

# Persephone

by Sadhbh Goodwin

I once heard that Persephone had golden skin

like sunset,

And that her hair was like hazel, or amber. Brown and alive.

She was made of sunlight and Demeter her mother, who made the crops grow

Must have wanted her all to herself, and greedily placed barley ropes and  
responsibilities

around her daughter's wrists and ankles to stop her  
from ever being

out of sight.

And when Hades first saw her he probably thought that

such a jewel

only belonged under the earth with him

As all the gems and crystals from the earth did.

And so he whisked her away, barley ropes and all

down to the underworld

Which was pitch black and sulphurous, full of vengeful ghosts and trapped

spirits who writhed and wailed.

Hades wanted her all to himself as well, so to prevent her escape

He hungrily placed bronze shackles on her ankles and chained her to the bed, an ugly basalt slab

So she would always be there to fulfil his wants and ugly wishes.

She lay there for weeks, legs chained to the bed, torso held down by

the crushing weight of the cavernous god.

His pomegranate lips stung, and burned her flesh,

branding her as his own

Helpless, tied down to be sacrificed alive to

a man or a monster

She could no longer tell the difference.

When her mother finally found her she grimaced in disgust at her once pure daughter chained to the death king's vast bed

Her once golden skin had turned dull, the colour of cigarette smoke and her hair lay in damp, dead, tendrils around her grey face

Persephone had wilted.

Demeter hissed at her in anger,

"Persephone how dare you, bringing shame on the gods and your name!" she shrieked and she grabbed Persephone by the shoulder, her nails were as sharp as her words

Stalagmites spearing through her chest

"I raised you to be a goddess, Lord Zeus himself had asked for your hand in marriage! And look how you've disgraced me"

She whisked her daughter away, in an angry cloud of barley dust and smoke

"I have given everything to you, you slut of a girl, you're no goddess, and you're certainly no daughter of mine!"

Demeter dressed her daughter in the coffin clothes of a bride to be and thrust her into the cellar

And then dressed herself in a fine mourning gown and flew to Olympus to announce

the death of her daughter

She locked eyes with Hades and the two

glowered at each other

In the cellar motherless Persephone screamed

Then she cried

Then she stopped crying, and she felt

then she taught herself to

speak.

New words, to fill up the space where "Mother" had been

"Friend"

yes, friend sounded good

"God"

that one she threw back into the underworld where it belonged

"Hope"

would fit there instead

"Own" she swapped with "Free"

"Dark" with "Moon"

For Artemis would light her way

The cellar seemed brighter now, and even though it had no windows

moonlight seemed to seep from some

Unknown source and illuminated the raw grey bands

around her wrists

Where the shackles and barley rope had chafed away the gold

revealing vein and vital arteries

that throbbed painfully

Persephone clenched her fist and watched as a trickle of blood ran down her wrist and seeped between her fingers

She felt a longing in her chest, a longing not to belong to anybody

No mothers with wasp-sting slaps and barley ropes and

celestial

responsibilities

No Death-gods with cavernous craving for jewels and fresh meat, invading being and bodies and

breath

She gritted her teeth and pounded her torn fists on the locked door.

Her mother wasn't going to rescue her

none of the gods would

They were all too petty, too

greedy

She would rescue herself, not be owned by anybody, or owe anything to anybody

She would be free.

She tore long strips from the black bridal gown and bandaged her ankles and wrists

In the cellar she found a blunt dagger and with this

she hacked off the rest of her hair

And started again

She found an old sword buried under decades of dust

so heavy that it hurt to lift

but she swung it

Again and again at the door until eventually it cracked open

she left everything behind except her dagger

and fled

To a forest so tangled and wild that even Demeter had not been able to tame it

Persephone ran through the trees

seething

Leaving wisps of tattered black lace caught on twigs and angry thorns behind her

Her legs burned and her heart beat hot in her chest

but she didn't stop

Dodging trees and barbed-wire brambles she caught the sun going down and the night fell upon her

Unable to see she tripped on a tendril of tree root and found herself sprawled on the cold, mossy earth.

She lay on the ground and breathed in the smells of the forest, rotted wood and leaf mould and pine-needles.

And looked up at the moon which was just a sliver of light through the clouds,

"Artemis will light my way," she whispered

She felt another moon glowing in her stomach, it's silver light was pumped through her bloodstream

"Hope."

