

Caryatid

I still remember how I danced with my sisters, grasping hand in hand, the fresh spring breeze whistling past our braids, blood still running through our veins, our eyes still lit with hope. Carefree footfalls on morning grass, the melodic harmonies of our laughter superior even to that of Apollo himself. A bite of the sweetest fruit I could ever have imagined, plucked straight from the bushes. Petals decorating our heads; oddly reminiscent of the victims of Karyai's rituals. I always felt a certain kinship looking into the soulful eyes of that gilded ox.

Karyai was a good home, all things considered, but we preferred to run; free of our daily cares, free of the endless incessancy of the local men, free of them all. And after we ran, we danced; a celebration of freedom, a testament to hope. I am still convinced that our revelry could even be heard by torch-bearing Artemis, the divine huntress.

We danced until Helios had finished his daily circuit, but still our dancing did not cease- we were only encouraged by the tranquil light of the moon.

A branch snapped in the undergrowth. Stygian clouds began to form overhead, concealing the moon's sympathetic glow. A voice, male.

"They're here!"

The frenzied panic set in.

We hitched up our *peploi* and ran. What else could we do? We knew what would happen if they caught us like this. We had been warned. A warning passed down through generations of women; yet we had no choice but to ignore it.

Daring to glance back at our hunters, I knew exactly what they wanted from us. Our mothers knew it too, but we were too stubborn and naïve to be led by anything other than our own desires.

I fled through the forest that had once been our sanctum, silently pleading with holy Artemis to take pity on me and turn me before they could have the chance. I knew this was a futile prayer; if she could save me, why not the countless others before me? Did we all deserve the same fate in her eyes?

"Every girl must have a husband, *korē*," my mother often told me. "That is just the way of the world."

"Well, not my world." I would reply, on the rare occasion that I was brave enough to do so. "In my world, I will never marry, and instead I will dedicate my time to my poems. I will teach the other girls in the village, and none of us will ever marry, and we shall dance and sing and invoke the Muses all year long." My mother admired my youthful ambition, chuckled, and shook her head. Of course, I recognise now that she was simply trying to save me from the fatal trap of optimism that had befallen so many women before us.

The world rushed past under my feet as I ran, past the trees that had once protected me, past the temples I had once worshipped at so devoutly (but what did it matter?), and past the lakes my sisters and I had once so blissfully swum in. Somehow, these things meant everything and nothing to me now.

At last, I fall, too exhausted to escape the inevitable any longer. I know that this is the last time I will ever feel the grass beneath my touch, so I savour it as much as I can as I lie, defeated. I don't know where I am, who I am, or even what I am any more. Just that it is all ending. The sole man who is still pursuing me, with the aged face of war, is rejoicing at having caught a bride at last. The happiest day of his life. Good for him.

He stands over me, grinning at his prize. I search desperately around me for some sort of saviour, but to no avail. My sisters have all but been erased, almost as though they had never even existed at all.

But I'll know. They can take a lot of things, but they can't take the past. History shall still exist, independent of whether we humans remember it or not.

The man extends his arm, as if to help me up. Left with no other discernible option, I take it, exhaling shakily. My hand meets his, and in an instant mine starts to harden, my once-soft skin turning into marble right before my eyes. The condition spreads swiftly from my arms to my torso, like some fatal disease. I manage to look down slowly at my feet, then up to the apathetic eyes of my captor; horrified, yet rendered utterly incapable of expressing so. I open my mouth to protest- but a girl cannot speak with lips of marble.

Inexplicably dissatisfied with his new trophy, my captor spends the next several weeks devoted to his chisel. He carves my body with an expression of deep concentration, then occasionally steps back with an air of self-satisfaction about him. I long to say something, anything, to resist this, but I am unable. As I find my thoughts getting more and more indistinguishable, I realise that he has gouged away at that part of me that allows me to think for myself. He has chipped away at my very essence, and in doing so has destroyed me.

"I love you," he whispers reverently, caressing my stone cheeks, but I know it isn't true. After all, it can't be true. How can you love someone without even knowing their name?

Now, I stand proudly alongside my sisters once more, but we are no longer carefree and young. Our wearied spirits have long since been relegated to our prisons of beauty. Every day is an endless parade of gawking strangers, admiring our form, our bodies; praising the ingenious sculptor who could create such a masterpiece. But how can they be blamed? They cannot possibly understand the nuances of our emotions, our memories, our minds- he made sure of that. These things have all been locked away in a marble jail, never to be thought of again; that is the curse of the Caryatid.

And so here I am, and here I will always stay. Doomed to forever support the structures of men, sentenced to being the object of curious onlookers' delight for all eternity.

Imprisoned for the crime of girlhood.

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