

Tales from Ancient Greece

1. PERSEPHONE

HERMES The earth, and everything in it, is alive!

It really is! Hear the wind in the trees? I'm flying over the hot and rocky land of Greece and every tree below me has its own spirit, its own nymph, who's born with the tree and dies with the tree. Every pool and river, too, has its nymph, its special spirit. And everywhere there are gods! And guess what – I'm one of them! I'm Hermes, the gods' messenger, which is why I can fly-y-y-yyy!!!

Check out the wings on my boots and my hat!

And I have to fly fast, because they keep me busy, the gods – because there are so many of them! For instance, down there: I'm swooping out over the sea now and the sea is the kingdom of the god Poseidon. And when you see the ocean storm and heave, that means Poseidon is stirring.

POSEIDON I can calm the waves if I choose or I can whip them into a ship-wrecking frenzy!

HERMES Poseidon is powerful, and he knows it!

But most of the gods live here – Mount Olympus – at the palace of the gods. Let me introduce you to one or two of them. The biggest of them all, the father of all the gods, is Zeus –

ZEUS I send the lightning and the thunder!

HERMES What a show-off! Music! That's my older brother Apollo. He's the shining god of the sun and the god of music. That instrument he plays, a bit like the harp that you have in your time, we call it a lyre.

APOLLO No music in the world compares with mine!

HERMES I'll be honest – modest he is not. Oh, but listen: there's a different kind of music. I tell you what. I'm flying down from Olympus into the valley below. There's a crowd of people outside a temple. It's built to honour another goddess: Demeter. Here we are! The people outside the temple have dug a deep pit in the earth...and into it they're pouring grain...

1: Persephone

PRIEST Demeter! We give you grain!

HERMES ...and a cascade of olive oil.

PRIEST Demeter! We give you oil!

HERMES And it's all for Mother Earth - the goddess Demeter. The people are giving something back to her, hoping she'll give them another crop next year. Produce new life in the spring. And my first story is about Demeter - goddess of the Earth and of the corn - and about her lovely daughter Persephone.

HERMES The story of Demeter - goddess of the Earth - and her lovely daughter Persephone, starts on a perfect summer's morning. Young Persephone is singing as she fills her basket with flowers...

PERSEPHONE I just need a lily, and then perhaps something else. Then I'll take the flowers home to my mother.

HERMES She might sound just a bit too sweet, but she's about to go through a big ordeal, so give her a break.

PERSEPHONE Ah, there! Down by the river - a whole bank of orchids!

HERMES Persephone's lovely morning...

PERSEPHONE Whatever's that noise?

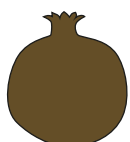
HERMES ...is about to take a turn for the worse. The mountain behind her isn't as rock-solid as it looks. Zeus, our father-god, once buried a monster under it, and the monster's always trying to escape.

PERSEPHONE Oh no!

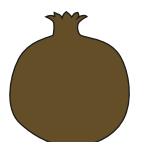
HADES Onward!!!

HERMES There's a deafening roar and a distant shout. But it's not the monster - it's another god...

HADES Onward!!!

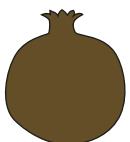


- HERMES It's a chariot. With black wheels, black horses, and a mighty, black-cloaked driver – 'cause the driver is Hades, the god of the underworld, the land of the dead! He came charging out through the smoking side of the mountain. So I flew down and asked him:
- What brings you here, Hades? What are you doing in the upper world?
- HADES The monster has split the earth open with his struggling! I can't have daylight pouring down into my kingdom! I've come to seal it up again! But oh - my - word! Look at that!
- HERMES Look at what?
- HADES Onward!!!
- HERMES What...where are you going?
- HERMES Quickly I flew ahead him...because in an instant I could see where he was heading...
- HADES Wooah!!!
- HERMES Hades reins in his horses and stands there in his chariot, gazing at Persephone, her arms full of flowers.
- HADES She is the most beautiful creature I've ever seen!
- HERMES Well, I could tell it was all going to kick off – so I flew up to Hades and tried to do some good...
- Erm, forgive me, Your Dark Majesticness...
- HADES She is beautiful!
- HERMES Yes, yes, you're not wrong. But you know who you're looking at, don't you?
- HADES A river-nymph, a flower-nymph, a nymph of a beautiful tree..?
- HERMES Er – close, but not close enough. It's Persephone.
- HADES Persephone? Oh, the very name!

