

## THE CREATION OF THE SEASONS

Demeter, the great earth mother, was goddess of the harvest. Tall and impressive was her appearance, and her hair was the color of ripe wheat. It was she who filled the fields with grain. Her own special daughter in the family of the gods was named Persephone.

Persephone was the spring maiden, young and full of joy. Sicily was her home where spring flowers are abundant. Here Persephone played with her maiden friends from day to day till the rocks and valleys rang with the sound of laughter, and gloomy Hades heard it as he sat on his throne in the dark land of the dead. Even his heart of stone was touched by her young beauty, so that he was eventually moved to rise from his dark underground palace and journey up to Olympus to ask Zeus if he might have Persephone as a wife. Zeus bowed his head in agreement, for he was happy to see his brother interested in finally dating.

One afternoon as Persephone and her maiden friends went picking and calling to one another across a blossoming meadow, it happened that Persephone strayed apart from the rest. Then, as she looked a little ahead in the meadow, she suddenly beheld a marvelous flower so beautiful that none like it had ever been known. It seemed a kind of wondrous rose, purple and white, but from a single root there sprang a hundred blossoms. Without calling to the others, Persephone sprang forward to be the first to pick the incredible flower for herself. As she stretched out her hand, the earth opened in front of her, and she found herself caught in a stranger's arms. Persephone shrieked aloud and struggled, while the armful of flowers tumbled down to earth. However, the dark-eyed Hades was far stronger than she was. He swept her into his golden chariot, took the reins of his coal-black horses, and was gone amid the rumbling sound of the closing earth before the other girls in the valley even had a chance to know something had happened. When they did finally get there, nobody was visible. Only the tulips and lilies of Persephone lay scattered in wild confusion over the grassy turf.

Demeter was horrified when she heard about what happened with her daughter. Disguising herself as a human, Demeter spent nine days, searching everywhere and asking all she met if they had seen her daughter. Neither gods nor men had seen her. Demeter in despair turned to Apollo, who sees all things from his chariot in the heavens.

"Yes, I have seen your daughter," said the bright god. "Hades took her with the consent of Zeus, so that she must now dwell in the land of the Dead as his queen. She definitely struggled and was unwilling, but Hades is far stronger than she."

When she heard this, Demeter fell into deep despair, for she knew she could never rescue Persephone if Zeus and Hades had struck a deal. She did not care any more to enter the palace of Olympus. She took on the form of an old woman, and wandered about the earth. At first she kept away from the homes of people, since the sight of little children and happy mothers gave her pain. One day, however, as she sat by the side of a well to rest her weary feet, four girls came down to get some water. They were friendly and charming as they talked with her and asked about the life of this homeless stranger woman who was sitting at their gates. The old woman told them she was wandering to find work.

The four girls listened to this story, impressed by the strange woman. At last they said that their mother, Metaneira (Met-uh-neer-uh), was looking for a nurse for their newborn brother, Demophoon (Dem-uh-foon). Perhaps the stranger would come and talk with her. Demeter agreed, feeling a great longing to hold a baby once more, even if it were not her own. She went to Metaneira, and glad to give her charge of her little son. For a while thereafter Demeter was nurse to Demophoon, and his smiles and babble helped her forget a little bit about her own missing child. She began to make plans for Demophoon: she would make him a great hero; she would make him an immortal, so that when he grew up she could keep him with her forever and always.

Soon the whole household was amazed at how beautiful Demophoon was growing, the more so as they never saw the nurse feed him anything. Secretly Demeter would smear him with nectar and ambrosia, like the gods, and she would breathe into him as he lay in her lap, and this allowed him to gain godly strength from her. When the night came, she would linger by the great fireside in the hall, rocking the child in her arms while the embers burned low and the people went off to sleep. Then when all was still, she would stoop quickly down and put the baby into the fire itself. All night long the child would sleep in the red-hot ashes, while his earthly flesh and blood changed slowly into the magical skin of the immortals. In the

morning when people came, the ashes were cold and dead, and by the hearth sat the stranger-woman, gently rocking and singing to the child.

