

Arachne

(Time – 7:36)

A rumour reached the ears of the gods and the goddesses, a rumour that there was a mortal woman named Arachne, who possessed such skill at weaving that her work dazzled the eyes of anyone who looked upon it. It was said that it moved people to laughter and tears in equal measure. Owl-eyed Athene heard the story and she snorted with indignation: some mere mortal, out-weaving her? She who had invented the loom, the spindle, the shuttle and all the women's arts? And had this Arachne ever given thanks for her gift? Had she ever made sacrifices to the goddess? Never!

Athene strapped on her sandals of untarnishing gold. She seized her spear and flashed down out of the sky to the kingdom of Lydia. When her feet struck the ground she changed her shape so that to all the world she looked like an old woman, leaning on a twisted stick. She hobbled to the village of Hypaepa. She made her way through the village until she came to the cottage of Arachne. Through the window she could see the woman working at her loom. She lifted her fist and knocked at the door.

Arachne welcomed the stranger. She fetched a stool so that she could sit in the cool shadows. She fetched a bowl of wine for her to drink. The old woman sipped, looked about herself and said, 'Some things that old age brings should be welcomed: wisdom, for instance. Your gift is great but it is just that – a gift, given you by owl-eyed Athene. If I were you, I would thank her before she decides to turn against you and stop your nimble fingers.'

Arachne shook her head. 'A gift? If only it were so. I have a skill, earned by long years of hard work and tedious effort. Let those who owe Athene give her thanks. As for me, I owe her nothing. Mine is an art won from suffering and sympathy. Let her come. Let her come here and show me that my work is tame and trite compared with hers.'

'She has come.' Suddenly the old woman doubled in size. The wrinkles faded from her face. The twisted staff became a bronze-tipped spear. Arachne sat uncowed, unbowed, and looked at the goddess without blinking. The goddess stared at the woman. The face of the goddess was beautiful, unchangeable as a constellation. The face of the woman was creased and wrinkled with all the joys and sorrows of a lifetime. Athene spoke first: 'We will have a contest of weaving, you and I, and soon enough we will discover who is the giver and who the mere receiver of gifts.'

Arachne nodded. 'Very well.'

The goddess set up a loom in the corner of the room and when everything had been made ready Arachne asked, 'What is to be our theme?'

The goddess smiled. 'Our theme will be this: the changeless power of the mighty gods and goddesses and the uppity cheek and presumption of you mere mortals.'

The woman and the goddess loosened their blouses, they rolled up their sleeves, each of them selected a thread from the rainbow of choices and fitted it to a shuttle. Each of them set to work, passing the shining shuttle from hand to hand across the loom. All the long day they worked, intent in their concentration, without stopping for food or drink. And then, as the shadows of evening lengthened and the light began to fade, they put down their shuttles and stepped back from their looms. Their bright tapestries were finished now.

Each looked at the other's work. On the loom of the goddess was the image of Hephaestus, fashioning the woman Pandora out of clay. There was Artemis watching as Actaeon was torn apart by his own hounds. There was Prometheus bound to his crag with Zeus' vultures devouring his liver. Arachne shuddered. Athena looked at Arachne's loom. There was Orpheus looking over his shoulder, seeing his wife's face fading. There was the boy Phaethon trying to control his father's horses. There was broken Cygnus, transforming into a swan. The tapestry of the goddess was flawless, masterful, perfect. But the tapestry of the woman was human, moving, touching. There was tenderness and

suffering. It had been woven with a golden thread of joy and a silver thread of sorrow. It had been woven with the knowledge that life is brief.

The immortal goddess saw that she was beaten. She snarled. She grabbed the shuttle from her tapestry and struck Arachne on the forehead three, four times over. Arachne moaned. She put her hands to her face. Her hair fell out. Her nose and ears fell to the floor. Her head shrank to the size of one black poppy seed, her body to the size of one black peppercorn. Her eight nimble fingers became legs that clung to her sides and she scuttled into the shadows and safety. Owl-eyed Athene ripped the woman's tapestry into bright ribbons. She flew out of the cottage and up to the high slopes of Mount Olympus.

But that night another rumour came drifting into her ears, a rumour from the village of Hypaepa, a rumour of spinning and weaving. The goddess' forehead furrowed into a frown and the next morning, as the dawn took her golden throne, she swooped down out of the sky to the kingdom of Lydia. She made her way to the cottage of Arachne. She peered through the window. The place was empty, and that was as it should be. But then, out of the corner of her eye, she saw something moving under the eaves of the roof. She turned and looked. And there she saw a creature, a tiny eight-legged creature drawing the final thread across a piece of weaving so beautiful, so intricately delicate that the goddess could only gasp in astonishment and admiration. The tiny creature was spinning a gossamer thread from her own belly and making a masterpiece. A spider's web, the very first, and it was hanging with drops of dew in the light of the dawn as though it had been threaded with silver tears.