

## The Pomegranate Letters

by Leslie Benigni

Hades,.....

My daughter is not another soul to collect.

It started in the field, didn't it? It was on the edge of our property and she laid in the tall grass while I tended to the wheat in the next patch over. It was summer and she was in her daze as she always was. She was traipsing behind me every now and again and singing her song in her proud and wild way.

"Persephone, why don't you make an effort with this harvest?" I asked, looking over the crops of the villagers as they went back into their homes for dinner. "You know you are the only child of mine that can help me, help them."

"Why must they make their sacrifices?" she asked. She sighed and plucked wildflowers from the tall grass around her feet.

"That is the unspoken agreement between us and them, god and mortal," I said. "They held up their end and we must reciprocate."

She sighed once more. I knew she did not care.

My most arrogant child responded with absolutely no conviction of her ability, looking at the fields around us and made them grow almost on a whim. Flowers bloomed out of nothing as did the vibrancy of all things vegetation. Small animals came wandering behind her, deer and rabbits. Even if it is her nature, literally and figuratively, she didn't care, and I don't believe she still does.

And then there was you.

Out of the corner of my eye, we noticed a dark stain in the undergrowth and I should've known better. I knew it was you and I knew we were near your cave, your lurch into the kingdom below. I merely thought you were silently warning us not to come near, but no. No.

I looked at you and then to my daughter and noticed one of the flowers she was holding between her porcelain fingertips had crispy, wilted edges. I should have taken that image for what it was: an omen. I was broken of my fixation on the flower when she asked a question.

“Mother, who is that man?” Persephone did not face me and I could easily define the silhouette of her face, the tip of her nose down to her lips.

I told her, “That is Hades.”

She saw what I saw, the darkness that wisped around you, a souvenir of your realm.

“God of the underworld and the dead?” This was the most focused I had seen her.

I nodded. “Correct.”

She left it at that and we forged ahead unto another. We came back and forth between this rural string of farmlands and Olympus as farmers sacrificed their cattle and goats to turn in our favor over the next several weeks. Persephone lagged behind, my lonely child, separate from her several other siblings because of her similar ability to myself. She gazed off into the undergrowth every now and again with a slight cackle under her breath, like the ravens that plucked their claws from tree branches to fly. That's when I knew she was already under your spell—what hex was it? What enchantment did you see fit to take my sweet child?

On one of our runs to the mortal world later that week, Persephone went off on her own accord as she did when I didn't redirect her to help. I went on my own to other village's fields, helping their harvest, checking to make sure each sacrifice would balance out. At the end of the day,

I returned to Mt. Olympus and assumed that she had returned without me, but looking around the great feast table with the other gods, I saw that her seat was empty. No one had seen her. My daughter was gone and the hard chill of panic entered my being.

I went to every nymph, god, and goddess to tell me what they knew and all leads went back to you. My suspicions were correct. You fully realized the bind you put me in. You knew that if you took her, I would not be able to retrieve her because I am not allowed to enter your kingdom. You knew all of this, you calculated swine. In fact, you are worse than swine, worse than the dirt that surrounds you down below in your *realm*. Crooked grins, sly hands, and a dangerous voice: you should be ashamed of yourself.

You've had her for too long. Bring her back to me.

Demeter

Demeter,

I would like to start by saying that your daughter is safe, if that's your concern. Know that I apologize for not coming to you sooner to request for Persephone's hand, but please know that I have loved your daughter since the first moment that I saw her, that day in the field, and vow to take care of her for eternity.

A servant came to me earlier that day as I sat alone, just as I have since the beginning of time, in my dark, stone throne room and informed me that you and she were going about your duties to the mortals too close to my realm's entrance. I sighed as I stood up, knowing that I would have to bear the sunlight of the waning summer day. I could have sent a servant, I could have, but my weary self needed the change from overseeing the souls. An eternity of overseeing and being

bound to the bleakness of my realm has turned into one long, dark night. I'm actually thankful that I didn't send a servant because otherwise I would have never seen *her*.

I emerged from the entrance enclosed by boulders leading out unto the undergrowth and saw you both fulfilling your duties to the mortals that submitted their sacrifices. I knew of your duties, Demeter, but did not know that one of your children possessed such an innate ability to create life from her tiny, fragile fingertips. Not only did her ability enrapture me, but her pure beauty: her lengthy locks that grazes over the wheat heads, but is made of golden silk, her naturalness and place among nature and life---it was instant. In that moment, I knew that she was everything I am not, a natural opposite, but a pure, youthful goddess that could bring out the best in me as I her.

