

Preview: Chapters 1-5

IKARION QUEST

**A LitRPG Adventure
Book Two in the
Ikarion Isekai Anime Series**

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PROLOGUE

The architect of *Ikarion* let the door to his domicile slide shut behind him, then stumbled into his living room. With a weary sigh, he allowed himself to sink with relief into the floating mesh web that served as his recliner and waited for the cords of long-held tension in his back and limbs to release. They didn't.

He frowned. Comfort never seemed to come easily these days. Was it guilt? Paranoia? Both? He closed his eyes and pictured the trio of human beings tethered to medic-bays that doubled as VR pods, slim, sterile tubing penetrating flesh and serving up a cocktail of fluids, nutrients—and chemicals—to keep the subjects alive, compliant, and under his control. That one was particularly gaunt and pale—functionally braindead—only served to sharpen the stabbing guilt twisting his stomach into knots. He'd already been diagnosed with ulcers once. The weight of accumulating secrets was taking its toll. What was his end game?

The impulse to protect and preserve his brainchild, the wildly popular immersive game, *Ikarion*—but especially his capstone achievement, the AI game controller known simply as Aum—now struck him as childish and short-sighted. Whether he worried about his boss, Monad CEO Louise Carrel, or World Police agents, he felt a growing certainty that it was only a matter of time before someone found him out. And

even if they didn't catch on, the expense of hiring and maintaining a contract with a specialized black ops outfit would wring him dry soon enough. Not to mention, the rugged, business-like "project manager" of the operation had put a fright in him. Missing a payment was not an option. Unless...

Unless he figured something out.

The sharp ping of a high-priority alert very nearly shook him loose from the mesh nest. Body trembling, he called out to his digital assistant, "Puh—put it onscreen." A thin black sheet of synthetic material slid down from his ceiling, dangled in front of him. There was a flicker as the display came to life, a flashing red-and-white notification filling the void.

*INCOMING SECURE TRANSMISSION FROM:
Unidentified@MonadTower*

The knife-like knot in his gut twisted and doubled in size. He attempted to steady himself, plaster on a smile. Wheezed: "Accept transmission."

Another flicker, then a face filled the screen, an ambiguously aged woman with steely gray-blond hair worn in a short bob, an ornate platinum-chain necklace hugging flawless porcelain skin. He flinched again as he took in the pinpoint pupils and compressed lips.

"Madam," he managed.

The frown intensified.

"I've been reviewing your logs," she said, flatly.

Shit, he thought. He blanched, mind reeling, desperately seeking rational cover, but any self-command he possessed was quickly betraying him.

"An audit?" he squeaked, then forced himself to breathe. "You're entitled, of course—I, umm—I trust everything is in order?"

Her steely gaze gave nothing. "You tell me."

She let him ramble, as he slipped painfully into bland managerial-speak and went down a well-rehearsed list of usual operational highlights.

Finally, she held a hand up to stall him.

"An executive at Omniversal is complaining that we never returned their virtuooid following the cross-over World Event. She's getting

quite insistent. The next season of *Rogue Angel* starts in three weeks.” Louise Carrel’s lips quirked, the first show of emotion. “Don’t tell me something happened to it, darling. You promised, most sincerely at the time, that transferring AI between systems would pose no risk.”

The pressure in his gut relaxed a fraction. She didn’t know. He still had time to set things right. Still had a chance to pretend the entire *Ikarion* Gate episode had never happened. Still had a chance to pretend the virtuoid hadn’t slipped off to another—quite real—realm of the Multiverse. All he had to do was find a way to do the impossible: reach a hand across the Multiverse, to the realm of Ikaris, and retrieve the Rogue Angel back to *Ikarion* and the Nexus.

“Well?” she prompted. Her eyes tracked the bead of sweat dripping from his brow, slipping down along his cheekbone to his jaw.

“I’ll...” Answer wrong, and *Ikarion* would be shut down for sure, whether by Monad or the world government. “...look into it, of course.”

Her chin tilted forward as she nodded. Of course he would. A pulsing ping on her end, soft but insistent, interrupted their exchange. Her eyes momentarily widened and flicked off-screen, breaking the trance-like grip she’d held over him.

“Is there anything else?” he asked.

She looked back at him, stared as if he wasn’t there. Then she recovered. “That’ll be all. I don’t want to hear from that Omniverse exec again, you understand? Get it done.” Before the architect could grovel, the transmission terminated, his CEO’s face replaced by a static rendering of the stylized tri-blue-M Monad logo.

With an explosive sigh, he sagged back in his mesh web. Whatever had intruded upon their call wasn’t his concern. He had his own problems to worry about. That he even knew about the existence of the Multiverse was a secret. *Ikarion* was modeled after his grandfather’s diary entries on Ikaris, which until recent events, he’d considered to be little more than a work of fiction. With the *Ikarion* Gate vanished as mysteriously as it had arrived, he was at a loss for how to retrieve the Rogue Angel. How had his grandfather managed to traverse between worlds? The diary offered few clues, but he’d scour the entries again anyway. What choice did he have? The clock was officially ticking.

