

Chapter 35: Paragons in Action

A gentle vibration slowly woke James up. It took a few moments to realise what was happening, before he finally found the culprit. The alarm on his wrist was rhythmically buzzing to get his attention.

Leaning back with a heavy sigh, James raised his voice without opening his eyes.

"Jackal, what time is it? What did I miss?"

It had been years since he had spent so long in an in-game environment. Liliana had suggested to him he should take it easy and ease himself back into a routine of using the rig regularly. James, however, felt that he didn't have that comfort. And now, after experiencing what the game had on offer, he suspected he would spend as much time in Abidden as he could. His body had felt so weak when he pulled himself out of the rig the previous night, he realised he hadn't eaten in such a long time and that he was feeling somewhat dehydrated. He intended to ask Liliana if he was using the nutritional packs correctly or if the symptoms he was having were natural side-effects of prolonged use in the rig.

He idly wondered if he could check in on the status of his faction while out of the game. Before he had logged out, he had assigned practically everyone in the faction a mission. Some of them had been high risk, while others seemed easily achievable. One mission that he really wanted to watch involved the follower that was eligible to become a member of his crew. It had turned out that the eligible person was the elf that he had seen fighting with fire against the former Slaver. What seemed bewildering was the role it had suggested for him. He was apparently the ship's Cook. James felt that there was some karmic irony occurring as his Quartermaster was the former slave captain and his potential new Cook was a former slave.

James had intended on spending more time trying to decide on the best course of action in Pedro's office, but the locket around his neck had become very close to expiring, so he needed to decide fast. He concluded that the most important thing for the Dread Faction was to establish a foothold in Rayth. Thankfully, he could utilise most of his followers that were previously Slavers to go out and complete that quest. From what James understood, all they needed to do was hold certain positions in the town for a period. This was one of the easier quests available on the board that James thought would have a high impact. The riskier ones that he implemented had a higher level of difficulty and a higher reward. James had sent Pedro and the new Cook with the unpronounceable Elven name to the Merchant District. He instructed Shari to go with them so she could sell off the equipment they had gotten from the Goblins. It probably wouldn't be much gold, but it was better than nothing. He also hoped that Pedro could get a better price with his charisma stat.

Pedro and the Cook's mission was to reinstate the protection ring. The reason this was so risky was because the Dread Faction was a complete unknown in Rayth. James's logic for sending the two of them, was that they had an equal blend of skills across all the attributes. It had

delighted him to find out that the Cook had attributes in wisdom and intelligence. It was an area that the faction had been sorely lacking in. Incidentally, James discovered Dervius could still welcome magic users as his followers. Until this point, James had assumed that any follower he took on would naturally become a dexterity based user. The Cook's class was Dusk Mage. He was Master rank and had a pretty high level.

The time is 1:42 PM. You missed quite a lot.

James finally opened his eyes and stared at the ceiling of his apartment. His chest and back ached as though he had completed a full workout the day before. He wasn't exactly sure when his body would start putting on more mass, but he was happy enough that he wasn't in any actual pain. The alarm on his wrist started up again, which caused James to groan in annoyance. His right hand came up to slap at the alarm repeatedly until it shut off. The words of the AI finally reached his ears, causing him to bolt upright in the bed.

"What do you mean I missed quite a lot? What happened?"

James asked frantically as he pulled himself out of the bed. His body ached with the sudden movement, but he ignored it as he made his way towards the kitchen. He idly noticed that he hadn't yet changed out of his Rig suit. He made a mental note to find out how to clean it or how he could get more of them to alternate between. He couldn't imagine that it was very hygienic to use the same one repeatedly.

The Paragons have made significant progress with their new characters. Jørgen Baw has completed his character creation and is now in the game. Media speculate the Wildcard Travesty was the one to kill Percivus.

As he opened the bedroom door, James' eyes darted to the screens surrounding his rig. He wanted to understand everything that was happening as dozens of questions rushed through his head. What met his eyes caused his stomach to lurch uncontrollably. The progress that he had been so happy with in Abidden suddenly felt inconsequential as reality came crashing all around him.

Aside from Scarr, who has achieved Master Rank, Greaves, Kincsö and Khance have all achieved Unique Rank by completing their Class quests.

