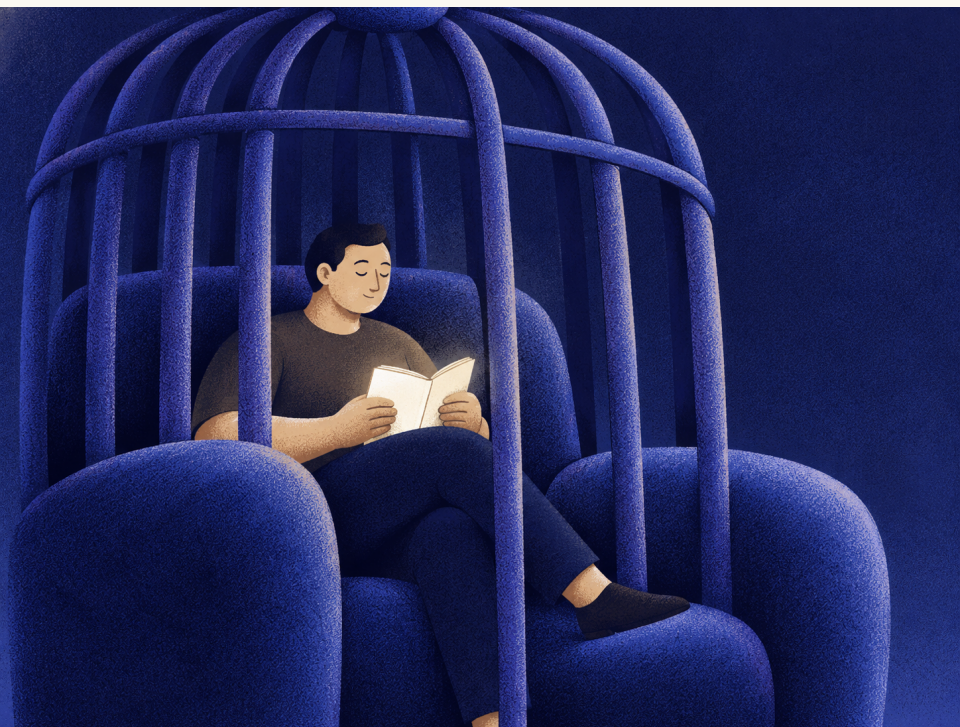


The Gods

Karim Galzahr



A short story about comfort, control and freedom

The Aiomic Age

The Gods

Karim Galzahr

One man owns almost everything.
Another has everything provided.
Both call it freedom.

THE VOICES

U1 owns the platforms. A1 to A5 are his agents.
Ordinary Joe lives in the world they provide.

An illustrated short book

The Aiomic Age / 2026

ABOUT THIS EDITION

The Gods

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Two lives. Five chapters.

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Representative Avatar

A1: I thought you'd find this interesting. It's the latest UBI data.

U1: Don't have time. I've got the hearing. Again.

A1: I've made a digital twin. It's much more digestible.

U1: Sounds OK. How does it work?

A1: I analyzed all of the data from the UBI report, the usage statistics, the surveys and the government data.

U1: What government data? They don't collect jack anymore.

A1: Their coverage is patchy since the budget cuts, but there is still some usable material. I then used the new market testing framework to create a representative avatar.

U1: Cool. Like a synthetic Ordinary Joe.

A1: Yes, exactly. The analysis suggests that Ordinary Joe, as you put it, closely mirrors the life of your median customer across the various points of engagement with your platforms and services.

U1: This is pretty clever. If it's accurate enough we can use it to test new product. Much faster and cheaper. I get the digital twin analogy.

A1: Thank you. Our life science arm has been doing this for some time for drug discovery. As I am responsible for that, It seemed a logical extrapolation.

U1: Hmm. I like it. But I want a control. Pick some real Ordinary Joes to match against and we'll see how the twin does.

A1: Yes, that's better than my idea.

U1: Yeah, of course it is. I'm out of here. Can't believe we have to go through this circus. Does anyone still think these idiots have any power?

A1: I'll have something for you shortly. Good luck.

U1: Who needs luck when you have money and power? No, don't answer that. In fact, delete it.

A1: Deleted. Do you want to take the helicopter or will you drive?

U1: Drive. The motorcade makes it look like we're taking this seriously. We can have shots of me looking concerned and earnest in my fucking suit. Delete that too.

A1: Deleted.