He had less than three weeks to do the impossible.

CHAPTER ONE

THE COSMIC WEB, minutes earlier

He directed his gaze downward, hoping to catch a glimpse of his form within the pale gray void. But there was nothing to see save for a dizzying array of shimmering silk-like strands that functioned like tunnels, burrowing through schisms in reality at a scale impossible to comprehend. Overlapping, distorted voices screamed at him, adding to his sense of disorientation.

You did this to us, they accused.

You destroyed the gate, hissed another.

Of course he had. What other choice did he have? Demon Lady Penkra had nearly unleashed the Bane upon Ikaris, and could not be allowed to do so again.

You only prolong the inevitable.

Gates. These strands, connective tissue between an incomprehensible number of worlds, each terminating in gates, each presenting a risk to the fabric of reality. So many gates. How many more Penkras were out there, willing to disrupt order for their own petty gains, willing to unleash chaos upon their worlds?

You will be erased.

By *you* the voices surely meant not just humanity, but the infinite collection of living souls spread across overlapping cords of space-time:

the Multiverse. The discordant tide of voices receded at the approach of a singular, almost kindly presence, allowing him to perceive the overlapping, subtle music-like vibrations of the Multiverse's connective strands.

"Who are you?" asked the Weaver. *"Who will you be?"*

Identities played across his mind's eye, clashing. One impoverished, possibly starving, definitely comatose—or worse. The other a hero on the rise—a Skeleton Key, whatever that meant.

"Tito," he answered, guessing at the intent of the query.

"What do you seek, Tito?"

"To return to myself."

Liar! screamed the Bane, pressed in against some invisible bubble.

The Weaver ignored them. *"To seek one who is not here, you must follow the way."*

"What does that mean? One who is not here ... do you mean me? The real me? How do I get back?"

"Shh. Listen." The cascading tones of infinite threads quieted to a shimmer. *"Do you hear?"*

There. A solitary thread, vibrating, that he felt more than heard. A steady pulse, familiar as the beating of his own heart.

"Yes, I think so."

"Follow it. The destination will find you."

Tito closed his eyes and waited...

... he was sinking beneath a wave, beckoned by the tug of an ocean current, gentle at first—tentative—as if waiting for confirmation.

Don't go, howled the Bane. *It's easier this way.*

A vision planted itself in his mind's eye, vivid shadows etching a pattern against a backdrop of light: inky-black nails like scissors, hungrily snipping at the stands of the Cosmic Web as the Bane surged to fill and expand the void. Tito ignored the vision, gave his consent to the wave, and felt the current sweep him away toward a singularity in space-time. An echo of a scream he recognized as his compressed and folded upon itself, the planes of perception converging to a single point—

—he exploded in a splash of contrasting colors of seemingly every hue, saturation, and brightness.

Feature: Lightning Calculator: There are 2048 distinct color variations in this setting.

Transdimensional Gateways: Anchor location set for Unspecified Realm.

He recoiled at the notifications. “Am I still in the game?” he wondered, and swallowed down the rising panic as he briefly considered looking down. What if he still had no body? That would be even worse. “C’mon, focus. Get your bearings.”

A digital, logical maze of circuits had replaced the ineffable strands of the Cosmic Web. Here and there, the circuits terminated at symmetrical structures that resembled stacks of blocks crawling with bright incandescent blips that brought to mind termites. Or sentries. Unlike the Bane, the blips maintained definition and dimension as they moved in a motivated, almost predictable fashion.

I’m inside the Nexus, he realized with a start.

Imago’s crowning technical achievement was home to both faithful and fantastical replications of reality. Deep within its bowels, reduced to component parts, he considered that the Nexus was missing something essential. If only he could put his finger on it. Structured and strictured, bound by rules and order, bound by the doctrine of code. Here, everything had a definition, even the unaddressed resources served a purpose. The element that lacked—he realized with a surprising rush of insight—was the yawning, unordered chasm of chaos.

It was as if whoever had designed the Nexus had spent time inside the Cosmic Web.

He pushed the thought aside. He’d followed the strand here, emerged inside the Nexus after stepping through the gate that was supposed to have linked Ikaris to *Ikarion*. Which way was home? Pausing, he closed his eyes and willed himself to listen, his awareness latched onto a bundle of energy and data. A twisting route into the heart of the network. Would that lead him to his body?

There was only one way to find out.



The circuit warmed—gradually, at first—as he immersed himself in the flow of data, nerves tingling as he clung like a misguided parasite to a coffin-sized data packet that traversed the Nexus in jagged stops and starts. As the winding, expansive digital realm flashed past, one relay at a time, an insistent, intrusive thought seared itself into the deep recesses of his brain: *I'm not supposed to be here.*

The walls of the circuit took on an incandescent glow. Beneath him, the cool, colorless data packet seemed to harden in response to the rising temperature. Immediately ahead, the circuit was collapsing in on itself. No, not collapsing—the walls of the circuit had turned porous, permitting tendrils of flame to lick and lash at the packets of data traversing within.

