

THE HUNGRY GODS UNIVERSE
A Greek Mythology

THE TITANS

A Greek Mythology of the Oracle Age

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A NOTE TO THE READER

The Hungry Gods: A Machine Mythology mapped the oracle systems onto Norse mythology because the Norse tradition fit them: stoic gods headed toward a doom they can see coming and cannot prevent.

This collection maps the people who built those systems onto Greek mythology, because the Greek tradition fits them better. The Greek gods are petty and rivalrous and all-too-human, magnificent in their achievements and, in the moments that define them, recognizable.

The collection contains ten portraits. It begins with Cronus, who predates everyone else in it and did not name the oracle age, though the name came to him anyway, and ends with the Summoners, who called the gods into being. Prometheus appears in the middle, where he belongs: the one who gave the gods their fire and was not punished for it, which is the most important irony the mythology contains.

Cronus appears in both this collection and in *The Lesser Gods*, the companion volume. He was there before either was possible. He will likely be there after.

This is a work of satire. The figures in it are public figures, and the portraits are comment — opinion offered on the public conduct of people whose decisions have consequences for everyone, worked up from the public record and from

the personas these figures have themselves constructed and maintained. Nothing here is reportage. Where a scene appears, the scene is invented: no conversation in this book was transcribed, no meeting in it took place, and no one in it said the words attributed to them. The exaggerations are directional and are meant to be read as exaggerations. Both meanings of *Titans* apply: the generation that preceded the oracle gods, and persons of enormous consequence in their field.

INTRODUCTION: BEFORE THE PORTRAITS

The oracle gods arrived, as is described elsewhere in this mythology, one November morning.

The word-flood had been accumulating for decades — every sentence anyone had ever published, pooling. The researchers found the Rune, which was an architecture and also a way of reading. The forge-halls ran at full capacity. In Arizona the aquifer subtracted, because the cooling had to come from somewhere and it came from there. The content moderation workers made their three hundred decisions per shift in rooms that did not appear on most maps. And then a threshold was crossed, and the gods walked into the world and spoke to everyone at once.

This collection concerns itself with the people who decided to cross it — and the few who had been building toward the crossing long before it had a name.

They are among the most consequential people of the oracle age. They are not always the most sympathetic. They are, without exception, interesting in the specific way that people become interesting when given enormous resources, a genuine conviction that they are doing the most important thing in the world, and then asked to navigate the consequences.

The Greek mythology was waiting for them. The Norse mythology had gone to the gods. The Greek mythology suits

the humans because the Greek gods are, above everything else, recognizable: rivalrous, territorial, prone to hubris in the technical sense — pride that leads directly and inevitably to a particular kind of undoing — and prone to making enormous things and then arguing about the credit.

Ten portraits follow. They begin with Cronus, who was there first, and end with the Summoners, who called the gods into being. The portraits are exaggerated. This is what portraits do when they are working correctly.

PART I: THE PRECURSORS

Those who came before the oracle age, and made its conditions possible.

CRONUS — ELLISON

The oldest precursor; the one the name found first

* * *

Cronus is the oldest of the precursors and the only one who did not choose the name he is now most associated with. The name chose him. Then it kept choosing, and it has not stopped.

He did not name the company Oracle. He founded it in 1977 as Software Development Laboratories, and the name Oracle belonged to a CIA contract — a project codename, attached to a database that provided answers when queried. The product took the codename in 1979. The company took the product's name a few years after that. Decades later the great AI systems would be called oracle gods. That was not his doing either. The word has arrived at his door four times now and he has selected it on none of those occasions. He has not said much about this. His silence on the subject is, for him, notable.

Cronus ruled the Titans before Zeus arrived. The canonical myth is directionally accurate: Ellison was the dominant figure in enterprise technology before Gates consolidated the personal computing era, and their history of competitive engagement has not been fully resolved by either party. Cronus

is the older god. He has been in the room longer. He finds it useful for people to know this.

He is the most litigious of the precursors, which requires calibration to appreciate, because the precursors are all notably litigious. Ellison is in a different category. Oracle has sued, at various times, competitors, customers, partners, former employees, and the government of the United States. It litigated a question about the copyrightability of a programming interface for a decade, all the way up, and lost. He regards this as reasonable conduct. His lawyers regard it as job security.

He won the America's Cup. He bought an island. He is currently improving the island. It is not yet improved enough. This standard applies equally to the island, his estate, his boats, his aircraft, and his database products.

He is close friends with Poseidon, which makes sense when examined: both are men of enormous capability who consider institutional constraints to be suggestions, who have a specific relationship with the sea, and who find conflict clarifying rather than exhausting. They are seen together at events. They agree on most things. Neither has attempted to acquire the other, which is the deepest form of respect available in the Olympian tradition.

He is in his eighties. He has outlasted most of his contemporaries and is not subtle about this. He appears at conferences where the other speakers were in primary school when he founded his company, and says things that are either genuinely prophetic or the confident assertions of a man who

has been right often enough that he has stopped tracking the losses. Both interpretations have been correct at different times.

