

[CHAPTER ONE]

IN AN INSTANT, Winter was gone. He disappeared like mist in the wind.

An empty feeling entered Cyclone's heart when he saw Winter vanish. One moment, his boss and Hero, Winter, was standing there on the Royal Tower in Underworld City, a smile on his face while Cyclone did his usual victory dance after they defeated Paradox and Atmosfear.

In the next, Cyclone saw Paradox appear on the air behind Winter. Cyclone had shouted at Winter to look out. Winter had turned around, only for Paradox to reach out, touch his chest with one finger, and say one word:

"Delete."

And that was that. In the blink of an eye, Winter was gone. The spot on the Royal Tower's roof where he had been standing less than a second ago was empty, leaving no sign that Winter had ever been here at all.

Still, a part of him hoped that maybe Winter hadn't actually been deleted, that perhaps he had simply been turned invisible or something like that. That is, until this notification appeared in his vision:

[Hero Winter] has been deleted.

Cyclone's breath caught in his lungs. He glanced at his character screen and saw Winter's name and icon crossed out. An ominous feeling of doom began to overcome Cyclone. Cyclone was normally a very happy-go-lucky kind of guy, but the dread crawling up his spine like a spider was completely different from anything he had felt before. Even his fear of Huntsman hadn't been this paralyzing, this deadly. He couldn't even talk, which was a huge issue for him, because Cyclone loved talking. The wind whipped around him, while the heat from the exploded Deletion Bomb still rose slightly from the roof underneath his feet.

Boss is gone, Cyclone thought. He's deleted. He's ...

Cyclone couldn't even think that last word. Tears started to form at the corners of his eyes, but he didn't let himself cry. Not yet. He wiped the tears away, but they kept coming anyway. It felt like someone had broken the water pipes in his head with a wrench.

Paradox, on the other hand, simply lowered his hand to his side. It was weird how he stood on the air like that. Cyclone originally thought Paradox might have Air Step, a Power that allowed people to walk on air, but after seeing Paradox delete Winter with a simple touch, he wasn't sure *what* Paradox was anymore. He wasn't even sure if Paradox was a player at all.

"Hmph," said Paradox. There was no emotion in his voice whatsoever, not helped by the plain metal faceplate he wore over his face. "He put up a better fight than I expected, but in the end, he was just another player after all. I should have killed him sooner."

Hearing Paradox talk so dismissively about Winter snapped Cyclone out of his grief. Red hot anger boiled in Cyclone's spirit, anger he had felt when facing Huntsman earlier, only much deeper and stronger than before.

"You murdered my boss!" Cyclone screamed, pointing at Paradox. "You monster!"

Paradox suddenly looked up at Cyclone like he had forgotten he was there. "You are still here? Odd. You should have stopped being a Sidekick as soon as Winter was deleted. Perhaps there is a delay in the D.E.S."

If Cyclone had been in the mood to think straight, he would have realized Paradox was correct. Sidekicks could only exist in relation to their Heroes or Villains. If a Hero or Villain was

deleted, as Winter had been, then Cyclone would be stripped of his Sidekick title and would go back to being just a Civilian. That is, until a new Hero or Villain entered the world and the System—as Cyclone had come to think of it—chose him to be their friendly, helpful Sidekick.

But Cyclone was in even less of a mood to think than he normally was. Grief like he hadn't felt in a long time bubbled up inside him like a volcano about to explode.

With a yell, Cyclone thrust his hands forward and unleashed Gust. Powerful, concentrated gusts of wind exploded from his hands and swept across the roof of the Royal Tower, sending the dust and dirt leftover from the Deletion Bomb swirling through the air.

Yet when Gust hit Paradox, he didn't even budge. His slimy, purple-and-black Costume seemed entirely unaffected by the hurricane-level winds roaring around him. Paradox just stood there, not making even one sound, before he shook his head and blinked out of existence.

But then he reappeared in front of Cyclone and punched him in the face. Crying out in pain, Cyclone hit the flagged stones of the Royal Tower. Dazed, he saw that half of his Health had drained in an instant. It was a testament to how powerful Paradox was that he could take off more than half of Cyclone's Health in one blow like that. And even worse, Cyclone suspected Paradox was holding back.

"Foolish anomaly," said Paradox. "I don't understand why you are still a Sidekick despite the loss of your player, but no matter. You can join Winter in the great beyond ... assuming anything more than nothingness lies on the other side of the black door of death for NPCs like you."

Paradox reached down toward Cyclone with one hand. Cyclone tried to get up but found his Stamina so exhausted from Paradox's single attack that all he could do was stare up at Paradox's incoming hand. He knew his time was up. Cyclone wasn't much of a religious man, so he didn't have any real preconceived notions of what happened after death. But he always did have a squeamish fear of death, especially deletion, which he always thought of as final death.

Well, maybe I'll at least get to see boss again, Cyclone thought, watching Paradox's outstretched hand growing closer and closer to his face. *Hopefully.*

That was when a massive roar rent the air like a sword. The roar was so loud that even Paradox paused. Although his faceplate hid his expression, Cyclone thought Paradox seemed shocked by the unidentified roar as he was.

"What is that?" said Paradox, looking around. "Another trick?"

Cyclone held up his hands. "Don't look at me. I'm just a humble Sidekick. I can't roar like a dragon. I can sort of meow like a cat, though. Want to hear it?"

Paradox looked at Cyclone in disbelief. "Why in the world would I want to—"

Paradox was interrupted by another roar and then the loud flapping of wings. A massive, brown-scaled dragon shot up past the edge of the roof. Its huge shadow fell over them as the dragon performed a lap around the roof. Both Paradox and Cyclone looked up in surprise and confusion at the massive dragon, its huge wings generating far more wind with each flap than Cyclone could summon with his own powers.

