

I am giving you two groups of excerpts from my book: chapters 5-7 and chapters 25-27. There are 140 chapters altogether.

5. Persephone's Story

In between his second and third wives, Zeus wooed his sister Demeter, whose fair hair rippled like a field of grain bending to the breeze. The siblings changed themselves into snakes and twined beneath the ground, copulating among the seeds of things waiting to be reborn. After ten moons had passed, Demeter gave birth to their daughter, Persephone.

Persephone was loved by Demeter with an intensity that no one but an only child experiences. Mother and daughter were usually together and when they weren't, a call from one would bring the other to her side, on earth or in the heavens, however great the distance.

There were some things, however, that Persephone preferred to do with her friends. One of these was flower-gathering, which in any case was properly a task for unmarried girls. Flowers were useful in cooking and healing; every household needed to harvest them when they were in season, dry them and keep them on hand. Wives had duties that might prevent them from going out into the meadows when the blooms happened to be ready, but daughters' chores were less important and could be postponed.

Girls were also sent to gather flowers so that they could enjoy sunlight and freedom, now and then, before the yoke of maturity fell on their shoulders. Every girl was expected to find a husband and bear children, but the responsibilities that came with marriage and motherhood meant that she would spend most of her adult life inside the house, captive to a pregnant belly, hungry infants and a recalcitrant loom. A girl who was allowed some liberty before marriage would be a more dutiful wife and mother – or so ran common wisdom, at least.

Although gods, of course, never needed to be healed and never did any kind of work unless they chose to, they nonetheless saw the advantage of sending their daughters out to the meadows when they were young. The meadow that

Persephone, her half-sisters and her cousins liked best was one that only goddesses could have found, for all the flowers grew together there in abundance – crocuses, irises, violets, hyacinths, roses and lilies.

One day, Earth caused a new flower to grow in their meadow, which was taller and more beautiful than all the rest: a dazzling narcissus, with a hundred heads springing from a single bulb. Its fragrance was so lovely that the whole world laughed with delight.

Persephone wandered away from her friends to look for the source of the wonderful scent. When she reached out to touch the narcissus, however, the ground suddenly split open at her feet. Four horses, as black as obsidian, galloped out of the chasm, pulling a golden chariot driven by Hades, the King of the Underworld.

With a pale but powerful arm, Hades grabbed Persephone around her waist and dragged her into the chariot. His enormous fingers dug into the soft flesh of her thigh and abdomen, leaving bruises that turned blue-black, the color of corpses. For weeks, she would see them on her body every time that she undressed. So would he.

In the moments before the chariot plunged back below the earth, Persephone had screamed out to her father, pleading for the help that any daughter would expect. Zeus, however, had scrupulously insulated himself against the cries that he knew Persephone would be making that day. Early that morning, he had settled himself inside one of his temples, focusing all of his attention on his worshippers' prayers.

Demeter did hear Persephone's screams; they bounced off the mountains, seeming to come from all directions at once. A sharp pain seized her heart. She tore the veil that covered her hair and clawed at her cheeks with her fingernails. Where was Persephone? Why was she screaming?

Wrapping herself in a dark cloak and clutching a torch in each hand, Demeter roamed the world unceasingly for nine days, pausing neither to eat nor bathe. She asked gods, she asked mortals, she asked birds whether they knew what had happened to Persephone, but no one could answer her.

On the tenth day, she ran into Hecate, who had been sitting in a cave near the meadow where Persephone had found the narcissus. Judging from what she had been able to hear at the time, Hecate feared that Persephone had been abducted, but she had no idea who the abductor was. She suggested that they ask Helios, who had probably seen the whole affair as he drove his splendid chariot across the heavens that day.

Demeter agreed, and so the two goddesses flew to the top of the sky, setting themselves down directly in front of Helios' chariot. His horses stumbled to a halt, snorting with surprise at the sudden obstruction in their familiar path.

Helios and Demeter were old friends; he listened attentively to her request for help. His reply, however, plunged her into even deeper despair. Yes, Persephone had been abducted and the abductor was Demeter's brother Hades. But 'abduction' wasn't what it was being called, Helios went on to explain. Zeus and Hades were presenting the union as a fully legal marriage: they had come to an agreement about bride price and all the other details some time ago. They had persuaded Earth to serve as their ally; she had deliberately sent forth the narcissus that lured Persephone away from her friends.

