

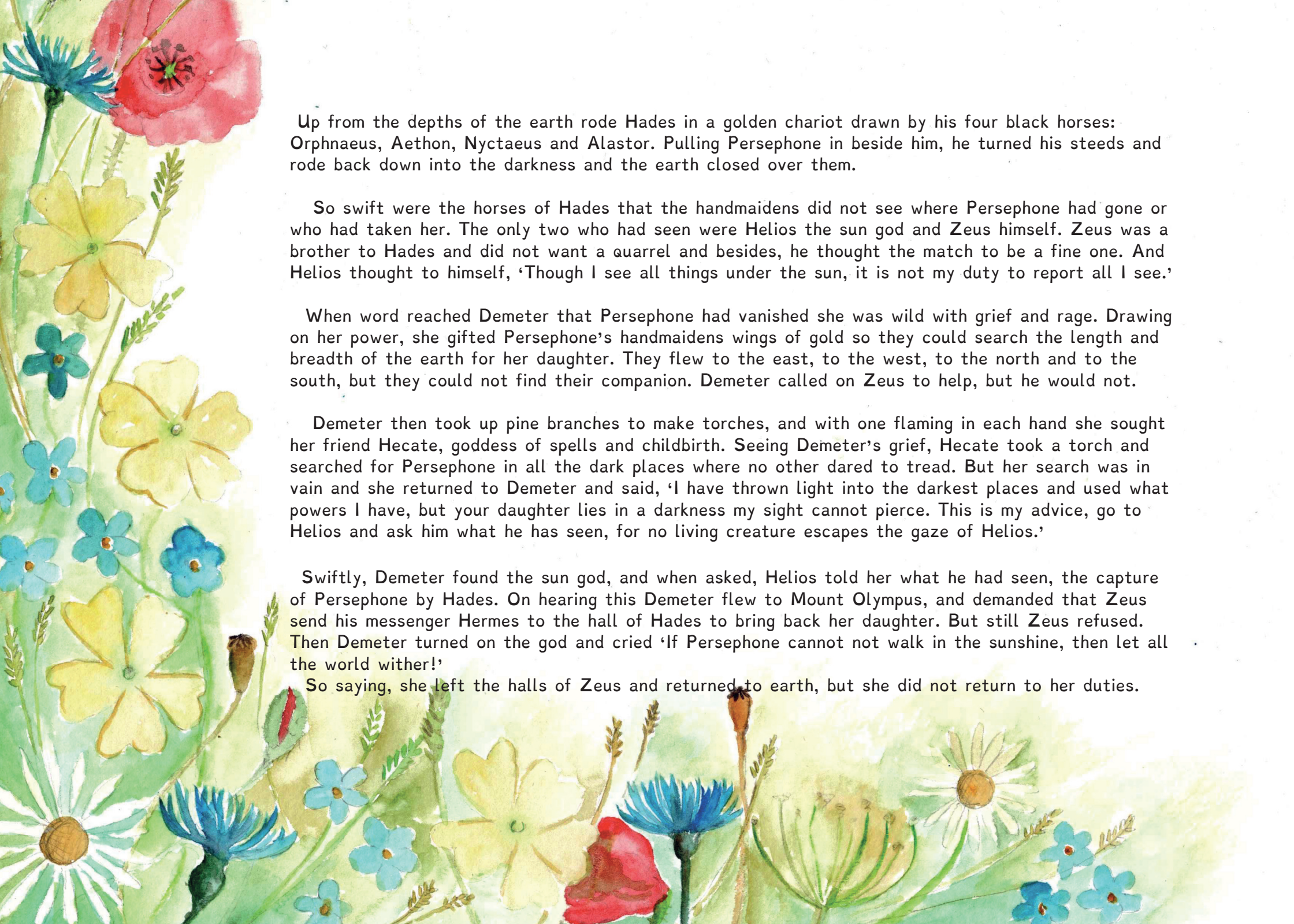
Persephone

LONG ago, when gods and goddesses still walked among men, the goddess Demeter tended the earth. Where Demeter walked the flowers bloomed, the sun shone and the crops were bountiful. The goddess looked after every growing thing with care and tenderness, but her greatest care was for her daughter Persephone. Persephone was very beautiful and many gods sought her hand in marriage, but Demeter swore Persephone would only marry with her agreement.

