

## Chapter Five: Damage Control

"So, just to sate my curiosity here... can you pinpoint the moment everything turned into a clusterfuck?" The Loremaster asked slowly, her hand on the table as she stared down Jorgen Baw. "Because I've watched this back a few times, and it only gets worse." With a slight turn, she gestured and the screens behind her rewound to where Jageranimus logged back into the game.

"Actually, you know what? Here's my favourite statistic. Do you know how many times you used your abilities from this moment? From the moment you tanked your reputation with the Celestials and Lamerian Throne? Go on, take a guess." Her laughter was humourless as she threw question after question at him. "Once, when you broke through the wall. Twice when you attacked the side of the ship. Thrice when your attack was blocked by Captain Wolfsbane. Three. You used three abilities, out of a list of... over forty. The Dread Pirate used movement skills the moment they came off cooldown. His blade and gun abilities were constantly in use. In the same time, James Sylvester activated his skills over three hundred times."

The Loremaster's laugh was genuine this time as she looked at Viktor for support. The exec just shrugged his shoulders and gestured lamely towards the Celestial Crusader, who hadn't spoken a word since their meeting began. "I'd normally try to make an excuse for him here, and tell you he's not used to games like this... but he literally killed Paragons, using skills and abilities just hours before his fight with James Sylvester. I'm just as clueless as you."

Before the Loremaster could respond to Viktor, Jorgen raised his hands defensively with a haggard expression on his face. "It was a personal dispute, and I made a judgement call."

Viktor's laugh drowned out whatever attempt the Loremaster made to speak. "Personal? Are you funding your entry into Abidden? Are you paying everyone's salary here? What fucking planet are you living on, Jorgen?" The incredulity on Viktor's face was almost comical as he leaned in closer to Jorgen with each question. "Would you prefer if we brought in Elisabeth Volte? It's her money that's on the line here, but it's OUR reputation that you're throwing to the dogs. I took a risk on you. We were going to show the world that competent gamers could destroy the Paragons and elevate Abidden into the PVP scene!"

Pacing around the table at the centre of the room, Viktor emphasised each of his points by raising his fingers, his voice becoming more irate by the second. "For a Legendary Hero, with fucking wings! How did you lose to someone at Standard Rank? You don't need to answer me. The entire world knows the answer, because your ineptitude was broadcasted live to a record-breaking audience of over twenty million viewers!"

With a single raised hand, the Loremaster took the reins once more. "Jorgen, this isn't an inquisition or a trial. We're not here to bully you, we just need to know that this... episode, and lapse of judgement, that it will not happen again. If you can guarantee us that, we can start salvaging what we can out of this situation."

Jorgen looked up at those words and gave the Loremaster a withering look. "Who the hell even are you?" At those words, Viktor finally snapped and slammed his hand down on the table, shocking both the Loremaster and Jorgen. "I'll tell you who she's not! She's not your last Loremaster, that you ridiculed for being a bit of a story-teller. Do you remember them? The team we assembled. Who gave you solid advice that you promptly ignored? Well, don't worry if you don't remember them... they're going to be on the Samantha Show tomorrow night, telling the world what you're really like behind the scenes." At the risk of the executive hyperventilating, the Loremaster interjected with a pained expression. "I'm a Loremaster that won't take your shit. Now, are you done feeling like a victim? Are you ready to get to work?"

Jorgen's eyes widened at that last remark. "How the hell have I been the victim here? All I've heard so far is how inconvenienced the both of you have been, but neither of you have set foot in that game." The aggravated gamer turned his attention to Viktor. "You brought me in to kill the Paragons and I did it. Greaves and Khance were killed by me. I danced to your tune to get companions and all that bullshit, but they're more of a hindrance than they are a help. Literally, any fucking step you make results in a loss of reputation somewhere. The interface throws hundreds of messages at you all at once and you can't see a thing. The game has nothing to do with PVP... its skills, equipment, factions, monsters and a complete load of crap I don't care about!"

Waving his hand at the screen showcasing the fight on the Tempest, Jorgen snorted dismissively. "If you strip away all that nonsense. Take away the wings and the armour, the ship and the crew. I would have fought Travesty in a one-on-one battle... and I would have killed him. There were too many things going on during that fight, and I couldn't perform at my best."

Viktor's laugh went from humourless to scathing. Whatever restraint he had left finally evaporated at the sheer ignorance he just witnessed. He had to take a few steadying breaths as he looked at Jorgen with an incredulous look on his face.

"Did you make this amount of excuses back when you were in the Scumlords? Like, did you literally spend the last ten years feeling like the victim? Your opponent was in a coma, Jorgen. A fucking coma. He was reduced to becoming an E-Classifier, and had to fight against the odds every single day to just survive. You want to paint him as the enemy? That he stole something from you? Jorgen, James Sylvester lost everything because of his fight with you, and you're crying over not getting a contract with Abidden? Grow up."

The muscles in Jorgen's jaw locked as he stared down the executive. He didn't make a single rebuttal and instead looked off to one side with a sigh and a shake of his head. A few more moments of silence passed before Viktor pushed himself away from the table and strode towards the door.

Just as he was about to leave, he turned and gave the Loremaster an apologetic grimace. "He's all yours!"

Jorgen watched as Viktor left the War Room. Now it was just him and the mystery Loremaster. He wanted to reframe his argument to make her understand what he was feeling, but every time he spoke, it came out wrong. Much to his surprise, the Loremaster changed the topic.

