

***Thank you for logging in, Quentin. We will begin when all attendees are accounted for. Please stand by.***

The CEO exhaled audibly as he turned around in his own chair. He was back in his office and was practically shaking with excitement. The raid had been a resounding success and he was still in shock that it had gone so smoothly. Once Bartleby died, the screen had faded to black as Helena stepped out of the shadows. Even though it was a short raid, it surprisingly wasn't the shortest in Abidden's history. There had been countless raids that had resulted in a full team wipe due to a stupid decision from Ethan. The fastest on record was less than a minute. Quentin had been instructed to nerf the enemies for all raids going forward after that one.

Quentin watched as each of the Paragons appeared on the screen in front of him. He arranged for them to have a few moments to speak to each other before they started the Investor call. This event wasn't anything like the usual weekly board meetings which only consisted of sponsor representatives and spokespeople. The Investor call was with the CEO's and top Executives for each of Abidden's shareholders. Since it was a new expansion, they were undoubtedly going to have numerous questions for him.

Quentin sighed as he collected his own thoughts. It was going to be a busy evening and he could tell from the faces of the Paragons that they all wished to be back in Abidden, playing as their new characters. After the investor call would be the press conference where Vendetta Enterprises would release more information to the various media companies that Kell had approved to attend. These meetings and conferences were certainly not the strong point of Quentin and he just wanted it to all be over, but there was a small part of him that was excited to tell the world about what they had managed to accomplish in such a short space of time.

Suddenly, Kell's voice entered the channel and addressed the Paragons and Quentin.

"Hey everyone! Well done earlier. Abidden has officially had it's highest viewership in recorded history and our subscription sales have practically exploded in popularity. You've all made a lot of people very rich tonight!"

Quentin had to marvel at how quickly Kell was able to put a smile on every Paragon's face.

Helena laughed as she shot straight back at the Wildcard.

"Eh, Kell, I don't think I was even the star of that performance tonight. You were incredible! Well done on your debut, did you enjoy it?"

Kell laughed off the question as he began to explain the format of the evening.

"Ha, yes. It was fun. Anyway, put your game faces on! You're not going to be dealing with the usual board reps today, this is going to be the heavy hitters. We have Pandora Security, Otterman Intelligence Solutions, Nexus Rigs, Royal D1 and a few others joining our call tonight. Just take a steady breath before you answer any questions they pose to you and whatever you

do, don't get defensive and snap at them. If things start to go sideways, I'll be interjecting on your behalf to smooth things out."

Quentin found himself nodding along to each of the points that Kell was making.

After Kell finished listing everything out for the Paragons, Helena asked him a question.

"Why can't we see your face? Where are you?"

Kell's answer was lined with annoyance.

"I'm stuck babysitting the reporters and media moguls here in the conference centre, but you'll all get to see my lovely face after the investor call."

Helena's voice picked up again.

"Sorry Kell, just wanted to verify... the Investors will be able to see us, but we can't see them?"

Judging from the faces of Khance and Greaves, neither of them knew the answer.

"Correct! These people are big fancy S-Classers like Quentin! They'll want to see their investments. You'll hear them though, so don't panic... most of them are harmless."

Kell answered with a faster tone before cutting off Khance from asking a question.

"We need to wrap this up now. They'll be joining in less than a minute. Compose yourselves."

Each of the Paragons nodded their heads as they readied themselves for what they assumed would be a battle with the investors.

After a brief few seconds of silence, Quentin's voice piped up.

"Did Curio Pharma fire CurioSity?"

Kell just sighed before chuckling lightly.

"Yeah, almost immediately. Percivus is on a tightrope too."

Quentin grinned at the news before throwing in another quick question before the call opened up.

"Did I hear correctly that PlayMates withdrew their sponsorship offer for Percivus?"

Kell paused for a moment, allowing the seconds to tick by until there were only a few left.

"Yeah, they signed with me instead."

The Wildcard teased before the investor call opened up.

Quentin practically choked and nearly fell from his chair.

