

# CHAPTER ONE

**J**OSEPH MAXWELL—BETTER known as Busker Burn, lead singer and guitarist of The Digitals and a rising star in the Capes Online streaming community—woke up with a start at the sound of gunfire in his ears. Waking up, however, caused pain to spike through Busker’s back and side. Clutching his side and back, Busker wasn’t quite sure why he hurt so much until a notification popped up in his view:

*Debuff added: Bleeding. -4 HP/2 seconds. Duration: 30 seconds.*

“Huh?” Busker said under his breath, reading the notification again, finding it hard to understand. He felt sticky blood leaking out of his side and back, but didn’t understand why he was having so much trouble understanding the notification.

That is, until he noticed another notification that must have popped up when he got knocked out. Pulling the notification up, Busker read:

*Debuff added: Concussion. -10% Intelligence, Agility, and Dexterity. Duration: 1 minute.*

Busker grimaced. That explained it. Not only was he bleeding out—for reasons he didn’t know or understand—but he was also suffering from a Concussion. That explained why he felt dimmer and slower than normal.

*But why am I bleeding and suffering from a concussion? Busker thought, furrowing his eyebrows. And why is the air so smoky?*

More loud gunfire caused Busker to instinctively curl into a fetal position, followed by screams of pain that were abruptly cut off. He couldn’t tell who was shooting at who, but when the gunfire died down slightly, Busker raised his head to see if he could get a look at his surroundings.

From what he could see, Busker lay on the side of the highway in the middle of nowhere. Well, it wasn’t *quite* the middle of nowhere. In the distance, under the darkness of the night, he could see a small town, the lights standing out brightly in the shadows. He estimated that the town was about two or three miles away, although he couldn’t tell what the town was. It certainly wasn’t Far Town, that was for sure.

But Busker would worry about that later. To his right, lying flat on its side, was what appeared to be a huge tour bus, like the kind that touring musicians and bands use. It was hard to make out many details in the darkness, but it looked like it had crashed. Smoke rose from the bus’ engine, while most of the windows appeared to have been busted out or heavily cracked. A stench of asphalt, burnt glass, and smoke entered Busker’s nostrils. Busker also tasted gravel in his mouth, which he spat out as quickly as he could.

*Whose tour bus is this? Busker thought. And where the heck is everyone?*

More gunfire suddenly peppered the air, but Busker thought he could pinpoint the gunfire coming from the other side of the bus now. It sounded like a war zone behind the bus and Busker still had no idea who was fighting who or why.

Busker put a hand on his head, feeling a terrible headache coming on. *Think, dude. Looks like you were riding this bus when it crashed. Try to remember how you got here.*

Unfortunately, the Concussion debuff seemed to be hampering his memory as well as his Stats. It was another drawback to being a digital being, that is, a human being who had their mind and consciousness downloaded directly into Capes Online. It meant that debuffs hurt Busker worse than other players playing at similar difficulty levels, which was part of the reason why Busker sometimes missed his physical body, despite knowing that it was impossible to return to it. Having a physical body would mean he could just log off and not have to deal with the pain or debuffs that caused him a lot of trouble in Capes Online.

Shaking his head, Busker forced himself to sit up. He decided that if he couldn't remember how he got here or where the other Digitals were, then he'd just get up and start looking. He'd try to avoid the gunfire, of course, but he suspected that his Teammates were probably fighting off whoever had attacked them.

Even that simple motion sent waves of pain shooting up his spine, however. He leaned on his arms, his palms digging into the harsh asphalt of the road. Dizziness threatened to overtake him if he tried to stand up. The constant bleeding wasn't helping, either, as he could feel his blood sticking to the rough road underneath his hands.

Another round of gunfire went off and then someone ran around the side of the tour bus and came to a stop. The figure wore dark clothing, which helped him blend in with the night somewhat, although for some reason he was wearing a cowboy hat on top of his head and a bandanna around his mouth.

Although the figure's details were hard to see, Busker could definitely see that the figure held a gun. And he didn't look friendly.

"Ah!" said the silhouette in a heavy Mexican-accented voice. "The target!"

Busker didn't like being called a 'target,' especially by a stranger with a gun. So Busker tried to get up, only for his concussion to cause him to stagger and fall over onto his side.

