

Chapter 19: Downtime

Despite his best efforts at staying awake, Khance was out for the count a couple of hours later. James had peppered him with questions about his experiences with the game. Ever since the conversation in the Neo with Don, James put his logical frame of mind to one side and remained open-minded on how Abidden really worked. It turned out that Khance had just as many insights as Don, and now James was reeling from the information overload. It was probably for the best that Khance was on the verge of passing out, because James needed a break too. The biggest surprise for him was the magic and crafting system that Chris Spectre had created for Artifice. If Khance was to be believed, the potential of that system was truly extraordinary. James glanced at the one screen that Khance had commandeered during their conversation. It hosted an intricate rune that Khance had designed, with no reference materials. The Paragon simply stated that if James was to put the symbol on the base of the Tempest, it would store energy from the Dread Lake. Beside that image was another rune of Khance's design that was to be engraved onto the cannons. Apparently, it would allow them to use that stored energy to increase firing damage. The most impressive part of the explanation was how it was an offhand remark by Khance, just him explaining how the system operated. He started speaking about magic circles and domains, but most of the information went straight over James' head. The conversation alone was a testament to how different Khance was without being under the influence of the Softeners. If there were any doubts about the validity of Khance's statements earlier, the tired exchange erased them. Now, the Paragon was sleeping soundly in the other room, and James was left to marvel at the series of drawings that now decorated his walls.

James, you asked for a warning when Nexus Rigs would accept the order. They will arrive in the next hour with Khance's temporary rig.

"Thank you, Jackal." James answered the AI as he tore his eyes away from the drawings. There were many high-level examples and Khance gave James a pretty solid overview of the magical capabilities within Abidden, but the crafting ideas were truly amazing. Despite their turbulent conversation before, James had a newfound respect for Chris Spectre. The man had essentially created a realm of endless possibilities, tethered only by the user's imagination. James couldn't help but be curious about how he'd do it as the Dread Captain. He had already seen the effects of the teleportation rune that brought the Dread Faction onto the Tempest, so he had already experienced it firsthand. That process had used Fibber's pool of mana and was supported by his mages, so how would the Dread Captain access mana? Would the Mana Lake have kept its power after being converted to the Dread Lake? He was curious to find out, but

one thing he was definitely certain of was that he needed to align with Khance. The knowledge of the Paragon was beyond anything James had expected.

A slight buzzing from his wrist showed a call was coming through. James glanced down and answered it immediately upon seeing Helena's name. "Hey, you got my message?" James started apprehensively. He wasn't sure how they were going to react to his very hands-on intervention with Alex. Much to his surprise, it was Varya's voice that came through rather than Helena's. "Is he still with you? Did he leave yet?" James couldn't help but laugh at the question. He wasn't sure if they just had zero faith in him, or full belief that Khance would have escaped by now. "There's no need to worry. He's still here. Doors are locked and I've some automated security in place to make sure he tries nothing funny. He's through the worst of it already and needs some time to recover."

Helena's voice appeared on the call, and it was obvious that she was trying to hide the doubt in her tone as she spoke carefully. "It'll be a lot longer than an evening before he gets through the worst of it. If you need us to come over and help, just let us know. We're in the area and can be there really quickly! We don't want to overstep, but... we've been in this situation with him before, and it might save you some pain if we intervene."

Her voice answered James' earlier question. They didn't think that Khance was going to make it, but it was reassuring to know that they at least wanted to support and help him. James knew how destructive well-intentioned people could be. "I have everything here under control, but thank you for checking in. I'll keep you in the loop with his progress, but it's for the best if you don't come over." He kept his voice firm but friendly, hoping they'd take the hint that he didn't want them to interfere. If they had already enabled Khance in the past, or allowed him to continue using, then they were only likely to make the problem worse. "Anyway, I've got to wake him up now so we can watch the #Penta-Price stream together. Are either of you going to be logging in before the downtime?" Both Helena and Varya paused at the sudden switch of topic before answering in the negative. "Khance's rig should arrive at my place later today, but he won't be fit to play for a few days. Hope you'll be able to hold the fort in Abidden!" Another slight pause came through the call before Helena launched into a stream of questions. "Wait! What do you mean his rig is going to your place? It's barely big enough for you! Let us get something better for you both!" Helena's voice was laced with concern, and James couldn't help but smile. "Nope. The place is perfect for the two of us, and this way I can keep a really close eye on him! Stream is starting soon, so I'll chat to you later! I'll send plenty of updates, so don't fret, okay?"

