

## Eurydice's Revenge

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The Underworld is surprisingly full of life. Where she had expected to see cold, empty stone, the walls of the tunnel foster soft mosses and luminescent mushrooms. A few scraggly flowers peek out of the cracks in the stone and butterflies flit down to drink their sweet nectar.

She holds out a hand for the butterflies to land on, but they pass right through her not-quite-there fingers. It hurts, she thinks dimly, the brush of living against not. She wonders if that's why he doesn't touch her, doesn't reach back and take her hand to reassure himself that she is still following, though he clearly wants to. Is it because he knows it will hurt her?

She doesn't know his name (she doesn't know hers either; down here, they are all nameless) but she knows that she knows him, knows that she loves him and that he loves her. He promised to take her home back in that throne room in front of those two beings. Together, the beings had felt like these tunnels – one of lifeless stone and silent footfalls and the other of moss and butterflies and growing things.

Ahead of her, he plucks anxiously at his lyre. The strings hum an achingly familiar note, dripping with longing and softened only by the life on the walls. His music was what got him down here, he'd said, and it would get them out. He only has to lead her there.

The color of the walls brightens from ebony to smoke and continues to grow brighter as they walk, one set of footsteps echoing around them. If her footsteps made noise, she thinks they'd be uneven. Her foot hurts with every step and she might be limping. The pain of the snake bite fades, though, as light washes down the tunnel.

The light flashes. She blinks to clear her vision and as her eyes adjust, she makes out the outline of the mouth of the tunnel. He picks up his pace and she follows, eager to let the light wash over living skin. They're close, so close she can practically taste it.

His steps falter at the mouth of the tunnel. She tenses. If he turns around, she'll have to go back to that place in the dark, nameless and faceless with a constant ache in her foot until the end of time. She doesn't want to go back. She wants to be alive again. She wants to remember who he is. She wants to remember who *she* is. "*Please keep going,*" she whispers, but the words fall soundless off her tongue.

He hesitates, then takes the three long strides it takes to leave the tunnel.

The sunlight hits her skin, and she stumbles forward, flooded with life and memories.

"Orpheus,"

He whips around and catches her, his lyre falling to the ground. "Eurydice," he smiles, eyes shining. "You did it,"

"*You did it,*" she whispers back, reaching up to cup his face and wipe away the tears on his cheeks. "You brought me back,"

"I brought you back," he laughs wetly and wraps his arms around her waist. He lifts her and spins and she shrieks with joy. The wind throws her hair around her face and when she lands, she is solid and her feet are painless. She touches her forehead to his and laughs, relishing the sound of their voices, the painless contact now that life brushes life.

"How did you do it?"

"I sang," he breathes, stirring the hair that falls across her forehead. "I sang until Hades cried and held Persephone close. I sang until he let you go, my beloved, my muse," A tear lands on Eurydice's face.

Eurydice presses a kiss to his forehead. "You sing so sweetly, my dove, how could he say no?"

"*He should have said no,*" an angry voice booms. It echoes above and around them, seeming to come from everywhere and nowhere all at once. Thunder crashes and the wind springs to life, tearing clouds across the sky to circle menacingly overhead. "*My brother should know better than to allow mortals to leave the land of the dead.*" Rain pours from the clouds, pummeling their exposed skin. Eurydice clings to Orpheus. They stand rooted in place, trembling. She scans the sky wildly, searching for the source of the voice. "*This cannot stand.*"

The sky explodes, throwing Eurydice through the air. Thunder cracks. Her ears ring; all she can hear is the blood pounding through her veins. She struggles up on shaking limbs and blinks, trying to reorient herself through the white spots dancing in her vision.

A limp figure slumps in a circle of black grass. A lyre gleams at its feet.

"No!" She screams, scrambling to Orpheus. His hair smolders gently and he lies still – so, so still – not a breath escaping his lips. "No, my dove, my life, no-"

She looks up. The clouds disperse but a tall man materializes over her. He looks down at Orpheus' body with disdain. He nudges it with a toe. It doesn't respond.

"*Why?*" She growls at him. Fury boils in her gut and her reason for living is limp in her arms so she doesn't care that she's snapping at a god. She doesn't care that he could smite her without lifting a finger. She doesn't care. "Why him and not me?"