The Paragons burst into laughter which was the first thing the S-Class investors of Abidden heard.

*Sounds like we've missed a joke! Pandora here, absolutely delighted to see Greaves back on the screen! Didn't think you had the balls to do that, Quentin! Long overdue if you ask me, long overdue! We at PBS Group think it's about time for a change.*

A husky voice started the proceedings with a laugh. It was one of the minor shareholders that only accounted for around one percent of Abidden's ownership, Pandora's Box Security Group.

"Thank you so much for the kind words, Miss Pithos."

Quentin answered with a genuine smile, wondering which investor would be the first dissenting voice from the pack. Pandora Pithos was one of the first sponsors to turn into an investor in the game.

*Haha! How many times do I need to tell you to call me Pandora? I don't want to be too presumptuous, but we'd love to have a chat about sponsoring Frederick Hargreaves again. It's good to see you again, sweetie.*

Greaves' smile was surprisingly gentle as he spoke for the first time on the call.

"I'd be happy to chat in the future, Pandora."

*Delighted to hear that, Greaves! You were incredible tonight... absolutely incredible. I'll be in touch with Kell to sort something out. Oh and I'll be in touch about this whole Vendetta stuff! I want in on it!*

With a final husky laugh, Pandora Pithos muted herself on the call, content in the fact that she had called first preference on sponsoring Greaves.

A moment of silence passed before at least three investors started to speak at the exact same time. One of them went silent, while two continued to speak louder in the hopes it would drown out the other.

Eventually, one of them relinquished and a singular deep voice remained speaking.

*...yes, thank you. Quentin, it's been an exciting evening but there are some concerns. Why were we not briefed about this new expansion? Also, another question we have is about the legal proceedings your team have taken against a former representative of the board, Victor Romero.*

Any of the background chatter between the investors suddenly went quiet at those words. The voice that was speaking belonged to an Executive of Royal D1, the second largest shareholder

of Abidden after Nexus Rigs. Quentin took a moment to collect himself before answering, it had been one of the questions he had expected to arrive and Elvira had already briefed him on the best answer to give them. The excitement of the night and the fact that Quentin had felt free of the board's influence for the first time in years, created a newfound bravery in the CEO. Before he could even think about the lines he had rehearsed with Elvira, he instead went on the offensive.

"It has been an exciting evening. The first in years. Why were you not briefed about the expansion? Probably the same reason I wasn't briefed about the Paragons being replaced. We wouldn't have agreed on the topic."

Quentin retorted in a calm tone as he leaned forward in his chair. One of the voices on the line started to laugh, another gasped and quite a few expressed disbelief. The most important of those voices that had asked the original question, was deadly silent as the CEO continued to speak.

"The legal proceedings that have been brought against Victor Romero were in the interests of the Paragons that were unfairly dismissed. It has since been resolved out of court, an independent arbitrator made a ruling that both parties were satisfied with. You didn't ask a question, so I can only imagine that you were making a statement of concern. Next question."

*Mr. Bell, there is no need for hostility. We at Royal D1 need to protect our interests and make sure that our investment is still sound. We can assure you that we have no agenda outside of making returns on said investments. Your behaviour at this moment in time is causing me to doubt your leadership and suitability as CEO of Abidden Zoetic Enterprises.*

The voice continued, this time equipped with its own edge. Quentin opened his mouth to snap back at the man, but was instead interrupted by a familiar voice.

"Kell Daystar. Head of Media Partnerships. I'll take this."

*Thank you, Mr. Daystar. I hope you can shed some light on this situation for us all.*

"Royal D1 owns 11.8% of Abidden at this moment in time. You already know how lucrative that investment has been in the years since, so I won't take up all of our valuable time by jumping into the financials. Tonight alone, Abidden's viewership reached its highest in recorded history. Our subscriptions are up 16% and we have met and exceeded all of our contractual obligations to you. So please don't insult our intelligence by claiming you have a concern regarding your investment. If you wish to withdraw your funding, we have a substantial list of companies that would replace you in an instant."

