

Name: _____

Date: _____

Period: _____

Arachne

Retold by Olivia E. Coolidge

Arachne was a maiden who became famous throughout Greece, though she was neither wellborn nor beautiful and came from no great city. She lived in a small village, and her father was very skillful at dyeing wool. Above all, he was famous for the clear, bright scarlet shade, which is made from shellfish and was the most glorious of all the colors used in ancient Greece. Arachne was even more skillful than her father. It was her task to spin the fleecy wool into a fine, soft thread and then weave it into cloth on the high-standing loom within the cottage. Arachne was quick and graceful, and her fingers roughened as they wove. Her fingers moved so fast that it was hard to follow their flickering movements. Her thread was so soft and even, her cloth so fine, and her embroidery so gorgeous that soon her products were known all over Greece. No one had ever seen the like of them before.

At last Arachne's fame became so great that people came from far and wide to watch her working. Even the graceful nymphs would steal in from the stream or forest and peep shyly through the dark doorway, watching in wonder. "Surely Athena herself must have taught her," people would murmur to one another. "Who else could know the secret of such marvelous skill?"

Arachne was used to being wondered at, and she was immensely proud of the skill that had brought so many to look on her. Praise was all she lived for, and it displeased her greatly that people should think anyone, even a goddess, could teach her anything. Therefore, when she heard them murmur, she would stop her work and turn round indignantly to say, "With my own ten fingers I gained this skill, and by hard practice from early morning till night. I never had time to stand looking as you people do while another maiden worked. Nor if I had, would I give Athena credit because the girl was more skillful than I. As for Athena's weaving, how could there be finer cloth or more beautiful embroidery than mine? If Athena herself were to come down and compete with me, she could do no better than I."

One day when Arachne turned around with such words, an old woman answered her, a grey old woman, bent and very poor, who stood leaning on a staff and peering at Arachne amid the crowd of onlookers.

"Reckless girl," she said, "how dare you claim to be the equal to the immortal gods themselves? I am an old woman and have seen much. Take my advice and ask forgiveness of Athena for your words. Be satisfied with your fame of being the best spinner and weaver that mortal eyes have ever beheld."

"Stupid old woman," said Arachne indignantly, "who gave you a right to speak in this way to me? It is easy to see that you were never good for anything in your day, or you would not come here in poverty and rags to gaze at my skill. If Athena resents my words, let her answer them herself. I have challenged her to a contest, but she, of course, will not come. It is easy for the gods to avoid matching their skill with that of men."

At these words the old woman threw down her staff and stood erect. The wondering onlookers saw her grow tall and fair and stand in long robes of dazzling white. They were terribly afraid as they realized that they stood in the presence of Athena. Arachne herself flushed red for a moment, for she had never really believed that the goddess would hear her. She would not surrender in front the group that was gathered there; so pressing her pale lips together in stubbornness and pride, she led the goddess to one of the great looms and set herself before another. Many skeins of wool lay heaped beside them to use: bleached white, and gold, and scarlet, and other shades, varied as the rainbow.

As the competition started, there was no sound in the room. The excited crowd in the doorway began to see that the skill of both was very nearly equal, but the goddess was the quicker of the two. A pattern of many pictures was growing on her loom. As they looked at the glowing colors, the spectators realized that Athena was weaving into her pattern a last warning to Arachne: The central figure was the goddess herself, competing with Poseidon for possession of the city of Athens; but in the four corners were mortals who had tried to strive with gods and pictures of the awful fate that have overtaken them. The goddess ended a little before Arachne and stood back from her marvelous work to see what the maiden was doing.

Never before had Arachne been matched against anyone whose skills was equal. She stole glances from time to time at Athena and saw the goddess working swiftly, calmly, and always a little faster than herself. She became angry instead of frightened, and an evil thought came into her head. Thus, as Athena stepped back a pace to watch Arachne finishing her work, she saw that the maiden had taken for her design a pattern of scenes, which showed evil or unworthy actions of the gods. When the goddess saw this insult glowing in bright colors on Arachne's loom, she did not wait while the cloth was judged but stepped forward, her grey eyes blazing with anger, and tore Arachne's work across the middle. Then she struck Arachne across the face. Arachne stood there a moment, struggling with anger, fear, and pride. "I will not live under this insult!" she cried, and seizing a rope from the wall, she made a noose and would have hanged herself.

The goddess touched the rope and touched the maiden. "Live on, wicked girl," she said. "Live on and spin, both you and your descendants. When men look at you, they may remember that it is not wise to compete against Athena." At that, Arachne's body shriveled up, and her legs grew tiny, spindly, and distorted. There before the eyes of the spectators hung a little dusty brown spider on a slender thread.

All spiders descend from Arachne, and as the Greeks watched them spinning their thread wonderfully fine, they remembered the contest with Athena and thought that it was not right for even the best of men to claim equality with the gods.