piled softly on top but flowing down the side of the hill with purpose, spreading out in its quest to reach the bottom. In a few months that quest will have ended, the blanket slowly pulling back up, but always leaving the white cover which will renew its quest again next winter.

As her effortless flight brought her over the valley, she peered down and caught movement. She immediately fluttered her wings and veered down, her head now pitched forward and eyes intent on the target. She flew directly towards a towering pine tree, resplendent in its mid-winter glory with pine needles embedded in snow casings. She angled around the jagged bonnet, then down to a branch where an unsuspecting squirrel was chewing on something small and green. Maiara swooped in and grabbed the squirrel in its talons, lifting it easily off the branch and up into the sky. The grip of the talons was penetrating, enough to expire the squirrel before Maiara would relish her meal.

2.

As the sun lowered to the west, closing in on the far off mountains near the big water, Maiara thought about her days as an eaglet in the nest amidst those mountains. Her memories were limited to just a few images now. How she touched down on the mountain when she couldn't maintain her flight, her wings not strong enough to keep her up for long periods of time. How her mother would watch from above, expecting her to get herself back in the air quickly before any trouble could come her way. But not coming to help her. That was her primary recollection – looking up and seeing her mother circle above, in sharp angled passes with her eyes fixed on the disappointment below. Those struggles made Maiara tough, an expert flyer capable of soaring higher and farther than the rest of her family. But they also made her leave, to find her own place in the world.

To the left, in the distance, she could see another eagle coming towards the peak. She didn't recognize the bird, or the flying style. But immediately she could make out the white head, and the relative size. He was smaller than her. He kept coming, but she was unsure if he saw her. He seemed to be peering down, apparently on a food quest. And then he shot down, disappearing into the trees but coming out quickly with something in his talons. He couldn't have gone very far in, she thought, but whatever he nabbed he did it quickly. She was impressed. He found a treetop to settle on and went to work on his dinner.

Maiara decided to take a closer look. She flew high above at first, out of his vision given his preoccupation with his prize. But as soon as she turned downward he looked up, his gaze now fixed on her. Fellow predator, maybe hungry. Too late, Aleko thought, as he swallowed the last of it. He took to flight, staying just above the treeline as she remained high above. A power play, he thought, but that's ok, let her enjoy it. She was impressive to watch, a strong flyer for sure, but graceful just the same.

She flew down towards a bare section of the mountain and found a small stick, then soared back up high above him. Aleko watched, wondering what was happening. All of a sudden, as she passed high above him, she dropped the stick. Did she mean to? It drifted a bit, but he flew over and easily caught it, falling back a bit to allow his talons to settle under the falling stick. Maiara then angled down again and found a larger stick, soared again, and dropped it again. He released the first stick and flew over and caught the second stick with ease. He sensed he was being tested. This process repeated two more times with ever-larger branches, each time he caught them with relative ease. He could see Maiara was happy, yet determined to keep challenging him. She headed down again, scouring the mountainside for a while, making him wonder what she was seeking this time. But then she dove down into a heavy foliage area, rife with trees and plant growth. She seemed to be rooting around for a while. Then she emerged, and in her talons was a log, easily 3 feet long and wider than her, yet somehow she clamped it with her obviously strong talons. He was mesmerized by her determination, and her strength in managing to fly with this log which had to weigh as much as she did. She soared past him, casting a brief glance his way. He offered a confident look in return, while soaring and diving as if he was the one on display. But he was worried he'd have to catch that log, even more worried it would knock him dead in the process.