According to the strictest interpretation of the law, the fact that the bride and her mother had been neither consulted nor informed about the marriage was irrelevant. Demeter might rage all she wanted, but Persephone was no longer hers. Persephone's father had given her to his brother as a wife.

6. Demeter's Wanderings

Demeter felt aimless, purposeless, in Persephone's absence. She went about her duties mechanically, blessing the fields as the months passed so that humans and animals would have enough to eat. She shunned the table of the gods—she was angry with some of them and felt humiliated among the others. She took to travelling throughout the mortal world instead, disguised as an old woman in a dusty black cloak, past the age of childbearing.

She wasn't always treated kindly. When Demeter passed through Attica, a peasant woman gave the thirsty traveler a

drink. When Demeter downed it in a single gulp, the woman's son rudely laughed and asked whether he should bring out a whole bucket. Demeter shook the remaining drops from her cup onto the boy's head; he turned into a gecko.

Far worse was what her other brother, Poseidon, did. He spied Demeter walking through Arcadia, near the town of Thelpusa, and was filled with lust when a lock of her beautiful hair fell free of the dark veil she was wearing. Poseidon pursued Demeter; Demeter transformed herself into a mare and hid among other mares who were grazing nearby.

Poseidon, however, wasn't fooled. Changing into a stallion, he raped his sister, grunting and whinnying with pleasure. Later, she gave birth to the wonder-horse Areion, who would serve as the steed of several heroes. Areion was a foal that any mother could be proud of, but the brutality of his conception left Demeter more desolate than she had been before.

Demeter drifted to Eleusis, a town just outside of Athens, and sat down at the village well. Four girls approached, carrying pitchers to be filled. Puzzled by the fact that an elderly woman was sitting there alone, they asked her who she was and whether she needed help.

Demeter responded by spinning a tall-tale. She said that her name was Giver, and that she had been kidnapped from her home on Crete. Her captors had intended to sell her as a slave, but she had managed to escape; homeless now, she needed a way to feed herself. She had a lot of experience caring for children—did they know of anyone who needed a nanny?

The girls were delighted by her question. They were the daughters of King Celeus, they told her, and their mother, Metaneira, had just given birth to a baby boy named Demophon—an unexpected joy, coming late in her life. Surely, she could use the help of a knowledgeable woman. They ran home to tell their mother to prepare for a visitor while the dark-robed goddess followed more slowly behind them.

When Demeter crossed the threshold of the room where the women of the household were gathered, her head grazed the lintel and divine radiance filled every corner. Metaneira, who cradled the tiny baby in her arms, was awe-struck; her mouth fell

open in amazement and she immediately rose to offer the stranger her chair.

Demeter, however, stood silent and solemn, with her eyes cast down. A servant, Iambe, realizing that the stranger was too modest to take a queen's seat, offered her a stool instead, covered with a woolly fleece. Demeter sat, but with a shake of her head declined the food and drink that Metaneira offered.

It was again Iambe who found a way to please her. With bawdy jokes and obscene gestures, Iambe made Demeter smile; only then did she remember her hunger and thirst. She asked Metaneira to prepare for her a soothing drink of water, barley and pennyroyal.

After the stranger had drunk the mixture down, Metaneira began to ask about her viewpoints on child-rearing. At what age did she think that babies should be weaned and what should they be fed on afterwards? Goats' milk? Grain mush? What was the best way to get them to sleep soundly? How did she judge when a baby's bowels were about to move, so that she could hold him over a pot and prevent his clothes from being soiled?

Demeter knew the answers to all of these questions, and more. She knew how to avert the demons who inflicted dysentery, fever and teething pain, and how to protect babies from the cantrips of women who envied their mothers' good fortune. Metaneira was pleased with these answers; she allowed Demeter to take Demophon in her arms and hold him close to her fragrant bosom. At once he sighed, and fell asleep.

As the days and weeks went by, Demophon grew like a marvel. Demeter was feeding him neither milk nor mush, however. Secretly, she nurtured him as she had once nurtured Persephone, anointing his skin with divine ambrosia and infusing her own immortal breath into his body.