"But they started the same rank as me... They were Standard Rank?"

James asked in disbelief as he verified Jackal's messages with his own eyes. It was true, their stats were all updated on the live feed in front of him. He couldn't figure out what had happened.

Each of them assisted one another with their Class Quests. With Helena's support, they could take on a greater level of difficulty and bypass the Master Rank to become Unique Rank.

As if to provide context, the primary screen that held all the Paragon stats changed to show in-game footage of the Villains in action. Five distinctive feeds appeared in front of James, who looked at each of them in confusion.

"Jackal, can you explain what's happening in this one?"

James walked closer to the screen to look closely at one particular image. It looked like several figures laying down on a staircase.

That is the Tower of Brutus. The High Temple of Strength and Endurance. Scarr has challenged the Tower to fulfill his Class Quest.

"What is his Quest?"

Scarr needs to kill the God of Strength. Each floor is a representation of Rank. He has already surpassed the Standard Floor, and it's Boss.

James watched the footage quietly for a few minutes. Scarr's character wore a simple pair of linen pants. Apart from that, he was completely naked. His skin morphed and changed as he moved from one opponent to the next. When James looked at it closer, he saw it was a series of tattoos on his body that were changing by the moment.

"What is happening with the marks on his body?"

The Goddess of Luck, Fortuna, gave him the Soul Hunter Class. In his Character Creation, she explained he could consume the greatest skills of his defeated foes. Each power he consumes makes a pattern on his skin.

James whistled in surprise at the mention of the unknown God. He had been curious who the other pedestal had belonged to in the Pantheon. The Class that Scarr had received sounded pretty interesting.

"So his abilities are like my Charlatan's Cutlass?"

Yes, but Scarr's ability is more potent than your sword. Your gained ability from the Butcher, Cleave, is a good example. Your highest attribute, which is Dexterity, determines the power of that ability.

James nodded his head as he listened to the AI's explanation. It didn't seem that much different to his sword.

Any ability that Scarr consumes becomes his. It will grow in power with him and will grow with each Rank he attains.

He watched as Scarr navigated through the floor of the Tower. His fighting style was no longer the comedic style that his viewers loved. A much grittier and violent assortment of punches and

kicks had replaced it. James gasped in surprise when he saw Scarr twist the neck of one of his opponents with a vicious snap.

"He really abandoned the Monk. Are we certain that is Scarr?"

James could scarcely believe it as he played back the beginning of the fight to watch it again at a slower pace.

Yes, that is Don Orso playing as the Villain, Scarr. His hand-to-hand combat stats are quickly rising to the top of the leaderboard amongst both Heroes and Villains.

"And you said he's going to kill Brutus? This is... insane. It's the first day! Why are they so fast at this?"

When the Paragons first entered Abidden at the very beginning. It took them three days to raise their Rank to Master. They reached Unique rank after two months. They tied each of their ascensions to a raiding or dungeon event. It's common knowledge that they needed to slow their progress to build suspense for viewers back when the game was first launched.

James glanced at the other feeds before taking a step back and rubbing his eyes. Whilst the raw footage was interesting, he was curious to know how the media was covering the meteoric rise of the Paragons and their characters.

"Jackal, can you show me the media coverage for Abidden?"

Jørgen Baw is dominating most of the news at the moment. Would you like me to feature him first?

"Yes, please."

With that said, the assortment of screens faded to black before a single large image appeared in front of him. It showed Jørgen Baw standing with an angelic halo hovering over his head. James unmuted the feed so he could listen to what was being said. The voices of two co-hosts on a morning talk show were excitedly narrating the series of events that had happened overnight. Their current feature was around the Character Creation of the C-Class Underdog Hero.