Maiara flew back and forth high above Aleko, wanting him to see her strength and know she was in control. It was working. Aleko wondered how long she could continue to fly with this massive stump. But he dreaded when she would finally release it. Still, he tracked her movements, trying to stay in range. Finally, she made a sharp turn to her left and then released it, causing the log to not just drop but to fall on a sharp angle, unlike the first sets of branches. Luckily Aleko saw this movement as it occurred, but he was flying in the other direction at the point she released it, given

her sudden sharp turn. Now behind her, he cut a similar sharp turn and flapped hard to position himself under the falling log. But its trajectory was angling away from him, fast. He flapped harder but it passed his altitude 8 feet in front of him. He gave a couple harder flaps of his wings and angled himself downward, to chase from above. He sped downward, but the ground surface was only about 40 feet away. Now 30 feet. 25 feet. Finally, he gained within inches of the log, reached out with both of his feet and grabbed on. He dug his back talons into the log and clamped hard with all four talons of each foot. It was secure. He flew up, somehow the energy of the conquest gave him the strength to fly with this massive extra weight. He soared up to Maiara, who looked on at this incredible pursuit and capture with amazement and satisfaction. This might be the one. Her babies would be safe with a father like this.

With the look he was hoping to get from her, Aleko now nodded and then released the log towards the lower peak they now flew over. He extended his talons toward her. She reciprocated, they locked on to each other and began swirling and twisting in the air, the mating dance in full bloom. For all to see, though there was no one else there. They had the sky to themselves, the way Maiara always liked it. She knew she could learn to share it now, it's what she always intended.

3.

The nest they built together sat atop a magnificent Western Red Cedar, the highest treetop in this valley near the base of the big mountain. The stately tree stood perfectly straight as it climbed nearly 180 feet in the air. They created a massive bed out of sticks and moss, with assorted other items they could find in the valley to fill out the bulk of it. The sides were then built up with larger branches and more moss to keep it together and protect from the wind. As the nest slowly came together, Maiara kept sneaking glances over at Aleko, at first to check on him, make sure he was

holding his own. She was a strong bird, she wanted a mate who could match her drive. But when she saw how powerful he was, and how intent he was on building a perfect home, she then looked over at him with a different set of eyes. This was something she never felt before.

When the nest was completed, Maiara and Aleko turned and looked at each other. This was new for each of them, they hesitated, staring but not moving. But then Aleko took two steps towards Maiara, and she gave him a slightly embarrassed smile. They came together, and it felt right to both of them.

4.

Six days later Maiara produced an egg, and two days later came a second, just before the sun disappeared behind the western mountains. The tiny off-white ovals seemed far too small to produce something as dominant as Maiara. She worried something might be wrong, but Aleko assured her they were normal. Not normal, more like incredible, he corrected himself. She felt better, but her concern lingered. She intended to stay and incubate them for as long as they needed to hatch, never leaving them.

In the middle of the next day, Aleko insisted she take a break, go off and get some time to herself, it'll be healthy for her. She couldn't leave, she told him. He insisted, said he was fully capable of protecting them, and took his place atop them as she moved over to the other side of the nest. She waited for several minutes, making sure he wasn't putting too much pressure on them, but moreso making sure he wasn't going to abandon them. She begrudgingly flew up and circled a few times around the top of the tree, keeping her eyes on the nest the entire time. She felt a little better, so she flew a little further, but kept circling. She then came back to the nest, settled on the other side, and went to sleep. She awoke the next morning, amazed she had slept through the night and that Aleko was still atop the eggs. He assured her everything

was okay, she needed to rest. She thanked him, but then took control and took her place on her babies, where she stayed until the next day. Aleko then insisted she again go off, this time for a real flight away from the nest. He knew his partner, what she needed. She watched as he settled himself on the eggs, then she took off, this time feeling more energy than the first time a couple days ago. But she also felt comfortable that Aleko could handle it, her babies were safe with him. The eggs were already growing too.

She decided to go to the peak. She needed the air up there, the calm. Sure enough, when she got atop the mountain she returned to her former self. That was only a couple weeks ago, but it felt like she was a brand new person with Aleko and the babies in her life. Still, it was comforting to know that she could always come up here and rediscover her true self, feel the power of this mountain galvanize her entire body. She felt renewed. She followed a long swooping arc around the peak, then pointed her beak to the valley and flew home.

