

Incomplete

by A.J. Burton

The man held the small chisel steadily as he carefully struck it with his hammer, marking the finishing touches on his latest piece, the chisel removing the final flaws from the face of the carving. Setting the hammer and chisel aside with his other tools, the man reached for a small rag at his side and proceeded to wipe off the small wooden statue of any sawdust that clung to his creation, scrubbing until the statue seemed to radiate a soft light.

He set the washcloth upon the table, sat upon his stool and admired his latest work. The carving was that of a pregnant woman, her hands gently caressing her stomach, a warm smile gracing her lips as her eyes gazed at the promise of new life. For a moment, the carver thought she had turned her gaze upon him, gratitude etched upon her features. He studied her unmoving form, looking for some hint of motion. But she was unchanged, her gaze fixed upon the child.

Some things won't ever change, thought the carver, and he carried her from his workroom. After all, it was his sanctuary where he could work undisturbed, surrounded by his tools coated with sawdust.

The next room, a massive storage facility, contained an infinite amount of raw material, the remains of dozens of trees, each with multiple shades of color, size and shape, patiently waiting to be molded into a living form. The carver glanced at the statue's face as he made his way through the room, the familiar shape of her smile comforting to him. He had spent a great deal of time on her face, and despite his fear that he wouldn't be able to recreate Alice's face from memory, the statue's features were a perfect replica of her. He was pleased that he had done her face justice.

The observation room was the perfect location for the young mother. As the room's newest occupant she would, he thought, command all attention as a symbol of renewal and fertility. He looked around. There were others in this room that would continue to inspire attention in their own way.

One individual seemed to peer at him. He was one of the older inhabitants here, old enough that his mahogany skin had begun to darken further with age. He, unlike most of the others here, did not possess a proper name, but in the rare occasions that someone from outside came to visit, the title of Warrior was considered appropriate. This is not just because of the deadly weapon carried in his hands, a cruciform sword as sharp as the day it had been forged, nor the shield on his back that was emblazoned with the symbol of long disbanded order of chivalric knights, but the eternal vigilance he expressed by his steadfast stance. He had not actually been born here. He'd been discovered by the woodcarver, hidden away in an abandoned cathedral and was rescued from rotting away in some forgotten cellar, unknown and unmourned. The warrior was necessary in an out of control world, a world of betrayals and heartbreak. The warrior watched over all the other citizens in loyal service.

The soldier was not alone in his vigil, the woodcarver noted wryly, as the walls were covered in a plethora of masks. Some of the masks were pale and expressionless, their empty gaze forever searching for what could not be found. Others were actors, caught in the middle of their performance, their eyes bleeding happiness, sorrow, hatred, love, apathy, and empathy.

A select few of these watchers were, like the warrior, foreigners generations older than the rest of the occupants; faces that were tattooed and shaped in reverence to old gods and forgotten spirits, shamans to faded cultures and dead religions. The carver knew that they still whispered to any who would listen.

The carver looked at the young mother again. He thought about Alice for the first time in years—Alice and her familiar cinnamon scent that he would always detect in her hair. “Do you like it, Arthur?” she asked, Her warm, heart shaped smile caressing his soul.

They had married on a Sunday and spent three glorious years full of fights, reconciliation, and living together. She’d told him that she was pregnant, that last week together, for a moment all was bliss. Then there was the accident. She had walked away from the wreck healthy as can be, joking even, laughing at Arthur for his fussing when she had only a light bump on her head. She’d died suddenly a few hours later, her heart still beating but her mind was gone. The doctor had said it was an example of “talk and die” syndrome, where the subject is talking and otherwise fine, but the brain is degenerating rapidly. She’d been dying and he hadn’t done anything...couldn’t have done anything.

He closed his eyes for a moment, unsuccessfully willing the tears to fade. He looked back at the young mother, warm tears running down his face, images of what should have been scarring his eyes. The statues looked down at him, quiet and respectful, thinking no less of him. After a silent moment of sorrow, Arthur rose; doing his best to look dignified and looked at his world, the one place where everything went as it should.

Arthur yawned suddenly, the effort he had spent in creating the young mother over the past week finally catching up to him. He stood and paused, his hand grasping her shoulder, feeling not the cold smoothness of the wood, but the warm softness of the dearest of hearts.

The Warrior seemed to make a motion to Arthur as he held her, making the old wood carver to realize something. He carefully moved the young mother closer to the Warrior, close enough that they eclipsed one another. For moment he gazed at them for a moment, a plethora of emotions flowing over his face until acceptance came. He turned away, knowing that the Warrior would protect her without failure, whilst Arthur, in time, would certainly fail.

He made his way to the exit, nodding absently at any of the room’s denizens who sought his eyes in greeting. He reached the exit, and turned off the light. At the door, Arthur turned back for a final glimpse at his creations, their silhouettes dancing about in the dying light. Then he grasped the doorknob with care, and quietly, so as not to disturb them, shut the door. Arthur

paused, winced, and reopened the door, flashing an apologetic look to a few indignant stares as he flicked the light switch back on. He understood, of course. No one likes to be left in the dark.