

## Witchlets Story 2011 — The Story of Demeter and Persephone



*Circle Round: Raising Children in Goddess Traditions,*  
Co-authored by Starhawk, Diane Baker and Anne Hill,

Circle round, and I'll tell you a very ancient story...

On a beautiful day in spring, Kore, daughter of Demeter, was gathering flowers with her maidens in a green meadow. The earth was green with new growth and lush with bright crocuses, sweet narcissus, and fragrant hyacinths. The young women sang as they picked the flowers and danced on the new grass.

In a far corner of the meadow, Kore noticed a golden gleam. She left her maidens and went to investigate. There grew a golden flower, more beautiful than any she had ever seen before. The flower's perfume made Kore feel joyful and carefree and just the tiniest bit afraid. She wanted to pick the flower and keep it for her very own. And even though she knew that you should never pick a flower that is the only one of its kind, she reached out her hand and plucked the blossom.

Instantly, she heard a great roaring and cracking sound, and the earth shook under her. She fell to the ground. When the air grew still, she looked up and saw that a deep chasm had opened just in front of her, like a tunnel leading into the heart of the earth.

Kore was a very curious maiden. She had lived all her life on the surface of the beautiful earth, loved and protected by her mother, Demeter, who was the Goddess of all green and growing things. Her life was filled with pleasure and abundance.

But she had always secretly wondered what lay underneath the bright surface of the world. Where did the spring flowers come from when they pushed their way up from below? If they were so bright and lovely when they emerged, what wonders might lie in the place where they originated?

"Here's an opening that leads beneath the earth," she said to herself. "Now I can explore the realms below. Oh, maybe I shouldn't go down. I know my mother wouldn't like it. But I will, just a little way, just to see what's there."

She left her maidens and the bright flowers above and entered the cavern. At first the way was wide. Light came from the opening behind her, and she could see the beautiful colors and interesting shapes of the stone.

But the chasm began to narrow. At first it was as wide as a room, then it was as narrow as a hallway. Kore could not see very much, as the stone walls blocked most of the light from behind. But somehow the gloom made her even more curious.

"I should turn around," she said to herself. "My mother will be worried about me. But I think I'll go on, just a little bit farther.

So she went on, and the passage became narrower and narrower. Soon she had to stoop down and bend her head to avoid the low roof of the tunnel. Then she had to drop to her knees and crawl. All the light disappeared, and she had to feel her way through the dark.

"I should go back," she told herself. "This could be dangerous, and my mother will be so worried if I don't come home! But if I just go on a little farther, I might come upon something wonderful."

So she continued on, until she was lying on her belly, squirming along the ground. Suddenly she realized that the passage had become so narrow and tight that there was no room for her to turn around. She tried to push herself backward, but her hips stuck. For the first time she felt afraid.

"Oh no!" she said to herself. "Now I've done it! How will I get out of here? My poor mother will be so worried! I can't go back, so I'll have to go forward and hope I come to a wider place where I can turn around."

But the passage continued to narrow, until she was fighting to squeeze through the crack in the rocks.

"Stupid me!" Kore said to herself. "Why did I ever come here? Why did I leave the bright meadows and the beautiful flowers? Now I might never see my mother's face again, or dance on the new green grass."

At that moment the earth gave way beneath her, and she fell, tumbling and turning over, down and down until she felt like she was flying through the dark.

"I'll be smashed to pieces!" she cried, "Oh, Mother, why did I ever leave you?"

But she landed as softly as a feather floats to earth, in the heart of the Underworld.

All day long, Demeter was waiting for the return of her daughter. While the bright sun was high in the sky, she didn't worry, but went happily about her tasks of helping the grain to grow and the trees to set fruit. But as the sun dipped into the west, she felt a chill in her heart. When evening fell, Kore's companions came running back from the field.

"Demeter, Demeter, Kore is lost!" they cried, "The earth shook and opened up, and when we looked back, Kore was gone. We can't find her anywhere!"