And she also was also doing something more. Each night, when the household was fast asleep, Demeter placed Demophon in the hearth-fire, as if he were a smoldering log. Slowly, carefully, she was burning the mortality out of him. Once she had finished her work, Demophon would never again be ill, never grow old and decrepit and would never, ever die and enter Hades' realm.

But one night Metaneira unexpectedly glimpsed her beloved son lying among the flickering coals. Misunderstanding what her nanny was doing—and having no idea who the nanny really was—Metaneira shrieked and slapped her thighs in anguish. '*O poi-poi*, my little one! What is this stranger doing to you?'

Hearing the queen's cries, Demeter angrily snatched Demophon from the fire and dumped him on the floor. 'Stupid human!' she screamed, 'Your tribe has never been able to tell the difference between good and bad. You have thwarted a glorious future for your son, Metaneira; I swear by the waters of the Styx that I would have made him ageless and immortal, and now you have brought an end to all that. Learn, now, who I really am: Demeter, the Giver of gifts to mortals and gods.'

'Now go tell your people to build me a fine temple on that hill over there, with a splendid altar in front. One day, in the future, I will teach you rituals to perform, so that you might once again earn my favor.'

When she had finished speaking, Demeter discarded her disguise. Old age melted from her body; she became tall and forbiddingly beautiful. Her hair cascaded in streams of gold over her shoulders and her face shone with a blinding brilliance. Her robes gave forth the pungent scent of thyme in summer—warm and sharp. Stooping to fit through the doorway, she strode from the house.

Metaneira's knees buckled beneath her and she collapsed, oblivious to the crying child who lay beside her on the cold tiles. His sisters picked him up, but it was a long time before they could sooth him, for they were poor substitutes for the nanny he had lost.

7. Demeter and Persephone

A grim year followed for mortals. Demeter sat alone in her new temple, longing for her graceful daughter. She ignored the seeds that nestled in the soil and let the fields fall fallow. Without a harvest, the people were forced to let their animals starve, and then, as their stores ran out, they began to starve as well.

Eventually, when the gods noticed that there was no longer any sacrificial smoke rising from their altars, they realized that they had a problem. Zeus sent Iris, his golden-winged messenger, to summon Demeter back to the company of the gods but Demeter, clutching her black robes more closely around her, refused to leave her temple.

Zeus sent the other gods, one-by-one, to plead and reason with Demeter, offering many gifts and new honors if she would return to their company and resume her duties, but she remained implacable in her anger, insisting that until Persephone returned, she would neither visit Olympus nor allow the earth to send up grain.

Reluctantly, Zeus tried a different solution. He sent Hermes to the Underworld to ask Hades to release Persephone, lest the entire world fall into ruin. After he had listened to Hermes' speech, Hades allowed an enigmatic smile to creep across his face. He conceded that he must obey Zeus, who was, after all, the king of the gods. Then he turned to his wife:

'Go home, Persephone, to your weeping mother. But remember what sort of husband you have married: I am the brother of Zeus himself, who rules over all the gods! Mine is a magnificent family! Do not forget, moreover, that as queen of the dead, you receive substantial glory in your own right, and hold immense power over everything that walks or creeps upon the earth. As my wife, you have the authority to punish for eternity anyone who has behaved unjustly or who has failed to honor you properly with sacrifices.'

Persephone was jubilant at the thought of leaving the dank, shadowy realm in which she had been living and she busied herself with preparations for the journey. As she was departing, Hades glanced around to make sure that no one was watching and then gave his wife a tiny pomegranate seed—blood-red and sweet. He knew that if she swallowed it, she would return to him, sooner or later.

Under Hermes' escort, Persephone swiftly arrived at the new temple where Demeter had secluded herself and Demeter, wild with joy, rushed out to meet her. As they embraced, however, Demeter had a dreadful thought.

'My child, please tell me that you didn't eat anything while you were down below! If you haven't, then you can stay up here in the sunlit world forever. But if you *did* eat something, then you'll have to return to the moldering realm of the ghosts for one third of each year, as the seasons come round. And tell me as well—how did all of this happen, anyway?'

