

Chapter One: Welcome to Nox Holdings

The Dread Pirate has successfully completed the Legendary Class Quest! The Void Kraken is dead. He defeated the Celestial Crusader and captured the Werewolf Captain, Wolfsbane. Most interesting though, is Vetra, the Vampire Storm Mage... who bit the Dread Pirate! James Sylvester is the first Wildcard to show their face in Abidden. He's the first Wildcard to reach the Legendary Rank, and he's the first player to become a Vampire. He now commands the Tempest, the largest and most fearsome ship in all of Abidden. Say hello to the Legendary Dread Captain, Sylvian!

Right now, I'm wondering how all the sponsors are going to react to the news when they wake up in the morning! I think we've finally reached a turning point in Abidden and I don't think they could deem it slanderous if I said that I don't think JeffX could stand against the Dread Captain. Hell, I don't think any of the Heroes could stand against him at this point now. I'm sure the sponsors see that too, and I think we're going to be in for a bit of a change-up in the rosters. There is another factor that we might overlook too! What about all those Heroes that signed up over the years that left the game because it was boring and didn't offer a challenge? Will we see some of them return to the fight?

#Penta-Price spun around in his chair, his arms waving around as he made wild speculations about the future of the game. He was so far beyond his allocated time-slot for the broadcast, but nobody seemed to care because their ratings were sensational. Like all good things, it had to end. He was winding down the broadcast when one interface in front of him flashed erratically. His voice didn't falter as he spoke to his audience, but his hand touched the interface to see what was going on, and all composure went out the window.

Helena!

All the screens switched to a black dragon soaring through a series of explosions at the Sky Palace. It was more like a slaughter than a battlefield, with countless Celestials laying on the ground covered in blood. Fire and smoke washed the streets, with the echoes of screams sounding out in the night. Zooming towards the holy temple, the camera showed the fallen companions of the Celestial Crusader. The Disciple of Darkness had killed all of them, with their heirlooms and artefacts destroyed or plundered. The last beacon of light that remained in the temple was resting at Helena's feet.

"You can't do this! The Prime Good... gave it to us, to oversee their work."

The Lamerian King gasped for breath as the chains of smoke constricted further around his body. Helena looked up at him, her face unreadable.

As if he was making progress, the King continued to reason with the Darkness.

"Without the Sky Palace, there would be civil war! You will create more enemies and factions to contend with if you do this! Think about it!"

The King's strained voice became tighter and more pained as the chains dug deeper into his skin.

Helena unfurled her crossed arms before finally addressing the King.

"New Kingdoms sound interesting... I think I'd make a great Queen, don't you?"

Before he could say another word, Helena grinned as she brought her boot down on the relic, shattering it into countless pieces.

What remained was a small ball of light that seemed to flinch away from Helena's eager hand. The Disciple of Darkness grasped the ball of light like a predator that found its prey, and the light fought to escape... but it was no use. Helena's fist clenched, crushing the light completely. The result of the action was instantaneous, with a thunderous tearing sound echoing all around her. Rumbling tremors caused the remnants of the temple to shudder.

"You fool! You've doomed us all!"

The King roared in dismay, his eyes searching desperately for any remnants of the light Helena just destroyed.

Helena dusted off her hands before turning away from the altar and moving towards the door. She couldn't resist one last mocking comment before leaving.

"Don't worry. I'm sure your God will protect you from the fall."

When Helena cleared the building, she leaped into the air... with a jet of black smoke propelling her upward into the sky. At the peak of her ascent, her black dragon appeared below her, allowing her to grasp onto it as though she were clutching invisible reins. Together, they soared above the ruined and fiery streets of Lameria. The streets were cracking under the weight of the buildings. However, the most noticeable change was the rapid descent of the floating island. Helena and her Dragon maintained distance and watched as the Sky Palace got smaller and smaller.

THE SKY PALACE IS FALLING!