When Persephone and I looked at one another, my heart stopped. Before, I was going to speak out a warning, but was left utterly speechless. She must have asked you about me and that's when her own interest in me began. All of us walked away, but she never stepped out of my thoughts as I returned to my throne. I replayed the moments, though as brief and mundane as they were, over and over in my head. With each passing soul into my realm, I began to notice features in each of the women that could have possibly resembled her, but none ever came close. It was a fool's wishing because, after all, no one could ever match the sheer quintessence of Persephone, that much I knew was a fact.

It became nonstop, especially as I realized that above my very head that the mortals were persisting on making their sacrifices to you and your daughter for an excellent harvest. That's when the idea came.

"Furiae," I called to my three main servants. "Inform me when Goddesses Demeter and Persephone come within close proximity of my realm." And they did as I asked.

The next time you both came to a string of farmlands that curved in and out beside the undergrowth. I watched you both as I stood in between spindling ancient trees thinking of what I would say, how I would ask your permission, how I would properly introduce myself to the lovely Persephone. When you both were close, I attempted to call out, as a greeting, but a crow flew right past me and nearly made me fall over. It squawked as it flew away and I noticed Persephone laughing; that was that crackling you heard in her laughter. If my minor embarrassments are works of enchantment then I would hate to see what you think of my actual powers.

But that bird was perhaps a good omen because without your noticing she waved to me, greeted me with a warm, honeysuckle smile that spread a feeling over my being like none I'd felt before.

I wanted more. I wanted her and I would have her.

As I had instructed days before, my servants called to me to rise above to the mortal land of sunlight and though I always despised doing so, now I had an absolute purpose. This time, as I strolled through the dark shrubbery and trees, there she stood (of her own free will, mind you) on the very edge of the field and the undergrowth. She knew of the boundary I could not cross and that I cannot cross into the field as it is not part of my realm, only the undergrowth of my entrance and no more. she was waiting for me.

My heart pounded. "Hello," I said.

"Hello." Her voice twinkled with warmth.

We stood in silence looking each other up and down. Then I took her hand. I couldn't feel myself reach out to her and yet her small, doll-like hand was placed perfectly, fitting in mine like two halves of a broken stone tossed around by the blackened sea then somehow washed up next to each

other. It was so sudden, even for me, that I thought she would scream for you, run away, or use her powers, but she did none of that, just smiled on and continued to hold my hand back.

“I’m sorry,” I told her, not taking my hand away.

“Why are you apologizing?” she asked. Then, I took my hand back at my side.

“You-You’re incredibly beautiful,” I said. “I never meant to stare or pry, but you have the most graceful powers I’ve seen among all of the goddesses.”

I couldn’t believe I said it. *Where is all this spontaneity coming from?* I thought. But, I knew it was her, she brought that out in me.

“Well, many thanks, indeed, *Hades*,” she said my name with an emphasis.

Then she stared at me, bore her pale eyes into my soul like a cat that doesn’t want to blink at some moving, interesting thing. I chuckled a moment.

“Aren’t you afraid of my darkness, dear?” A slight smirk.

“Oh, no” she said. “You haven’t had a chance to see mine.”

My smile loosened into a line. My heart thudded like great shrine drums.

“I must be going, my mother keeps a watchful eye on me constantly.”

The summer cicadas crescendoed their filmy calls.

She took a few steps close to me, so incredibly close that I could feel her slight breaths from her nostrils. Then she kissed me and tasted like strawberries, something too sweet that I couldn’t take. I almost trembled.

As she broke away, she said, “I will return in a fortnight and I wish to visit your kingdom.”

She glided away with the wind undulating in the wheat as her locks trailed behind her like a lioness's tail. I thought hard to believe that such a young goddess, or any goddess, for that matter would have any interest in coming to the underworld of their own will, let alone for a 'visit'. And then as I returned home and gazed over the lands of my kingdom, I realized that perhaps deeper beneath her beauty, she had iron underneath, a deep, churning metal that made her empathetic to who I was, what I was ruler over. It seemed she understood that not all darkness is bad because she seemed to have a bit of it in herself. For as fast as it was going, I felt that this had to be destiny, that we were meant to be together. We brought out a different side in each other that was perhaps better for the both of us.