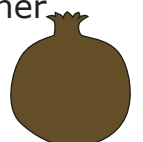


1: Persephone

- HERMES Yes, yes, it's a lovely name. But she's Demeter's daughter. She's the daughter of the goddess of the Earth!
- HADES Are you saying I'm not worthy of her?
- HERMES No, no, Your Mightiness -
- HADES I, Hades, god of the underworld, not worthy of the best the upper world can offer?
- HERMES No, it's just I can see what'll -
- HADES Silence! She must be mine! Yah!!!
- HERMES He went clattering up to Persephone...
- PERSEPHONE Mind! Look out!!!
- HADES I have no eyes for anyone but you!
- PERSEPHONE No! Stop! Put me down!
- HERMES ...and then he swept her into his chariot and was gone in a second, hurtling away back across the valley. I followed them over hills and plains till they came to a roaring river, where Hades struck the water with his sceptre...
- HADES Open!!!
- HERMES ...and the river and the riverbed split in two...and Persephone saw a chasm open, a huge black mouth leading down to the underworld.
- PERSEPHONE Ah!!! Where are you taking me?!
- HADES To my kingdom, to be my bride!
- PERSEPHONE No-o-o!!!
- HERMES And as she realised the awful truth I saw her pull off her golden sash and throw it on to the river bank. Then they were gone - vanished into the underworld - while the river closed above them. I knew Persephone's mother, the goddess Demeter, must've heard her screams - you could've heard them in Egypt. So I thought I'd better go and tell her what'd happened. I picked up Persephone's golden sash and flew off to find her...

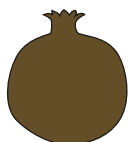


- DEMETER Persephone! Persephone! Daughter - where are you?
- HERMES I met her in the valley where Persephone had been picking flowers.
- DEMETER Hermes! Hermes! Have you seen my daughter?
- HERMES Erm -
- DEMETER There are flowers scattered everywhere! Something's very wrong, I know it! Have you seen her? Well? Have you?
- HERMES Have you ever had to give somebody bad news? Not easy, is it?
- DEMETER Hermes, what's happened? Why are you looking like that?
- HERMES It's not all bad news.
- DEMETER What do you mean?
- HERMES Persephone's going to be a queen!
- DEMETER What are you talking about? And what are you doing with my daughter's sash?
- HERMES Her sash? Ah, yes, yes, I thought you'd want to have it - as a keepsake.
- DEMETER What?
- HERMES A souvenir. Something to remember her by. I'm not doing this very well, am I?
- But eventually I managed to tell Demeter what had happened and - no surprises - she didn't take it very well...
- DEMETER The bride of Hades!
- HERMES A worthy bride, for a great king!
- DEMETER Of the underworld! Lost forever in the realm of darkness! Aaah!!
- HERMES Don't be upset.
- DEMETER Upset! I curse the land! I curse the earth that opened to take her down!



1: Persephone

- HERMES You can't do that! You've always blessed the earth and made the crops grow!
- DEMETER And now they will wither on the stalk! The sun will scorch the seed! The flocks will die! The people will starve!
- HERMES What about the fruit?
- DEMETER It'll rot!
- HERMES Perhaps I shouldn't have mentioned the fruit. And I tell you, the goddess Demeter was as good as her word: soon the fields were parched and bare, and all the flocks - the sheep, the goats - lay shrivelling in the burning sun. And the people well, the people were starving everywhere. What on earth was going to happen?
- *****
- HERMES Demeter had cursed the Earth and everything was dying. So Zeus, father of the gods, called her to his palace on Mount Olympus...
- ZEUS You should rejoice, Demeter! Persephone is going to be a queen, and married to a god!
- HERMES But Demeter was having none of it.
- DEMETER No! I want my daughter back! Until she returns from the land of the dead the earth will be a wasteland and the people will starve!
- HERMES So Zeus sent me to fetch Persephone home.
- ZEUS Hermes, go and tell Hades to give her back.
- HERMES What!
- ZEUS Go on! Away with you!
- HERMES Just like that! Like it would be a doddle!
- DEMETER And you must be quick, Hermes - if Persephone has eaten the food of the dead, she'll be lost to us forever!
- HERMES I hadn't thought of that! A kick of my winged boots and I'm away!



