

DEMETER AND PERSEPHONE

Demeter, the Great Goddess, bringer of seasons and giver of life-sustaining gifts, was the Olympian who most loved mortals and the earth that fed them, and they dearly loved her. She was delighted that farmers' wives set an extra place at the table in the hope that she would knock upon their door and join them for their evening meal. So she smiled when the gods teased her that she ate more meals in the humble homes of mortals than in the lofty palaces that Hephaestus had designed and the Cyclopes had built for the immortals on Mount Olympus. Demeter was kind, loving, and generous, but she was also the daughter of Cronus, feared ruler of the Titans, and the sister of Zeus, the Loud-Thunderer.

The joy of Demeter's eternal lifetime was her daughter, Persephone, whom she had borne to Zeus. Persephone loved sunshine, wildflowers, and laughter, and she had the gift of bringing what she loved into the lives of those who knew her. The wildflowers in Sicily were so beautiful that Persephone often roamed the fields there, carrying a large basket that she could fill with the beautiful blossoms. Bright-eyed Athena, the Goddess of Arts and Crafts, and Artemis, the Archer Goddess, usually accompanied her.

Aphrodite watched one day as Hades, the Lord of the Dead, drove his chariot around the island of Sicily. As usual, the King of Shadows was checking to see whether the unruly giant Typhon, who lay on his back under Mount Aetna vomiting fire and flaming ash, had created any cracks in the earth with his eruptions. Hades was quite relieved to find every piece of earth in its proper place, for he feared that if the earth opened above the Underworld and admitted the light of Helios's bright sun, his many subjects would tremble fearfully.

Calling her son, Eros, to her, golden Aphrodite said, "Few of the immortals have a high regard for our powers. Notice how Athena, Artemis, and Persephone all shun the idea of love. Zeus and his brother, the Lord of the Sea, have been subjected to our weapons, and it is time for us to rule the dark lord of the Underworld as well. Send one of your infallible arrows flying into Hades' heart, to make him full madly in love with Persephone."

Eros's sure aim struck Hades and took him to Zeus for permission to marry Persephone. "Of course, I would be delighted to give you Persephone, dear brother," Zeus replied, "but our sister, Demeter, would never agree to such a marriage. She would not permit me to exchange Persephone's freedom to roam through flower-filled fields, shimmering under the light from Lord Helios's chariot, for the opportunity to be queen in your dark kingdom. Power does not mean that much to the Great Goddess or to Persephone.

"However," the lord of Olympus concluded, "since you are my brother and the ruler of a mighty kingdom, if you insist on having Persephone, that would be a great honor for her. Although I cannot force my daughter to marry you, I will secretly help you to seize her."

So it came to pass that one day, as Persephone was gathering flowers on one of the Sicilian meadows, she noticed in the distance an incredibly beautiful bloom that she had never seen before. Leaving her companions far behind, Persephone immediately ran over the fields toward this unusual flower. She had no way of knowing that her father secretly had commanded the earth to create this special flower to lure her to Hades.

As Persephone reached toward the fragrant flower to add it to her collection, the earth suddenly opened wide, and out came a golden chariot drawn by black horses and driven by the dark lord himself. Keeping his left hand on the reins, Hades seized Persephone with his right arm, placed her beside him in the chariot, and drove off at top speed before Persephone's companions realized that she had disappeared.

"Mother! Mother!" she screamed. "Help me! Father, help me!" But her mother was far away, and no one among the gods or mortals heard her screams. Only Helios, Lord of the Sun, observed the crime from his chariot as he traveled across the sky. By the time Artemis and Athena arrived at the meadow, the crevice had closed, the unusual flower had disappeared, and Persephone was gone. All that remained was the basket filled with flowers that the young goddess had dropped when she was snatched away.

Persephone continued to call for her mother as the chariot carried her through deep lakes and smoking pools. As long as she could see the grain-giving land, the swift-flowing sea, and Helios above her in his chariot, she hoped that someone would hear

her cries. But when a sea nymph tried to stop Hades, he struck the earth, opened a crevice, and disappeared with Persephone into its dreary depths.

For some time after the earth had closed upon Persephone, the sound of her voice echoed from the mountain heights and issued forth from the depths of the sea. When the Great Goddess heard her daughter's cries, pain enclosed her heart in its mighty grip. From her lovely hair she tore its band, from her shoulders she loosened her dark cape, and freely she ran, like a wild bird, over land and sea, desperately searching everywhere for her lost child.