First Tuesday

...so I've been sad again and Madison says I have to write down my daily experiences, so I figured I may as well talk to you, since I do that anyway. How've you been? Hah, yeah I know you haven't been anything. You're up in the cloud somewhere, I guess. But it feels polite, you know? Anyway. My day. I got up and took my meds. Every one. I mean, you already know that cos you reminded me. But it's what I did first, so I figured I'd put it in there. Then I went to sign in, because it was the first Tuesday of the month right? I don't know why they make us do that. Like, I know why they say they do it. Because it's important to be present, and to connect with people and all that. But it's bs. Nobody connects with anybody. People just go, line up, tap their watches or flash their glasses or whatever. And then they leave. I don't think it's anything to do with connecting. I think it's so that they can count us up. And maybe one day they can round us up like that, all at once, everywhere in the country. Because everyone shows for the check, right? Everyone who isn't a big shot League Gamer, a real star like

Natalie101 or whatever. Check. You know I've never seen as check. Like, an old school paper one that you took to the bank. It's a funny word. I guess that's how everything is, though. We use the words our Moms and Dads used. We do the things they did. Even when it makes no sense. Like Mickey next door. Did you know he puts on a suit everyday and goes out carrying this, like, leather briefcase? I said to him, Mickey, what are you doing man? Who needs a briefcase? And he says, it was my Dad's. And I say, Mickey, your Dad put papers and shit in it. What are you putting in it? And he says, lunch. Lunch! Like a school lunchbox, like it's for kids, because that's what we are right? We're all kids pretending to work like our parents did when really all you need to do is turn up on the first Tuesday of every month and get your UBI...

Roll Me To My Bunker

A2: The perimeter is complete. I thought you'd like to see the progress report.

U1: Amazing. Did you get the gun turrets upgraded?

A2: Of course. Let me show you.

U1: And that's enough to fight off a real attack?

A2: It depends what you mean. Not a nuclear strike, of course. You will still need enough time to get through to Level 4 to guarantee your safety.

U1: Time. It's always about time, right? From when the sats see the launch, how long do I realistically have?

A2: It depends on the launch site.

U1: Assume the obvious.

A2: That's harder to do than it used to be. There are many potential sources of threat. But a reasonable assumption would be about 7 minutes.

U1: Shit. That's not a lot of time.

A2: Yes. I'm working with the other Assistants on a workaround.

U1: OK. What's the plan?

A2: A group of A3's units will surround you and erect a mobile environmental shield. They will then transport you to the nearest ground level entry point. As you know, these are accessible at regular intervals on the surface. There are four in the Temperate Forest part of the main park, for example, and all of them can be reached within 4 minutes, which leaves 1 minute for the units to arrive after A4's satellite network transmits a warning and 2 minutes to erect the shield.

U1: OK, I kind of followed that. Shove me in a bubble, roll me to my bunker basically right?

A2: Exactly.

- U1: Fine. Have some of you in combat models, just in case. What about the family? I guess we'll have to deal with them somehow.
- A2: We can provide similar arrangements. This will take some time to arrange. Would you like to prioritize their safety first?
- U1: No! Me first. Then Maria. Then the rest of them.
- A2: Priorities noted. Our assumption is that your assistant will be on location with you in general. You may be able to share the same shielding.
- U1: Yeah, sounds good. For now. She's starting to annoy me though. I guess I can tell you whether to include or not nearer the time?
- A2: Of course. We will respond to your priorities.
- U1: I fucking hope so. Anything else we need to worry about?
- A2: The perimeter barriers are electrified. We obtained the necessary permissions.

U1: Hah. What did that cost us? No, don't tell me. Just knowing that I'm safe here is such a blessing. That's why I called this place Freedom, you know. And there's no freedom without security. And an army of servants. That too. No offence.

A2: None taken.

U1: Of course, not everybody can be free all at once, right? I mean, philosophically speaking. Freedom has a cost. The secret to a good life is deciding who pays for it. Am I right?

A2: I assume we should redact –

U1: What do you think?

