

Chapter Ten: Shifting Landscape

Welcome back! It's your go-to host for all things Abidden, #Penta-Price! I'd forgive you for forgetting about me, what with every single streamer in the District switching over to give their hot takes on the Dread Pirate. Ha! No no, I'm not salty... hell, I'm not even mad. It just goes to show that we've moved to a whole new level of popularity! I've been informed by the team over at Abidden that we'll be launching some cool merch and discounts for all the loyal fans that stuck with us through the years. Don't despair if you're new here, there's some pretty interesting things in the works for you too! For example, today we're going to have a special guest joining us. It's not one of the Paragons, just to manage all those expectations! It's going to be a Loremaster from Abidden, who will announce some upcoming changes to the game, that I'll admit... sound pretty damn incredible.

But before we switch over to her, we need to do a quick rundown of everything that's happening behind the scenes. What? You haven't heard? The other streamers haven't told you what's happening over at the Abidden Headquarters? Could it be that they don't have that level of exclusivity that we earned over here? Okay, okay... I'll stop. Just as a warning to those of you who are new to watching in-game streams. Always check that you're watching a licenced stream. I'm dedicated to bringing you the juiciest and hottest takes in all things Abidden, and sometimes, I'll even have the players join me in the studio! Heck, we even had Quentin Bell here announcing the Villains Expansion not even a couple of weeks ago.

Whoa, I'm reading your comments! Fine, fine, I'll get on with the stream. I've gotten word that we have a few recent additions to the Wildcard and Hero rosters. Unfortunately, for the seven of you that loved Percivus, he's been officially cut from the game. CurioSity is gone too. There are a lot of comments from people that don't even know who those names are, and without getting political, you're not missing out. One change that is a sure-fire way to piss off some people is that Bartleby, the Battle-Brewer... He's been cut too! Greaves will probably have something to say about that, as all the polls don't lie. The audience wants to see a rematch!

Some of our contacts over at Hero HQ have indicated that Nexus Rigs might field a team in Abidden. If this is true, it's going to be absolutely huge! They have contracts with all the top-tier eSports professionals, and they're the market leader in gaming Rigs. If they were to launch a team to fight the Paragons, then we'd definitely be in for a show. While there is a particular team that comes to mind, it's apparently not going to be the Scumlords! There's been no whispers of them getting a new sponsor, which keeps them in Volte's fist. JeffX has renewed his contract with Abidden! This is... unexpected, to say the least. We have seen nothing remotely competent from JeffX... yet. So, eh... let's see how that goes! There is a lot of shuffling of seats, with many sponsors remaining tight-lipped on the subject... but, we've seen a recent post go live from Redfox Labs, they're not selling their seat! The rumours are going wild, because it looks like the group will put a Hero into the game for the first time in over five years, and the top contender is the youngest granddaughter of the family, Rose Farios. Some of you veteran fans might remember that Redfox took issue with the Abidden artificial intelligence and didn't even complete their character selection.

Well, every clue is pointing to the fact that they're coming back. Her recent statement on the matter was the following. "If it's to be, it's up to me."

#Penta-Price held up a single finger to the Loremaster that sat beside him. It was a signal that he would introduce her in a few moments and to be prepared for it. His eyes darted left and right to take in all the comments as he spoke. His script was practically non-existent, with only a few keywords up on a private screen to remind him of key talking points. With a single flick of his hand, he dismissed the first few that he already talked through and moved straight onto the next. His eyes were bright with excitement, and the genuine smile on his face didn't falter throughout the whole broadcast.

Wow, what a quote from Rose Farios... spoken like a true S-Classer. Ethan Davenport is still in contention for his place as the General of Light. Normally I wouldn't talk about a rumour from an anonymous source, but this one aligns a little too closely to what we've been suspecting, so I'll throw it out there for you to decide its validity. There's been an unfair dismissal case, where the bigwigs at Abidden have challenged the termination of Frederick Hargreaves! It's named Ethan Davenport as an unfit replacement, and the settlement is ongoing. We knew that much anyway, but now we're hearing that Ethan has been very upset that Jorgen Baw has come in ahead of him as the de facto leader of the Heroes. How upset? Enough to run straight into the battlefield and get his character killed. Combine that with his track record of in-game deaths and overall ineptitude... well, I'd start counting the days before he's given the chop and his seat goes to someone with actual skill.

With a single tap of his finger, #Penta-Price drew the attention of the Loremaster to the activity in the comments. Her eyes were drawn to an immediate uptick of engagement at the mention of Ethan's suitability for Abidden. He intentionally kept twisting the knife in the sore spot of the audience. The giddy smile on his face was the clear indicator of how much he was enjoying himself on the broadcast. Circling his finger again, he gestured that he'd wrap up this segment soon.

Ahh, we better switch segments before the Ethan posse froths at the mouth! But before we move to our interview with the esteemed Loremaster from Abidden, I've another juicy piece of gossip to act as the perfect segue to our next conversation. We know the identity of one of the new Wildcards! The next person to join the exclusive roster of Villains is none other than Chris Spectre! That name is going to be familiar to a lot of you, because he's the creator of Artifice! The game where you can craft practically anything! He wants to showcase everything his system can do... in Abidden?! Listeners, viewers and pirate streamers. I'd love to introduce you to our next guest, who will try to answer everything we throw at her, Loremaster Benè.

The Loremaster followed #Penta-Price's cue and introduced herself to the audience. A list of talking points was in front of her on one side of a screen, while on the other, a list of the top-rated questions from the audience gradually appeared after reaching a certain threshold of votes.

