

Chapter Six: Acknowledgement

With his new purchases already equipped, James strode out of the mall with a relieved smile on his face. With a new interface and outfit, he felt like he could finally blend in without scrutiny from strangers. He couldn't pinpoint the moment that he had started caring about what other people thought of him, but the indifference was a welcome change from the usual glares of judgement. He had tipped the incredibly helpful attendant and requested him to dispose of the clothing James had arrived in. Turns out that money truly can buy anything, and his aproned helper was more than happy to oblige. James felt incredibly at ease in the long coat, as it gave him a similar sensation to when he was in-game. The shoes were going to take a little bit of time to get used to, but everything else was a perfect fit.

One of the shop fronts that he passed was in-between adverts and had reverted to a simple reflective surface which James found himself gazing at absentmindedly. He could barely recognise the man that was looking back at him. Maybe it was the fact that his coat pulled his shoulders back gently, improving his posture, or maybe it was just how well the clothing fit? James couldn't tell, but he was happy with the improvement. The adverts resumed, and James found his reflection inserted into a holiday destination with pristine waters and a sandy beach. Beautiful men and women were draped over his shoulders with drinks in hand as the advert showcased what could be in store for him if he subscribed to whatever service they had on offer.

James continued to walk down the street, his curiosity kept him glancing at the following adverts. He almost barked a laugh when he saw an old advert of Khance selling some form of pharmaceuticals. James idly wondered if they had re-run it because of the return of the Paragons. A quick look at his new interface broke James out of his reverie, he was running close to time and had somehow forgotten that he needed to book a ride. An imperceptible vibration from his chest drew his gaze from the booking service. Much to his surprise, his ordered cab was overridden with a new booking.

"Nox Holdings, VIP Service." James read aloud in wonder. He was incredibly grateful that the man at the mall had reminded him to refasten the pin to his new outfit. James hadn't been wearing it long enough to remember. In the few seconds that it took James to reminisce, an elegant black vehicle descended from the sky with lasers aimed downward to display its landing zone. He subconsciously moved backwards along with everyone else that was in the way of the vehicle. Whatever anonymity he had garnered by buying new clothing instantly vanished with the arrival of the private cab. Stares bore into James as he awkwardly advanced toward the car, his pin vibrated once again and rewarded him with two door panels sliding open. The interior was pristine, with a lounge on one side and a private bar on the other. It was closer to a floating hotel room than a cab.

"Welcome, James Sylvester!"

The voice called his name, loud and clear. The result was instantaneous, with the gaggle of onlookers suddenly realising who the VIP in front of them was. Startled whispers turned into blatant exclamations of disbelief, and James bolted into the cab before they came any closer to him. "It's the Dread Pirate! That's him!" James heard their voices as he sat in his seat. It

reminded him of the plush elevator seat from Nox Holdings, as he practically sunk into it. He looked out to the group of onlookers as the doors started closing and did his best to smile. A plethora of interfaces were held upward, no doubt recording his movements or taking pictures of him.

"Show those A-Class bastards who's boss!" One voice shouted from the crowd which was met with a few genuine laughs and cheers. James's awkward smile finally melted into a real one as he waved at the onlookers. The moment that the doors closed fully, the sounds from the city outside melted away. James watched as the cab rose back into the air and started the journey towards the Neophyte Bar. The blur of buildings became dizzying to the point that James needed to lay back on the lounge and focus on his breathing. As if predicting his dilemma, a tray of inhalers and pills appeared on the armrest beside him. Muscle relaxants, mental stimulants and a few other choice flavours that James had no intention of trying. Instead, James started to rifle through the assorted scouting reports he had just purchased.

"Would you like to play your selected media files?" The voice spoke again from everywhere at once.

James picked a shard at random and held it up. "Yes please. This one to start."

Whilst James had expected only audio, the windows of the cab all started to display in-game footage that looked to be quite dated. It started with a highlight reel, showcasing incredible moments from different students. Some of them looked vaguely familiar, whilst others were complete unknowns. Top kills, surprise attacks, daring physical challenges... all were probably eye-catching for their time, but looked very dated now. The techniques and manoeuvres were basic, but executed very well. It was likely one of the earliest graduating bodies of Gigatech. "What class of Gigatech is this?" James asked aloud, hoping to sate his curiosity.

"Second Class."

James merely nodded as he went through the other files, looking for something more recent. Something flickered in the corner of his eye, and James turned his head sharply to look at the display. "Go back five seconds."

Without so much as a word, the media file went backwards to the specified time and began to play again. James watched as a single man stood at the centre of a battlefield, explosions occurring all around him despite the fact that he hadn't moved an inch. Not only that, his entire gear-set looked like it was pulled directly from Abidden, a game that wouldn't exist for at least another fifteen years. "Who is that player?"

"Chris Spectre. Gamer Tag: Anxious. Former eSports Professional."

James stared at the man's face. He didn't look familiar at all. "Former? What does he do now?"

"You have successfully arrived at your destination! Thank you for using Elite VIP."