Persephone replied. 'Well, Mother, when Hermes came to get me, I was really excited. Hades handed me a pomegranate seed—they taste so good!—and then he forced me to eat it. He did it kind of secretly. I couldn't help it. Really! That's what happened!'

'And this is how he snatched me away: we were all playing by ourselves, gathering flowers and having fun. Then I saw this beautiful narcissus. I reached over to pick it and suddenly, there he was! He pulled me into his chariot and took off for the Underworld, even though I kicked and screamed. It really upsets me to even think about all of this, but I want you to know exactly what happened.'

Mother and daughter embraced once more, taking pleasure and comfort in one another. While they were doing so, Hecate arrived, resplendent in a shimmering veil, and joined in their embrace. Ever since then, Hecate has accompanied Persephone wherever she goes.

Demeter's own mother, Rhea, arrived, too, to escort Demeter back to the tribe of gods. She told Demeter that Zeus had promised to give her whatever she wanted and that he had guaranteed that Persephone would spend only one third of each year below with her husband, if Demeter would relent in her anger and allow the plants that nourished mortals to grow again.

As so it was; everything unfolded just as Zeus had promised. But nourishment was not the only gift that Demeter gave to mortals on that occasion. Summoning the leaders of Eleusis, she taught them the rituals of her mysteries—mysteries that promised to their initiates abundance during life and a blissful existence after they had descended to the land of the dead. Happy are those who have seen the mysteries of Demeter and her daughter! But the uninitiated will have no share in anything good down in the darkness and gloom.

25. Artemis and Actaeon

After Cadmus had searched for Europa for many months, the gods told him to stop. At their command, he founded Thebes, the first city in Greece, and became its king. Zeus gave him Harmonia, the white-armed daughter of Aphrodite and Ares, as his wife, and their wedding was a grand affair, attended by gods as well as mortals.

Hephaestus thought carefully about what to give the couple as a wedding gift. Harmonia had been born of the on-going affair between his wife and her lover, which had shamed and distressed him for centuries. Innocent though Harmonia herself might be, her wedding provided an opportunity for Hephaestus to avenge himself, at last, upon her parents.

As his gift to the bride, Hephaestus forged a necklace that looked exactly like the one he had made for Zeus to give to Europa, which all of the goddesses had admired and coveted. Gleaming gold and sinuous as a snake, it was designed to nestle around the neck, and into the heart, of any woman who wore it.

When he prepared the gold for this necklace, however, Hephaestus added some other things: blood from a gorgon, quills from a harpy and an adder from Tisiphone's hair—dark elements that would curse the lives of all who wore it and the lives of their families, too.

It was many years later that Harmonia herself felt the evil of the necklace, but before that, she watched her four daughters suffer terrible fates. Semele, the mother of Dionysus, was consumed by fire when she insisted upon seeing Zeus in his true form. Ino was driven mad by Hera for nursing Semele's motherless infant and in that madness threw her own son into a cauldron of boiling water. Agave and her son Pentheus foolishly called Dionysus a charlatan when, fully-grown, he returned to his mother's city. Overwhelmed by Dionysiac ecstasy, Agave tore Pentheus limb from limb.

The fourth sister, Autonoe, married Aristaeus, the son of Apollo and Cyrene. For a long time, her life was happy. She bore several children to Aristaeus, including Actaeon, who was

sent to Chiron the centaur to be reared alongside Heracles, Jason and other young heroes. Chiron taught his students music, prophecy, medicine, and hunting skills.

It was the last of these that stirred Actaeon's blood. After he returned to Thebes, he spent his time hunting beasts of all kinds, accompanied by his friends and his pack of faithful dogs.

One day, after a morning's hunt, Actaeon suggested to his friends that they find a cool place to rest while the sun was at its highest. They hiked into a valley that they had seen nearby and there each man made himself comfortable. Some dozed under trees, some waded into a stream, others lay eating and drinking in the shade along the stream's banks.

Actaeon spotted a cave a short distance from where his friends had settled down. Guessing that the spring that fed the stream lay within it, he and his dogs set out to investigate. If he were right, a few more minutes of toil and heat would reward him with deeper shade and colder water.

