

CHAPTER ONE

IF BUSKER BURN did not know any better, he would have assumed that someone had been lying to him. How else could he explain knocking on the front door of what he had been told was the house of an older gentleman acquaintance of his, only to find himself face-to-face with a young, hot woman in tight spandex pointing a gun directly at his forehead?

The cold metal barrel of the gun was icy against his forehead. He found it hard to choose whether to focus on the young woman or the gun itself. The gun was the more immediate problem—its make and model impossible for him to identify at such close range—but the woman was the one who actually held it. Her thin, refined-looking index finger rested on the trigger. Although Busker had quick reflexes, he knew he didn't have quick enough reflexes to avoid getting his head blasted off from close range.

So Busker chose to focus on the woman standing before him instead.

She couldn't have been older than Busker himself, thus putting her age in her late teens or early twenties. As Busker had noticed before, she wore a tight blue spandex Costume that revealed her rather generous curves and left little to the imagination. Thin, sleek-looking metal shoulder pads covered her shoulders, looking strong enough to protect her but not heavy enough to limit her movement.

The woman herself had skin as dark as midnight. In fact, that appeared to be her name, based on the [ANTI-HERO MIDNIGHT] nametag hovering over her head. Due to the proximity of the gun to his forehead, however, Busker could just barely see her nametag. He supposed he didn't need to read it. Somehow, her scowling face made Busker doubt that she would spare his life just because he knew her name.

Licking his lips, Busker said, "Well ... this is awkward."

Midnight's dark blue eyes narrowed. "Quip again and I'll blow your head off."

Busker bit his lower lip. Naturally, he *did* have another smart-aleck comment in that vein to make—something about how everyone's a critic—but wisely decided to take Midnight's threat seriously.

Of course, even if she does kill me, I will respawn back in my Base, Busker thought, although I'm not really in the mood to die today.

Taking a deep breath, Busker tried to look as peaceful and nonthreatening as possible. "Okay. Looks like we got off to the wrong start here. If you'd just let me explain—"

"Did you bring anyone else with you?"

Busker paused. He hadn't, actually, although now he wished he had. His fellow bandmates had logged off for the day, while he'd told Spiritus, his Sidekick, that he wouldn't need her help locating the old man he was looking for.

Sure thought I was being generous earlier when I told her she could have the day off, Busker thought. Who knew that being a good employer would bite you in the butt?

Seeing no reason to lie, Busker said, "No. I came by myself."

Midnight's eyes glowed blue for a moment and she nodded. "You're telling the truth."

Busker raised an eyebrow. "Mind telling me how you came to that conclusion?"

"I have eyes that can see and ears that can hear," said Midnight cryptically. She pressed the barrel of the gun against his head even harder. "But that still doesn't make you harmless."

Busker gulped. He raised his hands palms out. "Lady, I'm completely unarmed. I couldn't hurt you if I wanted. You gotta trust me."

That was also true. Or partly. Busker really *was* unarmed, mostly because he'd broken his main weapon, his Burning Ax guitar, earlier that day. He could use his Powers to hurt her, but that was too

risky. Midnight probably didn't know what kind of Powers that Busker had, but she seemed very perceptive. He doubted he could sneak even a tiny Fireball past her and a Ka-Boom! was right out.

In fact, Busker had come to this house—which he thought was inhabited by someone else—precisely *because* his weapon was broken and the house's owner was supposed to be the one who could fix it.

Either Earl decided to go on another trip or the information I was given was wrong, Busker thought. *'Cause this girl here definitely doesn't look like an old white wizard straight from an epic fantasy novel.*

Midnight didn't lower her gun or point it away. Her hands held it with a surprisingly firm grip. Based on the way she held the gun, Busker guessed that Midnight must have some real-world experience using firearms. Most players with guns in Capes Online didn't hold them that well.

"I don't trust you," said Midnight. "Not even slightly. But I don't see any weapons. What do you think, Pick?"

"Seems unarmed to me, ma'am," said a small, slightly high-pitched male voice that seemed to come from Busker's pockets. "Can't find anything except some Health and Energy Drinks."

Busker felt something soft and light jump off of his legs. He wanted to look at it, but didn't dare move his head. He just noticed something small, brown, and furry crawl up Midnight's back and sit on her shoulder, carrying one of Busker's Health Drinks in its mouth.

It *looked* like a larger-than-average squirrel, only Busker was pretty sure it actually wasn't. It had the same face, head, body, and tail of a normal gray squirrel, but its eyes were far too intelligent. It popped off the lid of the Health Drink and downed it in one gulp, the red soda disappearing down its mouth before the squirrel tossed the empty red bottle away and rubbed its belly. "Tasty."

Midnight made a disgruntled noise. "Pick, what did I tell you about drinking the enemy's drinks?"

