

The Myth of Life

By Carina Fiorella

Ida's heart pounded in her ears as she ran through the dense woods. Breathing heavily, she strove through the brush, tripping over the branches and roots that wove over the forest floor, drawing blood from her scratched flesh. She shook off the stinging pain. The center of the forest was still miles away, and the world was tottering on the brink of destruction. If the stories were true, she could save it. She could restore what had been lost.

"Tell it again! Tell me the story about the forest! Please?"

Ida's father smiled, and looked up at his six-year-old daughter, who had come up next to where he sat in the grass, a pleading look in her eyes.

"Just one more time?"

He grinned. "Alright. One more time."

She cheered and promptly sat down on the grass, looking expectantly up at him.

"They say," he began, "that long, long, ago, before the gods came to this world, there was a forest. It stood alone, surrounded by the barren wasteland that this world once was. The arrival of the gods, and the birth of humanity found it standing tall, and it could not be brought down. And it did not change, new trees never grew, old ones never died. It remained the same, as centuries passed and the world around it aged. And we, curious as humans are, ventured into it, seeking to know and understand its secrets, believing that it held the secret of immortality, hoping to harness it for ourselves, hoping to become more than what we are. We wanted to be gods."

He stopped for a moment, leaning in closer, widening his eyes.

Ida giggled.

"But", he continued, "those who went never returned. Not one. They all left with promises of eternal life, but never came back to fulfill them. Those sent to search for the lost never came back either. And our curiosity was only heightened, but unable to confirm our ideas, we started to take guesses. We grew impatient, more desperate for an answer — we were willing to believe almost anything. Taking advantage of this, one man arose. He was a genius, a philosopher, and he told us all that he could answer our questions. He told us he had seen visions, which told

him that the forest was a gateway, through which the gods had come to our world — a gateway to heaven. But he warned against entering, teaching that he had not seen the fate of those who were lost in the forest. That there was a possible danger. He didn't tell us what it was, but we listened to him, glad to at least have something to believe. And the forest still stands, and we still have not seen its center. It is not, we were warned, made for humankind."

Ida grinned. "Is it true?"

Her father gave her a playful grin. "Well they say it's not, but you never know ... maybe they're hiding something ... the forest does exist, after all."

She giggled, and stood up, grabbing his arm.

"C'mon! I bet we can find out their secrets!"

He laughed, and followed her.

Whispering. So much whispering. What were they saying that couldn't be said in a normal voice? What were they hiding?

Ida was ten now, sitting under a tree next to the house, playing with the rabbits that gathered there. Her mother was standing on the front porch, whispering with a man in a uniform that had come earlier. She looked frantic. Ida was growing impatient — she liked knowing what was going on, and on top of that, her father should have been home *hours* ago. And she still had no idea what he was even away doing. Her mother had told her that he was away "helping us all out." Which didn't explain anything. Sighing in frustration, she got up and walked up to her mother, who immediately stopped talking.

Ida eyed her suspiciously. "What's going on?"

Her mother forced a smile. "Nothing dear. Could you go inside for a bit, please?"

"Where's Dad?"

A pause.

"He'll ... be back ... in a while."

The man in the uniform looked down at her with pity.

"In a while", Ida would eventually learn, meant "never".

Ida found out later that the world was at war. That her father had gone to fight, and had died on the front line. Meanwhile, the rest of the world was deteriorating. A disease swept the land,

killing the crops and cattle. Famine broke out, and when Ida was fifteen, her mother succumbed to it and died. In a desperate search for help, for relief, Ida sought out the forest. If her father's stories were true, she could find the gate. And should she return, she could deliver her world from destruction.

She was getting closer. The abnormal concentric circles that the trees formed were getting gradually smaller – the center should be only minutes away. She could almost see it: the last circle, the small clearing inside. Almost there. A few minutes later, Ida at last broke through the final ring of trees, gasping. Stopping to catch her breath, she stood to observe her surroundings, and almost cried out in horror. The dirt was strewn with bones. Human bones. Not only bones, full skeletons lay half buried in the dust, still almost perfectly intact. And there, in the midst of them stood a jackal, awakened by Ida's entrance. It stared at her, but it was unsettling, unnatural, its eyes were not that of an animal nor of a human. Ida stepped back, heart pounding in her chest. She turned her head from side to side frantically, desperately trying to find what she had come for, but only the same image greeted her everywhere she turned. Turning back to the animal, she found it still staring at her intently.

"Mortal."

Ida could only stare, wide eyed, in shock and horror. She was sure she'd heard it speak, but it couldn't have, it was impossible ...

"Will you never cease your searching?" It continued. "Will your futile attempts never have their end? There is nothing to be found here but death."

"What... who..." She was completely speechless, unable to form any of the questions running through her mind. She wordlessly gestured at the skeletons.

"I thought you'd have guessed. Where do you think they went? They never did return to your world."

"They..." she managed, "they came here in search of immortality... we thought they'd found heaven..."

"They did, in a way. Technically, it is true. Only they found it by another road."

"But-"

"They died," it continued, "because of their own blindness. It is not meaningless that they are called "mortal," for it is their destiny to be such. The immortality they sought, that lies in the heart of the forest, in me, is not meant for them. They were too proud, too greedy."

A pause. It turned its eyes from Ida to the morbid scene on the ground.

"I merely reminded them of their own mortality."

Ida felt it slip in once more. The hopelessness, the ice cold feeling that seized her, flowed into her veins, freezing her in place, numbing her mind.

"The world, my world ... it's dying," she whispered, "I thought if I came here I could find something that would save it..." she trailed off, staring at the ground.

The creature bowed its head.

"I am sorry. But it is fate, the fate of this world is to die. Your world shares your fate, and it cannot be changed. It will die, it has been destined since the dawn of time."

It turned its eyes back to her.

"It is more honorable to try to save one's world rather than oneself. But this place has a law. I cannot grant you what you seek," it paused for a moment, "nor can I allow you to leave."

Ida quickly stepped back. Her hands urgently sought the trees she had entered from, to grab on to them, to pull herself back under their cover. Her heart was beating fast, and the wind was roaring impossibly loudly in her ears.

"No... no you don't mean ... you can't"

"I must. There is a balance, it must be upheld. Since you must die, die knowing that you did so with honor, with virtue."

She fell to the ground. Her vision blurred, spots swam in her vision. The darkness was creeping in, surrounding her, until it completely veiled her eyes.

"Remember," she heard, it seemed to come from so far away, echoing and distorted in her dying mind. "You are mortal."