It isn't only men who seek relief from the day's heat, however. Just within the cave's mouth, in a pool below the spring, Artemis was relaxing after her own morning's hunt.

Her companions attended her. Some shook out her tunic, removing the burrs and thorns that had been snagged as Artemis raced through the thickets. Others, kneeling beside her, poured water over her back, while still others brushed out her coppery hair, which they had released from its combs and ribbons. The skin of the goddess, which was as white as alabaster in spite of her hours in the sun, glowed like the moon in the dimness of the cave.

As Actaeon strode into that dimness, it took a moment for his eyes to understand what they were seeing. When they did, Actaeon froze—first in terror and then in wonderment, as one would stand transfixed by any new marvel. His heart began to quiver and he seemed to hear its peculiar echo bouncing, erratically, from the walls of the cave. He felt his soul depart, no longer able to control his senses or his judgments. He did not know where, or even who, he was.

Artemis rose to confront the intruder, unmindful of how much more of her body she revealed by doing so. Her

companions rushed to stand in front of her, but the goddess's naked shoulders and her face, now red with both fury and embarrassment, still loomed above them.

She spoke.

'Foolish, impious man, to gaze upon a naked goddess – and you, a hunter who has often honored me with sacrifices! Go, tell what you have seen – if you still have the mouth to tell it with.'

And then Artemis splashed Actaeon.

Wherever the water touched his skin, fur began to grow. At the same time, his body changed shape. His arms grew longer and his hips merged into his back, skewing his balance; he fell forward onto what used to be his hands. His eyes moved around to either side of his head, which now was crowned by velvety antlers.

Actaeon had become a stag, fine quarry for the hunter he used to be.

The dogs, who had lingered outside, caught a new scent and ran into the cave. Bounding over them, Actaeon sped into the forest, filled with an unfamiliar fear.

At first it looked as if he might be able to run to cover, but he had trained the dogs too well for that: they chased him towards an open field and then ran him hard until his strength gave out. When, finally, they had surrounded him, he tried to call their names – 'Storm! Tigris! Tempest! Blackfoot! Tracker! Stalker! Wolf!' – but his tongue was no longer able to form the syllables. Grunts emerged from his mouth instead, until finally he fell silent altogether, as the dogs tore open their master's throat.

Afterwards, the dogs searched for Actaeon, proud of what they'd done and eager for his praise, but he was nowhere to be found. Despairing, they howled for their master until Chiron, who knew what had happened, created a statue of Actaeon to sooth them. They lay down around it, resting their muzzles on their paws.

When Autonoe learned of Actaeon's death, she wandered the wilds until she found his bones, which she buried. He was the first, but not the last, of Cadmus' descendants to run afoul of a god.

26. Niobe and Leto

Most of the early kings of Thebes were descended from Cadmus and Harmonia, but for a time the city was ruled by Amphion, the son of Zeus and Antiope. Amphion took as his queen Niobe, a daughter of the Lydian king Tantalus and Dione, child of the Titan Atlas.

The family of Tantalus was fortunate enough to have close relationships with the gods, who treated them almost as equals. Niobe was particularly friendly with Leto, the mother of Apollo and Artemis.

That should have been enough for anyone to boast about. Once Niobe became queen of Thebes, however, a new, invidious strain of pride corrupted her heart. Constantly, in her thoughts and in her words, she compared herself to Leto and insinuated – subtly at first, but with increasing boldness – that she herself was at least the equal of the goddess, if not more, in appearance and accomplishments.

'I am a sort of divinity, myself, you know – my mother was one of Atlas' daughters and my husband is the son of Zeus! Leto is the daughter of Titans whom no one even talks about anymore.'

Or: 'One would think that a goddess such as Leto would outshine a mortal woman in beauty, but if you look at *me* now, you'll see that this is not always the case...'

Or worse yet: 'Leto is so proud of those twins of hers, but heavens! I have *seven* sons and *seven* daughters, all of them attractive and accomplished.'

'Why does Apollo still keep his hair so ridiculously long? And Artemis – wearing men's hunting boots and hanging around in the woods with young girls? What are we to make of *that*? You could take away six of my daughters and six of my sons and I would still be a more fortunate mother than Leto.'

