

7-15-2019

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Recommended Citation

Bowkett, Kevan (2019) "*The Tale the Mountain Told*," *The Mythic Circle*: Vol. 2019 : Iss. 41 , Article 5.
Available at: <https://dc.swosu.edu/mcircle/vol2019/iss41/5>

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Mythcon 51: The Mythic, the Fantastic, and the Alien
Albuquerque, New Mexico • Postponed to: July 30 – August 2, 2021



The Tale the Mountain Told

by

Kevan Bowkett

This is a tale that the windswept grasses told to a mountain, one which rises far away, and the mountain remembered it as mountains do, and among its roots a miner heard it in the dripping of water from a crystal roof, and so it has come down to us.

Among the Ragaia people of the grasslands of Zireleth there was once a youth belonging to a poor family. The only way he could help keep his family alive was to put more effort into hunting than those with great skill—in order to bring home much less meat and hides than they. But he was diligent, and helped provide for his family, and so was respected.

He loved a young woman of the people, who belonged to the Clan of the Priestess — an august lineage, though of little power in that day.

One day their village learned that the Golden Rhea had been seen in the territory. This was a remarkable thing, for the animal was seen only once a century in the Ragaia plains. Capturing it was impossible, it was too fast and strong, but killing it and wearing its feathers would make any one into a leader, a great warrior and hunter.

The camp emptied of hunters, and of non-hunters who sought to try their luck. Soon almost no one was left at home. The youth, whose name was Ruk Ozzem, dithered about his tent. He did not see the point in trying to pursue the great Rhea when so many skilled hunters were on its track. He did not even own a riding-jaguar to keep up with the best hunters!

He wandered away from his tent out of the village to a little pool in the green pampa

grasses.

There was the Rhea! It was standing among the reeds, quietly drinking from the slough. But it looked so lovely, he couldn't bear to shoot it with an arrow. He watched, hidden, for a few minutes till the great bird was finished drinking. Then it slipped away into the tall grasses.

Once it had gone, he realized what an opportunity he had missed. How could he have been so stupid! Galvanized, he ran in pursuit of the bird, moving as quietly as he could this way and that among the thick vegetation where he had seen it. He found a golden feather, and thrust it into his satchel, but he could find nothing else. He cursed himself roundly.

"I could have slain the beast," he said. "But it seems true it cannot be caught."

A few people returned that evening from seeking the Rhea, but most did not, preferring to sleep out on the pampa or to continue the hunt through the night. Ozzem mentioned nothing, but received some mockery for having caught no food that day. Some mockery: but little, for he was a respected man; nor was it expected that hunters made a kill every day.

A day or two later he visited the young woman he loved, who lived out on the pampa with her family near an old solitary beech tree, under which the people sometimes made sacrifices and worshipped. He took her a gift of honey and potatoes and wildflowers, and she (her name was Razma), made the flowers into a crown which she set on her dark hair (her hair was dark blue, like the coat of the

griysa, the blue mongoose). He prepared a dessert of hot honeyed potatoes which made their tongues melt. Then they played cat's cradle games and other games of hand; then walked out on the pampa, along with the young woman's sister.

Early in the evening they parted, content, and he wandered homeward.

After walking a thousand and five hundred strides he came near a belt of oak and aspen trees, and took his bow and arrow in hand, for he had seen a movement by the wood's edge. He went toward it, and entered the forest along a narrow trail. He hastened, and coming to a glade almost filled with a reedy pond he looked, and saw — the Golden Rhea! As it bent down its head to take a drink from the pond, he raised his arrow to shoot; but the creature looked so lovely, standing on a stone in the pool near the further bank, with its golden feathers catching a beam from the setting sun that pierced the wood, so it seemed limned by a fiery haze, that he could not shoot. He let it drink, and drink again, and then turn, step to shore and vanish among the aspens and oaks of the further wood.

Presently the sunbeam disappeared and Ozzem shook himself and cursed, and hastened in pursuit of the beautiful creature. At first he thought he heard rustling ahead; but then it ceased, and though he ran back and forth along the narrow trails, quartering the whole wood from one side to the other, he saw nothing, not even a print or a feather. Finally he came out a ways onto the pampa, looking round, especially westward to where the orange sun was just dropping beneath the horizon. But the Golden Rhea was gone.