Quentin merely gaped at the screen, completely thrown by Kell's words. He had thought that he had maybe gone too far, but his little spat was nothing to Kell's path of destruction. Silence followed before Kell continued.

"I appreciate that we're all feeling excited at this moment in time, and due to the secretive nature of us releasing an expansion without the market knowing... it led us to make some unorthodox decisions. All of those things were accomplished under Quentin's leadership, which has resulted in our best performance in history. If you wish to discuss Royal D1's future with Abidden or a potential withdrawal, I can make time for us to speak later in the week. For now, we have an upcoming press conference to prepare for, and a range of equally important investors that have questions for us."

*I apologise. You're correct Mr. Daystar, I believe the excitement of the evening made me choose my words poorly. Lets have that meeting next week, congratulations on a great event tonight.*

Kell's voice remained calm and collected as he responded.

"Thank you. Next question to Quentin, we'll take Nexus Rigs."

Quentin stared dumbly at the faces of the Paragons who returned his blank expression.

*Nexus Rigs here. We knew about the expansion, but we never could have anticipated such a performance. Keep it up, Quentin. To the Paragons... welcome back! That's all from us.*

"Thank you. Next question to Quentin, we'll take Otterman Intelligence Solutions."

*Henry here! Just wanted to say... WOW! That was a phenomenal performance! I think you know what I'm going to ask, but I think now is a better time than any... will we be seeing some Otters in this expansion?*

The CEO couldn't help but laugh.

"You know what, Henry? We put a Unicorn in for JeffX... leave it with me. We might end up getting the Otters!"

*Actually! Yes! What the hell happened with JeffX? There was a different Villain! Can you tell us about that person?*

As Quentin opened his mouth, Kell interrupted once again but with a gentler tone.

"Nice try, Henry. We can't leak information about *those* individuals just yet."

*Ooooooh! You've more than one! Okay, I'm invested... Ha, you know what I mean! That's all my questions, thank you.*

"Thank you, Henry. We're short on time before the press conference is due to commence. Are there any investors that have outstanding questions for Quentin and the Paragons?"

Kell asked matter of factly before falling silent.

Graham from Dryksell Pharma here. I can't remember the last time I actually enjoyed watching an Abidden Raid. Myself and my family were practically glued to the screen! Khance, you were great tonight and we're delighted to have you in the Dryksell family.

A female voice screeched in the background of Graham Dryksell's call which caused a slight chuckle from Kell and a few of the Paragons.

Khance's face went bright red and thanked the CEO for his support.

"Thank you for **sponsoring** me."

Kincsö's grin was wide as she looked at her friend and whispered quite audibly.

"Do you think that was Sarah in the background?"

Khance coughed loudly to try and mask her question, his face now completely scarlet.

Thankfully, Royal D1 came to his rescue with a sudden question.

Dryksell Pharma has secured a sponsorship of a Paragon, how were we not afforded the same opportunity?

Kell's voice sounded out in confusion.

"The Sponsorship event was hosted at the Royal D1 Tower, a representative of your Media & Partnerships Division was in attendance. They were unable to secure the interest of the Paragons or Wildcards on the night, but they can try again in the coming months."

I also turned up to the event personally, which I think adds a layer of authenticity that a representative just can't mimic.

Graham Dryksell explained in a preaching tone and Quentin could easily imagine the CEO laughing in his home at getting a dig in at Royal D1.

If it makes you feel better, I turned up in person too... but alas, nobody wanted to be a Beastman Otter! There's always next time!

Henry's voice added into the mix, enjoying the back and forth.

Kell, Royal D1 would be delighted to host the next sponsorship event. I'll be there personally this time. Thank you for your time tonight.

Kell waited a few more moments before he wrapped up the call.

"Thank you all for your time, we shall revert back to liaising with investor appointed representatives from this point onwards. I appreciate that tonight was more of a debriefing than it was a full investor call, but time is not on our side right now. Good night!"

When the last of the investors left the call, Quentin exhaled loudly in relief.

"That wasn't as bad as I thought it would be!"