The doors opened to reveal a sight that James wouldn't have expected in a million years. Crowds of people were queued outside of the Neophyte Bar, all clamouring and protesting that they were regulars. Teams of suited men and women with overhead drones kept the people at bay. Nobody wanted to risk getting shocked or put down, which resulted in a swarm of people standing around and shouting in an orderly fashion. At the arrival of James, many heads turned in his direction, some in confusion but others in recognition. At the door of the bar stood Billy with a relieved expression on his face. The owner of the Neo squeezed past the disapproving looks from the bouncers, and made his way towards James.

"Is that one of the Wildcards?" A female voice shouted from the crowd.

Before James could even react, Billy was helping him out of the cab. "Took you long enough to get here! Everyone else arrived a while ago." His voice was on edge, as though he was going to break down at any moment. James and Billy both had to do a double-take of the other when James exited the car. "Are you wearing a suit?" James started, before Billy continued, "Why do you look like you're doing a cheap Dread Pirate cosplay?"

"Did he say Dread Pirate?!" Another voice in the crowd shouted out, reminding both Billy and James of their existence. A mild surge of people rushed forward to hear more of what the two men were talking about and a series of electric shocks were their reward. Some smatterings of laughter came out from the middle of the crowd that had pushed the front, while coarse swearing erupted from the lines that just got hit.

Billy gave James an apologetic look as he waved at the crowd. "Turns out that Sam told a few people what was happening at the bar today. It's my own fault, I shouldn't have told her, but I needed her working on her day off... and it seemed like a valid reason." The two men made their way to the door, ignoring the clamouring of the crowd and shouts looking for attention. Almost by chance, James turned his head just before entering the bar and made eye-contact with a woman who was staring at him. The look she was giving him was one of both recognition and confusion. James finally realised who she was and blurted out in his surprise.

"Sniper-Girl!"

Her face paled as James walked directly over to her and extended his wrist. "Remember the Slum Arcades? Can you share your contact information with me? I've something I wanted to talk-" Before he could continue, she flinched backwards with a look of suspicion and fear on her face. James stood in shock for a moment, not sure what just happened as she melted into the crowd, out of sight.

Billy put a hand on his shoulder and whispered gently, "How would you have reacted if a suit recognised you from a slum-arcade and cornered you?"

James pinched the bridge of his nose and squinted his eyes in annoyance. "Okay, that was my bad. Let's go in." Billy however placed a hand on James's chest to stop him from entering the bar. When the E-Classer looked at his friend in confusion, Billy just muttered something under his breath before pulling James into a bear hug. As quickly as it had started, it was

over, and Billy was back at the door rolling his shoulders in anticipation. His trademark grin was back on his face as he gave James an excited look.

"You hardly thought I was going to show weakness like that in front of Greaves, did you?"

James could only laugh as he followed his friend into the bar, he did glance one last time to see if he could see Sniper-Girl, but she was long gone.

Don's voice was the first one that James heard when he entered the bar. "You finally made it! Helena wouldn't let us order drinks before you got here! Billy, can you make that one you did last time?" James turned to look at Billy and was surprised to see that he was quite composed. The same couldn't be said for the rest of the staff who were standing rigidly in place behind the bar, many of them refusing to make direct eye-contact with any of the Paragons. Before James could even so much as utter a greeting, he was locked into a gigantic bear hug by Greaves. All of the wind left his body with that single action which left him dazed as Greaves withdrew, his hands firmly locked on James's shoulders. "Legendary! It's just incredible! Well done, James!"

James couldn't tell if it was from the oxygen deprivation or the warm expression on Greaves face, but he felt his own eyes welling up a little. With a short laugh, the E-Classifier grinned at Greaves. "Meant to tell you, Billy here is your biggest fan." The expression on Billy's face was priceless as Greaves turned to him. "My biggest fan?! Ha, a man with taste has finally appeared!" Without so much as another word, Greaves slid between James and Billy and hooked his arms around their shoulders. The Paragon laughed as he guided them into the bar. "Say, Billy... would you like to be a Wildcard? It would save us a bit of time here."

Helena's disapproving voice finally appeared. "Hey, don't go making up your own rules! Kell has a roster for us to get through." At those words, a glass broke behind the counter of the bar, drawing everyone's attention. Sam was horrified and looked as though she wanted the ground to open up and swallow her. The bar turned into a strange silent stand-off for a few moments.

Don's laugh broke the awkward silence as he moved behind the bar and started picking up the broken shards of glass. The action seemed to bring the staff back to their senses. Don's chit-chatting voice continued to natter as he worked. "See? We're all normal people at the end of the day." As if to emphasise his point, he placed the broken glass on the counter and turned to Sam, taking the glass from her hands too. Then, with her hand in his, he lifted it and pointed it at the different people around the room. "Okay, Greaves to start." Don urged, and Sam found herself pointing nervously at the Paragon. "Everyone thinks he's some big grouch, but he's just a giant teddy bear. He'll grunt a few times but will definitely pose for photos if you ask him to."

Sam laughed, which evaporated immediately upon seeing Greaves scowling at Don. He wasn't done yet though as Sam's hand was turned to point at Helena. "Don't be intimidated by Helena, if Greaves is a teddy bear, she's a mama-bear. She's on edge because she doesn't want any more players on the squad." Don's voice explained matter-of-factly. He

moved on before she could get in a retort. "Everyone knows it, so don't deny it. Ooooh, who do we have here? Sulking at the bar?"