"You said that the interface throws hundreds of messages at you all at once and you can't see a thing? Let's start with that. We can adjust the settings and customise your menus to make your life easier. I'd suggest removing everything but the essentials, similar to the default display in Kill-Shot. How about that?" Jorgen nodded, and the Loremaster continued.

"You won't need to worry about losing reputation anymore. Most of the Celestial Race has been wiped out and the Lamerian Kingdom has practically been eradicated. The few survivors will loathe you, but their faction's relationship with you isn't going to budge from Hatred, so that's another problem gone. We'll minimise the reputation changes from your menu so you're not interrupted by it. Next, was the companions? They won't be an issue for you either..."

Jorgen smiled in return. "... because they're all dead."

"Correct." The Loremaster congratulated with a brief clap. "Now, let's get started with a combat plan. Like it or not, Abidden requires you to use skills, equipment, factions and all that other stuff you don't want to use. If you want revenge against The Dread Captain, you're going to need to bring a lot more than just anger. First, we need a strategy. You'll need to know your skills inside and out, and you'll need to know your opponents. More than anything, you need to play the game smart."

With another nod of his head, Jorgen leaned in closer and listened in earnest.

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"Rumour has it, McClean, that you're en route to a sponsorship meeting with some bigwigs at Abidden. Can you tell the viewers of the Samantha Show if the rumours are true?" Samantha sat in the studio, this time in a purple dress. Unlike the previous evening, where they had hosted both Greaves and McClean, this was an impromptu afternoon show designed to rake in as many viewers as possible. The powers that be saw the ratings from the previous night and pushed Samantha back on set to do a follow-up show. McClean being available for a remote call gave them quite a bump in the ratings.

*Ah, Samantha... once again, I can't break my non-disclosure agreements. What I can tell you is that it would have to be something remarkable to keep me out of your studio today. So you can deduce from that what you wish.*

"Understood, McClean! Well, since we're clearly not going to wrangle out any details of what's happening today, maybe you could speculate... in your expert opinion, what might happen over at the Abidden offices today?" Samantha asked in an almost playful voice. After the previous evening of back and forth with McClean, she knew exactly how to get information out of him. Phrasing was key.

*In my expert opinion, I'd imagine there's more turmoil. James Sylvester has shown the world that expertise can defeat ranks, which throws the already idiotic progression system on its head. If a Standard rank character can not only fight, but defeat a Legendary character... It means that those endless raids in pursuit of ascension and levelling up are meaningless. I think that a lot of sponsors will take a hard look at their Heroes, with a single question in mind. 'Is this the best person for the new era of Abidden?'*

"A new era of Abidden is such a bold statement, could you perhaps clarify for us what you mean by that?" Samantha genuinely hated his approach of drip-feeding her pieces of information, giving pause only for her to ask him to continue.

*Well, obviously with the introduction of the Vendetta System and the revelation of the Villains expansion, Abidden is going all-in on combat. Complacency won't be rewarded in the game, because NPCs will have the capability of levelling up and growing. We've already seen the meteoric rise of that Shari character who went from Standard to Unique in a couple of days. Consider adversarial NPCs, enemies, rivals... how will they level up? What will their motives be? Will our Heroes be able to fight them and win? What of the Villains lurking in the shadows, too? Will the current roster of Heroes be able to put up much of a fight, if any at all? Those are the questions that the sponsors must ask right now. Do I think JeffX could handle himself against the Dread Captain? No. Do I think any of the current roster could? No. If I know that, and you know that... there's a reasonable chance that the sponsors know that too. I think we're going to see a bit of a shakeup, sooner rather than later.*

"One of our viewers has sent in an interesting question. I just wanted to preface this with the fact that these aren't my own thoughts!" Samantha lied with a laugh. "They can't help but notice how enthusiastic you sound about Abidden. Most of your career has been built on your critical views of the game, yet now you seem to have turned a corner. Would there be any underlying reason for that?"

*I pride myself on my integrity, and I can tell you I've always been an admirer of companies that try new things. Abidden has many fundamental flaws, but it also has many redeeming qualities too, that we rarely give focus too. The artificial intelligence, Locke, is absolutely unparalleled in this space. The sheer volume of personalities that have been created for characters throughout the game is remarkable. Now, I've done my research. I know they outsource a lot of the heavy lifting regarding development, but still... It's worth praising. From my perspective, and speaking candidly here... I was surprised at Jorgen's defeat. As a former member of the Scumlords, I had higher hopes for him. He's a capable fighter and a veteran in the PVP space, so for him to self-destruct so horribly in the game... Let's just say I'm curious.*

"You've been quick to condemn Jorgen Baw across your social channels-" Samantha was halfway through her sentence when McClean abruptly cut her off.

*Mr. Romero! A pleasure, as always. Sorry, just in an interview with the Samantha Show. Let me quickly wrap it up. Sorry, Samantha! I've got a very important meeting to get to.*

Without so much as another word, McClean ended the call. To say Samantha was livid would be an understatement, yet the deed had been done. The name drop at the end of his sentence was enough to send the viewers into a tizzy. Mr. Romero was quickly revealed to be Viktor Romero, who signed Jorgen Baw. Speculation ran rampant from that point on, with everyone all but certain that the Scumlords were reuniting.