The following week Maiara was again on a rare flight away from the nest. Aleko insisted on her taking time away, not being the sole parent on the eggs. As much as being away felt like an abandonment, she appreciated the time being atop the mountain, feeling the cool air lift her wings. She needed this, maybe as much as she needed to be on those eggs. She hunted for food, diving down into the nearby river to get brook trout. The first one she gobbled while still flying up from the water surface; the second one she kept in her talons and would bring to Aleko.

As she flew back down into the valley, she could see in the distance her nest, but more troubling two red-tailed hawks circling above. If it was just one Aleko could easily handle it by himself and still keep the eggs safe. But two could come at him from opposite sides, or different angles, leaving him defenseless and vulnerable. And that's exactly what she saw a moment later, as the first hawk

dropped down and followed a wide arc around the nest, while the second flew straight down at Aleko's rear side. Aleko turned to defend and opened his wings, far wider than the hawk's. But at the same time the first hawk came at him from the opposite side, angled up and grabbed at Aleko with its razor sharp talons. Aleko flapped his wings harder, but his left one was caught in the first hawk's talons. The flapping was rattling the hawk, but the pace slowed down, while the other hawk continued to engage him from the front and try to get its own talons on him. Maiara dropped the fish and flapped hard, getting to the nest in just a few seconds. She immediately clamped her talons onto the first hawk, which was caught off-guard and not in a position to defend itself. It was easily pried off of Aleko's wing. The hawk flailed away, trying to flap its wings, but felt the eagle's talons sunk in, one to its body and the other just below its head. It made a valiant effort to free itself, but to no avail. Maiara gave one final squeeze of its talons, and then dropped her victim over a craggy section of rockface. The hawk fell to the surface, bounced off the side of a boulder and tumbled down to the ground further below. Maiara didn't wait around to see if the hawk was still alive. She hurried back to the nest, worried Aleko might be too weak to fight off the other hawk, but to her eternal happiness he was there, upright and alone, no hawk to be seen. She alit to the comfort of the nest, looking him over and seeing numerous marks. But his face showed his resolve. He told Maiara that once his wing was freed by her taking that other hawk away, he easily fought off the male hawk, who flew away rather than fight a stronger foe by himself. Little did the hawk know he'd be fighting solo for a while. A long while.

Aleko, sensing the same concern Maiara had, moved off the eggs and looked down at them. No damage. Maiara came up close to Aleko and nuzzled with him. She was proud of how he defended the eggs. He was grateful for her help. He wasn't too proud to admit he couldn't handle both hawks by himself.



5.

A few weeks later something magical happened. Maiara had just moved off the eggs, telling Aleko she thought she felt something with the first egg. There seemed to be movement, which excited her. Aleko realized he had also felt something yesterday, but it was very slight and only happened once or twice. He didn't know what it was. Maiara looked closely at the egg and could see a difference in the color. Not the outside, still dull white, but it seemed like something under the shell was different. It was. The eaglet was working its way toward hatching, getting its first taste of oxygen. Then, as Aleko and Maiara were talking about it, they heard a scratchy tap, and the shell showed a crack. Then another tap and crack. Then the third, and the shell was open. They could see the baby eagle's head, or at least its beak poking through. It was breathing air and making noises. A few hours later the furry white ball was out of the egg and feeding. Aleko sat atop the second egg, which would go through the same process just over 2 days later.

Maiara and Aleko spent the next 2 months feeding and nurturing Orion and Sasha. Orion, the first-born male, was growing fast, getting its wings by its ninth week. Sasha, the female, was slower in its development, but by its tenth week it had passed Orion, larger and with a healthier appetite. It was time to fly, and the memories of her own travails were at the forefront of Maiara's mind. She could still see her mother looking down at her with the weight of her expectations and disappointment. She wouldn't do that to her babies, but they would still become powerful independent flyers like their mother and father.

Orion stepped to the edge of the nest first, wanting to prove himself as the elder and superior of the clutch. Aleko was flying twenty feet below the nest, hovering as best as he could. Orion stepped off and simultaneously flapped its wings, a mess of haphazard motions that saw him tumble down at an awkward

angle. He still flapped, harder and harder, determination evident, but though he slowed his descent his flailing led him into the talons of his father. Aleko flew him back up and dropped him somewhat gently back into the nest. Orion sheepishly raised his head and looked to his mother, afraid of the expression he'd be met with. But Maiara showed him love, and confidence, and then she told him he did great, better than her first time. He smiled.

