

ARACHNE'S GIFT

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AGES ago, on the shores of the Aegean Sea, there lived a Geek maiden named Arachne. She was special, for Arachne had a gift.

As a baby, she lay content in her cradle, trying to braid the sunbeams that danced above her head.

As a small child, while her friends struggled to tie the thongs on their sandals, Arachne strung daisies into chains and made baskets, tiny as hummingbird nests, from weeds and grasses.

And, as soon as she grew tall enough to stand upon a stool and touch the top of a loom, Arachne began to weave.

At first, she snarled the strands of wool and tangled her shuttle in the web of strings. But even though her hands ached and her eyes smarted, she would rip out her mistakes and begin again. Her friends thought Arachne strange, always shut away, always spinning and weaving.

“Arachne! Arachne!” they would tease her through the window. “You’ll not catch us in your net!”

Then Arachne would close the heavy wooden shutters, but the thump, thump of her treadle and the swish, swish of her reed could still be heard, far into the night.

Finally the day came when she no longer made mistakes. The wool Arachne spun was as warm as summer and light as a thistle puff. The cloth she wove was so delicate that a moth would leave behind its footprint, yet so strong no spear could pierce it. The same voices that had taunted Arachne now pleaded to buy a robe or wrap of her making.

“There’s not gold enough in Greece to repay me for your teasing,” she told them. Now she kept the shutters wide open for all to admire her skill.

The fame of Arachne the Spinner spread across the countryside, and even the nymphs slipped out from their secret hideaways to watch her at her work.

“Ah, Arachne!” cried one. “Your shuttle flies fast as an arrow from Diana’s bow!”

Arachne smiled. “Even swifter.”

“You have a gift from the gods,” said another.

Arachne scowled. “I have only myself to thank for my talents.”

“But surely the goddess Minerva was your teacher?” asked a third.

“Minerva!” Arachne turned angrily to the nymphs. “Why, should I meet that noble hag, it’s I who could teach her a trick or two!”

The nymphs gasped and disappeared like wisps of fog among the trees. But they whispered Arachne’s terrible boast to others. Now people spoke not of her clever fingers but of her bold tongue.

“Take care, Arachne,” they warned. “Nothing said or done escapes the gods on Mount Olympus.”

Their advice was annoying to Arachne as the buzzing of mosquitoes. “Should the gods be watching, it is because they envy me!”

Arachne went on with her weaving. As she pushed the shuttle back and forth, it seemed to sing, “None can match Arachne, None can match Arachne.”

One midnight, something scratched softly on her shutters. A branch, thought Arachne, blown by the wind, but she opened her door and peered out. All she saw was the silhouette of an owl, perched on a limb of an olive tree, black against the moon. Then a bent old woman, wrapped in a shawl, stepped from the shadows.

“Come in and rest,” Arachne offered.

“I seek not shelter but only to look upon your weaving.”

“Then you come too late,” Arachne replied. “My work’s best seen by light of dawn.”

The old crone pushed past Arachne to the loom. Her eyes darted up and down the tapestry.

“You weave splendidly,” she said, rubbing her bony fingers over the cloth.

“Yes,” agreed Arachne. “For I am different from most, and better than any.”

“Except Minerva,” the stranger said sharply. “Mind, even you cannot compete with that goddess.”

“I wish I had the chance!” Arachne stretched out her hands. “I am young and my fingers are nimble. Minerva is old, like you, Grandmother. Her glory is past.”

“Ask forgiveness, child, for such foolish words.” The woman’s voice was muffled by her cloak.

Arachne shrugged. “My weaving speaks for me.”

“Then your wish shall be granted.” The squinted eyes opened wide and the hands upon Arachne’s loom spread out strong, without a wrinkle. “Here, on the morrow, you shall have the contest you desire.”

“With whom?” asked Arachne.

There was a sudden rush of cold wind, and the oil lamp sputtered. Arachne shivered and rubbed her eyes. Her visitor had vanished. Through the door, yet ajar, Arachne saw the owl flap silently up from the olive tree. It was said that whenever Minerva journeyed into the mortal world, her owl always went with her.

“With Minerva,” whispered Arachne to the empty room. “The goddess herself has challenged me.”

