

Wildcards - Chapter 28: Realisation

"Jackal, give me a briefing on the first day of Abidden please."

James requested as he took a sip of coffee. He wasn't tired, or particularly thirsty... he just wanted the bitter taste. Billy had invited him to watch the Raid, but James declined. He hadn't yet explained to Billy what had happened in the last few weeks and he guessed that his friend was worried about him. Thinking of his friend, James then thought of Milly. She was another person he had completely neglected since he reunited with the Paragons. James had been postponing going through his notifications as most of them were the old messages of concern from the Paragons. He couldn't bring himself to delete them, but he didn't have the desire to go reading through them either. Instead of thinking about it too much, James made a mental note to contact his friends after he got to grips with Abidden. The game was his top priority at the moment and he didn't have the time or luxury to be slacking off.

How would you like your briefings to be structured?

James glanced at the screens that he had on all of his windows as he thought about the question for a moment.

"I want my individual performance analysed and then compared to the information we have access to about the other Paragons, Wildcards and Heroes."

Anything else?

James was about to decline when an idea struck him.

"Could you add in anything you think would be helpful to boost my own performance in the game?"

Understood. One moment please.

As James waited on the results he glanced over at the Rig that he had spent most of the day in. He didn't feel the same level of discomfort that he had associated gaming rigs with. Instead of feeling weak and nauseous, his body felt as though he had been working out all day. It was a pleasant type of exhaustion that he wasn't accustomed to. James knew he could easily log back into the game for a few more hours and his mind and body would be fine. He had even been reluctant to log out since he had been making good progress in the forest but he needed to see the raid and the big reveal of the Villains expansion.

James waited another few moments before raising his voice in concern.

"Jackal, is everything okay?"

The AI never took this long with any sort of request, which meant there was something wrong.

I need permission from Locke to access your data in Abidden. Locke needs approval from Dario or Quentin to authorise my request. It should take only a few more moments.

Blinking in surprise, James eventually nodded his head as he processed what the AI had just told him. Jackal really was a few tiers higher than any of the AI units that were available on the marketplace. He wondered what other uses he could put her processing power toward, but right now all that mattered was his performance in Abidden. For him to get better, he needed to see how he compared to the rest of the competition.

"Jackal, you understand what I'm trying to accomplish with all of this data. I'd like you to add any additional information that you think could be used to give us an advantage."

Understood. First we will work on optimisation of the Dread Pirate. After that, we will create a plan to give you a competitive edge based on the information we have access to.

James grinned as he placed his coffee cup down on the table. His shoulders were itching with muscle fatigue and he kept rotating them in the hopes that it would alleviate the sensation.

Dario has consented. Locke has allowed me access. Would you like me to make the changes automatically or go through them with you individually?

"Individually, please. Thank you, Jackal."

Detected Issue: You're slower than Kincsö despite both of you having a Dexterity orientated build.

*Solution: Change combat setting from **Player vs. Environment** to **Player vs. Player**. Proceed?*

"Yes! What is the main difference?"

*In **Player vs. Environment**, the environment around you slows down as you perform your abilities. This is proven to reduce motion sickness, nausea and disorientation. Alternatively, in **Player vs. Player**, your character moves at a higher speed which carries the aforementioned risks.*

"How much faster would I be if we switched to PvP mode?"

James asked as he picked his coffee back up in excitement. His eyes glanced over to the news footage of the raid being shown again and again from different angles. When Kincsö disappeared in front of ShieldBro, James appreciated how terrified the Hero must have been at that very moment.

Player vs. Environment slows down the world by 25% when you're using aim-based skills or movement-based skills. Player vs. Player allows you to move at your full speed all the time.

"Why didn't it just give me that option from the beginning?"

The Wildcards have been allocated an adjustment period to gain familiarity with their new Class. The Paragons started the game in Player vs. Player mode.

"Wait, does that mean that the Heroes were in Player vs. Environment mode? Is that why they died so quickly?"

No, they died because they fought poorly. None of their Classes were movement orientated. Player vs. Player mode has specific benefits for speed based Classes.

"Okay, what's next?"

James asked as he continued to stare at Kincsó's attacks. When he logged in, he would be able to move as fast as her. The idea of that kind of speed was incredibly enticing. He started to think of the fight with the Goblins and how much more efficient it could have been if he was able to move faster.

*Your mode has been successfully changed to, **Player vs. Player.***

A flickering of light caught James' attention, which caused him to look for its source out of reflex. The Threat Profiles section of his window screen had changed colours.

"With just one change, I'm suddenly more of a threat?"

