

Echo and Narcissus

Narcissus looked good, and he knew it. He had in fact made a career out of his looks, and now received more awards, fan mail, and most importantly money, than any other model in the business. His house (which had recently been hard hit by mansion tax) was filled with prints from throughout his professional life – advertising campaigns for cars and various beauty products, beside the latest in men's fashion. The few old frames, tucked discretely behind the stairs, were of younger days spent in junior competitions. These were seldom brought out into the open, save on the annual visit of parents who still insisted on reminiscing. For several years now, Narcissus had received letters, emails, and gifts from obsessive fans. These had included everything from Belgium confectionary to undergarments with rather shocking levels of frills.

None, however, were quite as persistent as Echo.

This young lady had, at one time in her life, been a rising star in the world of music, appearing on numerous talent shows as a teenager. On one such show she had displeased the judges – not advisable when performing before a panel of Olympians. She, like the contestants before her, had stepped timidly onto the grand stage to stand before the live audience staring back. Many had surmised that nerves had gotten the better of the young singer, causing the auditory disaster which followed. The goddess Hera, world renowned manager and talent spotter, had been so angered by Echo's babbling voice, that she had cursed her to only repeat the words of others. At first this had not been a major issue, with covers of songs being quite the rage, but the public soon become tired with an artist who could never be original, and the spotlight quickly faded.

It was soon after this that Narcissus made his name, and Echo, along with thousands of other love struck girls, became obsessed.

The messages that Echo sent had become ever more elaborate, and had quickly begun to irritate the object of her affection. It continued to the point where he replied in kind, telling Echo in no uncertain terms to leave him alone. Not to be swayed so easily, the silent girl attended one of the most exclusive fashion shows of the year (sponsored by Cyclops Entertainment's popular magazine, *We've Got Our Eye On You*) using her past connections, and climbed onto the catwalk while Narcissus flounced past.

This year, the new range created by Aphrodite included the iconic *Golden Fleece* – popular due to its durability, capacity to make one stand out in a crowd, and ability to be machine washed and tumble dried without shrinking. This same goddess had always admired Echo's voice and musical talent, and was more than happy to grant an old friend a small favour. Narcissus was greatly embarrassed by her intrusion so screamed that he didn't love her, and that he would be surprised if anyone ever did, leaving the devastated Echo repeating his derision to an audience of photographers and reporters.

While this sort of behaviour was not uncommon for the rather self-obsessed man, on this occasion even the critics commented that perhaps he had gone a little too far. After all, the last thing agents want is for the public to see their idol being condemned for his actions – as reported by *The Rich and the Reckless* soon after: 'It turns out there is such a thing as bad publicity'. This can most definitely be said when media appearances catch the attention of the gods. It was unfortunate for Narcissus that the deity paying attention at that particular time was Artemis – protector of women, amongst

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other things – a goddess who had made it her modern day mission to secure women’s rights around the globe.

As punishment for his arrogance and dismissal of the heart-broken Echo, the goddess cursed Narcissus to see his own face in the place of all others. This drove the model mad, both attracted and perturbed by the constant sight of such a handsome visage. He was devastated by the reaction which he now received from the visions before him, unable to see them as anything but perfection. They were, of course, merely illusions and the unfortunate neighbours whom Narcissus doted upon rebuffed his approach accordingly, having no idea of the pain they were inflicting. Echo, having been visited by the goddess, knew of this affliction, and took it upon herself to direct as many fans as she could find towards his abode. She instructed them to visit Narcissus but deny his pleas for them to linger that would surely follow.

Plagued by these visions wherever he looked, Narcissus locked himself at home, dismayed by the countless rejections. Even here the numerous memoirs of his career haunted his waking hours, and turned his once sweet dreams into nightmares of beauty.

Narcissus had, in the beginning, tried to keep up with the happenings of the world through radio – the curse took effect through all forms of visual media – but it seemed his torment followed at each turn. After his public shaming of Echo her career had experienced a second wind, and, with the help of both Aphrodite and numerous collaborations, the airways were soon awash with her latest compositions. For the shamed star it seemed that every syllable was directed towards him, and while friends insisted it was all in his head, Narcissus knew better. As it turned out, so did Echo. Such tracks as *Watch Yourself* and *A Million Faces* had become global favourites, and looped her haunting voice for hours on every station.