"What?" said the squirrel, apparently named Pick, looking at Midnight with fake innocent eyes. "It was a Synth Group Health Drink, same as the kind you always feed me. You know how much I love cherries."

Busker's eyes darted to the squirrel. "Not trying to be rude, but did that squirrel just talk?"

"Yes," said Midnight without missing a beat. "Anyway, I now know for a fact that you are unarmed."

Busker smiled. "Cool. That means you can remove the gun, right?"

"No," said Midnight without missing a beat. "You're an Anti-Hero and probably have Powers of some sort or another. If I let my guard down, you'd probably take advantage of that to attack or maybe even kill me. Can't take any chances."

"Lady, do I *look* like a killer to you?" said Busker.

Midnight's eyes moved to his hair. "No man should ever wear a crimson mohawk and expect to be treated as if he's innocent."

Busker scowled. "Hey, at least it's not as weird as a talking squirrel. That's just bizarre."

Pick sniffled. "Weird? How rude. Midnight, please put a bullet in his head. There should be room in the garden for a grave big enough for his body, don't you think?"

Horror rose up Busker's spine when Pick said that, but fortunately, Midnight said, "Sorry, Pick, but I don't want to kill him just yet. I want to know more about him and what he's doing here."

"I'm open to answering questions," said Busker. "A lot more fun than being shot in the face, anyway."

Midnight nodded and lowered the gun from Busker's head. But then she grabbed the collar of his flaming-red jacket and yanked him inside the house with surprising strength.

In the next instant, Busker found himself sitting in an old-fashioned rocking chair, which creaked and swayed under his weight. Before he could even register that information, however, Midnight shoved her gun against his forehead again, forcing Busker to look up at her. Midnight looked awfully tall from his position in the rocking chair, although his senses told him that the rocking chair was just really small for some reason.

But again, Busker didn't have time to pay attention to his surroundings. He had to focus on keeping this crazy girl with a talking pet squirrel from blowing his brains out. That was harder than it sounded, however, which was probably why Busker's voice of reason—which always sounded like the voice of his older brother—told him that he would die unless he carefully chose his words over the next couple of minutes.

"Whoa," said Busker, blinking. "You're faster and stronger than you look."

"Looks can be deceiving in Capes Online," said Midnight. "A lesson I learned a long time ago under different circumstances."

"Agreed," said Busker. "I would never have guessed that a woman as beautiful as you could also be so violent."

"Violence and beauty are deeply intertwined," said Midnight without missing a beat, although Busker noticed a hint of a smile tugging at the corners of her lips. "What brought you here? Answer my question before I decide you would make good fertilizer for Earl's daisies."

Busker bit his lower lip. Midnight had seemed pleased when he complimented her on her looks, but it was clear that flattery wasn't the way out of this situation.

Deciding that honesty hadn't gotten him killed yet, Busker said, "Actually, it's funny that you should mention Earl. He's the guy I came here to see."

Midnight tilted her head to the side. "You know Earl? How?"

"He gave me his Acoustic Guitar for completing a mission for him a while ago," said Busker. "That's as far as I know him, though. We're not exactly best friends."

"His Acoustic Guitar ..." Midnight trailed off, a thoughtful look on her face. "So you're the Busker Burn I've heard so much about."

Busker smiled. "So you do know me, after all. Not surprising, seeing as pretty much everyone knows me."

Midnight shoved the gun harder against his forehead. "I said I *know* you, not that I *like* you. Your music isn't that great."

Busker grimaced. "To each his own, I guess. But do you know Earl, too?"

"I do, actually," said Midnight, still without moving her gun. "Probably better than you, too."

"Is that why you're here in his house?" said Busker, resisting the urge to look to the left and to the right. He knew that any sudden movement would make Midnight blow his head off his shoulders, which was definitely not something he wanted to experience. "How do you know him?"

"We go back a long way," said Midnight. "But the better question is, how did you know where his house was?"

"Peggy Ann—the lady who own the cafe in town—told me," said Busker quickly. "Peggy knows pretty much everyone in Far Town. She pointed me in this direction."

Midnight's lips twisted in a skeptical frown. She obviously did not believe him, but she also didn't call him a liar.

Instead, she said, "Peggy, huh? I know her, too. Good woman. Maybe a little too trusting sometimes, though."

Busker breathed out a sigh of relief. "Then you know why I'm here, right?"

"I do," said Midnight with a nod.

Without warning, Midnight pushed the gun firmly against his forehead, causing Busker to flinch. He looked into Midnight's harsh blue eyes, cold and professional, the sort of gaze that he would expect a trained hitman to have in real life.

"You're here to kill Earl," said Midnight. "So I'll kill *you* instead."

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