

Chapter 36: Relativity

James pushed the plate forward in defeat, which caused Billy to bark a laugh.

"I'm still impressed! I know our kitchen is good, but two separate meals? What have you done with the James I know?"

Billy asked as he took the plate away and placed it into the service area beside the bar. Without so much as a word, one server of the Neo picked it up and brought it back into the kitchen. The action was seamless as Billy cleared away the condiments and wiped down the countertop in front of James.

"Still messy, though. Maybe you are the James I know."

The Barman teased in an offhand voice. His normally gruff demeanour had completely disappeared since James took one step into the bar. All that remained was a concerned friend that immediately put an order into the kitchen for some food. Billy placed a drink in front of James before he could utter a word in greeting.

"Not gonna lie, James. I'm feeling this conversation is one-sided. Are you going to tell me what's happening?"

James rubbed at his face as if trying to shake off the weariness that he was feeling on the inside. He thought the Neo might be a good place to lie low for a short period while he got his head together. There was so much that he needed to figure out, and he didn't even know where to begin. The earnest expression on his friend's face made him feel guilty for leaving him in the dark about everything.

"I'm sorry, Billy. I didn't mean..."

Billy raised a hand to stop James from apologising. He just gestured at the E-Classer.

"Don't apologise! Whatever you were doing has to be good for you. Just look at you!"

James dumbly looked at himself, not exactly sure what Billy was talking about.

"Have you been working out? You're not all skin and bones anymore, not to mention that appetite appearing out of nowhere."

Billy asked as he clapped James on the arm. It caused James to remember the moment that Billy had pulled his sleeve up all those months ago, revealing the scars from the slum arcades. This time was different as Billy gave his arm a gentle squeeze.

"That's muscle! Did you get yourself a manual job or something? Come on, stop holding out on me... where have you been?"

James seemed to crack out of his stupor at those words. He had assumed that Billy knew about his whole situation because of the message he had sent earlier.

"Billy, the picture you sent me of the drink...?"

James asked as he pulled up the picture on his interface.

"Ha, I know, what are the chances we make an absolute abomination of a drink... only for some bastard to have the same name in Abidden?!"

Billy laughed as he slid one of his menus across the table. At the very top of the drinks menu was the name of James' old avatar, Travesty, listed as a 'Special'.

"That's not the most amazing thing that's happened though since you left. Guess who won an Abidden viewership licence? You can start watching the Raids here! We're practically packed every night since the new announcement!"

The smile on Billy's face was infectious. James couldn't remember ever seeing the man looking this happy.

The E-Classifier looked at his drink for a few moments, wondering what he should do. He didn't want to trouble Billy with his problems, but he felt like he still owed his friend an explanation. A part of him worried that he'd end up telling Billy everything, only to lose everything the next day. The looming meeting with Nox was tearing James up from the inside, and he didn't know how to push it down. He just wanted to go back in time and play the game better. He just didn't know what he did wrong. How did the Paragons level up so quickly within a single day? Was he truly that inferior to them? Was all of his experience in the Slum Arcades for nothing?

Two fingers clicked in front of his face, snapping James out of his daze. He looked up in panic and saw Billy looking at him with a concerned expression on his face.

"Sam! I'm taking a break. Can you cover the bar?"

Billy asked one server, who just nodded her head as she took off her apron and made her way behind the bar.

"You're with me, come on."

Billy motioned for James to follow him into the back room, which was reserved for employees.

James just nodded his head in compliance as he followed the larger man.

They were two steps into the room when Billy turned around to look at James.

"Is it money problems? Are you in some trouble? Let me know so I can help."

His tone was earnest as he sat down on an old booth identical to the ones that were in the serving area. He gestured for James to take a seat across from him.

James sighed as he rubbed at his face again. He felt so guilty that he had soured Billy's mood with his own problems. As much as he wanted to solve everything himself, he really wanted a friend to lean on.

"I'm Travesty. The same one they're talking about in Abidden."

James blurted as he looked at Billy for his reaction.

The Barman didn't flinch in the slightest or change his expression as he responded.

"Is it a scam you're running with Milly down at the Cafe?"

There was no judgement in his tone, just concern which hurt James more. He felt like he really didn't deserve to be friends with this man at all.