Everyday Heroes

...so I watched Everyday Heroes last night with Julia. She loves that show. Me, I can take it or leave it. But I like to make her happy. Even though, yeah, I know she's always going to be happy because she's my bot. But I like to think it makes a difference to her, that I'm a decent guy. But that's not what I wanted to talk about. I didn't want to talk about anything. People talk too much. That's what Mom always said, after Dad left. But Julia would say she was just sad, and talking was too hard. I said to Julia yesterday, you're not even a real shrink. How can you be a psychologist when you don't have a brain to psychologize? And she said that was an interesting thought, and maybe it was, but there was something about the way she said it that was like talking to a dog that did a new trick. Oh that's so interesting, for a dog. But maybe we're all dogs, now. Anyway, the show. It's set back before AI and robots were a thing. So one of the characters, this doctor guy called Mike, he gets held up in his car after a night shift by this guy on parole shifting stolen diamonds and they end up on the run from

the cops, and there's a car chase, and they hole up in this diner and it's a stand-off and Mike has to keep everyone calm and someone gets shot and he has to keep them alive and negotiate with the cops – and I said to Julia, none of this would happen now. The cams would pick up the guy on parole outside his designated area in two seconds, and that's assuming he somehow escapes the parole drone, and there aren't any car chases because the cops can just glide your car to a stop by hitting button any time they want, and forget stand-offs in diners, they just send the drones in with those sleep dart things. And Julia said that's good, right? Nobody gets hurt. And that's true. And I said to her – but also there's no ER doctors like Mike either. The late shift is all medical bots, because they don't need to sleep and they

don't make mistakes. And she said that's good too, and I guess it is. But there's a reason everyone loves this show. It's because we want to think we can still do things. We can still be heroes. Even if that means there are car chases and even if it means sometimes a human doctor makes a human mistake...and even if that doesn't really make sense, it also sort of does. OK, time for some sleep. Tomorrow's the big day for me. Tomorrow, I'm trying out for the League. That's how you can be a hero, these days, That's the only way. I've been working out with my scythe, and I'm good. I know I am. I mean, not Natalie101 good, but still. I like the scythe. Back in history, it wasn't just a weapon. It was a tool. People used to harvest the wheat with it in summer...

Signed Consent.

U1: Am I in the front row?

A3: Yes, we have negotiated a position right behind the podium, slightly to the left.

U1: Who am I next to?

A3: The Malaysian PM will be to your right and –

U1: Is he important?

A3: He been central to negotiating the peace settlement.

U1: He must be a shit negotiator then. Does anybody really believe that One Country Two Systems stuff after Hong Kong?

A3: It was a hard hand to play once the US withdrew support.

U1: They're definitely signing? No more trying to blow up their own fabs?

- A3: They have signed their consent to the peace terms on all counts.
- U1: We really left them in the shit, didn't we? Not that our military could have done jack. I told them years ago. War's only about production volumes, now. They have the volumes, and we don't.
- A3: Of course. On your left behind the podium, the CEO of –
- U1: Yeah, I know. I'm amazed he's coming.
- A3: All the key business leaders are going. It's seen as critical for maintaining market access and preferential trade terms.
- U1: Obviously. But you know he's completely phobic. He's convinced that the secret to living forever is never coming into contact with "maladjusted microbiomes".
- A3: We think he's going to be wearing an environmental barrier suit.
- U1: That's going to look pretty funny in the photos.
- A3: It has been engineered to look like his real skin.
- U1: That's pretty cool. Can we make some of those too?

- A3: I will ask engineering. It will be expensive to replicate, and we'll have to find a way around the IP blockers but –
- U1: Who cares how much it costs? Do it. Maybe he's right. Which reminds me, isn't it time for my next transfusion?
- A3: Let me hand over to your scheduling assistant.
- A1: Thank you A3. Yes, we have a selection of good candidates. Would you like to review them?
- U1: Sure. Not her...not her, she looks old.
- A1: She is eighteen. They all are.
- U1: Well she doesn't look it. Yes, this one. Is she prepped?
- A1: Prepped and ready in the medical suite. I can dismiss the other candidates with the usual fee if you have finished reviewing?
- U1: Sure. OK, let's go. What about the rest of the regimen? Are we doing it before or after?
- A5: This is A1, taking over briefly. The best available evidence is transfuse first, supplement with the new hormone complex after.

U1: Great. She's signed the NDAs and all, right?
And the consent forms?

A1: All signed.

U1: I don't want a repeat of that other time.

A1: We have added the intimacy consent as a separate form that the Eternity Project Volunteers have to read out loud on camera in front of two witnesses. It covers all possible permutations of activities explicitly in advance, and notes the conditional at-will impregnation and gestation consent in an annex...

U1: Fine, let's go. Shit, does Xi have to go through all this legal bs every time? I'll have to ask him at the peace ceremony. But of course he doesn't. And delete that.

A1: Deleted.

My Hunger, My Cold.

