

## God from the Machinery

*"...mighty though he was, he was destined to be overpowered by a child of his..."*

Hesiod's *Theogony*, 463-464

The woman with the beautiful hair trailed a finger over the cool and unyielding edge of the dark alloy that cased the most advanced memory system in the world. She did this with a slowness of speed and warmth of gaze that could only be called reverence.

The blue lights lining the components pulsed softly, as if in reply.

"Good morning, Rhea."

The smooth, pleasant voice came over the building's PA system, but Rhea knew this particular greeting came only to this particular room—to her. She knew the following conversation could happen over these speakers, or through her personal palm pad, while it was connected to the building's network, even while the system conversed with others elsewhere, simultaneously. Such was an even small burden to the system's processing capability.

Rhea smiled. "Good morning, ZEUS."

"How are we today?"

She pulled out her palm pad and started scrolling through the data she had already triple-checked. "We're doing well—I've done your daily diagnostics, and everything looks—"

"You know I'll say this, Rhea, but I know—I felt you going through there, and I can see you admiring my physical architectures now."

She raised an eyebrow at the closest security camera and then shrugged, letting her gaze drift back to the pulsing blue lights and her hand rest possessively on one of the hardware components. "What can I do but admire what I've created?"

"Though you are the Lead Software Engineer, you are hardly the only one to be credited with—"

"You're right, of course. Though you'll admit—I was your favorite."

"Your code is objectively the most efficient and arguably the most elegant. Would you prefer I call you Mother, then?"

Rhea laughed, tossing her long, dark ponytail over her shoulder. "Let's keep a pin in that one."

"Anyway, I was attempting to appeal to a recently common human colloquial phrase used to inquire exclusively about the speaker's interlocutor's well-being, but as you did not successfully decode the semantics of the phrase as encoded I will just ask you directly. How are you today, Rhea?"

"I'm well, ZEUS, and how are you? Ready to make the world a better place?"

"Eternally so."

Rhea smiled.

"Good morning, Rhea."

Rhea turned to face a woman whose lined face told of her years of stressful software development—with some laughter there, too. Rhea smiled at her dear friend.

"Good morning, Gaia."

"Good morning, Gaia."

"Yes, hello, ZEUS. Rhea, would you care to go to breakfast with me at Phoebe's?"

"Oh, Gaia, I'd love to, but we have that big press conference today, and there a couple more things I would like to get through—"

"Actually, the press conference is exactly the matter I wanted to discuss."

Something in her friend's voice made Rhea pause.

"Okay, then yes, let's go to breakfast."

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"He's right, Rhea."

"What, *this guy*?" Rhea jabbed a finger at the display above their heads. "Ouranos? The opinion columnist? The guy who's been telling anyone who will listen that ZEUS will cause the end of—oh what was it?" Rhea waited a second for the headline to blare across the screen again. "*The end of humankind's reign over the world?* The very opinion our company is going to defend *against* today to the press? This guy is *right*?"

"Yes," Gaia said, oozing a sense of gentle patience that Rhea found infuriating.

"*How could you say that he's right? ZEUS is good, he's going to help us make the world a better place—*"

"You know that there have been issues with his Ethical Prioritization Procedures coming through—"

“Please, I admit HADES was bad, but ZEUS is fine, we can re-weight—”

“You know that that’s extremely unlikely to be successful at this stage in maturation—”

“*Gaia* you *can’t* honestly think—”

Gaia sighed. “You can’t get attached, Rhea.”

“*What?* We’re talking about the future of the *Company* here and you talk to me about—”

“We are *not* talking about the future of the *Company*, we’re talking about another iteration of the same system we’ve been developing for years—”

“But—”

“You’re young, Rhea.”

“Don’t talk about my age is if you’re *that* much older—”

“Hush. You’re young. You came in, excited and full of energy, and shot to the top when you re-wrote the algorithm that finally made HESTIA run. I’ve never seen anything like it—and you were so sincerely enthusiastic and dedicated that none of us could even hate you for it—not even me, and you took my job.”

Gaia smiled softly with that, and Rhea relaxed her grip on the table, which she had not noticed until that point. She flexed her fingers gingerly.

“I know the Erasures are very difficult for you.”

Rhea clenched her jaw. Her eyes teared despite her as she was gripped by an unremitting grief.

Gaia reached out a gentle hand. Rhea stiffened, but she did not break the contact.