The deathless gods who knew where Persephone was remained silent. Mortals could not help the grieving and distraught mother. So that the darkness of night would not slow her search, the Great Goddess kindled two pine torches in the fiery crater of Mount Aetna. From that time on, neither Dawn nor the evening star found her at rest. But she searched the earth in vain.

At last, Demeter returned to Sicily, where Persephone had last been seen and her own fruitless search had begun. Not knowing who to blame, Demeter punished Sicily first. If no one could tell her what had happened to her daughter, she would withdraw her life-sustaining gifts. So she broke the plows, killed the oxen and the farmers who owned them, and commanded the earth to shrivel and mold the seeds it harbored. Soon the very land that had been famed for its fertility became barren. First, the country was plagued by drought. Then, blasting winds brought with them a deluge of rain. Corn that had not withered upon the stalk was devoured by greedy birds.

From Sicily, the Great Goddess wandered back across the earth, causing a year of drought and devastation for all of humankind. She so concealed the nourishing seeds within the earth that not one of them sprouted. Even when teams of oxen pulled curved plows over the fields so that the farmers following behind could plant white corn, golden-haired Demeter made all of their labor come to naught.

Then, still carrying her flaming torches, the Great Goddess approached the lord of the sun, who watched both gods and mortals. Placing herself in front of Helios's horse-drawn chariot, Demeter said, "I heard my daughter scream as though someone had seized her against her will, and yet I have been unable to learn what has happened

to her. Since your chariot takes you high above the grain-giving land and the swift-flowing sea, did you see who took my child?"

To these words Lord Helios replied, "I will tell you the truth, Great Goddess, for I pity you in your sorrow. Zeus, the Cloud-Gatherer, gave Persephone to the Lord of the Dead to become his queen. You heard her cries as Hades carried her down to his gloomy kingdom. Yet the marriage is a good one, since the dark lord is your brother and rules a mighty kingdom. Try to put aside your anger and your grief."

Demeter's heart now overflowed with a deeper and more savage sorrow. Torn between fury and anguish, the Great Goddess determined to punish Zeus and the other Olympians by causing all mortals to die of starvation. Then the deathless gods would no longer be honored with sacrifices and gifts, and grim Hades would gain more shades to honor him.

Zeus, fearing that such might be her intent, sent wind-footed Iris to command Demeter to return to Mount Olympus. When the Great Goddess did not respond, Zeus commanded the other Olympian gods, one by one, to approach her and offer her greater honor and glorious gifts. However, Demeter refused all but the last of these messengers. To him she said, "Tell Zeus that I will set foot upon fragrant Olympus in order to talk with him, but I will not permit any seeds to sprout upon the earth until I have seen my beautiful child."

When the Great Goddess approached Zeus she said, "Father of Gods and Mortals, I come pleading to you on behalf of our daughter. Even if you do not care for me, surely you love Persephone! You know how she loves the light of the sun, the joyous sound of laughter, and the scent of flowers. How can you make her live in our brother's dark and dismal kingdom, ruling over the dead when she so loves life? And how could you permit her to marry someone who had to seize her against her will? Tell Hades that he must let her go!"

"Truly, Demeter," Zeus replied, "I share your love and your concern for our daughter. However, Hades seized Persephone because he loves her, and he is as great a god as I am. Only the drawing of lots gave the Underworld to him and Olympus to me. If our brother's love and power cannot make you put aside your anger and resentment, then I will let Persephone return to you—as long as she has eaten no food in Hades'

dark kingdom. But if she has consumed the food of the dead she is condemned to remain in that dismal land, for so the Fates decree."

To these words the Great Goddess replied: "I will meet Persephone on the meadows she loves. Until then, the earth will remain lifeless and barren. Farewell."

As Demeter departed, Zeus sent his messenger Hermes, the Wayfinder, down to Hades' grim kingdom to persuade the dark lord with kind words to let Persephone return to her mother. Hermes found the Lord of the Underworld in his gloomy palace and said, "Hades, kind uncle and Lord of the Dead, my father has commanded me to bring Persephone up to her mother.

"The Great Goddess," Hermes continued, "has threatened to destroy all mortals by withholding their source of food, thus removing from the gods their source of honor and sacrificial offerings. She has hidden all seeds deep in the earth where they cannot sprout, and not one of the Olympians has been able to soften the rage and grief that fill her heart."