Zeus crouches down and she doesn't like what she sees in his eyes. He looks hungry and everything in his stance is predatory. She shrinks back, pulling Orpheus closer.

"Because," he says, voice honeyed, "It would be a shame to waste such beauty." His hand brushes her cheek and she yanks her face away.

"Stop."

He reaches for her again. "Don't be difficult," he croons.

"I am his," she spits, shielding herself with Orpheus' body.

"No," Zeus snaps, lightning flickering in his cloudlike beard. His hand darts forward to grab her chin. He tilts her head up to expose her face. "You are *mine*. I spared you, you should be-"

A flash of brown-and-white slams into Zeus' face. It pecks at his eyes and nose and tongue while he shouts and swats at it. Lightning crackles in his beard and Eurydice smells singed feathers. Zeus retreats and is gone in a flash of lightning.

A nightingale flits away from where Zeus had just been and perches on Orpheus' lyre. It cocks its head at Orpheus and whistles sadly.

Eurydice blinks at her unlikely hero and turns to look back in the direction it came from. Faces disappear between the trees, and she sends a silent thanks to the nymphs. She reaches out to the nightingale. It hops onto her hand with a soft chirp. She moves it up so it can perch on her shoulder.

The bird looks around, warbles sharply, and flits away before she can stop it. Left alone, she clutches Orpheus' hand in both of hers. It's so cold already. The fingers lay stiff, so unlike their agile counterparts that played the lyre so sweetly.

The weight on her shoulder alerts her to the nightingale's return. A coin gleams in its beak. She holds her hand out and the bird presses the coin into her palm.

She gently slips the coin under Orpheus' tongue. She can't get him back; she knows that. Hades gave them one chance and Zeus stole it from them. She can only hope she'll meet him in Elysium.

She takes the lyre when she leaves. It's the only part of him that she can keep. She plucks a few notes and the nightingale warbles in response. The notes are clear and sharp but not quite a melody yet. What was it that Orpheus had tried to teach her? Her fingers dance over the strings, music flowing from her soul. It's not his music – she couldn't play that if she tried – but it's hers and it washes over her like a memory.

She stops, tears spilling over her lashes. She grits her teeth and glares at the sky. She is going to avenge Orpheus.

She's going to do it or she's going to die trying.

She travels. She plans. She plans her revenge on Zeus and she plans her life after it. She's going to have to wait a long time after she defeats Zeus before she can join Orpheus. She'll live in the country, she thinks as her fingers dance over the strings. A small home with a garden. She'll plant flowers in the spring and clear the dead plants in the fall.

She hums an old song that Orpheus used to sing. It's been months since he died but it still hurts. Sometimes she dreams that she's dancing with him in the fields as he sings to her, kisses her, loves her, and then she wakes up with the phantom of his arms around her waist and his lips on hers, a melody floating in the back of her mind, just out of reach. She cries on those nights, her wounds freshly reopened, reminding her of everything she lost. She's angrier those nights, too, and it builds. She bottles it, saving it for Zeus. He will feel her wrath just as soon as she's finished planning her revenge. Her plan has to be flawless; she refuses to fail.

The nightingale may have made her grief easier to handle; she didn't have to deal with it alone. The bird chirps, pecking at some seeds in the grass. She smiles at it, grateful for its presence in her life. She hums and it warbles back.

“Is it a good companion?”

Eurydice startles at the unfamiliar voice and whips around to face the source. A young man with warm, dark skin picks his way through the grass to sit next to her. She regards him warily, but he just sits back to watch the clouds.

“Who are you?” She asks.

“Your path as you have set it will destroy you.”

“What?” Her heart leaps to her throat. She clutches the lyre closer to her and the nightingale hops onto her shoulder.

The stranger turns his golden eyes to her, and they are brighter than the sun. It almost hurts to look at them for too long. “You cannot defeat a god. Many, many mortals have tried, and all of them have fallen.”

“You can’t stop me,” She grits her teeth and glares at him.