James laughed as he counted the Heroes he was capable of fighting in a one on one situation. Prior to the raid, James had been a bit skeptical of a level one new character being capable of killing an established Hero. Yet, the Paragons made short work of the raid party, with only Greaves having a tough time in his fight with Bartleby.

"Bartleby, how would I fare against you?"

James looked up at the list, only to see the Battle Brewer up at the top of the list beside Ethan. Both of their portraits were shaded in red to indicate that the Dread Pirate wouldn't be capable of beating them in a one-on-one fight.

"JeffX, CurioSity, Percivus, MamaBest... all green. Which isn't really a surprise. ShieldBro is red? Which means Kincsó is stronger than me?"

As James was talking to himself, Jackal interjected.

It is incorrect to deduce that Kincsó is stronger than you based on her fight with ShieldBro. Based on statistics, Kincsó should have lost in her fight against him.

Based on power levels alone, the Paragons should have lost their fight. You'll note that Scarr and Khance remained outside of the fighting. They are both the weakest players in all of Abidden right now.

"Can you put up a ranking please?"

Of the strongest players?

"No, of the weakest."

James replied with a smile as the information appeared in front of him.

"Wait, how is Scarr at the top of this list? He's weaker than JeffX and MamaBest?"

Scarr's Class is the Soul Hunter. He made a decision which resulted in him being one rank below the starting class. He will begin the game as a Commoner, not unlike Shari that you encountered before she became your Follower.

"Hopefully he's happy with his class."

James said absentmindedly as he thought of his own character creation. He wondered if a similar thing happened to Don, if the game had pushed an option at him from the beginning.

Are you happy to be the Dread Pirate?

Jackal asked suddenly, which caught James by surprise. He forgot for a moment that there was a personality hidden somewhere in Jackal. Thinking of the question that she had just posed to him, James only needed a second to answer.

"Yes. It's actually quite exciting so far. It's outside of my comfort zone and I need to learn more about it, but so far, it's fun!"

Good. Are you enjoying Abidden?

"Yes. Although I've only really just started and fought some Goblins. I wouldn't say that I've made any sort of progress in the game."

Would you like to continue optimising the Dread Pirate?

"Yes. Let's get to it."

Detected Issue: You can't learn skills passively.

Solution: You can improve existing skills until you acquire new ones. Charlatan's Cutlass has the capability to steal skills which will improve your versatility in battle. You can acquire equipment that will grant you an Intelligence bonus. By gaining

one point of the Attribute, you will be able to learn new skills passively albeit at a much slower pace.

James paused as he listened to the solution provided by Jackal. A lot of these concepts had crossed his mind, but it was great to get the facts of the situation instead of him overthinking it. Being able to learn skills would give him a lot more peace of mind.

"Understood. What's next?"

Detected Issue: Class Progression has not been prioritised.

Solution: You need to complete your Class Quests to unlock the true power of the Dread Pirate. Find your Ship. Recruit your Crew. Establish your Lair. Grow your Faction. This will give you more offensive and defensive options. The Dread Pirate will be able to level up faster and will have additional supports.

James shook his head ruefully as he listened to the AI. Jackal was completely right, he had just run off into the forest to fight Goblins because of his excitement of playing the game and his annoyance with Calista from the Pantheon. If he wanted to succeed at the game, he needed to be smarter than what he had done up until that point. Now that he thought about it and heard the words from Jackal, James had to laugh. It was so uncharacteristic of him to run into a fight without a plan. He prided himself on his patience and planning, but when it came to his first foray into Abidden, he had thrashed through the trees to kill some Goblins.

"I really needed to hear that, thank you, Jackal!"

You're welcome. Would you like me to make suggestions regarding your Sponsorship contract?

James froze at those words. He had been so focused on the game that he hadn't even thought of consulting with Jackal about his partnership with Nox Holdings.

"Yes please, Jackal."

Your contract is annual. The normal term for a contract is Monthly or Quarterly, to maintain competition between the sponsors which results in the Player getting the best deal available. As a new player in Abidden, this is a very poor contract. For you, this is a very lucrative contract.

"Why is there a difference in its value based on me?"

James asked as he tried to keep an edge out of his voice. He couldn't help but feel like he had just been insulted. Before he could stop himself, he added another comment for Jackal.

"Should I just be grateful because I'm in debt?"

Nox has given you a permanent residence which you have a track record of living in. Since she didn't accept your contract breakage fee, you never stopped being her

tenant. To ascend to D-Class, you need to have guaranteed employment for a year or more. Normally sponsors wouldn't take a risk of that length of time on an unknown player, so that is why it's lucrative to you in this instance. Once you've cleared your debt, you will be eligible to become a D-Class citizen.

