

## Chapter 21: A Journey

Quentin and Dario stood amongst the entire department of Loremasters, watching the preview of the time-skip. Locke had certainly been busy, and it showed across the entire world of Abidden. Each of the Loremasters watched a certain area of the map carefully, making note of any dramatic changes which they could report on later. It would take them some time to analyse the progression of the AI residents, but each and every one of them was excited to start.

They had already been watching for a few hours now, and it was clear that they would need to condense the events into a highlight reel of some description. There were also areas that they definitely couldn't show live, otherwise it would ruin the surprise for the players. Locke was very much setting up her side of the chessboard, which included some obvious plays... but also a few hidden threats in the background. Dario's eyes narrowed at the repeat appearance of Traya on the screen before a thought popped into his head. "Quentin, do you think she's trying to move people to other areas across the map? She's pushing Traya pretty hard."

Quentin didn't answer immediately and instead just shook his head as he looked across the different screens. Gathering his thoughts, he glanced back at Dario with an apologetic smile. "Sorry, this is just incredibly fascinating." Quentin started with a wave of his hand at all the screens. He frowned ever so slightly as he thought of the question. "No, I don't think she's making a concerted push for Traya... but rather, I think she's pushing everything all at once. Most of our players stayed in the same stretch of land, near the Lamerian Kingdom and the Sky Palace... but now, those things don't exist and the Heroes will need to find new footholds."

Dario reluctantly tore his eyes away from the screens to check his interface which was buzzing intermittently. A few quick taps rewarded him with a private message from one of the sponsors. His eyes flitted across the words as a wide smile appeared on his face. "Looks like Dayna is ready to field her team in time for the expansion launch!" Quentin whirled around in surprise, the screens forgotten. "Already? How did she manage that? Do we know who they are?"

Glancing back at his wrist, the engineer re-read the message before chuckling. "Yeah, I think everyone will know who they are." He gave a meaningful glance at the crowded room of Loremasters and Quentin caught the hint. "We can talk about it later. But a whole team? How many seats did she get?" Without needing to consult the message again, Dario held up two fingers. "Just the two to start immediately, but another three will be joining... at the end of their current season."

Suddenly Quentin's attention snapped to the screen. "What the hell is that?" Dario and the Loremasters watched as a hulking titan of a creature emerged from a fissure in the ground. It wasn't humanoid at all, and looked more like a gigantic earthen spider with incredibly thick legs. As if it signalled the start of a new pattern, more horrifying creatures started to appear on other areas across the map. Some looked to be enormous birds of prey with

metal-looking wings, while others were terrifying dragon-like fish that swept through the seas.

*They are World Bosses. Each will grow in strength the longer they survive, and when they reach a certain level... they'll start to hunt.*

Quentin heard Locke's voice in his ear and couldn't help but marvel at the sight of them. He started to wonder how the Heroes and Villains would be able to take on monsters of such magnitude, and was curious if James, Jorgen and Helena would be able to take one down if they worked together. Some of them were appearing in undiscovered locations around the map, which would ultimately require more exploration from the players. It was an excellent way to promote the other areas that Abidden had to offer and reward discovery.

*So far, we've resolved over two thousand abandoned quests from the Heroes. The result has been the evolution of threats around the world, with nearly six hundred NPCs reaching Unique rank. Many are on the cusp of becoming Legendary unless they're dealt with immediately.*

Nodding his head in understanding, Quentin gestured to Dario that he was speaking with Locke as he pointed at his ear. "Is Unique the highest level of new addition to the game?"

*No. There are new Kingdoms being formed all across Abidden, with many of the figureheads being at Legendary Rank or above. There is also the introduction of a new level between Unique and Legendary for NPCs, which is called Elite. NPC's without evolutionary potential will be capped at this new grade. All NPCs that have never fought or gained experience will need to advance from Commoner to Standard rank, before then being able to advance to Master, Unique or Elite. The World Bosses are separate from the normal levelling structure that we use for the Players and NPCs, with each of them having incredible destructive power and an enormous amount of health. The experience and loot they give would be enough to give a Faction or Kingdom a competitive edge in the game, which is why it would likely take an entire Kingdom or Faction to take one down.*

"That sounds good, and hopefully these World Bosses will result in some large scale battles for our viewers." Quentin idly remarked as he mulled over Locke's words. "Legendary figureheads, like Kings and Queens... how many claimants are there across Abidden?"

*There are currently one hundred and twenty claimants in Abidden, some hold fake claims and others are rightful rulers. To keep it interesting for all the players, we have a number of claimants that are at low levels. They can be added as companions into the player's party, and can later grow into becoming a figurehead for a newly established Kingdom or can usurp a seated monarch. Those claimants are at Standard rank and will be dependent on the Player to amass supporters via accomplishments and fame. The number of claimants will grow if the Players decide that they wish to become a figurehead of their own Kingdom.*

Quentin smiled at the thought of one of the players becoming a King or Queen. Helena would definitely be the likeliest character to achieve that accolade, with her being the most powerful person in the game. He couldn't help but wonder if she'd want the title or not. Glancing back up at the screens, Quentin's eyes were met with a myriad of images, all looking equally captivating and exciting.

