

Century

Don't look back

Persephone does not look at me when she speaks first. She is watching the dark, the way it folds and unfolds like breath.

“Do you know why he has come, Euridice?” she asks.

“Yes.” My voice sounds steady, but I don't feel steady. “I heard him singing.”

“It's beautiful. You always did fall for his music too, didn't you?” she says. “Even when you tried not to.”

I shift my weight. The stone beneath my feet is grounding. “Is that a fault?”

Persephone turns and her eyes soften - not with pity, but recognition. “It's not a fault,” she says. “But it is a danger.”

I glance down the tunnel. “He has come because I should belong to the world he left.”

“And do you?”

I open my mouth, then close it. I hadn't realised I didn't have an answer yet. “I loved him,” I say instead. “I still do. I think.”

Persephone nods once. “Love survives many things. That does not mean it survives unchanged.”

I swallow. “What happens now?”

She considers me carefully. “Now,” she says, “you walk back to the land of the living. And Orpheus walks just ahead. And between you is trust, and Fate.”

Come back to me...

The words echo down the tunnel, bending as they travel.

He came down into Persephone's kingdom with his conclusion clenched tight in his hands. He arrived with a song already finished. That, more than anything, tells her how this will end.

“You must not count the echoes,” says Persephone.

“Because they will change,” she adds. “They will sound like -”

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“You must not name the voices that call your name,” she continues.

“Because names pull -”

I cannot live without you...

Persephone’s words blur beneath his song, like ink dropped into water.

“You must not doubt, or hesitate -”

Come back to me...

“Because hesitation is where stories—”

I need you...

“Do not make the mistake of believing seeing her is the same as possessing her.”

But sometimes words are only for those who might misunderstand them, Persephone thinks.

“Do not turn around. Not even to make sure she is there.”

“I understand,” says Orpheus.

I flinch, because I hear what she hears too.

He is scared. No. He is not scared. He is foolish. The doubt in his voice is a song unsung, a melody twisting itself in the hollow of his chest where his heart is.

He walks forward, and Fate waits for him to trust it. It moves with him; it curls around his ankles. He is part of it. He does not trust it.

There is a snake at his foot. *I will defeat you, Fate.* Yet some part of him knows his own.

It does not rush him. The snake lifts its head as he starts walking, its tongue flicking. It remembers me.

It could trip him; force him to turn. I see all the ways it might. It could uncoil itself across the path, a pale ribbon of muscle and scale, slow and deliberate... it could slide over his boots... rear, hiss, bare its small teeth, scare him before his mind can have enough time to think.

But the snake remains where it is, motionless except for the soft flick of its tongue.

It waits.

So do I.

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Orpheus is singing. Each step he takes is a stanza, each breath a note. Each step is a promise he does not fully understand. Each step...

I know that sound. I loved that sound. I hear Persephone's voice in my head as I remember what it was like to share a story with Orpheus.

I cannot live without you...

And I think, yes, I loved him once. But returning would turn our love into a story we will have to live in, which I cannot accept.

"Euridice?"

I am behind you, I think. I am always behind you.

The light ahead grows warmer and wider, reaching for us like a promise it has already decided I want. But behind me, the darkness holds its shape. It does not pull. It lets me breathe. I notice how it listens, how it keeps my footsteps without repeating them back to me. The dark is not empty; it is patient and layered and alive. I have learned its textures, the way it softens sound, the way it allows me to exist without being seen. As the light swells, I realise I am not afraid of the dark. I am afraid of being taken out of it. Rescue can be another kind of taking, I realise.

"Are you there?"

I am here. I am not. I am everywhere your path does not reach.

"We will be together again," he says in the voice I once would have followed blindly. *You are mine.* And I am struck by how gentle he thinks he is, how quiet control can be.

He stops. He cannot see me watching, but I am a now presence he cannot measure. I have learned the rhythm of my own pulse, the cadence of my own silence. I am not the one who needs saving.

"Euridice?" *Don't leave me...*

I need to see you...

And I let him, because I am not a story he can finish.

When he leaves, he will tell this as a tragedy. He will say the gods were cruel, that fate was unjust. They will listen. They will mourn for him. My name will be carried in his song

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like a wound, preserved until it belongs more to him than to me. And I will remain here, not lost, not stolen, but finally unclaimed. I am a story that did not end, only stepped out of the light.