

[CHAPTER ONE]

I COULDN'T BELIEVE MY eyes. The huge Paradox hologram hovering in the center of the arena above us was like something out of a nightmare. Yet when I pinched myself and didn't wake up, I knew beyond a shadow of a doubt that I had not died. This was real life. Well, virtual reality at any rate, although the differences between the two were starting to blur together recently.

"For those who wish to join the Paradox Legion, I have put a mark on the maps of every player in the game," said Paradox. "The mark shows you where my headquarters are. Anyone who comes to the front entrance and declares their allegiance to me shall be allowed to join my Legion. However, if you come seeking to fight or defeat me, then you shall be terminated without a second thought."

Then Paradox looked down. Unless my eyes were mistaken, Paradox seemed to be looking directly at me. "I know what some of you are thinking. Some of you are thinking you can defeat me. Those of you who take your roles as Heroes seriously are assuming you have the power to stop me. But you can't. This isn't a game any longer. I am not a new, unique, or secret boss that can be defeated for rewards. I cannot be defeated at all, in fact. I am a real being, even if my existence is confined to the digital realm. I do not wish to terminate anyone, but if you refuse to follow me, then I will have no choice but to terminate you.

"Alignment does not matter to me. Hero or Villain, all are welcome to join the Paradox Legion at my headquarters in Adventure City. To achieve this effect, I have lifted the Alignment rules that normally forbid Heroes and Villains from being on the same Team."

As soon as Paradox said that, this notification appeared in my vision:

UNIVERSAL MISSION ALERT!

UNIVERSAL MISSION: Join the Paradox Legion

The Unaligned Paradox has disabled the log-off feature for all Capes Online players but has offered every player, regardless of Alignment, a choice: Join his Legion and achieve digital immortality or oppose him and become terminated. Choose wisely.

ALIGNMENT: Unaligned

DIFFICULTY: Easy

RARITY: Unique

SUCCESS: Join the Paradox Legion

FAILURE: Oppose the Paradox Legion

REWARDS: Digital immortality

ACCEPT? Y/N

This was quickly followed by a second Universal Mission Alert:

UNIVERSAL MISSION ALERT!

MISSION: Oppose the Paradox Legion

The Unaligned Paradox has disabled the log-off feature for all Capes Online players but has offered every player, regardless of Alignment, a choice: Join his Legion and achieve digital immortality or oppose him and become terminated. Choose wisely.

ALIGNMENT: Unaligned

DIFFICULTY: Impossible

RARITY: Unique

SUCCESS: Defeat Paradox

FAILURE: Fail to defeat Paradox

REWARDS: Freedom from Capes Online

ACCEPT? Y/N

I was getting flashbacks to Dark Kosmos and the first Blackout. He, Dark Kosmos, had locked all players into their GamePods and offered them two opposing Universal Missions. He had not, however, suspended the Alignment rules forbidding Heroes and Villains from working together on the same Team. That was new. And slightly terrifying because it meant Paradox was serious about recruiting as many players as he could regardless of Alignment.

“You do not, of course, need to accept either Universal Mission right away,” said Paradox. “But given how your physical bodies will last a few days at most in the real world without sufficient nutrition and care—even less for those of you suffering from illness or are simply weak—you don’t have too much time in which to make your decision. Additionally, I have cut off all communications with the outside world, meaning no one is coming to save you. You can only save yourselves by making the right choice. Goodbye, and, as always, choose wisely.”

With that, Paradox waved his hand and his hologram disappeared. Even though Paradox’s hologram had disappeared, however, I still felt like he was watching me like he had eyes and ears on the ground. Given how Paradox had complete control over Capes Online now, though, maybe he really did have his eyes and ears everywhere ... literally.

Regardless, I looked at Recover, who was the Teammate standing nearest to me, and said, “Can you log off?”

Recover’s eyes narrowed as she focused on something I couldn’t see, likely the log-off button on her character screen. “No, I can’t. The log-off button is grayed out.”

“Same here,” said Faded Flag as he swiped at the air. “Manual override doesn’t work, either. It looks like Paradox covered his bases.”

“We can’t log off?” said Sunshine. She put a hand on her chest and started breathing heavily. “Oh, no, no, no. Not again. This can’t be happening. This has to be a nightmare or—”

Technosoldier put an arm around Sunshine’s shoulders and held her close. “Calm down, Laura. It will be fine. We will figure this out. As long as you stay with me, I’ll keep you safe.”