We've finally gotten our first look at the infamous, Jageranimus! Jørgen Baw will use his former Scumlords in-game identity when he enters Abidden. Whilst there was a lot of speculation that he would take on the role of the Celestial Archer... I think many of us were hoping to see a whole new character being created. Well viewers, you'll be happy to know that we have a brand new character... and a whole new race! Yes, you heard that correctly, Jørgen Baw has started the game as an actual Celestial. You'll recall that Helena gained her wings, but was ultimately human throughout her time in the game. Jørgen will start as an actual resident of

*the Sky Palace. Our first ever Angel Character! Can we show those wings again?
Absolutely gorgeous!*

James couldn't help but raise his eyebrows in surprise. New races were incredibly rare and for them to give it to a new player without him having any prior experience in the game was quite a surprise. He thought maybe it was Quentin's way of saying they weren't playing favourites a little too much with the Paragons. The narrator continued to speak about the new specifications of Jørgen's new character. In the background it showed him standing in front of the Prime Good in the Pantheon. None of the Gods that James had encountered were there. He imagined that since Jørgen was going to be taking Helena's place as a Unique Level Hero, he'd have a much stronger starting build than everyone else.

So Jageranimus... am I saying that correctly? Haha, okay, so it would seem that Jageranimus is going to have full use of his Celestial Wings much like our other players have full use of their legs. There's no cooldown on them, and it would seem he has them as a racial trait. Additional racial traits include a 'Blessing of the Light' which increases his recovery rate dramatically whilst under the sun. In terms of weapons, we had assumed correctly that he would use a Hunter build, reminiscent of his time in the Scumlords where he played as a Ranger. What we got completely wrong though was his class. Say goodbye to the Celestial Archer... and say hello to the Celestial Crusader!

"The Celestial Crusader? That sounds a bit..."

James frowned at the title. He wasn't sure if it was just a gimmick name to tie in with the legacy of the Paragons or if it was a meaningful title.

"Jackal, are the Celestials a Faction? Like, could I be a Celestial Dread Pirate?"

You could not join the Celestial Faction because of your Villainous alignment. The Celestials are direct followers of the Prime Good. Just as Dervius can give you sway with Vampires and Locke can give sway with Demons, the Prime Good rules over the Celestials. To further answer your question, Abidden ties your honorific to Dervius as he is your God.

"Then what about Helena? She's the Disciple of Darkness, and she is backed by the Prime Evil. How come she doesn't have a race in front of her name?"

Helena is currently a part of the Nefarious race. They are a Demon Nobility that live in the shadows. They have yet to be discovered in Abidden, so there is not much information available outside of the content that the Loremasters have provided.

James watched as Jørgen Baw, now in-game as Jageranimus, strode through the Great Hall of the Sky Palace. His armour gleamed in the light as NPCs all around him rejoiced at his appearance. It looked as though he wore a full-plate armour which looked more suited to a

knight rather than a hunter. A sword that hung at his side showed he would be capable of doing significant damage up close if required.

"Is this live? Where is Jørgen now?"

No. This was from a few hours ago when he first launched into the game. He's actively completing quests at the moment in the lands around the Sky Palace. As a Celestial Crusader, he's able to recruit people to his cause, much like your ability to create a crew. His current quests revolve around building up that force.

The screen switched to a new scene of Jørgen flying through a battlefield with his sword drawn. His speed was incredible as his blade cleaved through bodies easily. A burst of sunlight erupted from his blade, followed by a thunderous cheer. It emanated from a group of people that were rushing onto the battlefield. They had scraps of golden armour that looked somewhat similar to Jørgen's. Each of them looked as though the golden blade had buffed them as they tore through the battlefield. Their opponents looked quite similar to the Slavers from Rayth, and James assumed they were bandits that had been growing in power.

"How many quests has he completed since he logged in?"

James asked as his stomach clenched. He felt nausea welling up inside.

Jageranimus is currently on his fourteenth quest. He has assembled a small militia and four unique follower companions.

Closing his eyes to calm himself, James tried to figure out what had gone wrong. Why were so many people ahead of him? The Paragons increased their ranks considerably in a single day. Jørgen Baw had been in the game for less time than him and had achieved so much more. Why was he progressing so slowly in comparison?

"Jackal, how is my performance compared to the other Wildcards?"

You're currently in second place, after Kell Daystar. An in-game opponent killed Elvira Corbeau's character, so she is in last place. In terms of progression and impact on Abidden, you're in second place after Kell Daystar. In terms of wealth, you're in last place. You're only surpassing the Wildcards with your character level.