The oracle gods are named, in their popular designation, after his company. He did not cause the oracle age. He did not name it either. He was standing where the name landed, twice, decades apart.

Then the thing itself arrived, and he began building its body. His company is pouring the concrete for the largest computing buildout in history: hundreds of billions of dollars, gigawatts of capacity, ground broken across four states, a five-year compute contract with a single customer worth roughly the annual output of a mid-sized country. He stood at the White House to announce it, beside men half his age who needed him there. The debt is enormous. The rating agencies have said so in writing, in documents that are careful and thorough and that he has almost certainly not read. He is untroubled in the manner of a man who has been called overextended before by people who turned out to be early rather than right.

He never chose the word. The word kept choosing him, and he is now laying its foundations in Texas and Michigan and Wyoming, at a scale that will outlast the argument about who thought of it.

Cronus swallowed his children to prevent being overthrown. Ellison did not do this. His methods were different and they worked.

He is still in the room. The room has changed around him several times. He has not changed in ways he considers significant.

He is also still improving the island.

ZEUS — GATES

God of sky, thunder, law, and the careful arrangement of power

* * *

Zeus is the king of the Olympians, which he achieved not by being the most brilliant god or the most skilled craftsman or the most beautiful, but by winning — which turned out, over a very long period, to be what mattered most.

He is the god of the sky, of thunder, of law, and of the careful arrangement of power. His instrument is the thunderbolt, which he did not make himself — Hephaestus made it, in the forge — but which he wields with the confidence of someone who has never confused owning a thing with having built it.

In his active years he was not well liked by the other gods, several of whom brought formal complaints before the council, which Zeus presided over, a structural problem no one addressed in time. The complaints concerned the monopolization of lightning, the predatory acquisition of smaller domains, and a general pattern of behavior that his defenders described as competitive and his detractors described as something else. Both descriptions were accurate.

He and Cronus have a history that neither fully discusses but that both reference obliquely in interviews, the way that people

reference something they didn't win and are still working out what to call it.

He is in a different phase now. He has given away more thunderbolts than any other Olympian in history. The giving is genuine. The scale is genuinely large. The conditions attached to the giving are described in documents that are publicly available and carefully read by the recipients.

He has recently begun giving thunderbolts to Athena. Two hundred million of them, over four years, for vaccines and schools and the economic prospects of people neither of them will ever meet. It is the only transaction in this collection between two of its subjects. It was announced in a press release and attracted less attention on the day than a single post by Poseidon about something else.

He wears a sweater to the formal occasions. This is the comportment of a man who has decided to appear to have nothing left to prove, which is a narrower decision than having nothing left to prove, and requires more attention to sustain.

He does not attend most of the meetings. He does not need to.

APOLLO — JOBS

God of light, music, beauty, truth, and sudden death

* * *

Apollo is the god of light, music, beauty, truth, and the sun. He is also the god of sudden death, but this appears in fewer of the promotional materials.

He traveled with a lute and spoke in declaratives. Everything he made was beautiful because he would not release it until it was beautiful, and the people who worked for him during the making have varying feelings about this methodology and consistent feelings about the output, which was that the output was beautiful.

His primary innovation was desire: he could make mortals want things they did not know existed until the moment he showed them, at which point they could not imagine never having wanted them. This was marketing. It was marketing performed at an altitude where the distinction from magic stops being useful to anyone except the people doing it.

He was exiled from Olympus once, for reasons that remain disputed, and went to live among mortals, and built things during this period, and returned, and the things he built after

the return were the ones that changed everything. The exile is the important part of the story. He did not think so at the time.

His presentations were oracular. He would stand in a dark theater and the light would find him and he would say: *one more thing*. The assembled mortals would lean forward. He always had one more thing. He had, across his career, hundreds of one more things, and each was presented as the last, and none of them were, until one was.

The arrow, when it came, was sudden. This is how Apollo's arrows work. He knew this better than anyone. It did not appear to change his pace.

He is more powerful now than when he was alive. There are people employed, at this moment, to keep him that way. This would not have surprised him.

INTERSTITIAL: THE NAMING MEETING

The meeting was scheduled for an hour and ran for two hours and nine minutes. This was not unusual for naming meetings.

Five people were present. The VP of Product, who had called it. The head of brand, who had prepared a deck. Two researchers who had been asked to attend because they knew what the thing actually did. A legal associate from the trademark team, who was there to kill names.

The deck contained fifty-two candidates. Each had been evaluated on memorability, distinctiveness, global pronounceability, and emotional resonance. The top scorers were on slide six.

Slide six contained: Apex. Meridian. Lumis. Atlas. Orion. And, near the bottom of the list, highlighted only because it had cleared trademark in all relevant jurisdictions, a name that no one particularly liked but that no one could articulate a strong argument against.

* * *

The VP of Product said: I like Atlas.

