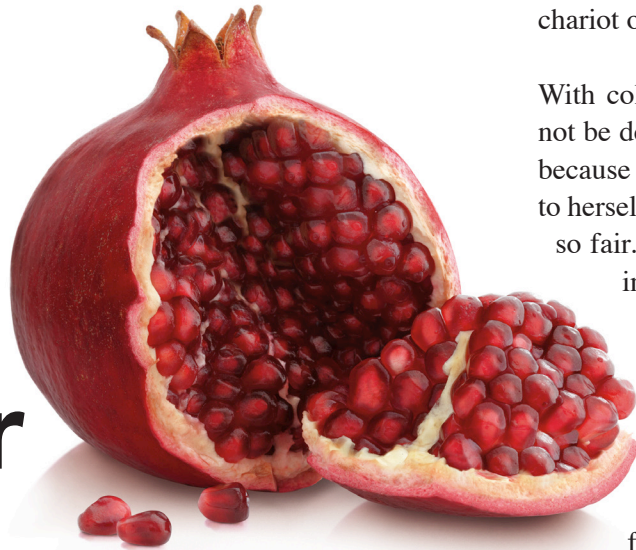


Demeter



Now once there was a time when there was no spring, neither summer nor autumn, nor chilly winter with its black frosts and cruel gales and brief, dark days. Always was there sunshine and warmth, ever were there flowers and corn and fruit, and nowhere did the flowers grow with more dazzling colors and more fragrant perfume than in the fair garden of Sicily.

To Demeter, the grain goddess, was born a daughter more fair than any flower that grew, and every year more dear to her became her child, the lovely Persephone. By the blue sea, in the Sicilian meadows, Persephone and the fair nymphs who were her companions spent their happy days. Too short were the days for all their joy, and Demeter made the earth yet fairer than it was that she might bring more gladness to her daughter Persephone. Each day, the blossoms that the nymphs twined into garlands grew more perfect in form and in hue, but from the anemones of royal purple and crimson, and the riotous red of geraniums, Persephone turned one morning with a cry of gladness, for there stood before her, on one perfect slim stem, a wonderful narcissus, with a hundred blossoms. Her eager hand was stretched out to pluck it, when a sudden black cloud overshadowed the land, and the nymphs, with shrieks of fear, fled swiftly away. And as the cloud descended, a terrible sound filled the air, as of the rushing of many waters or the roll of the heavy wheels of the chariot of one who comes to slay. Then was the earth cleft open, and from the hole arose the four coal-black horses of Hades, neighing aloud

in their eagerness, while the dark-browed god urged them on, standing tall in his chariot of gold.

With cold, strong arms, Hades seized the girl in his mighty grasp that would not be denied, and Persephone wept as she shivered at his icy touch and sobbed because she had dropped the flowers she had picked. Surely, she foolishly thought to herself, the king of the Underworld could not take one so young, so happy, and so fair. She had only tasted the joy of living, and fain she would drink deeper in the coming years. Her mother must surely save her from death – her mother who had never yet failed her – her mother and the gods.

But ruthless as the mower whose scythe cuts down the seeded grass and the half-opened flower alike and drops them in slices on the meadow, Hades drove on. His iron-colored reins were loose on the black manes of his horses, and he urged them forward by name till the froth flew from their mouths like the foam that the furious surf of the sea drives before it in a storm. Downward, deep into the blackness of darkness his horses passed, and Persephone knew no more the pleasant light of day.

When Persephone didn't arrive home at her usual time, Demeter was immediately alarmed. She searched over land and sea, from where Dawn, the rosy-fingered, rises in the East, to where Apollo cools the fiery wheels of his chariot in the waters of far western seas; the goddess sought her daughter without success. With a black robe over her head and carrying a flaming torch in either hand, for nine dreary days she searched. And yet, for nine more weary days and nine sleepless nights the goddess, racked by human sorrow, sat in hopeless misery. The hot sun beat upon her by day. By night, the silver rays from the moon smote her more gently, and the dew drenched her hair and her black garments and mingled with the saltiness of her bitter tears. At the gray dawning of the tenth day, her elder daughter, Hecate, stood beside her. Queen of ghosts and shades was she, and to her all dark places of the earth were known.

