Fiction Excerpt 1: Myths Retold by Ovid

Born one year after the assassination of Julius Caesar, the poet Ovid lived during the early years of the Roman Empire. He wrote many poems about love, but in his later years, he wrote a poem called *Metamorphoses*, which retold myths about Greek and Roman gods. The stories in this excerpt are based on Ovid’s retellings.

Apollo and Daphne

Daphne (/daf*née/) was the daughter of the river god. She was quick, beautiful, and strong—and she loved to hunt. She loved running through the forest, chasing deer with her bow and arrow. She loved being free.

“Daphne, my daughter,” her father would tell her, “it is time for you to marry and give me grandchildren.”

In answer, Daphne would laugh. “No, thank you. I do not need a husband or children.”

One day, the sun god Apollo saw Daphne hunting. He saw her strength and speed and was impressed.

The god of love, Cupid, was also watching. He shot Apollo with one of his golden-tipped arrows, causing Apollo to fall in love with Daphne. Then Cupid shot Daphne with an arrow, but Daphne’s arrow was tipped with lead. This arrow strengthened her determination to resist love.

Apollo, now smitten (even more in love) with Daphne, ran after her. “Stop!” he called. “Wait!”

But Daphne only ran faster.

“Do you know who I am?” Apollo cried. “I am no poor shepherd. I am Jupiter’s son.”

Daphne had no intention of giving up her freedom, not even to the son of a god. She kept running until she could run no more. When her legs weakened and she ran out of breath, she found herself in a forest on the banks of her father’s river. She called to him for help.

The instant she called for help, her feet began to grow roots, anchoring her to the ground. Her arms grew stiff. Her skin turned to bark, and her hair became leaves. The quick, beautiful girl who loved to run had become a beautiful laurel tree.
Apollo hugged the tree and pressed his ear to its trunk. He could hear Daphne’s heart beating inside it.

“Oh, my love!” Apollo cried. “I will honor you forever. The laurel will be my tree from now on. I will place its leaves on my lyre and on my quiver. I will make wreaths of its leaves to be worn as crowns by heroes and poets.”

Then he himself made a wreath of laurel leaves and placed it on his own head as a symbol of his love for Daphne.

**Orpheus and Eurydice**

The Muses were goddesses whose songs were so beautiful that the word *music* was named for them. One of these goddesses had a son named Orpheus (/or*fee*us/), whose own music was also quite beautiful. When Orpheus played his lyre, the most savage beasts of the forest would calm. Trees would bend to listen more closely, and even rivers would bend to listen to Orpheus’s melody.

People could not escape the beauty of Orpheus’s music either. When Orpheus fell in love with a young woman named Eurydice (/yoo*rid*ih*see/), he played his lyre and she fell in love with him, too.

But his beautiful music was not enough to change what happened on their wedding day. During the ceremony, Eurydice was bitten by a poisonous snake. Orpheus could do nothing to save her. She died in his arms.

Overwhelmed with grief, Orpheus wandered aimlessly, playing his lyre. His music had changed, though. Instead of impressing people with the beauty of his songs, Orpheus drove them to tears.

One day, while he played his melancholy tune, he had an idea. “My music attracts the souls of people who are alive. Maybe it will also attract the souls of people who have died. Maybe if I go to the Underworld and play for its king, he will return my Eurydice to me.”

So Orpheus journeyed to the Underworld. He took a ferry across the river Styx, the border that separated the world of the living from the dead. He followed a dark and winding path downward. As he walked, he played a tune so sad that the ghosts wept. When he reached the entrance to the Underworld and the three-headed dog that guarded it, he used his music to quiet the dog so it would let him pass.
When he came before Pluto, the Underworld’s king, he played his lyre and sang of Eurydice. He sang of their love, of his loss, and of his grief.

“Oh, mighty king,” he begged. “if you have ever known love, please let my Eurydice return to the world of the living.”

The usually ruthless king was moved by Orpheus’s tale. “I will grant your request,” Pluto said. “But there is one condition. On your journey back, you must not look backward—not even once. If you do, your beloved Eurydice will return here forever.”

Orpheus agreed to the king’s condition, and Eurydice was brought to him.

Together, the lovers climbed the path out of the Underworld, their eyes focused forward. The path was steep and difficult. Orpheus could hear Eurydice behind him, stumbling and slipping. Oh, how he wanted to look back to check on her! How he wanted to turn and help her!

They struggled on. As they approached the light of the living world, Orpheus’s worry got the better of him. He glanced back over his shoulder.

And just like that, in a snap, Eurydice disappeared, pulled back to the world of the dead.

Her cry echoed in Orpheus’s ears. He fell to his knees, clutching his lyre, and sobbed. He had lost his Eurydice again, this time forever.