Persephone and the Seasons

One bright, sunny morning, the goddess Demeter said goodbye to her daughter Persephone. “I’ll be back for supper,” she called. Demeter was the goddess of all the plants in the
world. She made sure the corn grew tall in the fields and fruit ripened on the trees. The weather was always fine and there were harvests all the year.

After her mother had gone, Persephone went out to meet her friends and pick flowers with them. Searching for the very best lilies, she wandered away and was soon on her own.

Suddenly, she heard a noise and looked up. She saw a chariot pulled by four black horses, driven by Hades,
god of the Underworld. Hades had fallen in love with Persephone, but knew Demeter would never allow him to marry her daughter.

Before Persephone could scream, Hades dragged her into the chariot and raced away. As they thundered across the ground, a huge cleft opened. Hades drove straight down it and the ground closed up behind them. He and Persephone had disappeared into the Underworld.

When Demeter came back that evening, she called to Persephone but there was no reply. The house was empty. When it grew dark, Demeter began to worry. Where could Persephone be? At midnight, she lit a flaming torch and set out to look for her. All night she searched, calling, "Persephone, Persephone, where are you?" But there was no answer. For nine days and nine nights, Demeter searched, not stopping to sleep or even to eat.
Dressed in black instead of her usual bright clothes, Demeter wandered all over the country as a haggard, old woman. Because she no longer looked after the crops, the corn rotted in the fields, no fruit ripened on the trees and the grass turned brown. There was nothing for the sheep and goats to eat and all the people grew short of food. Soon they were near to starving.

Zeus called a meeting of all the gods and goddesses. "This is very serious," he said in the voice that rolled like thunder. "Unless we can persuade Demeter to take care of the Earth again, all the people will die."

"Hades must let Persephone leave the Underworld," said a goddess. "Only then will Demeter save the Earth."

Zeus called for Hermes, the messenger of the gods. "Go to Hades and ask him, very politely, to return Persephone to her mother," he said. Hermes flew off at once. Only the gods and goddesses could go into the Underworld, the home of all the people who had died, and come out again.

"I will never let Persephone go," growled Hades. "I love her
and I want to marry her." "Please, Hades," begged Hermes, "please be reasonable. You know Persephone doesn’t love you and won’t marry you."

"Very well," roared Hades, very angry. "I’ll let her go if she hasn’t eaten any food while she’s been here. You know the rule. If she has eaten anything in the Underworld, she must stay here forever."

"That’s easy," said Hermes. "Let’s ask her." Persephone cried, in answer to the question, "I couldn’t eat anything here. I’ve never touched even the smallest crumb of food."

A misty ghost of a gardener was listening. "Oh yes you did," he croaked. "I saw you. You picked a ripe pomegranate and ate it."

"No, no," cried Persephone, "I didn’t eat it all. I was so thirsty, I just swallowed a few of the seeds." "That’s enough," shouted Hades.

"Please, Hades," begged Hermes, "let her go for a little while. A few seeds aren’t much." "Oh, all right," growled Hades. "Persephone may go back to the Earth for half of
each year but must spend the other months here with me, in the Underworld."

Holding Persephone’s hand, Hermes flew with her out of the Underworld to Demeter. “Oh, my darling daughter,” cried Demeter, hugging Persephone. “You have come back to me at last.” “Yes,” sobbed Persephone, “but I must go back to the Underworld for part of every year.”

Demeter knew she had to accept this. At once, she looked young again. She put on her brightest clothes and began work, making new shoots of corn and grass grow and leaves open on the trees. It was spring all over the Earth.

All through the summer Demeter was happy and busy, watching the fine harvests of corn and fruit. But when Persephone had to go back to the Underworld, she was sad and it became autumn. The leaves on the trees turned brown, the grass stopped growing and the weather turned cold. It was winter, until Persephone returned. Then Demeter was happy and it was spring again.