

Chapter 39: End Scene

"Whoa, slow down! What are you doing here, aren't you're supposed to be in the game?"

Dario exclaimed in surprise as Kell stormed into the room. But the Head of Media didn't warrant the engineer with a response. Instead, he made his way over to the control console at the edge of the table, bringing up an interface which he could sift through at high speed. Dario looked over to Quentin to see if the CEO had any idea what was happening, but his friend was just as stupefied.

"Kell, is everything alright?"

Quentin ventured cautiously. Kell's jaw clenched ever so slightly, before relaxing as he turned to face his boss.

"The Samantha Show wanted to interview a Paragon for an Abidden segment. It didn't work with our schedules, so we postponed it. They ended up filling the slot with someone else."

Kell took a step back and gestured at the live interview feed with annoyance written all over his face. Both Quentin and Dario leaned forward to see a tall man seated in the interview chair across from Samantha.

"Are we supposed to know who he is?"

Dario ventured after a few moments, looking over to the equally puzzled Quentin.

Taking a deep breath, Kell composed himself before speaking.

"Sorry about that. It's proving to be quite the challenge to manage the press when I'm logged into the game for most of the day. That man is potentially a problem for us. He owns McClean Consulting."

Kell nodded with a wry smile on his face as Quentin audibly groaned with annoyance.

Dario's face remained blank, but it was Quentin that enlightened him this time.

"He's essentially the market leader in competitive gameplay research. We implemented his practices in our combat encounters and they worked really well."

The Lead Engineer looked between Kell and Quentin as if urging them to continue.

"Well? Why is this a bad thing?"

Quentin sighed as he looked at the figure on the screen. The man was using his hands as he explained some type of point to Samantha.

"McCleane's main rise to prominence has been his critical views of Abidden. He has made it no secret that he hates our game."

Dario snorted derisively.

"We've had negative reviews before, hell... there were years that I'd have been on that stage telling Samantha that the game was trash. Why should we care what he has to say?"

Kell leaned forward and pointed his finger at the image of McCleane.

"Did you know that Mr. McCleane was one of the original Scumlords that fought against the Paragons back at the Division One Invitational?"

Quentin's eyes widened at the sudden realisation.

"Wait, so you're saying that the primary reason he's been attacking us all these years is because he lost to the Paragons? How did we never know about him being a Scumlord?"

Kell shook his head.

"Honestly, it's not a fact that anyone would have cared about a week ago. This narrative around the C-Class Hero, Jørgen Baw, has catapulted the Scumlords into the spotlight. Which is all a part of his plan..."

Dario didn't even ask this time, he just stared at Kell until the blonde man elaborated further.

"Victor Romero. He's been a very busy man over the course of the last few days... It's clear that he's behind this interview on the Samantha Show. I think he's trying to build a profile around the Scumlords so he can get them into Abidden as a package deal alongside Jørgen."

Quentin suddenly laughed, which caused both Kell and Dario to look at him in surprise.

The CEO merely shrugged his shoulders with a smile on his face.

"We don't control the Heroes in the game, so what is the point in worrying?"

Kell opened his mouth to continue, but Quentin raised a hand to interrupt him.

"Our job isn't to sabotage the competition. If the investors want McCleane, they can have him."

Kell closed his mouth, saying nothing. A thoughtful look crossed his face after a moment.

"You're attempting to goad me, aren't you?"

He asked eventually, which caused Quentin to laugh.

"I'm just saying... if you want to take down McCleane, maybe you should do it as a Wildcard instead of the Head of Media?"

Kell sighed as he focused his attention back on the interview.

"My job is to know everything that's going on, Quentin. Surprises like that don't sit well with me."

The trio watched the interview in silence as McClean tore into everything about Abidden. Just when the interview was mid-flow, Samantha made a show of introducing an unexpected guest.

Dario's eyes widened as he watched a familiar figure join McClean on the stage.

"You've got to be kidding me..."

Kell just placed his head in his hands and groaned at the sight of the new guest, but Quentin was laughing.

"This is fantastic!"

Samantha, as much as I'd love to get caught up with the current hype that is surrounding Abidden... I can't in good faith categorize it as anything more than an elaborate publicity stunt.

McClean spoke quietly and methodically as he placed a hand on Samantha's desk. His expression was careful and his tone, practiced. He had an air of sophistication that encouraged people to listen when he spoke. His interviewer, Samantha Wheeler, sat with a smile as she listened to his response. Her first question to him had been about the Abidden expansion.