Leto, who was more tolerant than most gods, chose to ignore such remarks. And yet, when fate has decreed that a family must be destroyed, madness festers in a mortal mind, provoking divine anger.

And so it was for Niobe. One day, she finally went too far. Striding through the streets of Thebes, bedecked with jewels and wearing a robe spun from gold, she burst into the temple of Leto, where incense was being burned in honor of the mother and her twins. Niobe ordered the participants to remove the laurel crowns that they were wearing and stop the ritual at once. If they wanted gods to worship, she told them, they should look no further than their local palace.

Gentle Leto had finally had enough. She called her twins to her side. Before she had even finished describing Niobe's offences, Apollo and Artemis were heading down to Thebes, enraged. As Apollo said, further discussion would only postpone punishment.

Apollo found Niobe's seven sons out hunting and, pulling his swiftest arrows from his quiver, killed them one-by-one. So forcefully did he pull his bow-string that his arrows transfixed the boys' bodies, entering their backs and then emerging, bloody, from their chests. Niobe's sons fell onto the forest floor, startling the animals that they had been stalking.

Meanwhile, Artemis travelled to the palace. There, she found Niobe's seven daughters in the women's chambers, arranging one another's hair and picking out clothes for the day. Her arrows flew as swiftly as her brother's and were just as sharp. The seven girls soon lay on the floor, their blood staining the costly mosaic.

When Niobe discovered what had happened, her grief was as intense as her arrogance had been. She tore her hair, she clawed her cheeks, she rent her beautiful robes. She cried *eleleleu! eleleleu!* as Greek woman did when loved ones died.

And she wept. She wept as if her heart were breaking, she wept until her eyes were swollen shut and her face was mottled, she wept until the shreds of her robes were wet. Her women tried to comfort her, her cooks tempted her with food, but she walked the empty halls of her palace inconsolably, a woman blessed with children but now childless, weeping for what could never be restored.

The gods, taking pity at last, turned Niobe to stone and sent a whirlwind to carry her back to the land of her birth. There they

placed her, still petrified, on a crag of Mount Sipylus. Yet even as a stone, she continued to cry, trickling water down the mountain.

The crag came to be feared by the local shepherds, who sometimes heard uncanny wails echoing from it in the night. Uncannier still, from afar they could see the form of a woman on the mountain, crouching down in her grief, but each time they climbed the slopes to confront her, they discovered that she had vanished into the rock.

And the corpses of Niobe's children? No one had performed their burial rites on the third day, as was customary, because when Zeus had turned Niobe to stone, he had turned her household to stone as well. For nine days the children's bodies lay in their own gore until finally, the gods noticed and buried the children themselves.

27. Athena and Arachne

Before she became queen of Thebes, while she still just a girl in Lydia, Niobe had a friend named Arachne. Although they came from different social classes—Niobe was the daughter of King Tantalus and Arachne's father, Idmon, was of no particular importance—they were bound by a common love of textiles. Niobe loved to drape herself in beautiful fabrics and Arachne loved to create them.

Arachne was, in fact, renowned throughout Lydia for her skill as a spinner and a weaver. The neighboring nymphs would leave their springs and mountains to gather round, marveling at how fine were the threads that she teased from her spindle, how evenly she beat her weft and how gracefully she strode back and forth before her loom, passing her bobbin through the shed of the warp. Her fingers caressed the threads as she worked, and when she lay down at night, her empty fingers continued to move, longing for threads that were no longer there.

But it was for color, and the stories that color helped her to tell, that Arachne was most renowned. Idmon was a dyer by trade, coaxing yellow from buckthorn berries, red from madder, purple from the local shellfish. Arachne had grown up

surrounded by hanks of newly dyed thread, drying bright in the sun. She gazed at yellow and saw Callisto's pelt, at red and saw Hephaestus' forge, at purple and saw Europa's robe. The green extracted from delphinium became, in her mind's eye, the Arcadian forests through which Pan wandered and the blue extracted from woad became the sea from which Aphrodite sprang.

All of these colors and more suffused her textiles; all of these stories and more were narrated by her fingers. When she cut a finished piece from her loom and unrolled it, finally making visible the entire tale, her admirers stood enthralled. Justifiable was Arachne's fame; justifiable were the praises she won.

