

THE SEVEN POMEGRANATE SEEDS

DEMETER was one of the more gentle goddesses who inhabited Mount Olympus. Not for her were the jealous rages of Hera, the whiplike chastity of Artemis, or the burning passions of Aphrodite. Demeter was the goddess of agriculture and of marriage. Her hair was the color of wheat at harvesttime, and her eyes were a pastel blue. She delighted in bright colors, often wearing brilliant ribbons and carrying a golden torch.

Only once did she really lose her temper. This was when she discovered that the beautiful trees in a grove that was sacred to her were being cut down by a foolhardy young man named Erysichthon. Perhaps he was some sort of early town planner, but whatever his reason for this act of vandalism, Demeter appeared to him disguised as a mortal and asked him if he would be so kind as to stop. His answer was short and unfriendly.

Then Demeter assumed her own form and punished Erysichthon in a way that was truly horrible. She condemned him to remain hungry forever, no matter how much he ate. From that moment on, he seldom stopped eating. At dinner that same night, he astonished his parents by eating not only his food but theirs too—as well as that of their seventeen guests. In the weeks that followed, he ate so much that his weeping father was forced to throw him out of the house, no longer able to afford his keep. And yet the more he ate, the thinner and hungrier he got until, in the end, he became a beggar, shuffling pathetically along in rags, still stuffing himself with the filth he found in the streets.

This, then, was the full extent of Demeter's anger. But most people would agree that Erysichthon got only what he deserved. For the unnecessary destruction of a tree is a terrible crime.

Demeter had a daughter named Core (later on, her name was changed to Persephone) whom she loved more than anything in the world. Unfortunately, another of the gods also loved the girl, although in a very different way. This was Hades, the shadowy lord of the Underworld, the god of death. Hades had spent virtually his whole life underground, and his skin was pale and cold. No light shone in his eyes, eyes that had seldom seen the sun. And yet he had seen an image of Core, magically reflected in an ebony pool, and he had lost his heart to her. So great was his love that he took a rare leave of absence from the Underworld, traveling to Olympus. There he came before Zeus and demanded that he give Core to him as a wife.

The demand somewhat embarrassed the king of the gods. For although he did not want to offend Hades, who was his brother, Zeus could not let him have what he wanted. For Core was his daughter. He had fallen in love with Demeter some years before, and Core had been the result. If he were to send the girl to the Underworld, Demeter would never forgive him. Moreover, it would hardly be fair to condemn his own daughter to such a gloomy place—for the kingdom of Hades was such a dull and dismal land. But on the other hand, what was he to say to Hades, who was older than he and . . . ?

"I'll think about it," Zeus said.

And promptly he forgot all about it.

When it became clear that he was not going to get a satisfactory answer out of Zeus, Hades decided to take things into his own hands.

"He did not say I could have the girl," he reasoned to himself. "But neither did he say that I could not. And surely, if something is not forbidden, then it must be allowed. Of course it must! In which case, Core shall become Persephone, and as Persephone she will be my wife."

And so it was that two days later, Core found herself kidnapped by the grim god of death. She was living in Sicily at the time and was out in the fields with some of her friends,

collecting wild flowers for a feast that same evening. Noticing a particularly bright narcissus, she leaned down to pick it. Suddenly the ground trembled. As the blood drained from her face and her friends screamed, dropping their baskets and scattering in all directions, a great chasm appeared in front of her, yawning like a black mouth. Desperately, Core tried to keep her balance. But then a white hand that smelled of damp earth stretched out and grabbed hold of her, pulling her forward. With



a hopeless cry, she tumbled forward, disappearing into the chasm. The ground trembled again, then closed up as suddenly as it had opened. Only a jagged line, zigzagging through the flowers, showed what had happened.

When Demeter discovered that Core was missing, her grief was overwhelming. Almost overnight she changed. No longer did she wear ribbons and bright colors. No more was her laughter heard in the fields. Covering herself with a dark veil, she flew around the world on a search that would take her nine days and nine nights. Not once did she stop for food or for drink—or even to rest. Her only thought was for her daughter. She visited Sicily, Colonus, Hermione, Crete, Pisa, Lerna . . . nobody had seen the girl, nor was there any sign that she had been there.