Your debt can be cleared relatively quickly if you meet your performance obligations with Nox Holdings. Nox requires you to maintain favourable ratings, develop territories or properties and finally to defeat Heroes. You won't have ratings or the opportunity to defeat Heroes until you've had your debut as the Dread Pirate. To ensure you achieve the bonus from Nox, you will need to develop your territories. To gain a territory, you need to establish a lair.

"Okay, those are good points. We'll worry about the D-Class application another time, but it's great news! I need to focus on my own performance. Jackal, can you look at the Loremaster's files to find the most suitable location for me to establish a lair?"

There is a large village called Rayth that is not far from your location. I don't have more information about it at this time as it is one of the new areas released with the expansion. Geographically, you're situated in an undiscovered area of Abidden. The Dread Lake surrounds the island where you're located. It will be difficult to leave that starting zone without your Ship. Combining the protection of the Dread Lake, the undiscovered nature of Rayth as well as your current anonymity as the Dread Pirate, that village is the most suitable location for you to establish your Lair.

"I have a few more hours that I can log-in for. So might as well get started. Thank you for your help, Jackal. Can you work on optimisations and analysis while I'm playing?"

Of course. Have fun.

James laughed as he placed his cup back on the table. He hadn't yet changed out of his suit for the Chessmaster, so he didn't need to do much to get ready. Just as he was about to get into the rig, Jackal's voice echoed around him.

James, wait. Locke is sending me information that needs to be relayed to you.

"Is everything okay?"

Suddenly, all of the screens illuminated and showed what looked like a press conference. However, in this conference, James only recognised one person who stood to the side of a beautiful blonde woman. It was a face that was etched into his mind from a lifetime ago.

"It is with great pleasure that we're able to welcome back one of the greatest eSports Players into the Volte Aerospace family. With Helena's recent departure from Abidden, we're delighted to announce that Volte Aerospace will be the official sponsor of the newest Hero! Jorgen Baw! For those of you that haven't heard of him, he's the former Leader of the Scumlords! Five time District One Invitational

winners. Former holder of the PvP First-Knife Award, which he earned by having the fastest kill speed in the Platinum League. He's also a bit shy about the fact that he has killed Helena, in-game, in the past."

Jorgen's face didn't so much as twitch throughout the speech. His eyes were sharp and focused on a point directly in front of him. He looked like he was trained in the military as he remained quietly by the woman's side.

"We're so happy to be sponsoring Jorgen again after all these years and firmly believe that he should be given a proper chance in Abidden. You see, Jorgen here isn't like the other players like the Paragons or Heroes... He's a C-Class citizen, and we don't think his social class should disqualify him from competing. I hope that you'll all join me in welcoming Abidden's newest Hero!"

James loosened his jaw that he had been unconsciously clenching in tension. He had killed Jorgen Baw back at the District One invitational. He had been the last person to die in the team battle. James knew that Jorgen blamed him for everything that happened since. The Scumlord's lost their sponsor, they lost their place in the Platinum League, they disbanded and went off to become solo players... all to limited success. James was the person that prevented the Scumlord's from entering Abidden. He single-handedly ruined their career.

"Jackal, what are the chances he knows that I'm a Wildcard?"

James couldn't help but ask as he watched the stoic figure on the screen.

Suddenly, a reporter's voice pierced through the crowd to get a statement from the new Hero.

Mr. Baw! In today's press-conference with the Paragons, I challenged Helena with the fact that you've killed her in the past.

A flicker of amusement crossed Jorgen's face as he turned to regard the reporter. He didn't say a word which the reporter took as an invitation to continue.

She went on to say that the person that killed you in the District One Invitational... is in Abidden, right now, as a Wildcard. How do you respond to that?

Whatever composure or militaristic vibe that Jorgen Baw possessed up until that moment, was thrown viciously out the window as he let out a growl. His hands started to shake in anger as he looked down at the reporter. A moment of silence washed over the crowd before Jorgen finally began to laugh. It was a low chuckle at first before climbing in pitch to become a maniacal laughter. Some of the crowd took it as confidence, others took it as genuine mirth. Few detected the unbridled rage that was emanating from Jorgen Baw at that very moment. When it looked like he wasn't going to say anything to the reporter, he finally spoke.

"I'll see you soon, Travesty."

There's a 100% chance that he knows you're a Wildcard.

Jackal answered in the same robotic tone and James couldn't help but laugh.

"I think its time to make the Dread Pirate stronger!"

Good plan.