"Kore!" Demeter let out a heart-rending cry, "My dear, only daughter! Kore, where are you?"

Nobody could tell her where Kore had gone.

"I'll search for her," Demeter vowed, "I won't rest until I find my daughter!"

And so she began to search. Through the fields and the meadows, under the tall trees of the woodlands and along the rocky coasts of the sea, she wandered.

"Have you seen my daughter?" she asked every person she met, "Kore, the bright flower-maiden of spring, have you seen her?" But no one knew where Kore had gone.

Farther and farther Demeter wandered. From the hillsides of Greece she crossed the sea to the islands, climbing steep mountains and following the banks of streams. But no one in the islands knew where Kore had gone.

At last she wandered back to her homeland. She came to rest outside the gates of the town called Eleusis, in the middle of a broad plain that was the most fertile land in all of Greece. She sat beside the well, covered her head with her cloak, and mourned. She cried until she felt completely empty. Then she got mad.

"I am the Goddess, Demeter!" she cried, "I shouldn't have to suffer like this! I am the one who makes all things grow, who gives the gifts of food and life. No more! Until Kore is returned to me, there will be no more growth! No food, no life; no seeds will sprout, no fruit will set, no grain will ripen, no young things will be born! Nothing, until the whole world is as dead and empty as I feel!"

And so the gardens died, the grapes withered on the vine, and the fields were parched and empty. The people went hungry, and there was no joy anywhere.

In the Underworld, all was shadowy and dim. Kore wandered and wandered through wide halls of stone. The spirits of the dead surrounded her like twittering ghosts.

"Help us, help us," they hissed and whispered, "We are so cold, so gray, so lonely. You are so full of life and color and the memory of the bright sun."

"How can I help you?" Kore asked, "I am lost myself. Oh, why did I ever come down here? I want to go home, to the bright meadow and the flowers. I want to see my mother's face!"

"Stay with us, come close to us," the ghosts pleaded. They frightened Kore, and she ran from them, through the twisting passageways of the Underworld.

At last she came to the largest hall, a great underground cavern. In the center, on a huge, black throne, sat a God. He was dark and handsome, dressed all in black, and Kore knew instantly who he must be.

"Hades!" she greeted him, "Lord of the Underworld! I am your cousin Kore, the Maiden of Spring. Once this realm belonged to my Grandmother Hecate. You took it from her, and now you must help me get back to the living world of sunlight and flowers."

"Kore," Hades greeted her. As soon as he said her name, he fell in love with her. In that realm of gray shadows, she was like a golden gleam of spring sun, like a rare flower that scented the air. He wanted nothing more than to take her and keep her forever as his very own.

"My dear cousin," Hades said, "I am sorry to have to tell you that no one ever returns from this realm. You will have to remain here. But since you are a Goddess, I will happily make you my bride, and together we will rule the land of the dead."

"But I don't want to be your bride!" Kore protested, "I want to go home to my mother."

"Come sit here beside me," Hades said. She noticed a second dark throne next to his. "Rest from your wanderings, and have some food and drink. You'll feel better."

"I want to go home," Kore said, but she was very tired. So she sat on the throne next to Hades.

"Don't be sad," Hades said, "The Underworld is a place of great riches. All the gold and jewels and precious stones belong to us. We are wealthy."

"I don't care about gold and jewels," Kore said, "I want my mother! I want flowers and fruit and living, growing things." She was so sad, she couldn't eat or drink.

Back on earth, the harvest had failed. Demeter still sat grieving beside the well. She was so shriveled and withered that no one recognized her as a Goddess. To the people of Eleusis, she appeared to be just an old beggar woman. Still, they took pity on her, and tried their best to cheer her up. They brought her a soothing drink of mint and barley water, but still she mourned. Baubo, the clown Goddess, came and told her jokes, but she did not smile. The Queen of Eleusis herself invited Demeter to her home. The Goddess was not comforted, but she did appreciate the kindness of the people of Eleusis. Their city became the site of her temple, and their fields were ever the most fertile in Greece. And so, if you ever meet an old beggar woman, be kind to her. Remember, she may be the Goddess in disguise!