*Helena has single-handedly destroyed the Sky Kingdom and Lamerian Throne!
Where is the Royal Family? We only saw the King!*

*Civil war is an understatement! The Sky Palace has suppressed countless
upstart rulers, but what will happen now that they're gone?! The floating city was
a bastion of the divine! Celestials, a direct race from the Prime Good, with the
right to rule over all others... but what will this mean for them now?!*

*Did we just witness an eradication? There are so many questions! We need
more information.*

*Our deep dive this morning will relate to the Dread Captain, but our afternoon
show will look into the Sky Palace and what went wrong! How did Helena do
this? Just how powerful is a Disciple Rank character?*

#Penta-Price watched the scene with a smile on his face. They truly had entered a new and daring age of Abidden. It felt like a statement had been made, that they were overthrowing the old rule and welcoming in a new and exciting age of play to Abidden.

The Shoutcaster unconsciously held his breath in the moments before the Sky Palace impacted with the mana lake below.

Whatever impact the viewers expected was nowhere near as dramatic as the reality. An enormous swell of water lurched upward, flooding the nearby banks as the Sky Palace caused the beginnings of a tidal wave with its descent. More and more fragments of rock and city fell to the water, but instead of shattering further, they merely sank down to the bottom of the lake.

Well, I guess there's one silver-lining to all of this, viewers. If you were having a bad day, just imagine how Jorgen Baw must feel at this very moment. The game charged the Celestial Crusader with protecting the Royal Family of Lameria and his base of operations was the Sky Palace. He's going to log into the game with no base, no companions, no artefacts and a drastically changed reputation score with a lot of factions.

You know, I think we're going to see a lot more from the Vendetta system now. Factions, Kingdoms, and Cities going to war are going to create a lot of new adversaries across Abidden. Will they be good or evil?

I guess time will tell!

#Penta-Price continued to throw around a few ideas or suggestions about what this might mean for the future of the game, but in the back of his head he knew it was a turning point. The Heroes would need to make some drastic changes to be any competition to the Villains. Each of the screens around the Shoutcaster showed the still sinking city.

Gone were the days of month-long raids, with no progress and constant disappointments. The pace of the game was almost too fast at this point.

Would the Paragons become Legendary in a few days too?

#Penta-Price smiled to himself as he signed off for the night.

He couldn't remember a time when he had been this excited to do his job.

"Please speak to your housing representative regarding outstanding or ongoing claims. We don't deal with any disputes at this location, thank you very much."

James had barely opened his mouth when the receptionist spoke to him. More impressive was the fact that she looked at him with a pleasant smile, but he could tell that she was looking straight through him. It was the same way that Sarah Dryksell had originally looked at him while he was on her examination table. Unfortunately, he was used to that kind of reception.

A small part of James wanted to apologise for the confusion, but a much larger part of him overruled that emotion immediately. Mere hours ago, he had steeled himself towards the goal of empowering E-Classers. He wouldn't get very far if he let people continue to treat him like a piece of dirt on their shoe. He did idly wonder if it was his clothing that was identifying him as an E-Classifier. It's not like he had a sign on his forehead that proclaimed it to the world.

"I'm not here regarding a claim. I've an appointment with Nox."

James kept his voice steady as he calmly explained the reason he had ventured into District One.

The receptionist leaned back slightly as she appraised him with a long glance. With a slight tilt of her head, she checked the interface in front of her.

"What is your name?"

James had to admit to himself that he thought she'd give him a much harder time. Maybe it was just a mistake on her part.

"James Sylvester."

A few moments of silence passed as she checked for his name on the system.

He knew he had an appointment, but something about her demeanor was throwing him off guard. Was she going to look up and tell him that there was a mistake and that he shouldn't have arrived?

Whatever expression or reaction that he had expected from her, panic wasn't it.

Colour drained from her face, all composure evaporating at once.

"I'm so sorry, Mr. Sylvester!"

