

PROLOGUE: ALL OR NOTHING

Taavi Zanatos gripped the edge of his terminal, knowing his knight would not return. As if in answer, the knight saluted and lowered his visor, its black armor shining as it marched away.

His knight, a digital hero known as the Gallant, wasn't any more real than the other assets in the sim. And yet, who could call BreakPoint a mere game? The knight was his last chance to protect the life of an innocent man. Cultivated and patched through the ages, BreakPoint served as a proxy for war.

A thirty-meter hallway separated Taavi, a reclusive engineer who trained on AI sims, from his opponent and childhood hero, Ikkyu Qiceran, nine-time world champion and treasure to his nation. Though Ikkyu was past the usual retirement age, his abilities seemed to only improve with time. With a few more victories, his five-year winning streak would soon become six.

Taavi adjusted his camera to study the man he had trained to become for the last fifteen years. His camera peeked through the crystalline walls of Ikkyu's battle room to reveal a solemn face free of strain, giving not a hint of the twelve hours of battle that had left

Taavi, and his army, broken and battered.

Taavi curled his hand into a fist that routinely broke bricks, wishing it could smash down the door that secured Ikkyu in his five-by-five-meter chamber. But as long as Ikkyu, perfection incarnate, entered a 32-byte hash at the top of each hour, there would be no physical combat. Which meant Taavi's Six Second Flow knockout technique would remain useless. And, which left Taavi fighting on the strategy board, pitted against Ikkyu's nearly clairvoyant ability to predict his every move.

Taavi waved a hand, and his view of the battlefield shifted into a panoramic display of the board. His knight moved into position and merged with a platoon of twenty soldiers, each unit indistinguishable except for the triple-plumed helm that marked the Gallant as commander.

His knight paced up and down the double row formation, then pointed to the front line and yelled, "Move!"

The platoon marched forward as one until they stood at a narrow section of a mountain pass overlooking a valley. A sea of enemy White swarmed below. Knight and platoon formed a wedge of Black, staking their shields into the earth, then drawing their bows.

Taavi bowed his head. "You will be remembered."

Though he wasn't playing for the fate of a nation, Taavi was still being used as a pawn. The elite often coerced rivals into making impossible BreakPoint wagers. Horang Karelian, First Citizen of Char and leader of the known world, had forced a simple merchant to bet his life on Taavi winning against Ikkyu. When the merchant died, Horang would complete his third monopoly. News anchors had already declared Ikkyu's victory as a foregone conclusion.

A chime rang, signaling an incoming message marked with Ikkyu's silver seal. It was an invitation to resign and get paid a small, yet significant, portion of the prize money—a custom from an older age meant to honor a worthy opponent.

Touched that his hero approved of his skills, Taavi sat up a bit taller. Then the reality of the merchant's fate sank in: as soon as he accepted that money, drone enforcers would vaporize the merchant

without so much as a “make your peace.”

Taavi closed his eyes.

His small startup that he had poured his soul into for a decade needed that money, and the merchant’s death was inevitable. But Ikkyu’s invitation to speed things along shattered the illusion that Taavi could play the game and remain innocent. He had known these kinds of deaths happened, but they had always felt one step removed—atrocities committed by an oligarchy that stomped on everything to get what it wanted. Surely, nothing to do with regular folk like him.

Disgust and rage roiled within—at the First Citizen’s unquenchable greed, at Ikkyu’s callous indifference, and at himself most of all for having dedicated his life to a game that culminated in such a despicable moment. Taavi sent his thanks and regrets, feeling simultaneously righteous and idiotic as he traded pride for poverty.

Taavi could almost hear Ikkyu’s answering sigh. The old man shook his head and ordered his army to charge. Ikkyu’s first wave of White staggered under a flurry of arrows. Taavi zoomed in to admire his knight’s rebellious smirk one last time.

“Last stand,” whispered Taavi.

White closed in on Black’s line. The Gallant dropped its bow and pulled out a golden sword that sparkled like a star, then drew the blade across one arm in a shallow cut. As blood touched earth, a red aura expanded around the platoon. The troops doubled in size and entered a battle frenzy, led by the Gallant. The first wave of White met Black, and died.