Since there was no food to harvest, famine covered the land. Everywhere, people starved. At last even the Goddesses and Gods up on Mount Olympus began to feel hungry. No one was feeding them with sacrifices. No one was making offerings.

"This can't go on," Zeus the Thunder God said at last, "We must get Demeter back on the job. Can't anyone reason with her?"

"Until Kore is returned to her, she won't make fertility for the land or the people," said Hecate, the old Goddess who was Kore's grandmother, "Demeter can be very stubborn when she's angry. I think you'd better help her if you want to eat again."

"Well, where is Kore?" Zeus asked, "Didn't anyone see where she went? She can't just have disappeared."

"That's exactly what she did," said Helios, "I saw. I see everything. She went down to the Underworld, and now Hades wants to make her his queen."

"The Underworld! That's a serious matter," Zeus said, "No one returns from the land of the dead."

"Then the people will starve and the earth will die," said Hecate, "And even we, the Goddesses and Gods will go hungry."

"Perhaps we could make an exception in this case," Zeus said, "As long as Kore hasn't eaten any food down there, we can let her come back."

"Please, eat something," Hades begged Kore. She had grown sad and pale, and yet to him she seemed even more beautiful, like a silver pearl gleaming in the dark.

"I'm not hungry," Kore said, "I want to go home."

Hades begged her to eat, and tried to cheer her by showing her all the beauties of the Underworld: the caverns of crystal and the glowing, jeweled halls, the underground rivers and vast lakes, the streams of molten golden lava. He was so kind, so attentive, so worried about her that she actually began to feel somewhat fond of him. Still, she wanted nothing more than anything to go home.

"Please eat," Hades urged her, "You are growing so thin, it hurts me to watch you suffer."

He held out to her a handful of the seeds of a pomegranate. They were red as rubies, a brightness among the shadows. They appealed her.

"After all, I can't go back home," she told herself, "I might as well enjoy what is here."

She reached out her hand and took the seeds. Popping them into her mouth, she sucked the sweet, tart juice.

Instantly, everything changed. The shadows came alive. They were the ghost memories of all that had ever taken place above, but they were also the images of what had not yet been, rich with all the possibilities of change and growth. The dead and the unborn danced together like colors in a kaleidoscope, and from their movement new life would be born.

Suddenly Kore was filled with a joy and power she had never known before. She plucked two flaming torches from the wall of the cavern and began to dance. She whirled and spun and leaped, playing with fire, dancing the way from death and rebirth and back again. The dead followed her, and as they spiraled together, women in the upper world began to feel new life stirring in their wombs.

"This is where the seeds come from!" she proclaimed, "This is the wonderful place where flowers are born. And I am its Queen, Queen of fire. I am no longer just little Kore, Demeter's daughter. I am myself, Persephone, Queen of the Dead."

"She has tasted the food of the dead," Zeus said. "Now what do we do?"

"She has changed," Hecate said, "No longer is she the sweet young maiden Demeter grieves for. Now she is Queen in her own realm. She can never again belong wholly to the upper world, but she cannot belong completely to the Underworld, either. She must be a bridge between them, showing the dead the way to rebirth and reminding the living of life's end so they remember to be fully alive."

"For every seed she has eaten, she must spend one month each year in the Underworld," Zeus agreed, "But in the spring, she can return to the upper world with the new shoots that rise from the bare ground, and bring life and hope and rejoicing to her mother."

"And so for part of each year the earth will be bare and brown and support no life," Hecate agreed, "But in the spring, when Persephone returns, all of nature will rejoice."

And so Persephone rose from the Underworld, and Demeter greeted her with great joy. They danced together on the new grass, and everywhere their feet touched, spring flowers bloomed. And so each year when Persephone returns, life blossoms everywhere. But when she descends, Demeter covers her head with her cloak. Leaves fall, the harvest is gathered in, and life rests until Kore returns once more.

The End