

CHAPTER ONE

THE SECOND THAT Joseph Maxwell—better known in-game as Busker Burn—stepped off the bus to Far Town, he knew something was wrong.

The small town of Far Town, his original starting area in-game, looked about the same as usual. A small, fairly rural town with a single red stoplight, a tiny grocery store that was currently closed, and a post office not too far from the bus stop. The hot sun overhead shone as brightly as ever, the heat reminding him of Texas, although as a Fire Type, Busker actually enjoyed the heat. The scent of freshly-mowed grass near the post office entered his nostrils, causing him to breathe it in deeply.

If I didn't know Capes Online was just a game, I would have thought this was real life, Busker thought. He glanced at his body, however, and frowned. *Although when you think about it, this basically is 'real life' for me, now that I no longer have a physical body. Still feels weird.*

Even so, Busker thought something seemed *off* about Far Town. He didn't see any NPCs or players on the streets like he usually did. Granted, Far Town had a much lower population than, say, Adventure City, for example, but you could still usually count on seeing a good number of newbies spawning here or walking the streets of Far Town seeking out their tutorial NPCs whose job was to introduce and explain the game world and mechanics to new players.

Yet the streets were empty, making Far Town look like a ghost town.

Then again, I can't imagine that the Blackout War has particularly helped Capes Online's player base, Busker thought, fingering one of the buttons on his jeans. *As much as I love this game, I'd probably log off forever, too, if I could. The bus ride here was pretty empty as well.*

A soft sneeze behind him made Busker look over his shoulder. A hooded spirit carrying a scythe hovered behind him, wiping her 'nose' with one hand while clutching her weapon in one hand. The Synth Group Bus had already sped off, the large hover vehicle barely a speck in the distance down one of Far Town's rural roads.

"You okay, girl?" said Busker, turning to face his Sidekick.

"Allergies," said Busker's Sidekick, Spiritus. She sounded slightly congested. "I wish we didn't have to come back here. All this Johnson grass is making my allergies bad again."

Busker chuckled. Although Spiritus might look like the grim reaper, she was actually his loyal and faithful Sidekick with the Anti-Hero Alignment just like him. "Yeah, but how else am I supposed to move all of my stuff from my Base here to our new Adventure City Base?"

"You do realize that the Winter League has several thousand members, right?" said Spiritus. "I imagine that most of them would have been more than happy to help the famous Busker Burn move to Adventure City."

Busker chuckled again. "Most of the Leaguers have logged off and I'm not sure when they will log back on. And you know me. I just can't wait. Nyle can tell you all about that."

Spiritus sighed. "If you insist. I suppose we should make this quick."

"Agreed," Busker said with a nod. He turned around again and lifted one foot off the ground. "Although we've got all the time in the world, we've also got no time to lose. Let's go!"

Busker took one step forward ... and an energy cage exploded into existence around him with a deafening *bang*.

Startled, Busker took a step back and looked around at the cage in which he now found himself. It was approximately eight by eight feet and colored a deadly pink color that made Busker feel unsafe.

"Busker!" said Spiritus in surprise, holding out a hand toward him. "Are you all right? Do you need help?"

"Nah, Spiritus," said Busker. He grinned. "I think I can get out of this on my own."

Busker pulled his fiery guitar off his back and, strumming the strings a couple of times, considered which Power he wanted to use to free himself. As a Level 80 Anti-Hero, Busker had a wide variety of Powers and Skills at his command that he had developed over the years. He considered using one of his Ultimate Powers but decided that would be too wasteful. A simple Ka-Boom!, however, should do the trick.

Raising his hand, Busker was just about to start rocking out when beams of energy lanced out from the bars and struck his back and chest. A sudden weakness fell over Busker, causing him to drop his Phoenix Ax onto the ground and collapse to his hands and knees. It felt like all of the strength had been sapped from his bones, which was confirmed a second later when a notification popped up in his view:

DEBUFF ADDED: Weakening. -90% Strength, Stamina, and Agility. Duration: Unknown.

