

CHAPTER ONE

WAS IT STRICTLY *necessary* to blow the front doors off of the Glitchling Factory, thereby setting off every single alarm bell in the building and drawing the attention of every single Digitus Cultist who worked there?

Probably not. The original plan had called for a bit more subtlety. The initial idea was to spend a few days doing recon on the Factory, scouting out its defenses, getting an idea of just how many Cultists might be working there, and how many Glitchlings this Factory produced. Then The Digitals would spend another few days planning an assault on the Factory itself, likely involving some sort of plan to cripple the Factory's defenses before setting even one foot inside the building.

That was probably how the Glitch Elimination Task Force—Capes Online's elite task force dedicated to destroying all glitches in Capes Online—would have done it.

It might have even been the wise way to do it.

It definitely would have been the subtle, sensible way to do it.

But Busker Burn, the leader of The Digitals and one of Capes Online's premier musicians, didn't describe his brand as 'sensible' or 'subtle.' His musical brand was rocking out loud, shredding notes on his guitar, and wearing a bright red mohawk that doubled as a signal and symbol of defiance against established norms and authority all by itself. His music manager, a middle-aged woman named April Guess, always used terms like 'loud' and 'explosive' when describing his musical style and brand to other people, so why not live up to it?

Admittedly, I'm fairly sure Digitus Cultists are the exact opposite kind of people who would like my music, Busker thought, stepping through the smoke-filled doorway, his crimson sunglasses protecting his eyes from the smoke, *though for different reasons.*

Busker glanced around at his surroundings as he entered the building. This particular Glitchling Factory—located about halfway between the towns of Far Town and Blades in the middle of mostly empty countryside—looked very similar to the one in Adventure City. Dozens of conveyor belts crisscrossed the ceiling overhead, while glass tubes pumped chemicals and liquids in every color of the rainbow into huge machines that looked like something straight out of a dystopian science-fiction novel. The air in here was much colder than the hot desert air outside, almost too cold even for Busker. His nose picked up the familiar scent of bleach, ammonia, and various other chemicals he had come to expect to find in a Glitchling Factory, as well as the faint but undeniable stench of old blood, which permeated the air so thickly that he could practically taste it.

Oddly, however, Busker saw no actual hooded Digitus Cultists. He did see the machines active overhead, with what looked like strange egg sac-like bags of glowing energy sitting atop the conveyor belts. A brief Scan showed him that the sacs were [GLITCHLING EGGS], which puzzled him because he hadn't realized that Glitchlings were hatched rather than born.

A harsh hacking cough to his right made Busker look. A hooded, ghostly figure hovered in the air beside him, a sharp-looking scythe gripped tightly in her bony hands. Her blue eyes looked more watery than usual inside her hood as she waved her free hand in front of her face.

"Next time, warn me when you are going to make something go *boom*, okay?" said the hooded ghost, her feminine voice tinged with annoyance. "You know how smoke irritates my allergies."

Busker held up his hands apologetically. "Sorry, Spiritus. I just wanted to make an entrance."

Spiritus, Busker's Sidekick and most trusted friend and ally, grunted and looked at the empty Factory. "For who? The Glitchling Eggs? Because I don't see anyone else here other than—"

Spiritus was interrupted by the sound of boots scuffing against the smooth concrete floor and the swishing of robes. Busker caught glimpses of movement among the twisted branches of machinery and technology around them, figures that looked even more ghost-like than Spiritus moving with quick but precise footsteps.

“Looks like we’re not as alone as we thought,” Busker muttered to Spiritus.

Stepping forward, Busker raised a hand over his head and shouted, “Hey, Kool-Aid drinkers! I know you’re in there. Come out, come out, wherever you are. Or are you afraid of a single player and his trusty Sidekick?”

Busker’s voice echoed loudly off the walls of the Factory, magnifying it by tenfold. Busker was actually taken by surprise by how loudly his voice echoed. This Factory had looked a lot smaller than the last couple of Glitchling Factories they had reduced to rubble over the last month and a half. Yet it sounded even bigger than the last few.

Maybe the rumors about them making big Glitchlings here are true after all, Busker thought.

Hooded figures in midnight black robes emerged from the shadows. With their identical outfits and nametags, the Digitus Cultists were almost impossible to distinguish from one another. About the only thing the hoods and robes didn’t hide was their height. An unusually tall and thin Digitus Cultist climbed down from one of the conveyor belts above, while one that was barely five-foot stepped out from behind an entire row of strange, multicolored chemicals. Even so, the rest of the Cultists were close enough in height that they looked like clones.

For some reason, seeing the identical hooded faces and bodies of the Digitus Cultists sent a shiver down Busker’s spine. Maybe it was because it was a reminder that Busker had once been one of them, even if he’d never worn those robes. Or maybe it was because seeing so many people wearing the exact same outfit, meant to destroy their individuality and make them cogs in the machine that was the cult of Digitus, contrasted so sharply with his own individualistic ethos that it hurt.

Either way, Busker didn’t show weakness or fear, even as the Digitus Cultists quickly outnumbered him and Spiritus. He estimated there were about two dozen or so Digitus Cultists, which again surprised him. Glitchling Factories were not known for needing extensive crews of workers. Due to how automated the entire Glitchling production sequence was, a good Glitchling Factory could get by on less than a dozen, if even that much, Cultists at any one time.

Yeah, we definitely ran into a big operation here, Busker thought. *That will make it even more fun to destroy.*

Spiritus must have been thinking the same thing, because she floated a little closer to Busker and whispered, in a voice as low as a soft winter breeze, “Two dozen. That’s twice as many as we were expecting.”

