

I Fear Not For I Have You

Devotion lingers long after grandeur crumbles, persisting in the space between what is remembered and what has been forgotten.

The temple stood alone on a hillside overlooking a village that had once thrived under his divine care. Nowadays, the villagers took different paths to market, avoiding the crumbling stone steps that led to his only remaining sanctuary. They did not speak his name, a word lost to the fading memory of the few from his reign that still lived. He remembered when their worship had filled him with power, when prayers had flowed to him with great abundance.

Now he was merely a shadow in this empty place, lingering between existence and oblivion, cast into darkness by those who had once opposed him. He felt his own consciousness losing strength, sometimes unstable for days or weeks. He always came back to find her there, still faithful, still speaking his name as if it held any worth. He, once unbreakable, infallible, was almost entirely sustained by the pure faith of one single, mortal woman.

“My glorious lord,” Isa would call, and each time, a horrible shame would course through whatever remained of him. Glorious? He, who could no longer manifest as even a gust of wind? He, who watched helplessly as she withered away in service to a deity who could grant her no favors, perform no miracles?

He watched her days unfold in painful repetition.

Each morning she would rise before the sun, her body shivering beneath the threadbare blankets in the temple’s chamber. His many priests had once slept here, yet now the room was sparse. “Blessed is the day that begins in your name,” she would whisper, her voice hoarse with sleep. She would splash her face with the bitterly cold water from her single basin, then dress

herself in the blue robes that had once marked his clergy. She had sewn them herself from memory of the texts she'd studied, each stitch a prayer in his name.

By first light, she would be at his altar, lighting fresh candles. Her hands trembled more with each passing season, but her movements never lost their intention, their reverence. She would prostrate herself before him, forehead touching the stone that generations of knees had worn smooth.

"I bring you my devotion, Lord, meager though it may be." Meager. As if dedicating her entire mortal life to a forgotten deity was a small, inconsequential thing. He sometimes felt that it was him who owed her his insignificant devotion.

She would clean often. The temple was vast, with corridors that led to chambers only she had dared to explore. She liked to focus on the atrium, where his statue stood tall, carved from stone long before her birth. Offerings had, at one time, piled high at its base. Now, only dust collected there, which she always swept away with a smile.

She would work until her breathing grew labored, until spots danced across her vision. Only then would she allow herself to rest, leaning against a column, eyes fixed adoringly on his unmoving likeness.

"Your radiance remains undimmed," she would say, "Even if the world forgets, your magnificence endures." If only she knew how false that was. "Forgive my weakness," she would whisper, "Tomorrow, I will do better."

Noontime prayers were once boisterous affairs, his temple filled with people lauding his glory. Isa's solitary voice echoed in the vast open chamber, reciting liturgies she had pieced together from the fragments of texts she had salvaged from the temple, before his history was pillaged for kindling.

“Though darkness falls and light fails, your vision remains clear. Guide us through shadow to your eternal glory.”

Us. She always said “us,” though she remained alone. He could not find an explanation for the ferocity of her belief, the absolute certainty with which she proclaimed his greatness, even as evidence of his failure lay all around her in crumbling stone.

Afternoons were spent tending the temple grounds. In spring, she planted flowers in the cracks between the stones. In summer, she harvested herbs from the wild garden that had only grown wilder as time invaded. In autumn, she gathered wood for the winter. In winter, she shoveled paths through snow with her hands, blue from cold.

“The temple must remain worthy of you,” Isa would say, though her back bent harshly under loads of wood or buckets of water, too heavy for her humble frame. “Your dwelling place must reflect your glory.” The work was too much for one person, especially one who allowed herself so little. He watched as her body consumed itself, as her cheeks hollowed and her steps slowed. She had been beautiful once, with dark eyes that sparkled and hair that shone in the sun. Now her beauty was sharpened under the harshness of martyrdom.

Evenings were devoted to study and prayer. She would sit cross-legged in dim candlelight, reading from his texts, copying passages onto scraps of parchment she traded her food for in the village. Her handwriting grew more illegible as the days went on, but she seemed to take comfort in it, and thus wrote often.

“Knowledge preserves you,” she would say. “If these words are lost, who will remember your wisdom?”

Wisdom. Had he ever possessed true wisdom? Or merely the arrogance that alludes one to the idea of being wise? He could not remember dispensing great truths or profound insights.

His priests had spoken often of his might, his dominion over darkness. Not wisdom. Never wisdom.

Yet she believed. Believed he was wise and good and powerful still. Believed he was worthy of the sacrifices she made every day in his name.

She would finally sleep when exhaustion itself claimed her, often slumping over her writing or prayers, waking with stiff joints and blue feet. Still, each morning she rose just the same, and her days remained unchanged.

Seasons passed this way, years, a decade. The occasional passersby began to whisper of the “temple ghost.” Children dared each other to peer through the broken windows, hoping to catch a glimpse of the decrepit pale woman in blue who spoke to stones. Some kinder souls left offerings of bread or fruit at the bottom of the temple steps, not out of reverence for him, but out of pity for his lonely priestess.

Most of these offerings Isa would bring to his altar.

“See, my Lord? They remember, in their way. Your greatness still touches their hearts.”

It is not him they remember, it is her they pity. They see her wasting away in service to a god too weak to save even her, who loves him most. Sometimes, when winter was harshest or when illness took her in an unforgiving grasp, he would watch on as she ate the offerings herself, always with tears of shame painting her cheeks.

“Forgive me,” she would sob. “My body is weak, but my heart is yours eternally!”

