

## Chapter 22 - Showtime

*It's been four years since we've had this many players online in Abidden! I can see the waiting screens as we start the official countdown. Our breaks are out of the way, our scheduled downtime is finally over, the expansion is now in place... and when this number on the screen reaches zero, we're going to be in the latest expansion of Abidden... Kingdoms! I'm your host, #Penta-Price, and I'm delighted to be bringing you the latest news of all things Abidden! I know, I know... you're probably sick of hearing me, and eager to see what our Heroes, Villains and Wildcards get up to in the new update, but bear with me for a few more moments and I promise it'll be worth it.*

*A quick roll-call of everyone waiting to get into the game, we have on the Paragon side... Helena, Greaves, Scarr and Kincső waiting in their rigs. There's no sign of Khance or the new fan-favourite, James Sylvester. He may be joining later in the day, so don't hop off the channel just yet! On the Hero side, we have the Celestial Crusader, Jorgen Baw... joined by some of the new recruits. We don't know their codenames just yet, but they're going to be going through the character creation in the Pantheon the moment that the game goes live.*

*Rose Farios is one of the people that has definitely been confirmed, but the Matriarch of Nexus Rigs, Dayna Ortega, has fielded two new Heroes that will also be doing their character selection. We don't know much about them, but their call signs are currently set as 'Sakura' and 'Quaid', but they could very well be placeholder names and they most certainly don't ring any bells in my mind. If any of you recognise them, let us know in the comments!*

*Everyone is being tight-lipped about the choices, so we don't know exactly what's happening, but sources say Dayna has a line-up of five Heroes! There are another three still to get their seats! Rumours had been circling like sharks, but it looks like JeffX has managed to retain his seat and he's loaded in and waiting to play. How do we all feel about that? Greaves has voiced his concerns about the singer in the past, but do you all think he deserves to keep his seat? Let us know below.*

*Mama-Best has taken her exit and rather than a culinary artist coming in to take the slot, we have Tanner, who rose to fame in the online sensation Babylon, the Tower Climbing game. Replacing CurioSity is Lasairiona who hails from the McMaster Dojo, the once-popular martial arts game. Will she be able to regain her former championship glory? Time will tell. Shield-Bro, despite everyone telling him to throw in the towel... has remained head-strong and retained his seat in Abidden. He's currently waiting to enter the game. We have a new player migrating across from the controversial creation game, Alchemaster, but we don't have their game tag yet. I was never a big fan of Alchemaster, as it always felt like a bad clone of Artifice. Have any of you played it? What are your thoughts, should I give it another try?*

*You'll notice that I haven't mentioned any of the other Scumlords? Despite the outcry to give them a chance in the game to take on the Paragons, it looks as though negotiations have fallen through for now. Maybe we'll see them in the future, but for now, it looks as though Jorgen is going to be the only Scumlord in Abidden. I imagine McClean will have something to say about that eventually... But viewers and listeners, you'll be delighted to know that the forum of public opinion finally blessed us with something wonderful. Bartleby has gotten his golden ticket! The Clancy Group cancelled his contract and he was set free into the cold harsh world, only to be snapped up immediately by another sponsor! They'll undoubtedly have a press-conference after they make their characters, but fingers are crossed that Bartleby will square off once again with Greaves for their highly anticipated rematch!*

*Only a few more minutes before we get to see the first trailer and opening cinematic of the new expansion! Let's see, what else do we have to cover... whoa! My mistake everyone! Huge thank you to the commenters for absolutely putting me to shame right now. I've never paid any attention to Kingdoms of Wrath, so I hope you'll all forgive me for not recognising the name of Nexus Rigs' new signing, Sakura! Apparently we have a real heavy-hitter coming from one of the top magic-arena strategy games! That really is a mouthful of a genre. Not seeing any hints for the other signing, Quaid, just yet, but maybe our commenters will find something out soon.*

*We have a few other Heroes that are waiting in their rigs, with some names we haven't seen logged on in years... Puggle is back after a long hiatus! He's one of Abidden's youngest players at fourteen years old, and how he has a seat at all is beyond me. Now, onto the Wildcards...*

