

CHAPTER ONE

WITH THE HARSH stage lights beating down on him like the rays of the sun, Busker Burn raised his guitar pick into the air and brought it down in one final swift dive-bomb. The sound exploded from the speakers on both sides of the stage, so loud that it probably would have rendered him deaf in real life. A loud hiss and crash behind him indicated that Jumpeteer, the drummer, had finished with a bang, while the sound of banging on the keyboard told him that Hairdon't, the keyboardist, was just about done with hers. A final riff from Inspector, the bassist, closed them out, softer than Busker's dive-bomb, but still quite loud.

The audience—tens of thousands of players, mostly Hero Alignment, sitting in the stands around them—screamed in excitement. Their collective screams were even louder than the music created by The Digitals. Holographic signboards containing phrases like 'WE HEART U BUSKER' and 'DIGITALS ROCK' flickered above the heads of hundreds of concert-goers, while others hopped up and down in their seats, and more than a few shouted back how much they loved the band. Transparent holo-cams zipped and hovered through the air, livestreaming the band's performance for the other hundred thousand or so fans watching from home or in the real world.

From Busker's HUD, he could see hundreds of positive comments being posted per minute, moving too fast for him to read. It made him grateful that SI Games, the company that built and maintained Capes Online, had hired moderators to keep up with the chat. Although Busker liked to think of himself as a decent multi-tasker, he couldn't rock out and respond to the hundreds of comments and likes that their livestreams usually got at the same time.

Wiping the sweat off his brow, Busker pulled the red-tipped microphone off of the stand in front of him and stepped forward. Although his Fire Shades made his vision slightly dimmer than normal, coloring everything with a crimson tinge, Busker had no trouble at all with looking out at the almost uncountable number of fans still screaming and shouting the names of him and the others in the band.

Waving a hand, Busker said, his voice amplified to a ridiculous degree by the microphone, "Thank you, thank you, everyone! To both the fans who could make it in-person tonight and to the fans who watched over one of our livestreams, thank you! None of this would even be possible without the continued support of our awesome fans and viewers. You guys rock!"

The crowd exploded again, shouting happily at Busker, although Busker noticed that their screams were significantly quieter again. A ping in his ear caused him to glance at a message he received from someone, which read:

Hey—

I turned up the volume for the microphone so you can speak over the crowd. Thought you might need it.

Tech Spec

Busker smiled. Tech Spec was not only his friend from high school, but also the official sound engineer for The Digitals. Tech Spec was highly methodical in his work, but also nimble enough to respond to improvise. It made Busker glad that he had managed to negotiate for Tech Spec as their sound engineer when he signed that initial contract with SI Games to play concerts for them and invited him to join the band so Tech Spec would be in on their group chat.

Looking at the audience again, Busker said, "Okay, everyone! Thanks again for attending our performance. You can buy merch at any of the tables on the way out or go to the Capes Online Bulletin Board to find out the time, date, and location of our next concert! We're all so grateful for your support that we just can't say it enough. Right, guys?"

Busker looked over his shoulder at the other Digitals. Inspector, the ghostly detective, stood a few feet away from him, his transparent features partially obscured by his hat. As usual, he wasn't smiling, although he did nod once to show his appreciation for the fans. That was a relief. Out of all of The Digitals, Inspector was the one who seemed to have the hardest time adjusting to their newfound fame and struggled to interact with the fans in a way that wasn't creepy or awkward. Busker had only recently managed to convince Inspector to just thank any fans who sent him messages or fanmail.

Inspector's subdued acknowledgment was a sharp contrast to Hairdon't, the keyboardist. She stood behind her keyboard, which went up to her waist, and waved enthusiastically and happily at the audience. Her ridiculously long blonde hair, which grew all the way past her waist down to the floor, shone brilliantly under the warm spotlights, going well with her skintight white spandex costume that had a scissor-like design on the front. She even blew kisses to the audience, which didn't surprise Busker. Despite her hesitancy about becoming famous, Hairdon't had adapted well to fame since their first concert and now probably had more fan engagement than any of them. It helped that she had also started a hair and fashion-focused HeroTV channel, which had the added bonus of bringing over people who loved her fashion advice into The Digitals' collective fanbase.