"A dragon?" said Paradox. "Where did this come from?"

Cyclone was also confused, at least until the dragon came to a stop several feet away from the roof, flapping its own wings hard to maintain its position in the air. The dragon's curved head, brown scales, and whip-like tail, along with its parachute-like wings, were instantly recognizable to Cyclone, but any doubts he had about the dragon's identity were swept away when he saw its rider.

A black man rode on what looked like a saddle on the dragon's back, right in between its wings. The black man wore a shining golden football helmet, which was the coolest thing among his hodgepodge of a Costume. Well, Cyclone never thought of it as truly hodgepodge. The thick work gloves, the rubber boots, the huge shoulder pads ... that always looked awesome to Cyclone. Other people might think FunkyFresh94—or, as Cyclone knew him, Funky—looked like a noob who had no idea what he was doing, but Cyclone knew from experience that Funky was far more capable than he looked.

“Cy!” Funky shouted. “Sorry I’m late! Those brainwashed Dwellers were a real pain in the ass. Came as fast as I could.”

“Don’t worry, Funky!” Cyclone shouted back, giving him the thumbs up. “Aside from the fact this Paradox guy is pretty much a god, I’m okay!”

“What about Winter?” asked Funky. “I saw the notification that said he was deleted, but—”

Funky stopped speaking when he looked at Paradox. Cyclone had really good long-distance vision—better than his short-distance vision—which was how he was able to see a light of recognition appear in Funky’s eyes when they landed on Paradox. Weird. Did Funky know Paradox?

Paradox also seemed to know Funky. His usual calm demeanor was gone. Instead, when he stood up and turned to face Funky, he acted like he was about to come face-to-face with his equal for the first time. His muscles were far more tense, like a tiger about to jump on its prey. But Cy didn’t try to attack him while he was distracted, knowing from experience just how useless his attacks were.

“I didn’t expect to see you here,” said Paradox. “I thought I would never see you again.”

Funky’s eyes narrowed. “You shouldn’t exist. You know that?”

Well, *that* was a rather rude thing to say, Cy thought. True, Paradox was clearly a sociopathic monster who probably only saw other people as a means to an end, who had helped Atmosfear and other Villains get away with all kinds of evil things, murdered Winter right in front of his eyes, and also had a really bad fashion sense, but Cy still thought Funky could be a bit more polite than that.

“So you haven’t forgotten what I am?” said Paradox. He spread his arms. “Then you know why I can’t die. And why I am destined to become the god of the new world. Will you join me in my quest to achieve ultimate power or will you oppose me?”

Cyclone expected Funky to say no—it’s what Winter would have done—but instead, doubt and hesitation flickered across Funky’s face. That made no sense to Cyclone. Then again, a lot of things didn’t make sense to Cyclone, including the true purpose of aglets, which a detective friend of his had once assured him were quite sinister.

But then Funky shook his head and scowled. “No. You murdered Winter, who is my friend. That is something I can never forgive, no matter what.”

Paradox lowered his arms. Unless Cyclone’s eyes were playing tricks on him, Paradox seemed almost ... hurt by Funky’s statement. “Is that so? Then you have chosen to perish alongside Winter.”

Paradox raised his hand, but before he could do anything, Lennox the dragon rushed forward. The huge dragon moved faster than Cyclone had ever seen him move before, even faster than Paradox could teleport. Lennox snatched Paradox in his huge, deadly claws and then took off into the air. The wind from his flapping wings nearly sent Cyclone stumbling over the edge of

the roof to the streets of the Underworld City below, but he managed to grab onto the edge at the last second and pull himself back over.

Panting hard, Cyclone looked up. Lennox had already flown a great distance in such a short time. He wouldn't even be visible against the black, underground sky of the cavern in which the Underworld City had been built if not for the golden glow that generated from the dragon like a sun. It was probably Funky's golden football helmet providing the glow, which made Cyclone wish he had a golden football helmet. Cyclone wasn't really into sports except for cricket, but he thought a golden football helmet would be really cool to have.

Despite the distance, Cyclone thought he saw Lennox hurl something—Paradox, most likely—into the air. The small thing flew like a bullet until it struck one of the many stalactites hanging from the cavern's ceiling, the stalactites that provided most of the Underworld's natural lighting in lieu of the sun and stars.

When Paradox crashed into the stalactite, a massive explosion ripped across the cavern roof. The light from the explosion was so bright that it completely banished the darkness on the ceiling, lighting up the entire cavern like the sun itself had descended into the Underworld. It showed the hundreds of thousands—maybe even millions—of stalactites which covered the ceiling of the cavern, their crystalline forms shining so brightly that Cyclone thought he was going to go blind for sure.

But then the light faded away, causing the Underworld to return to its normal level of illumination, and then a few seconds after that shards of crystal began to rain down on Cyclone, the remains of the destroyed stalactite. It was quite beautiful, really, reminding Cy of an old poem he had once written to a girl in fourth grade he had a crush on about how his heart was a crystal and it was going to rain all over her heart like a—

Thunk. Something hard and metal slammed into the back of Cyclone's head hard enough to take a few points off his Health bar.

"Ow!" said Cyclone, rubbing the back of his head. "That hurt! What was that?"

Cyclone looked down when he said that and immediately saw the answer to his question:

It was the smoldering metal faceplate of Paradox.

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Read the rest of *The Player Glitch* [HERE!](#)