The silhouette, however, rushed over and kicked him in the side. Busker rolled over onto his back, his bleeding side wound spiking with pain from the blow. It was enough to rock Busker's world and make him wish he had never woken up at all.

But now that the silhouette was closer, Busker could see him a little better. He was clearly a Mexican man, probably in his thirties. He wore a black cowboy get up with a strange star attached to his vest that reminded him of a sheriff's badge. Hovering above his head, the nametag [ROAD BANDITO] could be seen, which meant that this guy was an NPC, most likely.

Not that that made him any less deadly, though, especially when the Bandito pointed his gun at Busker.

"Time to die, Anti-Hero," said the Bandito. "Once you are dead, I'll take that guitar of yours and sell it for more money than I know what to do—"

The Bandito never got to finish his sentence because a sharp blade cut through his neck, sending his head flying off his body somewhere into the darkness beyond Busker's vision. The Bandito's body collapsed and disappeared like all dead NPCs did, revealing a ghostly, grim reaper-like figure hovering before him, her scythe dripping with the Bandito's blood.

Although the hovering figure's form might have been intimidating to someone who didn't know her, Busker's face burst into a smile when he saw her. "Spiritus! Glad to see you. That Bandito guy almost got me."

"I know," said Spiritus, who was Busker's Sidekick. She peered at him more closely and grimaced. "Good God, you look terrible. I knew you got thrown out of the Bus, but dang."

Spiritus floated down next to Busker and handed him a Health Drink, which Busker accepted without question. The cherry-flavored soda felt great on his parched lips, washing away the taste of blood and gravel in his mouth.

Wiping his lips, Busker looked at Spiritus and said, "Thanks for the drink, but what the heck happened? Where are we and where is everyone else?"

Spiritus' eye holes widened in shock. "You mean you genuinely don't remember? You must be in even worse shape than I thought."

Busker rubbed the back of his head, feeling dirt and blood caked into his mohawk. "I guess I must have hit my head really hard or something, because yeah, I don't remember a thing."

Spiritus' bony teeth chattered. "This is not good. I thought you might be dead, but losing your memory is even worse."

"Why?" said Busker, tossing away the empty Health drink bottle. "Who attacked us?"

"I'll explain in a bit," said Spiritus, hovering through the air. "Right now, we need to—"

The sound of a gunshot pierced the air and a bullet hole suddenly appeared in Spiritus' chest. Spiritus gasped and collapsed onto the ground, clutching her bleeding heart. Busker could see that Spiritus was losing Health and fast, which was bad because her overall Health was much lower than his.

Getting onto his hands and knees, Busker crawled over to Spiritus and said, "Spiritus, hey! Can you hear me? Spiritus, please—"

"Don't get any closer to the Sidekick and I won't have to kill you, too," said a dark, British-accented voice from the shadows.

From out of the shadows just beyond Busker's line of sight stepped a man seated atop a positively demonic-looking horse. The horse snorted, pawing the ground with its front hooves, its dead white eyes glowing unnaturally bright in the shadows. The stench of death wafted off the horse's body, which Busker could smell even from here. Its fur looked rough and wild, like it had been partially buried for years, its ribcage showing through its thin skin.

Seated atop the horse was a man wearing black leather clothing. Two long, curved horns curled out from his forehead, giving him a ram-like appearance. Demonic wings were folded up against his back, while his huge, yet thin hands clutched the horse's reins tightly. What looked like a black sword was sheathed at his side, while his unnaturally pale face made him look even more ghostly than Spiritus. The nametag [VILLAIN+ DARKHOLD] hovered over his head, illuminated by blood-red lighting that added to his demonic appearance.

Busker gulped. "I know who you are. You're Darkhold."

Darkhold smiled in a satisfied way. "I see that my reputation precedes me. And I know who you are, Busker Burn, lead singer and guitarist for The Digitals. A pleasure to meet you ... even if this is may be our last, as well as first, meeting."

Seeing Darkhold sparked a memory in Busker's mind. Combined with the healing properties of the Health Drink that Spiritus had given Busker, he now remembered the sequence of events leading up to this moment.

Although he kind of wished he didn't because remembering what came before wasn't going to help either him or Spiritus survive Darkhold's power ...

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