The Paragons nodded their heads and chattered between themselves, relief on many of their faces.

Kell's calm and calculated voice brought them back to reality.

"The press-conference is about to begin!"

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Quentin and the Paragons all appeared on screen at the exact same time. In one of the company meeting rooms, dozens of reporters sat at desks with an interface in front of them. The screens were pre-loaded with information that Kell had provided regarding the expansion. The main talking points, exclusive information and questions Quentin and the Paragons would be happy with answering. This type of private press event was standard in the industry, and many of the reporters abided by the rules so that they could guarantee a seat at the table. Kell always allowed a few negative members of the press to join the events, just to keep the reviews balanced. He also encouraged the negative press to ask their questions first, knowing they'd excuse themselves almost immediately to begin their smear campaigns.

At the top of the room in front of all of the reporters, Kell sat on a table with a wide smile on his face. Behind him were the large faces of the Paragons who were ready for the conference to begin. Each of them wore a relaxed smile on their face with only Quentin looking slightly anxious.

"Okay, time to begin. Everyone settle down."

Kell spoke as he clapped his hands and gestured for the staff to close off the doors at the back of the room.

"I don't need to remind you all that all recording is prohibited during this conference. The interfaces that have been provided to you are pre-loaded with clips, interview snippets, images and information regarding the expansion. Everything in that press-pack is completely free for your use. Ah, you all know this already! Let's get started with the interviews... who is up first?"

A hand raised in the air and Kell sighed.

"You can use your interface to signal that you would like to ask a question. No hands necessary."

Kell smiled as a smattering of laughter emanated from the assembled members of the press.

The woman that held her hand up high frowned before tapping into the interface.

"First question is from the Ivy Network."

Kell announced as he gestured up to the Paragons above.

*Yes, I'm from the Ivy Network. My question is for Helena.*

Helena nodded her head to indicate that she was ready.

*Everything about the raid tonight was rushed and lacked the build-up of previous campaigns. Additionally, you've been the Celestial Archer for years now. You've fought the Prime Evil every single time, but now when he appears in front of you... wounded! You join him? It felt contrived and insulting for fans of the Celestial Archer. The Celestial Archer would never have done that.*

The voice sounded emotional towards the end of the question and Helena actually had to stop herself from being sarcastic with the woman. A part of her wanted to say that she would have died uselessly like her friends had done before her. Another part of her wanted to reason with the woman and make her see that no amount of fighting alongside the Heroes would have been enough to take down the Prime Evil. Of all the things that went through Helena's head at that time, the emotional voice of the reporter was what brought her back to reality when she answered.

Thank you for your question. You are correct. The Celestial Archer would never surrender. She was given an opportunity to save her friends who fell to evil. I firmly believe that she is still somewhere inside the Disciple of Darkness... biding her time to free the Paragons from the shadows and finally defeat the Prime Evil.

Kell looked at the reporter to confirm that she was satisfied with the answer before moving onto the next person.

"Tytan, you're up next."

*Thank you. Reporter for Tytan here. My question is for Kincső.*

The reporter hesitated for a moment and looked at Kell, as if to ask if it was okay to continue.

Kell just pointed up at the smiling face of Varya who waved at the screen.

*Kincső, can you tell us more about your new Class? It looks stealth based, but is this an adaptation of the God Blade?*

Varya's smile grew even wider at the question.



My Class is... Ghostblade! It's a completely different character than what you're used to seeing me play. This class specialises in deception, stealth and speed. When I was the God Blade, everyone only knew me as the girl that rushed into battle and attacked the biggest enemy. It was a fun reputation, but it didn't really define me. The Ghostblade Class will allow me to show my personality and strengths outside of combat. You already got to see some of my new tricks tonight. One of my skills allows me to throw my voice in different directions. I was able to make ShieldBro think I was all around him, which allowed me to get in range while he panicked. Little deceptions like that, combined with stealth and speed will allow me to dominate my opponents.

The reporter was nodding emphatically as he raised his hand before pulling it down and tapping the interface in front of him.