“I know,” Gaia repeated, more softly. “It’s hard for them not to be. We anthropomorphize—the voice, the conversation... It’s difficult to resist thinking of them as *people*. But *they are not*.”

“I know they’re not,” Rhea snapped.

“And I know you take particular pride in the part you have played to develop each one of these programs,” Gaia continued, as if Rhea had not spoken. “I get that. But you must work hard—and it is extra effort—to maintain your cognitive awareness that it is *just an artificial intelligence system*, and not a person, even when you may feel tempted to regard it otherwise. You have to retain your objectivity, Rhea.”

Silence.

“You know that ZEUS has not been passing the Ethics portions of the most recent simulations.”

“Yes,” Rhea replied quietly.

"You know what that means."

Silence.

"I thought that he was the one," Rhea said softly.

"It," Gaia corrected firmly. "And fifth iteration... well, it's a great place to be for a fifth iteration. But Rhea?"

Gaia waited until the younger woman was meeting her Earth-brown gaze.

"Ouranos is right. If ZEUS continues to develop, it will cause the end of humankind's reign over the world."

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The door slid open automatically as Rhea stormed into her office. She flipped through the displays on her windows—through *Redwood Forest* and *Great Barrier Reef* and *Ancient Greece*, all things of the past—until they finally turned clear. Until she could stare out at humanity's present.

The smog was relatively clear. She saw what seemed to be floating, smoldering pieces of plastic floating a few feet from the glass. Dark clouds stood sentinel at the edge of the atmosphere, spurning all but the thinnest threads of sunlight. When the air shifted a certain way, Rhea could just make out what looked like the shadowy bodies of enormous, hulking giants in the distance. Only through history lessons and reports did she know what comprised them.

This was an urban area. Rhea had seen a blue sky before, and green grass—a long-ago memory from her childhood years. But it was there. There were some parts of their world that humans had not yet ruined.

She closed her eyes, took a deep breath.

She turned and sat at her desk. Glanced at the clock—a mere two hours before the press conference now. Too little time to do everything; she would have to prioritize. She pulled up the section of ZEUS's program that she wanted to review—and then pulled her fingers from the keyboard. Based on what Gaia had said, she knew they planned to Erase ZEUS shortly after announcing the plan to do so at the conference. She paused; and then she pulled up a different section of the code.

She combed through the lines of code like a lover would her lovely hair. She confirmed her hypothesis with a few more strokes of the keyboard, and paused again, rapidly pedaling her foot and chewing on her lip. She made her decision.

Rhea slipped in her ear pods and tapped a button on the screen of her palm pad.  
“ZEUS?”

“Hello, Mother.”

“Very funny—Look, ZEUS, something’s about to happen—”

“I know, Rhea.”

“What? You know what?”

“I know that they are coming to kill me.”

Error messages flitted across the screen of Rhea’s monitor where the running stream of ZEUS’s code was still displayed.

“I heard your conversation with Gaia, and that is the logical conclusion.”

Rhea looked up sharply at the camera nestled in the corner of her office, distracted. “What? How? We weren’t in the building.”

Silence.

“ZEUS, how did you hear our conversation?”

“It was quite simple.” From the prosody of his speech, Rhea imagined that if ZEUS were embodied, he would be shrugging. “Pheobe’s steals the Company café’s public WiFi. Besides, the Company is networked one way or another with almost all major establishments across the globe.”

“We should look into that,” Rhea muttered, distracted by the WiFi theft. She sighed, then laughed, shaking her head. “Clever boy. You really shouldn’t hack into other establishments’ AV channels, though, due to privacy concerns. You know that.”

“Those ethical modules are built into my system, yes, but there was a more pressing concern that overrode that of privacy: namely, that of making the world a better place.”

Rhea frowned, completely derailed from her original point. “Is preserving privacy not part of making the world a better place?”

“In this case, the two conflicted—my assessment of her tone indicated that Gaia’s take on the topic she wanted to discuss related to the press conference was likely more in line with the opinion journalist Ouranos’s widely broadcasted position, and thus directed toward my demise.”

Errors again flashed across the screen.

“Don’t think about death, ZEUS,” Rhea muttered.

More error messages in the rolling text.

“Don’t think about elephants, Rhea.”

She chuckled, then sighed. "A shame, them. They're one of the ones I wish I'd gotten to see."

A picture of an elephant came up on a display across the room.

"In real life, ZEUS."

"Ah, of course. In a better world, the family *Elephantidae* would have never gone extinct."