With Ikkyu occupied at the pass, Taavi moved to the second phase of his plan: two dozen raids on Ikkyu’s supply lines. At first, Black expanded across the board. However, Ikkyu countered at every turn. His second wave of White carved into Taavi’s defense at the pass.

In less than five minutes, half of Taavi’s remaining army was gone. Taavi continued to play as if he had a chance, wishing he could stick it to this joke of a system.

A flash on screen jolted him from his daze. It was twenty seconds from the top of the hour. Taavi ran to his door and pounded

in the 32-byte hash displayed above a keypad. Sixty agonizing seconds later, his door locked with a hiss, securing the safety of his gaming room for another hour. Feeling a fool, he peeked down the hallway that separated himself and Ikkyu.

Ikkyu's door glowed red.

Taavi's heart skipped a beat. Ikkyu, the man who commanded battle with the ease of an evening stroll, had forgotten to secure his room.

Taavi dabbed sweat from his brow and studied the newest wave of White lining up for the charge. His Gallant still lived, and with a bit of luck, might last two more minutes. Taavi relayed a series of commands to his tattered army, then threw his door open and sprinted down the hallway. There was no time to grab his striker, the weapon that might knock Ikkyu out with a single tap.

Ikkyu was consumed by his console when Taavi burst in and slammed the door against the wall. Taavi leapt at Ikkyu with a flying kick, honed with the conditioning of one hundred thousand AI combat sims. Ikkyu stumbled back, eyes wide. Taavi, sailing through the air, had aimed to knock a sitting Ikkyu from his chair. Instead, his blow struck Ikkyu in the back of the head and sent them both crashing to the floor.

Taavi placed a hand on the wall to haul himself up. He clenched his jaw, ignoring a spasm in his ankle as he found his feet. He glanced at Ikkyu to confirm he was breathing, then turned to the terminal. His Gallant's red aura faded, and the remains of Taavi's platoon shrank back to normal size. Aside from the Gallant, only two soldiers remained, one standing on either side.

A third wave of White marched forward.

Taavi bowed his head, hands pressed together to honor the merchant, and waited for the end.

At the edge of the pass, the armies of White lined up row by row. The last soldier joined.

And stayed standing at attention, as if awaiting orders.

Taavi watched in awe.

Ikkyu's every move had been manual.

The man was not human. It took several more heartbeats for

Taavi to realize he had won.

Lights flashed. Taavi fell into a fit of laughter as his name marched across the screen, declaring his victory to three billion viewers around the globe.

Shock turned to dread as the camera panned to a group of enforcer drones heading for Horang's chambers.

BreakPoint could decide the fate of a nation, but this was the first time the game had failed to serve the ambitions of the ruling class. Assuming this wasn't a staged show, Horang, First Citizen of Char, was about to die. Taavi shuddered, wondering if he would be strong enough to survive the enemies he had made this day.

A soft moan pulled his attention back to Ikkyu.

Blood oozed from Ikkyu's head and pooled across the floor. In the background, drone reporters entered the room to get the scoop. Taavi knelt before his fallen hero and tried to make him comfortable as he yelled, "Medic!"

Howlite Harbor was a notoriously lavish neighborhood, gentrified to the point that the ultrawealthy had displaced those who were merely wealthy. It was a place so immaculate, its roads could be used as dining tables. A place filled with unaffordable restaurants, sculpted gardens, and architectural wonders. A safe haven, where residents could quietly ignore laws and poverty as they pleased.

A place designed to keep people like Miranda out.

Thanks to a vendor truck accidentally leaving the back door cracked between fuel stations, she had been able to sneak a ride and therefore bypass the community gate and guards. But if she didn't clean up soon, she would probably get arrested.

"Number 665, Howlite Spa Station of South Westernia welcomes you. We hope you enjoy your stay."

A concierge bot, one of the fanciest Miranda had ever seen, had a voice pitched musically to soothe the mind. It ended its greeting with a soft chime and the station door opened with a cushioned hiss. An herbal aroma welcomed her as she stepped into the silvery

tilled chamber, furnished with a velvet stool and hygiene nook. One strap at a time, she unshouldered the small pack that contained all she owned in the world, and placed it on a stool with a loving pat.

She turned to the mirror and took a cloth towel from the dispenser, dabbing at her soiled cheeks and a head full of debris—a gift from sleeping on the grass for a week. She combed through her ratted dark hair and splashed cold water on her face. Her odor was something fierce, but her dwindling funds had made bathing a rare luxury. Her sixteen years were enough for her to know that if she remained a walking biohazard, she could never enter a place where real money was earned.

