

Persephone and Demeter

adapted from Thomas Bulfinch

A sudden earthquake roused Hades from his underworld kingdom. Worried that his dark world might be laid open to the light of day, he mounted his chariot with the four black horses and came to the earth's surface to investigate.

In the midst of his travels, he was observed by Aphrodite, who immediately noticed his lack of a wife or lover, something she interpreted as a personal affront being that she was the goddess of love! Not wasting a second, Aphrodite called for her son, Eros (though most of us now refer to him on Valentine's Day as Cupid). She said: "My son, take your darts with which you conquer all, even Jove himself, and send one into the breast of yonder dark monarch, who rules the realm of the underworld. Why should he alone escape? Seize the opportunity to extend your empire and mine. Do you not see those who despise our power? Athena the wise, and Artemis the huntress, are still single; and there is that daughter of Demeter, who threatens to follow their example. I want you to join these two in one."

The boy unbound his quiver, and selected his sharpest and truest arrow; then, straining the bow against his knee, he attached the string, and, having made ready, shot the arrow with its barbed point right into the heart of Hades.

As Hades was shot, his chariot passed directly over Persephone, who was playing with her companions, gathering lilies and violets, and filling her basket and her apron with them. When Hades saw her from his chariot, it was love at first sight, and in the blink of an eye he carried her off to be his wife and queen. Of course, from Persephone's perspective, she was being kidnapped by a complete stranger. She screamed for help to her mother and her companions and begged Hades to let her go.

Text from Persephone to her mother, Demeter:

Reply text from Demeter to her daughter, Persephone:

Deaf to her pleas, Hades urged his steeds on. In fright, Persephone dropped the corners of her apron and let fall her gathered flowers, their loss an addition to her grief. Then Hades' chariot plunged towards earth and, though terrified, Persephone hoped death might release her from her kidnapper. But at the very last instant, before the chariot smashed into the ground, the earth opened up to Hades, clearing the way for him to return to his dark kingdom.

Demeter sought her daughter all the world over. Bright-haired Aurora aided the search when she came forth in the morning, and Hesperus looked as well when he led out the stars in the evening. Even though Persephone was with companions, no one told Demeter about Hades' brutal act of abduction or how the earth opened and then shut its greedy mouth upon them both. All of the bystanders were afraid of Hades' wrath were they to tell the truth. At length, weary and sad, Demeter sat down and wept, believing her daughter was gone forever.

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Text from friend of Persephone's to other mutual friend:

Reply text from mutual friend to friend of Persephone's:

Donning the colors of mourning, Demeter's sorrow gave way to anger. She blamed everyone for the loss of her daughter. Always known for her nurturing since she was the goddess of the harvest, Demeter decided that mankind would suffer her loss with her. She broke the farmers' ploughs and bade the fields to betray their trust. Young crops died, destroyed by violent rain, unending drought, or freezing cold.

Just as it appeared mankind might perish from starvation, the waters of a stream took pity on the grieving mother and revealed Persephone's whereabouts. Describing its journey through fissures, crevices, and hidden channels, the stream revealed that Persephone was the prisoner of Hades, trapped in the darkness of the underworld.

Alarmed beyond belief, Demeter went straight to Zeus and demanded that he intervene. "The daughter I have sought so long is found. Her theft I'll bear if Hades will but bring her back; a thief, a kidnapper is no proper husband for my child."

Secretly, Zeus was deeply concerned over the fate of his worshippers. If mankind became extinct, the gods would be robbed of their sacrifices. But being the supreme god, Zeus was not about to reveal his fears and cede the upper hand to Demeter. Instead he countered, "The only crime I see from Hades is one of love and passion. Such a son-in-law should not disgrace you. To be Zeus's brother, what a splendid thing! But if your heart's so set to part them, Persephone shall reach the sky again on one condition, that her lips have touched no food."

Text from Zeus to his brother, Hades:

Reply text from Hades to his brother, Zeus:

Demeter readily agreed since she had warned Persephone never to partake of any food from strangers. Zeus immediately dispatched Hermes with a message demanding Persephone's immediate release.

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A good six months had passed between Persephone's sudden abduction and her mother's negotiations with Zeus. Though frightened and despondent at first, Persephone slowly became accustomed to her new surroundings and her new husband. In fact, a love for Hades began to stir within her heart.

Text from Persephone to her BFF:

Reply text from BFF to Persephone:

For the longest time, Persephone refused any food Hades proffered, tempting though it was, hoping that she would soon be returned to her mother. Finally, her hunger became overwhelming, the likelihood of ever leaving the underworld became ever distant, and her distrust of Hades became a faded memory. When offered a pomegranate, her favorite fruit, she ate six seeds. Embracing his beloved queen, Hades now knew that their betrothal was eternal.

Text from Persephone to her mother, Demeter:

Reply text from Demeter to her daughter, Persephone:

Upon Hermes' arrival, Hades told him of the pomegranate seeds.

At first, it appeared that Persephone would never see her mother again, but Hades softened and a compromise was made, by which she was to pass half the time with her mother, and the rest with her husband. Demeter allowed herself to be pacified with this arrangement, and restored the earth to her favor.

Text from Persephone to her husband, Hades:

Reply text from Hades to his wife, Persephone:

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