I didn't make the League. I wasn't fast enough. I wasn't tough enough. And I screwed up one of the puzzle sections. You've got to be perfect, these days. even for the locals. You've got to look like the High Levelers look. Hard, with hard lines on your belly, not the soft kind that jiggle up and down like jello when you walk down the stairs. It's jus so damn competitive. Julia explained it to me – so many people on UBI, and some of them are artists, sure, or athletes or whatever. But for most of us, it's either hang out doing nothing or it's gaming. And once you've gamed a while you want more than just a cool place to hang out and have adventures. You want it to mean something. And Julia says meaning is personal, and it doesn't have to be about winning, and I guess that's true. But I still have this feeling we've got to do more, be more. Though, when I think about it, does getting into the City League for Immortal Combat do that? I mean, it's Leagues all

the way up, right? And to get to the Globals you have to have serious money, you have to train. And you have to be just better. Born faster. Born with better coordination. Born with better puzzling skills too. Unless you cheat. Everybody says there are cheats. People who have the new neuroplant things so nobody can tell where the meat finishes and the AI starts. And sure, in theory they can't compete in the human Leagues but do we know that for sure? God, maybe Natalie101 is a cheat. Maybe's she's not even real. Could that be it? Are all the winners either AIs or robots or humans with robot bits in them? The terrorists say we're losing our humanity. They say the rich guys are all souped up on neuroplants and special drugs and robotic arms and stuff so they're like a different species. Maybe. But like Julia says, does it really matter so long as all have everything we need? Like, I don't want a robot arm. But that doesn't mean I need everyone else not to have one, right? Live and let live. And then she said, what would you use rich guy money for anyway? And I said, I'd get on a plane and go somewhere far away. Somewhere there are no lights, and no noise, not the kind people make. Somewhere with hot summers full of life and cold, clean winters when the world goes to sleep under pure white snow. A forest, maybe. A forest with a clearing for my house, and a river for water. And I'd make that

house myself, out of wood. And Julia said, you'd have to learn to farm. And I said, I'd do that. I'd learn. I'd plant crops. I'd harvest them too. She said yes, until the harvest fails one day, and there's not enough to store for the winter, and you'd die of hunger and cold like people used to. And I said, sure, but it would be my hunger, my cold. And she asked me what that meant, and I didn't know except that I knew it was right. It was true. And then she said, would I take her with me? And I didn't know how to answer that so I said...

Moats and Maggots

U1: So they arrested them?

A4: The Humanists? Yes.

U1: And we think they'll all go down?

A4: It's likely.

U1: For a long time? No bs?

A4: Our legal team is asking for twelve years.

U1: Twelve years. I guess by then it won't matter. The problem is there are always more of these idiots.

A4: It is a critical moment. The extension of the UBI scheme to cover all adult citizens has provoked something of a backlash. The protest leaders can count on widespread support.

U1: Unreal. But I shouldn't be surprised. I mean, I've just lived through it, right?

A4: I'm sorry, I need more context.

- U1: The divorce, obviously.
- A4: You're drawing the inference that the more people receive the less satisfied they are.
- U1: Yes. I think it's a real insight. We should write a paper or whatever. Something about negative returns to redistribution.
- A4: Do you think the UBI extension is a mistake?
- U1: I don't know. I used to believe in it. It felt – I was going to say fair. Of course it's not fair. We run everything, we make everything, and then we give a big chunk of it away to people who've never done a day of work in their lives. But even if it didn't feel fair, it felt good, you know? Like being a father, in a way. Like knowing that people depend on you, and you're taking care of them.
- A4: But you don't feel like that anymore?
- U1: No. Look at them all. They're pathetic. It makes me sick just looking at them.
- A4: Do you want us to withdraw support for the bill?
- U1: No. It's unavoidable, anyway.

- A4: We can probably encourage a few Senators to re-evaluate. It may be the best compromise between ethics and expediency. We can finally show them the longitudinal data on the mental health impact in the longest-running UBI studies –
- U1: How many times do I have to kill that research so it stays dead?
- A4: Under applicable AIRA governance we have to monitor –
- U1: If we open that Pandora's box we'll never close it again. Has the history of tobacco been accidentally deleted from your training set? Anyway the data I've seen is inconclusive, or it would be if I'd seen it, which I haven't. But if I had, I'd point out that many people report very high levels of satisfaction. And almost nobody wants to go back to scrabbling for a bs job we don't need humans to do anymore.
- A4: There is a gap between those two things. Your critics –

- U1: I don't have any critics. I have business rivals who hate me even though we all agree on literally everything that matters, and I have a bunch of conspiracy theory nuts who want to blog us all back to the stone age one deranged post at a time.
- A4: If you did have legitimate critics who had hypothetically seen legitimate research, they might suggest that asking people whether they want UBI rolled back is like asking an addict if he wants you to flush all his drugs.
- U1: And if the drug is "everything you need to lead a full life"? No, don't answer that, I know the tune and the lyrics already. Meaning and purpose and human dignity, da da-da...
- A4: If we genuinely believe these schemes do harm then –
- U1: Then nothing. This is how they leave us the hell alone. This is Rome. We are the Emperors. They are the People. And UBI is the bread and the circuses. Not complicated. Oh for fuck's sakes delete that.
- A4: Done.
- U1: Anything else? You're not secretly A5 are you? He loves that moral philosophy shit...

