



# Orpheus

In the country of Thrace, surrounded by all the best gifts of the gods, Orpheus was born. His father was Apollo, the god of music and song, his mother the muse Calliope. Apollo gave his little son a lyre, and himself taught him how to play it. It was not long before all the wild things in the woods of Thrace crept out from the green trees and thick undergrowth, and from the holes and caves in the rocks, to listen to the music that the child's fingers made. The coo of the dove to his mate, the flute-clear trill of the blackbird, the song of the lark, the liquid carol of the nightingale – all ceased when the boy made music.

The proudest trees of the forest bowed their heads that they might not miss one exquisite sigh that his fingers drew from the magical strings. Neither man nor beast lived in his day that could not be swayed by the power of his melody. He played a lullaby, and all things slept. He played a happy tune, and the flowers sprang up in full bloom from the cold earth, and the dreaming red rosebud opened wide her velvet petals, and all the land seemed full of the lively echoes of the lilt he played. He played a war-march, and, afar off, the sleeping tyrants of the forest sprang up, wide awake, and bared their angry teeth, and the untried youths of Thrace ran to beg their fathers to let them

taste battle, while the scarred warriors felt on their thumbs the sharpness of their sword blades and smiled, well content. When he played, it seemed as though the very stones and rocks gained hearts. Nay, the whole heart of the universe became one great, palpitating, beautiful thing, an instrument from whose trembling strings was drawn out the music of Orpheus.

He rose to great power and became a mighty prince of Thrace. Not his lyre alone, but he himself also played on the heart of the fair Eurydice and held it captive. It seemed as though, when they became man and wife, all happiness would be theirs. But the omens on that day were against them. Soon after their nuptials, as Eurydice wandered through the blue-shadowed woods of Thrace, a bold god named Aristaeus saw the lovely Eurydice and ran after her, planning to force her into his home. She, afraid of his wild uncouthness, fled. She ran, in her terror, too swiftly to watch her step, and a poisonous snake that lurked amongst the fern bit the fair white foot that flitted, like a butterfly, across it. In agonized suffering, Eurydice died alone in the field, and Aristaeus fled when he saw the snake attack. Eurydice's spirit fled to the Underworld and Orpheus, who was the one to discover his wife's lifeless body, was inconsolable in his grief.

The sad winds that blow at night across the sea, the sobbing gales that tell of wreck and death, the birds that wail in the darkness for their mates, and the whisper of the leaves of the heavy clad blue-black cypresses, all now were hushed; for greater than all, more full of bitter sorrow than any, arose the music of Orpheus, a long-drawn sob from the broken man.

Grief came alike to gods and to men as they listened, but no comfort came to him from the expression of his sorrow. At length, when to bear his grief anymore seemed impossible, Orpheus wandered to Olympus, and there sought Zeus, requesting permission to seek his wife in the gloomy land of the shades. Zeus, moved by the singer's anguish and his song that celebrated Zeus' defeat over the Titans, granted permission for Orpheus to take the journey to the Underworld, but solemnly warned him of the terrible perils of his undertaking.

But Orpheus' determination was too intense to know any fear; thankfully, he hastened to the darkest of caves and soon arrived at the entrance of Hades. Stark and grim was the three-headed watchdog, Cerberus, which

guarded the door, and with the growls and the furious roaring of a wild beast athirst for its prey, the monster greeted Orpheus. But Orpheus touched his lyre, and the brute, amazed, sank into silence. As he played on, and the dog gently licked the singer's feet, and looked up in his face with its savage eyes full of the light that we see in the eyes of the dogs of this earth as they gaze with love at their masters. On, then, strode Orpheus, playing still, and the melody he drew from his lyre passed before him into the realms of shadow.

Surely never were heard such strains. They told of perfect, tender love, of unending longing, of pain too great to end with death. Into the blackest depths of Hades, the sounds sped on their way, and the hands of Time stood still. From his bitter task of trying to quaff the stream that ever receded from his parched and burning lips, Tantalus ceased for a moment. The endless course of Ixion's wheel was stayed, Sisyphus gave up his weary task of rolling the boulder and sat on the rock to listen, and the Danaides set down their sieves as they paused in their futile task of scooping water. All of the restless shades that came and went in the darkness, like dead autumn leaves driven by a winter gale, stood still to gaze and listen.

Before the throne where Hades and his queen Persephone were seated, sable-clad and stern, Orpheus still played on. And to Persephone then came the living remembrance of all the joys of her girlhood by the blue Aegean Sea in the fair island of Sicily. Again she knew the fragrance and the beauty of the flowers of spring. The scent of the violets seemed to fill the air, and fresh in her heart was the sorrow that had been hers on the day on which the ruthless King of Darkness tore her from her mother and from all that she held most dear. Silently, she sat beside her frowning, stern-faced lord, but her eyes grew moist.

When, with a quivering sigh, the music stopped, Orpheus fearlessly pled his case. Let him have Eurydice, give him back more than his life, grant that he

might lead her with him up to the light of man – that was his prayer.