The gnawing sensation in his stomach grew worse. Anxiety coursed through James as he heard the report from Jackal. He had quietly suspected that he had been progressing well in the game, but to hear the stark reality that he was second last in practically every category was polarising. Normally, his mind would be in overdrive to figure out a solution or a way to correct his path. But his head was completely blank. All he could do was stare at the information in front of him and realise that he wasn't as good as he thought he was.

A few more moments of silence passed as James watched the live feed in front of him. It looked like Scarr and Khance had only logged on recently. Greaves had finished up, so likely had done

a similar all-nighter like James. Kincsö was in the middle of a quest, so he could only guess that she was probably a few hours into her playtime. When he pulled up their log-in times, he saw he was mostly correct. Helena was the longest logged out, but he guessed that was because of her participation in the raid. There were no live feeds of Elvira or Kell because they hadn't yet been unveiled as Wildcards. James saw it as a minor blessing his footage wasn't on display for the world to see just yet.

"Jackal, what else have I missed?"

Travesty has gone viral. A few sources close to Jørgen Baw have spoken out about how Travesty ruined his professional career. There are a series of conspiracy theories that are floating around, all of which contribute to the narrative that Travesty destroyed Jørgen's future prospects. The media channels are all dubbing him, the underdog of Abidden and the C-Class Hero. Pulse data from overnight has shown that an overwhelming majority of C-Class and D-Class citizens support Jørgen Baw. His approval ratings have skyrocketed. Jageranimus vs. Travesty is the most anticipated fight in Abidden, according to the pulse data, with Helena vs. Jageranimus coming a close second. Third place is Bartleby vs. Greaves.

James laughed grimly. He truly had become a Villain.

"Okay, is there anything else?"

Yes. Your first meeting with Nox Holdings is tomorrow evening. They have pulled this forward based on your performance in Abidden, which they labeled as *lacklustre and unsatisfactory*.

James took a seat as he repeated the last two words in his head. Nox wasn't satisfied with his performance. She wanted to see him tomorrow night. Was she going to fire him and break their contract? Was she going to threaten him? James tried to control his breathing, but the anxiety continued to spike as he jumped to conclusions. It wasn't his apartment. It wasn't his rig. He owned nothing in the apartment except for his clothes. The sudden realisation of how easily he could be discarded and replaced flashed through his head. The complacency he had shown until this point almost made him physically sick. He needed to improve his rankings against the Paragons and Wildcards.

Swallowing the discomfort and the pangs of hunger, James strode over to the rig and attempted to open it up. He didn't have much time. He needed to improve his performance before he met with Nox. If he could somehow get better results, then maybe he could turn the whole situation around. It was just one day so far, so he could definitely catch up to them. He just couldn't let them get too far ahead of him. When his hands touched the rig, Jackal's voice filled the air.

You've not yet completed your resting period. You can log back into Abidden in 9 hours and 22 minutes.

James froze at the words as his mind went completely blank. He hadn't considered the recovery cooldown period at all.

Walking back to one of the bar stools in the kitchen, James sat down and cupped his face in his hands. He sat there for a while until his breathing calmed. When he felt stable and no longer at risk of a panic-attack, James got to his feet and walked to his room, not even glancing at the screens on the wall. He stripped out of the rig uniform and had a long shower. The aching in his body relaxed and James tried to let go of the anxiety that was coursing through his body. When he caught himself wondering how much time had elapsed while he was showering, he realised he needed to get out of the apartment and clear his head.

With that decision made, James dried himself off and got dressed. His only set of nice clothes were the ones he had bought for the raid night on Billy's instructions.

James checked his interface and accessed the messages he had been postponing until that point. Dozens of messages and missed calls from Billy. He opened the most recent one and quickly sent an automated reply.

I'll meet you at The Neo. I'm on my way over now.

Walking to the door, James spared a last glance at the screens and the rig in the centre of the room.

"Jackal, please deactivate the screens."

Without so much as a word, the displays disappeared and reverted to their normal window form. Sunlight shone through the apartment, transforming its atmosphere.

A soft vibration shook his wrist, and James looked down to see a reply from Billy.

It was a picture of the abomination that Billy mixed and had dubbed the 'Travesty'.

This thing has never been so popular...

James genuinely smiled at the message as he locked up the apartment and made his way to meet his friend.