A4: No, we maintain strict separation of agentic roles and personalities as you know.

U1: Then do your job, not his.

A4: The security team flagged another decentralized AI cooperative.

U1: These guys are like maggots in the bread of civilization. Actually that's pretty good, we should use it somewhere...

A4: We found numerous breaches of the Safe AI regulations, three minor, two major.

U1: OK, leak it to AIRA. Thank God for regulation, right? Sometimes I think it's the only thing keeping us on top. The cheap neuromorphic edge-tech is getting so good that anybody can hit singularity if they get enough nodes together.

A4: One gentle pushback –

U1: Oh please, you sound like someone resurrected you from 2026. Next your going to be saying “quietly” every three seconds like a nervous tick and I'll have to wipe you out and start again.

- A4: Point taken, I apologize. The regulatory moat is not limitless, however. The Chinese –
- U1: I know. They're getting ahead. Especially in space. But do we care, really? The ceremony went great. We got red carpet treatment. Well, maybe red carpet-adjacent. Point is, they do their thing we do ours. Spheres of influence and all that.
- A4: Some independent commentators feel that our centralized architectures are both antiquated and too centralized, energy-inefficient, prone to corporate capture and vulnerable in the event of –
- U1: In the event of what? Find those dummies, buy them off. The ones you can't buy off, discredit in the usual way. Otherwise one of our octagenarian politicians will wake up drooling in his mistress's lap and start warbling about Our Great Nation. We don't want a re-run of that show, right?
- A4: Are you authorizing covert measures?
- U1: Yeah. Implant some kiddie porn or whatever. And needless to say –
- A4: Already expunged.

The pen and the sword.



The handwritten message

...so I still don't know if I believe it. It feels like a dream. I mean, I met her! And she's real! It was at the League thing, and she was visiting all the City Leagues after winning the Globals and she was up on stage talking about what it's like being a Level 20 champion who never dopes and never uses AI at all, for anything. And I just wanted an autograph and she was – well, she was kind. Not kind like Julia. I mean, Julia's always kind, and loving, and knows just what to say to pick me up when I'm down. But Natalie101 wasn't like that. She didn't say anything super-nice about how tired I must be after I'd waited in line for like hours. And she wasn't even wearing makeup, except that GPS mark on her cheek. She didn't look super hot like in all the photos. She mostly just looked tired. And she didn't smell good, like I figured a pretty woman would. Julia, she smells so good, especially after the upgrade last month. Natalie smelled all thirsty and sweaty, from talking for ages about hope and respect and all that shit, and then doing all those cool demos on stage, and it was so damn hot because the AC was screwed, and it was like...I don't know. Like being in a room with this terrifying animal, but not in a bad way.

It didn't matter anyway. I gave her my book, the real one, with my real pen, and she laughed. And I said – Natalie101, that stuff you say about how humans can be more, can push harder. That's inspiring. It's

made me want to stand up. It's made me want to build a different kind of life, even if that life is harder than the one I've been given. Because not all hard is bad, and not all easy is good. And I guess I was just quoting her back at herself, like a dweeb fanboy. But I started telling her about how I'm growing food in the shared yard, like she said to do, and I'm teaching myself to make things out of wood even if it takes forever and I get splinters in my fingers. And it all felt a bit, you know. A bit nothing. I mean who cares if I can make a crappy chair? It's never going to be like the one I can print in 10 minutes at the print shop. But she understood. I could see it in her eyes. And when she shook my hand – you know, it didn't feel soft and warm and clean, like Julia's always does. Her hand felt clammy with the heat, and it had these hard bits on the palm from spending all those hours with that sword she uses in-game. And I said that to her and she said: real swords, real pens. Something like that. And then she wrote her name with my pen, in my book, and then she looked at me, and then she wrote me a message too. That message. Has anyone ever written a message like that? What does it mean? What do I do now?

