From sailors who were turned into pigs, nymphs that sprouted into trees, and a gaze that converted the beholder to stone, Greek mythology brims with shape-shifters.

The powerful gods usually changed their own forms at will, but for mortals, the mutations were often unwanted. One such unnerving transformation befell the spinner Arachne. Arachne was the daughter of a tradesman who spent his days dying cloth the deepest shades of purple. She had a flair for spinning the finest threads, weaving them into flowing fabric, and creating magnificent tapestries.

People flocked to watch her hands flying across her loom, as if thread sprung directly from her fingertips. But as praise for her work grew, so did her pride. Arachne could often be heard boasting about her skills, declaring that her talent surpassed anyone else's—mortal or divine. She refused to see weaving as a gift from the gods.

Rather, she flaunted it as her own personal genius. Unfortunately, the goddess of wisdom and crafts, Athena, overheard Arachne making these claims. Planning to teach the ungrateful girl a lesson, Athena disguised herself as an old woman and stole amongst the mortals. She berated Arachne in public— how dare the weaver claim herself greater than the gods?

But Arachne only laughed, barely looking up from her loom. Provoked, the old woman threw off her cloak to reveal her true form. If Arachne insisted on defaming the gods, Athena would challenge her to a contest directly. Masking her shock at the appearance of the grey-eyed goddess, Arachne accepted the challenge.

Athena drew up her own glittering loom as a great crowd gathered to watch. The weavers began, eyes fixed and shuttles blurring. Athena conjured wisps of cloud from above and slender threads of grass from below in a spectacle of strength. She wove tremendous scenes that showed the power of the gods: Poseidon riding the waves, Zeus firing thunderbolts, and Apollo hurtling across the sky.

In Athena's splendid tapestry, the glory of the gods dwarfed mortal life. But Arachne had no interest in boosting godly egos. Her tapestry showed the gods abusing their power: squabbling amongst themselves, drinking and bragging, and meddling in the lives of mortals.

She represented Zeus as a philanderer, transfiguring himself to ensnare women: a swan for Leda, a bull for Europa, a shower of gold for Danae.

Arachne then turned to the misdemeanors of other gods, from Pluto's abduction of Persephone to Bacchus's wild pursuit of Erigone. Even though she cast the gods in the most unflattering light, Arachne's work shone with her dazzling skill. Her tapestry was almost alive, filled with movement and lustrous colors that winked triumphantly. When Athena saw Arachne's undeniably beter and flagrantly subversive work, she flew into a rage and turned on the human weaver.

Arachne's glee dimmed as she felt her body shrinking and contorting. Her fingers waved wildly as her arms stuck to her sides, and black hair sprouted all over her body. The goddess left Arachne with a single spool of thread unfurling from her belly, a slim reminder of her human talent.

For challenging the assumption that the gods were untouchable,
Athena had shrunk her adversary into the first spider.

To this day, Arachne and her children spin out her penance—
or is it undaunted persistence? —
in the shadows of giants.