At last she went in desperation to Helios, the god who every day followed the sun, riding across the heavens in a golden chariot drawn by four white horses. Nothing ever escaped the eye of Helios. Soaring in an arc, high above the world, he could see everything. And what he had to tell Demeter chilled her heart.

"You must forget Core," he said. "Core exists no longer. Look, if you will, for Persephone—destroyer of men—for that is what she has become as wife of the king of death. Yes! Hades has stolen her from you. Never again will you see her. Where she is now, deep in the shadows of the Underworld, she is lost even from the sight of Helios."

At once Demeter went to Zeus. White with anger and haggard after her nine days of fasting, she was almost unrecognizable, and the king of the gods squirmed in front of her.

"I didn't say Hades could take her," he muttered.

"Did you say he couldn't?"

"Well . . ."

"I want her back, Zeus. You will return her to me!"

"I can't!" The king of the gods almost wept with frustration. "You know the rules. If she has eaten so much as a mouthful of the food of the dead, she is stuck in the Underworld forever."

"She won't have eaten. She can't have eaten."

"And anyway," Zeus went on, "you know Hades. There's no arguing with him. He has to have his own way . . ."

"Very well," Demeter cried. "Until my daughter is returned to me, no tree on earth will yield fruit. No plants will grow. The soil will remain barren. The animals will starve. Such is the curse of an unhappy mother. Bring her back, Zeus. Or humankind will perish!"

So began a year of unrelenting famine. The crops withered, and even the grass turned brown and rotted. As Demeter had promised, the animals, unable to find fodder, died by the hundred, their bloated carcasses dotting the arid landscape.

At last the situation became so desperate that Hermes, the messenger-god, was sent down to the Underworld to bring Persephone back.

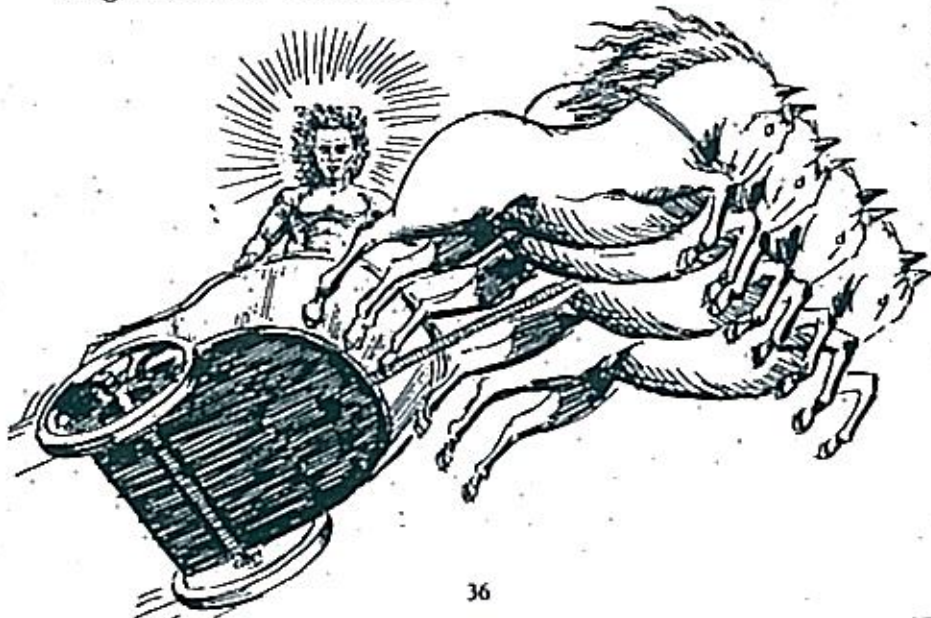
"Never!" Hades exclaimed. "I love her. I will never relinquish her."

"But does she love you?" Hermes asked.