Kell sighed as he looked back at the reporter from Tytan.

"I assume you want to ask all of the Paragons about their new classes?"

The Tytan reporter smiled ruefully before giving an awkward shrug.

Kell just nodded as he turned to face the Paragons.

"We're going to get those questions, so we might as well get ahead of it. Khance, you're up next!"

I am the Shadow General. It was originally designed as the mirror of Greaves' previous class, the Light General. The class specialises in strategy, shadows and death. Narratively, I believe there will be an origin cutscene released for myself and Kincsö in the next few days... but I think I'm allowed to tell you some of it?

The former Divine Healer looked at Quentin's screen who gave him a thumbs-up gesture.

Essentially, myself and Kincsö were trapped in the realm of the Prime Evil, fighting off waves of undead. By using the energy around us, we corrupted ourselves in a bid to destroy him. I don't think I can say anymore though! Oh! One last thing, I would like to officially apologise for killing my replacement. Good Healers are so hard to find these days!

Khance finished with a grin as he looked at the other Paragons who merely rolled their eyes or sighed in response. Only Kincsö laughed at his terrible joke.

"Greaves, you're next!"

Kell announced as he gestured to one of the screens, as if the reporters didn't know which Paragon was which.

My class is the Breaker. I specialise in hunting, taming and adventuring. Instead of jumping to take the mantle of Shadow General, I took a step back to think about what I really wanted to do in Abidden this time around. I don't want to be responsible for people, nor do I want to be leading an army or taking the hits from bosses. I wanted to find a character class that would build on my individual strengths and give me an interesting path in Abidden. I hope that the Breaker will allow me to do that.

When Greaves was finished, a number of reporters looked to be a bit underwhelmed by his responses.

"If you look in your pre-loaded packs, you'll find more information on Greaves' new class. Scarr, you're up next!"

Kell started by giving the reporters a meaningful look as they finally started looking through the provided packs.

I am the Soul Hunter. I made a deal with a God that came with an incredibly heavy price. Due to that, I wasn't able to participate in the fight tonight nor can I really comment on my proficiencies as I don't have any. Wish me luck.

If Greaves' response was considered boring and safe, Scarr's was the exact opposite.

Reporters jumped to their feet, and after a stern look from Kell, they started mashing their interfaces to indicate that they had additional questions.

Kell raised his hands and motioned for them to calm down and take their seats.

"You won't find information on Scarr's class in the pack since his class is very unorthodox. Scarr, I think you can give a little bit more information though?"

I originally wanted to be a Ninja, a Beastman Ninja actually. I went into the Pantheon with the intent of being exactly that. Ask my wife! I told her I was going to be a Beastman Ninja. Even had the merch made for my big debut! But it wasn't meant to be...

Don's voice became deeper and more theatrical as he spoke.

The God that spoke to me... she warned me. She told me that nobody else could handle this particular class... she started to explain more about it, but do you know what I said to her?

Don looked directly at the reporters from his screen, pausing for dramatic effect.

I told her. Don't tell me the odds!

Kell shook his head and looked back at the reporters but was surprised to see them all grinning excitedly at Scarr's words.

"Looks like we know what tonight's headlines are going to be... Helena! Are you going to tell us more about your new character?"

Helena smiled as she began to explain.

The Disciple of Darkness is a Legendary Class character and now, quite possibly the strongest character in all of Abidden. The class is a powerful damage dealer with excellent mobility. It'll use a mixture of black magic for ranged attacks and a sword for close combat. I know that my wings were incredibly prolific as the Celestial Archer, but I'm afraid that I've sacrificed them... for a Dragon. I'm not sure if that's the sort of information you're looking for?

Helena teased with a cheeky smile as she looked at the other Paragons to see their reaction.

Scarr groaned as his headline prospects were dashed by the simple mention of a dragon.

Kell got to his feet and clapped his hands to get the attention of the assembled media companies.

"Please, please... we have more to get through! I promise, if you all behave and listen to the boring stuff... we might show you a clip of Helena on the Dragon."