He wanted to forgive her. Wanted to command her to eat, to rest, to leave this crumbling relic and find a life worth living. But gods could only speak in dreams, and she was too devoted to interpret his messages as anything but signs of good faith.

He had managed to appear in a dream once, revealing himself to her, asking her desperately to leave. She awoke in tears, a smile on her lips, believing he had blessed her with a vision.

“You came to me,” she had exclaimed to his indifferent statue, “You, in all your magnificence. Your voice was like thunder, your eyes like the stars!”

He had appeared to her as he was, barely more than a cloud of smoke from a dying fire. His voice was dry, his eyes dull. Yet she had seen glory, had heard power. Her faith transformed his weakness into strength, her love painted his faded visage as majesty.

There was love in Isa’s devotion, he realized. Not the distant love between worshipper and deity, but something deeper, more personal. She spoke to him easily, sharing small observations about her day, asking questions she did not expect him to answer. She would describe the movement of light through stained glass that had long since shattered, broken pieces long since swept away.

“The sunrise was a brilliant gold this morning,” Isa would tell him with a soft smile, “I wish you could have seen it. Maybe you did, from wherever you are. Nothing escapes your gaze, after all.”

Everything escaped his gaze. He could barely maintain awareness of this one temple, this one woman. The world outside was a blur, a distant fog beyond the limits of his fading sight.

It was this intimacy that sustained him, even as it drained her. Each shared moment was a tether holding him to his existence, preventing his slip into the oblivion that claimed gods when the last memory of them faded from the Earth.

He could hardly bear the price of such a gift. Her devotion never wavered, but her body betrayed her with increasing frequency. She would collapse while carrying water from the well,

lying unconscious for hours before dragging herself back to her feet, apologizing to him as though her weakness should offend him.

“Tomorrow, I will be stronger,” she promised, “Your divine presence gives me strength, though my body is weak.”

Spring came, and with it a brief resurgence of her strength. She ventured into the village for the first time in months, trading the last of her things for a new candle and some wildflowers.

“They asked if I was your daughter,” she smiled, voice light with playful laughter. “The old woman at the candlemaker’s shop told me about how once, when she was small, this temple was filled with people. She said her grandmother was healed here, by your gracious hand.”

He remembered those healings, remembered when travelers would come from miles around, bearing offerings and prayers, remembered how it had felt to touch someone with divine power, to mend what was broken, restore what was damaged. Now he could not even ease the suffering of the one person who still spoke his name.

That night, Isa slept more peacefully than she had in years, wrapped in the comfort of knowing that some memory of him still lingered in the world beyond her own devotion.

Of course, winter always returns.

He felt himself weakening alongside her. As her flesh struggled, so too did the power of her belief, not in fervor but in potency, in strength. He tried to reach her, to warn her. Summoned what little remained of his power to appear in another dream. The effort of it nearly destroyed him, scattering his consciousness like ashes in the wind.

When he returned to awareness days later, he found her weeping before his altar.

“Forgive me, my dearest lord,” she sobbed. “I have failed you so completely that you test me with visions of abandonment. I will never leave you! Never forsake you! Your temple is my home, you are my purpose. I promise you my love!”

On the longest night of the year, she knelt before his altar with a single candle, laying out her meager offerings. A sprig of evergreen, a piece of bread saved from her last trip to the village, a small carving whittled with desperate hands.

“Ten years I have served you,” she whispered. “Ten years since I found this place, since your name called to me in deepest sleep. They say you are forgotten, but how can that be when I remember you so completely? When I feel you in every breath, every heartbeat?”

As she spoke, her body began to finally succumb. She collapsed before his altar, candle toppling over and extinguishing against the stone floor.

In the sudden darkness, something shattered. Perhaps it was the universe taking pity, or perhaps the intensity of her faith channeling what little remained of his godly power. The barrier between worlds had thinned.

He knelt beside her trembling body, finally visible to her human eyes. He appeared as he truly was, an uneven form desperately holding itself together, edges blurred and fading, eyes dim where once they had shone brightly against the darkness.

“My Lord,” she gasped, her eyes filled with wonder despite the pain. “You have come to me at last.”

What she saw was not what he was. In her eyes, he appeared powerful, tall and regal, wrapped in a cloak of the night sky studded with stars, eyes gleaming with divine light.

“Why?” he asked, his voice tired, “Why sacrifice your life for a god who could give you nothing in return? Can you not see what I have become?”

“I see you as you truly are,” she smiled. “Magnificent... beautiful-”

“No,” he said, anguish twisting his faded features. “I am nothing but a memory. My power is gone, my name is forgotten.”

“You speak this way to test me,” she said softly, reaching upward to touch his face with her fingertips. “To see if my faith will waver in the face of your humility. But do not worry, my lord, my love. I will not forsake you. I have felt your presence every day. You are no less now than you ever were.”

He tried to show her the truth, to reveal the emptiness where the divinity she loved had once resided. But her perception, shaped by years of unshakable faith, transformed even this display of weakness into something holy.

“Your divine light,” she breathed in awe. “It pulses... like a heartbeat.”

“I cannot save you, Isa,” he admitted, cradling her head in hands barely holding their shape.

“My strength is gone.”

“I never asked to be saved,” she whispered. “Only to serve. Only to love.”

He held her as her breathing slowed, as the cold of the temple floor seeped into her warm flesh. In her eyes, he saw no fear, no pain, only contentment, peace. And reflected in them, for only a moment, he could see himself as she saw him, worthy of devotion.

“Thank you for this, the greatest love.”