Both Varya and Helena held onto the call for a few moments longer, making James promise again and again to contact them if there was anything at all they could do to

help. He believed them, but all Khance needed right now was time and mental stimulus. His brain was waking up for the first time in years and James was going to throw every challenge he could think of at the man. James tapped his wrist again to make sure that the call had ended and was dismissed from his interface. He moved to the fridge and pulled out a few cold bottles of water. "You've twenty seconds to get dressed before I drag you out of that room!" James shouted in the room's direction. A muffled groan was the only answer he received, followed by a sad set of footsteps dragging towards the bathroom. With no prompting from James, Jackal readied the stream by combining all the window displays on one large screen. A countdown timer was ticking away, but James didn't want to give Khance any excuse to stay in the room. He'd rather have him alert and ready for when they started.

"Hurry, it's starting!" James shouted again as he placed the bottles on the floor in front of the couch. He hated to admit it, but since Alex mentioned the lack of side-tables, James became very aware of how little furniture he had in the apartment.

You're joining us on a very special broadcast right now! I know it feels like we're edging you with so many streams, and not a lot of game, but for all the new viewers out there that are experiencing Abidden for the first time... you need to know that us veterans have seen nothing like this before either. We're obviously talking about the new expansion that's being implemented as we speak.

Downtime is going to be taking place in a few hours, and we can see a few new Heroes entering the game for the first time. There are some old faces that many of you won't have seen for a very long time. There will be a few Wildcards dipping their toes into the game for a few hours, but we won't be able to see any of them until they throw the first punch. If all of that wasn't exciting, it gets even better. When the downtime hits, we're going to see the evolution of Abidden live.

We're going to watch in real-time as the time speeds up in Abidden! I thought it was going to be offscreen, but Quentin has assured us we're going to watch it happen. We can't keep an eye on everything all at once, but our team is going to be sending in a lot of the best updates, and we'll have Loremaster Bene in the studio later to give us extra insights about what we're seeing.

Apparently, we're going to see the introduction of World Bosses too! So that's my intro for the moment. You're watching Abidden with #Penta-Price, and we're going to be getting our first look at everything after the break!

At the sound of the streamer's voice, Khance stumbled through the door looking like absolute death. There were dark circles under his eyes and his skin was pale. James couldn't help but be reminded of the E-Classes he used to see queuing outside the medical centres. Khance truly looked like a man that was on the cusp of death. James had the good grace not to stare at him and switched the subject quickly. "Coffee? You haven't missed anything." The Wildcard hopped to his feet and gestured for the Paragon to take a seat on the couch while he busied himself in the kitchen. With only a moment of hesitation, Khance dragged himself over to the safety of the couch. Clutched in his hand was a blanket he found in the bedroom. In the blink of an eye, he was cocooned in the material, with only his head poking out at the top. By the time James returned with a steaming cup, Khance was half-asleep with his head resting on the firm cushions. He placed the cup on the floor a little distance away from the blanket burrito so it didn't get knocked over. His reward was a mumble of thanks from Khance.

The advertisements were relentless, which ranged from Nexus Rigs showcasing their latest models of consumer rigs, to recruitment videos for the various gaming universities. They were the ones that came just after the Abidden segment before the mainstream adverts kicked in. James wanted to sigh inwardly as a furniture advertisement started playing, asking him if he had just moved into a new apartment and needed to furnish the place. A few images of stylish side-tables accompanied the pitch before a series of costs and estimates appeared on the screen. It would apparently only take a day for his entire apartment to be furnished perfectly. Khance chuckled from his cocoon and James shot him a withering look. Next up was an advert for the latest coffee machine and James decided he needed to check on his privacy and security settings in the apartment. A few minutes later, after even more targeted adverts that showed them the next generation of nutri-packs, they returned to the stream, which revealed the grinning face of #Penta-Price.

As always, we're going to be getting as many of the adverts done as soon as possible so we've uninterrupted time in Abidden. To new viewers that get frustrated, take it up with your networks. I'm a victim just as much as you! Now, we have a few developments that I'm really excited to talk about.

There are a few Wildcards that we've speculated about and we've not gotten confirmation on anything, but some rumours have been coming out of Nexus Rigs! Looks like Chris Spectre was seen leaving their HQ yesterday! Now, why would that be something of note? Well, we're taking that as confirmation that he's definitely getting a rig and will appear in Abidden as a Wildcard. He's not on the latest Hero roster! But there is another reason that we've been watching Nexus Rigs closely.

