

## Chapter 38: New Direction (Part 1)

Jorgen gave a strained smile as he opened his eyes to the sounds of applause. A series of voices started speaking to him before he got out of his Nexus Rig. Blinking for a moment, he reached to his chest where he usually kept his spectacles, but they weren't there.

"You're off schedule by twenty-three minutes, please keep this in mind during your next session. We need to maximise your efficiency during your first day."

The voice was indecipherable amongst the collective gaggle of executives. Most of them were there on behalf of his bitch of a sponsor, Elisabeth Volte. The others were there on behalf of his new liaison, Viktor Romero. The easiest way to differentiate between the executives was how they spoke to him. Volte's people wanted a return on their investment, which resulted in emotionless comments and rigid instructions. Romero's people wanted to relax him and develop a relationship with him. The applause only ever came from the Romero group. The criticism that he heard before stepping out of his own rig, that was 100% a Volte member.

"Your fight with Greaves was absolutely incredible! I can't wait to see you fight the others!"

Jorgen's tight smile remained etched on his face as he glanced around for his spectacles. The only thing that made this whole facade worse was being unable to see clearly. It just made all of their nattering even worse.

Someone pressed his outdated spectacles into his hand, which the Hero took gratefully. After putting them on, it relieved him to see everything come back into focus. One term of his sponsorship was to keep his visual impairment untreated, as it garnered more sympathy for him within the media. His persona was the C-Class Hero, the Underdog of Abidden. They described a slight visual impairment as a debilitating disability.

Jorgen smiled as he raised his hands to the crowd.

"If your comments don't relate to the next steps in the game, please remain quiet. Analysts, you're up!"

Jorgen's comment was cutting and more than a few people looked offended. A small group of men and women poured out of one room with a series of screens opened in front of them. Each of them was a Loremaster, and they wasted no time in filling him in.

"The next available companion that we've recommended is Cristophe. He's a Blacksmith in Venna, he'll want to appraise and inspect your Celestial armour. If you accept, it will raise your status with the townspeople, which will then add to your militia recruitment. If you fly into the city, with your weapons sheathed, it will provide a higher reputation bonus with the citizens and factions."

The first analyst spoke quickly and precisely, just as Jorgen had requested. He didn't want to be wasting any time during his momentary breaks away from the game. He had developed a schedule and routine for both himself and his staff to follow with each of them reeling off information in quick succession.

"You're not maximising your ability, Blessing of the Light. While the damage you take is minimal, you have higher buffs when your total health is at maximum. Keep using the ability as it also raises your reputation with people that witness it."

Nodding his head, Jorgen made his way towards the refreshment tables. Whilst his eyes went to the range of luxurious confectionery, he instead poured himself a glass of water as he listened intently to the instructions that were being relayed all around him.

Before the third analyst could speak, Jorgen gestured at the table filled with treats.

"Am I allowed to have any of this?"

An employee of Nexus Rigs shook his head.

"Not yet, Mr. Baw. It might reduce your in-game time, which is why we would suggest continuing your use of our Nutri-packs."

Jorgen's expression darkened.

"I thought so. So why the fuck is it here then?"

His question this time went unanswered, which caused Jorgen to frown.

"I'm sorry, did I tell you to stop speaking?"

Jorgen's attention returned to the analysts that looked incredibly uncomfortable. One of them took it as an opportunity to shine and stepped forward. His voice was confident as he started his report.

"As you know, your Class Quest requires you to launch a Crusade in the name of the Prime Good. To do this successfully, you must maximise your reputation with as many factions as possible. Recruitment is going to be integral to your success, so we need to make sure you're constantly maximising your opportunities. After you visit Venna, make your way to Lostridge. We are still calculating which companion there would be most beneficial for you, but there is another reason to go there..."

Jorgen sighed as he gave the analyst a level stare. There was always one that was a storyteller.

"There's another reason to go there, yeah?"

Jorgen laughed as he took a drink of water before shaking his head.

"Remember when I said I wanted concise reports?"

The analyst glanced at his colleagues, who refused to make eye contact.