Let's look at the facts. They've implemented a combat model that doesn't actually suit their player base. You saw earlier how Ethan Davenport was easily dispatched by Kincsö. He's never been in a Player vs. Player environment, and it's painfully obvious now how quickly the Paragons will dominate the roster of Heroes. Are we supposed to rejoice? Is this actually entertainment, seeing companies represent incompetent celebrities? Should we fawn over the Paragons for being able to beat inexperienced combatants? None of what we've seen is professional, it's-

Samantha quickly jumped in with a question for McClean, bringing him back to one of his previous statements.

Incompetent celebrities? That's a bold statement, especially since many of the Heroes have spent several years playing Abidden! Could you provide some further insight into what you meant by that?

McClean's laugh was almost mocking.

Have you never watched a competitive match before? I've mentioned this in the past in interviews and still stand firmly by it. Abidden is a flawed game that doesn't have a balanced combat system. Their proprietary artificial intelligence handles the

balance and logic of the game, which is laughably inept. In the space of a day, we've seen the Paragons climb up to Unique rank. That guy with the spear, TroyLegal? He's barely gotten to Master level after two years in the game. Am I meant to believe that TroyLegal can defeat a Paragon? Are we to assume that it's an even match-up because of their tenure? No. You don't become competent through time served, nor do you become more capable because you're backed by a sponsor.

Samantha's years of training stopped her from gaping at the man opposite her. It was clear he was out for blood, and it looked like the celebrities and Abidden were his primary target. Samantha knew that a dissenting voice would bring in the viewers, especially a reputable voice in the industry. She couldn't believe her luck when he had offered to come on the show. After the first few moments of the interview, Samantha mentally discarded all of her prepared questions and instead allowed the man to continue his tirade against Abidden. She stoked that fire and directed him where needed, but he was doing her job for her, perfectly.

There are hundreds of Virtual Reality MMO games available on the market, accessible too with basic equipment. They have logical combat, structured tiers of progression, and a very high skill cap. I'm an alumnus of Gigatech University, and I can guarantee that you could pluck any student from there and they could defeat the former roster of Heroes.

[Why only the former roster of Heroes? Has your opinion changed with the unveiling of Jørgen Baw?](#)

McCleaun paused as he planned his answer. A calculated smile tugged at his lips before he crossed his right leg over his left.

I've competed alongside Jørgen in the past and have found him to be quite capable. It's clear that he's created a strategy which works very well against the Paragons. It would be unfair to categorise him alongside his counterparts. To put it in simple terms, Jørgen is a competitive gamer. He fights people who fight back. You can't mimic that kind of calculation and reaction speed. Some Paragons have already witnessed the difference in skills already. It's just a matter of time before Jørgen defeats Helena.

[Interesting that you should name Helena when everyone is speaking about this unknown Wildcard called, Travesty! Have you any insights into what the battle may look like between Jørgen and Travesty?](#)

At the mention of Travesty, McCleaun's demeanour changed. His jaw tightened and his arms folded. A brief respite of silence appeared before he laughed it off with a smile.

I actually fought against Travesty too. Not sure if you knew that, Samantha? I can't speak about it too much because of the non-disclosure agreements with our old sponsor... but I went head to head against him in the past.

McClea's smile grew wider at the astonishment on Samantha's face.

Does that mean to say... that you were one of the Scumlords? You've fought the Paragons?!

Instead of answering, McClea gestured at his lips to show them sealed and raised his hands defensively.

Ah yes! The non-disclosure agreement! Oh, but we all really want to know! Ahh, what can you tell us?

Samantha fueled her voice with just enough astonishment and curiosity to pull more information out of her guest.

I should be able to provide some insights on the battle between Jørgen and Travesty, but I must make a disclaimer that I will draw this insight from my experience consulting high-performance eSports teams over the last number of years. I'm not drawing any conclusions from previous interactions with Travesty. I just needed to preface my answer with that. I hope you understand?

McClea's hand was once again placed on Samantha's desk as he gave her a meaningful look.

Of course! Then let me rephrase that question for you... In your professional opinion, what will the fight between Travesty and Jørgen look like?

There are several parts to this answer, so I hope you'll humour me for a moment. The first element is to ask what we currently know about Travesty. Speculation is rampant that he was the one that killed Percivus during the live raid... but I can assure you, that's not him. My guess is that it was another Wildcard, so Travesty has a completely different skill-set to that of this unknown Wildcard. Some analysts and critics have been quick to give their opinions, but they're unfortunately working off skewed data. Travesty is a capable player. The Wildcard that killed Percivus had no idea how to wield a knife and was a complete novice in how he dispatched his opponent.