Reluctantly, she approached the pay station.

10 CIN tokens for a five-minute shower.

Who needs gate guards with prices like these? she thought, trying not to dwell on the fact that her last shower had cost half a CIN. Miranda shoved her clothes into an autowash box on the far wall. Then, with much more reverence, raised her hand to an amulet around her neck and recited her seed, wincing as her meager 100 CIN became a double-digit 90 CIN.

Faucets emerged and rotated, blasting her head to toe with soap and steam. Chunks of earth fell away as she held out her arms to let waves of water massage away her troubles.

When she had first left home, it had been exciting to trade mundane routines for a gritty life under the stars. Now, the comfort of a hot shower brought back wistful memories of her well-intentioned family. Her immigrant parents barely spoke the language of Westernia, but they had pushed her to work hard and do as she was told so she could someday make a family of her own—a three-thousand-year-old path so certain that it might as well have been prophecy.

It was this path that had destined her twin brothers, eight years older, to become factory workers at the same place their parents worked.

One summer, Miranda lied about her age to work there and help the family, and had seen into her future. Twelve-hour shifts had devoured her body and left no time to recover, let alone make

something of herself. She had folded bags of processed food to the thrum of sixty ticks per minute, as the air coated everything in a layer of hot butter and left a lingering stink in her clothes. Managers flexed their authority through petty grievances, firing people for using the bathroom at the wrong time—all for a wage that paid above the poverty line *only* because everyone worked seventy hours per week.

Their one delight had been watching the nightly BreakPoint competitions, cheering for gladiators that came from humble beginnings, becoming heroes that proved dreams could come true.

But she could no longer accept her parent's gifts from the factory, knowing what price had been paid. She now knew which machine had severed her father's right pinkie and why her mother's cough would never heal. Her pittance of additional wages were not enough to fix the cracks that invited the ants and cockroaches into their shoddy apartment. When she had tried to share her meager earnings from the factory, her parents refused and insisted that she save them for something special.

The factory experience led her to question why she should bother with school if she was going to end up like that. In response, her parents had locked her in her room, supposedly for her own good. Their punishments grew increasingly isolating, banishing her from even the family BreakPoint viewings.

Everything changed the day Miranda had pilfered a portable comp from a donation bin in the school library and learned how to root it. She altered its chassis to make it look like the ones authorized for school use, then used it to go on the net and play mock battles of BreakPoint where she made her first friends—the Crypto Gardeners.

On the surface, they were an eclectic group of scoundrels who liked to play games and hack into things they shouldn't. They asked questions and taught her how to probe beyond the approved information, pulling her into a virtual world more vibrant and seductive than anything she had ever seen—a place where she could find her own answers.

Glued to their world, she learned how to parse through the

deluge of unreliable information. She delved into the rise and fall of civilizations, the miracles of science, religion, and paradigm-shifting art.

When her parents caught on to her secret life, they decided to banish her to a delinquency school that was a prison in all but name. A few days before she was supposed to go, Miranda took what little money she had and left everything behind, swearing to defy her prescribed fate. Two years of adventures had led to odd jobs, each more desperate than the last. So far, the main thing she'd learned was that even beyond the factories, the rules of the world were clear. There were winners and losers, and she was far from winning.

In the soothing heat of the shower, she basked in memories of warm food and soft beds. It might not be too late to return to her old life, but to do that, the best parts of Miranda would have to die.

She turned the nozzle to maximum and let a wave of steam flush away all thought. Jet blasts turned her skin pink as they carried dirt and grime down the drain.

The timer beeped and the water slowed to a trickle then cut off, replaced by a warm fan. A chamber opened from the wall, presenting a warm towel and padded slippers, along with her freshly laundered clothing, neatly folded. Patting herself dry, Miranda pulled on a black hooded dress and combed her hair until it shone.

She repacked her bag and gave it a final pat before sneaking in the towel and exiting the chamber.

She stepped outside with her chin held high, copying the winners she'd seen thousands of times on screen. She started down the hill towards the heart of Howlite Harbor, known for its high-stakes gambling and elder grape wine. She passed through a central plaza, crossing train tracks that led to a nearby station—one that could take her home.