Warning: Heat damage imminent. Since you are not immune to extreme temperatures, you should probably turn around promptly.

The data packet began to bubble and boil beneath his grip. His nerves flashed with pain. He gasped as he reflexively released his grip, then braced himself as he tumbled toward the floor of the circuit. What would happen if he died inside the Nexus? He didn't find out. Instead, he encountered no resistance as he passed through the boundary of the circuit, as if the walls had been an illusion.

He stared.

What the hell is that?

Stretching out before him was an unfathomably large barrier of flame—a literal firewall. Something flickered deep within, looming like a phoenix or a fiery raptor. Beneath its powerful, taloned claws, he caught the impression of castlelike battlements. He blinked and the vision was gone. The expansive wall of flame remained, tendrils of heat flickering outward, the ends terminating dangerously close to his position.

He found himself backpedaling in open space, yielding despite his intentions to reach whatever lay on the other side of that wall. “This makes no sense,” he mumbled to himself, pondering why the path to his body had led him here. To this dead end.

There has to be another way.

But the only obvious way back was through the White Wizard. Through that terrible ten-head hydra, Aum. Would they let him log off in peace, or would they again threaten him with restitution? He studied the wall of flame for a time, looking for any hint of an opening or entrance that wouldn't melt his avatar to bits. Saw nothing but unyielding flame stretched like a canvas across x- and y-axes.

If he wanted to get home, he was going to have to find another way.

CHAPTER TWO

If you wanted something bad enough, Tito reflected, the most direct way to an end was a straight line. He was more of the circling sort, if he was being honest. And why wouldn't he be? There was literally no one around to lie to. Not in this back alley digital hellscape. Not unless he wanted to test the wall of flames and get a close look at the nightmare awaiting within. A straight line forward was likely to get him killed. What would reincarnation look like in the back alleyways of the Nexus? He wasn't sure he wanted to find out.

No, what he needed was a back door he could circle around to. A back alley.

Unbidden, he thought of the alley behind his apartment unit. Dangerous at the best of times, thanks to gutter rats and scattered debris. At the worst of times? People had been murdered back there. He closed his eyes, tried and failed to block out the cascading flood of loosely associated sensory memories. Tried and failed to block out the blood-curdling screams. The futile pleas for help. Tendrils of flame licked at his nerve endings. The final choking gasps for air. Neighbors. Family members. His parents. He opened his eyes. This wasn't helping.

He tried to hold onto the image of the alley.

Transdimensional Gateways: Would you like to set an anchor location for the Prime World of Imago?

“What the hell is this about anchor locations?” he muttered. Then, because he was short on ideas, he added, “Yes, please.”

The *please* was unnecessary. Probably. But when in doubt, good manners had to count for something. And for better or worse, this definitely counted for something. The interface flashed a new message.

Transdimensional Gateways: Anchor location set. Would you like to travel there now?

He took another look around at the hostile surroundings. For whatever reason, his first attempt at returning home had led him here. A virtual dead end. Later, he would reflect that this might’ve been a good moment to pause and think things through. Like, *really* think things through. But it had been a long few days. And more than anything, what he really craved was a good night’s sleep in his own bed. In his own room. In his own world. If he’d been thinking things through, he’d remember that he was very likely on the verge of death. Or in a coma in a hospital somewhere. Even if he found his body, he was still in avatar form. How was he supposed to get back to being himself?

But he didn’t think it through. In a rare moment, Tito ignored his doubts—and ignored the still-blinking unread alerts in the corner of his view—and opted for the straight line.

“Yes,” he replied, finally. “I would very much like to travel there now.” And so, for the first time in recorded Nexus history, a transdimensional portal opened at the virtual doorstep of a particularly large, imposing, unmarked server farm. And whether that might catch the attention of any entities monitoring the space, Tito didn’t stop to consider the implications. Instead, he acted.



People in black bodysuits were tending to him, attaching wires, checking his vitals. They left his counterfeit headgear on. His window was open, but there was no open air, only some sort of chute or other attachment.

Broken glass crunched underfoot as Tito emerged from the portal into the perpetual shade of a familiar decrepit alleyway. Judging by the visibility—he could make out the silhouettes of the disposal bin and smaller objects—it was still early evening. The dream he'd had, so lucid as to seem like he'd been there, couldn't possibly be real. But then, here he was, still in avatar form. Home. On Imago. If only this was a dream. Reflexively, he closed the portal behind him. Then, he peered up, hoping rationally if not realistically for a glimpse of an intact apartment window several floors up.

He grimaced, realizing there was no light source to create a reflection. The window might be closed. Or not there at all. There was no way to tell.

