

1st Place (High School, 2022): Emily Taylor, Whangarei Girls High School, The Secrets of Persephone

They said she was stolen. Kidnapped. Dragged unwillingly into the world below.

“Oh, sweet Kore,” they cried in despair. “Gentle maiden. Beautiful goddess.”

They didn’t understand. How could they? “Why, little flower princess,” they asked, “would you give up the world of life and sunlight for the harsh darkness of the Land of the Dead?”

They didn’t know about the dark pit at the bottom of her soul. The part of her that liked to watch the flowers wilt and die. They didn’t know that when she saw *him* she knew she had found something infinitely more desirable than a thousand years in a golden meadow. He was her other half. Death to her Life.

He saw past her mother’s stifling expectations. A dress that pinched her skin and forced the breath from her lungs. He saw her for more than a glorified flower nymph. She waited for him to take her away, down to the depths of the earth –to the vast, dark halls of the House of the Dead. There they could dance together to the lonely trills of a nymph’s lyre. When his moonstone eyes looked at her, she felt truly *seen*.

With her absence, the world above became icy and barren. The dead trickled into the Underworld, then began arriving in far greater numbers. She couldn’t help but feel bitter. Demeter always did throw a tantrum when things didn’t go her way.

He looked at her, pale eyes gleaming, and promised they would never be apart. He would bring all of the living into the House of the Dead if that’s what it took.

She smiled.

The others found her eventually, of course. She could hear their cries, bewailing the loss of innocent Kore as they ventured down the dark paths to the Underworld to the House of Hades. They didn’t expect to be met with two rulers.

The little flower princess had become Queen of the Dead.

Demeter cursed Hades’ name, crying for her daughter to come home. How dare he corrupt her, she screamed. How dare he force her to eat the pomegranate.

They didn’t know she had eaten the fruit willingly. That she’d savoured each honey-sweet bite. And that the juice had stained her lips the colour of blood. They didn’t know that when he kissed her she felt more alive than she had in all her time in the world of life. He tasted like mint and smoke.

They didn’t know the way he whispered her name. Soft and reverent. A plea. A prayer.
Persephone.

Emily Taylor