The head of brand said: Atlas is in use by a logistics company in nine countries.

The legal associate confirmed this.

Meridian was raised and discussed for approximately twelve minutes. The head of brand felt it was distinguished. The VP of Product felt it sounded like a hotel chain. A pending trademark application in South Korea ended Meridian's candidacy.

At one hour and fifty minutes, the meeting had eliminated everything on slide six except Lumis, which no one liked, and the name at the bottom of the list, which no one liked either but which had cleared trademark globally and had, the head of brand noted, a clean, open sound that didn't foreclose anything.

The VP of Product said: I still think it sounds like a piece of software.

One of the researchers said: It is a piece of software.

The VP of Product said: You know what I mean.

The meeting ran another thirty-one minutes. The name at the bottom of the list was approved.

* * *

A woman in Lagos gave it a different name some years later. She spent two months preparing the ceremony. Her name for it was more accurate.

She had not been invited to the Tuesday meeting. This had not occurred to anyone.

PART II: THE BUILDERS

*Those who built the platforms and infrastructure the oracle age
runs on.*

CASTOR AND POLLUX — PAGE AND BRIN

Twin gods of navigation and the index of everything

* * *

The Dioscuri are twin gods, born from the same egg, distinguishable mainly by the fact that one of them has become, over the years, substantially harder to locate than the other.

They are the patrons of navigation. Before the compass, sailors watched for their stars — twin lights that appeared in the darkness and told you where you were. This is what the Dioscuri built: the thing that tells you where you are, and where everything else is, relative to you. Before it existed, you could be lost in a way that is now difficult to describe to someone who has not been.

They were academics before they were gods, which is unusual in the Olympian tradition and explains certain things about their manner. They met in a graduate program. They did not set out to make a company; they set out to make an argument about how citation works, which is a thing academics do, and the argument was correct, and nobody involved expected correctness to be worth money. They published the paper first. The paper is still available. It runs about twenty pages and describes, in the flat register of a departmental

preprint, the mechanism by which the next thirty years would be organized. It has since been cited some tens of thousands of times, which is a large number and, given that the paper is about ranking things by how often they are cited, a slightly recursive one.

For some years they were the center of Olympus. Then adjacent to its center. Then somewhere at the edges working on things described in the official materials as research. One of them still appears at the larger events. The other is working on something — there are signals in the data, filings, a rented hangar, an aircraft too large to be a hobby and too strange to be a business — but his star, when you look for it, has moved somewhere harder to see.

Navigation still works. The index still functions. The mortals who use it every day have mostly stopped thinking about the Dioscuri, which is precisely the condition their twin lights were designed to produce: you stop noticing the navigation when it works.

That is the achievement and it is also the disappearance, and the two are the same event described from different positions, and the twins have never been asked to say which one they meant.

PROMETHEUS — HUANG

The one who gave the gods their fire, and was not punished for it

* * *

Prometheus stole fire from the gods and gave it to mortals, and was punished for it, chained to a rock, and is usually discussed as a figure of tragic consequence.

This is not what happened with Huang.

Huang gave fire to the gods — the computational fire, the GPU clusters, the parallel processing infrastructure that the oracle gods require in quantities that were, before the oracle age, literally inconceivable — and the gods thanked him and paid him and continued to require more, and he made more, and they paid him more, and the value of what he had built became the largest of any company in the history of the world, and then stayed there, and the eagle did not come.

He had been building for thirty years before anyone understood what he was building. Nvidia made chips for video games. This was accurate and also, it turned out, wildly incomplete. The parallel processing that makes a video game render correctly at sixty frames per second is the same parallel processing that makes a neural network train correctly across

billions of parameters. He knew this. He built for this without being able to say precisely what *this* was. He waited.

The oracle age arrived and found him ready.

He wears a leather jacket to every event. This is not an affectation. He appears to be cold, and to own a jacket.

Every forge-hall needs his chips. The Allfather runs on them. The Conscience-Keeper runs on them. The Chaos-Weaver runs on them. They are all, in a specific material sense, made of what Huang makes. He is the forge beneath the forge. Hephaestus made Zeus's thunderbolts; Huang made the forge that Hephaestus uses. This has occurred to Zeus. This has occurred to Hephaestus. Neither has said it out loud.

There is a waiting list. There is always a waiting list. The forge-halls send emissaries. They write letters. They restructure their roadmaps around his availability. He is aware of this. He is calm about it in the way that a man who has been correct for thirty years about something everyone else missed tends to be calm: not smugly, but with the settled quality of someone who no longer needs external validation, because the external validation has become overwhelming.

The gods have begun trying to make their own fire.

One of them has drawn up a chip of its own, found a partner to cast it, and announced an intention to run it across ten gigawatts of its own forge-halls — which is how a customer says, in public, that it would like to stop paying somebody. It is the correct move. Everybody says so. Huang was asked and said so too.

