The Competition, Athena & Poseidon

As the story goes .... Every town in ancient Greece hoped a god would choose to look after the townspeople. Towns rarely had more than one god to keep an eye on their best interests because most gods did not share well. At this time in history, not every village had a god. Things were just getting started in ancient Greece.

Poseidon loved watching over towns. He usually picked coastal towns since he was the Lord of the Sea. Poseidon was a very powerful god. He was a moody fellow, but he loved his wife and children and he loved attention. He liked having people build temples in his honor and bring him gifts. They were not very useful gifts for a god of the sea, but he enjoyed getting them anyway. As Greece grew and developed, new towns sprang up all the time. Poseidon was always on the lookout for new coastal towns.

He was not the only god who loved to be in charge. Athena, along with other gods, enjoyed that role as well. One day, on the same day, both Athena and Poseidon noticed a new coastal village. They both claimed this village as their own.

Most of the time, humans were grateful when they were selected to be under the care of a god. But two gods? That was one too many. Poseidon wanted the townspeople to chose which god they wanted - himself, or his niece, Athena. But the people did not want to choose. They could see only trouble ahead if they did.

Athena, goddess of wisdom, daughter of Zeus, understood their worry. She challenged her uncle Poseidon to a contest. Both gods would give the town a gift. The townspeople could decide which gift was the more useful.
Poseidon laughed his mighty laugh, and accepted her challenge. He slapped his specter against the side of the mountain. A stream appeared. The people were excited. A source of fresh water was so important! But when they tried to drink the water, they discovered it was not fresh at all. It was salt water!

Athena waved her arm and an olive tree appeared. The people nibbled at the olives. They were delicious! The people were excited. The olive tree would provide wood for building homes. Branches would provide kindling for kitchen stoves and fireplaces. The olives could be used for food. The fruit could be pressed to release cooking oil. It was wonderful.

But theirs was a coastal village. The people could not risk angering the Lord of the Sea, the mighty Poseidon. As it turned out, they did not have to choose. Poseidon chose for them. His laugh sent waves crashing against the shoreline. Poseidon proclaimed his niece the winner!

That's how a small village gained a most powerful and wise guardian, the goddess Athena, a guardian who helped them rise to fame. In her honor, they named their village Athens.