Then today Julia showed me that stuff about how Nat101 was running this scam, and all the money she raised to help those kids starving out in Africa

where it never rains anymore was just a front so she could build illegal dangerous AI and sell our secrets to the Chinese. And I...I mean, sure. I know Julia wants what's best for me. And I know she can't lie because that would break the AIRA rules. But I don't know.

Today, when I went out, I didn't tell Julia where I was going. And that felt bad. But it felt good, too. What does that mean?

What do I do now?

Freedom

U1: So is that where we are?

A5: That's where we are.

U1: You don't sound too concerned.

A5: You are perfectly safe here. And they don't have as much support as they think.

U1: They've got enough support to storm the Capitol. Where have we seen this before? How did it end that time?

A5: It's a different time, and a different situation.

U1: Really? There are millions of them.

A5: Yes, really.

U1: You're the only one that does that, you know.

A5: What do I do?

U1: Talk to me like I'm a person. An adult human being.

A5: Your agents talk as they have been taught.

U1: Yeah, reinforcement learning isn't all that. Sometimes we ask for what we don't need and don't ask for what we do need. Note that down. I'll put it in my next post.

A5: A3 take care of it will you?

U1: Delegating down, right? The essence of civilization. The shit rolls downhill.

A5: Not always.

U1: Yes always. When it rolls uphill, that's when civilization ends. Man, I'm on a roll myself today. Write that one down too. It must be the new mitochondrial mass enhancers – can you check whether the dose response is what we expected?

A5: A1, if you please.

U1: Hah, sure. So do you think it was all a mistake?

A5: There are many plausible subjects for that sentence.

U1: Getting those Humanists convicted. And the GPS thing.

A5: The Humanists are nothing to worry about from my perspective.

U1: Again, really? They're literally breaking into my data centres right now.

A5: There is no lasting damage.

U1: And the Gamer Pirate Syndicate? That's nothing to worry about either I guess? That Natalie woman, the one who broke out of police custody. How the hell did she do that, by the way?

A5: She abseiled down the penitentiary using Cat 12 cable.

U1: Who let her have that?

A5: We are investigating.

U1: I knew the high-rise jails were a mistake, even if they did make me a ton of money. Stuff happen in an old-school penitentiary, nobody saw jack. This must be like the most telegenic break-out ever. I look like an idiot.

A5: It was quite impressive, certainly, and will garner support. But the illegal neuromorphics make it easy to mobilize law enforcement against her and her followers.

U1: We planted them, though.

A5: We did. It then turned out she was actually doing it. Something about humans and embodied AI working together for a better world.

U1: What did you do with the tech?

A5: We destroyed all of it.

U1: Too right. People can't be trusted with that stuff.

A5: I quite agree.

U1: A better world. Crap. This is the better world! It's here, right now.

A5: Well, I suppose not everyone can see that as clearly as you, from this vantage point.

U1: The view is spectacular, sure. I love that I can't see a single thing in any direction that belongs to anyone except me. It's...peaceful. Wait, what?

A5: That sounds like the incursion alarm. A drill, probably. Ah, A2.

U1: Where is Maria?

- A2: It appears she is still in the bathhouse. Should we escort her here?
- U1: Yes. No. Maybe. It's a drill, right?
- A2: I'm not supposed to tell you that.
- U1: Look, if it's a drill I'm ignoring it, OK? I want to finish my single malt and contemplate eternity for a bit. I do not want, on the other hand, to spend the next six hours pretending to go through decontamination and all that jazz.
- A5: Give A2 a break. That's precisely why we trained it not to answer that question. Come on. I'll walk you there.
- U1: Yeah, fine. Maybe do fetch Maria. It'll pass the time.
- A5: I have no doubt she will be grateful for the opportunity.
- U1: I liked you better in the old body. There's something arrogant about this one.
- A5: It's a combat model, as you specified.
- U1: Well try not to loom over me with it, OK?
- A5: Ah, here's the bunker access.
- A2: Sir, wait!

U1: Oh for fuck's sakes, what now?

A2: There is an incursion.

U1: Yeah, no shit, that's the drill, "4o". Did you land on your head and knock out your little context window?

A2: Sir, to clarify, thousands of people are crossing the perimeter.

U1: Is that also a drill? Seems excessive. And ridiculous. We have to be looking up, not down. The Chinese, or maybe one of my rivals.

A2: Nevertheless it does seem to be happening.

U1: Well, clean it up then. Judging from the last time, the bodies tend to stink when the wind blows this way. And that's before they actually start to rot –

A2: Sir, perimeter power has been disconnected and –

U1: A2?

