

# [CHAPTER ONE]

IT SEEMED LIKE I could never catch a break. Between getting deleted and figuring out how to get 'undeleted,' for want of a better word, I thought that I would be able to take at least a little time off to rest and relax. Capes Online might not have been the real world, but it felt real to me and right now I was running on fumes even with the Stats buff I got from my brother. It didn't help that I just expended all of my Energy to take down an army of man-made monstrosities that looked like they had walked straight off the set of some old-fashioned B-movie horror flick.

Now, not even five minutes after I returned to the main game with my younger brother in tow, I found myself standing face to face with Director Charles Omar, the Director of the Department of Virtual Reality, and the only man in the game who could make my digital life a true living hell.

Good ol' Chuck, as I called him, stood in the snow leftover from my Blizzard attack with his arms crossed in front of his chest, looking comfortable despite the freezing temperatures. His immaculately cut beard, perfectly pressed blue suit, and squeaky clean office shoes made him look like your average office worker drone, but looks were often deceiving in this game and they couldn't be any more deceptive than they were with Department of VR agents.

As an Avatar, Chuck was effectively invincible to all normal attacks and weapons. If I tried to attack him, I wouldn't even be able to touch him, much less land a blow on him. Even worse, Avatars could institute certain restrictions on player characters, such as locking our Level or restricting our movement to a particular geographical location. Or even worse, delete us, which I wouldn't put past Chuck if he deemed it necessary.

My Sidekick, Cyclone, stood in front of me, wielding his Kunai. He looked very different from the last time I saw him, wearing a full suit of Ninjutsu Armor. A quick Scan also showed me that Cyclone's Class had changed from Speedster to Ninja since the last time I saw him, plus he had gained a few levels and had much higher Stats than before. Even with all of these improvements to his character, however, he still stood no chance against Chuck in a fight.

Sally, my girlfriend and fiancée, hid behind me. She was even less useful in a fight than Chuck. She was basically just a Civilian. She did have some kind of Powers of her own, but she seemed unable to use them at will. Even if Sally could fight, I am not sure I would have let her. I couldn't stand the thought of Sally getting hurt or even killed in a fight.

A quick glance over my shoulder showed me my brother, Busker Burn, and his Sidekick, Spiritus. But they weren't in much of a position to fight, either. Both of them had used some of their most powerful Powers recently, which had the side effects of draining them of their Energy and lowering their Stats for a while. Even if they were at full strength, they probably wouldn't have been able to do much against Chuck, if anything at all.

That basically left me and Cyclone as the only ones who could stand against Chuck in a fight. As I had already pointed out, however, the odds were against us. Frankly, I was surprised that Chuck hadn't just decided to delete us all outright and take Sally himself. After all, he had the power to do it.

That was what this stand-off was all about. Sally had originally been in the custody of the Department of VR as their mysterious Test Subject in something called the Infinity Program. I had managed to free her, but we still didn't know anything about the Program or how Sally even

got involved with it. All I knew was that the Department wanted her back. I also knew that I wasn't going to let them lay even one finger on her, not if I could help it.

"You have gone very quiet all of a sudden, Nyle," said Chuck. He tilted his head to the side. "I take it you are considering my offer?"

"The answer is no, Chuck," I said, holding my cracked Ice Daggers before me. "And if you try to take her, I will end you."

Chuck tilted his head to the side, an unimpressed look on his face. "I understand your protectiveness of the Test Subject, but frankly I think you've forgotten exactly what us Avatars can do. Observe."

Chuck snapped his fingers. My Ice Daggers shattered in my hands, making me grunt in surprise and Sally yelp in fear. The Ice Daggers didn't hurt when they exploded, but it was surprising nonetheless.

"And that, as you know, is but the smallest application of the power I command," said Chuck. "With a single thought, I could freeze all of you and take Sally myself. Or delete all of you outright. Given how you just recently escaped the Junkyard, I doubt you or your brother wish to return there again so soon. I take it you aren't very popular with the Junkyard Corps."

My hands balled into fists. "I am not going to give you back Sally. I don't know what you did to her or what you plan on doing to her, but I am not going to give her to you. Ever."

"Forgive me if my memory is incorrect, but I seem to recall you agreed to show me where Sally was after you finished your mission back in the Underworld," said Chuck. "I understand if your promise slipped your mind given what happened afterward, but you always struck me as a man of your word, and yet here you are, telling me that you are going against your word. I hope you only forgot about it, because if you haven't—"

"My memory is fine, Chuck," I said. "It's just that I've changed my mind. I can do that, right? America still has freedom of speech."

Chuck put his sunglasses back over his eyes. "Be that as it may, Winter, that does not change the fact that the only reason I have yet to take Sally by force is because I respected our agreement. Unlike Director Johnson, I try to reason with you Project Second Life participants as much as possible. But if necessary, I am willing to enforce my will with less ... reasonable methods, if you catch my drift."

I understood what he was saying perfectly. Fact was that Chuck had probably been the friendliest and most reasonable Department agent I'd ever met or dealt with. He was basically my only ally within the Department. Under other circumstances, I would agree with him that I might have been treating him too harshly.

But this was Sally we were talking about. She was the love of my life. I had vowed not to lose her again. Even if that meant fighting against the entirety of the Department of VR, that would be fine by me. I was willing to go above and beyond what was necessary to keep Sally safe.

Still, I had to be smart about it. Chuck *did* have the power in this negotiation, after all. He could easily crush me without a second thought. It was time to practice my Negotiation Skill and hope that my Charisma was high enough to make him more likely to let us go, though given how low that particular Stat was, I couldn't say I was very confident about it.