Then Busker's eyes slipped over to Jump, the drummer. Jump was the youngest of The Digitals, not even out of high school yet. Despite that, he had some serious talent for drumming and was easily the most enthusiastic and friendly of the bunch. Like Hairdon't, Jump had his own streaming channel, mostly to show off the fights and adventures that he got into, although sometimes he would do drumming streams. Busker fully expected Jump to do his usual impromptu drummer solo, which was always a fan pleaser.

That was why Busker was confused at Jump's stoic expression. Jump was as still as a statue, holding both of his drummer sticks in his hands unnaturally straight. He looked like someone had hit the pause button on him. But when Busker looked into his eyes, he thought he caught a glimpse of conflict, as if Jump was fighting with himself.

Busker was not the only one who had noticed Jump's unnatural stillness. Hairdon't, who stood nearest him behind her keyboard, looked at Jump with confusion and concern. Inspector, meanwhile, eyed Jump with skepticism, like he thought Jump was trying to pull a prank on them and he was waiting for the inevitable fallout.

Yet Jump still did not move. He just sat there behind the drums, droplets of sweat slowly making their way down his face and neck into his Costume, his hands gripping his drumsticks firmly. His sightless, yet conflicted, gaze stared straight ahead, resembling a deer caught in headlights more than anything. His lips trembled slightly like he was trying to keep himself from screaming.

Then, without warning, Jump shook his head. His shoulders relax and he lowered the drumsticks to his sides. He looked down at his feet, seemingly unconscious or maybe asleep.

"Um ... Jump?" said Busker. "You okay, buddy?"

Then, just as abruptly, Jump looked up at Busker. His eyes no longer looked conflicted. Physically, he looked pretty much exactly the same as he always did, but something about the way he held himself seemed different to Busker. He sat on his stool like he wasn't used to it and held his drumsticks in a rather awkward fashion like he rarely used them.

"Actually, Busker, I'm fine," said Jump in an upbeat tone. "I just got a little overwhelmed by the passion of this concert. The emotions, man. They were just too much."

Busker's sixth sense immediately told him something was off. Jump's voice sounded exactly the same as usual—eager, excited—but the words didn't sound natural in his mouth. He almost sounded like someone trying to do a bad impersonation of him than the real Jump.

Then again, I'm also exhausted from our performance, Busker thought. *Maybe I'm just hearing things.*

Jump smiled, an expression that looked rather forced, and said, "But Busker, may I speak to the audience quickly? I just have a few things I want to say to my fans before we head out."

A reasonable request, Busker thought to himself.

He held out the microphone to Jump and said, “Here you go, buddy. Tell the fans what’s on your mind. I’m sure they’ll be excited to hear it.”

Jump’s smile changed when Busker said that. For a moment, his smile was almost evil. It was the kind of smile that Busker associated with Villains who were happy that their evil plans were going just as they thought.

But then Jump’s smile turned back to normal. He dropped his drumsticks onto the stage—another oddity, because Jump always handled his drumsticks with care and made sure to put them up properly when he was done with them.

That probably should have tipped off Busker that something was wrong here, but his mind, exhausted from the concert, barely paid attention to that detail. Nor did he wonder why Jump walked so awkwardly toward him, not even jumping, which was Jump’s usual way of moving.

If Busker hadn’t been so exhausted, he might have been able to figure out what was going to happen next and maybe even put a stop to it.

But he didn’t. Busker simply handed the smooth-handled, slightly sweaty microphone to Jump. Jump didn’t thank or even look at Busker when he took the mic, however. Jump just walked up to the edge of the stage and stared at the audience, holding the red microphone so close to his mouth that he looked like he was trying to eat it.

“Hello, Digitals fans!” Jump said, his voice magnified well beyond its normal volume, loud enough for everyone in the Stadium to hear, waving at everyone as he spoke. “Did everyone have a fun time watching us rock out tonight?”

The crowd cheered and clapped their hands and stomped their feet, with more than a few ‘Yes!’s and ‘Yeah!’s rising above the chatter. It made Busker smile. He always enjoyed seeing the audience having a good time and was glad that Jump was asking them how they were enjoying themselves.

Jump lowered his hand and then began pacing back and forth, a motion that Busker thought didn’t look quite right on him. It occurred to him why: Jump never paced. Ever. Even when he was thinking.