Khance propped his face up with his hand and stared lazily at Don, as if daring him to say something. Don grinned as he pointed Sam's finger at the Shadow General, but Varya inserted herself between them. "Don't be mean, Don." The expression on Kincso's face was tempered but still gentle, which removed all the fun from the exercise. Don finally relinquished Sam's hand and continued the rest of the introductions in a half-assed manner. "That's Kincso, she has a heart of gold. Khance behind her is probably the most capable here, but crippled by an inferiority complex." The look of rage on Kincso's face as she leapt towards the bar to grab Don's shirt was absolutely terrifying, and more than one of the staff let out a shriek of panic. Don was unfazed as he stepped away from her clawing hand.

"I'm not apologising for that one. We all know it." Don lifted his hand to point across the Bar to the only filled table in the premises. "Elvira is our lawyer. Kell is our media. Quentin is our owner... and Dario is Greaves' dad." With a clap of his hands, Don turned back to Sam with a smile on his face. "Now that the introductions are done and we've definitely broken the ice, how about some drinks?"

James watched as Khance put a reassuring hand on Kincso's elbow. The fury in her eyes reverted to disappointment as she shrugged off his hand and took her own seat at the bar. Helena was staring daggers at Don from across the room and the only people that seemed to finally be at ease in the room were the staff members who were looking to Billy for some form of normality.

Kell got up from his seat and walked down the steps to where all the Paragons stood. "Could you all take your seats please? I'm sure that Billy and the rest of his crew can offer table service. You also don't need to be cautious about how you speak, they've all signed non-disclosure agreements and Elvira explained exactly what could happen if those were to break. That fiasco outside is a good example of what we don't want to happen." James suddenly understood why all of the staff were so terrified when he had walked in the door. Kell gestured at himself, Elvira and finally at James. "They're aware that we're Wildcards, but other than the reveal of the Dread Pirate... apologies, Dread Captain. They don't have any knowledge about our classes."

The Paragons went to the prepared booth, with Helena giving Don a look of death that made him reassess where he was going to sit. Kell's voice continued, explaining how the event would take place. "Instead of inviting people to the event, we've created a shortlist of profiles for you all to review and vote upon. All votes are equal, but all of you will have three weighted votes that you can use to give certain candidates a higher chance of success. Personally, I don't think this system is required as we can probably settle this with an open forum, but if need be, we'll have it in place."

When everyone nodded their understanding, Kell continued. "Just to remind you all, the reason that we're here is to select the best candidates to fight whatever new roster of Heroes appears in Abidden. We're looking for individuals that will be able to rejuvenate interest in the game, at the level of what James Sylvester achieved last night. Our company name is Vendetta Enterprises, and many of our candidates will have their own motives in wanting to

play the game. We need to find those that best align with our own goals." Taking another breath, Kell looked specifically down at Don. "Pity is not a reason to select a candidate. We need capable people that could become future stars. Imagine you're selecting the next wave of Paragons, not the next wave of Heroes. Is that understood?"

Helena raised her hand and Kell merely nodded at her to continue. "How are we supposed to assess their suitability when we won't know what classes they'll select in Abidden. We used to have Khance as a healer and he was integral to our success, but we don't have anyone with that kind of support ability yet." Helena's eyes glanced at Elvira for a moment before continuing. "No offence intended, but it's going to take some time for Elvira to scale up to a point that she'll be useful to us as a wider team. I think having more support orientated Wildcards would help us in the long-term."

Elvira cast her eyes downward despite nodding her head in agreement. Both Kincso and Don gave Helena a disappointed look, but the Paragon ignored them both as she aired her annoyance. "I appreciate that we need to boost our ranks and there is a lot of ownership at stake, but... how can we appeal to individuals to support our team, rather than play the game solo?"

Kell waved his hand towards the table where Dario and Quentin still sat. "Locke has been brought along too, with a list of the proposed classes for the new Wildcards. We'll be able to make pretty accurate predictions on how they'll match up. I can't answer your last question about appealing to individuals, but in my own opinion, I think it falls under your own capabilities as a Leader."

Helena fell silent as Kell clapped his hands together. "Excellent... and before we get started, we have one last surprise."

At the sound of Greaves' voice coming out from all of the speakers, everyone at the table grinned and cheered. James felt all eyes on him, not understanding what was happening. It took him a few moments to realise that Greaves' voice was a recording from an interview. The expectant look on everyone's face finally made sense as James watched the Raid release footage for the first time. He had gotten most of the updates from Jackal, but the reality was so much more than he could have expected. His senses were in overload as he tried to listen to everything from the introduction, to taking in the expressions on everyone's faces. They looked truly delighted for him and his success. He hadn't expected much fanfare for his performance, but it genuinely warmed his heart to see how happy they were for him.

James looked over to the top table where Quentin was giving him a thumbs-up gesture. The CEO opened his mouth and shouted, what was possibly the most sobering sentence of all.

"You're in 1st Place, James!"