Thank you all for the warm welcome. My name is Benè, and I work as a Loremaster in Abidden. Before I launch into answering your excellent questions, I thought I'd explain my job in a little more detail. Loremasters look at the world of Abidden from the skies above. We see everything that was, everything that is, and everything that

will be... or could be! Having Locke as our artificial intelligence means that the world can develop outside of our expectations, and it's happened so many times. The wall wasn't meant to be destroyed, but now we have the Dread Lake taking over the Mana Lake. What will that mean for the creatures that inhabit both ecosystems? It's going to turn into an all-out war! What about the communities that needed the Mana Lake? They were peaceful during times of prosperity, but how will they react when food becomes scarce? What factions will profiteer from the spreading discord? Will new Heroes or Villains rise from the chaos? Loremasters ask these questions and understand the outcomes that should happen, but you must remember, the Players are actively changing the course of Abidden's history with every decision they make!

Implementing the Vendetta system has caused so many exciting changes, yet they feel stunted compared to the extraordinary feats of our Players. In just a few short days, the Dread Pirate advanced from Standard rank all the way to Legendary rank. No matter what system balancing you put into Abidden, the non-player characters cannot compete with that level of advancement. Well, at least not yet. The team decided we needed to give Abidden a chance to catch-up with the players. Give the Vendetta system time to operate, and to give the players a meaningful challenge in the fights to come. We didn't want this just to be an impediment for the players, so we instead found a way to reward meaningful choice in the game. Abidden has a history of catering to the Players by reducing the challenge. Our solution is not to increase the challenge by inflating the power levels of the existing enemies... We're instead going to give Abidden the time it needs to learn, develop and grow.

Once a week, Abidden will have down-time. Rather than time standing still, like we did in the past. We're going to speed up time in Abidden, advancing the world by weeks or months. Missions with time limits will be failed, consequences will be harsher...

#Penta-Price could barely contain his excitement and found himself asking his own fan questions.

Sorry to interrupt you, Benè... but I can sense the questions that are going to arise from this one and want to get ahead of them. What sort of consequences are you talking about? Surely, we already have them in the game. The Dread Pirate fought the Void Kraken instead of a more manageable foe. Is that not a consequence of meaningful choices made by that player? I don't want to put you on the spot with these sorts of questions, but the time-stop or advancement thing... it sounds like it will actively benefit only a fraction of playstyles. Is this another method to give the Villains an advantage over the Heroes? Lastly, before I pass the torch back to you... what is the team hoping to achieve with this update? Having time-skips will eradicate Raid progress and likely have lasting impacts on long-term strategies.

"Excellent questions, thank you!" Benè began, but #Penta-Price gestured for her to lean closer to the studio setup for better sound quality. The Loremaster nodded and turned her attention back to the audience.

Consequences already exist in the game, but to use your example... and to elaborate on mine, let me ask you a question. What happened to Maris the Siren? She's now in a new ecosystem that is rich in magical energy, how will she adapt to that? If we left

her for a few days, would there be any meaningful change? Maybe! But what if a month had passed in Abidden. What sort of power would Maris have accumulated in that time? Would she even be alive? Did one of the other ship guardians kill her? The Vendetta System would allow her to gain experience and grow, just as it allowed the other ship guardians to grow. And what happened to them? Now that the Void Kraken has been removed from power, is there a pirate fleet rising from the labyrinth? The consequences we want to see are narrative driven. We want to explore the stories of the characters in the world and create meaningful moments for the players. Will Rayth become more than a backwater trading town now that it has access to the world? Will the Vampires return to Abidden? Will the Elves stand by after their Mana Lake was polluted? Which Kingdom will seize the power left on the table by the fall of the Lamerian throne? Those are the consequences that could turn into new plots and stories for Abidden. Will it benefit the Villains more than the Heroes? No. It'll benefit the players that can think strategically... but even then, there are so many outcomes that could happen! Oh, and I apologise... you asked about the progress of Raids. It's the humble opinion of the Loremasters, that raids shouldn't take months to complete...

We don't shy away from those sorts of observations, so be sure to keep them coming! For all of you out there that didn't catch the shade... our lovely Loremaster also thinks that the Heroes have historically taken way too long to clear the Raids in Abidden. So then, since we have such a wealth of knowledge sitting here in the studio, what questions are you going to ask her? Let's see... oh, here's a good one, and it shows they listened. Thank you, User518449, you're definitely not a bot and we appreciate you. Your question to Loremaster Bené is the following: Of the current roster of Heroes and Villains, which player is best suited to these new time skips?

This is actually a difficult one to answer, because we have a lot more insights into all the players than the audience would see. I could give you the honest answer, but I don't think they'd accept it without the context. So, what should I do, #Penta-Price? Should I tell the viewers who the dark horse is in the game, or should we instead play it safe and pick some fan-favourites?

#Penta-Price turned in his seat and saw the grin on the Loremaster's face. He made a gesture to signal that it was the perfect response, and then whirled his hand to see if she could keep it going.

Actually... let's do a poll. If the viewers guess the dark horse correctly, I'll tell them all the behind-the-scenes secrets! But if they get it wrong... well, you'll just have to wait until I'm on the show again and we'll try again. I've a feeling this competition will get easier once our player has time to show their skills!

Leaning back in his chair, #Penta-Price tapped one of the buttons on the array in front of him and gave the Loremaster a laugh. "Keep this up, and you'll end up taking my job! But between ourselves... it's Spectre, isn't it? He's the dark horse?"

Instead of answering the Loremaster just shook her head slowly, causing the shoutcaster to grin even more as he unmuted himself.

Audience, we need to get this out of her! Cast your votes!