It takes only a moment for a life to change ineluctably, but more than a single footstep to reach the fatal precipice. Arachne fell into the habit of considering her art to be completely her own; her mother had died when she was young and she felt that she had learned little from local women. Her gifts seemed to spring from her fingers of their own accord. Lacking real rivals, she had never learned the grace of humility. Sometimes, admirers would tell her that she had been blessed by Athena, but she understood this only metaphorically.

One day, when a townswoman repeated that phrase, Arachne mumbled, never breaking her pace in front of her loom, 'Blessings or not, let Athena descend and compete with me. I'll bet my life that I'd win.'

Though mumbled, the words reached Athena's ears. Disguising herself as an old woman, she squeezed through the crowd around Arachne.

'Be careful, child,' Athena said, 'it is one thing to claim preeminence among mortals—and you rightly do so—and another to claim supremacy over a goddess. Athena can be a merciful goddess; ask her pardon now and you may yet escape her wrath.'

Arachne answered. 'Go home and preach to your kinfolk, grandma. Let Athena see to her own affairs.'

Suddenly, the old woman vanished and Athena was there. The sun seemed to dim against her steely brilliance; the air grew

cooler and the spirit of the crowd turned somber. Everyone but Arachne fell to their knees and bowed their heads.

As for Arachne, she was caught unprepared. Her cheeks turned first red, then ashen white. She stood still as a stone in front of her loom and for once, her fingers stopped moving.

But no one excels without cultivating determination. Arachne—poor, foolish girl—shook herself into action. She ripped from her loom a half-done textile and began to prepare the header of a new one. Conjuring her own loom from the air, Athena did the same.

How different were their chosen topics! At the center of Athena's web was her own triumph over Poseidon, when the two, bestowing gifts, had contended for the city that became Athens. The olive tree that she had given and the spring that was his gift were so wondrously lifelike that you would swear that the first could be watered by the second. Around this centerpiece Athena wove warnings to Arachne. Scene after scene showed mortal hubris and its wages: people turning into mountains, birds and trees for contending with divinities.

Arachne depicted the lustful predations of the gods. Here was Zeus as a bull, cutting through blue waves with a terrified Europa on his back; there he was a snow-white swan, nestling against Leda; there he was again, a spotted green snake, raping Persephone. Nor was it only Zeus that Arachne portrayed: Poseidon, in the form of a black stallion, was mounting blonde Demeter; Apollo, cloaked in shepherd's brown, was impregnating Isse. The scenes that Arachne depicted, censuring the gods, were astoundingly varied, but through the subtlety of her skill, she managed to suggest a dreadful unity.

The textiles done, the weavers stepped back to regard them. It was immediately clear whose was technically superior: neither Athena nor Envy herself could fault Arachne's artistry or her skill as a weaver.

Ice-grey fury filled the goddess' heart. She kicked at her own loom weights, sending them spinning across the ground like tops, and then, her anger unrelieved, turned her wrath against Arachne's work. Betraying the very craft that she

claimed to champion, Athena tore the beautiful fabric to shreds. Then, seizing a bobbin, Athena beat its creator over the head.

Arachne, too proud to endure such humiliation, looped a noose around her neck and jumped. Before she could die, however, Athena grabbed her by the waist, slackening the rope.

With a trace of pity in her voice Athena said 'Live on, blasphemous girl – even if you hang forever.'

And then she sprinkled upon Arachne the juice of an herb that Hecate had cultivated. Immediately, Arachne's hair, nose and ears fell off. She shrank severely, until she could scarcely be seen anymore. Then her arms and legs disappeared into her abdomen, making it bulge like a tiny ball.

When Athena took away Arachne's arms, she also took away her thumbs, an artisan's most useful tools, but she permitted Arachne's restless fingers to remain. Now they sprang out of her bulbous abdomen, four to a side. With them, Arachne learned to work such colorless threads as she could still spin and to weave a new kind of textile, although each one was as drab as the next.

And whenever any fly or moth dared to disturb her weaving, Arachne paralyzed it with poison and spun her threads around it like a tiny bobbin – a grim trophy of her artisan's skill.