Jorgen's fingers snapped as he clicked them, drawing the analyst's attention right back to him.

"Did I stutter?"

The analyst shook his head, but the Hero didn't relent.

"Try again. This is your last chance. Be concise."

Nodding quickly, the analyst glanced at his notes and took a steadying breath.

"Next location is Venna, Companion information is pending. A Holy Artifact exists there that will provide a boost to an attribute of your choice. We suggest Dexterity, as it will bring you closer to earning the 'Aim' attribute."

Jorgen smiled reassuringly at the nervous analyst.

"See? Don't you feel much better now? Doesn't it feel great to not waste everyone's time?"

The analyst bowed his head in embarrassment.

"I'll retrieve the relic, but I won't be putting it into Dexterity. Only Greaves and Helena have ranged attacks, and I've already shown how I'm able to take down Greaves and his new Breaker Class. So go calculate what other skill I should work towards, I don't need aim."

The group of analysts all nodded respectfully before retreating into what they had dubbed, *The War Room*. It was one of the first things that Jorgen had implemented before they started the campaign. He wanted a team of experts and Loremasters that would guide him through the first few days of the game. Instead of leaving things to chance, he wanted to attack the game with militaristic precision. The first thing he needed to do was to assert dominance. Killing Khance was inconsequential, but Greaves was a much more valuable target. Helena was the key event. If he killed her in a one-on-one environment, then it would cement his place as the best in the game.

Jorgen looked at the walls of information that surrounded him as he regulated his breathing. The excitement of the game combined with the adrenaline of battle was intoxicating for him. He wanted to get back into his rig and start hunting the rest of the Paragons.

One of Viktor's team moved forward to explain the key points since Jorgen had last exited the game.

"Scarr has logged out recently. Helena is still out, too. Kincsö has just killed Ethan."

A wry smile appeared on Jorgen's face at that last piece.

"Ethan took the bait and rushed right in?"

Viktor stepped into view, holding a pastry from the confectionery table. His eyes were lit up with excitement as he gestured to the screens.

"Yes. All it took were a few rumours that Ethan feared the Paragons and avoided the raid. It looks like a few of the other Heroes are about to seal their own fates too."

Jorgen quite liked Viktor. He was calculating and opportunistic. In the space of a day, he had brokered a deal with Volte Aerospace to get Jorgen enlisted into Abidden as the flagship Hero.

That alone would have been impressive, but the executive had gone even further in his machinations. He had come up with a plan to destabilize the current roster of Heroes, which would make Jorgen look that much better in his role.

"So it's only a matter of time before they get cut loose from the game?"

Jorgen asked with an expectant look on his face.

Viktor's eyes darted across the screens as he continued to eat his pastry. It was another element that Jorgen liked about Viktor. He didn't walk on eggshells and didn't talk for the sake of talking.

"You'll need a decisive victory first, then we can talk about recruiting in the rest of the Scumlords. No investor wants to be the face of the losing team. They're only used to Abidden adapting to them. Now they're entering an environment where they need to adapt to Abidden."

Viktor looked at Jorgen as he raised the last piece of his snack.

"Honestly, I'd risk the reduced in-game time for this. They're superb."

The executive dusted the crumbs from his hands and wiped at his face with a napkin. His eyes went back to the screens that seemed to tell a story that only he could understand.

"CurioSity is dead in the water, and his sponsor is looking for a suitable replacement. It's better to market the Scumlords as a package deal, but more realistically the sponsors are going to want to feel as though they picked them."

Jorgen continued to listen to the executive as he made his way back to the refreshments table. He picked up the same type of pastry that Viktor had been eating.

"Percivus is on the chopping block too. He tried to run away from the Paragons and got himself killed in a humiliating manner."

Viktor continued to explain as he pointed at one screen in particular.

"Since we've stoked the fire about this Travesty guy, they're replaying the footage again and again of him killing Percivus. That's bad press for the sponsor, so he's almost guaranteed to be out too."

Jorgen's jaw clenched at the mention of Travesty, but he kept his emotions in check. Viktor fell silent for another moment before pointing at another screen.

