Just as Proserpina picked a beautiful narcissus, the earth began to rumble. Suddenly the ground cracked open, splitting fern beds and ripping flowers and trees from their roots. Then out of the dark depths sprang Pluto, god of the underworld.

Standing up in his black chariot, Pluto ferociously drove his stallions toward Proserpina. The maiden screamed for her mother, but Ceres was far away and could not save her.

Pluto grabbed Proserpina and drove his chariot back into the earth. Then the ground closed up again, leaving not even a seam.

When the mountains echoed with Proserpina’s screams, her mother rushed into the woods, but it was too late—her daughter had disappeared.

Beside herself with grief, Ceres began searching for her kidnapped daughter in every land. For nine days the goddess did not rest, but carried two torches through the cold nights, searching for Proserpina.

This passage introduces the main conflict of the myth: after Proserpina is kidnapped by Pluto, the goddess Ceres begins a frantic search for her missing daughter.

- What happens to Proserpina as she picks flowers?
- Where do Pluto and his chariot spring forth from?
- What does Ceres do to try to find her daughter? How does she feel?
“I will only forgive you,” said Ceres, “if you build a great temple in my honor. Then I will teach your people the secret rites to help the corn grow.”

At dawn the king ordered a great temple be built for the goddess. But after the temple was completed, Ceres did not reveal the secret rites. Instead she sat by herself all day, grieving for her kidnapped daughter. She was in such deep mourning that everything on earth stopped growing. It was a terrible year—there was no food, and people and animals began to starve.

Jupiter grew worried—if Ceres caused the people on earth to die, there would be no more gifts and offerings for him. Finally he sent gods from Mount Olympus to speak with her.

The gods came to Ceres and offered her gifts and pleaded with her to make the earth fertile again.

“I never will,” she said, “not unless my daughter is returned safely to me.”

Jupiter had no choice but to bid his son, Mercury, the messenger god, to return Proserpina to her mother.

This passage is a turning point in the myth: Ceres’ grief causes such global problems that Jupiter is forced to intervene.

- Why do the king and queen build a temple in Ceres’ honor?
- How does Ceres behave after the temple is built? What problems result from this?
- Why does Jupiter decide to help Ceres? What does he do?
Pluto knew he could not disobey Jupiter, but he didn’t want his wife to leave forever, so he said, “She can go. But first, we must be alone.”

When Mercury left, Pluto spoke softly to Proserpina: “If you stay, you’ll be queen of the underworld, and the dead will give you great honors.”

As Proserpina stared into the eyes of the king of the dead, she dimly remembered the joy of her mother’s love. She remembered wildflowers in the woods and open sunlit meadows. “I would rather return,” she whispered.

Pluto sighed, then said, “All right, go. But before you leave, eat this small seed of the pomegranate fruit. It is the food of the underworld—it will bring you good luck.”

Proserpina ate the tiny seed. Then Pluto’s black chariot carried her and Mercury away. The two stallions burst through the dry ground of earth—then galloped over the barren countryside to the temple where Ceres mourned for her daughter.

When Ceres saw her daughter coming, she ran down the hillside, and Proserpina sprang from the chariot into her mother’s arms. All day the two talked excitedly of what had happened during their separation, but when Proserpina told Ceres about eating the pomegranate seed, the goddess hid her face and moaned in anguish.

“What have I done?” cried Proserpina.

You have eaten the sacred food of the underworld,” said Ceres. “Now you must return for half of every year to live with Pluto, your husband.”

And this is how the seasons began—for when fall and winter come, the earth grows cold and barren because Proserpina lives in the underworld with Pluto, and her mother mourns. But when her daughter comes back to her, Ceres, goddess of grain, turns the world to spring and summer: The corn grows, and everything flowers again.

This passage resolves the myth’s conflict and gives an explanation for the changing seasons.

- When Pluto gives her a choice, where does Proserpina say she wants to live?
- What does Pluto give Proserpina to eat?
- Why does Ceres moan in anguish when she hears about the pomegranate seed?
- What effect will Proserpina’s action have on her mother and the rest of the world?