

Chapter Nine: Intentions

From the moment that Quentin and Kell entered the room, a sense of tension and unease drifted between the sponsors. Each of them glanced at one another, wondering who was going to address what they were all thinking. Much to the collective relief of the group, it was Dayna of Nexus Rigs that put them out of their misery. "Quentin, I hope you don't mind me asking you straight like this... but what are your intentions for Abidden in the future?" Her expression was friendly, with a calm smile resting on her face. "Branching away to create your own company has felt a little... unorthodox, and I just wanted to know what's happened? Did you grow bored? Are you looking to own a bigger piece of the pie? Help us understand the thought process behind all of this."

A series of nods and expectant looks came at Quentin from all around the room, with some looking ready to go on the offensive the moment Quentin slipped up. If there was one person who wasn't looking forward to hearing the response, it was Viktor Romero who wished he could just start the day all over again. McClean stood beside him, casually flicking through his interface and looking positively bored. Dayna gestured at Quentin with her open palms, as though she was relinquishing her time to speak. "Ah, yes... about that." Quentin began with a laugh. "I was informed that Helena was being cut from the roster of Heroes, and that I had no say in the matter. The idea of losing our last Paragon was too much, and I finally found my spine. Instead of watching Abidden turn into a circus, I brought us right back to the basics. It's a game, and we want to see people playing it entertainingly. I think we... and I mean that as a collective." Quentin smiled meaningfully as he looked at the faces around the room. "Lost sight of Abidden's core concept."

One sponsor raised a hand to interject, but Quentin spoke over him without missing a beat. That action alone caused a few people to look at the CEO in a new light. "You asked about my intentions for the future? It's very simple. I want to create a competitive gaming landscape that will push Abidden and its players to their limits. Locke hasn't been challenged in years, and we have a wealth of stories, missions, quests, monsters and events that have never seen the light of day. As I'm talking to you right now, there are over a thousand unique enemies that have never been discovered in Abidden. With the Vendetta System in place, those enemies are growing in strength and they're going to change the entire landscape of the game." Quentin's voice was charged with an infectious excitement that drew the sponsors in closer. "I created Vendetta Enterprises to correct the wrongs of my past and share the success of Abidden with the people that made it what it is today. The Paragons have already earned their share of the company, but the Wildcards that are coming through... they have everything to fight for. They're going to go after your Heroes with everything they have, and we're not only encouraging it... we're incentivizing it."

With a slight cough from Kell, Quentin caught himself mid speech and laughed ruefully. "Sorry. Got a little ahead of myself there." Despite their concerns of being overly antagonistic, more than half of the sponsors looked ready to take on the challenge. Others looked unsure as they cast glances towards Dayna, as if to signify that they were closer to selling their seats in Abidden. Quentin recalled the original question he was asked and referred to it. "Apologies Dayna, I could talk for hours about this stuff, so you can probably tell that I'm definitely not bored with Abidden! Do I want more piece of the pie? Sure, but I'll be sharing it with my players... I have more than enough money to be happy. My ambitions are now in seeing something extraordinary unfold. I want everyone to see those incredible moments, and feel that rush of excitement and anticipation... I want to

experience last night's battle again and again, with Heroes and Villains, fighting against the world we've created. It's going to be incredible!"

Glancing over at Viktor, Quentin paused for a moment as he considered his next words. With a slight shake of his head, Quentin turned back to the sponsors and gestured with his hand to where Viktor stood. "Despite our differences of opinion and the strains of our previous working relationship, I have to commend Mr. Romero on his choice of Hero. Jorgen Baw fired up the Paragons and created a wave of excitement for us, but the rivalry between him and the Dread Pirate created a media frenzy." Nods of agreement were the only sign that the sponsors had heard what Quentin said. Viktor didn't move a muscle as he watched Quentin intently, waiting for the eventual knock out that was coming. The CEO continued carefully as he gestured once again at Viktor's rigid form. "Right now, Viktor is your only chance of beating the Paragons and Wildcards."

