The Story of Demeter and Persephone
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Demeter, whom the Romans called Ceres, was the goddess of harvests and growing things. She made green shoots grow in spring and wheat ripen in autumn. She had a daughter called Persephone, whom she loved with all her heart. Because Persephone was so beautiful many gods and heroes wished to marry her, but Demeter sent them all away. Nobody was good enough for her daughter.

In those days it was never winter, and there was nothing Persephone enjoyed more than gathering flowers. One day she was out looking for flowers with her friends when the earth shook and a terrible rumbling noise filled the air. Her friends ran away screaming and Persephone was left alone. Imagine how terrified she was when the ground split open in front of her. Up through the earth, in a cloud of smoke, came a black chariot pulled by four black horses and driven by an invisible
charioteer. It was the chariot of Hades, king of the dead. He had been watching Persephone as she picked flowers and had fallen in love with her beauty, and now he had come to drag her down to the underworld to be his bride.

Demeter waited in vain for Persephone to come home that evening, and the next, and the next. She was beside herself with worry. What could have happened to her daughter? She asked Persephone’s friends, but they had no idea where she might have gone. At last she took a torch and went out into the night to search for Persephone.

Demeter disguised herself as an old woman called Doso. For many weeks she roamed across the earth, asking everyone she met whether they had seen Persephone. Nobody had.

Demeter was too sad and angry to think about anything but her lost daughter. All the green shoots withered and died without her to look after them, and no new plants grew. Winter had come at last.

Eventually Demeter came to the palace at Eleusis, where
King Celeus asked her to be nurse to his two sons. Celeus was a kind king, and Demeter grew very fond of the little princes. She decided to thank Celeus for his kindness by turning his son Demophon into a god. She rubbed the baby with ambrosia, which makes the gods immortal, and put him on the fire so that the human part of him would be burned away. She had only just started when Demophon’s mother came into the room and screamed at the sight of her baby on the fire. Demeter had to reveal who she really was. It was too late to make Demophon immortal now, so instead Demeter taught his brother Triptolemus how to plough, sow, and harvest. When he grew up he went around the world showing people how to grow crops.

Now that Demeter was herself again an old swineherd went to her with some news. He had seen Hades kidnap Persephone. In fact, some of his pigs had fallen down the crack in the earth made by Hades’ chariot. Demeter went to her brother Zeus to tell him what Hades had
done. She said that no plants would grow again until she had Persephone back. Zeus was worried that everyone on earth would starve, so he agreed to send Hermes to Hades to ask for Persephone’s return. Hades wanted to keep Persephone in the underworld. He tried to think of reasons why she could not go back to her mother. It wasn’t until Demeter was standing at the entrance to the underworld ready to embrace Persephone that Hades remembered:
“If she has eaten anything at all in the kingdom of the dead she will have to stay with me for ever.”
Persephone had been so miserable that she hadn’t felt like eating anything. She said no food had passed her lips since she had been in the underworld.
“Are you absolutely certain?” Zeus asked her.
“Well…” said Persephone, “hardly anything. Just four little pomegranate seeds.”
“Then you will be mine for ever.” Hades seized her arm and she and Demeter both burst into tears.
“If I can’t have my daughter I’ll make sure nothing ever grows on earth again,” wept Demeter.
Hermes had an idea. He knew that Persephone would have to stay in the underworld because of the pomegranate seeds. But he suggested that she need only stay a month every year for each seed she had eaten. The rest of the year she could stay with her mother.
Everyone agreed that this was the fairest arrangement. For eight months of the year Persephone lives with Demeter. Flowers bloom, fruit ripens, corn grows. Then Persephone must go down to the underworld to live with Hades for four months. Demeter is too sad to look after the crops and everything dies. It is winter. When Persephone comes back she brings the spring with her and everything comes back to life again.