“So glad to hear that,” said Jump, his feet moving swiftly across the wooden stage. “Concerts should be fun and I am glad that we’re able to give you guys the fun you deserve. But ... well, life isn’t always fun and games. Am I right, people?”

The crowd chuckled at Jump’s joke. Busker could see a few people in the front row elbow their friends and whisper something, probably something about how Jump’s observation was dead-on. Busker certainly couldn’t disagree with him on that.

Jump then stopped right in the middle of the stage, his back to Busker and the other Digitals, facing the crowd. “Yeah, life can be pretty hard sometimes. But you know what’s *really* hard?”

“What?” the audience cried out, with more than a hint of anticipation in their voices.

Busker was also interested in finding out where Jump was going with this. He thought that Jump’s impromptu stand-up was pretty out of character for him so far, but maybe Jump was trying something new.

That was when two things happened.

The first was another *ping* in Busker’s ear. Puzzled, he glanced at his notifications to see a message from Jump in his inbox. In fact, it was actually an email, of all things, not a normal message sent through Capes Online’s messaging system.

Hold on, Busker thought, glancing at the Jump standing before him. *Is Busker sending me emails while talking to the audience? That’s weird.*

Even weirder, the subject line of the email read ‘Re:HELP!’, which only confused Busker even more. He was tempted to open the message immediately, but the next weird thing happened.

Jump, standing stock still, his smirk featured in glorious HD on the huge holographic TV screens hovering above the stage, said, “Entertaining *you* losers. That’s what’s hard. Entertaining you simple-

minded, pathetic fans who waste all your money on stupid BS like tickets to freaking digital concerts. I mean, seriously, how lame can you get?”

The tone of the crowd changed as quickly as if someone had flipped a switch. It went from interested, excited, and amused to annoyed, angry, and offended, with a hint of confusion tossed in for good measure. Heads turned as fans looked at each other in puzzlement, wondering if they had heard Jump right.

Busker himself was too shocked to respond. He stared at Jump uncomprehendingly, wondering where in the world *this* had come from. The Jump he knew was a nice kid who would never insult anyone, especially in such a public and condescending way. Hairdon’t even clasped a hand over her mouth, while Inspector looked at Jump as if all of his worst fears had come true.

A ringing sound in his ear caused Busker to start. Tech Spec was calling him, so Busker answered the call and said, “What’s up?”

“Just wanted to make sure that this was part of the show,” said Tech Spec over the phone, his voice dry if slightly worried. “Because I’m looking at the concert’s program and I don’t see ‘viciously insult the paying customers’ anywhere on it.”

“Can you cut the audio?” Busker whispered back.

“Nope,” said Tech Spec. “I’m trying, but for some reason the sound system isn’t responding. Give me a few minutes and I might—”

“Idiots!” Jump bellowed, his voice dwarfing the angry cries from the audience. “All of you, idiots! Seriously, I get paying big bucks for an actual, real physical concert, but this is stupid. Video games aren’t real life, people. Even if you live in a video game, it’s still not real. You’ve all been fooled into supporting a huge, faceless megacorporation that doesn’t give a *damn* about you.”

Busker gulped. Years of playing in concert had given him a refined ability to tell when an audience was happy and when they were unhappy. And right now, the audience could generously be described as *pissed* beyond all measure. They looked like they were planning to jump down from their seats and rush the stage.

At the same time, the hundreds of likes and comments they had been receiving on their livestreams had transformed into a deluge of hate comments and dislikes. Busker saw more than a few death threats to Jump, along with plenty of insults that usually got the commenter banned from chat. Not that banning anyone caused the hate comments to slow down, however. If anything, they sped up, coming in faster and faster than the chat mods could keep up with.

Okay, this is getting out of hand, Busker thought. I don’t know what’s gotten into Jump, but I gotta stop him before he makes things even worse.

Before Busker could do anything, however, Jump said, “But I’m not done yet. No, I have one final, very special present to share with you all. Wanna see it?”

The crowd booed and hissed and some people even started throwing fruit, hot dogs, and even a few shoes. Fortunately, the stands were far enough away from the stage that none of the projectiles even got close to the band, but Busker still didn’t like seeing the crowd turn on them like this.

Jump then laughed and said, “Happy birthday!”

With that, Jump spun around, dropped his pants, and mooned the audience.

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