“Let us go to the Sun God,” said Hecate. “Surely, he hath seen the one who stole away our fair Persephone. Soon his chariot will drive across the heavens. Come, let us ask him to guide us to the place where she is hidden.”

Thus did they come to the chariot of the glorious Apollo, and standing by the heads of his horses like two gray clouds that bar the passage of the sun, they begged him to tell them the name of the one who had stolen Persephone.

“No less a thief was he,” said Apollo admitted, “than Hades, King of Darkness and robber of life itself. Mourn not, Demeter. Thy daughter is safe in his keeping. The little nymph who played in the meadows is now the Queen of the Shades. Nor does Hades love her without return; she is, in fact, now in love with him, too.”

No comfort did the words of the Sun God bring to the longing soul of Demeter. And her wounded heart grew bitter. Because she suffered, others would suffer as well. Because she mourned, she wanted to whole world to mourn. The fragrant flowers reminded her only of Persephone, the purple grapes brought to her troubled mind a vintage when the white fingers of her child had plucked the fruit. The waving golden grain told her that Persephone was as an ear of wheat that was reaped before its time.

Then upon the earth Demeter brought drought and barrenness.

Gods and men alike suffered from the sorrow of Demeter. To her, in pity for the barren earth, Zeus sent an embassy, but in vain it came. Merciless was the great earth goddess, who had been robbed of what she held most dear.

“Give me back my child!” she cried. “Gladly I watch the sufferings of men, for no sorrow is as my sorrow. Give me back my child, and the earth shall grow fertile once more.”

Unwillingly, Zeus granted Demeter’s request.

“She shall come back,” he said at last, “and with thee dwell on earth forever. Yet only on one condition can I grant thy fond request. Persephone must not have eaten any food through all the time of her sojourn in the realm of Hades.”

Demeter then gladly left Olympus and hastened down to the darkness of the shadowy land so she could once again hold, in her strong mother’s arms, the girl who had once been her precious clinging child.

But in the dark kingdom of Hades a strange thing had happened. No longer did

the pale-faced god, with dark locks and eyes like obsidian, hold any terror for Persephone. He was strong and cold, as she had feared, yet now she also saw an infinite tenderness in his face. Knowing the edict of the ruler of Olympus, Hades craftily gave his stolen bride a pomegranate, as red as the heart of a man, and she had taken it from his hand and, because he willed it, had eaten a few of the tart-sweet seeds.

Soon, Demeter arrived and, saying nothing to her brother Hades, took Persephone’s hand, guiding her up to the land of the living. Back to the flowery island of Sicily her mother brought her, and the peach trees and the almonds blossomed as she passed. The olives decked themselves with their fuzzy gray leaves, the corn sprang up, green and lush and strong. The lemon and orange groves grew golden with luscious fruit, and all the land was carpeted with flowers.

It wasn’t long before Hades pled his case to his brother, admitting that his courtship had been abrupt but arguing that his wife wanted to be by his side in the Underworld. And besides, he argued, she had eaten food in the realm of the dead; she was bound to be returned to him.

To satisfy both parties, Zeus made his decree. For six months of the year, Persephone would stay with Demeter, bringing a time when gods and men could rejoice in the natural abundance that accompanied Demeter’s happiness. And for

the other six months, one month for each of the seeds she had eaten, Persephone would leave her mother’s green and pleasant land for the dark kingdom of him whom she loved. In those months, the trees would be bare, the earth chill and brown, and under the earth the flowers would hide themselves for a season, awaited the return of the fair daughter of Demeter.

And since that time, Persephone has come and gone as scheduled. Seedtime and harvest have never failed, and the cold, sleeping world always awakens and rejoices upon the return of the lovely Persephone.



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