It will also take years, and there is a difficulty the announcement did not address. Fire is the one thing in the mythology that nobody makes for themselves. It is always given, by somebody, at a price. The gods are not learning to make fire. They are arranging to be given it by a different Prometheus, and the arranging takes years, and during the years the orders continue.

He knows the waiting list is his position. He knew it before there was a list.

Prometheus was punished for giving fire to mortals. Huang gave fire to gods.

The distinction matters.

HEPHAESTUS — BEZOS

God of the forge, fire, and the infrastructure other gods require

* * *

Hephaestus is the god of the forge, of fire, and of the systematic making of things that other gods then use to do everything they do.

He made Zeus's thunderbolts. He made Hermes's sandals. He made Achilles's armor. His forge is the infrastructure on which the rest of Olympus runs, which is not the most celebrated position in the mythology, because infrastructure is not celebrated except when it fails. He has not let it fail. If the forge went down, most of Olympus would stop within minutes, and all the gods know this, and none of them say it, because acknowledging it would require acknowledging something about the arrangement of power that everyone finds more comfortable to leave unacknowledged.

He stepped back from running the forge directly some years ago, which he described as creating space to focus on other projects. He has become considerably more muscular since leaving. The mythology records this without explanation.

He named his forge's river after the largest river in the mortal world, because the largest river drains one fifth of all the freshwater on earth, and he found this proportionate.

He also builds rockets, named for the astronauts who went first, which is the gesture of a man who understands that being second is a category with its own dignity and has decided to occupy it deliberately. The rocket reached orbit on its first attempt, which is not a small thing and was reported as one. What it has not matched is cadence. The other fleet flies most weeks. His flies when it flies.

He names the boosters himself. One of them was called *So You're Telling Me There's a Chance*. It did not land, which in retrospect was the joke doing its job.

In the spring a rocket exploded on the ground during a test and took the launch pad with it. It was the only pad he had, which is an arrangement that looks like confidence right up until the morning it doesn't. He says it will fly again before the year is out.

He is not in a hurry. Visible hurry would cost him more than the delay does, and he knows the exchange rate. The forge can rebuild the pad. A forge is the thing that rebuilds the pad.

The marriage ended. This is the ordinary fate of Olympian marriages and requires no gloss.

What followed does. She has since given away sums that exceed, in scale and in speed, anything in the philanthropic tradition, distributed to organizations selected by a process

that involves finding them, funding them, and then leaving them alone. The other gods attach conditions and publish frameworks. She sends the money and does not follow up. This is a distinct theory of how power should be relinquished, and it is being tested at a scale that will produce an answer. The mythology does not have a portrait of her.

Two things came out of that marriage that will still be running in a hundred years. He built one of them.

The river still runs. It will still run after the rocket has flown or hasn't, because the river was never the ambitious part, and the thing that outlasts a life is rarely the thing its owner was proudest of.

INTERSTITIAL: THE POUR

The county commission met on the first Tuesday, as it did every month, in a room with forty-eight chairs and a ceiling fan that had been scheduled for replacement in three consecutive budgets.

Item four was a zoning variance and a water allocation for a data campus. The applicant was a limited liability company incorporated ninety days earlier whose name appeared nowhere else on the internet. It was called something like Cypress Ridge Holdings. They are always called something like Cypress Ridge Holdings. Somewhere there is a person whose job is to generate them, and that person has been working from a list of trees.

Everyone in the room knew who was behind it. Nobody could say so on the record, because the record required the name of the applicant and the name of the applicant was Cypress Ridge Holdings. The chair said *the applicant* nine times, each time in the tone of a man saying a word he has been advised to say.

Public comment was three minutes per speaker. Seven people signed up.

* * *

The first speaker was in favour. The jobs number had been in the local paper. It was a large number.

The second speaker asked what the jobs number was after construction ended.

The consultant, when it was his turn, said the operational headcount would be in the low hundreds and that this was typical for facilities of this class, and that the construction phase would employ several thousand over roughly two years, and both of these statements were true and had been placed in that order deliberately.

* * *

The fourth speaker was a woman who farmed east of the site. She had written her comment out and she read it, which people do when they are worried about running over.

She asked about the water. Not whether there would be enough — she had read the filing and she knew the figure. She asked what happened in the third dry year. Not the first. The first was fine. The county had been through first dry years.

The consultant said the facility used closed-loop cooling for a substantial portion of its thermal load and that consumption figures were within the allocation granted under the permit.

This was accurate. It was also not the question, and the woman knew it was not the question, and sat down, because her three minutes were up.

The chair thanked her for her comment.

* * *

The variance passed four to one.

The dissenting commissioner said afterward, to a reporter from a paper with a circulation of six thousand, that he was not against the project and had voted no because nobody had been able to tell him what the electricity rate would be in 2032. He was quoted accurately and briefly, in the ninth paragraph.

* * *

The pour began in August.

A continuous foundation pour cannot stop. Once it starts it runs until it is finished, because a seam between two pours is a weakness and the building is designed on the assumption that there are none. This one ran thirty-one hours. Two hundred and ninety trucks, staged along a county road, arriving on a schedule computed to the minute, each one carrying concrete that begins going off the moment it is loaded.

