

Stone and Light

Elias had given thirty years to building the cathedral — so far.

In the beginning they had called him young. Then promising. Then gifted. He had a marvelous talent for rendering figures in stone so that they seemed almost to breathe.

He arrived before dawn. He left after dusk. He carved saints whose faces caught the light in ways that made even the grizzled bishop fall silent. He carved angels whose eyes seemed to rest in blessing on all who gazed upon her, her arms opened wide in welcome and love.

Around his neck he wore a small bronze medallion — his family crest. He came from a long line of stone masons. His ancestors had worn it when they pledged themselves to the craft.

He had taken it off only once.

When she left him.

They had stood near the quarry road where the river could be heard but not seen. The spring thaw had swollen it; the sound ran thick beneath the earth.

“You can cut stone anywhere,” she had said. “I will not spend my life stuck in this town.”

He did not argue.

“You love stone more than me.”

After a long silence, he removed his medallion and placed it around her neck.

“I’ll have another made, just like this one,” he said. “We’ll be waiting for you.”

She left.

He never saw her again.

Elias returned to the scaffolds the next day. And the day after that.

Inwardly, a question tormented him:

Was she right? Had he chosen stone instead of her?

Years folded. The cathedral climbed.

He began a statue for the south portal — a woman holding a lamp, its flame sheltered in her palm.

He could not seem to get her face right.

It tightened too much. It hardened. The mouth drew thin, almost reproachful.

A messenger came from a town upriver. A former apprentice — now master sculptor on his own great work — needed Elias' help.

Elias packed a small bag and set out. He reached the old inn at dusk.

When he signed the ledger, the innkeeper's eyes fell on the medallion around his neck.

"There was a woman who stayed here some years ago," he said slowly. "She wore that very same crest."

Elias' breath caught.

"We got to talking. She was angry when she arrived. Spoke of a mason who would not leave his work."

Elias did not move.

"But before night fell, she changed her mind."

The innkeeper stirred the fire.

"She said she had gotten it wrong. That he was not stubborn, but faithful. And she wanted that faithfulness for herself, too."

A pause.

"She set out the next morning to return."

Another pause.

"The same morning the river took the bridge," the innkeeper said quietly. "Many were lost. Maybe she was one of them."

At the apprentice's project, the troubled vault loomed overhead.

From the ground, it seemed to sag slightly at the crown. The young master insisted the measures were exact.

"I'm sure they are," Elias said.

He climbed the scaffold and stepped onto a narrow gallery above the nave. From there, he saw it.

"It is not the arch."

He gestured for the apprentice to join him.

From that higher place, the fault revealed itself — a supporting rib set slightly out of line.

"The arch wasn't wrong," the apprentice said.

"No," Elias replied. "You were just standing in the wrong place to see it."

When he returned to his own cathedral, he went back to the south portal.

The woman with the lamp stood waiting, her mouth still holding that hint of severity he had wrestled with for weeks.

He stepped slightly to one side.

The face altered in the shifting shadow. The firmness remained; the harshness fell away.

He frowned — then, on impulse, turned the base a few degrees.

The light struck differently.

The mouth steadied. The eyes softened without yielding. The lamp seemed almost to glow in her sheltering palm.

There.

That was all it needed.

He paused a moment. He closed his hand around the medallion, thinking of her.

Then he moved on to the next stone.

— *William Zeitler*

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