“Duration unknown?” Busker said, his voice sounding weak even to his ears. “What the hell—?”

“Sir, I’ll get you out,” said Spiritus. She reached out toward the cage with one hand again. “I can Phase through the bars and—”

Spiritus was interrupted when she touched the bars and screamed in pain. Flashing pink energy flowed from the bars into Spiritus’ body. Her robes even began to smoke as her body temperature shot up. She finally wrenched her hand free from the bars, only to immediately collapse onto the ground, her body not even twitching, her scythe now sitting by her side.

Another notification appeared in Busker’s vision:

[SIDEKICK SPIRITUS] is Unconscious!

It was a relief that Spiritus hadn’t died, but he noticed that her Health had dropped to sub-10%. That was impressive, given how she was a Level 40 Sidekick and had a ridiculously high amount of Health already. It made him wonder exactly what this cage was made out of. In all his years playing Capes Online, Busker had never seen anything like this before.

But then another pulse went through Busker, causing him to groan at the spike of pain. He sometimes wished that Capes Online wasn’t so realistic, especially when it came to pain. Then again, that was probably his own fault for choosing the Real Pain option when he first started playing a long time ago. It might have meant he maximized his EXP gains, but it also meant that he felt pain more acutely than other players.

Don’t give up, Busker, Busker told himself. Nyle wouldn’t give up if he was in this situation and he’s way lower-leveled than you.

Taking a deep breath, Busker tried to stand. He got about halfway up before another spasm of pain hit him and he fell back down to his hands and knees. His body felt like every nerve was being twisted at once, easily some of the worst pain he’d felt in his life.

“You won’t be getting up that easily, I’m afraid, Busker Burn,” said a familiar manic British voice before him. “Miss PopRocks made sure to get the highest quality Energy Cage that credits can buy. Even a player at your Level is rendered as helpless as a newborn babe once captured within the Energy Cage.”

Gasping for breath, Busker looked up, although even that simple motion sent spasms of pain through his neck and body.

Through a gap in the bars of his cage, Busker saw a pale-faced British man with long, dirty dreads, a ripped t-shirt with the name of the famous punk band Dead Rats on his chest, and a knife holstered at his side. Hovering over his head was the nametag [SIDEKICK MANIA], although Busker would have identified him even without his nametag.

“Mania?” said Busker. “What ... what are you doing here? And where’s PopRocks? You mentioned her.”

“Questions, questions,” Mania observed. “Miss PopRocks is right. You ask way too many.”

Mania snapped his fingers. The Energy Cage pulsed again and Busker screamed as his pain worsened. He managed to keep his head up, however, staring at Mania in confusion and disbelief.

“I don’t understand,” said Busker, his voice even weaker than ever. “Why ... what is this?”

“A trap,” said Mania, “although one that we wouldn’t have been able to set ourselves if not for our source’s information that you were coming back to Far Town.”

Busker’s eyes widened. “Who told you that? No one other than my brother knows where I am.”

Mania chuckled. “That’s our—and by our, I mean Miss PopRocks’—secret. You, on the other hand, have far more important things to worry about. Such as your life.”

Another pulse and more pain. At this point, Busker was barely able to remain conscious. Despite his full Energy bar, Busker doubted he’d be able to use any of his Powers even if he hadn’t been imprisoned in the Energy Cage.

Even so, Busker just smirked. “My life, huh? You do realize that if you kill me, I’ll just respawn in my Base, right? I mean, that would mean losing half of my money and all of my current EXP, but that’s where I was going anyway, and I ain’t afraid to grind.”

Mania pursed his lips. “I should be more ... *precise*. I don’t mean ‘kill’ as in sending you back to your Base. I mean termination.”

Fear spiked through Busker’s heart when Mania said that. ‘Termination’ was the term for players getting killed in real life as well as in-game. Although supposedly impossible, Busker had seen it happen too much over the past several months to dismiss it as something cooked up by overly zealous conspiracy theorists.