No one was quite sure when Narcissus died. Some doubted whether he had, after all; they had never found a body. As a result of this mysterious disappearance, Narcissus became the conspiracy theory of the year, with conflicting sources claiming suicide, murder, and from the more extreme, alien abduction. Although it may seem strange for this arrogant man to be missed, many girls mourned his passing, each sure that, had it been them, Narcissus would not have shown such vanity.

It was only many years later, when the house was demolished to make way for the 2032 Olympic Games, that a single flower was discovered. Apparently having withstood countless frosts and the trampling of a dozen construction workers, its golden petals remained unrumpled and seemingly immune to the beck and call of the winds which eddied all around.

The Story of Arachne

It had been necessary in recent years for the gods to change their ways in order to properly integrate with our modern, and swiftly evolving, mortal realm. In Olympus, times changed slowly and were met with greater reluctance by many of the more old fashioned beings – particularly those who felt that their influence was slipping away with the arrival of the technological age. Others, however, chose to embrace these changes, seeing the wisdom in entering and understanding the world which we mortals have come to rely on. Only then could one such deity possibly hope to maintain their power.

The goddess Athena had such vision, and over the past fifty years had built up an empire in various guises to produce a wealthy and powerful business mogul. She now owned several of the planet's largest and most profitable companies, including the worldwide software firm *NiteVizion*®.

A highly stylised owl crest perched upon each company letter head and on the uniform of loyal workers, having formed the basis of Athena's company from the beginning – an emblem with which I am sure you are all familiar. It was a symbol which connected her grand past to the modern day, and was the embodiment of her wisdom and accomplishments. It had of course evolved over the decades, with angles replacing curves and vice versa, as fads arose then faded just as fast. Each detail was of great importance to the goddess, having established a reputation for meticulous precision – a quality which had served each venture well. It seemed that in whichever area she invested, customers wanted the same thing: quality but at a reasonable price. Athena held these principles in high regard, and while she thrived on competition, her divine pride would allow none to outdo her.

Though the wrath of the tycoon was well known, aspiring web designer Angeline was, like many young people, hot-headed and brash, with little respect for the recognised leaders in the profession. She was determined to make her mark on history one way or another, and was not concerned with what enemies she made along the way. This attitude was partly down to her upbringing – four brothers had always meant that Angeline had to fight for everything – and partly down to the unfortunate preconception that the law would protect her from any disgruntled rivals. In most cases this would be true. However, while Athena was happy to play by the rules as long as they suited her purpose, Zeus was the only real authority in her eyes, and he rarely concerned himself with such trivial matters. It was these attitudes which lead Angeline to one day make a most costly mistake.

The internet was a haven for Angeline, as it was for many of the designers and programmers whom she considered friends. Despite the regularity with which they communicated, in reality each knew very little about the others, having only a screen name for reference. It had long since been realised that revealing personal information to strangers was a bad idea, and even Angeline followed this unspoken rule. Everyone had heard the stories of identity theft and harassment which plagued those who had been too blasé with their details. As a result, to everyone that mattered, she was known simply as 'Arachne'.

Every evening, after a day of coding (and in this case hacking), Angeline would visit her favourite site – a place for web designers and programmers to convene and compare creations – and show off her work to friends and competitors. Today had been particularly fruitful, as reflected by the replies posted by the confident, and what many would describe as pretentious, Arachne. As always, she

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uploaded her work – protected of course – for others to view, and received high praise from her peers.

On this occasion, Angeline had taken her ‘talents’ to a new level all together, having managed to hack *NiteVizion*®’s mainframe. No damage had been done of course; she had simply wanted to challenge herself and have a peek into the world that she someday hoped to be a part of. While this sort of nosing around wasn’t unheard of, sneaking through the defences of such a global company was more than a little risky, but most certainly impressive. The one thing that Angeline had not planned was for her achievement to reach the notice of her victim, but Athena liked to keep tabs on many sites, just in case this sort of a situation arose.

Min3va: You dare to attack one of my creations, and then boast about it to your pathetic little friends?