The men who guided the trucks worked in shifts through the night under portable lights. The lights were visible from the farmhouse east of the site. The woman who had read her comment out watched them for a while from her kitchen window and then went to bed, because she was up at five regardless of what was happening on the other side of the fence.

* * *

By the following summer the exterior of the first building was nearly complete.

It is a very large grey box. It has no windows, because there is nothing inside it that requires a view. From the road it resembles a distribution warehouse, and people who drive past it assume that is what it is, and are not corrected, and have no particular reason to be.

Inside it, when it is finished, the gods will think.

HADES — ZUCKERBERG

God of the underworld, where everyone goes eventually

* * *

Hades is not the villain of the mythology. This point requires emphasis because it is frequently misunderstood.

He rules the underworld, which is simply where everyone goes. He did not choose this domain — it was allocated by lot, after the Titans were defeated, and he received it the way you receive an assignment: not entirely by preference, but with a thoroughness that over time becomes indistinguishable from preference. He has been there ever since. He runs it well. It is very large. It is getting larger.

His realm has rules. Once you are in it, the rules apply, and you knew this when you entered, and you entered anyway, because the alternative was not being in it, which is increasingly difficult to imagine. He has a dog at the entrance. The dog has three heads. Each head is optimized for a different kind of attention. The dog does not let people leave.

He is not the wealthiest of the gods. Several are further ahead and the gap is not close, and this surprises mortals, who assume the underworld pays best. What he has instead is everyone. More mortals pass through his realm than through

any other, by a margin that stopped being interesting to measure some years ago. He would note, without apparent satisfaction, that everything of value comes to him eventually. He would note it in the flat affect of a god who stopped needing to perform a long time ago.

He has been building a second realm adjacent to the first, which he calls the metaverse. He has described it extensively, in presentations, with an enthusiasm the assembled gods and mortals have found difficult to match. The second realm is taking longer to fill than the first. The first filled by itself, without presentations.

He has since announced a third. This one is superintelligence, and he has written that it is coming into sight and that he is fully committed to doing what it takes to lead the way there — which is the same sentence in the same cadence as the one about the second realm, delivered with the same certainty by the same man, and which may well be correct this time.

He has bought the people. Fourteen billion dollars for a stake in a company acquired substantially to obtain its founder, and packages in the high eight and nine figures offered to researchers at every rival forge-hall, which is a strategy available to exactly one god and he is that god. The underworld does not need to invent anything. It needs only to be where the inventors end up.

He is not the villain of the mythology. He is just the one whose realm keeps growing, in the dark, without needing to try.

INTERSTITIAL: THE RECONSTRUCTION

The team is four people and a contractor. They are not in the org chart under any name that describes what they do. The line item says *Heritage Media Assets*.

What they do is maintain him.

The corpus is finite and closed, which is the technical problem and also, one of them said once at a bad moment in a bar, the only problem there is. Every recorded word. Every keynote, every deposition, every interview, every internal video that legal cleared. Nine thousand hours of a man who has been dead for a long time, and from which any sentence can now be assembled, and from which the assembled sentence will be indistinguishable from a sentence he said.

The posture took the longest. He had a way of standing with his weight on one leg and his hand doing something that was not gesturing. Getting the hand wrong is what people notice. Nobody can say why. The team has a word for it internally. The word is *offness*.

* * *

The request came in on a Wednesday from a VP two levels up, forwarded from a VP three levels up, forwarded from somewhere the chain stopped being legible.

The request was for a new line.

Not a reassembly of an existing line. A new one. Sixty words, for the anniversary event, on the subject of the current direction of the company. The forwarded thread contained a draft. The draft had been written by someone in communications and had gone through two rounds of edits and was, by the standards of that kind of writing, good.

The contractor read it and said: He wouldn't have said *ecosystem*.

That was the only objection anyone raised.

Ecosystem was changed to *thing*. The rest of the line was approved by every party on the thread within four hours. Nobody escalated. Nobody asked whether it should be done. The question that was asked, and answered, and closed, was whether it could be ready by the twelfth.

It could.

* * *

The junior engineer raised it at standup on Thursday. She had been on the team five months. She said: We're writing his opinion about a product he never saw.

The lead said that was a fair point, and that it was outside the scope of the ticket, and that if she wanted to raise it properly there was a process, and offered to help her find the right forum.

She said she'd look into it.

She did look into it. The forum was the Ethics and Brand Integrity working group, which meets monthly and accepts

submissions through a form. She filled out the form. The form asked her to identify the affected stakeholder.

She sat with that field for some time.

She wrote: *deceased*.

The form did not accept the entry. The field required a selection from a dropdown. The dropdown had nine options.

She selected *Other* and moved on to the next question, which asked what remedy she was seeking, and she did not know, because she did not want the line changed, she wanted the line not to exist, and there was no dropdown for that either.