That was why Busker felt cold despite his Fire Type. “You wouldn’t.”

“But I would,” said Mania. “That is why Miss PopRocks sent me. She is taking advantage of the current climate in Capes Online to take out a particular threat to her streaming career.”

Busker gulped. He knew who ‘Miss PopRocks’ was. Like him, she was a famous Capes Online streamer, well-known for her, er, ‘adult’ streams and attire. She was also a spoiled brat and hyper-competitive to a fault, seeing Busker as her top rival. It had been a while since Busker had last heard her name or even thought about her, but that’s why he recognized Mania, who was PopRocks’ Sidekick.

“I know Amy doesn’t like me, but this is too far even for her,” said Busker. “I’m not just an NPC. I’m a person. Terminating me is basically murder. If the government finds out about this—”

“But they won’t,” Mania replied. He gestured at the empty streets of Far Town. “Since the end of the Blackout War, most of the Heroes and Villains in Far Town have logged off permanently. Most of the Civilians have shuttered their doors, too, for fear of the Glitchlings and rogue players who wander the world now. There’s no one to witness what I am about to do to you, as I plan to delete your Sidekick, too.”

Busker took in a deep breath, fighting against the unconsciousness threatening to knock him out. “But what if the AI is recording this?”

Mania smiled. “Why do you think PopRocks sent *me* to terminate you, rather than come herself? Plausible deniability. I already have a reputation for being a ... rogue ‘NPC,’ as you Heroes sometimes call us. If anyone finds out that I terminated you ... well, PopRocks can always pretend that I got glitched. Given how many people believe Capes Online to be glitched already, I am sure that most people would be willing to believe that.”

Terror filled Busker like nothing else. His mind was flashing back to the time he got deleted and ended up in the Junkyard, only termination was even worse than deletion. At least with deletion, there was a chance of your data being restored, assuming you avoided getting recycled in the Junkyard.

With termination, though?

There was no respawning or restoring from that.

Busker immediately pulled up the League Chat and attempted to send a message to his brother, only to get this error message:

ERROR. Capes Online Messaging System is currently down for maintenance. Please try again later.

“Trying to send a message for help?” Mania said. He laughed. “It won’t work. Even if the messaging system hadn’t been down, the Energy Cage already blocks all messages into and out of the Cage. So you can’t call on the help of your brother Winter or any of the other members of your pathetic League.”

Doing his best to remain calm, Busker said, “I think you’re bluffing. Terminating a player isn’t as easy as deletion. You need special equipment to do it.”

“Such as this?” said Mania.

He pulled out a shiny silver disk from his pocket. It was about the size of one of Dad’s old-fashioned CDs, but with a blood-red capital ‘T’ etched into the surface. Mania flipped the disk around for Busker to see, although Busker wasn’t quite sure what he was looking at.

“What is that?” said Busker.

Mania waved the disk. “This? A new weapon created by the same source who tipped Miss PopRocks and me off to your arrival in Far Town. It’s an experimental Termination Disk which, if applied to the skin of a player, will terminate said player. Especially if the player in question does not have a physical body outside of the game world.”

Busker gulped. That reminded Busker of the Terminator sword that belonged to Atmosfear, his brother’s archenemy. Only Atmosfear’s weapon had been gifted to him by a living glitch, so Busker had no idea where Mania had gotten his from. Was there someone else in Capes Online developing weapons that could terminate players? If so, who and why?

Not that Busker had much time to ponder those questions, though. Mania stepped forward and, with a wave of his hand, caused the front bars of the Cage to disappear, allowing Mania to enter the Cage with Busker.

Busker normally would have taken advantage of that moment to escape, but he was still too weak. Mania grabbed his chin and forced his head up, forcing Busker to look directly into Mania’s manic eyes.

Holding the silver disk in his right hand, Mania said, in a dangerously soft voice, “Don’t cry, Busker Burn. Because what I am about to do next will hurt like the dickens.”

With that, Mania slammed the disk again Busker’s forehead and Busker screamed as his body was destroyed.

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