This was an unexpected correspondence, and at first Angeline was too shocked to respond, unable to believe how careless she had been. *Why did I decide to publically announce what is essentially a crime on the internet?* Why indeed. But while it was clear that Athena knew *Arachne* was the culprit, Angeline remained certain that there was no way her true identity could be found, and so replied without fear of retribution.

Arachne: Yes, and while I’d love to say your defences lasted well, I’d be lying.

Min3va: I will see you are punished for such insolence; I have the power to ruin you.

Arachne: ooo, I’m *so* scared. What r u going 2 do? I bet IRL u’re just some sad stuck up OAP who sits reminiscing about ‘the good old days’ when ppl still cared. :’’’(

Although Athena had learned over recent decades to be less sensitive and more tolerant towards the words of mortals, there were some things that even she could not let go. Being called a pensioner was no exception. The reference to people no longer caring had come a little too close to the truth, although not in the way Angeline had intended, which only served to enrage the goddess further. Any admiration that may have been felt for a fellow creator excelling at her work was snuffed out in that instance, leaving only divine pride unused to being bruised.

With that, the words on Angeline’s screen blurred to be replaced by an unblinking owl perched upon an olive branch. Text began to scroll beneath the bird, each letter morphing from Greek to English in a bold Times New Roman.

‘Since you choose to insult me we shall settle this matter accordingly.

**A competition will be held to prove who can create the most accomplished piece of code,
broadcast so that all may bear witness.**

The loser will never be able to code again.’

As the challenge faded to black, Angeline stared at her blank screen, as unblinking as the regal owl had been moments before. Though shocked and even a little scared, Angeline’s confidence did not waver – if Athena couldn’t protect her own site from being hacked, what chance did she have? As

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she sat wondering what Athena could possibly have meant by 'broadcast so that all may bear witness,' a timely blue link appeared on the monitor.

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As usual, a few minutes after her outburst the goddess began to regret her actions. She would, of course, never admit to such feelings; rash behaviour had been a problem of hers since a young age. Even when only a few centuries old, Athena had been outspoken and rarely considered a response beyond the moment, consequences being of little concern to her immortal mind. Though ironic on many levels for the goddess of wisdom and strategy, these were attributes that did not always come naturally to the daughter of Zeus – a god not known for tolerance. While for mortals such feelings of regret may lead to one calling off such a challenge and each party going their separate ways peaceably, as you may imagine, this was not the case. Athena was left staring into indignant eyes that reflected back from her now blank monitor, knowing that to lose or concede the competition would shame herself and all of Olympus – not to mention a blight on her professional reputation.

The contest commenced two days later, with viewers able to follow the progress of each competitor live via YouTube, and comment accordingly. Angeline and Athena were to work in identical rooms with identical equipment and produce a new app, usable on PCs, tablets, smart phones, and a multitude of other branded products, from scratch. The only condition: it must be one hundred percent original. Each was able to follow the other's progress via the live video stream, but had been given strict warnings against directly copying from the other. This would have not only been cheating, but the worst kind of cheating – obvious and poorly done. The debate over who should judge the competition had been long, painful, and circled back on its self on more than one occasion (a phenomenon that many referred to as a 'Pandora's circle'). It had finally been decided that a public vote would choose the winner, proving that it is the inevitable conclusions that take the longest to reach.

It had initially been quite a challenge for Athena to come up with a product that would appeal to the general public, but that she would also be willing to give away for free. After all, for a successful business woman to give away her designs without consideration of profit went entirely against the Styx. Both products, winning or otherwise, were to be made available for free online after the contest. As she paced about her deceptively large office, the goddess conversed with the many owls which lined the room, perched on any available surface.

"It's not that I'm against charity – I am always glad to give some of my wealth to those in need – but to deny this sort of opportunity seems silly." The owl in front of her blinked slowly.

"Don't judge me Hektor, you know as well as I that if I don't create a product worthy of sale, then there's no chance of winning." Feathers were shuffled uncomfortably and a slight hoot escaped one beak. "Yes, Zina, winning is all that matters here."

Athena sighed. Owls made good company and were usually able to follow her chariot of thought; perhaps they were having an off-day. A large bird, silhouetted against the bright morning sun which filtered through the window, cleared his throat to speak for all his feathered friends.

"Are you, perchance, struggling to think of a design milady?" All heads turned to the goddess for a reply.