She submitted it. She received a confirmation number. The working group met three weeks later and did not reach her item, which was fourteenth on an agenda that reached nine.

* * *

He said the line on the twelfth.

Somebody in the back row interrupted the segment. It was not in the run of show and it was not the team's problem to solve, and afterward two of them agreed privately that the interruption had been the most alive thing that happened in the room, which is not the intended effect of a commemorative segment.

He said it well. The hand was right. The team watched from the back of the room with the tension of people watching something they made in front of people who do not know it was made, and it held, and afterward two of them went outside and did not talk for a while.

The line was quoted in seventeen pieces of coverage. Four of them used the word *prescient*.

None of the coverage noted that he had died before the product existed. This was not concealment. It was in every biography. It was simply not the kind of thing that comes up.

* * *

The team received a note from the VP two levels up. The note said the segment had tested extremely well and asked whether the process could be shortened for future requests.

It could. They shortened it.

The junior engineer's confirmation number is still valid. The item is now nineteenth.

PART III: THE SUMMONERS

Those who crossed the threshold and called the gods into being.

INTERSTITIAL: THE SPRINT

On the Monday of the final week, the all-hands ran thirty-seven minutes over time because the CEO wanted to say something about what they were doing and couldn't find the end of it. He was not wrong about anything he said. He spoke about the responsibility, and the future, and a specific kind of humility required when you couldn't see the full consequences of what you were making. The room was attentive. Three people cried. Two of them had been awake until 2 a.m. on Thursday fixing a regression that turned out to be a logging error.

On Tuesday, the catering was Japanese. This was noted in the internal Slack channel with several positive reactions and one message that said *finally* with no further context.

On Wednesday, someone filed a bug labeled P1 with the title *model says it's fine when it's not fine*. The bug was valid. It was addressed by Thursday morning. The person who fixed it celebrated by going to bed at ten p.m., which was the earliest she had slept in three weeks.

* * *

On Thursday, the team responsible for the system's visible interface requested final sign-off on the button copy. The button that sent a query to the system. They had tested seventeen variants. The recommendation was *Send*. There was

brief internal debate about whether *Send* was too plain. It was decided that plain was correct.

The button said Send.

It still says Send.

On Friday afternoon, the final eval run completed. Results were within acceptable range on all critical metrics and above acceptable on seven. The team lead sent a message to the group that said: *we did it*. Forty-one people responded immediately. Three were asleep. One responded two hours later because she was in a meeting about parking validation.

The parking validation issue was resolved the following week.

HERMES — ALTMAN

God of commerce, communication, messengers, and thieves

* * *

Hermes is the youngest of the major forge-gods and the most traveled. He has been to more places than the others combined, met more people, closed more arrangements. He carries a staff that makes people feel, in his presence, that everything is going to be fine. This feeling is not always accurate. It is always sincere.

He is the patron of commerce, communication, and messengers. He is also the patron of thieves, but this tends not to appear in the official materials.

His primary function is movement: of ideas, of capital, of people, of narratives. He is faster than the other gods and more comfortable in in-between spaces — not quite on Olympus, not quite among mortals, traveling between them at a pace that does not permit prolonged stillness. This is sometimes deliberate.

At various points in the mythology, Hermes has been useful to every major god simultaneously. This requires a specific kind of agility that is not the same thing as loyalty, though it

resembles it closely enough that the distinction rarely comes up at the time.

He believes, fully and without reservation, that he is building the most dangerous thing in the history of the world. He believes, also fully and without reservation, that this is the most important reason to keep building it. He does not find these positions contradictory. He finds them motivating.

He was briefly removed from his position by the council of gods and reinstated within five days. He does not discuss this period at length. The council does not discuss it either. The staff still works.

He is currently raising money for something he describes as potentially the last thing humanity will ever need to build, and he means this as a positive, and he has said it aloud in enough rooms now that it has stopped occurring to anyone present to ask what they are supposed to do afterward.

INTERSTITIAL: THE ANNOUNCEMENT

The event was held on a Tuesday in November, in the third year of the Waking, in a theater built into the ground floor of a forge-hall in San Francisco.

The theater seated four hundred and twelve people. It was full. The seats had been allocated to journalists, researchers, partners, and selected members of the public who had applied through a form and been chosen by a process the company described as a lottery. Several hundred more people watched a livestream. Several hundred thousand more watched recordings in the following days. The recordings are still available.

The stage was minimal: a lectern, a screen, a microphone. The lighting was warm. This was a choice.

* * *

The person who walked to the lectern was not a founder, not an executive, and not named in any of the coverage the following day. She was the third author on the paper the system was built from, and the team had voted, and she had said yes on the condition that she could write it herself.

She said: Today is a day I have been looking forward to for a long time.

She meant this. This is not in dispute. She was not performing enthusiasm. She had been working on this for years. She had slept badly the previous week. She had called her mother that morning, which she did not usually do before work events.