They really had a beautiful game, but despite a long and tenured road of development, it felt as though the game was still trying to find its own identity. Common criticisms had been easy to ignore over the years, but now that they were shot into the spotlight, they were bombarded with new eyes on their game. There was a lot of positive sentiment, and Quentin was delighted by that... but there were also a lot of people that questioned why the game even existed in the first place.

Apparently, you couldn't classify Abidden as an eSport because its player-base was too old. An argument Quentin thought was laughable when you considered each player was in a full-immersion virtual reality rig, but it was one of the many arguments that was made around eSports. Countless observations were made, comparing the game to the classics that used physical speed and reflexes.

The ongoing barrage of negative public sentiment towards the game was draining, and Quentin wasn't exactly sure how to come out of it on top. How were they supposed to market their game as it was, and highlight all the incredible things that were possible in it? It's combat could easily be on par with Killshot, and the crafting system was taken directly from the market-leading, Artifice. The in-game world was gorgeous, and the quest storylines were great, if they were actually played out.

Sighing to himself, Quentin decided to ask the question aloud. "Locke, how would you market Abidden? How do we differentiate ourselves from other games right now? What should our argument be, when people attempt to tear us down?" Dario just chuckled as he turned to Quentin. He apparently knew the answer too, but he gestured for Quentin to listen to Locke first.

*Abidden is on the verge of becoming a competitive landscape. There will no longer be a single ruling faction, and it will create war and chaos across the lands. For the game to thrive, we will need Players that can actually challenge what Abidden has to offer. The Vendetta system is now fully functional and active, with NPC's able to learn, develop and grow within the game. The legacy Heroes that have been using Abidden as a marketing platform are going to be targeted by the newly evolved citizens that they failed in the past.*

Quentin tried his best not to think of JeffX, but all he could think of was how the young man hadn't attempted a single quest in his entire time with Abidden. There were likely countless jaded NPCs that he failed to protect from harm. With not even a single combat related skill, and the lowest level out of all the Heroes, Quentin wondered if this would be the final nail in the coffin for the singer. Despite the animosity he felt towards the entitled kid, he didn't want to turn him into a laughing stock in front of the world. His sponsor apparently wanted to keep him in the Bard role, so there was nothing really that Quentin could do. He continued to listen to Locke and found that the thoughts of JeffX went straight out of his head.

*We're adding narrative consequence and reactivity to the quests. Positive quest outcomes will exist too, with varying effects based on the personalities of the NPCs and the actions of the Players. Market Abidden as a reactive world that will reward and punish players for their choices. We've created engaging storylines and arcs, but ultimately it will be the players that create the best stories in Abidden. The fight on the Tempest shouldn't have happened, but James made it happen. The Sky Palace wasn't supposed to fall, but Helena made it happen.*

"From a game design standpoint, we do have a lot better reactivity than others. Most are content to just have fully destructible environments, so having narrative flair is definitely in our favour." Quentin agreed with a sigh of relief. He knew the reasons that Abidden was better than other games, but he just needed the reminder every now and again. No matter what point in your career you get to, imposter syndrome will follow you like a dark cloud.

*We've created a whole cohort of underdog characters in the Wildcards, with them able to appear at any time as they attempt to take down one of the Heroes. That level of suspense will hook the viewers, knowing they may witness something extraordinary. How many of the Heroes are going to attempt a Legendary Class Quest now that they've seen a Wildcard do it? How incredible will that be to watch? Abidden is creating a personal journey for each Player, and the audience has the opportunity to invest in that story and follow their journey. Abidden isn't about how many kills a character has, or what cool thing they crafted, it's about the journey.*

Quentin stood there with a smile on his face from hearing Locke's breakdown of where Abidden stood in the market. It was both reassuring and exciting to hear. When Dario's chuckle turned into a laugh, Quentin turned to look at his friend curiously. The CTO gestured towards Quentin's ear with a knowing smile. "Yeah, Kell was chatting to Locke about that very thing yesterday. You probably got the resulting speech about it being a journey? They argued about it for hours, but finally settled on that marketing angle." Dario's normally gruff demeanour seemed to have melted away somehow.

The man in front of Quentin looked positively elated. "If you ask me, I don't think that we need any spins or angles or anything like that. Just look at it! It's amazing just the way it is." Dario gestured at the screens with a wide grin on his face. "The last few weeks have turned this game from a beautiful but underutilised gem, into something extraordinary. Aren't you excited to see what happens next? Will Jorgen find James and try to fight again? Will Helena intervene? What will happen with the Scumlords?" Dario asked all the hypothetical questions as he lifted his wrist into the air and gestured at his interface. "What happens when you take the reigning champions from Killshot and put them into Abidden?"

A moment of silence appeared between the two men as Quentin just stared at Dario in shock, who stood with a stupid grin on his face.

"You're fucking with me!" Quentin cursed in disbelief as he grasped at Dario's wrist, searching for the message he was talking about. Instead of resisting, Dario merely opened the message in question for Quentin to see. The CEO's eyes locked onto each and every word from Dayna but couldn't believe his eyes. Here he was trying to come up with a valid reason that people might want to watch Abidden, or why they should give it a shot... when

the reigning champions of Killshot, who were likely to retain their title by the end of the season, were going to be joining their game? They had tens of millions of fans, and they were coming to Abidden? Quentin could only stare at Dario who gave him a knowing smile. "Remember Quentin, It's a journey."