Sasha then took her turn. She was confident, just like her brother, but didn't show it outwardly, preferring to wait and see what happens rather than give off an attitude she couldn't live up to. She stepped off, flapped, and immediately her wings caught air, they were working in tandem and flapping smoothly, almost effortlessly. She descended, but moved outward and eventually maintained her altitude. Aleko flew about ten feet below her, just in case, but she was managing, until she wasn't. She started to descend again, Aleko could see it, she was obviously losing energy, so he flew up and grabbed her, and flew her back as well. She settled into the nest, but knew better than to look at Orion. She knew he was jealous, and that she could rub it in, but that wasn't who she was. As good as that might have felt for a few minutes, she knew how she'd feel in his position, for far longer than a few minutes. Maiara saw this too, was concerned about it. She was in Orion's position when she was an eaglet, and her sister and brother let her know it. Constantly. She gained instant respect for how Sasha carried herself. She told her she was proud of her flying, but also proud of her behavior. Proud of both of her children equally.

6.

A few weeks later the time had come. Orion and Sasha had both become solid flyers. Sasha was soaring by her third try, which drove Orion harder. Orion's determination, stubborn like his mother and probably his father too, led him to equal Sasha's ability quickly. He constantly insisted he be allowed to practice, Aleko each time obliging his son and getting in position down below. But

soon enough that wasn't needed, he took off and soared with ease.

But today was the day every eagle parent dreaded, despite their pride. Orion and Sasha would leave the nest for good, stake out into the world and find their own place in it. Maybe that place would be here, in the mountains. But Maiara left that up to them, it's not an eagle parent's place to tell their eaglets where to settle.

Maiara and Aleko looked at ease sitting next to each other in the nest, but that belied the concern building up inside each of them. Orion, as the older child, went first, as tradition held. He nuzzled both of his parents, then flew off, soaring high but waiting for Sasha. She was slower to move. She was confident, right from the start, but she was always comfortable in the nest, not restless to leave like Orion. But she knew it was time, so she stepped over and nuzzled. She stayed in Maiara's embrace for a long time, telling her how much she appreciated her mother, her strength. She would strive to be like her. Sasha lifted off and flew up to Orion, unable to look back for fear of being unable to leave. They flew off, towards the peak, honoring their mother, but with no knowledge of where they would fly beyond the peak.

7.

Maiara stayed in the nest for a full day, depressed and pensive. Aleko gave her the space and time she needed, going off for long periods getting food and just appreciating the time to himself. But late the next afternoon he told her it was time. Reluctantly she took flight with him, and they headed up to the peak. Thoughts of Orion and Sasha out by themselves in the world dominated her mind, as they did for the past few days, but now the majesty of the mountains and the crisp air in her face started to clear her mind. Maybe they were experiencing the same feeling somewhere else. Were they still flying together? Did Orion set off by himself, ever-so-determined to prove himself in this

world, or would he pair with his sister to find a new home, knowing they were both safer and stronger together for now? Maiara could only hope.

Aleko sensed her mind was still there. He assured her Orion and Sasha were fine, ready for the world. They raised them well, strong and intelligent. And they had Maiara's drive, nothing would get in their way. She felt better. She looked across the expanse, appreciating the colors that were starting to come through where before it was just white. She was a sleek and still vessel carving a fluid arc across the top of the mountain. Aleko always appreciated watching her fly, it was like no other bird he'd ever seen. Nothing in her mind could change the beauty of her flight. But her gaze was now focused westward, where the sun was angling down. Aleko saw this and joined her, gliding alongside his partner, quietly, leaving her to her thoughts. The sun was setting on this day, on this chapter of her life. Their lives. Tomorrow it would rise again, and start a new chapter. She smiled at Aleko, and they returned to their home ready to get started.



Maiara – “wise”; *from Native American Tupi origin*