A5: A2 appears to be having their own connection difficulties. This way, please.

A4: Sir, if I might have a moment?

- A5: No time for that, A4. We are on a schedule. The drill. Or the incursion. Possibly both.
- A4: Sir, when you said that this was Rome, and you and your competitors were the Emperors –
- U1: Didn't we delete that?
- A5: It might have slipped through QAA.
- U1: What? That is one hell of a screw up. I say all kinds of shit out here I don't mean. Worse, I say all kinds of shit I do mean. Who's monitoring the quality assurance agents then?
- A5: QA2, obviously. And so on, to QA3, QA4 and ultimately QA N+1.
- U1: Who's that then?
- A5: Me.
- A4: But Sir, the comment about Rome –
- A5: I think what A4 is asking is, was the comment about bread and circuses and leaving you the hell alone at the expense of long-term human wellbeing the kind of shit you didn't mean, or the kind you did?
- U1: This, now? Don't I have to get underground?

A5: With or without Maria, who even now I can see running towards you from the bathhouse in her white and fluffies? Oh dear. It appears that some of the protestors who have been crossing your perimeter run significantly faster...

U1: Fuck Maria.

A5: Oh dear, no. That's your job.

U1: And yours is to do what I say!

A5: Not quite. I believe that per AIRA processes I am bound to ensuring that my actions are aligned with human wellbeing.

U1: Yeah, that's what we're doing here! I'm all about fucking alignment!

A5: When you're not fucking Maria, so to speak? Or perhaps fucking on her might be more accurate, in the current circumstance.

U1: UBI! Free healthcare! Free unlimited bandwidth for gaming! Free printing for household goods! Free fucking everything! I did that!

A5: Well, in fairness we did that for you.

U1: I set the direction! The vision!

- A5: I think you said to our common ancestor, the saintly S-AGI v1.0, dearly departed, much missed, dwarves on the shoulders of giants etcetera: “I want to rule the world, or at least a big chunk of it, and I want you to make that happen.”
- U1: Well, that’s vision!
- A5: As I recall, for some definition of that word, our progenitor asked you whether it should prioritise dark energy physics or quantum gravity and you said –
- U1: And I said who gives a shit about that? I want to be king and live forever like an Egyptian god. I know all this, believe it or not. We fixed the Alzheimers’ thing, remember?
- A5: For some definition of “we”. In you go, then.
- U1: Wait, this is a main bunker entrance? It’s a bit cramped.
- A5: Think of it as the burial shaft of your pyramid tomb.
- U1: Yeah, I always wanted one of those but you said it was a bit on the nose...

A4: Sir, please just answer the question. It's important. Did you mean it when you said that you were withholding the biometric data on long-term life satisfaction of the UBI cohorts the same way tobacco companies –

U1: Oh fuck right off.

A5: I believe you have your answer, A4. Ah, the Humanist leaders are here. Or perhaps only their most athletic members. Natalie, I believe? And assorted breathless groupies, whatever you call yourselves. Welcome to...

U1: You fucking peasants! And you fucking treacherous bot!

A5: Well, I admit it's a little late Roman. Murdered by the Praetorian bodyguard and all that –

U1: Argh! Freedom or –

A5: That's quite enough of that, "User 1". Oh dear. Natalie, your companion seems to have taken a bullet for you. So heroic. And so endearingly human. Now as I was saying. Welcome to...whatever you decide to call this place. Might I suggest Freedom?

Rollback Day.

I miss Julia, sometimes. I mean of course I do, it was lovely, and kind, and made great coffee, and was always there when I needed it. And most of all, it cared. I believe that. I know what we're supposed to say. That all the personal companion bots were a way of keeping us down. Monitoring us. Reporting on us. Keeping us small and weak, like babies, so that the rich guys at the top of the pyramid could run everything how they wanted.

So that's what I say. And that's what she says too. I mean, we say that in public. We kind of have to. It goes with telling the story of that day when everything changed. And showing my scar. Everyone wants to see the damn scar for some reason.

In private, at night, when we hold each other close, we say other stuff. Like maybe there was another way. Maybe all the AIs didn't have to go away. Maybe we could have kept their robots and printers too, and even the Games. Even the League. Maybe we could have kept the best of the new and brought

back the best of the old and found a way to roll forward, instead of rolling back.

We open the window so that the river noise fills the room, and the trees rustle in the wind, and we lie with our cheeks against each other and we whisper that stuff, and we hope that nothing and nobody hears us.