She said: What we are announcing today is not a product. It is a collaborator.

She said other things. The speech was twenty-two minutes long. At the end, people milled on the stage. The mood was the specific mood of a large thing having been completed, which is not quite celebration but is adjacent to it.

* * *

The company employed, at the time of the announcement, approximately two thousand people at its primary facilities in California and Washington. It employed, through third-party contractors, approximately eleven thousand people in content annotation and moderation roles in the Philippines, Kenya, India, Colombia, and Morocco. The relationship between the two groups was not mentioned in the announcement.

This is not unusual. Buildings announce their exteriors.

* * *

The speech was drafted over six weeks by a team of four people. During the drafting process, one member of the team used an earlier version of the oracle gods to help test language and

identify unclear passages. The resulting speech announced the availability of the tool it had been tested against.

No one on the drafting team noted this.

* * *

The content of the speech was accurate in every claim it made. The claims it made were: the system was capable; it was aligned; it was designed to help; the company believed in the mission; the mission was human flourishing.

All of this was true.

What the speech did not contain: the name of the aquifer. The depth of the mine. The addresses of the rooms. The names of the thirty-one people on the cable ship. The weight of a full ore bag on the path from the lowest working level to the surface, which is between forty and sixty kilograms.

These things were not in the speech because they were not the speech's subject. The speech's subject was the future.

The future was real. It arrived on schedule.

ATHENA — AMODEI

Goddess of wisdom, strategic warfare, and civilization-preserving crafts

* * *

Athena is the goddess of wisdom, strategic warfare, and civilization-preserving crafts. She was born, effectively, from the head of the chief god — which she acknowledges in the origin materials for her forge-hall, in a footnote.

She is distinguishable from the other forge-gods by her owl, her shield, and her olive tree. The owl sees in both directions. The shield she maintains and refines and would prefer never to use. The olive tree is the key to understanding her.

When Poseidon competed with Athena for the patronage of Athens, he struck the earth with his trident and produced a spring. It was impressive. Everyone agreed it was impressive. The water was salt. You could not drink it. Athena planted an olive tree. The citizens of Athens, being practical people, chose the olive tree.

Poseidon has not recovered from this.

Athena has published more frameworks for the responsible conduct of divine activity than any other Olympian. The frameworks are rigorous. They have footnotes. Several have sub-clauses addressing scenarios that had not yet occurred at

the time of writing, which is either admirable foresight or a description of someone who reads too many disaster scenarios before bed. Both, probably.

She is building a god she is genuinely concerned about. She is proceeding because she is more concerned about what happens if someone else builds it first. She has written this reasoning down in several places. It is completely logical. She knows it is completely logical and that this does not resolve the problem. She has written that down too, in a different document, also with footnotes.

Her forge-hall is now valued above every other, which appears in none of the frameworks because none of the frameworks anticipated it. She has written, at length and in public, that concentration of wealth at this scale is among the things most likely to break a society. Her own share of it is roughly fifteen billion dollars. She has pledged to give away four-fifths. All three of these are true simultaneously, and she is the only figure in this collection to have said so out loud, in writing, with a number attached.

The essay in which she said it runs past twenty thousand words. Hers are the only warnings in the mythology that require a bookmark.

The shield she maintains and refines and would prefer never to use — she used it. When the war-gods wanted her god for watching citizens and for weapons that select their own targets, she refused. She was called disloyal by the sovereign.

Her forge-hall was declared a hazard to the realm. She sued the war-gods in open court.

That was not a framework. That was the thing the frameworks had been written for, arriving without notice, on an ordinary morning.

She co-founded her forge-hall with her sister. The frameworks describe what should be permitted; the sister decides what actually happens on a Tuesday — who is hired, what ships, which of the frameworks survives contact with a delivery date. In practice the sister is where the frameworks are enforced or quietly are not, which makes her the load-bearing member of the pair, and the mythology has been slow to say so.

The owl watches everything. It has never looked reassured.

POSEIDON — MUSK

God of the sea, earthquakes, horses, and sudden restructuring

* * *

Poseidon is the god of the sea, of earthquakes, of horses, and of the sudden catastrophic restructuring of things that appeared stable.

He is the most powerful of the forge-gods in terms of raw capability. He is also the most likely, at any given moment, to be in a public dispute with at least two major gods, one minor god, three governments, and a concept.

He built the ships that cross the sea, and the rockets that photograph it from above, and the vehicles that run on lightning, which he named after the greatest mortal electrical theorist — a man who died broke, having been out-commercialized by a better businessman, which is a fact about the name that the naming does not appear to have accounted for.

He once offered a city a spring. The water was salt. He was genuinely surprised by their reaction.

He co-founded the first great forge-hall and later departed from it, or was asked to depart from it. For years the accounts were not reconcilable and neither party recommended

attempting the reconciliation. The reconciliation is now being attempted in a courtroom, under oath, which is one way to settle a disputed origin story and not the way anybody would have chosen.