Arachne could not sleep that night. To steady her mind and her hands, she carded and spun and sorted her wools, choosing only the softest and finest. Then she strung her loom with a web of new, strong threads. She had just tightened the last peg when her door burst open.

Minerva stood on the doorstep, bright as the rising sun. The goddess wore a shining breastplate, and a golden helmet crowned her head. The owl sat on her shoulder, its talons curled about a jeweled guard. But the loom Minerva brought was made of wood and no grander than Arachne’s own. Minerva stared at Arachne, her gray eyes glinting with sparks, like those struck from a flint.

Arachne met her gaze. Even now she would not apologize.

Without a word, the contest began. The nymphs grew dizzy watching, so fast did the fingers of the weavers skim across their looms.

The goddess wove with the colors of the heavens. She used the golden rays of the sun and the blue from the midday sky. She drew palest pinks and greens and lavenders from the rainbow and worked with silver spun from starshine.

The story Minerva spun was of the heavens, too, scenes of the dozen most powerful gods. Father Jupiter sat upon his throne, and Neptune, ruler of the sea, rose

up from bubbling waters. Apollo scattered the clouds with his chariot, and Diana arched her arrow at the moon. Minerva placed herself, victorious, in the center of her cloth. In the corners she embroidered smaller figures. These were the unhappy humans who dared to defy the gods.

“Arachne!” the nymphs said softly. “See how Minerva warns you!”

Arachne ignored them. Nor did she listen to the song of her shuttle as it sighed, “Do not mock Minerva, Do not mock Minerva.”

Arachne worked with the colors of the earth. Her oranges and scarlets were the shades of spring poppies. She picked yellow from the summer daisies and purple from autumn grapes. Her gray was soft as winter’s mist, but her blue was bright, as if she’d dipped her yarn into the sea.

Arachne, too, put the gods into her patterns. But the tales she chose to tell were dreadful.

She pictured Minerva, defeated in battle, with her owl a cowering sparrow. She showed the goddess Juno in a jealous rage. She dressed Jupiter as a swan, foolish in his feathers, and again disguised as a bull. So artful was her hand that the swan seemed about to trumpet and the bull to bellow aloud.

At nightfall, Minerva stepped back from her loom. “The contest is over. My work is finished.”

The nymphs crowded about Minerva’s glowing tapestry. “Ah!” they cried, shading their eyes, for it was like looking at the sun itself. Then they peeked over their shoulders at Arachne’s handiwork. The nymphs were speechless.

“Who is the winner?” Minerva demanded.

“Judge for yourself,” answered Arachne.

Minerva wheeled about and stared in disbelief at Arachne’s loom. An insult to the gods was stitched in every splendid scene. “Wretch!” she shrieked.

Arachne held her head high and smiled. “My work deserves praise, for it is as perfect as your own.”

Snatching Arachne’s shuttle, Minerva tore down the weaving. “This is what your wickedness deserves!” she declared.

Arachne looked down at her tapestry, in shreds on the floor. Nothing was left of her marvelous work but a single strand, dangling from the frame. With shaking fingers, Arachne seized it and tied it tight around her neck.

“Hold!” Minerva’s hand loosened the knot. “You wish to hang, and so you shall, but in another manner.”

Minerva drew a flask from the folds of her tunic. When she unstopped it, fumes rose like smoke, for within were the juices of a powerful plant called aconite. “This is my gift to you,” said the goddess, sprinkling a few drops on Arachne’s head.

Arachne’s skin tingled, then grew numb. She felt weightless as a cloud. It seemed as if this were the way she was born to be.

“Since you are proud to be different, you shall be like no other on earth,” spoke Minerva.

The nymphs saw Arachne change before their very eyes. Her body shrank smaller and smaller. Eight slender legs replaced her fingers. Her nose and her ears disappeared; her hair fell away. But her mouth remained, and the last thing that the nymphs saw of Arachne was her proud smile. Now some strange new creature hung suspended from the loom.

“Live,” said Minerva, “and spin your wondrous webs forevermore.” So saying, the goddess left.

The thunderstruck nymphs were silent. As they watched, the creature slowly spun its way to the top of the frame and began to weave a web. Arachne the maiden had been transformed into the first of the world’s spiders. And, for Arachne the spider, work had just begun.