

(This is pretty long.)

The sound of the chisel echoed in the empty workshop, a rhythmic pulse that had become the very beat of my heart. The cold marble resisted beneath my hands, but slowly, inexorably, I was coaxing life from its blank face. Or so I told myself. But no matter how carefully I chipped away, no matter how painstakingly I sculpted each curve, each line, it still felt hollow.

It would always feel hollow.

He would never look back at me, not truly, not from these cold, dead eyes.

Marble is a beautiful material, truly beautiful enough to bring anything to life. But not him.

My prince. His name alone was enough to send a tremor through me, enough to fill my chest with that agonizing, burning ache that had become my constant companion. His presence was so resplendent that it felt as if the gods had carved him themselves, shaping him with their hands from the very essence of beauty.

I had seen him only once—just once—and it had been enough to unravel the very fabric of my existence. He was a living sculpture of divine perfection. He hadn't seen me. Why would he? I was just a shadow in the crowd, another face among the throng of commoners who gasped and strained for a glimpse of their prince. I was none more than commonfolk to him, but to me he was everything I worshipped.

But I had seen him. I could not avert my eyes. I stayed hidden in the shadows, peering out from behind the columns. Watching. Waiting. And when he passed, something in me had shattered into tiny fragments. I couldn't pick them up, I could not see all the microscopic shards, I was broken.

No. Not broken— changed.

From that moment, he consumed me.

His beauty was unbearable. It wasn't the kind of beauty that made one weak in the knees, though there was that, too. No, it was the kind of beauty that demanded to be preserved, to be studied, to be worshipped. There was something sacred about it, something untouchable. His face was a contradiction—soft yet sharp, delicate yet fierce.

I had spent every moment since that fleeting glimpse trying to understand it, trying to recreate it in stone, and yet, no matter how perfectly I rendered his features, it was never enough.

The marble was cool beneath my fingers, but my hands were burning, shaking as I worked. How long had it been? Days? Weeks? Time no longer meant anything. There was only him, only the image of his face that had seared itself into my mind, a haunting vision that lingered in my waking hours and twisted my dreams into torment. Turning everyone and everything else in my life to a blur, he devoured every inch of my mind and soul.

And now here I am in this dimly lit workshop, laboring over a block of marble that would never come close to the reality of his beauty. My hands trembled as I worked, not with fatigue, but with the weight of the longing that had settled into my bones. I carved each detail with a reverence that bordered on madness, shaping the gentle slope of his nose, the proud line of his jaw, the soft curve of his lips.

God, his lips.

I hovered over them now, my chisel poised, breath caught in my throat. How many hours had I spent carving and smoothing those lips? How many sleepless nights had I spent obsessing over their shape, the way they must move when he spoke, the way they must part when he smiled? I had never heard him speak, never seen him smile, but in my mind, I had imagined it a thousand times.

And that was the cruelty of it, wasn't it? The cruelty of knowing that I could never come close enough to hear that voice, never close enough to see that smile. I was nothing. A sculptor. A commoner. I existed in the dust of the earth, and he—he was something divine, something too perfect, too far above me to ever notice my existence.

But I noticed him. I noticed everything.

The chisel clattered to the ground as I stumbled back from the statue, my chest tight with the agony of it all. I could still feel him watching me, even though I knew it wasn't real—just stone, cold and lifeless. But it didn't matter. His eyes were always on me, no matter where I went. I turned away, but there was no escape from that cold, unblinking stare of the marble eyes I had carved. No matter where I stood in this cursed room, I could feel it—watching, judging, waiting. Everywhere I went, he was there—perfect and unreachable, a distant star I could never touch but couldn't help but follow. Even when I closed my eyes, his face still haunted me, perfect and untouchable, like some divine being sent to torment me. His beauty was like the sun—blinding, unbearable to behold for too long, and yet here I was, trying to capture it, trying to own it.

I pressed my palms to my temples, trying to steady myself, but the desperation only grew, clawing its way up from the pit of my stomach, tearing through my ribs until it lodged itself in my throat. It was suffocating me, this need to be close to him, this need to understand him. It was a hunger that gnawed at my insides, relentless, insatiable.

I wanted him.

Not just the image of him, not just the beautiful, unreachable prince that I had built up in my mind—I wanted the man. The living, breathing man. The one who laughed, who cried, who bled like anyone else. The soul behind those dark, unfathomable eyes. I wanted to see him up close, to touch him, to know him in ways that no one else could. And yet, even as the thought crossed my mind, shame crashed over me like a wave.

How could I even think that?

What right did I have to dream of feeling something so pure, so perfect? To touch him—truly touch him—would be a sacrilege. I was filth, nothing more than a pair of hands covered in dust and sweat, hands that had no right to sully something divine.

But god, I wanted to.

I wanted to reach out, to trace the lines of his face, to feel the smoothness of his skin beneath my fingers, to know if he felt as warm as I had imagined. But I couldn't. I couldn't taint him. I was terrified that if I touched him, if I allowed myself to get too close, I would destroy everything.

God, what was wrong with me?

I stepped back from the statue, my breath catching in my throat. The prince's likeness had been coaxed from the cold, unyielding marble, each line, each feature so painstakingly accurate it felt as though I had summoned him here, into this dark and silent space, to torment me further.

But as I stared at it, the statue stared back at me, its empty eyes mocking me, reminding me of everything I could never have. I had given it everything I had—my skill, my passion, my soul—and yet, it wasn't enough. I could never capture the essence of him . Not the real him. Not the man who haunted my every waking moment.

It wasn't enough.

It would never be enough.

I could feel the madness creeping in again, that desperate hunger gnawing at me, urging me closer. My fingers hovered over the statue's face, over the delicate curve of his lips. I wanted to

touch him, to feel the smoothness of the stone beneath my fingers, to trace the lines of the prince's beauty with the same tenderness as one might caress a lover.

But I couldn't.

I wouldn't.

I wasn't worthy. How could I ever hope to lay my hands on something so pure, so perfect? The thought of it made my stomach twist with a mixture of desire and disgust. To touch him would be to ruin him. And yet, the more I denied myself, the more I felt the pull.

I wanted to scream. I wanted to break the statue, to shatter it into pieces, but I couldn't. I couldn't destroy the only thing I had of him, even if it was a lie, even if it would never be enough. I couldn't let him go.

I stepped forward again, my hand trembling as I reached for the statue's face. This time, I didn't stop myself. My fingers brushed the cool marble, tracing the lines I had carved with such care. His lips. His jaw. His brow. I knew them all. I had memorized every detail, every angle. And yet, it felt like nothing.

It was just stone.

Lifeless. Hollow. Empty.

It wasn't him.

It would never be him.

And that—more than anything—was what finally broke me.

I closed my eyes, swallowing the knot of grief that had lodged itself in my throat. It wasn't the statue I wanted. It wasn't even the beauty I had tried so desperately to capture.

It was him.

I wanted the warmth of his skin, the sound of his voice. I wanted to see the flicker of life in his eyes, to hear him breathe, to feel the pulse beneath his skin. But even if he were standing in front of me, even if I could reach out and touch him, I knew I never would. I would never dare.

Because the truth was, I was terrified. Terrified that if I got too close, I would see the flaws, the cracks in the perfection. Terrified that if I touched him, I would ruin him. And maybe that was the cruelest irony of all.

Because in the end, it wasn't the prince who was untouchable.

It was me.

THE TEMPEST