



ATHENA, the goddess of wisdom, was the favorite child of Zeus. She had sprung fully grown out of her father's head.

Her mother was Metis, goddess of prudence, the first wife of Zeus. He depended on her, for he needed her wise council, but Mother Earth warned him that, were Metis to bear him a son, this son would dethrone him as Zeus had dethroned Cronus, his father who had dethroned his own father, Uranus. This must not happen, thought Zeus, but he could not do without her advice, so he decided to swallow her. Slyly, he proposed that they play a game of changing shapes, and Metis, forgetting her prudence, playfully turned herself into all kinds of animals, big and small. Just as she had taken on the shape of a little fly, Zeus opened wide his mouth, took a deep breath, and zip! he swallowed the fly. Ever after, Metis sat in his head and guided him from there.

Now it happened that Metis was going to have a daughter, and she sat inside Zeus's head hammering out a helmet and weaving a splendid robe for the coming child. Soon Zeus began to suffer from pounding headaches and cried out in agony. All the gods came running to help him, and skilled Hephaestus grasped his tools and split open his father's skull. Out sprang Athena, wearing the robe and the helmet, her gray eyes flashing. Thunder roared and the gods stood in awe.

Athena's constant companion was Nike, the spirit of victory. With Nike at her side, Athena led armies, but only those that fought for just causes. In time of peace she stood behind the artists of Greece and taught them the fine and useful arts. She had great pride in her own skills at the loom and the potter's wheel, but was happy to see her pupils excel as long as they showed her proper respect.

One of her pupils was Arachne, a simple country girl, who was wonderfully skilled at the loom. People came from far and wide to admire her weavings. Stupidly she boasted that she had learned nothing from Athena; indeed, that she was better than the goddess!

That hurt Athena's pride. Disguised as an old woman, she went to the girl and tried to talk sense into her.

"Your work is beautiful," she said, "but why compare yourself with the gods? Why not be contented to be the best among mortals?"

"Let the goddess Athena herself come and measure her skill against mine," Arachne answered haughtily.

Angrily Athena threw off her disguise and stood before the girl in all her glory.

"Vain girl," she said, "you may have your wish. Sit down at your loom and let us compete."

Athena wove the most beautiful tapestry ever seen, every thread and knot was perfect and the colors sparkled. It pictured the Olympian gods in all their glory and majesty.

Arachne's tapestry was also beautifully woven; Athena herself had to admit that the girl's craftsmanship was flawless. But what kind of a picture had she woven? An irreverent scene making fun of Zeus and his wives!

In a wrath the goddess tore the tapestry to shreds and struck the girl with the shuttle. Immediately Arachne felt her head shrink almost to nothing, her nimble fingers change into long, spindly legs. Athena had turned her into a spider.

"Vainglorious girl, go on and spin your thread and weave your empty net forever," said Athena to Arachne, the spider. Athena was a just goddess and she could be very stern. She knew that the gods were great only as long as they were properly worshiped by mortals.

Athena was very fond of a certain city in Greece, and so was her uncle, Poseidon. Both of them claimed the city, and after a long quarrel they decided that the one who could give it the finest gift should have it.

Leading a procession of citizens, the two gods mounted the Acropolis, the flat-topped rock that crowned the city. Poseidon struck the cliff with his trident, and a spring welled up. The people marveled, but the water was salty as the sea that Poseidon ruled, and not very useful. Then Athena gave the city her gift. She planted an olive tree in a crevice on the rock. It was the first olive tree the people had ever seen. Athena's gift was judged the better of the two, for it gave food, oil, and wood, and the city was hers. From her beautiful temple on top of the Acropolis, Athena watched over Athens, her city, with the wise owl, her bird, on her shoulder, and under her leadership the Athenians grew famous for their arts and crafts.