James had barely blinked in shock by the time the receptionist had gotten to her feet and slid around to the front of the booth to where he stood. Her body flowed into an elegant bow that he thought would be impossible by looking at her form-fitting suit.

"My name is Elodie. I will take you to Nox immediately. Please forgive my earlier carelessness."

James could only stare at the young woman, who was still bowed. Was Nox truly that terrifying?

As if it had a ripple effect, James noticed that her colleague at the reception desk had also moved to the front of the desk and taken a similar bow.

All resentment and anger that had been building in him from her tone had dissipated.

"Please don't bow, it's genuinely okay. Just lead the way!"

Elodie's smile seemed a little forced, as though she didn't believe him, but she acknowledged his words and immediately guided him towards the elevators.

"Thank you for your kindness, Mr. Sylvester. We were advised that several VIPs would attend a meeting this morning, because of the broadcast last night. We just didn't expect one of them to use the main lobby entrance."

James looked at her with a hint of surprise.

"Ah, you know about the broadcast? Do you watch Abidden?"

Elodie smiled at him as she first entered the elevator. Her entire demeanor had changed so drastically in just a few brief moments. Was this the power of being a celebrity?

"Of course! I'm a big fan of yours."

Her hand gestured for him to take a seat at the centre of the elevator, which he gratefully accepted. The plush material seemed to welcome him as he sunk into the comfortable seat. Elodie remained standing at the controls of the private elevator and James tried to look anywhere else but at her. She was truly beautiful, and he didn't know why he felt so uncomfortable in her presence.

James caught sight of a few of the receptionists chatting to each other and looking over in his direction. That view was abruptly cut off as the doors closed, revealing a reflective surface. He finally knew why he felt so uncomfortable when he saw his appearance. The clothes he had bought for the raid only a few weeks ago were raggy looking, making him look disheveled. Before he could curse at himself for not getting better clothing for his meeting, he felt Elodie's hands land on his shoulders.

"Would you like a back massage, Mr. Sylvester?"

James stared at the reflection of Elodie in the elevator doors. She was incredibly close to him, so much so that he could smell her perfume. Silvery blonde hair draped over one of her shoulders and James could sense it with his peripheral vision.

"Sure, why not?"

Elodie's smile didn't falter in the slightest as she continued to watch James in the door's reflection. Her palms gently caressed his shoulder blades before her thumbs started working on the base of his neck.

Closing his eyes, James enjoyed the sensation as the fatigue in his muscles melted away at her touch. She knew what she was doing.

He didn't even need to listen to the warnings in the back of his mind. He had lived as an E-Classifier long enough to recognise the signs of attempted manipulation.

James just expected her to be more subtle about it.

A moment later, her voice appeared in his ear, this time with a more sultry tone.

"I've seen a few of these sponsorship meetings before, Mr. Sylvester. They're going to assign some staff to you, to help manage your brand portfolio..."

James opened his eyes and blinked a few times before looking at Elodie's face again. She was watching him intently as she spoke, that forced smile still on her face.

"I qualified as a Media Consultant and have a year of experience working as a Receptionist here at Nox Holdings, Mr. Sylvester."

Suddenly, Elodie's hands ventured down James' chest as she continued to speak.

"I would love the opportunity to work for a Legendary player. A personal assistant, branding... whatever you want."

James kept his expression passive as he watched her make her pitch.

Elodie's venturing hand eventually landed at his wrist, which she tapped twice. She paused for a moment, as if to see if James was going to stop her.

He just watched quietly as she added herself as one of his personal contacts.

Elodie's smile grew wider as she straightened up and slid her hands back to his shoulders. She gave them a playful squeeze before clapping them gently.

"Looks like we're here, Mr. Sylvester."

Stepping around the chair, Elodie offered her hand to help James get to his feet.

When James stood, Elodie took a half step forward so her body brushed up against his.

"Good luck in your meeting, James. I hope we'll get to see a lot more of each other."

Her voice was almost a whisper as she took a step back and pressed a button at the elevator.