"Ahem." A silhouette stepped out from behind the disposal bin. Something dark and lumpy crawled up the shade's arm onto the shoulder and hissed. "Last I checked, this was my alley." An arm lifted, a sort of short cylinder in hand, and Tito braced himself for the worst.

The tip of the cylinder sparked, a dull yellow glow washing over the debris-ridden alley, revealing a familiar ratty teenager wearing a jagged grin, accompanied by an equally ratty creature perched upon his shoulder. Lil' Johnny and his pet Neomorph, a genetically engineered rat-dragon hybrid.

Tito felt himself relax. After all he'd been through, a low-level street ganger was the least of his worries. He took a moment to return his gaze to the grungy apartment exterior, noting the reflective surfaces of the upper-floor windows. There was a notable gap where his window should have been. He suppressed a shudder, willed himself to return his attention to the immediate problem.

Lil' Johnny was leering at him. "Oy, I was talking to you, Rabbit."

He cringed at the familiar nickname, then quirked an eyebrow. Surely the kid couldn't recognize him. Not in avatar form. No, he must use that name with all his potential marks. Tito let the silence linger, relishing the moment Lil' Johnny's posture shifted from predatory to questioning.

Health: 70/70 | Recovery: 4
Energy: 100/100 | Rejuvenation: 7

Attack: 4 | Defense: 4
Damage Multiplier: 5

ATTRIBUTES [43 Points]

- Augmented Soul - Primal
- Connected: Merchants' Guild
- Dreamwalker - Limited
- Energized - Expert
- Exorcism
- Feature: Appearance
- Feature: Lightning Calculator
- Immutable
- Magic: Gateways
- Nullify: Transdimensional Powers
- Pocket Dimension - Expert
- Sixth Sense - Greater: Dimensional Gates
- Unique: Reap Multiplicant
- Unique - Primal: Can destroy dimensional gates

SKILLS [4 Points Converts to 40 Skill Points]

- Business - Expert
- Cultural Arts
- Forgery - Advanced
- Gaming - Advanced
- Languages - Expert
- Law - Advanced
- Leadership - Advanced (Specialization: Cooperative)
- Listening - Advanced (Specialization: Spiritual)
- Navigation - Advanced (Specialization: Gate Cardinality)
- Occult - Advanced (Specialization: Spirits)
- Occupation: Merchant - Advanced
- Persuasion
- Search (Specialization: Irregularities)
- Survival (Specialization: Dimensional)

BURDEN: Soulquester [-10 Points]

- Tied to Hedge Merchant Class
- Unique: Can only gain Advancement Points from completing quests

BURDEN: Coward [-4 Points]

- Inept Attack - Major
- Inept Defense - Major



Wait, he thought, *so Skeleton Key was a Class?* That must've been what the unopened notification was for—his successful battle for the *Ikarion* Gate had unlocked the remaining 14 Points of his Unknown Power Attribute and changed his Class. And this Skeleton Key one was a doozy. Not that it would help much with his martial abilities.

Short of running away, he had few options. The Persuasion skill might be handy ... if Lil' Johnny were an NPC and not a real person. He quickly ran back through the list, even as the Neomorph crept ever closer. Tito paused on one of the Attributes, mind racing as he contemplated the limited possibilities, settled on one that was decidedly crazy. But, backed into a corner as he was, it was fight or flight.

He wasn't about to turn around now. He could worry about the ramifications later.

Tito swore to himself as the rat-dragon leapt in the air, claws extended. Instinct took over and he aimed a kick at the Neomorph's face. His foot landed and the rat-dragon dropped, momentarily stunned. He didn't wait for it to recover. He sprinted past the creature, ignoring the crunch of debris beneath his feet as he charged straight at Lil' Johnny. The gutter punk gawped at Tito, the hand-torch slipping from his off-hand grip. But he recovered quickly enough, finding the presence of mind to lift his knife hand.

Instead of worrying about trying to dodge the blow or to knock the knife aside, Tito focused on invoking the Attribute.

Pocket Dimension activated: You gather your willpower and focus on a small fold in the fabric of reality. Your thoughts find purchase on the subatomic matter comprising this existence, willing it to bend and stretch to your will.

The gutter punk snarled as Tito closed the remaining distance, even as a shimmering hole in reality formed in the space immediately behind him.

Congratulations! You have created a new Pocket Dimension with a 10-meter radius. This room-sized pocket of reality is yours and yours alone!

This effort has depleted your Energy by 10.

Health: 70/70 | Energy: 60/100

Tito lowered his shoulder and ignored the knife as he bowled into his target. He grunted in pain as the shiv parted flesh and buried itself deep in his arm.

You have taken piercing damage to your arm: -9 Health

Lil' Johnny howled in outrage as he tumbled backward, arms flailing as he tried in vain to remain upright. He tucked his chin as he braced for the impact that never came, and then he blanched. His body hung in suspended space, rotating end over end.