He carried on westward toward his village. After a few minutes he came upon a slough in a hollow and there he saw Razma sitting on a boulder among the tall grasses, putting on a sandal.

"Razma!" he cried. "A pleasant evening to you!" He was puzzled at seeing her — had he

not just left her near her home, to the east? — yet he did not ask her what she was doing there, for such questions are deemed busybodyish and bad form by the Ragaia, and in addition she was of the Clan of the Priestess, whose actions on occasion seemed inscrutable.

"And to you, Ozzem!" she cried back, laughing and standing up. "But we cannot visit; my sister is not by."

"No of course," he said. "But you did not see the Golden Rhea? For I saw it in the wood of the rock pool back there."

"Fortunate Ozzem!" she cried. "But I have seen nothing. It must have gone another way. If I see it on the way home, I will send you a message. Do not fear we will forestall you; you know how my parents disdain the hunting of the Rhea. I must away now."

"Then I shall carry on," he said. "My thanks and a fair evening twilight to you, Razma!"

"I came to tease you, Ozzem!" she laughed. "Now I will back home on Blackfangs!" which was the name of her parents' riding jaguar. She waved, and ran away into the high feather-grass on the slope beyond the slough. He waved back, and turned, and went on.

On his way home he met the hunter Songaia and her husband, returning from a journey to her mother. They sat under a lone oak tree and spoke of the Rhea, and Songaia discouraged Ozzem from tracking it, saying that would waste his time, better spent trying to feed his family. But at that his heart ceased to be quiet, and silently roiled with the thought that she wanted the Rhea for herself, and that was her reason for speaking so.

He reached home. Razma sent no message that night, nor the next day. "She has not seen the creature," said he, skinning an anteater as the sun dipped toward the horizon.

No more was the Great Rhea sighted in the ensuing weeks, and some of the people's

enthusiasm wore off. But many, especially the keen hunters, kept seeking, knowing from tradition that the beast might appear at any time in the twelve moons after its first sighting—and that it was in the last hour of the last day of the last of those twelve moons, that the great hunter Irzaia had chased and slain it almost in the last few breaths of its allotted time. So hope dimmed only slightly.

Then word came out to Ozzem's family of a calamity that had befallen one of Ozzem's older brothers. This brother lived not in the plains but worked in a large building called a mill by a river near the town of Teyara at the southwestern edge of the pampas. He worked to grind grains into powder, and in exchange was given little square pieces of metal, which he sent to a trading post at Dusky Sands Lake. The metal pieces, stored up there, allowed Ozzem's family to go to the post twice a year and buy dried foods, some clothing, and occasionally metal tools. But now word came by a trader that a millstone had fallen onto Ozzem's brother and damaged his back so that he could no longer work in the mill. He was coming home to the village to live.

Ozzem's father and mother and maternal uncle called Ozzem to them in the hearth room of their hut (for the elders had a hut rather than a tent), and his mother said to him:

"O Ozzem, Satzem your brother will soon be here. He will stay here to live, as long as Kaia wills. And he will leave at Dusky Sands Lake almost all his pieces of metal that he has received at the mill, and a great number of other pieces that the chieftain of the mill has given him out of sympathy for his misfortune. With all of these pieces of metal we will be able to keep Satzem here, for a long time, even though he is badly hurt. But we will not receive new pieces from the mill. We must have new pieces, or we will go hungry. You and some of your siblings hunt. Your hunting is well, Ozzem, but it is not enough to keep us sufficiently in food, if all of the metal at Dusky

Sands Lake must go to keep your brother Satzem. So you must put away your bow and arrows and must go away from the pampas, and must go to work at the mill at Teyara as Satzem has done, and grind grains into powder and send us more metal pieces to Dusky Sands Lake."

Ozzem blanched. "But I am a hunter!" he said. "I have been trained to it. Satzem never was, but was trained for growing vegetables and such. It is too big a change for me."

"It is a change you must make, Ozzem," said his mother. "We will go hungry without this."

"If you were a great hunter it would be different," said his uncle. "As it is, go you must."