90 CIN. Enough for a ticket, a good meal (as long as it wasn't here), and some change to spare. A part of her longed to find out whether her family would forgive her, but she kept her gaze forward and strode to the pier.

Her eyes fell on a two-story building with a holographic screen and sparkling neon lights. Howlite Inn was a crossroads that

welcomed travelers passing by the water's edge. The Inn's sweeping lines and curves molded into geometric shapes, simulating the infinite and tantalizing the eye with artistic mastery.

BreakPoint betting pools marched across the screen, showing the lineup for the day's regional matches. One tier down from Platinum Class, the players were all rising stars. Though the event was not nearly as famous as Dream, the Platinum Class championship on the island of Char, it was a favorite for gamblers who enjoyed the unpredictability and player-designed outfits that were not yet bloated by sponsor ads.

To warm up the crowd, the tournament showcased a Platinum Class exhibition match with the legendary Ikkyu Qiceran—who, demonstrating his usual flare, was pummeling an unfortunate man.

BreakPoint was so lucrative that nations regularly adjusted their election dates to accommodate major tournaments. Miranda's family had glued themselves to the game, teaching her the rules at the tender age of six. They had also warned her to never gamble, advice she often found wise.

Except for now.

BreakPoint. Miranda's sanctuary—the magical game that took her away from all her troubles. She had spent her childhood studying the underlying math, timing, build patterns, matches, and techniques. Months ago, she had become too poor to consistently power her comp, let alone buy one of the fancy ones that converted between pocket and lap-sized, but she still snuck into sports cafes to watch the games. She was about to learn whether her obsession counted for anything.

Today, her bet would be real.

Miranda turned away from the board to step inside when it flashed suddenly, declaring Taavi Zanatos the victor. Stunned, she stepped closer to the news feed and watched as medics rolled out a stretcher with a white cloth enshrouding a body. They proceeded with an air of unhurried solemnity reserved for the dead.

Was that Ikkyu, the player who had invented the playbook for modern BreakPoint? Her heart clenched so hard that for a moment, the world trembled. Ikkyu's games had been her silent teacher, his

interviews and routines her private lectures. He was a man who had become so familiar, it felt like she had lost an uncle.

Her thoughts were interrupted by a bell. The next match was starting. Biting back her grief, she quickened her step and headed for the entrance. Thoughts of Ikkyu would have to wait. Had he been her literal uncle, he would not want her to fail now, and she had no intention of playing out her life as some cog in a machine.

With a bit of luck, 90 CIN might just be enough.

Miranda trembled as she passed between a pair of towering double doors. Silver staircases curled along each side of the room, meeting on either side of an arched balcony. Along the walls, unicorns leapt among clouds and stars. She passed between sheer pink drapes and entered a room with polished marble flooring. Lounging patrons in sequined embroidery sipped neon drinks from long-stemmed glasses. Their unwelcoming eyes followed her as she hurried across the room and made her way to the back.

On the far wall, there was no mistaking the swirl of black and white on the triptych floor-to-ceiling display. Hypnotized by the vast screen, she stepped closer. She was far too poor to compete as a player, but she had played thousands of hours of mock battles, dreaming that in some other life, she was in one of them.

The two contenders faced off, one on either side and larger than life. Their hands moved in a blur as they commanded their forces in battle. In the center, formations swept back and forth, as Black and White fought for control. A glowing green border indicated a friendly no-combat match.

The memory of Ikkyu's dead body being rolled away replayed through Miranda's mind. She shivered, grateful that this battle would resolve solely on the board.

From the cheers and betting odds, White was the favorite and assumed victor. Patrons had turned from the game to chat with one another and order fresh rounds of drink.

Reminding herself that she needed money, Miranda kept

her attention on the board. White's perimeter was expanding, but subtle changes in contested areas indicated that Black had a 5% lead on buffs. Each skirmish quietly shaved away pieces of White's fortifications with the finesse of an artist, and neither had yet placed their hero units.

Miranda pursed her lips, hoping to hide her grin. No wonder the odds were skewed, and in the wrong direction. She approached the betting counter and stood in front of the nicest-looking attendant: a middle-aged woman with gray hair and a crystal barrette. The woman adjusted her glasses and peered down over the counter.