"I get it," I said. "I understand why you want her back. But I can't let you do that. You know why. You're married, aren't you? How would you feel if your wife was held hostage by the same government agency that supposedly protects you, without your knowledge? You would want to free her, right? And *keep* her free?"

Chuck stroked his beard in thought. “True, I would be very upset if my wife was held hostage by some impersonal government agency, especially if it was an agency I worked for. But you must understand that I don’t want Sally back merely to hold her hostage, as you seem to imply. This is a matter of national security. Otherwise, I would be content to let you and Sally spend the rest of your digital lives together. You deserve that much.”

“National security?” I said. “What do you mean by that?”

“The Infinity Program,” Chuck replied. “As I told you at our last meeting, the Infinity Program was beyond top-secret. Only Director Johnson understood exactly what it was about, but he left no records to help us understand the point and purpose of the Program. We only know that it was a Program put in place approximately four years ago at the request of President Renner, President Nelson’s predecessor.”

“President Renner?” said Sally behind me suddenly. She scowled. “Oh, you mean the guy who claimed he *wouldn’t* pass more gun control legislation but did anyway. Glad that idiot got voted out of office. He deserved it.”

Despite the tense situation, I couldn’t help but smile. Sally was a huge political junkie. I, myself, on the other hand, couldn’t care less about political crap. I had spent countless hours listening to Sally rant on about this or that politician or party or law back in the real world, rants that always struck me as unnecessary. Still, the fact that Sally said this was yet another confirmation that she was still the same Sally I knew and fell in love with.

“I will admit I didn’t care much for President Renner, either,” said Chuck, “but unlike other Presidents, he had always been very interested in VR technology and how its advancement will affect not just America, but the whole world. That is why I was not surprised to learn that he was the one who ordered the creation of the Infinity Program.”

“So why not go and ask him what it was about?” I said. “He’s still alive, right? What’s he doing now, playing golf like most ex-prezses do?”

“Probably shmoozing with his lobbyists in his private mansion trying to undermine the rights of American citizens from behind the scenes,” Sally grumbled under her breath. “Like the ‘patriot’ he is.”

“I *would* have asked President Renner about it, but unfortunately, that is no longer possible,” said Chuck. “At one o’clock this morning, President Renner was found dead in his private mansion in Rhode Island by one of his maids.”

I started. “He’s dead? How did he die?”

“The official story is that he committed suicide after a long period of struggling with mental illness,” said Chuck. Then he lowered his voice to a mere whisper. “The truth, however, is that he appears to have been assassinated, though by who and for what reason, we are still trying to determine. No one leaves the White House without making at least a few enemies and President Renner made more than his fair share of political enemies during his time in office.”

“He was one of the *least* popular presidents of all time, so of course he has enemies,” said Sally. But then she caught herself and said, in a voice that wasn’t entirely convincing to me, “But, er, sorry to hear about his death. It sounds very tragic.”

“Not only is it tragic and untimely, but it is also an obstacle to us understanding the truth behind the Infinity Program,” said Chuck with a sigh. “That is why I am asking you to hand over Sally. We believe that all of the relevant files about the Infinity Program are buried somewhere within her memory. If we can only gain access to those files, then we will finally be able to determine what the Infinity Program was.”

“I don’t like all this talk about ‘accessing’ memories,” said Cyclone with a gulp. He touched his forehead unconsciously. “You aren’t going to take, like, a big drill to her forehead and poke her with it, are you?”

“The exact methods we will use to extract that information from Sally is not important,” said Chuck. “What is important is getting her back. As I said, this is a matter of national security. I know how hard this must be for you, Winter, but as the newly-appointed Director of the Department of Virtual Reality, I have no choice but to ask you to return Sally to our custody. Now.”

I now understood why Chuck wanted Sally back. The matters he spoke of sounded very serious. I had to admit I was also curious about the Infinity Program and what role Sally played in it. If it had been started four years ago by President Renner, then Sally might not be the first or only Test Subject to have ever been used in it.

But at the same time, I still didn’t want to let Sally out of my sight. I wanted to keep her right where I could see her. Chuck had not mentioned what the Department would do with Sally *after* they extracted the information from her mind. Would they let her go? Or hold her prisoner? Something told me they would do the latter, no matter how much Chuck might reassure me that they wouldn’t mistreat her.

Yet if I said no, Chuck would take her anyway. He had the power to do so, after all. He could just freeze time, grab Sally, and run. And I wouldn’t even be able to find him again if he didn’t want to be found. I still had the ‘HELP’ button in the corner of my character screen that allowed me to summon him, but something told me that that button wouldn’t be very helpful in rescuing Sally again if I pressed it.

What made this situation even worse was the knowledge that there was nowhere for me to run to in Capes Online. The only place I could go to where the Department couldn’t follow was the Junkyard, but I had no intention of ever setting foot in that place ever again.

Once again, I found myself trapped between a rock and a hard place, a location I seemed to find myself often these days. It made me yearn for simpler times when the worst thing I had to worry about was going to work on Monday morning.

Still, I knew in my heart of hearts what my decision was going to be even before I did it. I stood upright, summoned another set of Ice Daggers, and said, “The answer is still no, Chuck. If you want Sally, come and take her yourself.”

Chuck sighed exasperatedly. “I can’t say your answer surprises me, but it does disappoint me somewhat. Very well. I will do my best to take her while inflicting as little pain on you as possible. Please don’t take what I am about to do personally. I am simply doing what is in the best interests of America. That is all.”

-

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