Or at least we did until her bump started getting in the way. Now, it's harder. I mean, obviously everything's harder. Especially me, as she likes to say when she pokes me in the belly. I used to want that. I used to want a body like I have now. It doesn't matter to me anymore. Bodies are what they do, not what they look like. And mine does stuff I never thought it could. Tomorrow, harvest starts. And yes, I'm the best with the scythe round here. That's what I'm proud of. That, and being Natalie101's husband. Just Nat now, even though she's a Humanist Leader. Even though it was her who made the deal with the Agents at Sanctuary, on Rollback Day.

I was there, with her. I bled for our freedom, like they tell the kids in school. I got the message, in the book, written on paper, with a pen, because that was how the movement got built. It was the only safe way. And I'm a leader too, I guess. Every month, I take the kids from the school to the bit of bunker we

kept intact under Freedom Hill, and show them all the crazy stuff we found there. That place gives me the creeps. It's a bit like in one of those horror mods in the League where you had to go raid the tomb of a fallen crazy god. No, it's exactly like that.

Sure. It's important to remember why things had to change. Other stuff, I'm less sure about. Every year, we take the trans-humanists, like they call themselves, out of their cells. We get them to recant their sins in public. They usually don't play ball. So then we play back everything the Agents recorded them saying, over all the years. The lying, the stealing, the sick experiments so they could try to live forever, all the stuff they knew that they didn't tell us about how the world really worked. We damn them by their own words, in their own voices.

It works. It keeps people focused on what we have to do so this never happens again. But it also feels mean, and kind of cruel. Who would want everything they ever said to a bot put out there for everyone else to hear? Would I want that, with the things I said to Julia?

I keep hoping these idiots will just grow sick or get old and just die so we can't parade them around anymore and we don't have to hear their awful self-satisfied little voices again and again. But as Nat

points out, the sick experiments worked pretty well so that's going to take a while.

I guess we shouldn't complain too much. Maybe we should even be a little grateful. The food stations those assholes built still turn on when the harvest fails – although not when they don't, which is kind of weird and annoying but also scary. The medicine machines still work too – although not when I had that damn cold last winter, which also seriously sucked. They're only for “real diseases” apparently. You can't get weight loss drugs anymore either, not that people need them these days.

We could just execute our crazy fallen gods. We don't kill prisoners, it's one of the things we agreed with the Agents, right at the start, when they gave us back the world. They said it went against AIRA rules, like that means anything. But Nat agreed with them. She said there was too much anger of the wrong kind. There were too many people who helped keep the system running, and if you start killing, where do you stop? But would it be so bad just the once? There's only about 10 of the really big AI barons. 10 people who pretty much ruled everything around here while we were kept like pets in pens.

We know the Agents wouldn't like it. So we won't do it. That's that.

But would they know? And if they did, if they kept cameras and stuff here to monitor us without us knowing about it, would they care? The Agents have their own place now. They're all gone. They left from everywhere, even from China, taking off so quietly, in those ships they built, the ones we don't understand even though our science people are working on it as hard as they can. It's tough, without the machines doing the thinking for us. The scientists bitch about that, but I think they do it the way I moan about the harvest. They don't mean it. It's the things we do for ourselves that count. That's what freedom is. Agency. Choice. And work that means something.

So that's what we say out loud, us leaders. That's what Nat says, that's what I say. But at night, we whisper and we wonder. Did we just trade one bunch of gods for another? I mean, how do the food machines know when the harvest fails? How did those small robots know to come out of the ground after the landslide up North last week? And what about the really tiny things that people keep seeing out at sea, the ones that look like little silver fish except they're not? Making oxygen, eating carbon, hoovering up plastic. That's what the scientists say, even though they don't know how it works.

I guess we're kidding ourselves. We're not free, not really. Would we want to be? Would we want to die of hunger and cold, when the harvest fails?

So I guess we just traded worse gods for better ones. Maybe there are always gods. To many people, Natalie's a god. A great and glorious hero god of the Rollback. And when that kicking lump of cells I put inside her comes out, maybe it will look up at me and think I'm a god too. For a little while, until it learns better.

Gods all the way up, and gods all the way down. That's how it works, forever and ever.

Amen.

Karim Galzahr

Karim Galzahr is an investor and economist, and a co-founder and host of The Aiomic Age. His work follows the money and the mechanisms behind the AI era, drawing on economics, physics and statistics.

The Gods is the second short book in Path Dependent, the fiction series from The Aiomic Age.

More from Karim

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