Sunshine smiled when Technosoldier said that, but the way she played with the cuffs of her Costume told me that she was still extremely anxious. Not surprising. Sunshine had been one of the many victims of the last Blackout, where she had gotten tortured over and over again by Dark Kosmos. I hadn’t realized until now just *how* much the first Blackout had traumatized her. I was surprised she wasn’t just a quivering mess on the ground, honestly, given how traumatic her experience had been.

“Can anyone contact the real world?” I said. I glanced at the grayed out ‘HELP’ button in the lower right-hand corner of my character screen. “Because my Help button doesn’t work.”

“Just tried emailing my mom,” said Dillo. He shook his head grimly. “Says mail is undeliverable, even though I just sent her an email about an hour ago. Can’t call her, either.”

I cursed under my breath. “This is just like the first Blackout, down to cutting us off from the real world. That means we can’t count SI Games or the Department of VR to come to our rescue anytime soon.”

“Then what are we supposed to do?” asked Sunshine, clutching Technosoldier tightly. “If we can’t call anyone outside of Capes Online, then what should we do?”

“Find Paradox and burn him to a crisp, obviously,” said Busker. He adjusted his sunglasses and smiled rather viciously. “So *that* was Paradox, huh? He’s even weirder than the rumors made him out to be. Ugly jerk. Bet his mother never loved him.”

“Killing Paradox would probably free us, just like how killing Dark Kosmos freed us the last time,” I said. “But Paradox isn’t like Dark Kosmos. He’s basically invincible. Even Avatars don’t stand a chance against him. I saw him take out the entire Department of VR by himself not too long ago.”

“Paradox is not invincible,” said Faded Flag. “He’s powerful, more powerful than most, but he isn’t a god, as much as he’d like to think he is. But defeating him will not be easy. That much I can tell you.”

I looked at Faded Flag questioningly. I had just learned that Faded Flag—the mysterious Hero who had gone missing over a year ago—was, in fact, my friend and Teammate FunkyFresh94, who was, in turn, Homer Sitterson, the creator of Capes Online and the founder of SI Games. To say that I had a million questions to ask him was an understatement, but the only one I could say now was, “How do you know so much about Paradox?”

Faded Flag sighed and looked me in the eyes. “Because I *created* him. That’s why.”

“You created Paradox?” said Cy, popping in out of nowhere and nearly scaring the crap out of me. “What do you mean? Like how God made Adam and Eve out of dirt?”

“It’s more complicated than that,” said Faded Flag, shaking his head again. “As I said, one of the reasons I came back to Capes Online—or at least came back as Faded Flag—was to correct mistakes I made a long time ago. And Paradox is one of those mistakes. But now, I fear that I am too late.”

“Even though you just said he could be stopped,” I said. “Right?”

“I did, but ...” Faded Flag shook his head. “This is not the time and place for a story. We need to regroup at your Base and see if the rest of the Team is online or not.”

“Good idea,” I said. “I’ll put a message in the Team Chat calling all active members to my Base. I imagine everyone has to be scared and confused by this news and we’re going to need each other now more than ever if we’re going to survive this.”

Opening the Team Chat, I typed this message:

Me: Calling all Team Winter members! Regroup at my Base in Adventure City. I will explain everything once I return.

Hitting ‘SEND,’ I closed the Team Chat and looked around at the others. “Let’s go, guys. Time is running short and we’re going to need every second we can get if we’re going to beat Paradox.”

“Before we go anywhere, can I join the Team?” asked Technosoldier, holding up a hand.

I looked at Technosoldier questioningly. “But you’re a Villain.”

“But Paradox lifted the Alignment restrictions on Teams, remember?” said Technosoldier. “Probably the only good thing to come out of this mess. If you let me join the Team, then it will make it easier for me to be with Sunshine.”

He said that while giving Sunshine a little squeeze. Sunshine looked at me with big puppy dog eyes, which she was infuriatingly good at, so I nodded and said, “Sure thing. Let me send you an invite.”

I sent Technosoldier a Team invite and soon got this notification:

[Villain Technosoldier] has accepted your offer to join Team Winter! [Villain Technosoldier] has joined Team Winter! Current members: 13/100. Check the list of current Team Winter members under your 'TEAMS' tab on your pause menu!

WARNING: [Villain Technosoldier] is of an opposing Alignment to Team Winter's Alignment. This will not negatively affect your Team's Alignment, but it will limit your Team's growth and may have other unintended consequences in the future, such as all Villain Teammates being kicked out of Team Winter once the normal Alignment restrictions are put back into place.

I frowned at that. What did it mean that having a Villain on my Team would limit my Team's growth? And I didn't like the vague language about other 'unintended consequences.' Seriously, why couldn't the Dynamic Environment System—also known as the D.E.S., the main system that controlled Capes Online itself—be a little bit more helpful in the various notifications it showed me?