With that devastating comment, Quentin leaned back and folded his arms with a smile. Viktor's jaw practically hit the floor and McClean barked a laugh of disbelief. The other sponsors didn't fare any better, with many of them making incredulous noises or chattering amongst themselves that Quentin had finally lost the plot. Sarah Dryksell, however, was one of the few that pondered the statement. Kell took that moment to calm the crowd, stepping forward and gesturing gently for their attention. His smile was reassuring as he cast a glance over at the dumbfounded Viktor. "Viktor brought in a Hero that posed a challenge to the Paragons. In the most recent Raid, where Helena defected to the villains... only one of your Heroes could fight against the Paragons. Also, it was my first time in Abidden, and I managed to kill one of your established Heroes. Celebrities with huge fan-bases are great for merchandise sales and consistent viewership ratings, but they're going to be killed relentlessly in the fights to come." Kell walked around the table behind the sponsors as he spoke. His tone was reassuring as he stated the facts. "Getting rid of Percivus was smart. CurioSity getting cut was another good idea. Bartleby, though..." Kell looked over at Viktor as if to check and saw the executive roll his eyes at the news. "Bartleby stood toe to toe with Greaves, which puts him as the second-best Hero in Abidden right now. He was released from his contract a few days ago. We're not here to tell you who you should sponsor and who you shouldn't. What you need to revise is your performance metrics. Marketability should be a bonus rather than a requirement. You need to prioritise competence and experience if your roster is to have any chance of survival in Abidden. Viktor understands the game and has shown he has good instincts, even though he's an asshole."

Viktor wasn't sure if he should have been annoyed by the comment or grateful for easing the tension in the room. His prospects of getting the Scumlords into the game hadn't been completely dashed. He even had a few backup plans if they refused to take his initial offer. The executive calmly watched Kell pace around the room, wondering what the motives were behind all of this. Did they want something from him? Were they going to negotiate something to do with Jorgen? There were too many questions and not enough answers, but Viktor was certain that they needed him for something. If they needed him for something, that meant he could likely get a few more seats on the roster. He wouldn't be able to negotiate a Wildcard seat, but maybe one or two of the Hero positions. As he thought back over the words Kell had used, he paused and looked at Quentin. Did the CEO genuinely only care about the game being entertaining? Was that their play? Viktor bit his lip out of habit before catching himself. But it was too late. Kell's eyes were on him.

"Like right now, look at him... he's just been called an asshole, and he's currently calculating how to get his players into the game. That's the level of dedication you all need." Kell laughed as he gestured at Viktor. The executive had the decency to give the Wildcard a thin smile and immediately stopped his scheming to listen intently. Kell gave him a wink that could have almost been called conspiratorial, before he resumed talking to the sponsors. They weren't idiots and many of them had

built their own fortunes, so swaying tactics wouldn't cut it. Then again, some of them saw this as a hobby and made their decisions purely with emotions and instinct. Kell was targeting both groups at the same time. "The reason myself and Quentin have come over to you was not to rush you into deciding, or to put pressure on you. Rather, we wanted to explain the changes that were going to be coming up in Abidden and to give you as much of a head start as possible. The Villains side are only going to be fielding six Wildcards from today's intake. We'd recommend you carefully consider the ones you're ready to proceed with, or the ones you're hoping to pick. If you make a rash decision now, it'll likely come back to bite you in the ass."

Kell tapped the interface on his wrist and sent a file to the table. "You'll see here our planned expansion for Abidden. It's going to be launching soon and will incorporate a lot of changes to how the players will interact with the world and how the world will react to them. It's going to reward people that have long-term strategies and can foster relationships with the NPCs around Abidden. If we were to look at Ethan Davenport, he would be a good example. He is quite liked across the continent, because he acts like a Hero and whilst he's probably a bit too performative, it works for Abidden right now. In the Kingdoms expansion, Ethan would likely rise to prominence either as a Monarch, or he'd be able to put one of his companions in that position. It's quite easy to see him in that role, and how interesting do you think it would be if you had Ethan running a Kingdom? How would he react to the threat of war? Would he lead his armies from the front lines? Can you imagine that sort of battle being streamed to millions of adoring fans? Now, what about ShieldBro? Or MamaBest? Can you imagine them having any sort of impact or commercial draw for this new era of Abidden? The answer is no. They're not aligned with our goals, and even if they were, they're likely to underperform. Does anyone disagree?"