HERMES Mind you, I didn't know why she was worried about the food business. Persephone was so upset, I couldn't imagine she'd eaten a bite the whole time she was there. Still, down to the underworld I flew.

It's not a place you'd want to go, the land of the dead. Seriously gloomy: dead people drifting around everywhere. And there sat Persephone, on a throne beside Hades, crowned the queen of the underworld but looking as if her life was ended – which of course it would be if she'd eaten the food of the dead. Well, I took Hades aside and told him what had happened.

It's all going pear-shaped, honestly.

HADES

'Pear-shaped'?

HERMES

Demeter's heart-broken and, well, she's taking it out on everyone else. And Zeus is commanding – er, asking very nicely, that is – that you give Persephone back.

I expected Hades to go ballistic, but no. He turned to his bride, poor pining Persephone and said:

HADES

Persephone - I know how unhappy you are, my dear – nothing I can do will cheer you.

PERSEPHONE

No. Nothing.

HADES

And you're growing so thin, eating nothing I offer. And your mother is grieving.

PERSEPHONE

She is?

HADES

So Hermes tells me. You must return to her.

PERSEPHONE

You mean it? I can go? You'll let me leave?

HADES

I will. I'm not the cruel monster you think I am.

PERSEPHONE

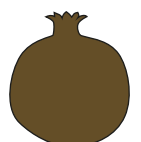
Oh, Hades!

HADES

My dear!

HERMES

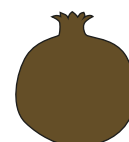
Yes, all very jolly. But there was something not quite right. Hades had this funny smile on his face...



1: Persephone

- HADES But you must be hungry, Persephone. Take some food to see you on your way.
- PERSEPHONE Oh, no - you know I can't. If I eat the food of the dead I'll have to stay down here forever.
- HADES Of course - how forgetful of me. But you must be thirsty.
- PERSEPHONE Yes, very thirsty.
- HADES Then take this.
- HERMES And he offered her a bright red, juicy pomegranate.
- PERSEPHONE A fruit? I can eat no fruit.
- HADES Of course - just suck the juice: it's rich and sweet. Drinking is not forbidden.
- HERMES I wasn't too sure about this. Pomegranates are juicy, all right - but they're full of pips, thousands of them: no fruit on earth has so many. And pips **would** count as eating.
- PERSEPHONE It looks delicious.
- HERMES Hang on, Persephone, I'm not sure -
- HADES Let me cut it for you.
- PERSEPHONE I'm so thirsty.
- HADES There - see the juice!
- HERMES Yes, but -
- PERSEPHONE I can't resist.
- HERMES Persephone - !
- PERSEPHONE Mmmm! It's so, so sweet! But oh! Oh! Oh!
- HADES What's wrong, my dear?
- PERSEPHONE The pips! I've swallowed the pips!

- HADES Oh, how tragic!
- HERMES You - you knew that would happen! Demeter will mourn forever! The whole world will be barren and the people will starve! All life on earth will end!
- HADES Oh, calm down, Hermes. You're always so dramatic!
- HERMES But then I had an idea...
- Do a deal!
- HADES A deal?
- HERMES Share her!
- HADES Share her?
- PERSEPHONE What d'you mean?
- HERMES Persephone's only eaten a small part of the fruit: she should stay here with you for only part of the year. The rest of the year let her be with her mother in the upper world. That way things will live.
- HADES Then die again, when she comes back here.
- HERMES Then live again when she goes back up!
- HADES And die again.
- HERMES And live again!
- HADES And die again! A never-ending cycle!
- HERMES Exactly!
- HERMES And that's just what happened. Hades let me take her back to Demeter...
- DEMETER Persephone!
- PERSEPHONE I'm home, mother!
- DEMETER Oh, my dear, dear daughter!



1: Persephone

HERMES ...and the goddess in her joy made everything turn green again!

DEMETER Let the flowers bloom! Let the trees bear fruit! Let the fields be filled with golden grain!

HERMES But it only stays that way for part of the year. And then, Persephone returns to Hades in the underworld, Demeter goes into mourning again and the earth turns cold and the fields are dead and empty.

Sometimes people fear that Hades won't keep his part of the bargain: winter seems long – will it ever end? But underground all is stirring. Just like a pomegranate, the earth is full of seeds, and every year Hades sends Persephone back, Demeter rejoices, and everything springs green again. It's just as I said: the earth – and everything in it – is alive!