She closed her eyes and slept

Soundly for the first time in weeks

Listening to the sounds of the dryads in the trees whisper,

Their voices were wind through the leaves

She awoke to shards of sunlight that had broken through the canopy,

Her feet were aching and blistered and her lips were chapped and cracked,

Blood trickled painfully through her teeth

in little red streams

But she was alive and this gave her hope

And her hope made a well from which she drew strength

She climbed stiffly to her feet and looked around

The trees grew claustrophobically close together

their roots entwined in a chaotic crochet

The sun sliced through the canopy in gaudy yellow rays, dripping through the leaves like honey  
Shadows shied away from the sweet sunlight but Persephone drank in its warm nectar

She decided to build herself a home in the heart of the forest  
Woven together with brambles and honey, dewdrops and earth  
She fastened branches together to make a shelter  
And covered them with moss to keep the rain out  
Using pine needles she sewed herself a cloak of animal skin and ferns  
And created a place where none of the gods would find her.

At first she lived off nuts, which cracked her teeth and were dry and bitter on her tongue  
And berries  
Their juices staining her lips violet.

She strained to sip rainwater, collected in bowls of bark  
But it wasn't enough and once again Persephone felt herself  
slipping away...

She made her first spear.  
Used her dagger to sharpen a slender branch she had found lying under fallen leaves  
It was a flimsy weapon and she was no skilled hunter or marksman  
The days passed and still she had caught nothing  
Her hunger had made her clumsy and in the shadows she had nothing but birdsong to aim at  
But slowly she learned and finally succeeded  
And built a small fire on which to cook her prize  
The meat was tough and tasteless but she picked the bones clean  
Licked the dripping fat off her fingers and reclined

Drowsy and full in front of the crackling fire.

After that it got easier,  
Persephone learned how to walk so softly on the mossy ground that  
Not even the dryads heard her footsteps as she stalked her prey

Whispering lullaby spells that her mother taught her  
She sung the deer to sleep as her arrows expertly navigated their way through the animal's soft hide  
Before embedding itself in its vital organs.

She learned to carve arrows so sharp they couldn't be felt as they sliced flesh from bone

Weaving bow-strings from vine and sinew  
Persephone thrived and bloomed in the shadows, hidden from the gods  
And all who wished to possess her.

Meanwhile, Hades grew more and more bored of the underworld's macabre entertainment  
He no longer found thrill in the torturing of souls  
And even when he gazed down, into the pitch black depths of Tartarus  
He felt none of the usual exhilaration  
His rotting heart beat fast only when he thought about the golden nymph  
That had slipped out of his closed fist like  
a snake through a trap.

Golden ichor pumping through his veins to the sound of her name, filling him with bitter longing  
He remembered how her mother had stolen her selfishly away  
And then announced to the Olympians that Persephone was dead  
But she wasn't

Hades of all people would have know that.  
Persephone remained among the living  
For now at least  
Demeter had her and Hades wanted her back  
He would get her  
Hades always got what he wanted.

Demeter had grown increasingly unpredictable  
Flitting like a locust between seasons  
She spat blight at crops, wilting wheat with ergot and feverish fury  
Winter enveloped the earth as Demeter lamented her lost property  
It was all Persephone's fault  
After all it was her daughter who had gotten herself kidnapped  
and locked away  
It wasn't Demeter's fault  
Demeter had just been doing a her job as a mother  
And when she came home from Olympus to find that once again her daughter had gone

Hades was to blame

He always was

But Demeter would reclaim her prize

And she would punish whichever god was responsible for stealing it

Dressed in corn-silk and lurid crimson poppies she set forth to find Hades and make him beg for mercy

She vowed that Death would fall when spring came to Tartarus

Deep in the forest Persephone had changed

She was taller now, and strong

No longer her mother's daughter she had shed gold in exchange for skin

As dark as the mossy ground and as tough as tree bark

Her hair had started to grow back after she had hacked it off in her mother's cellar

Her hands were calloused, cracked and caked in mud, and her legs always ached after

Long days spent tripping over tree roots while hunting but

Persephone was happy

In a way that Demeter had never seen

In a way that Hades never would

She learned spells from the dryads who whispered willowy guidance

As she cast glowing enchantments that spiral through the forest like ethereal glow worms

She learned to etch runes into her arrows so they would never miss

She was growing into a goddess and she knew

Persephone had become less sunlight and more sorceress

More power than petals and stinging pomegranate lips

More predator

The gods could tear themselves apart

and they would

But Persephone was not going to fall with them