"ShieldBro is practically untouchable since he is the face of his apparel brand sponsor. JeffX might be a bit of a problem though."

A bark of laughter escaped Jorgen as hearing those words.

"The kid Bard? How could he be an issue?"

Viktor shook his head.

"You're thinking emotionally, not logically. You of all people should know what happens if you're complacent."

A surge of annoyance welled up in Jorgen.

"Coming from the guy who got fired by Dryksell Pharmaceuticals? Yeah, I did my research."

Viktor merely laughed as he returned his attention to the screen.

"I won't be making the same mistake twice. Hopefully, you'll have learned something from your fuck up too."

Jorgen's momentary anger and annoyance faded away as quickly as they appeared. He rubbed the arch of his nose and pressed his thumb and finger against his eyes.

"Okay... why should we care about the Bard?"

Viktor pointed at a series of numbers on the screen.

"The reason that Travesty is trending across all social media has nothing to do with our attempts to discredit him and boost your ratings."

Jorgen's brow furrowed in confusion, but Viktor continued to explain.

"An overwhelming surge of JeffX fans called for Travesty's head, because he dared to impersonate their beloved teenage sensation. The amount of death threats being sent to the HQ is ridiculous. JeffX released a statement that he will start playing the game seriously from now on. He's going to get revenge on Travesty for worrying his fans like that."

The Hero grimaced at those words. It would be harder to take down someone with such a loyal fanbase.

"Okay, we'll drop JeffX for now... how about Bartleby, he wasn't doing too good in the charts in the last few months?"

Jorgen suggested as he glanced at the screens. None of the information on them made any sense to him. They mostly composed of codenames and a series of numbers and charts.

"Bartleby could have been a good option a few days ago... but it would seem that Greaves has elevated the Battle Brewer to a whole new level of fame. In a press conference, the former General of Light told the media he was looking forward to fighting Bartleby. Combined with the fact that everyone knows that Greaves doesn't rate Ethan Davenport, it created a sense of awe around the Battle Brewer."

A sudden sound of chatting broke out from the other side of the room, which caused the two men to turn at the same time. A group of analysts were arguing just outside the War Room, which drew practically everyone's attention.

"What's going on?"

Jorgen's voice cut through the noise and caused the atmosphere to drop immediately.

Two analysts looked at each other in silence as though trying to deter the other from speaking.

Unfortunately for them, the storytelling analyst from earlier saw this as an opportunity to redeem his previous fuck up.

"Mr. Baw, they were arguing about Travesty. One of them found information about the Wildcard which the other is trying to discredit."

The satisfied smirk on his face when he finished didn't budge when the two analysts gave him a look of death.

The first analyst turned to Jorgen with an apologetic look on his face.

"I apologise, Mr. Baw. There is no solid evidence yet. I didn't want to trouble you with this."

The second hesitated for a moment before taking a different tactic, turning instead to the executive standing beside Jorgen.

"Mr. Romero... A civilian is claiming to have worked with a Gamer called Travesty. They sent in a series of recordings which I've analysed. The fighting style matches the depiction of Travesty that Mr. Baw has described in interview... but it doesn't match the performance of the Wildcard that killed Percivus."

Jorgen's face lit up as he moved past the analysts to enter the War Room.

"Can you show me the footage? Who is the person who sent it in? Why didn't you call me about this immediately?"

The Hero's anticipation overshadowed his annoyance as he waited expectantly for the analysts to answer him.

The first analyst gave the second a withering look before turning his attention back to Jorgen.

"Apologies, Mr. Baw. The reason I didn't bring this to your attention is the fact that this... Travesty person, is an E-Classifier in the Slums. The source is quite unreputable too. Runs a few shady businesses in the outskirts and goes only by the name, Darius."

Viktor laughed as he turned to go back to his screens.

"Wait."

Jorgen's voice called out to the executive, causing him to turn around.

"Didn't you just say we can't be complacent?"

Viktor paused with an expression of disbelief on his face, but Jorgen was adamant.

"Let's check it out."