This hasn't been discussed publicly yet, but there are mutterings going around in the industry that Nexus Rigs is dropping their neutrality...

Nexus Rigs is going to field a team of Heroes in Abidden. We've speculated on the Scumlords coming back into the game, but this... is so much better! The market leader for virtual reality rigs, who is a huge shareholder in Abidden, has taken a bigger chunk of the pie. Looks like they're going to be using their incredible roster of eSports champions to create a new team for the game. If we thought that James Sylvester heralded in a new style of play for Abidden, the introduction of competent Heroes is definitely the next step in that journey.

Will Jorgen Baw standby and watch this all happen, or are we going to see some competitive rivalry happening on the Hero roster? What will this mean for the remaining celebrity roster? Are they going to pack their bags, or are they going to adapt to the unfamiliar landscape? We'll have Loremaster Bene join us after the break to find out more!

Khance shifted on the couch so that his legs were crossed. He leaned down, and an arm appeared out of the blankets to pick up the fresh cup of coffee. His tired eyes were fixed on the screen as he listened to the stream. "How does it feel, knowing that you're being casually spoken about to millions of people?" Khance asked absentmindedly as he cupped his hands around the steaming mug. It was a question that James hadn't really expected, or thought about all that much. All he could do really was smile and shrug. "I'm numb to it, because it doesn't really feel real or warranted. It'll pass as soon as the next cool thing happens in Abidden."

Much to his surprise, Khance shook his head at those words. "No, James. It won't ever pass. Your fight is going to go down in history as one of the most incredible moments in Abidden. I've had a few moments appear in the top ten, and they've been discussed to death over the years. None of those come even close to what you did... so prepare yourself for that. It's only been a few days since it's happened. Just wait for the mainstream people to pick up on it." Despite him sitting in a cocoon of blankets and comically clutching at a coffee cup, his words sounded like sage advice. Maybe it was just his tired tone, but he sounded like he knew what he was talking about. James conceded without an argument and just gestured at the screen in front of them that was still showing adverts. "What's your thoughts on the new team for Nexus Rigs? It's cool if you don't want to talk about them."

Khance didn't answer immediately. He turned his head to James and gave him a wry smile. "Are you asking me as a shareholder? Or do you mean personally? Because as a newly appointed investor that has a stake in the company... A team of competent people coming into the game is great. I think they'll pose a threat to us Villains and really set a new challenge. It'll likely create healthy amounts of tension and drama, which will keep viewers and ultimately rake in more money." Khance spoke subjectively as he weighed up the different options. He placed the cup back on the floor and looked back at James. "But if we're speaking personally? I'm disappointed that they took away Scourge. I know I don't have any right to be annoyed... but I am. I poured my heart and soul into creating that machine. I only ever got to use a fraction of the stuff I put on it, as the Healer class was locked to the fourth circle. I'd love to use it now that I'm the Shadow General."

James saw the defeated look on Khance's face and tried to lighten the mood a little. "If you had it, do you think you wouldn't have died as much?" Much to James' relief, Khance let out a bark of laughter before shaking his head in amazement. "I can't believe how many people don't check the stat sheets. I thought you, of all people, would have seen through it." The Paragon gave James a look that was a perfect blend of disappointed and quizzical. Before he could retort, Khance leaned in closer. "I'll tell you a little secret." James mimicked his action and also leaned in closer. Khance looked to both sides as though worried that someone might overhear, before cupping his hand at the side of his mouth. "You know how I play as the Shadow General? It allows me to use a wide range of magic... such as curses, necromancy and illusion! Remember how I made a puppet of CurioSity during the raid? I can make even better puppets, that look just like me." Khance leaned back and gave James a wink, which stunned the Wildcard. "There's no way Jorgen would have fallen for that!" Without waiting for Khance to confirm or deny the statement, James whirled around to the screens and called for Jackal.

"Jackal, can you show Khance's death in Abidden from the other day? When Jageranimus killed him?" James asked quickly, wanting to see the footage with the new context. He hadn't paid attention to the other things that were going on in the game because he had his own things to worry about.

The Shadow General, Khance, has yet to die in Abidden. Would you like to see footage of his summons being defeated?

Khance picked up his cup with a smile and leaned back on the couch. The sigh of satisfaction he gave off was smug as James just stared at him in surprise. "Yes, Jackal. Show me." The advertisements melted away to reveal the fight between Jageranimus and what James had assumed was Khance. The Shadow General wore a set of flowing

black robes that only partially obscured his face. Bolts of black burst forward at the Celestial Crusader, but none of them made contact. The Shadow General leaped in different directions, evading a flurry of attacks from Jorgen. After only a short back and forth, Jorgen struck the figure down with a burst of golden light. The robed figure screamed in Khance's voice as it was defeated instantly, crumpling to the ground before disappearing from sight. James turned on the couch and looked at Khance, who conceded immediately with a laugh.