"She . . . she will learn to. In time."

"But there is no time," Hermes said. "Her mother, Demeter, is destroying the world in her grief. If you do not release Persephone, mankind will come to an end."

"Why should the extinction of mankind be of any concern to the god of death?" Hades asked.



"Because even death depends on life. Nothing can continue without it."

The king of the Underworld thought long and hard, but then he nodded his head.

"You speak the truth," he said. "Very well. It seems that I am defeated. My wife, my Persephone . . . she must go."

And he turned his head, bringing his hand up to cover his eyes.

When Persephone heard that she was to be returned to the world of the living, she was so happy that she laughed and cried at the same time. But one of the gardeners of Hades, a man by the name of Ascalaphus, also heard the news, and at once he crept off and changed into his best clothes. Then he knelt before Hades.

"Oh ghastly and glorious master!" he said, rubbing his hands together in front of his chin. "Dread lord of the Underworld, grotesque king of the dead, sovereign of the . . ."

"Get on with it!" Hades commanded.

"Of course! Of course!" The gardener laughed nervously. "I just thought you'd like to know that your wife, the good and delicious lady Persephone, has tasted the food of the dead."

"That's impossible," Hades said. "She has refused to eat since the day I brought her here. Not so much as a crust of bread has passed her lips."

"I'm sure. I'm sure. But something less than a crust of bread has, noble king. With my own eyes I saw her eat seven pomegranate seeds. In the garden. I saw her."

Then the eyes of Hades lit up. "If this is true," he said, "you shall be rewarded."

"Rewarded?" Ascalaphus licked his lips. "Well, I didn't do it for the reward. But if there is a reward. Well . . ."

"Follow her to the surface," Hades said. "Do what must be done."

So when Hermes took Persephone with him in his chariot, Ascalaphus rode on the back, unseen by either of them, dreaming of his new career (for he had never liked gardening very much), perhaps as secretary to Hades or perhaps as palace librarian or even—who could say?—as the next prince of Hell. And no sooner had Demeter received her daughter in a joyful embrace than he stepped forward with a crooked smile.

"Persephone has eaten the food of the dead," he cried. "She must return with me to the Underworld. There's nothing any of you can do about it. It's the law."

"Is this true?" Demeter asked.

Then tears sprang to Persephone's eyes, and she sank to her knees.

"Yes, mother," she whispered. "I ate seven pomegranate seeds. But that was all I ate. Although I was one year in that horrible place, that was the only food that passed my lips. Surely it doesn't count. Surely . . ."

But by now Demeter was weeping too.

"You have eaten the food of the dead," she said. "Though mankind will die when they take you from me, there is nothing I can do."

When the gods heard what had happened, they held a great conference to discuss what should be done. On the one hand, nobody wanted the world to end. But neither could they allow Persephone to remain in the land of the living. At last, a compromise was reached and both Persephone and Demeter were called before the throne of Zeus.

"We've come to an agreement," Zeus explained. "And I hope it satisfies you because it really is the best we can do. Listen. What would you say if we allowed Persephone to stay in the world for six months of the year, provided she spent the other six months with Hades in the Underworld?"

Demeter thought for a moment. "Make it nine months with me and three months with Hades and I will agree," she said.

"Very well. You've got a deal."

At once the famine ended. Nine months later, Persephone went back to begin her spell in the Underworld, and although she was never a truly loving wife to Hades, she was never unkind to him.

The miserable Ascalaphus never received the reward he had been hoping for. For Persephone punished him for his treachery by pushing him into a small hole and covering him with an ornamental rock garden complete with flowering hibiscus border and fishpond. In this way he was condemned to spend the rest of eternity not only in the garden but under it too.

This myth explains why it is that for three months every year the cold season comes, and it looks as though the world has gone into mourning. Then the trees lose their leaves, nothing will grow, and, like Demeter, we look forward to the spring. For it is only in the spring, when Persephone is released from her dark confinement, that the warmth and the colors will return and we can all—gods and humans—celebrate the return of life.