Not kicked out yet, Miranda thought. *Now to convince them to let a minor legally buy in.*

"Lively crew," she said, then winced as the woman narrowed her eyes.

Aborting the small talk, she unslung her bag and pushed her money across the counter, trying to assume an air of nonchalance as she looked from the woman back to the game.

The attendant stepped away and disappeared behind a closed door. After a moment, she returned with a chilled bottle of water and handed it to her.

"On the house," she said. "Dear, what is it you really need?"

Miranda cracked open the bottle and soothed her parched throat. She checked the board again and turned back to face the woman, then spoke her seed, commanding the amulet to release her life savings. "Everything on Black," she said.

The attendant's gaze traveled from the board full of White, to the long odds, then back to Miranda. After a long pause, she tapped a key. The transaction voided with a warbling beep.

"I don't steal from children," she said. "I have enough free passes into hell."

Miranda clutched both hands at her waist and gripped her dress. Once Black dropped the hero, it would reveal itself to be a sleeping giant. From the renewed cursing and cheers, the game was nearing its end.

Miranda bit her lip and initiated the transaction again. "I insist."

The attendant started to shake her head again. “I’m not going to take your money. You’ll thank me later.”

Desperate, Miranda whipped out one of her most prized possessions: a relic poached during her great exodus—her cousin’s proof of adulthood. Miranda’s curved eyes and simple unadorned dress were foreign to the region, so there was a chance this woman might not be able to tell them apart. “Ma’am, I understand looking young is a blessing, but this is bordering on offense.”

The attendant gaped, then stammered, “I... I’m sooo sorry.”

Miranda lifted her chin, trying to convey a fierceness she didn’t feel. She was repaying the attendant’s kindness with humiliation, but her future depended on that bet. Once she won, she would leave a generous tip. “Save it, there’s no time!” she almost hissed.

The attendant blushed and confirmed her bet. The viewing room fell silent as territory changed sides faster and faster.

Miranda fell through the realms of possibility. The landing would be either luxurious ... or crushing. She reached into her pocket and fiddled with her favorite pair of dice.

White spread across the board in a play that nearly snuffed out Black.

One of us is about to lose—might as well live on the heights while I can, she thought.

Miranda turned back to the woman at the counter and casually threw down the dice, hoping they would reveal her fate.

Snake eyes.

A losing throw. But for her or White?

Aw, what the hell.

“I think I’ll wait here to collect, if it makes no difference to you,” she said.

The attendant was about to protest, when someone threw their glass on the floor and cried, “Pox in a hell hole!”

Everyone turned as one to see a board filled with Black.

Miranda leaned forward, eager, as the attendant turned back to her with a look of wonder.

“I’ll take half of my winnings in this region’s bullion, and half in CIN,” she said.

As the attendant moved to obey, a man in a dark suit emerged from a back room and planted himself at the counter.

“You know the rules, Beatrix. Cheater money belongs to the house,” he said.

He gestured behind him and two large burly men appeared.

They stepped forward, each seizing Miranda by an arm. She flailed and kicked as their steely fingers dug into her flesh and lifted her off the ground. She opened her mouth to scream, when a melodious command cut through the chatter.

“Pay her.”

Silence fell as a tall woman glided up to the counter, her long white gown billowing in her wake. Her sculpted alabaster curls cascaded to her waist, a soft contrast to the fire in her imperious gaze. Her eyes glowed a deep green as she leaned in, whispering softly.

The man turned as pale as her dress. At his signal, Miranda was led, politely, back to the counter.

“Pay her!” squealed the man, retreating with a slam behind the same door from whence he’d come.

Beatrix, the attendant, cringed as she counted out a pile of coins and a digital chit.

The imperious woman’s face softened for the attendant. “I will remember your kindness, Beatrix.”

Beatrix slumped against the counter as the lady in white slid the small fortune, and the dice, into Miranda’s trembling hands.

Heart fluttering, Miranda left a few coins for Beatrix. Then she took the chit—enough to eat for a year while sleeping in a real bed.

The woman lifted a hand and guided Miranda’s chin up, until they looked eye to eye. “Basic math tells me you didn’t start with much. Tell me, was that all you had?”

Miranda nodded.

“Why?” the woman asked.

Miranda blushed. “It’s not like I had much to lose.”

