

The Temple of Lost Gods

by **Tully McCombs** in **Submissions for grades 9-12**

Gresha's broom swept softly across the roughened floor, thin bristles scraping on the wood. Her grey hair tumbled in thin and tangled ringlets around her wan and narrow face, the veins on her hands stark against the wrinkled skin that clenched the handle of the broom. No light shone through the thick-paned glass windows, despite their immaculate state. Candles flickered throughout the room instead, placed in small puddles of old wax of many colors on every available surface. The only sound in the dusky hall was that of Gresha's bare feet thumping quietly against the ground as she walked. There came a deep voice all of a sudden, one that seemed to come from everywhere at once. "Old woman," it spoke in tones like a hollow stone. "Old woman, why do you still walk?" Gresha kept sweeping, pausing only for a moment. "No child has come to relieve me of my duty, Great One."

"You have cleaned the halls of this temple for 200 years, old woman. How do you still breathe?" This time there wasn't even the faintest of hesitation. "I am needed, Great One. I cannot leave until my duty is done."

"My understanding was that you mortals died after barely a hundred years at most. My fellows have left, the vast majority of those you serve gone with them."

"The others have left, aye, and your brothers and sisters with them. But it is to you that I pledged my life, and so to you it shall return."

The voice seemed to frown in confusion, despite having no visible face. "You are my last believer, old woman. All you would need to do to relieve yourself of your position is die, or forget. Fail to know of my existence, and I will no longer be a burden, old woman. Besides, you are nothing but sweeper. You are no monk, no priestess of my faith. You are not expected to follow true to your word when there is nothing left but ashes and dirt."

The old woman stopped and looked at the altar beside her, laden with dust and cobwebs. The altar itself was made of dark and shining wood, mostly covered by a faded cloth that once was emerald green. On it was a bowl of salt, a dried-out twig, an empty bowl, a feather, and a stick of old and shriveled incense. In the center was a small green statue of a naked man, leaves sprouting from his arms and limbs raised as if he were dancing.

"Yet, Great One, when only the ruins of something is left, are not the only survivors the kings and queens of their people, if only by elimination?"

Light never came to the hall anymore, and Gresha had started to run out of candles. The old woman spent them carelessly anyway, in reverence to those who had left, and those who had died. Yet one day, an intense sense of foreboding swept over her. It had happened at last. The cool wood of the last candle chest creaked against her fingers as she pulled it open. The old woman peered inside, a lantern in her hand. Her heart pounded in her chest with a dull ache. There was nothing there. Gresha

licked her lips nervously, bending down to rummage inside. Nothing. Wait—there was something there. A small bundle, wrapped in silk. Gresha picked it up with trembling hands, closing the lid of the chest and taking her lantern from the ground. She walked back to the hall in silence, sliding down a wall to sit cross-legged on the ground. Gresha slowly removed the cloth from the bundle, holding it gently. Inside- she froze. Inside the bundle were three tall, golden candles and one strange, alien construction: a mask, of supple leather, of a bird's face. The empty eyeholes bored into Gresha's forehead as if they were somehow alive, but no movement came. The old woman sat as still as stone. One by one, the candles guttered out, swallowed in their waxen blood. The old woman still sat cross-legged on the floor, silk bundle unfolded on her lap. At last, just as the single remaining candle began to go out, she stood, leaving the bundle on the floor. She took one candle from the cloth, lighting it quickly from the remains of the last. Gresha then sat back down, shaking. If there were enough light to see, and if anyone ever came to the temple of lost gods, then they might have seen the tears trickling down the deep lines of Gresha's weathered face to fall on the floor, and the silk, and the mask. Then again, they might not.

“Old woman, old woman, why do you weep?”

Gresha stiffened abruptly at the voice's question. She could sense no teasing or maliciousness in it, but perhaps the voice truly was just making fun of her. The old woman answered anyway. “The last of my lights will go out soon, Great One, and with it so must I.”

“Why is that, old woman? You have stayed here so long, neither eating nor drinking, cleaning my temple for hundreds of years. Why must you die with the light?”

There was only curiosity in that tone, and mild confusion.

“With the dark comes monsters, Great One. Do you not recall the night the others left? Even among your brothers and sisters, there were those that died. Dark brings nightmares, and nightmares kill.”

“There were no monsters, old woman. Only slumber and poisoned blades that night.”

“I weep also for the dreams of my childhood, dreams I hardly remember but that died in this hall.”

“Dreams, old woman? What need have you of dreams?” the voice sounded puzzled. “Dreams cannot kill you, or even let you live.”

The old woman sighed the sigh of an ancient tomb. “I am human, Great One. Humans dream.”

“Well—“the voice hesitated. “Tell me your dream then, that I might guide you through this fading of the light.”

Gresha gazed up at the windows, coated as they were in shadows like a word you can't take back. “I was a bird once,” she breathed at last, “and I flew on wings feathered with the rustling of music. But while I soared I was in the dark, forever and always lost there. One day as I wandered, I passed through a place and in that place was light, only for a few seconds. But then I flew on, as I had no choice, and glided out back into the black again.”

There was nothing, only a pause, as Gresha rested her head against the wall, fingertips tracing the leather mask.

“What are you holding, old woman?” came a question.

The woman opened her eyes, looking down at her hands. “It doesn’t matter anymore, not while the light is failing.”

“But what is it?”

Gresha gave a little chuckle. “It is a mask, Great One. I should not have touched it, just as I must not touch your altar. But I did anyway, for in that bundle was the last of the candles.”

There was silence once again.

At last, the voice spoke again. “Your dream.... You hold it very dear, do you not? Even now?”

“Even now.”

“You are my last believer. If you die when the lights go out, as you said, then so will I. I can be your silver bird, old woman. If you will ride my back as far as you wish, to all eternity and back again, I will be glad to carry you. And so when the lights do at last fade, I can carry you with me.”

“To wherever gods go when they die,” mused the old woman.

“To wherever heroes go.”

Tears welled up again in the woman’s eyes, but she made no move to wipe them away. Finally she answered. “You do not know my name. No magic can be worked on someone if you do not know their name.”

The god sighed. “Divine magic—can have exceptions. I will carry you for as long as you like, as long as you have left, if you would have me. Gresha.”

In an empty temple of long-dead gods, there is a hall covered in faded dust. Crumpled against the wall on one side, bones broken by a nightmare’s teeth, a strange smile on her face, is the withered corpse of an old woman. In her hands lie two candles on a square of silk, and a small pool of melted wax. On the altar on the other side of the hall, beside a bowl of salt and another of nothing, a stick of incense, a feather, and a dried-out twig rests a leather mask with silvered eyes and a bird’s face, crying.