When a fortnight was upon us, I came above once more and waited. I saw you heading over to a field at the foot of the mountain, out of my reach to call you, and though I should have, it almost felt wrong at this point, like you should not have known. There was something in Persephone's voice that last time I saw her that internally warned me of that.

Though, I saw you, Demeter, I could not catch sight of your daughter across my line of vision. I focused in on a black speck over yonder and thought that it was a crow. Something yanked the sleeve of my robe and my love had found me.

"We must hurry," she whispered. "Let us go to your realm."

She pulled me to walk beside her and I was astonished at her eagerness to join me. I took one last look at you heading for pearly Olympus as we walked to the entrance of the underworld, large gray boulders leaning on each other in such a way to create a small mouth for souls, etc. to journey down.

Because she naturally had my permission, Persephone was able to enter, but before setting foot in the darkness, she stopped, making me halt with a jolt.

Her face was inscrutable, but I could tell she was thinking hard about something—I assumed the decision she was making to join me in my realm, the choice to stay with me. I would prolong the ‘visit’ as much as I could so that she would want to stay. I stood next to her on the precipice of the darkness and turned to her.

“I tell you such fine music waits in the shadows of hell,” I said.

She took that in with such deep eyes with small glints of black then took her steps inside.

So, Demeter, your child decided on her own to come with me into my home. I believe she loves me as I love her. It is a shame as I hear the world above has decayed, that Persephone’s hard work has gone to waste in order to transform into a wasteland, creating autumn and thus frightening the mortals with their now dead crops. My love has taken the spring and summer with her and she doesn’t seem to care. She has taken to the darkness and I believe that she showed her proclivity to this place when I saw the deepness of her eyes, the small inherent darkness that she let me peer into and allows me to peer into now as I show her my duties and all of the lands beneath your feet.

As I said before, I apologize for not asking you before taking your daughter’s hand, but she has apparently taken mine on her own. She wears strength and darkness equally well, the girl has always been half goddess, half hell.

Hades

Mother,

Whether or not you believe Hades is none of my concern, but you must take it from me before you wreak havoc onto the mortals’ lands: I am queen of this realm now. I don’t know why



you aren't surprised by this newfound situation. I was bored of your world, Mother, always bored. You say that what I have is a gift and that it should be shared with those mortals that sacrifice for us, but I disagree. Before I left for this world under your world, the mortals would sacrifice more and more and we would give more and more. I know it is the agreement, but they do not know hardship, never have. I have nothing personal against them, but I believe that without hardship, how would anyone remember what the good was? How would anyone know that there is a light at the end of a struggle, that there is hope?

I know about these things because you have had me under your thumb since you knew that my abilities matched your own, possibly even surpassed them. Your powers have always been great, but we both know that they wane and I can make all of the abundant flora and fauna faster and greater than you ever could have. It would seem that even the mortals depend on me more than they do you. You've consistently wished me to use my abilities because you know that you will retire and it will be my time to take on the duties every year for eternity.

You've never let me out of your sight or go beyond your general area. These same rules applied that day in the field, but there was something different. He was something different. Hades looked at me like no one had ever looked at me.

Though darkness surrounds him, there was something enchanting about the depth at which he gazed upon me, not that I was just another beautiful face, but that I was something more. Those flowers I picked the day we saw each other were already crisp with death and it was something so outside of myself, so outside of my knowledge that I knew he had something to offer me—a way out.

I went to him several times, made him mine, enraptured him until he felt it even at the base of his spine. I told him I wanted to visit his kingdom, but I think we both knew it would be much

longer than a visit and would involve so much more. As I took his hand and made him lead me to the actual entrance, I did, doubt myself. I had never taken a leap like this before and I wondered if it was worth it.

Then he said to me, "I tell you such fine music waits in the shadows of hell" and I knew I had to make the plunge. So I did.

His world was all blues and blacks, filled with stone and smoldering spots. I only saw the souls from a distance, but it wasn't until we boarded the long wooden ferry with the skeletal, hooded Charon that I decided to look into the luminescent river. They looked like cobweb faces, ethereal and almost like stringy tissue swirling around in some potion of a cauldron. I thought it almost looked beautiful. Hades beamed at me.