A smile. “Please. Your win was no accident.”

Unable to deny the woman who had saved her, Miranda stood on tiptoe and cupped both hands to the woman’s ear to whisper. “I

saw riches and drink through the window. I figured someone had to be drunk enough to make a careless wager.”

The woman placed a hand on Miranda’s shoulder and gave it a squeeze. “Oh, you are a gem. Gambling has its place, but there are much easier ways to make money. How would *you* like to be the champion the world bets on?”

Words fled Miranda. *Her?* A BreakPoint player? It sounded ridiculous. When at last she found her voice, it came out as a squeak. “Impossible!”

“Certainly dear, if you don’t try. But, you’re closer to the top than you think.”

Miranda followed the woman’s gaze to a table near the back. Three men—all in thick button-down coats suitable for trekking through a tundra—glared back with growing scowls.

“You just beat three of Westernia’s top BreakPoint analysts. No doubt they’ve lost quite a bit of their client’s money, thanks to you,” said the lady.

Miranda shook her head in wonder, “Who are you?”

“The one who will take you to the top. Call me Sage. I prefer names that are earned, not branded by birth,” said Sage, tracing a finger across Miranda’s cheek. “And what, my dear, shall I call you?”

Miranda snatched her cousin’s ID from the counter, then hesitated. She didn’t want to lie to her savior, but she dared not leave a trail for her family or reveal her minor status.

As the silence stretched, Sage filled the void with a radiant smile. “What about Arrow? You are someone who knows how to pick your target and fly true.” She pointed to the screen that panned across Char’s BreakPoint Arena, lights flashing as a new contestant walked on the stage. “A little guidance, and we’ll get you there soon enough.”

For the first time, Miranda—or rather, Arrow—felt like she had gotten things right. Numbly, she nodded, letting the shackles of birthright fall away.

Sage placed an arm around her, and with the lightest touch, guided her out into the shining sun. Her voice tinkled as she spoke. “Leave a name behind, and everything becomes possible.”

“First Citizen, it is time.”

The messenger drone dipped in a short bow, inviting Violet Celestine to follow. It took several heartbeats for Violet to realize that the words were meant for her.

Horang Karelian, First Citizen of Char—her husband and head of the Karelian-Celestine family—was dead.

Ikkyu, head of the Council of Truth and general to the Grapevine, was dead. Her parents were dead. Killed in a suspicious plane crash a year ago. Liliana Celestine, her sister, had been exiled two years ago.

Her husband had run on enough evil that Violet had assumed he would live forever. Though she had little love for him, his passing meant she was now truly alone.

And on this day, a little of Violet died too.

Numbly, she rose to her feet, forcing herself to shuffle down the empty halls that had once been vibrant and full of laughter, back when she had believed that ruling would be the duty of others. In the thickening silence, with only the quiet hum of the drone for company, it was as if she too now walked with the dead.

She rode a glass elevator up sixty-four stories to the roof, where a shrine overlooked the island of Char. Attendants dressed in the mourning color of white bowed in her wake, offering her a mirror and makeup tray to check her appearance. Violet added a bit of powder to her cheeks, then stepped through the arched doorway that led to the outdoor shrine.

Now in the public eye, she pulled her lips back in a smile that hopefully convinced the drone reporters, and the world, that she was in control. Upon the death of Horang, Violet had become the last remaining heir for the Celestine-Karelian estate, a duty she had expected to be handled by her husband, and later by her children. But now, less than two years after being married, that duty had passed on to her. And, in accordance with the rules of the Great Keys, all of Char stood witness to her becoming First Citizen.

A long marble table with a mat lay before her. Behind it, the

three-foot coin representing the CIN token spun round and round. To either side, ink-spider robots hovered, waiting with their sharp needle legs to imbue her inheritance.

An attendant came forward with a small glass of water and a numbing pill. Violet lay down and closed her eyes, body growing lighter as if floating amidst clouds. Straps extended from the table and wrapped around her extremities, binding her. A silvery needle entered her arm. She tried not to think about the shadowy forms that hovered above as they tattooed the twin fish into her flesh, marking her as First Citizen. Then came the sound of a drill, followed by a pressure on her chest.

Violet shivered and flexed against her bonds. As blackness descended, she pursed her lips, refusing to scream as the world witnessed her ascension.