"But if I go," said Ozzem, "Razma whom I love will cast me aside and will even spit upon my memory. For the women of the Clan of the Priestess never mate with any but hunters or warriors. She cannot mate with a man who grinds grain into powder for pieces of metal. And she will spit upon the thought of me for casting her aside in exchange for such work—as she will deem it."

"You are not betrothed, Ozzem," said his mother.

"She loves me, mother, father, uncle," he said, looking at them. "I have a good chance with her. But with this – none."

"Bauxla of Green River married a man of the Strand Clan who grows vegetables in Thalevea Hills," said Ozzem's uncle.

"Our Bauxla is not of the Priestesses' Clan," said Ozzem in frustration. "Razma's parents and Razma herself would never agree. They are too proud."

"Too proud for the pittance they have, and wield," said his mother.

"The matter is settled," said his uncle. "Prepare yourself to go before winter."

Ozzem's father looked down, sad.

Ozzem went out onto the pampa to think.

Small sandpipers darted about on foot near

the stone he sat upon; and he looked at them vacantly.

He thought of abandoning his family; then at once recoiled in grief and shame.

It was not to be thought on. But how could he both help them and win Razma? He might leave the pampas indeed, and go not to Teyara but to the great city beyond it at the head of the Gulf of Leaves — Ayara Firnu, red-walled bastion of the Cothiryan Empire. There he might take service as a soldier, and fight in the Empire's wars. Many of the Ragaia did so. But alas! Those who best succeeded were jaguar-riders, and few enough of them ever came back from the quarrels of the Imperial princes. Without a jaguar he would, even if hired, be relegated to low-paying menial work that Razma would laugh at and scorn to call a warrior's. And would she ever consent to come to him there, and leave the pampas which she loved? If he stayed at home, he could disobey his parents by continuing to hunt, and through constant effort hope to feed them sufficiently. If he were a good hunter! If he slew the Golden Rhea he would become such. If he slew the Rhea all his problems would be ended.

He stood and set to tracking. He had three months until the time for his departure came. He went again to the wood of the rock in the pool where he had seen the Rhea, and again quartered the wood, seeking for any clue. He shot a guanaco just outside the trees, took part of it home, told his sisters where the rest lay, ate some, then returned and continued the search. He found nothing, but drifting eastward came to the place where Razma lived. She was out under the tree, nursing a cut calf. He paused by her, concerned.

"It is nothing," she smiled, and laughed. "A few days and all will be well."

"What happened?" asked Ozzem.

"A badger," she replied. "My father has killed it."

"If you see aught of the Golden Rhea I beg

you would tell me, or send to me," he said in a low voice. "It is important that I kill it."

"You know how my family feels about that."

"Yes, but I beg you," he said. "I must become a better hunter than I am." But he was afraid to tell her what he must do if he failed in becoming such.

"Practice," she said, and smiled and looked down. "Practice and find the feel of the matter."

He sought for three days, in the barren lands east of Razma's home. He looked particularly near pools or sloughs, beside which he'd seen the great bird both times. He saw no sign, but killed a guanaco, a big armadillo, and an adult rhea of the ordinary kind and each time bore some to the nearest camp and told them where to find the kill, if he'd left some cached for others. Then he returned to his seeking. Once, bringing the armadillo to the small camp of Songaia the hunter, he heard from her how her husband had seen the Golden Rhea near Skull Slough and had shot and actually struck it, but it had escaped.

"Here is a feather to prove the tale," she said, drawing forth a copy of the one in his own satchel: complete with the bluish rainbow along the hairs when they were stroked. "It fell when he struck it."

"A fortunate encounter," said Ozzem.

Songaia set her daughter to curing the meat for Ozzem and he rested an hour before resuming his search. In that hour Songaia's daughter told him the tale of the strange jaguar that came out of the Dawn and became ancestor of all the great cats of the plains of Zireleth and the adjacent mountains. While she spoke, Ozzem removed one feather from an arrow and fletched the arrow with the feather of the Rhea, which still gleamed as if new-fallen. When he had finished he said to Songaia's daughter, "Now what was that strange jaguar, I wonder?"