“I know,” said Busker, “but keep your cool, Spiritus. Remember the plan. Everything will be fine.”

Spiritus eyed Busker skeptically but nodded. “All right. But I’m still not quite sure how blowing the doors off of the entrance is supposed to take them by *surprise*.”

Busker rolled his eyes. “You’ll see. Just try to look natural and—”

“Busker Burn!” a loud, commanding masculine voice boomed throughout the Factory. “The traitor himself.”

From out of the shadows directly before Busker stepped a large, bulky Digitus Cultist who towered above most of the others. He quickly pulled his hood down, revealing an all-too-familiar, rock-like face with red eyes that glared at Busker as if trying to kill him with bad looks alone. The other Digitus Cultists quickly parted to let the giant through, their body language suggesting that the giant was the boss. Nor did the giant stop until he was standing in the middle of the floor about twenty feet away from Busker, his massive hands curled into boulder-like fists that reminded Busker of wrecking balls.

Busker flashed the giant a mocking smile. “Hey, Choker. Long time, no see, buddy.”

The giant Digitus Cultist, whose nametag read [DIGITUS CULTIST CHOKER], cracked his thick knuckles. “ ‘Buddies’ don’t collapse ceilings on top of their friends.”

Busker shrugged. “They don’t try to choke each other to death, either. Maybe we can put that behind us and start again.”

Choker snarled. “I would never give a traitor like you the time of day, much less seek to make amends. Unless, perhaps, you repent of your utter blasphemy and heresy and come back to Digitus.”

Busker tilted his head to the side. “Weird. I didn’t realize that Digitus was all about *forgiveness* now. I thought you guys were all about putting ‘heretics’ like me to death.”

“Whether you would be accepted back into Digitus is dependent on the High Elder’s judgment,” said Choker, barely hiding the rage and disgust in his voice. He pointed a log-like finger at Busker. “I only bring up the subject of repentance in the off-chance that you *might* feel some regret for betraying your brothers and sisters in the cult.”

“Looks like you bet wrong, dude,” said Busker, “ ‘cause I don’t feel *any* regret for leaving you creepy Cultists behind at all.”

Choker shook his head. “I can’t say I am surprised. Your rebellious nature condemns you, which is why I will take pleasure in finishing what I started in your Base.”

Choker cracked his knuckles as he said that, while his fellow Digitus Cultists raised their hands or drew weapons from the folds of their robes, clearly ready for a fight.

Busker still chose not to show any fear or weakness. He had to admit that seeing Choker here had surprised him, but Busker had always been a good improviser, so he said, “At least my Base actually looks like a home now. This Glitchling Factory is kind of depressing.”

“Aesthetics are irrelevant, traitor,” said Choker. “A factory is meant to be a place where things are manufactured. That includes Glitchlings, which this Factory produces much of under my watchful eye.”

“Yeah, I was curious about that,” said Busker. He folded his hands behind his head. “Did the High Elder put you in charge of this Factory or something?”

“He did,” said Choker with a nod. “Decreasing numbers of brothers and sisters among our ranks have forced the High Elder to make some important but necessary organizational changes to ensure the continued survival of Digitus. Such as promoting me to the Inner Circle and making me manager of this Factory. It is a title I hold with honor and prestige.”

Busker cracked his neck. “I get it. Digitus is still bleeding out members like there’s no tomorrow, so the old man’s desperate enough to put a big lug like *you* in charge of one of Digitus’ most important Glitchling production facilities.”

Choker’s eyes burned with hot fire. “Silence, heretic. You understand *nothing* about Digitus since you have left it. If you knew what the High Elder was planning, then you wouldn’t be smirking.”

Busker folded his arms across his chest. “Given how I’ve come out on top of every confrontation with you guys so far, I can’t say my smugness is unwarranted.”

A soft, deadly smile appeared on Choker’s lips. “If you were wise, you would run now. Very, very, *very* far away.”

Busker raised an eyebrow.

Normally, Busker could dismiss that as Choker’s typical blind devotion to Digitus and the High Elder speaking.

Yet something in Choker’s words, his smile, his tone, told Busker that perhaps Choker wasn’t just speaking from a place of mindless loyalty to his cult, but factually, as if warning Busker of something that was coming that even he could not deal with.

Busker shook his head. “I don’t have time for mind games, dude. I came here to raze this entire Factory to the ground. So either move out of the way ... or fight.”

Choker laughed mockingly, while the other Digitus Cultists chuckled, giggled, or laughed along with him.

Then Choker clapped his hands and said, “I am aware, from speaking with my brother and sister Cultists, that you have grown stronger over the last several months, but you are still outnumbered ten to

one here, traitor, if not even more so. Let's just say that your odds of destroying this Factory by yourself are barely higher than zero."

Busker shrugged. "Weird. I never said I came alone."

Even as Busker said that, a huge shadow suddenly appeared in the doorway behind him, falling over Busker like a blanket. The shadow fell over Choker and the other Digitus Cultists, who all looked up at the giant, shadowy form standing above Busker. Busker also looked over his shoulder at it, even though he really didn't need to.

A massive grim reaper-like figure stood in the doorway behind Busker, looking a bit like a giant version of Spiritus, only far scarier. Ghostly green eyes peered out of a ragged hood, while two bony hands emerged from the ragged sleeves of the giant's cloak to tightly grip a scythe as tall as a tree. The temperature in the Factory seemed to fall another five or ten degrees in an instant, even making Busker shiver, the scent of death now entering his nostrils.

"What ... what in Paradox's name is that?" said Choker, his face much paler than it had been just a few seconds ago.

Busker shot Choker a grin. "That? Is my little friend. But you can call him Shadow Reaper. And he doesn't play nice with idiots like you."

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