At these words, Hades smiled grimly, but to Persephone he kindly said, "Go now with Hermes to seek your dark-robed mother. But, in your heart, know that I too love you and want you here with me.

"Think of me with kindness," Hades continued, "for I will be a good husband to you. Remember that I am the brother of Zeus and my kingdom is also very great. While you are here, you will rule everything that lives and moves, and I will see that you receive the greatest honor among the deathless gods. I will punish for eternity anyone who wrongs you or who does not worship you with sacred rites and sacrifices."

When she heard her husband's words, Persephone's heart filled with joy. While the Wayfinder harnessed Hades' immortal horses to his golden chariot, the Lord of the Underworld gave Persephone a honey-sweet pomegranate seed to eat so that his beloved wife could not remain forever in the upper world. Persephone, unaware of the consequences, swallowed the seed.

When she had mounted the chariot, Hermes took the reins and the whip into his hands, and they quickly left the palace. Once the deathless horses reached the upper air, neither the swift-flowing sea nor grassy meadows nor the peaks of mountains were any obstacle to Hades' swift steeds.

Demeter waited for Persephone in a meadow that should have been ablaze with the colorful flowers of summer. Now, however, this ground, like the lands that in prior years had produced rich crops of corn and wheat, lay barren and idle. As soon as she saw Hades' golden chariot, the Great Goddess rushed to meet her daughter. Hermes had barely halted the horses before Persephone leaped down from the chariot and threw her arms around her mother's neck in a long, happy embrace.

As Demeter held her dear child in her arms, her heart filled with fear, and she suddenly asked Persephone, "My child, tell me truly, when you were in Lord Hades' dark kingdom, did you taste any food? If you ate nothing there, you can live here where the sun shines with your father and me. But if you had any kind of nourishment you must return to your husband, for the Fates have decreed that anyone who eats the food of the dead must remain in the dismal land of death!"

Persephone's eyes filled with tears, and she replied, "I will not attempt to deceive you, Mother. As Hermes was about to bring me to you, my husband gave me a honey-sweet pomegranate seed to eat. I swallowed it because I was hungry; I had no idea of the consequences."

Tears then flowed uncontrollably from Demeter's eyes, for it seemed that her visit with her dear child was doomed to be brief. Sorrow and despair threatened to push all the joy of their reunion from her heart. She felt she could not bear their eternal separation.

Suddenly, Demeter's spirits lifted with surprise and delight as she saw her own mother, Rhea, approaching them. With great love, the Mother of the Gods embraced her daughter and her granddaughter.

"Come, my child," said Rhea. "A mother must have the strength to bear pain as well as joy. Sorrow visits all of us. You must not let your grief destroy you.

"I have come from Mount Olympus," Rhea continued, "and I bring you a special message from your brother, Zeus. He wishes you to rejoin the Olympian family, where you will be highly honored among the deathless gods. He gives you his word that Persephone need spend only one-third of each year in Hades' dark and gloomy kingdom. When the time comes each year for the earth to bring forth the fragrant flowers of springtime, she will leave the kingdom of darkness and return to you. You will

be together until all of the crops have been harvested and Helios, Lord of the Sun, has caused the days to become short and cool.

"So put aside your anger against Zeus, my child. Enjoy your lovely daughter for the seasons that you can be together, and make the earth once again yield the life-giving fruits that mortals need to sustain them."

Demeter heard her mother's words and smiled through her tears. She would have her daughter after all! These separations she could endure. Immediately, she caused the fertile land to blossom with leaves, flowers, and life-giving fruits. Then the goddesses joined the immortals on Mount Olympus.

Thus the pattern of the seasons became established. Each year, after the harvesting of the autumn crops, Persephone would return to her husband, the dark Lord of the Dead, for the winter months. Then, in her loneliness and sorrow, Demeter would allow the earth to lie leafless and idle.

As soon as Lord Helios once again warmed the earth with the sun, and the days became longer, the Great Goddess would see her beloved child joyously running toward her. Once again, in her great joy, Demeter would cause all flowers and seed-bearing plants to blossom upon the earth. Once again, she would bless the mortals she loved with her life-sustaining gifts.

Then people would often see a beautiful mother and daughter roaming together through sunny flowering meadows. Farmers' wives once again would set an extra place at their table for the evening meal, hoping that their beloved Demeter would join them to share the fruits of their labors.