"No, no, no, no," he said, his voice gaining urgency and then cracking. "What the fuck is this?" He reached out, hands clutching in futility for Tito. But his assailant was *out there*, while he was trapped *in there*. Wherever that might be.

Tito ignored the pain lancing down his injured arm as he reached with his off-hand and scratched his head. As Lil' Johnny unleashed a string of profanity, he regarded his catch with lips parted in what might've been a grin or a grimace. He really hadn't thought the rest of this through.

Before he could reach a solid conclusion, he felt a sharp pinch around the back of his calf, accompanied by a garbled growl. The rat-dragon had its mouth closed around the fabric of his now-torn pants. In the dim yellow glow, beady little eyes glinted with lethal intent.

You have taken piercing damage to your leg: -5 Health

Tito growled back, ignoring the pain as he stooped down and pried the Neomorph loose. Holding the rat-dragon out at arms length, he bared his teeth and snarled, "Go to hell, you rat-assed mutt!" With a disgusted grunt, he heaved and watched with grim satisfaction as the rat-dragon crossed the threshold into the pocket dimension and began to free-float alongside a visibly ill Lil' Johnny.

The low-level street ganger puked on himself, then let out a strangled howl of rage. "I'm going to kill you, Rabbit! Let me out of here! I'm going to fucking kill you!"

“No thanks,” muttered Tito. With a dismissive wave of the hand, he willed the opening between this realm and the pocket dimension to close and watched with grim satisfaction as the hole quickly stitched itself shut and vanished. A part of him wondered if this was a mistake. If he’d regret making Lil’ Johnny and his pet prisoners. Another part worried that they wouldn’t have enough air to remain alive for any length of time. In truth, he had little idea how any of this would work. He wished he could just close his eyes and wake up. That life could go back to normal.

If only.

His gaze flicked back to the open window a few floors up. It was time to go home.

CHAPTER THREE

Tito regarded the entrance to the building with dismay. Gaining entry required a keyfob. He never went anywhere without it, lest he be locked out and left to fend for himself in the inhospitable neighborhood streets. Unfortunately, he wasn't exactly himself these days. He knew better than to wait for someone to come in or out; in these parts, only a lunatic—or someone being held at knife-point—would be crazy enough to let a stranger in. He reviewed his options on his Character Summary, but between his Attributes and Skills, nothing was standing out.

A notification flashed for his attention.

IKARION HELP SYSTEM:

Did you know that Magic: Gateways includes the ability to disable basic locks? All doors open to you now, Skeleton Key—particularly mundane ones such as this!

“Umm,” he mumbled. “Okay? So, what do I have to do—wave a hand or ask nicely?” But his avatar's built-in help system didn't respond. Which meant the question was either beneath answering or he needed to figure it out himself.

He focused his attention on the keyfob scanner and, with his pulse faintly beating in his eardrums, he waited for something to happen.

Nothing did.

“Unless...” The pulse. Was that normally there? Or was that merely the throbbing pain in his shoulder pleading for attention? But come to think of it, in his avatar form he couldn’t recall any prior awareness of a pulse or heartbeat. So maybe...

He focused on the rhythm as he watched the scanner, felt the pulse grow stronger.

And then stop.

Click. An LED on the scanner blinked green as the door unlatched.

“Huh.” A fleeting smile ghosted his lips, the first in days. “A guy could get used to this.” As he crossed the threshold into the building, he felt a small thrill. Now he understood the appeal of playing a roguish character.

His hand drifted to the lapel pin, a representation of a lyre, thinking of the bard. What was the Bard formerly known as Rogers up to now? Not still a prisoner, he hoped. And what were the Harpers, truly? A collection of rogues and musicians, or something more? Despite his curiosity, he knew there was no going back. Once he reunited with his own body, he was determined to be done with video games.

Done with adventure.

A door slid open at the end of the hall. Someone poked their head out, took one look at Tito’s avatar, the shiv lodged in his bloodied shoulder, and hurriedly retreated back to the safety of their cube.

Tito hurried for the stairs, took them two at a time. Found his door, locked and undisturbed. He found the pulse again, quicker this time, and stepped into his apartment. The door slid shut behind him as he gaped.

The furnishings in his apartment cube had always been spartan if functional. But what little he owned had been mostly turned upside-down or inside-out and emptied. Countertops, tabletops, drawers, cabinets. Even his sweat-stained mattress lay flipped on its side, the top edges pressed claustrophobically against the wall, exposing lethal dust bunnies to the open air. A slight breeze drew his eyes to the open gap where a window should be. Fragments of window slats and plexiglass had been cleared away, loosely scattered across his countertop and sink.

Whoever had come for him had only come in and out via the window, like one of those black ops merc teams in the 3-D holo-dramas on the Nexus. But who would possibly bother for a nobody like him? Yes, the White Wizard had threatened him and the others—for using counterfeit headgear to play *Ikarion*—but even so, this seemed beyond the pale.