One day Hades, Lord of the Underworld, came to Demeter saying, 'Your daughter is a lovely maiden, but if she were married to Hades she would be endowed with power as well as beauty and would rule the Underworld by my side.' But Demeter laughed at him, saying, 'Persephone deserves better than to live in the dank bowels of the earth. She will never be a wife to you!'

Hades went away, but he could not forget Persephone or the insult of Demeter's rejection, so he thought, 'If Demeter will not agree to the match, I shall take Persephone with cunning.' It happened that Persephone was out gathering flowers with her handmaidens. The girls walked among the flowers, straying a little here and a little there. Persephone had wandered a little further from her companions when she spotted a narcissus nodding in the breeze, 'Well' she said, 'I have walked this whole earth with my mother and yet never seen a flower so fair.' So saying, she stooped, but as she pulled on the stem to pluck the flower the earth opened and Hades grasped her outstretched hand.





Up from the depths of the earth rode Hades in a golden chariot drawn by his four black horses: Orphnaeus, Aethon, Nyctaeus and Alastor. Pulling Persephone in beside him, he turned his steeds and rode back down into the darkness and the earth closed over them.

So swift were the horses of Hades that the handmaidens did not see where Persephone had gone or who had taken her. The only two who had seen were Helios the sun god and Zeus himself. Zeus was a brother to Hades and did not want a quarrel and besides, he thought the match to be a fine one. And Helios thought to himself, 'Though I see all things under the sun, it is not my duty to report all I see.'

When word reached Demeter that Persephone had vanished she was wild with grief and rage. Drawing on her power, she gifted Persephone's handmaidens wings of gold so they could search the length and breadth of the earth for her daughter. They flew to the east, to the west, to the north and to the south, but they could not find their companion. Demeter called on Zeus to help, but he would not.

Demeter then took up pine branches to make torches, and with one flaming in each hand she sought her friend Hecate, goddess of spells and childbirth. Seeing Demeter's grief, Hecate took a torch and searched for Persephone in all the dark places where no other dared to tread. But her search was in vain and she returned to Demeter and said, 'I have thrown light into the darkest places and used what powers I have, but your daughter lies in a darkness my sight cannot pierce. This is my advice, go to Helios and ask him what he has seen, for no living creature escapes the gaze of Helios.'

Swiftly, Demeter found the sun god, and when asked, Helios told her what he had seen, the capture of Persephone by Hades. On hearing this Demeter flew to Mount Olympus, and demanded that Zeus send his messenger Hermes to the hall of Hades to bring back her daughter. But still Zeus refused. Then Demeter turned on the god and cried 'If Persephone cannot not walk in the sunshine, then let all the world wither!'

So saying, she left the halls of Zeus and returned to earth, but she did not return to her duties.

Crops began to fail and a terrible famine spread across the land. Zeus, seeing the earth turn barren and all life begin to die, at last sent Hermes to the Underworld to bring back Persephone.

Hades, knowing that he would have to give up his bride, plucked a ripe pomegranate from the dark orchards of the Underworld and took it to Persephone. 'Take this,' he said 'for you will need strength for your journey home.' Persephone was hungry and Hades had been kind to her so, without thinking, she reached out and took six seeds from his hand and ate them. Hades was pleased, for he knew the laws of his land, and if anyone ate of the fruits of the Underworld then there they must remain.

Wing-footed Hermes came and led Persephone out of the darkness and up to Mount Olympus where she stood before her father Zeus, who said, 'You are returned to your mother so that the earth can bloom once again. But I see that you have eaten of the fruit of Hades, therefore you are now also of that world.'

So, it was decided that for the six pomegranate seeds Persephone had eaten she would live six months of the year with her husband Hades in the Underworld, and after those six months had passed she would return to the sunlight so that her mother Demeter would stop grieving and the world would once again turn lush and green.

The seasons turned, and though the earth mourned Persephone's loss in the darker six months, the Underworld rejoiced to have their Queen back. But when the six months had passed and she returned to her mother, every field, forest and mountainside blushed with new buds and the birds sang of Demeter's joy.

