

## The Story of Spring

Demeter speaks:

"Greetings, my children. How wonderful to see you gathered in a circle of women, like the mortals of old. Especially at this, my favorite time of year. For Persephone has returned, bringing the spring with her.

Ah, I see the light beginning to dawn in your eyes. You're remembering back to your seventh grade English class. Persephone... she was the one who was kidnapped and raped by Hades and carried off to live in the underworld and her mother Demeter was so despondent she caused winter to happen and she went to Zeus and begged for her return but she had eaten some pomegranate seeds so she could only come back half the year...that Persephone. Well, first of all, I don't beg. But let me start at the beginning. Let's go back to the time when women told the stories...

The world was so young then and the mortals were so new. The men would hunt in the woods and plains, bringing meat to feed their mother's tribes. The women would wander through the thickets and meadows, gathering plants for food and their healing arts. I loved to move among them, sometimes just watching, sometimes pointing out an especially delicious plant or powerful herb. Most days my daughter Persephone would accompany me. She especially loved the new green shoots and the swelling buds. But there were no seasons then. The plants grew and died back in an unending cycle, one day passed as the next, and so the months and years went by.

One evening as I was resting, however, Persephone came to me and her face was troubled. 'What is it my daughter?', I asked her. 'Mother, you know how I like to linger with the mortals as they prepare their evening meals. Well, today I stayed later than usual and I noticed that as it began to grow dark the mortals looked around fearfully and made ready to douse their fires and run into their tents. When I asked them what troubled them, they told me the spirits of the dead wander in the night and they were afraid to remain outside lest they meet them.'

'I wanted to see if it was as they had said, and so I hid myself, and sure enough, as it grew completely dark, the spirits began to appear. They moaned and cried out the names of their loved ones. Mother, I saw such fear and confusion in their eyes. Is there no one in the underworld who receives and comforts the dead?'

As usual, my daughter had managed to hit a sore spot. 'It is I who have dominion over the underworld,' I told her. 'For is that not where the plants rest in the times before their sprouting? And many times I have instructed the mortals to store their grains in one of my caves until the time for planting has come. But my work is here, feeding and instructing the living.' 'Mother, I will never forget what I saw tonight. I will go to the dead and help them.'

I argued with Persephone, reminding her of the earthly joys we shared. But I could see that look in her eyes and I knew her mind was made up. So early the next morning, I led her to the deepest, darkest cave I knew, handed her a torch, and reluctantly said goodbye.

This next part of the story is Persephone's but I know it well. Persephone walked on and on into the cave, until the sunlight grew dim and disappeared and the air grew moist and still. She walked for hours in silence, until suddenly she heard a sound like the roar of a mighty river. Rounding the next corner she found herself in a huge cavern, stretching as far as the eye could see. It was filled with the spirits of the dead, and they wandered aimlessly, hugging themselves and crying out their pain and bewilderment.

Persephone did not hesitate. Climbing onto a boulder, she planted her torch, raised her arms and cried out, 'I am Persephone, and I have come to be your Queen. You have left your earthly bodies and you now reside in the land of the dead. Approach me and I will initiate you into your new world.'

The spirits stopped their motion and gazed at her. At last one woman climbed up beside her. Persephone grasped her shoulders gently and, looking into her eyes, blessed her saying, 'You have waxed into the fullness of life, and waned into darkness. May you be renewed in tranquillity and wisdom.' And she watched as peace and hope replaced fear in the woman's eyes.

One by one, the dead approached, were blessed, and left again. And throughout the chamber, the dead faced their new life with a feeling of peace. For days and weeks Persephone continued her work, never flagging, for everywhere in the underworld she went, she saw the tranquillity her presence and her blessing brought.

I, on the other hand, was not so content. I wandered the earth, visiting all the caves and cracks I knew, searching for some sign of Persephone, but I found none. In my despair I plunged the earth into the first winter it had known. I forbid any plants to grow. Everywhere, the trees were bare, darkness replaced light, and snow covered the land. At last I stopped my wandering and came to rest on a bare hillside, staring without seeing and without hope.

I do not know how long I sat there, but one day I saw a movement before me, and a ring of purple crocuses pushed their way through the snow. I was too despondent to even feel rage at my injunction being broken, but suddenly it seemed to me that they spoke. I leaned forward and heard the flowers whisper, 'Persephone returns, Persephone returns!'

I leaped to my feet and ran toward the place where I had last seen my daughter, crying out in my joy, 'Persephone returns, Persephone returns!' Everywhere the earth began to respond. The snow melted as the warm sun emerged, green shoots pushed up through the earth, and animals shed old fur and began their mating dance. The mortals emerged cautiously from their winter homes.

Sure enough, when I reached the cave, Persephone stood blinking in the soft sunlight. We greeted each other with such great joy, but even then, gazing at my daughter, so unchanged and yet so different, I knew she must one day return to the underworld.

And now, each winter, the mortals join me in waiting through the bleak season of my daughter's absence. And each spring, we are all renewed by Persephone's return."

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