"All the attacks were illusions and they wouldn't have done anything if they made contact with him. That's why I made them all go wide. I recorded the screams, grunts, taunts and a few other choice lines that I'd be able to activate whenever I chose. The choreography was the worst though, because I had to do all of those movements first and record the patterns. Once I had all the movements done, I created a sequence that would look like a convincing battle. I'm not at a high enough level that I can inject 'souls' into the vessels, but I can still manually control them. At higher circles, I'll have access to better abilities, but it's not worth the pain of the world turning against me." Khance explained as he pointed at the screen. His eyes were locked onto the movements of the puppet and a grimace appeared, as though he wasn't happy with what he was seeing. "This looked a lot better to me a few days ago."

James shook his head as he, too, turned in his seat. Everything Khance said was leaving him with more questions. He couldn't help but be impressed at the ingenuity of the play. "What are circles? Why would the world turn against you?" Khance's arm extended out with his empty mug. "Can I have water this time? The headache has returned!" James smiled as he took the cup from him and got to his feet. The Paragon explained things as James went to the kitchen. "Those runes I showed you yesterday? Each of the symbols is like the letters of a language, or parts of a set. They can be swapped out with other symbols from the set, and different things will happen. How you arrange them, the patterns you make, their order and how they overlap... all have different effects. That's essentially the basis for magic and crafting in Abidden. Each circle of magic has a corresponding set of symbols and patterns. The higher the circle number, the more complex and interesting the patterns can become. Higher demands mean more mana, so you need to become creative with how you draw it in... similar to how the Tempest could pull in power, you need to find a mana source that will sustain your magic." James returned to the couch and gave Khance a glass of water which he gratefully accepted. "That's where things get tricky. I might only have one thousand points of mana, but the circle I want to use requires five thousand. The natural order of Abidden would dictate that I cannot perform that magic, but I can harness mana that doesn't belong to me. When I do that, the world tries to rebalance things... usually through stopping the practitioner."

Khance downed the water in one go and placed the cup to one side. His shoulders trembled, and he gripped the blanket closer to his skin before continuing. "The circles are typically aligned with rank. As Unique, I should be able to use the third or fourth circle of magic. If I was at the level of a Disciple, then I'd probably be able to get up to the sixth circle. To put things into context, the Gods use the ninth circle, and the Prime Good and Evil use the tenth. Scourge had fast-casting on pretty much every circle up to fifth. Whoever ends up using that rig will instantly be able to use magic at a Legendary level, if they can get a power source, and if they're willing to deal with the backlash from the rebalancing."

James ignored the #Penta-Price stream that had resumed because he really wanted to know more about the magic system. It was incredibly interesting. "Okay, so... where is the challenge? Wouldn't every magic user risk dying if it meant breaking through the next circle? Sounds like an incredibly efficient way to power-level." While he spoke, he glanced to the screen to see if they were missing anything, but it looked like #Penta-Price was just rehashing known information. Khance laughed at the question as though it was obvious. "If I logged-in right now and tried to break into the third circle, I would need to first prepare my staging area. Imagine a rune the size of a building at my feet. Then I'd need to flood it with mana, which would either require a huge magical energy source or require a lot of sacrifices. Then, I would need to construct the first circle from scratch, drawing it out in the air in front of me. Every symbol and pattern in a certain sequence. A single misstep will undo everything. Only when the first is done will I be able to start the second. When it's done, then I can move onto the third. Each one takes longer and longer, the patterns are harder, the sequences are more difficult, and the backlash becomes harsher. I'd wager by the fifth circle, there would be an army of monsters coming in to attack me. I could never do any of this as the Divine Healer because it was against the flow of nature..." Khance finished his explanation with a sigh of annoyance.

Before James could say anything, Khance spoke absentmindedly. "If I can harness the corrupted mana from the Dread lake, and you host me out on the water... I could probably break the fifth circle. The creatures in the lake would kill any invading force. The Dread Faction could keep me alive while I'm in the staging area..." Before he could get ahead of himself, James interjected. "Whoa now, are you just inviting yourself onto the Tempest?"

Khance gave James a wry smile. "I thought you wanted to keep an eye on me?"