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“Certainly not Arastoo, . I have too many ideas, that’s just the problem – I don’t know what would appeal to the greatest number of people.” Athena waved a hand impatiently and dropped into the chair that materialised beneath her.

“When in doubt ma’am, go for the cute factor – it never fails. Most watched NewView (popular music and vlog site) videos of 2014 have proved that much, and I see no reason why this contest should be any different.”

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By the time each contestant was settled into their new working environment, two ingenious – or so they hoped – designs had been laid out. Athena had opted for an owl avatar that accompanied a user through their daily internet use, interacting with each page. Not only was it utterly adorable, but the bird also allowed any site to be personalised, whether it be changing the layout to suit a particular device, or to make browsing and research more accessible.

This was opposed by Angeline’s sleek purple spider (arachnophobes look away now) which, once downloaded, would assist the user with any technology-based problems they may have encountered – essentially a more versatile version of the Olympiad Winged Sandal or installation Pegasus. The animated sprite was able to process input glitches and problems – both typed and voice-activated – then search the database she had programmed access to for a solution, which it would then deliver with aplomb.

Both worked with commendable speed and skill, as was to be expected, and the stream soon filled with praise for each. As with almost all public voting events, most had already made up their minds before the contest had begun, basing their decision on long held allegiances and preconceptions, whether it be for the rich magnate, or the oppressed hellhound. In an attempt to ensure that the outcome was based on skill alone, a panel of judges had also been organised, each an expert in the field of marketing and product design. Such recognisable names as Midas of *Golden Entertainment*, owner of *Witch Games*, Circe, and designer of NewView itself A. Plato. These esteemed figures joined the flow of chatter which accompanied the event, informing the less educated viewers of the progress made, and for the most part commenting on the merits of each emerging product.

As the contest neared its end, Angeline and Athena were able to view and test each other’s creation before the public unveiling. Both were impressed, and neither could guess who the public would favour – not even the goddess.

When the votes were counted and verified, several seconds of silence stretched out before the announcement, broken only by the occasional cough from the live audience that had gathered. Spotlights flared into existence, sweeping across the stage to focus on the winner, and leaving a stunned Angeline consumed by darkness.

Devastated, she ran off stage, hiding her brimming, bloodshot eyes from the cameras. The defeated girl locked herself in the contest room, now devoid of recording equipment, and clutched her laptop to her chest, unwilling to relinquish her only talent.

This reaction, while not entirely unforeseen, made Athena think. This was something she did of course do all the time, but on this occasion was a different matter. It was not often that the thoughts

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of a deity turned to an individual mortal such as you or I, and if they did it's usually out of disdain or a passing curiosity. With Angeline however, the goddess's attention remained fixed. Despite the anger which the young girl had stirred, and the potential profit which had been lost, Athena felt pity for the first time in nearly three millennia. She, like the majority of the gods, was not known for forgiveness and second chances, instead dealing out justice where she saw fit. *I ought to remove her skills and all knowledge she gained in the field as the contest decreed.* A slight frown appeared between her angled eyebrows as she made her excuses and exited gracefully from the stage to the sound of rapturous applause.

Locked doors being no great obstacle to a deity, Athena appeared beside the sobbing girl and placed a hand on her gently shaking shoulder. The connection between Angeline and the technology she thrived upon was apparent, and while no goddess would go back on her word, Athena saw a way of allowing the inspiring work of Arachne to continue. Being the self-acclaimed mistress of loop holes in this modern world (surprisingly similar to the affairs of Olympus a millennia ago) Athena watched, her lips curled ever so slightly upwards as Angeline shrunk and pixelated, vanishing as far as mortal eyes could tell.

Opening the abandoned laptop, Athena clicked on the defeated program, waiting patiently as a sand timer turned before her eyes. This was soon replaced by a rather confused looking arachnid, clearly unused to its new surroundings, and the extra limbs now under its control. A speech bubble appeared above the creature, accompanied by a tiny voice.

“what are you? what have you done to me?”

“It would have been wrong to rob the world of such a talent, and to destroy what you love. I have made you part of your program – with more knowledge available now than you could ever have imagined.” Eight wondering eyes widened. “Use it well child. I will be watching.” Athena stood and looked down at the spider, “And as for what I am – the clue's in the name.”