

Arachne

(Time – 11:45)

Between the four realms, between the earth, the sea, the sky and the land beneath, in the place where all four meet, everything can be seen and heard. In that place there is a tower. It is always open. It has countless apertures: windows and doorless doorways. It is built of echoing bronze, which amplifies the words brought on the wind. There is no quiet there, no silence in any part, always can be heard murmurings, like the sound of the sea's waves heard at a distance. This is the House of Rumour.

A host inhabit this hall, a shadowy throng of words that flit about. They meet, they spawn young who grow and grow until their moment comes and then they're gone. Here live: gossip; vicious slander; ugly truth. Rumour herself sees and hears everything, she encourages the journeys of these travellers.

Through the House of Rumour came the story of a Lydian woman, whose skill at the loom surpassed all others. This Arachne was not of noble blood, she was no princess. Her fame came from her skill. It was said she wove such vivid images into her tapestries that even the bright immortals gasped to see their acts depicted so vividly before them.

The story of Arachne's skill reached the eyes of owl-eyed Athene, the goddess of war and wisdom, and she snorted with indignation. Some mere mortal, outweaving her! She who had invented the loom and the spindle and 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, she flashed down out of the sky to the Kingdom of Lydia. And when her foot struck the ground, she changed her shape, so that to she looked to all the world she looked like an old woman, like an ancient crone leaning on a twisted stick. And she hobbled across Lydia until she came to the village of Hypaepa. And she hobbled through the village until she came to the cottage of Arachne. She could recognise it by the nymphs peering through the windows at the woman working at her loom. In the shape of an old woman, the goddess hobbled to the door of the cottage. She lifted a twisted fist and she knocked.

Lydian Arachne welcomed the stranger in. She gave her a bowl of wine, a stool to sit on in the cool of the shadows. The stranger sipped. She looked at the tapestries hanging from the walls. She put down the bowl and said: "some things that old age brings should be welcomed. Wisdom, for instance. Your gift is great, but it is a gift that was given to you by the goddess of war and wisdom, owl-eyed Athene, who gave us the loom, the spindle, the shuttle, all the women's arts. If I were you, I would thank her before she turns against you and stops your nimble fingers."

"I have no gift," said Arachne. "I have a skill that was earned with long years of tedious effort and practice. Let those who owe the goddess thank her. As for me, did she make me give this woman's face such a look of sorrow and regret? Did she make me give this couple's embrace such a sense of passion? No. Life, life inspired me, not a goddess. Let Athene come, let her come here now and show the world that my work is tame compared to hers."

"She has come."

Suddenly the old woman doubled in size. The twisted stick became a bronze-tipped spear. Nymphs fell on the floor at the goddess' feet or scattered in all directions. But the woman Arachne sat, uncowed and unbowed. And the goddess stared at her. A mortal and an immortal. The face of the woman creased and wrinkled with the joys and the sorrows of a lifetime, and the

face of the goddess beautiful, unchanging as a constellation of stars in the sky, unchanging as a crystal embedded in stone. And it was the goddess who 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. And as to the judge, the choice is yours.”

Arachne shuddered. She knew that if she chose a man or woman to be judge ... well, who would dare give her the victory for fear of the fury of the goddess? And she knew that if she chose a god or a goddess ... well, which one of them would ever allow the victory to go to some mere mortal? And then she thought: there is one of the immortals who knows something of sadness and suffering and separation. And she said, “the judge will be Persephone, the goddess of the spring”. And Athene said: “Very well.”

And Persephone was fetched, and when she entered the cottage it was as though the spring entered with her. There was a warm breeze. The colours of the threads on the spools and spindles glowed as though with some interior light. But Athene had noticed nothing. She was too busy setting up her own loom in the corner of the room.

And when everything was ready, Arachne said, “what is to be our theme?”

And the goddess smiled her inscrutable smile and she said, “our theme will be this: the timeless of the mighty gods and goddesses, and the uppity arrogance of you mere mortals.”

And Arachne nodded. And the woman and the goddess selected a thread from the rainbow of choices, and each of them fitted the thread to a shuttle, and each of them began to pass the shuttle from hand to hand across the loom, and the threads became shapes and the shapes became forms and the forms became pictures. And all morning they worked. And all afternoon they worked. And then, as the evening came, and the shadows lengthened, the woman and the goddess put down the shining shuttles, and they stepped back from their looms. Their tapestries were finished.

Bright Persephone, goddess of the spring, stepped forward to judge their handiwork. She saw many stories depicted on the two tapestries. Of course, she looked first at the tapestry of the goddess, and she saw: Apollo playing his lyre while the whole of creation held its breath. And then, in the tapestry of the woman, she saw a pale yellow flower leaning over its perfect reflection in the still waters of a lake. On the tapestry of the goddess, she saw Artemis, smiling to herself as a stag was dragged down by his own hounds. And on the tapestry of the woman she saw two trees, an oak and a linden, their leaves echoing the faces of an old man and an old woman, looking deep into one another's eyes.

And for Persephone there was no contest. The tapestry of the goddess was flawless, perfect. The tapestry of the woman moved her.

Persephone, who knew something of sorrow and separation, she looked at these little figures loving and losing, embracing and cowering in terror, and she understood their passion. The tapestry had been woven with a golden thread of joy and a silver thread of sorrow, woven with the knowledge that life is brief.

“The woman Arachne has won.”

Owl-eyed Athene snarled. She grabbed the shuttle from her loom. She struck Arachne between the eyes. Arachne moaned. She stumbled back. Her hair fell out, her body shrunk to the size of one black peppercorn, her head to the size of one black poppy seed. Her nimble fingers became legs that clung to her sides and she scuttled into the shadows and safety.

Athene threw back her head and hooted with owl laughter. With owl talons she ripped Arachne's tapestry to bright ribbons. With owl wings she flew out of the window of the cottage and up to the high slopes of Mount Olympus.

But that night, from the bronze halls of the House of Rumour, she heard a story. A story from the village of Hypaepa in the Kingdom of Lydia, a story of spinning and weaving. Her forehead furrowed into a frown, and as the dawn took her golden throne, Athene strapped on her sandals of untarnishing gold, she seized her spear, she flashed down out of the sky to the village of Hypaepa.

She made her way to the cottage of Arachne, she peered through the window, and 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 eave of the roof. And she turned and she looked. And there was a creature, a tiny creature drawing the final thread across a piece of weaving so beautiful, so intricately delicate that the goddess could only gasp in astonishment.

The tiny creature was spinning a thread from her own belly, and making a masterpiece. A spider's web, the very first, and glistening with drops of dew in the light of the dawn as though it had been threaded with silver tears.