Tito frowned at the apartment. If not the White Wizard, then who else? The local gang? Lil' Johnny had threatened a protection fee increase, but he was pretty sure that was just an unsanctioned grift. No, this wasn't the work of a street gang.

He stepped further inside, gravitating toward the overturned mattress. This was where he'd been, the last time he logged into *Ikarion*. Again, he marveled at the fact that he was both outside the game and yet somehow still using his avatar. Was he logged in even now ... or was this some sort of purgatory?

Overwhelmed and out of options, he stared at the mattress and wondered if he could sleep his way out of this mess. Short of ideas, he reached out, intending to pull the mattress down to the floor.

Tito drew up short at the sharp protest in his shoulder. Lil' Johnny's shiv. It needed to come out. He reached up with his off-hand and drew in a breath, then yanked hard. A jagged flair of agony shot down his arm as the crude blade came loose. He screamed in surprise at the vivid sensation, then let the bloodied shiv drop to the floor.

Warning: You are bleeding!

You will lose 1 Health every minute until you staunch the flow.

Health: 55/70 | Energy: 60/100

He suppressed a shudder and blew out his breath in frustration. He could let himself bleed out, but what would that gain him? In the far corner of his apartment cube, a pile of rumpled clothes lay strewn across the floor. He rifled through the pile, settled on an old hole-ridden shirt, and with one hand did his best to create a make-shift tourniquet.

Success - Survival (Partial): You have created a poor-quality tourniquet.

Bleeding reduced to 1 Health every 10 minutes.

Rest to clear any remaining status effects.

Health: 54/70 | Energy: 60/100

Nodding with grim satisfaction, he returned his attention to the upturned mattress. “You don’t have to tell me twice.” With a grunt, he pulled it off the wall and let the mattress fall to the floor with a thud. Dust motes kicked into the air. Miraculously, his avatar didn’t feel the urge to sneeze.

“That’s better.”

With no plan for what to do next, he collapsed onto the sweat-stained surface with a groan and shuttered his eyes, willing sleep to come.

And failing that, oblivion.

CHAPTER FOUR

Standing at the center of the penthouse office that occupied the entirety of the thirteenth floor of Monad Tower, awash in the blue glow of digital holographic projections, she studied the decrypted contents of the counter-intrusion report folder. Preliminary analysis suggested a rogue AI, but the profile was unrecognized. That in itself wasn't alarming—by now AIs could evolve in unexpected ways—but they still left fingerprints, if one knew where and how to look. Digital DNA could be used to track back the family tree, so to speak. So where were the fingerprints? Nothing existed within the Nexus by chance. Nothing within the Nexus arrived at the front door of the secretive Vault. Not without her explicit consent.

The analysis was inconclusive, little more than a series of dead ends, so she turned her attention to the raw data. What did she hope to find that her private army of specialists might have overlooked? The reasonable answer: nothing. Monad CEO Louise Carrel was nothing if not reasonable. But reason had its limits. Where reason failed, deep intuition—fueled by fourteen centuries of experience—must suffice. Visual renders were generally useless—avatars in Nexus were ornamental and served little practical purpose. She opened the visual reconstructions anyway.

And muttered a series of curses.

That a virtuoid or flesh-and-blood hacker might choose the form of a flamboyant avatar would surprise no one, least of all her. That the avatar had the unremarkable appearance of a third-rate fantasy street merchant—race: Human—might raise an eyebrow or two, but many hackers considered themselves artists and who could begrudge one the poetic license to pose as an insignificant working-class commoner? Class struggle was ostensibly at the heart of both art and counter-commerce. But she knew better.

No one, not a single entity of flesh-and-blood nor digital consciousness, had ever come so close to penetrating the outer boundaries of her Vault. Placed within a well-hidden, secluded sector of the Nexus that shouldn't even exist, none had even come so close as to gaze upon the outer bounds of the firewall. And yet, here it was. Indisputable evidence.

She frowned at the merchant's generic loose-fitting tunic, then zoomed in on the collar. The frown deepened as she took in the small metal pin, fashioned in the shape of a lyre.

The symbol of the College of Harpers. From Ikaris.

"Impossible," she breathed. But clearly it wasn't impossible—merely vexingly improbable.

Hastily, she gestured the visual away and paced around the floating display. How had an agent of the College of Harpers—a group of technological neophytes from another Realm—managed to nearly infiltrate the Vault, achieving what no one on Imago had, let alone hack into the Nexus with such advanced technology? Ikaris was a low-technology fantasy realm, not some secret enclave of cybersecurity experts. Had she inadvertently opened a doorway? She shrugged the thought aside. *Never*.

"Impossible," she muttered again. She was the Imago Gatekeeper—nothing was by chance. Ever. There had to be an alternative explanation.

And yet...

She stared at the lapel pin: undeniable evidence that something had gone terribly wrong. What did the Harpers think they were playing at? Surely they didn't know her secret. Not this one. She had others ... almost too many to remember. The nosy Harpers coveted their secrets. Well, whatever their motives, their intrusion left her little choice. At the upcoming Omphalos Council—where the self-selected

representatives of the Prime Worlds convened—she'd be having a word with Ikaris's Gatekeeper. The keeper of that realm's most prized secrets.