Presently Metaneira became suspicious of the strangeness of it all. What did she know of this nurse but the story she had heard from her daughters? Perhaps the woman was a witch of some sort who wished to steal or transform the boy. In any case it was wise to be careful. One night, therefore, when she went up to her room, she set the door ajar and stood there in the crack silently watching the nurse at the fireside crooning over the child. The hall was very dark, so that it was hard to see clearly, but in a little while the mother noticed the dim figure bend forward. A log broke in the fireplace, a little flame shot up, and there clear in the light lay the baby on top of the fire.

Metaneira screamed loudly and rushed forward, but it was Demeter who snatched up the baby. "Fool," she yelled at Metaneira, "I would have made your son immortal, but that is now impossible. He shall be a great hero, but in the end he will have to die. I, the goddess Demeter, promise it." With that, old age fell from her and she grew in size and figure. Golden hair spread down over her shoulders, so that the great hall was filled with light. Demeter almost revealed her "true form" to the poor mother, but quickly caught herself before she did. Instead, she turned and went out of the doorway, leaving the baby on the ground and Metaneira too amazed and frightened even to take him up.

All the time that Demeter had been wandering, she had given no thought to her duties as the harvest goddess. Instead she was almost glad that others should suffer because she was suffering. Nothing would grow. As the gods looked down, they saw threatening the earth a famine such as never had been known. Even the sacrifices made up to the gods slowly disappeared as humans could no longer find food for themselves, let alone food to offer up to the gods.

At last Zeus sent Iris, the Rainbow, to seek out Demeter and appeal to her to save mankind. Dazzling Iris swept down from Olympus swift as a ray of light and found Demeter sitting in her temple, the dark cloak still around her and her head bowed on her hand. Though Iris urged her with the messages of Zeus and offered

beautiful gifts or whatever powers among the gods she chose, Demeter would not lift her head or listen. All she said was that she would neither set foot on Olympus nor let fruit grow on the earth until Persephone was restored to her from the kingdom of the Dead.

At last Zeus saw that he must send Hermes to bring back Persephone to the light. The messenger found dark-haired Hades sitting upon his throne with Persephone beside him, pale and sad. She had neither eaten nor drunk since she had been in the land of the dead. She sprang up with joy at the message of Hermes, while the dark king looked gloomier than ever, for he really loved his new queen. Though he could not disobey the command of Zeus, he was crafty, and he pressed Persephone to eat or drink with him as they parted. Now, with joy in her heart, she stopped refusing all his offers of food. Persephone was eager to be gone; but since the king kindly asked her, she took a pomegranate from him to avoid argument and delay. Giving in to his pleading, she ate seven of the seeds. Then Hermes took her with him, and she came out into the upper air.

When Demeter saw Hermes with her daughter, she started up, and Persephone too rushed forward with a glad cry and flung her arms about her mother's neck. For a long time the two hugged each other, but at last Demeter began to question the girl.

"Did you eat or drink anything with Hades?" she asked her daughter anxiously, and the girl replied:

"Nothing until Hermes released me. Then in my joy I took a pomegranate and ate seven of its seeds."

"Oh no," said the goddess in dismay, "my daughter, what have you done? The Fates have said that if you ate anything in the land of shadow, you must return to Hades and rule with him as his queen. However, you didn't eat the entire pomegranate, just seven of the seeds. For seven months of the year, therefore, you must dwell in the underworld, and the remaining five you may live with me."

So now for seven months of every year Persephone is lost to Demeter and rules pale and sad over the dead. At this time Demeter mourns, trees shed their leaves, cold comes, and the earth lies still and dead. But when in the eighth month Persephone returns, her mother is happy and the earth happily celebrates her return. The wheat springs up, bright, fresh, and green in the fields. Flowers unfold, birds sing, and young animals are born.