Hades glanced at his wife and knew the accord must be given. Eurydice would be returned to Orpheus, but only on one condition. Not until he had reached the light of earth again was he to turn round and look upon her face. Eagerly, Orpheus agreed and, with a heart almost breaking with gladness, he heard the call for Eurydice and turned to retrace his way, with the light footfall of the little feet that he adored making music behind him. Too good a thing it seemed – too unbelievable a joy. She was there – quite close to him. Their days of happiness were not ended. His love had won her back, even from this dismal land of darkness. All that he had not told her of his love while she was on earth he would tell her now. All that he had failed in before, he would make perfect now. The little limping foot – how it made his soul overflow with adoring tenderness. So near she was, he might even touch her were he to stretch back his hand...

But then there came to him a hideous doubt. What if Hades had played him false? What if there followed him not Eurydice, but a mocking shade? As he climbed the steep ascent that led upwards to the light, his fear grew more cruelly real. He thought he heard her footsteps stop, and he feared that when he reached the light he would find himself left once more to his cruel loneliness. Too overwhelming for him was the doubt. So nearly to the top they were that the darkness was no longer that of night, but as that of evening when the long shadows fall upon the land, and there seemed no reason for Orpheus to wait any longer.

Swiftly, he turned and found his wife behind him, but she stood there only for a moment. Her arms were thrown open and Orpheus reached to grasp her, but before they could touch Eurydice was pulled away from him, back into the darkness.

"Orpheus, no! Oh, farewell," she said. "F-a-r-e-w-e-l-l..." and her voice was a sigh of hopeless grief. In mad desperation, Orpheus sought to follow her, but his attempt was in vain. At the brink of the dark, fierce-flooded Styx, the boat with its boatman, old Charon, lay ready to ferry across to the further shore those whose future lay in the land of shades. Orpheus ran to him,



begging to be allowed passage. But Charon angrily rebuffed him – there was no place for Orpheus in his ferryboat; only those who went, never to return, could find a passage there. For seven long days and seven longer nights, Orpheus waited beside the river, hoping that Charon would relent, but at last hope died and he returned to the forests of Thrace, where trees and rocks and beasts and birds were his only friends.

Day and night he stayed in the shadow of the woodlands, all the sorrow of his heart expressing itself in the song of his lyre. The fiercest beasts of the forest crawled to his feet and looked up at him with eyes full of pity. The song of the birds ceased, and when the wind moaned through the trees they echoed his cry, “Eurydice! Eurydice!”

In the dawning hours, it would seem to him that he saw her again, flitting, a thing of mist and rising sun across the dimness of the woods. And when evening came and all things rested, and the night called out the mystery of the forest, again he would see her. In the long blue shadows of the trees, she would stand. Up the woodland paths, she would walk and her little feet seemed to flutter the dry leaves as she passed. Her face was white as a lily in the moonlight, and ever she held out her arms to Orpheus. The poet was tortured in those woods, imaging the wife he could never behold.

For Orpheus, it was a good day when Jason, chief of the Argonauts, sought him out and bid him come to aid in the quest of the Golden Fleece.

“I have had enough of toil and of weary wandering far and wide,” sighed Orpheus. “In vain is the skill of the voice which my goddess mother gave me; in vain have I sung and labored; in vain I went down to the dead and charmed even Hades to win back Eurydice, my bride. The fault of her double-loss is entirely mine.” Ultimately, though, he agreed to join Jason with the secret hope that he could die honorably on the battlefield and earn his way to the Underworld.

In the good ship, Orpheus took his place with the others and sailed the watery ways, and the songs that Orpheus sang to his shipmates and that tell of all their great adventures are called the Songs of Orpheus, or the Orphics, to this day.

Many were the mishaps and disasters that his music warded off. With it,

he lulled monsters to sleep; his melodies worked more magic on the hearts of men than the songs of the Sirens when they tried and failed to use their honey-coated voices to lure the Argonauts to their deaths.

When the quest of the Argonauts was over, Orpheus returned to his own land of Thrace. As a hero, he had fought and endured hardship, but his wounded soul remained unhealed. Again the trees listened to his songs of longing. Again they echoed, “Eurydice! Eurydice!”

As he sat one day near a river in the forest, there came from afar an ugly clamor of sound. It clashed against the music of Orpheus’ lyre and buried his sound, as the coarse cries of the screaming gulls that fight for carrion silence the song of a soaring lark. It was the day of the feast of Dionysus, and through the woods poured the god and his drunken followers. Long had these louts hated the loyal poet-lover and his neverending sorrow over one fair woman who now dwelled with the shades. Orpheus tried to ignore the obnoxious voices of the revelers, his eyes turned away from their dancing through the green trees, a riot of color, of fierce beauty, of mad song. Mad they were indeed this day, and in their madness the very existence of Orpheus was a thing not to be tolerated any longer. At first, they cast stones on him, but his music made the rocks fall harmless at his feet. Then in a frenzy of cruelty, with the drunken lust to cause blood to flow, they threw themselves upon Orpheus and tore him from limb to limb, casting at last his head and his blood-stained lyre into the river. And still, as the water bore them downstream, the lyre murmured its last music and the white lips of Orpheus still breathed of her whom – at last! – he had gone to join in the shadowy land, “Eurydice! Eurydice!”

The gods, moved by Orpheus’ tortured life and brutal fate, spirited his soul to join his wife in Elysium. And in the heavens the gods placed his lyre as a constellation of stars called Lyra, where it brightly shines on the nightengales as they sing their songs in the dark.

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