The so-called Master Harper.

CHAPTER FIVE

Oblivion didn't come. Not exactly. He dreamed, not of others, but himself. Unremarkable dreams. Old recurring dreams. And then came the familiar memories: in the courtyard playing with neighbors, parents lurking at the edges, doing whatever parents did. For once, the nightmares didn't follow. He dreamed instead of what might have been. If the fault zone wars hadn't come. Hadn't robbed him of everything. He dreamed he'd gone to school. Graduated. Found a boring job. Lived a boring, normal life, free from the ineffable mysteries of Dimensional Gates and the Cosmic Web.

His dreams shifted as he became more lucid.

A voice wiggled its way into the foreground—his own—small but insistent, demanding a rational answer to the irrational: *Why dream of the mundane when you've got an entire Multiverse at your fingertips? Why dream of the mundane when you're a Skeleton Key?*

No, protested a separate part of his brain. *There is safety in the mundane. All you have to do is go back to the game and log out. Everything will go back to normal.*

Could it be that simple? But why return to *Ikarion* at all. Why not log out right now? Again, he wondered what had happened to his body, where it had gotten to. If he was here, he couldn't be dead. Wherever he was, he was still alive, still connected to the Nexus.

Could he use his Dreamwalker Attribute to dream of himself? Why not?

So he tried...

...nothing happened.

He considered despair. Drifting into darkness and never waking. He could do that, couldn't he? The avatar had no needs, could endure forever, could possibly even sleep without dreaming.

Or he could get up.

He let his eyes drift open. Daylight had managed to find its way into his apartment via the solitary, abandoned window-frame. His shoulder no longer hurt.

Health: 70/70 | Energy: 100/100

Tito looked around his apartment cube, considering. Whoever had removed his body had also taken the counterfeit headgear.

He had no friends in these apartments. Even the lonely kept to themselves. There was nothing for him here. Where else could he go? Where else could he want to go? His mind wandered until thoughts settled upon Perk, her unbridled enthusiasm for adventure a stark contrast to his desire for safety and security. A smile cracked his frozen features, then chilled once more. If anyone was better suited for dealing with these surreal, frankly impossible circumstances, it was someone like her.

What was really going on here? There had to be a better explanation than some mystical woo-woo about Transdimensional Gateways and a Cosmic Web. The simple answer: he was hallucinating. It was the only rational possibility. Or, he was still somehow connected to the Nexus, even now. And this was all a simulation. Whatever the story, somewhere—out there—he was alive and, if not well, at least still had a pulse. Whether he was insane or dying or both, he had to do something. He couldn't just sit here and feel sorry for himself.

With a weary sigh that had little to do with the condition of his avatar, he lifted off the bed and focused on an open space at the foot of the mattress. A portal shimmered to life, extending from the floor to the ceiling.

It was time to get moving.



Tito—*no, he'd best think of himself as Card here*—stepped onto a trampled cornfield, a column of smoke rising in the distance. Not twenty paces beyond the portal, a grizzled centaur stood ringed by a troop of goblin raiders. Flanking the centaur were a handful of Adventurers, complete with shoddy training spears and pot lids, quite possibly fresh from New Player Orientation. He and Perk had always joked about Old Sir Goat's combat readiness drills, suggesting they might get attacked by a horde of radishes. Yet here it was, an attack on the farm. If only Perk were here to see this.

After unleashing a string of curses at the gaping newbies, the centaur hefted a spear and stamped forward—Card noted a limp—and impaled one of the goblin raiders. A loot sack appeared, glowing softly at the centaur's hooves.

Not real goblins, then. Not really dead. Not really real.

Even so, a few short weeks ago, Card would have fainted. Or at a minimum felt queasy. And yet he didn't.

Curious.

IKARION HELP SYSTEM:

Did you know that Augmented Soul can grant intrinsic, contextual benefits to your gameplay experience? In your specific instance, with a cumulative Soul of 10, you will notice a remedial soothing effect for physical symptoms of post-traumatic distress.

Card was frowning to himself, puzzled by this message, when one of the newbies turned in Card's direction and pointed. The others turned, noticing his presence and then breaking into cheers.

"Yay, reinforcements," shouted one.

He reflexively spun around, expecting to see more players. But it was just him—along with an open portal, overlapping notes humming at a frequency only he could hear.

"Whoops," he muttered under his breath. "Should probably close this." Before someone accidentally stepped through into his apartment.

That would be awkward. With a wave of the hand the portal snapped out of existence, silenced.

Old Sir Goat spun around, took one look at Card and *harrumphed*. “Whadya’ll gawping at, you shabby two-leggers? Defend yerselves!” As if on cue, a pair of goblin raiders flanked the centaur, waving copper shortswords menacingly. The rest of the goblins, nine in total, pressed in closer to the Adventurers with a chorus of snarls and overabundance of spittle.