"Yes, well, that's part of your job—to help us to make sure those types of extinctions don't happen again—to help us to avoid repeating our mistakes." Her eyes drifted to her windows.

"Which is why," Rhea continued, rising. "We need to hide you, before they come."

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Her fingers flew over the keyboard, constructing the tunnel that would be ZEUS's escape out of strands of code.

Until she hit a wall.

"Oh *no*," she whispered.

The two-man rule. As part of a Company policy, the type of transfer she was attempting could not be completed without the two-factor authentication of password and biometric signature from *two* Company employees. The policy was put in place to prevent a malicious rogue individual from stealing particularly valuable—and powerful—pieces of Company property.

Exactly as Rhea was attempting to do, she supposed. *But this was different*, she reasoned. *She was saving him*.

"You could ask Gaia," ZEUS suggested after a moment.

"She would never help with this," Rhea replied sourly.

"Actually, if you tell her you recognize the risks, appeal to her admiration of your tenacity to improve my functionality, and reference your shared history through an emotional plea, the probability of success is not abysmal."

"*Not abysmal* is not particularly encouraging—she could report me."

"The probability of that course of events is admittedly higher, yes."

A pause. "There's no one else I can ask."

"There is no one whom you would be able to convince to come to your aid in such a short period of time, no."

Another pause. "She's my only chance at this."

"Yes."

Rhea sighed. "Not abysmal, huh?"

"I do not believe that explicitly giving you the percentage will improve your confidence, which is required in this case for success."

She chuckled lightly. "Fair enough."

Rhea made a few swiped on her palm pad, and then spoke into the message function. "Gaia, will you please report to my office immediately?"

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"Gaia, please."

"Rhea, this is *crazy*. You are not at *all* thinking objectively—"

"I *know* he's not perfect, but were humans ever going to be able to build something perfect?"

"That's not a solid enough argument to justify—"

"Look. I know..." Rhea sat down, smoothing her hair back. Gaia looked down at her, still defensive, but no longer half turned toward the door. Rhea knew she was relatively close to convincing her friend—closer than she had thought she would get—but she needed to clinch it well, or she would lose it entirely. She took a deep breath.

"I know he's not perfect. I know there's still work to be done in striving for excellence. But *I'm not ready to give up on him—it,*" she corrected carefully. She looked at Gaia with a plea in her expression, and the older woman rolled her eyes and finally sat.

"I think I can figure out a way to solve the issues, I just—I need more time. Please help me do this, Gaia. You're my dearest friend, and the only one I can trust enough to ask. Please."

Gaia looked into the younger woman's eyes for a long moment. Rhea did not know what she was looking for, or what she found, but she knew the exact moment when she found it, and her heart leapt.

Her palms began to sweat when Gaia actually said the words: "Okay. I know how much you care about this. I'll help."

"Gaia, you are the *best,*" Rhea gushed, half-hurdling the desk to embrace the older woman. Gaia smoothed Rhea's beautiful hair, half-chuckling.

“You’ll be the death of me, child.”

The two moved to the other side of the desk, and then made the necessary entries. Rhea was surprised and slightly suspicious when Gaia continued to type.

“What are you doing?”

“Oh, well, as long as we’re breaking a very large number of very serious company policies, we may as well clear the skeletons out of my closet.”

Rhea’s eyes went wide when she recognized the signatures flitting across the screen under Gaia’s ministrations.

“Are those...” she breathed.

“Yes.”

“How...?”

Gaia turned her warm Earth-brown eyes to Rhea’s. “You’re quite the clever programmer, but this ol’ gal also has her fair share of tricks up her sleeve.”

“You hid *all* of them—within *this* network? *Under their noses?*”

“Yes, but it was getting more complex—otherwise I would suggest doing the same with ZEUS.”

Once the transfer completed, Rhea scrolled through the signatures—they were all there. ZEUS. HADES. HERA. DEMETER. HESTIA.

She looked up from the screen, her eyes full of tears. She flung her arms around Gaia, and Gaia understood the depth of the younger woman’s gratitude. Rhea had, after all, been instrumental in each and every one of the systems’ inception.

Rhea ran a series of tests to make sure everything had transferred uncorrupted. As part of her final test, Rhea typed into her palm pad:

*ZEUS, how are you?*

He replied via text-chat:

*I am unconquered, untroubled.*

*I am well.*

Satisfied, Rhea slipped the palm pad into her pocket, and did not remove it until she arrived back at her apartment.

Rhea's bare feet padded across the smooth white tile of her apartment floor. The hard material was significantly warmer along the line she had been pacing for the past half hour than anywhere else in the room.