So everything we thought we knew about this Travesty character is wrong? What sort of play-style do you think he would have, in your professional opinion of course?

Raising both of his hands with palms upward, McClea balanced the two whilst maintaining eye contact with Samantha.

On one side we have Jørgen who has excelled for years as a Ranger class character. He's playing to his current strengths with this new Crusader class that he's playing. Plate armour would normally restrict and prohibit movement speed, but his celestial wings give him more versatility. That alone makes him a fearsome

opponent to the Paragons because he can create range and take them out from a distance. We've already seen this with how Khance and Greaves lost their battles with him. If you add the fact that Jørgen's armour allows him to take heavy punishment, then consider that his light blessings heal him... he's essentially the worst match-up for all the Paragons. Apologies, Samantha. To understand Travesty, you need to understand Jørgen.

McCleaan then looked at his other hand, which he raised slightly.

Travesty is a tactician. He's methodical and plans his attacks based on the weaknesses of his opponent. His capability is actually quite fearsome, but it's ultimately going to be his downfall. I would bet that Travesty will be a Strategist or in some form of Commander type role. I would have envisioned him as the Shadow General, but as we've seen... Khance took that role. Regardless of what class he took, he's likely to lose the encounter with Jørgen. That's just a fact.

How can you be so sure?

This time the mocking tone came through a lot more clearly as McCleaan shuffled in his seat with a laugh. The glance he gave Samantha comprised disbelief.

Jørgen replaced Helena, and with it, achieved Legendary Rank. Helena is at Disciple Rank, which I can only assume was a piss-poor effort to add balance to the game. The other Paragons started new characters, most of which were at Standard Rank. This is going to be true of the Wildcards too... so Travesty will be very unprepared for the upcoming fight. It's highly likely that he will avoid a confrontation. Then again, I suppose we could argue that ranks mean nothing after seeing how the Paragons practically sailed through their ascendancy quests to rank up? It just brings us back to how the game is fundamentally flawed.

Samantha nodded her head in an encouraging manner, hoping to pull more information from her guest, when suddenly her eyes caught movement at the edge of the studio. She resisted the urge to turn her head, but was grateful to hear the voice of her producer echo in her ear. Something incredibly exciting was happening and a genuine smile pulled at her lips. She raised a hand as if to halt McCleaan, and judging from his facial reaction, you would have guessed that she slapped him.

Sincere apologies for cutting across you like that, Mr. McCleaan... but it looks like we have a surprise guest joining us today on the show.

Standing up from her desk, Samantha practically danced around the table to embrace her new guest. When her body broke away from the unknown figure, the camera captured a perfect shot of anger on McCleaan's face.

Viewers, I am delighted to introduce you all to one of our favourite people in the world of gaming. The former General of Light and Abidden's new Breaker, Frederick Hargreaves!

Greaves gave an uncharacteristic grin as he waved to where the cameras were recording. In a show of indifference, the hulking figure pulled his guest chair closer to Samantha's desk, which forced McClean to move out of the way. His smile was unapologetic as he took a seat and brought up his interface. As if to bring the attention back to himself, McClean's voice rose to deliver a barbed comment.

You seem quite happy for a man that was just defeated by Jørgen! Are you sure that attending interviews is the best use of your time?

The mocking smile was back on his lips as he got comfortable again in his own seat.

Viewers of the Samantha Show were treated to a rare sight as Greaves laughed good-naturedly. Without so much as a word, he brought up his interface and made a show of checking his messages. Just when Samantha was about to ask what he was doing, Greaves finally spoke.

Well... it looks like there's no hush money in my bank account from Elisabeth Volte or Volte Aerospace.

Both Samantha and McClean's eyes widened in shock at the comment, with Samantha being the first to recover with a coughing laugh. Few people were brave enough to name and shame corporations, let alone the owners.

I also didn't sign one of those fancy Scumlord non-disclosure agreements... probably because we won that match!

Greaves' entire demeanour was unrecognisable. A carefree individual had completely replaced the normally gruff and irritable figure. His natural charisma completely drowned out the previous analytical rant of McClean.

So what do you say, McClean? Should I finally tell everyone what really happened at the District One Invitational all those years ago?

A mixture of shock and panic washed over McClean, who tried and failed to regain his composure. His voice faltered as he attempted to play the comment off, but the normally stoic Greaves was only getting started.

Samantha, would you and your viewers like to hear a story?