As the doors opened, James took a steadying breath as he looked at Elodie, who seemed pretty proud of herself.

"You're a big fan, you said?"

Turning on one heel, she shyly played with her hair while giving him a coy look.

"Probably one of your biggest fans."

James couldn't help but laugh at the situation.

"Well then, this should be easy! What's the name of my Void Demon?"

Elodie's smile faltered as she realised he had caught her in her lie.

"Thought so."

Nox Holdings clearly had a hierarchy amongst the staff. The person who welcomed him from the elevator didn't even give Elodie a passing glance as he pushed a button that closed the elevator doors in her face.

"Welcome, Mr. Sylvester. My name is Hobbs, and I'll be taking you to the boardroom. May I offer you any refreshments? They have already advised me you're a fan of coffee! We have every type you could imagine, so please ask."

James scratched the back of his head.

"I'm not actually that familiar with the different types, sorry..."

Hobbs didn't miss a beat as he whispered conspiratorially.

"Don't worry, I hardly know half of them myself... but it's always nice having the options! I'll get you one of my favourites, and if you don't like it, we'll find one that you do. How does that sound?"

James smiled at the friendly nature of the man.

As they walked down the corridor, James opened his interface and deleted Elodie's contact information from his contacts.

Hobbs frowned once he noticed what had happened.

"Mr. Sylvester, please let me know if you were inconvenienced on your way up here. We foster a culture of ambition and development at Nox Holdings, but too many wish to take the simple route up the ranks."

James shook his head in response.

"I wasn't. Thank you for the concern. What should I expect in this meeting, or are you not allowed to tell me?"

Hobbs slowed his steps and gestured for James to do likewise.

"You surprised Nox. That doesn't happen very often. Our teams have been working throughout the night to respond to all the enquiries from other brands. There's a movie deal, a fashion label, a car sponsorship, a theme song, and countless others that are waiting for you beyond those doors. Nox doesn't care about any of that, though, but it's a necessary evil in her mind. The most important meeting will be with the architects. You're going to meet with them later."

Hobbs listed out the different meetings as though he were reading it from a pad.

"Don't worry about it though, you're the star of the show. You're too valuable to rip to pieces."

With that said, Hobbs resumed walking at his normal pace, which brought them to the enormous doors of the boardroom in just a few brief moments.

"Oh, and if you have any form of phobia with heights... stay away from the glass. You're currently on the 150th floor of Nox Holdings, which is an experience to behold."

James nodded as processed all the information. He didn't know that there was going to be so much to the meeting. He had thought it was just going to be a performance review with Nox, but this was outside of his expectations.

Hobbs stretched out his hand, which held a small black box. A small silver and black pin was at its centre.

"This will grant you entry into the executive lounge, the spa, resort and restaurants. You can also visit any clubs or specialist activities with this pin. It's essentially the full VIP access to the tower. We also have a chauffeur service, which takes you straight to the executive lobby. You won't be harassed, or accosted by low-tier staff that way."

The look that Hobbs gave James was pointed, and the wink was almost knowing.

"Unless, Mr. Sylvester enjoys that sort of desperate attention?"

Hobbs jokingly pulled his hand backward as if to withdraw the pin, but James took it gratefully.

"Thank you, Hobbs. Also, please call me James. I'm never going to get used to 'Mr. Sylvester!'"

Nodding his head with a smile, he pulled open the door to the boardroom.

"Good luck, James."

James was in absolute awe of what he was seeing. Royal D1 had been the most impressive location he had ever seen, but this boardroom was a whole different league. At the centre of the room, on a smokey glass elevated platform, was a massive ornate boardroom table that looked like it could seat at least fifty people. On his current level was a series of see-through meeting rooms with glass walls. Important looking people occupied many of them, with groups of uniformed people surrounding them. The vibe that he got was like the sponsorship meeting, but it was different in one fundamental way. He was the centre of everyone's

attention. The moment he had stepped into the boardroom, countless eyes from the surrounding meeting rooms snapped to him.