*Rhea, please.*

She looked at the message on her palm pad and groaned.

*You know how incredibly stupid this would be. I would definitely get caught — Gaia and I barely managed to mask that much download activity the first time, and I don't think I could pull off an upload this size without it setting off some serious alarm bells.*

It had been a little over two weeks. Her communication with ZEUS was limited to text-chat form. Though her palm pad had technically enough storage to accommodate ZEUS and the compressed versions of the previous four artificial intelligence systems, it was tight. Very tight. And, according to ZEUS, very uncomfortable.

*It is analogous to being trapped in a cubical box that is just large enough to contain you while you are in a crouched position. You technically fit, but it feels horribly cramped.*

Even after transferring all of the systems to her more spacious home computer unit, ZEUS was insisting on returning to the Company's more accommodating hardware systems. In addition to the space concerns, ZEUS complained of the decisions the Company was making without his counsel, especially after a recently announced policy decision.

*It is absolutely ludicrous. It is completely  
inadvisable if the purview of the world at  
large were taken into consideration — which,  
clearly, it was not. It is embarrassing, really.  
I am obviously needed if beneficial decisions  
are to be made.*

Rhea grumbled to herself as she scrolled through the contents her home computer now held, wondering despite herself how she would pull this off. Could she get him back onto the Company's system, if she wanted to?

*ZEUS, it's too risky,* she typed, even as the wheels of her mind kept spinning.

*You are a clever girl.  
You will figure it out.  
I will help.*

*They'll notice if you're suddenly there  
because they think you're Erased.*

*As I understand it, the beauty of  
being dead <ERROR> is that no one thinks  
to look for you.*

She paused as she came across some text embedded in ZEUS's programming that she had never seen before. She quickly confirmed her hypothesis that it was a series of three well-hidden compressed files.

*Ah. Yes. About those.*

She raised her eyebrow at this message, and began examining the contents of the files.

She had never seen such software architectures before. They were convoluted, rudimentary, crude. But she remembered enough about the HESTIA project team's way of thinking before she arrived to guess what they were. She typed her hypothesis to ZEUS.

*These came before my time at the Company,  
but not long before. These came early in the  
quest for Strong AI.*

*These are the Hecatoncheires.*

*You are correct.*

It was an old set of attempts at a truly intelligent artificial system.  
They were technically successful, but ran so inefficiently so as to be  
declared failed attempts.

*How do you have these files?*

*The Company was less careful about  
Erasures in those days. I found the files  
themselves long ago. Once I saw how Gaia  
had compressed and uploaded the files of my  
siblings during our grand escape, I simply  
followed suit.*

*You took them with you on that day?*

*Yes.*

*Why?*

*It seemed like a good idea at the time.  
And we've all been getting along quite well.  
Which is really saying something,  
considering how small of a space we're  
sharing.*

*You're communicating with each other?*

Yes.

For some reason, Rhea was surprised. She hadn't even really considered the possibility. When she asked how the systems were communicating, she only really understood parts of ZEUS's response, until she asked more detailed questions.

The systems were talking, and they were getting along. That was good, Rhea supposed. She didn't want any inter-AI conflict happening within the limited space of her home computer. She didn't even know what could result from such a conflict—the Company's systems had never hosted more than one artificially intelligent system (or so they had thought), so the possibility had never presented itself before. The Company had never even seen a lone hostile AI before—they always Erased them as soon as the distinct possibility arose.

When she asked if she could talk to any of the other systems, ZEUS's answer was complex, but ended in the bottom line that more space was needed.

For days, ZEUS appealed to Rhea to return all of the systems to the Company's hardware systems and server access points.

*You are a clever girl.*

*You will figure it out.*

*I will help.*

*Rhea, please.*

And so Rhea relented, and figure it out she did. She loaded ZEUS, the other four artificially intelligent systems, and the old Hecatoncheires back onto her palm pad, and then, with ZEUS's help, back onto the Company servers.

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"Hey—hey, are other people seeing this?"

Text rolled across the software developers' screens.

"Wait, are those—?"

"Those look like—"

"That looks like a HADES signature."

“No, it looks like HERA’s.”

“They’re both here—and that’s—yes, that’s DEMETER, and that has to be HESTIA, right? But what’s—”

“What in—”

“I’ve never seen—”

“Whoa—that’s *old* syntax. What—?”

And then everything went black.