She laughed and said, “There is only one piece of lore about that, Ozzem. It is this verse that goes with the story:

*The jaguar thrust its head into the Sunrise
And so became a lion.*

But no one knows what a ‘lion’ may be.”

Ruk Ozzem thanked her, rose, and set again to his seeking of the Golden Rhea. He scoured Skull Slough, as others were doing, then chuckled — so many people were gathered there it must frighten away their quarry. He went north and east into the pampa, moving from slough to slough, killing prey, hauling it back to Songaia’s, then setting off again. Soon he was bringing in as much meat as any hunter of the first rank.

Finally he came to Red Aspen Wood, in the furthest reaches of his clan’s territory.

By a pool in its midst he saw the Golden Rhea. It was gliding away from him.

It was too beautiful to shoot.

But he hardened himself, and took his arrow new-fledged with the Rhea’s own feather, and shot.

He struck it, and it leaped away and ran. But before it vanished he had driven a second shaft into its body.

He tracked it, and followed its heavily dropped blood through the woods. He saw several bloody feathers and caught them up eagerly.

But then he could find no more blood, and even the bent and broken grass of its passage vanished as the wood ended and a stretch of stony, scrub-brown ground extended before him.

He could find no traces though he was four days looking. But the beasts came easily to him; he killed and cached five.

Finally, carrying a young guanaco he’d slain, he returned to Songaia’s place.

She came running out to him, and said,

“Razma is missing. Her father said she went north and east. Did you see her?”

He shook his head.

“Her mother says she’ll be praying by the Younger Tree north of Red Aspen,” said Songaia. “It is not quite her time for that, but she has gone there before when it was not expected.”

“I have been all round Red Aspen,” said Ozzem. “She is not there. But I did not go as far north as the Young Tree.”

“Itunya said a party is coming to seek her there,” said Songaia.

“I will go also,” he said.

Three hunters came soon afterward, and with Ozzem set off north across the pampa.

They came to the Younger Tree, a great cottonwood standing on its own on an island in a large slough.

Razma was there, dead.

She appeared to have fallen out of the cottonwood onto the upthrust branch of a leafless wild plum, then dragged herself off of it, and collapsed and died by the water’s edge.

Her left hand was in the water.

They bore her homeward in procession, lamenting.

In silence, her mother and sisters took her and prepared her for burial in the traditional manner of the Clan of the Priestess. While they did so, Razma’s father invited Ozzem into the family’s hut and sat him down, serving him tea made with pampa cleavers. The older man was sad, and a tear dropped into his tea, but he smiled wanly, and said, “So, Ozzem, now you are a great hunter! For you have slain many beasts, and you have killed the Golden Rhea.”

“Have I sir?” he said. “I sought it, but could not find the carcass.”

“Oh yes, you did,” said Razma’s father. “The carcass, as you call it, is that which my wife and daughters are binding up for burial.”

“Sir!” cried Ozzem, horrified.

“Indeed it is so, though it is secret,” said the older man. “Every century is born among

us a child who becomes the Golden Rhea. Sometimes they are slain by hunters, sometimes not, and if not the transformation passes, and never returns.”

“But why did she — or you — not tell me?” cried Ozzem. “I would have held my hand!”

“Would you? ‘Tis well. But the Rhea exists so the hunters of the people do not hold their hands. So the hunters of the people grow strong in the pursuit—even as you have done, even before you slew her.”

“I didn’t want to slay her!”

“Of course not,” said her father. “But ‘tis done, ‘tis fate, ‘tis for good. Now you will be a skilled man of the plains, and that will aid your family, your clan, and all the people.”

“I wanted to ask her to accept me as her

mate,” said Ozzem.

“Others have wanted similar things. Fate comes between; and life’s steps continue. Do you want some honey to your tea?”

“Thank you, no,” said Ozzem.

“Show folk the bloodied feathers,” said Razma’s father. “They will believe you. And still more they will believe your skill.”

But they believed it not: for he showed not the bloody feathers, but buried them among the grasses, and then left and took service in the legions of Ayara Firnu, the red-walled city, and his remittances in square pieces of metal were all of him that came back to the sunlit, windswept pampas.

—The End—



“Morning Dew.” Photograph by Janet Brennan Croft