"Good Morning, Mr. Sylvester."

A well-dressed man appeared out of nowhere, holding a platter of decorative cups.

"Would you like me to prepare your coffee?"

James could only nod in shock as his eyes wandered around the luxurious space. He barely heard what the employee was saying as they handed him a cup and saucer.

"Also, our Executive Chef has taken the challenge of making anything you desire from the kitchen. Merely touch the pin that Hobbs gave you, and we will come right away to take your order."

With that said, the well-dressed man filled the cup from an equally ornate decanter before stepping back towards a nearby wall.

James glanced that way and was shocked to see a host of employees, all standing at the ready, as though they were waiting to be summoned for a task at any moment.

Suddenly, the transparent glass of the meeting rooms became reflective, hiding their occupants from James. The reason for the sudden change became apparent immediately afterwards.

"Welcome to Nox Holdings."

Nox's voice carried down from the elevated table up above. With a simple flick of her hand, a dozen employees left their perch to stand in front of the reflective meeting rooms. It almost felt like Nox had turned the luxurious meeting area into a prison.

"I wanted to talk to you in private before we join the circus, so come on up."

James looked at the cup in his hands awkwardly, but the same well-dressed man appeared at his side once again.

"Let me take that up for you, Mr. Sylvester."

Rather than being impressed by the employee's attentiveness, James shuddered at how exhausting it all seemed. He would hate to have that kind of job.

With another look around him, James followed the attendant up the steps to where Nox was waiting for him.

The S-Class CEO wasted no time in jumping straight into the details.

"I had some expectations, but I don't think anyone could have expected that sort of outcome. I'll be honest, I wasn't overjoyed with your selection of character. A Dread Pirate doesn't really have any synergy with a commercial and residential property letting, does it?"

Nox asked rhetorically as she walked around the boardroom table. The trek actually took her some time because of the length of the table, but she used it as an excuse to explain her thoughts.

"When you established your lair at Rayth, I was a little disappointed. It was a small tutorial area, completely locked off from the rest of Abidden. Owning a small, underdeveloped area that nobody has ever heard of wasn't a good look for our brand."

The S-Classer finally reached her seat, but instead of sitting down, she held the back frame of the chair and gazed at James.

"When I saw the recordings of your fights, I saw a strategist that worked smarter than his opponents. I don't know what I expected from becoming your sponsor."

Nox gestured for James to take a seat at the table opposite to her own.

"I sent you a message to say that I was dissatisfied with your performance, and I can safely say, you were definitely not on track to earning your bonus."

A slight smile tugged at Nox's face as she finally took a seat at the table facing James.

"But then you went and took on the Legendary Class Quest..."

Nox paused for a moment before her smile turned into a grin.

"It was truly incredible to watch and I'm very excited to see what the Dread Captain will do in the future."

James watched as a familiar object slid across the table. It was a contract tablet, similar to the one that Nox gave him at the sponsorship meeting not so long ago.

Nox continued to speak as James picked up the tablet.

"Your contract with Nox Holdings is no longer sufficient, considering the sudden change of status and fame. Before we invite the vultures to the table, I wanted to negotiate a new deal with you."

James looked at the tablet in his hands for a moment, seeing only blank spaces where he expected there to be an offer.

"There's nothing written here."

He finally ventured in confusion.

Nox rested her face on her palm, her cold grey eyes locking onto James' face.

"So lets decide on some clauses to put in there, if you're up for it."

Her voice was playful and lacked the edge that had been haunting his thoughts for the last week.

James looked at Nox for a second before he reached into his pocket and withdrew the pin that Hobbs had given him. He pressed the face and was rewarded with an almost instantaneous attendant appearing at his shoulder.

"How may I help you, Mr. Sylvester?"

James smiled at Nox before looking at the attendant.

"I'm going to need a lot more coffee."