Silence took over the room as many of the sponsors dissected the information in front of them. There were visuals of castles, armies, armour and many new areas that they had never seen before. Quentin saw the surprise on their faces and added in his sentiments again. "As I've said, there was a lot of material we made over the years that never got approved. Now is the time for us to make these changes and give the viewers something exciting to look forward to."

Dayna laughed at the interjection as she glanced over at Quentin with a smile. "Are you asking us to approve this, or telling us to approve this? That spine you grew is quite fierce!" The smiles that appeared on the faces of the sponsors as they continued to go through the information showed that they, too, were pleasantly surprised by the change in Quentin. Seeing it as his opportunity to dive back in, Quentin started talking through the different units, buildings, and factions that would appear with the new expansion. The meeting tempo had changed, and now all of them were wondering who this man was and what he had done with the previous iteration of CEO. Kell happily relinquished the room to Quentin, who was in his element explaining all the details of the upcoming expansion. "For example, if we think about JeffX's capability as a Bard... what if he was a Battle Bard? If he aligned with an army and gave them a buff, all those soldiers at standard level would be able to compete with the Dread Faction for a short period of time! How would that turn the tide? JeffX singing a power-ballad over a battlefield, Helena's dragon looming above, the Tempest sailing into battle and launching cannons from the sea. It would dwarf anything we saw last night, and that's only from naming a handful of players. What will the world look like if you get another James Sylvester? To drive conflict, we need capable and confident players that will rise to the occasion. Their role as a brand ambassador should be secondary to their competence on the battlefield or in the game. Oh yes! And the Factions, I just spoke about the Dread Faction... well imagine if they became the Dread Fleet? What happens if the Dread Captain makes an army? Sure, they'd have a

few penalties for marching on land... but they'd destroy practically anything in their path. Kell, I don't think I should even tell them about the World Bosses..."

Kell spread his hands wide as he laughed. "It's a lot for them to take in, but I'm seeing a lot of excited faces in the room. Why don't we take a break and stretch our legs a bit? The ones bored to tears can get a drink with me, and the ones wanting to know more about your expansion can chat to you. Sound good, everyone?" With that said, several relieved faces got to their feet and went straight to the bar. When quiet finally came back to the room, Sarah Dryksell breathed a sigh of relief and looked across to the only other occupant in the room. Dayna from Nexus Rigs returned her sigh with an imitation herself before speaking. "So, I'll put my cards on the table and hope you'll return the favour. I'm looking for seats for a team I'm putting together, but you have something else that I want."

Sarah leaned forward and folded her arms on the table before hazarding a guess. "You want some of the rooms in the new Dryksell Tower?" To her surprise, Dayna laughed it off and waved her hand as if it was a joke. "Not at all! It's a fine tower, but I have a few of my own. What I would be interested in trading from you, is Alexander Vance."

To say Sarah was stupefied would be an understatement. "Khance? You're looking for him? He's like... the most underperforming Paragon on their roster and has the highest level of in-game deaths on the villain side." Dayna's smile remained fixed. "Then you should happily trade him across? What's your price?"

Shaking her head, Sarah tried to get her mind around this whole situation and felt somewhat as though she was the butt of an unknown joke. Was there some history that she didn't know about? "I'm sorry, but my father was the one to secure that particular contract. He seems very keen on keeping Khance on our roster despite his low performance in-game."

Dayna's smile didn't fade, but her eyes showed her disappointment. "Not to worry, Sarah. It would seem as though your father is quite the perceptive man." With that said, Dayna got to her feet and tilted her head towards Sarah before moving to the door. "I'll have my people arrange the change of seats."

Sarah, however, wasn't done. "What do you mean, he's perceptive? Am I missing something?" Dayna gave Sarah an appraising look, as if to decide if she would explain herself or not. After a moment, she rested her hands on the back of one of the chairs and gave Sarah a level stare. "Get him clean, and off the Softeners. Put him in the rig I made for him and see what happens."

"Softeners? The stabiliser drugs?" Sarah was baffled by the statement and had even more questions, but Dayna was already leaving. With a final turn, Dayna looked back at Sarah with a mischievous smile before giving one last piece of advice. "You should recheck the scoreboard by the way. Khance hasn't died yet."