His personal chambers were filled with music. The Furies, three female servants sung their songs and played on ivory flutes to a tune that was so drawn out and sharp that its melancholy almost made me cry. His other servants welcomed me with a feast of meager food, but it was food. A small roast of a bird, fruit, and wine.

"My dear, what do you think of this place?" he asked me.

As I looked up at cracks along the stones of the walls and the torches that lit every so often between the ribbed pillars, I felt both uneasy and excited.

"I'm not sure," I said, honestly. Then images of the sun, the warmth of the day, and the flowers I would pick day in and day out. My eyes started to water.

Hades rushed to my side from the head of the table and held my hand, perfectly fitting into his.

"My dear, my dear, it is not so dreadful here," he said. "Come, I will show you."

We walked from his stone temple back to the ferryman, but this time, he had another destination in mind. We sailed across the glowing river in silence until we came upon a mouth of another cave that had a light at the end of it. With a smooth grind onto the flat rock shore, Hades jumped out first then plucked me from the boat. As we headed into this cave, the unknown source and strangeness of the light made me anxious.

I thought that perhaps this was too fast and I made a hasty decision with a man that I thought I could make assumptions about. But as he held my hand and we walked further down the tunneling path, we came unto a clearing of a green pasture seemingly with its own sunlight. There was a forest just beyond and I thought we were back above ground in a place that was warm and familiar to me.

“Where are we?” I asked.

“This,” he said. “is one of the many lands of my kingdom. Not all souls linger in the river, many end up here, in the In-between.”

“The In-between,” I repeated.

“Many souls are confused on where to go, what decision to make, what change needs to be made.” It was as if he knew what was going on in my mind.

Soon, off lingering by olive trees were fully-embodied ethereal souls, walking around like he and I. They noticed us visiting their land and waved to us and we did the same. I looked up at him, his dark circles protruding from under his thick eyelashes and thought he was handsome, but not in a way that I had seen before. He was handsome when I first saw him but in this artificial, underworld sun, he looked beautiful. A monster trapped in a beautiful body.

From this kind gesture, I knew that I made the right decision. He made me feel at home, while I was transitioning quickly to these strange, new surroundings. He knew I missed certain aspects of the world above, the one I knew so well with light and sunsets and land. He took me to a special place down below that would always remind me of above. Perhaps it was through this and more that he did love me, and for that, he became more than a way out and I then loved him, too. This place will never even be Olympus filled with glorious banquets at the long, shining table with all our gods and all our family, but down here it is enough because Hades is my family now and he has all of the festiveness, but in his own way. I think I bring out the light in him as he brings the dark in me. We are strangely the same.

Mother, I was not abducted, I wandered down into his shadowy land of my own volition and fell in love with him.

Therefore, there is no reason for you to rage unnecessary havoc on the mortals above as my absence has already damaged their crops. The Furies told us of this as we sat at the long stone slab dining table. It had been some weeks since I made my venture and we were sitting for another meal of a different roasted bird, fruit, and wine.

“My Lord and Lady, Goddess Demeter has brought to the attention of the other gods of Lady’s disappearance from the upper worlds. Goddess Demeter has been denying the mortals’ sacrifices as well as causing famine and disease.”

“Of course you didn’t tell her, as I suspected,” Hades sighed.

“I have told you of my mother!”

He rested his hand on mine. “My dear, you are still such a young goddess and you still have a mother that loves you. I will send a scroll and do my part, but I’m afraid you must return to her. We

have no purpose if no mortals are left alive. You have spent your time here, but you let the mortals have their time of rebirth, their spring unto summer.”

Panic set in. “Hades--”

He lifted a finger. Beside him on a golden plate were blood red pomegranates sliced down the middle with their numerous jeweled seeds exposed. He grabbed one half with his other hand and gave it to me.

“Eat and you will always come back to me,” he said. “She can have you for a little while and it will do you some good, but do not fret because you are mine and I am yours.”

Mother, I wanted pomegranates, I wanted darkness---I wanted him. I plucked the seeds of my own accord and Hades did not place my crown upon my head, it was me with my own hands.

Before I planned my departure, Hades had been writing in his scrolls, occasionally burning them because he doesn't think they're any good. He never tells me what he's writing, but I can tell when he doesn't like something. Encrusted in all the darkness is his bright eyes that are the same color as the wheat fields above. It's enough home for me.

He showed me that in the coldest of places, we can make a wonderful home.

Until I return,

Persephone