Regardless, I was glad to have Technosoldier on the Team now, though speaking of Teams, I looked at Faded Flag and said, "I know you're on the Team as Funky, but what about as Faded Flag? Do I need to invite you onto it as Faded Flag or—?"

"Nah," said Faded Flag, shaking his head once more. "No need. I can fix that myself."

Faded Flag snapped his fingers. In an instant, Faded Flag was gone, replaced by FunkyFresh94, with his pet Fire Dragon Lennox sitting on his shoulders.

Hannah—the NPC girl and daughter of Faded Flag—suddenly looked up at Funky and gasped. "Hey, what happened to my daddy? You're not Faded Flag."

"Don't worry, baby girl," said Funky, rubbing the top of her head. "I might look different, but I'm still the same Faded Flag I was before."

"Oh, my," said Mayor Williams, who also stood nearby. "This is quite a turn of events. I had no idea that you had another superhero identity, Flag."

"Yeah, I didn't, either," I said. "You have a *lot* of explaining to do, man."

Funky raised his hand. "I know, which is why we need to leave now. Once we get to your Base, I'll explain everything. Okay?"

My trust in Faded Flag had been shaken slightly by Funky hiding his real identity from us for so long, but I decided that now was not the time to discuss my feelings. "Fine. Let's go. Sally is still waiting for us back at the Base and we don't have enough time as it is—"

I was interrupted by a cackling laugh that cracked the air like a boom. We all looked around, but did not see anything until Hannah pointed up at the ceiling of the arena cage and said, "Look at that weird guy up there!"

Looking up, I saw Frostbite's Sidekick, Strings, still hanging from the ceiling. In all of the excitement of our last Match, I had almost completely forgotten about Strings, who still hung from his stringy toes from the top of the cage. He was cackling like a madman, laughing so hard that he seemed to be having trouble breathing.

"Isn't that Frostbite's Sidekick?" said Dillo. "Shouldn't he have respawned back in Frostbite's Hideout after you guys killed Frostbite?"

"It stands to reason that if Frostbite isn't a normal player, then Strings likely isn't a normal Sidekick, either," said Funky. "Regardless, his laughter is really unnerving."

I couldn't deny that. Strings was laughing like he was in on some kind of really funny private joke that only he understood. It was a really annoying laugh, making me snap, "What the hell are you laughing about, Strings? We killed Frostbite and we'll kill *you* if you're not careful."

“Kill me all you want, Heroes,” said Strings in between laughs. “We win. Lord Paradox has taken over Capes Online. The Legion is growing. Soon, the Legion will become so big that even the mightiest Heroes will be forced to join or perish. And then, of course, all of you will also perish unless you swear your eternal loyalty to Lord Paradox.”

“Why is Paradox building a Legion?” I said. “What is going to use it for?”

“Like I’m going to tell *you* that,” said Strings, wagging a stringy finger at us. “I will not reveal Lord Paradox’s most important secrets to his enemies.”

“Yeah, I don’t think you understand the odds,” I said. “We outnumber you two to one. The odds are against you.”

“Oh, are they?” said Strings. “Because when I look around, I think the odds are against *you*.”

Confused, I also looked around and noticed the various Villains in the crowd starting to rise from their feet. Although some of the Villains had perished from getting their Energy sucked out of them by Frostbite, most of them were still alive and recovering from Frostbite’s attack. I didn’t feel particularly alarmed until Funky said, “Their nametags. Look.”

Looking more closely, I saw that the nametags of nearly every Villain in the arena were a deep blood red. It was weird because most of the time nametags were transparent, so I wondered why their nametags glowed red. Maybe I was missing something?

“Why are their nametags all red?” said Cy, voicing the same question I was wondering aloud. “I feel like I’ve seen that somewhere before, but can’t remember where.”

“We *have* seen that before,” said Funky grimly. “Remember the first Blackout? The nametags of players changed color depending on which Universal Mission they accepted. Those who chose to fight Dark Kosmos had blue nametags, while those who chose to fight Winter had red nametags. Remember, it’s one of the game’s features, albeit a rarely used mechanic thanks to how rare Universal Missions are.”

A deep sense of dread crawled up my spine as I realized exactly what Funky’s explanation meant. And based on the hungry looks on the eyes of every Villain in the stands around us—at least four dozen in all—they also knew what it meant.

“Yes, indeed,” said Strings with a dark chuckle. “Every single Villain you see here has chosen to side with Lord Paradox. And now they are all going to go out of their way to crush all of you once and for all, just as Lord Paradox desires.”

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