

Ikara's Rose

by Paul Melko

Many years before humans came to the World, strong, silent Oak loved Ikara. But Ikara was a beautiful goddess, tall and elegant with the body of a bird and the head of a woman, and much beloved by many. The gifts that the other gods gave her were grand and wonderful.

Urilianin, Yuris, and Thoot vied especially for her favor with gifts and treasures and feats. Urilianin fought the dragon Krile and brought one of its solid gold tails. Yuris, spending many years at work, crafted a graven, hollow throne-egg from a huge pearl the size of a boulder. Thoot stole the pearl from Yuris and gave it to Ikara as his own gift. Yuris then laid the head of Thoot at Ikara's feet, but this gift she rejected.

Oak, while a strong god, was not a rich god. He had acorns but no gold or iron or power. No gift that he thought of was better than those Ikara already had received.

He pondered this for many years, observing the beautiful Ikara from afar, offering her shade when it grew hot, or shelter when it grew cold. But never did he talk to her, even when she perched upon his boughs, although he did sing softly when she slept, songs of love and adoration.

His friend Squirrel, in whom Oak confided, suggested flowers picked from the fields or cakes made from his acorns. Oak rustled his boughs in negation. He had seen others give Ikara such gifts, but even though she smiled as she accepted them, later the flowers wilted, and the cakes were eaten. Still, though, Oak thought that a single rose symbolized his love for Ikara the best. A single bloom with its stalk of thorns. If only it would last forever, then it would be the perfect gift.

Finally, Oak had an idea. He gave Squirrel an acorn and told him to bury it at the base of a mountain. Squirrel did as Oak asked, and buried the seed, a part of Oak's self. Before long, a sprout appeared. The sprout grew tall in its first season, and was soon a sturdy sapling. But the tree did not grow away from the mountain into the sunlight; it grew against the mountain, squeezing it tightly with its branches.

Year after year the oak tree grew, higher up the mountain and farther around it. Beneath it, roots burrowed through soil and rock, tearing at the heart of the mountain and digging deeply into the earth.

Finally, after many years, when the mountain was almost completely concealed behind the pointed leaves, Oak took all his great strength and heaved. With a mighty groan, with the splintering of rock, the mountain broke free and rose above the ground. Not much, but a few inches at least.

Each year, cradled in the branches of the tree, the mountain rose higher and higher. And on the inside, with the help of Squirrel, Oak transformed the mountain using the strength of his great limbs and the rain and wind he directed with his leaves. First he smoothed all the edges down, rounding, polishing, and shining. Then he etched into the surface the image of a single rose, delicate petals, thin, winding stem, and thorns, sharp and pointed.

The tree grew high into the sky. The other gods questioned Oak about this extravagance.

"Why do you grow so high, Oak? Why do you reach for the sun so far? Why do you cover half the world in shadow?"

But Oak was a silent god, and did not answer.

At last the time came to unveil his gift to Ikara. He asked a favor of the great god Urilianin.

"I ask you to cut this tree down. I ask you to fell this part of me. But be careful that you do not crush the others around you. Be careful that you do not harm the animals or the gods," Oak said.

Urilianin leaned heavily on his axe. "And why should I do that? This tree is big and will take many days to cut. What will you give me?"

"I have nothing to give you. I ask that you do it as a favor, and I will give you a favor in return at some time in the future."

Urilianin was a crafty god and decided that the favor of a strong god like Oak would one day be a good thing.

"I will do this thing for you."

Urilianin was a god of great strength, built with a man's body and the head of a bull. His weapon was the great axe he carried, and he was broad-shouldered from wielding it. He stepped to the base of the tree and swung with all his might.

The axe bit deeply into Oak's bark, but not deep enough to find the white wood. Oak groaned silently in pain, and waited for the next swing. He felt the cut since his being was part of the new tree, as it was part of all oak trees, every one that existed on the World. The next stroke found bark again, as did the next fifty, until the white of the trunk's

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inner meat finally shone through. Oak's roots twitched in pain. But he had known this time was coming. He had already made his decision, and he would bear the agony.

For weeks Urilianin swung his axe. Cutting deeper and deeper into the tree. The gods, creatures, and animals came to watch. Even Ikara came, sitting on a nearby hillside, and observed the swings of Urilianin. Oak was glad to see her, but could not concentrate on her beauty for the pain was very great.

On the twentieth day, Urilianin reached the pith, darker than the outer flesh of the oak. He was forced to stand in the hollowed-out cut to swing his axe, deep in the crevasse he hewed. It was as if he mined for metals deep in the dark ground. Above him, Oak strained to keep the mountain perched on his branchy shoulders.

Finally, on the night of the thirtieth day, there came a great crack. Urilianin, resting at that moment against his axe handle, jumped into the air, then ran for the edge of the trunk, lest he be crushed in the fall.

"Run! It falls! It falls!" he cried.

He leaped from the crevasse he had cut and rolled along the ground. A shrill whistling cut the night, the sound of branches swishing through the air as the tree fell. Animals, creatures, and gods ran for cover.

Oak crashed upon the World with the sound of a thousand peals of thunder, settling across half the world in a cloud of dust. And as he lay there, gazing at the heavens, he saw it, his gift to the goddess Ikara, sailing among the stars. It was more beautiful than he had imagined.

There came a gasp. "Look!" someone cried. "A new moon."

All the world looked into the sky that night, saw the beauty of it. Ikara looked up and cried at the sight of it, tears of rapture streaming down her cheeks into her feathered nape. Oak, seeing this, was happy.

Urilianin too saw Ikara's joy, and turned to Oak. "I shall have my favor now, Oak. I would say that I have done this thing, that I carved this rose with my axe as a gift to my beloved. I claim this as the favor you owe me."

Oak, weak and exhausted, said, "A favor must be returned when asked. You may claim this moon as your own."

Urilianin climbed to the hill on which Ikara stood and said, "Yes, this moon was forged by me as a gift, as a gift to my beloved." He turned and

looked into Ikara's eyes. Ikara, moved by the sight of such a marvel, smiled.

The gods, creatures, and animals cheered and celebrated into the night, such that none, save Squirrel and Oak, saw Ikara and Urilianin leave together, hand in wing.

Squirrel tsk-tsked. "Why did you do that? Why did you let him take credit for your gift?"

Oak rustled his leaves. "My love is as constant and lasting as that moon. Urilianin's is as constant and lasting as this leaf. Ikara will see the truth in time, and until then, the moon will remind me of the time to come."

Squirrel shrugged and went to bury the plethora of acorns that now littered the World.

END

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