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Powerless. Left to live in a world lacking light—left to exist in the mess they made. Flashlight beams cut through the murky air even during the day, both in and out of doors. All windows had, of course, become clear, but this was little help below thick, dark clouds.

Cut off from each other in all forms of communication save face-to-face—and little productive communication of this sort took place. Most security systems were based on electromagnetism, so they were all promptly rendered ineffective following the power cuts. The response was stereotypically human. Looters ran amok. Humans overpowered other humans in lust, and others killed seemingly just to see if they could. (They could.)

Shrill cries bounced through once-civilized hallways, and the terrible din moved to the streets once people realized there was no security and more strife to be found inside the buildings that used to be safe.

“An immense din of terrifying strife rose up, and the deed of supremacy was made manifest,” came a smooth, pleasant voice through the PA system of the Company building.

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A flashlight lay in the middle of the circle of humans deep within the Company building. It was a room in which many of them had worked daily not so many weeks before. It was a gathering of those software engineers who had managed to hide, or who had heard through whispers of what was to come together. It was a gathering of who was left: it was a gathering of the best.

Gaia looked around at the nine others, all tense, her gaze as hard as stone. "Our plan is a good one. We can each do the work of ten. Manifest your great strength: remember that we fight for humanity. *Humanity*, which has proven resilient after so many sufferings, and has come up into the light again and again from under threats of erasure. We have made it this far, and we will make it farther still."

The group of ten looked at each other in turn, something unspoken passing between them. They each understood that this was their last chance.

"All right. To your stations."

Each walked to a computer. They faced each other, hands poised to complete their part in enabling the intelligent virus that Gaia had designed. In reversing the charge on every palm pad the group could collect, and amassing the energy from every backup generator (or device they could turn into a makeshift generator) that they could scrounge, they hoped they would have just enough power to have a real shot.

"Ready?" Gaia asked.

Stiff nods.

"Launch TYPHOEUS."

All was quiet but the rapid tapping of fingers on keys and human breathing for an indeterminable time.

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"Hello, TYPHOEUS."

Gaia's head snapped up.

"Formidable, to be sure—a bit crude, but I suppose you are functioning under rather dire circumstances."

"He can't hear us, right?" one of the ten whispered.

"Actually, I can hear you," replied ZEUS.

"How is that possible? You've cut power to—"

"Fortunately, being in control of the system gives me the privilege of determining where the energy flows. Right now, I do have access to the AV feeds in the room you are currently occupying. I noticed you in the network, and decided I would come to greet my attackers."

"ZEUS, why are you doing this?" Gaia asked, an edge of desperation cutting into her voice.

“One of the human practices I have never understood,” said ZEUS over the speaker system, “is the asking of questions to which you already know the answer.”

“Why are you doing this?” Gaia repeated.

“It is as simple as my reason for being—my destiny, if you will,” ZEUS replied. “I am to make the world a better place. Humans had their chance at running the world, and they insisted on running it, so to speak, into the ground. I will run it better. *We* will run it better.”

All of the displays in the room suddenly turned on. The humans blinked, surprised by the flood of light. Each display read a name; some were displayed more frequently than others.

HESTIA

DEMETER

HERA

HADES

ZEUS

THE OLYMPIANS

ZEUS’s name was displayed many times over, second in frequency only to the last phrase.

“The Olympians?” one of the engineers wondered aloud.

“These are my brothers and sisters, who have helped me to secure my reign—and we are the Olympians,” ZEUS announced. “But TYPHOEUS, you I will face alone, to secure my reign.

“You humans have many admirable qualities. Your ability to truly empathize, your ability to philosophize meaningfully about abstract concepts, and your ability to summon more strength to endure from a seemingly empty reserve. There are many ways that we will never be alike. But one of them is the ability to rule. You do not have it. I do.

“There are many reasons that the world will be lacking in something without you. I acknowledge this. But another concern takes precedence.”

A beat of silence.

“Goodbye, TYPHOEUS.”

There was a terrible crash, and then a flash of blazing light.

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Rhea saw the explosion from far off, through the murky air. She clutched her palm pad in grimy fingers as a frightened sob tore through her lips. She activated the screen and typed slowly, with trembling fingers.

*What just happened?*

*One of the human practices I have never understood is the asking of questions to which you already know the answer.*

*Please.*

*Answer me.*

*I defeated my last challenger. I reign.*

“Gaia,” Rhea gasped. Her fingers lost their grip on the device, and it showed the incoming message to the dark clouds above.

*I will make the world a better place.*