“I’m not trying to,” the stranger says, leaning back again. He stares at the clouds with an oddly wistful expression. Eurydice settles, finally sure that he isn’t a threat. Still, she watches him out of the corner of her eye. She’s curious. He radiates the same longing that sits in her heart, occupying the place Orpheus used to reside. The stranger looks at her again with that familiar weight. “My son loved you so much. From what I’ve heard, he’s waiting for you very patiently.”

Eurydice chokes back a sob. Her throat burns with tears. “How do you *know*?”

He smiles sadly. “Hades is kinder than you’d think.”

He holds her eyes with his powerful gaze. “You cannot defeat Zeus physically, but there are other ways to take revenge on a god. Make him feel your pain. Remind him that even gods love as strongly as mortals do.”

He holds her gaze for another breathless moment, then heaves a sigh heavy with millennia of grief and gets to his feet.

Eurydice watches Apollo leave and turns his words over. A new plan starts to form.

Eurydice marches up the mountain, lyre in hand and bird on her shoulder. She has spent months preparing, practicing, perfecting. When she is done with him, Zeus will know the grief of one who has lost their lover.

Gods whisper as she passes through the tall doors of Olympus but make no move to stop her, even as she throws open the doors to the throne room. Zeus startles, and when he sees her in the doorway he narrows his eyes. “You.”

The nightingale ruffles its feathers and whistles a low warning. Hera leans forward in her throne, looking between her and Zeus with a quickly darkening expression. Eurydice ignores her.

“You took him from me.”

Zeus' expression is stony and lightning crackles in his beard. "Hades should not have let mortals leave his realm."

"That is *not* your call to make!" Hades materializes in the room. Even she can feel the fury rolling off his shoulders. "The Underworld is *my* domain. You didn't want it. You have *no right* to dictate what happens there!"

"*And,*" Eurydice plucks a note on her lyre. "You left *me* alive. That was your biggest mistake."

With the gods' attention back on her, she throws herself into the song. *Make him feel your pain,* Apollo had said. She has a lot of pain for him to feel.

She sings of Orpheus. Of loving him, of leaving him, of losing him. She sings of cold nights and lonely days, of a heart missing its match. She sings of a long walk behind him, of a long walk without him. She pours the aching of her soul into the strings, the song, her voice. She sings through tears and pain. She sings as she imagines Orpheus did when he begged Hades to let her go.

She sings of Orpheus.

She sings of being alone.

The final note echoes in the silent chamber. She looks around at the gods. At some point during the song, Apollo had slipped into the room. He offers her a watery smile.

Hades reflects her heartbreak with empathy that she'd never expected from the god of the dead.

Hera weeps silently, her hands clasped in her lap and her eyes cast away from her husband.

Zeus gapes at her, tears running freely down his face. His breaths hitch as his eyes flicker wildly from god to god. Apollo and Hades lift their heads and move to stand on either side of Eurydice. The nightingale whistles its soft support.

Zeus' searching gaze finally lands on Hera and he melts. He grasps her hand and bows his head over it, whispering hoarse apologies between sobs. Hera shudders, closing her eyes against tears, but she doesn't pull away.

Eurydice sees this, the pain she's inflicted on the gods, and turns. She's done what she came for. It's done nothing to satiate her ache for Orpheus, but there's a twisted satisfaction to knowing that the cause of her pain feels it too.

Hades catches her as she leaves. "He's waiting for you, but he wants you to take your time."

She smiles at him weakly and nods, not trusting the emotion pressing against her voice. "Thank you," she manages, and walks out of Olympus. The gods continue to weep.

She has nothing left to do but fulfill her earlier plan of moving to a small cottage in the countryside. The nightingale remains her constant companion as she maintains her garden. She plants flowers in the spring and cuts back the dead plants in the fall.

She goes into the nearby city to pray at the gods' temples, but she offers sacrifices to Hades and Apollo privately. Hades' altar nestles snugly in the shaded corner of her garden, surrounded by candles and precious metals. Apollo's sits on the opposite side of the garden where the sun warms the garden wall and the honey and wine she leaves for him can bask in the glow.

She lives her life. She takes her time. And when she steps out of Charon's boat, he was indeed waiting for her with outstretched arms to fold her into his warmth.

"Eurydice, my love."

She falls into him, and for the first time in years she is complete.