*which is unfortunately going to be a very short segment, because we're not allowed to know anything about them! Looks like they're going to remain a surprise for the game, and the mechanic to keep them anonymous is still in place! Wildcards won't be revealed to the game until they attack a Hero. Now, it's not all doom and gloom dear viewers... We do know that eight people have signed contracts, which brings the Wildcard total to eleven people. Ten of which are online right now, with only James Sylvester being offline. Looks like the Wildcards mean business!*

*So far, we have had two reveals... the first being Kell Daystar, Abidden's media representative, and James Sylvester, the sensational new E-Classer that literally sailed into Legendary status both online and off. The rumor mill has been spinning, and we know that Chris Spectre is somewhere in that line-up too. There have been some mumblings on social media from a few other personalities, with many hinting at talks with Abidden. The coming days will likely reveal facts from fiction as the roster gets finalised. Who are you all going to be watching? Let me know in the comments below in a few minutes, because right now, we're getting our first look at Abidden's new expansion... Kingdoms!*

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Billy didn't need to hush the crowd in the slightest. The entirety of the Neo fell into a respectful silence as the lights dimmed. Anticipation swept across the room, but was only visible via their expressions. Giddy smiles and wide eyes fixed on the displays around the bar. Sam and the girls shook their heads as they slid behind the bar, waiting for the trailer to end before they resumed their work. Billy was just as bad as his customers, making one of the patrons shove over in the booth so he could sit down and have a good seat for the announcement.

The thundering roar of an unknown creature sounded out before the screens burst into light to reveal a terrifyingly large sea creature that launched into the sky from the black sea. Its body was like a snake, coiling through the wind as it flew effortlessly towards land. Dramatic music started playing as the screen tore away from the sea creature, only to reveal a hulking behemoth made of earth and rock. Countless legs moved purposefully forward as though it was hunting a distant target. Devastation followed each step as the pillars of rock smashed into the

ground, destroying everything around it and adding even more mass to its grotesque frame. The camera zoomed away to show the trajectory of the monster, only to then zoom forward to reveal a castle and surrounding village.

Bursts of chattering started in the pub in an attempt to identify the location. but Billy shouted for everyone to be quiet. He didn't recognise the location either, and he had watched practically all the footage from over the years. As the seconds passed, Billy and the entire clientele of the Neo watched in awe as dozens of these terrifying creatures were showcased around the map, with many of them appearing in locations that they saw for the very first time. Suddenly, Locke's voice sounded out... as the voice of a God, explaining the events of the current expansion.

For years, the evils of Abidden have remained unchecked and unchallenged. They are not mere threats for Heroes alone... it will take more than that to destroy them.

The landscape suddenly lurched and changed to zoom off into the distance where an armoured force of men started to march towards the approaching Titan. Purple banners with a foreign emblem billowed in the wind as the army advanced. At their front, on a tamed Wyvern, sat a woman with a plumed helmet and a glaive in her hands. The scene leapt forward to show the commander orchestrating her troops in various formations. Magic battered the earthen creature from the side, while others sought to flank it for bonus damage. It was a truly incredible battlefield, but it wasn't enough. The scene changed once more to show a battered and bruised commander limping away from the battlefield with a broken glaive, in the background, the newly revealed castle and village had erupted in flames as the creature continued its reign of destruction.

Powerful factions have grown in the shadows, with many vying for power. Claimants are everywhere, seeking to be placed on thrones. Will our Heroes and Villains manage to restore the balance in Abidden? Can they take down the terrifying World Bosses before they destroy everything? Which Kingdoms will remain standing at the end of the conflict? Who will become King or Queen, that rules the land?