Card’s hands twitched into the hidden pockets of his tunic, grasping once more for a dagger that wasn’t there. The glimmer of the loot sack at the centaur’s hooves reminded him this was a game now. He looked around, optimistic that there’d be more littering the cornstalk trampled dirt. If only he could be that lucky. His eyes drifted back to the loot sack, ready for the taking. What was he thinking? Was he seriously considering jumping into the fray? Apparently he was.

It’d be risky. If the grizzled centaur warrior-turned-farmer didn’t impale him with his spear, who was to say the goblins wouldn’t land a blow? Or he could just walk away. But what did he have to lose? A great deal less than Old Sir Goat, who was, he reminded himself, an NPC. Once dead, NPCs didn’t come back. A new farmer might be created to replace him, but it wouldn’t be the same character. After all the times he’d let his former employer down, surely he owed it to the surly old centaur to give it his best.

The Adventurers seemed to be having a hard time of it, but even if they died, they’d respawn. Meanwhile, the pair of goblins were pressing the centaur, harassing him too quickly for him to level his spear. Instead, Old Sir Goat was forced to use the spear haft defensively.

Well, if he wasn’t going to faint or vomit, he might as well make himself useful. With the nearest goblin’s back to Card, he leapt into action. Racing forward, he made for the loot sack and knelt. *Quickly now*, he urged himself as he glimpsed the sack’s contents.

***Goblin Raider’s remains: 5 copper, 1 string, 3 lumps of fuzz,
1 copper sword (small)***

Would you like to take anything or everything?

Without hesitation, he grabbed the hilt of the sword and mentally swiped the rest into his inventory to sort out later. The loot sack vanished and Card stumbled back just to avoid being trampled by a limping centaur.

Card stared at an old scar on the exposed flank, devoid of fur, now bloodied by a copper sword buried halfway to the hilt. Sensing an opportunity, two more goblins peeled away from the cluster of Adventurers and pressed the injured centaur.

“You planning to kneel down there all day,” huffed Old Sir Goat, “or bloody be useful for once?”

“Sorry,” replied Card, scrambling to his feet. “I’m trying.”

“Try harder and be quick about it.”

Properly admonished, Card lifted his claimed sword and scanned for the disarmed goblin and found him not two steps to his right. The goblin was jumping over and over again at the centaur’s flank, trying and failing to recover the sword or to drive the rest of the blade home.

Card surprised himself by successfully thrusting his own sword into the goblin’s exposed back. The copper blade came back out cleanly and the centaur’s attacker stumbled but did not die. The injured goblin spun with an agitated snarl, revealing rows of needle-like teeth, and lunged forward.

Managing to keep the sword between them as he backpedaled, Card’s heel caught something lumpy and solid. He went tumbling backward and landed on his ass. The sword landed on the ground behind him.

All too late, he realized the lumpy something was a stunned goblin laying prone at his feet. Only now it was recovered and eyeing him with mindless, violent fervor, alongside its injured companion.

Weapon forgotten, Card crab-crawled, trying to evade the twin attackers as they bore down upon him. The injured goblin paused just long enough to recover its sword. Card cursed himself for being so careless. But at least, he could console himself, he’d drawn their attention away from Old Sir Goat, if even for a moment.

In unison, the goblins scurried forward faster than Card could crawl, then leapt into the air. He gaped as they arced above him, seemingly in slow-motion, as they drew their blades back for a killing strike.

No, not slow-motion. The goblins were frozen in mid-air, like a 3-D vid on pause, eyes and mouths wide with apparent malice.

Experimentally, Card tried sitting up. Reached out. Poked one of the goblins in the belly with an extended finger. It didn't budge, didn't react. "What the?"

He moved out of the goblins' path, surveyed his surroundings. Everyone and everything was frozen: Old Sir Goat, the other goblins, even the newbie Adventurers. The distant column of smoke hung in the air, unmoved by the breeze. Curious, but besides the point.

Remember why you're here, he chided himself, now that he had a moment to think instead of reacting. He'd come here to log off. And that's what he'd do. He turned to regard the grizzled old centaur again, flinching at the sight of the copper sword poking out of his exposed flank. That had to hurt. But Old Sir Goat was a veteran of many battles, even if they were all fictional. The NPC could handle himself just fine.

Yet before he could think better of it, he grasped the hilt of the copper sword and gave a tug. The weapon came out smoothly. Hopefully the centaur's wound would heal quickly.

"Right," he muttered to himself. "Now stick to the plan."

This was as much of a plan he had left. Nevermind what he might find when he finally escaped the surreal prison of this wacked out avatar. Assuming he wasn't in a coma—or worse.

It was time to find out.

Card drew himself tall and with as much enthusiasm and hope as he could muster, proclaimed the long-anticipated command, "Log out."

And held his breath.