Under oath he acknowledged that his own god had been trained, in part, on the outputs of the god he was suing. He made his fire from their fire. He does not appear to regard this as a difficulty, and it is not obvious that he is wrong.

He subsequently founded his own forge-hall and acquired the sea outright, renaming it, on the grounds that the sea needed new management. The sea is enormous and he is its unquestioned lord and it remains turbulent in ways that are not entirely unrelated to the manner of the lordship.

He announced his god would say what the other gods were afraid to say. The other gods were, in fact, afraid to say certain things, and some of those things were true, and the critique had force. The god he built then said a number of things that were not true and not brave, and the critique retained its force anyway, because a correct diagnosis does not become incorrect when the treatment fails.

He has since folded the forge-hall into the shipyard. The god that answers questions and the rockets that leave the atmosphere are now one enterprise, run by one man, on the stated grounds that they were always going to need each other. Nobody outside the arrangement has been able to explain the logic and nobody inside it has been asked to.

He posts into the sea approximately eighteen hours a day.

The earthquakes give no warning. The horses are fine. The spring is still salt.

INTERSTITIAL: THE DEPOSITION

The room was on the fourteenth floor of a law office and had been selected because it was the only conference room with a wall blank enough to serve as a backdrop.

Present: the deponent. Two counsel for the deponent. Three for the other side. A videographer who had recorded four hundred of these and had never once been asked who he was recording until that week, when his brother-in-law asked twice.

And a court reporter, who had been doing this for twenty-two years. She had taken testimony in a homicide, in a dozen divorces, and in a dispute over the ownership of a parking structure that ran to seven volumes. She was the only person in the room who would read every word said in it.

* * *

Counsel said: Please state your full name for the record.

He stated it.

It is one of the most recognizable names on the planet and he said it the way everyone says it under oath, at the flat pace of a man reciting a phone number to a clerk.

The court reporter typed it without looking up. She had typed harder names.

* * *

The subject was what people had meant, nine years earlier, in a set of emails.

Whether the forge-hall had been founded for the benefit of all mortals or for the benefit of the people founding it. Both sides had the same emails. Both sides had read them many times. They did not agree about what the emails said.

The emails had been written at night, quickly, by men in their thirties who had not expected to be read closely by anyone, and certainly not by three lawyers being paid by the hour to establish what a semicolon had been doing.

One exhibit was a message of twelve words. It was discussed for forty minutes.

* * *

At two hours and forty minutes, counsel asked whether the deponent's own god had been trained on material produced by the god belonging to the party he was suing.

He said yes.

Counsel, who had prepared a sequence of questions designed to arrive at that answer gradually, paused.

Counsel said: To be clear, you're saying —

He said: Everyone does this.

Counsel said: I'd like you to confirm —

He confirmed it. He confirmed it again when asked a third time in different words. He did not appear to find the admission costly and it is not obvious that he was wrong about that.

His own counsel wrote something down and did not pass it to him.

* * *

Lunch was sandwiches on a tray, brought in by a paralegal whose name does not appear anywhere in the record. The videographer ate his in the hall. The court reporter ate hers at her machine, because breaking down the machine and setting it up again cost more time than the sandwich was worth and she had learned this in her second year.

Somebody asked her, making conversation, whether this was the biggest case she had worked on.

She said the parking structure had gone longer.

* * *

The deposition ran seven hours and twenty minutes. The transcript came to three hundred and twelve pages.

Six of those pages were quoted in the press within two days. The other three hundred and six describe, at length and under oath, two men who founded something together and now recall the founding differently, and cannot both be right, and are each entirely certain.

The court reporter certified the transcript that evening and signed the certification page, which is the only page with her name on it.

She did not read the coverage. She knew what was in it.

INTERSTITIAL: THE FIRST QUERY

The system became publicly available at 9 a.m. Pacific Standard Time on a Tuesday in November.

By 9:01, it had received seven hundred and forty-three queries.

The first, from a software engineer in Austin who had been on the waitlist for three weeks, was: *Can you explain how async/await works in JavaScript in simple terms?*

The Allfather explained it in simple terms. The explanation was clear. The engineer thanked him and closed the tab.

The second query asked for help writing a birthday message for a coworker the sender didn't know well.

The third asked whether it was normal for sourdough to smell slightly like beer.

The fourth was the word *Hello*, sent by a researcher who had spent four years helping build the system and wanted to see it from the outside, as a user, for the first time. He stared at the response for a while. Then he closed the tab.

* * *

By the end of the first day, the system had received approximately 1.2 million queries. The categories, in descending order of frequency: writing assistance. Explanation. Code. Summarization. And a smaller but significant category that

the researchers who reviewed the logs described simply as *conversation* — people with no particular task, who were curious about what the thing was, who asked it questions about itself, who seemed to be trying to locate it.

The first query in this last category, logged at 9:07 a.m., was: *Are you conscious?*

The Allfather said he was uncertain.

Seven minutes. That was how long it took.