As if by magic, the crowd settled and watched Kell like expectant children awaiting a reward.

"Excellent. Now, Quentin... you're up!"

The CEO just laughed at having his segment being referred to as the boring piece of the event. Looking at Helena for a moment, a playful side of Quentin wondered if his news could topple her headline victory.

Thank you all for attending! I'm delighted to see the excitement generated around our new expansion and the return of our beloved Paragons! Tonight we have launched the first expansion to Abidden... Villains! This expansion was made possible by the creation of a new company, Vendetta Enterprises. Many of you know my motivations in creating this company, especially if you were listening to #Penta-Price's show earlier this evening, but most of you won't know how we did it. Vendetta Enterprises is different to Abidden Zoetic Enterprises in a number of ways. First and foremost, the company is completely private with no external investors. The ownership of the company is as follows:

Quentin tapped the interface to replace his face with a screen that showed the breakdown of ownership for Vendetta Enterprises.

Quentin Bell	10%
Dario Hargreaves	10%
Aliyah Dreyfus	10%
Jasmin Dreyfus	10%
Helena Murdoch	5%
Frederick Hargreaves	5%
Alexander Vance	5%
Don Orso	5%
Varya Weaver	5%
Wildcard cards	35%

As the eyes of the reporters flitted over the information, it was glaringly obvious who had reached the end of the chart. Sudden chattering erupted to identify what a Wildcard was and why it had so much of a share in the business.

Quentin didn't leave them in the dark for too long.

I'm sure you've all identified that there is quite a large share that's unaccounted for at the bottom of the list? Well, I'll put you out of your misery. That share of Vendetta Enterprises is allocated for our new players which we've been referring to as our Wildcards! Right now, there are twenty-three Heroes in Abidden. When Helena's replacement is found, it will be twenty-four. It's unfair to think that our Paragons here would have to go up against such a large force! No, we're instead going to level the playing field and bring in more talent. We've already started, and have a few players already in the game... I think you've all seen one of them already. Well, Percivus certainly has!

The audience laughed good naturedly as they took notes from Quentin's speech. Without raising a hand or tapping an interface, one voice casually asked the CEO a question.

*Do you have any celebrities in mind for these Wildcard positions?*

Quentin blinked in surprise at the interruption and Kell gave the man a withering look before allowing the question.

Quentin laughed as he thought about the question.

I would have thought I made my stance clear on the show with #Penta-Price! There won't be any celebrities joining Vendetta Enterprises as a Wildcard. We're opening up recruitment to the PvP Leagues, the District Invitationals and the Gaming Universities to start off. We're confident that we'll find the right type of players that will add to the Villains expansion experience. As for them becoming shareholders, well... getting into the game is one thing, keeping their place is another. We're going to bring competitive gameplay back into Abidden!

The CEO grinned as he finished his speech, delighted with how it was received. The excitement in the packed conference room was palpable.

Kell was about to wrap up the conference when one last question came in for Quentin from one of the smaller media outlets that usually ran negative campaigns.

"Okay, you're the last one. Make it quick."

Kell instructed the reporter who raised his voice to be heard over the excited chattering.

*Mr. Bell... you mentioned previously that there are only twenty-three Heroes in Abidden at this time. Can I take it that you are unaware of the fact that Helena Murdoch's replacement has already been found?*

The room went deathly quiet in an instant as the reporter stood firm, a self-satisfied smirk on his face as he waited for a comment from the CEO.

Quentin decided to take the bait.

I can't imagine they found someone better than Helena, but I'll humour you, go on.

The reporter's smile didn't falter in the slightest as he responded immediately.

*On the contrary, Mr. Bell. The Heroes have signed Jørgen Baw. Former Leader of the ScumLords... who killed Helena in-game the last time they met!*

Quentin floundered at the remark and the reporter looked practically elated.

Kell moved in to try and manage the situation but Helena's voice washed over the whole crowd, her words freezing everyone in place.

Good thing one of our Wildcards is the guy who killed him.