Images of various castles appeared, with many in a state of disrepair. They looked like the perfect blueprint of base building which didn't escape the viewers' notice. Before a word could be said, Locke continued to talk about claimants, with a few faces around Abidden appearing... showing some of the Heroes and some of the Villains, but then it focused on some of the companions in the game, with the final scene showing Vetra, the First Officer of the Tempest, sitting on a black throne. If ever there was an image that inspired discourse, it was the idea that the Dread Captain's companion might become Queen. Billy didn't stop the customers from chatting this time as the screen finally faded away to reveal the interface, asking him which player he'd like to follow live.

"We're putting Greaves on for now, but the moment James gets online, we're switching over to him. Okay?" Billy asked the bar as he made the selection. Not a single person raised a complaint as Sam and the girls moved around the bar and resumed their work.

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"Well, that was pretty underwhelming." Khance snorted as he stood up from the couch in James' apartment. They had watched the stream together, but it apparently had failed to impress the Shadow General. Khance tapped at his pockets for a moment before sitting back down with an annoyed expression on his face. "When is that Lancaster guy due to get here?"

James got up from his seat too and gave Khance a reassuring look. "He'll be here in a while. Why are you suddenly so anxious? What's going on?" After Liliana packed up her tools and left, James had sat for a few hours listening to #Penta-Price discussing the various possibilities for Abidden. Khance had woken up a few hours ago and seemed fine up until the broadcast, and James wanted to know why.

Khance sighed before rubbing at his face with his hands. He gestured at the screen and then at the Chessmaster sitting in the centre of the apartment. "How many times did he mention your name? Three, four times? The entire world is waiting for you to log into the game and showcase all your new items and abilities, but you're sitting here, babysitting me. I just want that damned psychiatrist to get here so you can start playing!" His voice was strained and a pang of anxiety

managed to surface which confused him greatly. Khance felt his eyes welling up and just looked at the ceiling with a sigh. "Why the fuck am I getting so emotional? This didn't happen with the other withdrawals." A few moments of breathing passed before Khance gave James a curious look. "Like, I know I don't need them to be happy, and I know taking them would be destructive. But... ninety percent of me wants to rifle through your bins to see if I can find them, isn't that pathetic?"

James felt his wrist vibrate, only to see a message pop up on his interface. Glancing up, he saw that Khance was shaking his head and muttering while pacing around the room. Pressing the message, James saw that it was from Liliana, warning him about a Nexus Rigs press conference. After reading it a couple of times, he looked back up at Khance who was now looking at him curiously. "What's your mental stability like, Alex?" Khance's eyes darted from James' face to the interface before his face broke into a grin. "Go on then, hit me. What is it? Has Dayna already reassigned Scourge?"

Rather than answering, James switched the channel to show the Nexus Rigs press conference which featured Dayna and a slender woman with jet black hair. They had missed the start of it, and the questions were already underway. Dayna's expression looked to be mildly troubled, but Sakura was very much at ease in giving her answers. The audience continued to laugh at whatever had just happened, but the next question that followed highlighted the topic of conversation that Liliana wanted to hide.

"Great to see a Hero that's not afraid to come out swinging! Another question regarding Alexander Vance. You've made it clear what you think of him squandering the opportunity to use Scourge, but what do you think of him as an individual? Would you classify him as a rival? Was he someone you looked up to in the past? What are your thoughts?"

Sakura didn't hesitate for even a moment before she snorted in laughter. "I was under the impression that this press conference was about my signing with Nexus Rigs, and not about my feelings on a washed-up Paragon? What is left to say? Is he a rival? Absolutely not. Would he be someone I'd look up to? No. When he fucks up his time as a Paragon and gets booted, maybe he can come be my healer? How is that for a headline?"

James blanched at her wording, surprised that she managed to look both elegant and refined as she tore the reporter to shreds. Dayna's troubled expression finally made sense to James. Not backing Khance was one decision, but to back someone that was dragging his name through the mud was another. Lifting his hand to turn it off, James saw Khance's arm rise in protest. "No. Leave it on, please. Actually, could you restart it for me? I'd like to hear it from the beginning." Khance's voice was calm and collected as he watched Sakura's press conference.

"Are you okay, Alex?" James asked after a moment, but Khance's only answer was a cold smile.