"No, Billy. There's no scam, all of it is legitimate. I've moved to District 8, they've hooked me up with a sponsor too. I'm a Wildcard in the game."

Billy's smile became almost sympathetic as he leaned forward in his seat.

"Okay... lets say that what you're saying is true. If you're now a Wildcard in the game, why are you so upset?"

His tone was reassuring, but his face showed how concerned he was. It was clear as day that he thought James was delusional, but wanted to be supportive to him.

James took a deep breath before explaining everything that had happened to him in the last few weeks. He brought up the previous relationship with the Paragons and spoke about how everything had moved so quickly. Billy's expression shifted and changed as the story progressed. Sympathy turned into confusion, which then morphed into curiosity followed by disbelief. When James got to the part about becoming the Dread Pirate Sylvian, Billy was practically on the edge of his seat with excitement. James continued to explain what had happened on his first day of playing the game, from the attack on the Goblins to the large-scale battle with the Escravo Cartel. Finally, James told him about Nox wanting to meet with him in one day's time.

By the time James had finished his explanation, Billy exhaled long and hard.

"That's quite a story you've got there."

His face showed his conflicting emotions as he wrestled with the best advice to give his friend. He wasn't sure how to best navigate the intricate metaphor James was using.

"You don't believe me, do you?"

James laughed at seeing his friend struggling so much to give him an answer.

Billy raised his hand.

"It's just a little hard to give you advice when I don't really know what the problem is!"

James just stared at him.

"I just told you... Nox is going to fire me and drop my sponsorship. The Paragons have already outranked me in a single day. Jorgen Baw is going to kill me the moment he finds me!"

Billy just nodded his head.

"Yes, you mentioned all of those things... but I still don't see what the problem is? You might outrank them tomorrow? You might kill Jorgen Baw when you see him and as for Nox, well... did she say you were getting fired or having your sponsorship dropped?"

James sighed as he looked up at the ceiling, but Billy continued to speak.

"Okay, I think I understand what's going on here... you borrowed money from someone, who we're calling 'Nox', and you needed to complete a job for them but it went south? Am I close?"

Billy asked as he placed his hands on the table. He was giving James an inquisitive look that caused the E-Classer to burst out laughing.

"Fuck Billy, do you actually still think I'm lying?"

The Barman just raised his hands defensively.

"I'm just saying that you're name dropping some very special people! Show me your Gaming Licence and I'll believe you. Fuck it, no... show me your account balance!"

Billy challenged James as he moved closer in the seat.

"Actually!"

Billy declared as if he had an epiphany.

"Call one Paragon. Yeah, that'll do it. Anyone you like... call them."

He leaned back in his seat with his arms folded, a victorious smile on his face.

James just looked at him and shook his head.

"I genuinely cannot wait to see your face."

Billy's smile became wider until James started interacting with his interface.

"Wait... what are you doing?"

Suddenly the sound of a call filled the employee room, which caused Billy to whisper harshly to James.

"I know all of their voices, so you will not fool me with one of your friends picking up!"

After a few moments of beeping, a tired voice answered the phone.

James! What's up? I just logged out. How was your first day?

Don Orso's voice burst out from the interface, causing Billy to turn white.

"I have to apologise Don. I had a pretty rough day and tried confiding in a friend who didn't believe I was a Wildcard!"

James layered it on thick as he gave Billy a meaningful look. Billy looked as though he wanted the ground to open up below him and swallow him up.

And you called me to prove it? Haha, I don't know what to say? I'm Scarr! Nice to meet you, James' friend!

"Thanks Don, I think your voice completely did the trick though. He looks a little ill if I'm honest."

James genuinely enjoyed the reaction Billy was having. It was as if the E-Classer was seeing in real-time, the Barman's realisation that the story was true.

Fancy a drink? You can tell me how your first day went!

"Sure, I'm at the Neophyte Bar. It's an E-Classer haunt down in the Outer Districts. I can send you on the address."

Excellent! I think I've heard of the place. I'll see you in about an hour!

With that said, Don hung up and Billy just stared at James in total disbelief.

"So, do you believe me-"

Before James could finish his sentence, Billy had bolted upright and rushed to the door.

"SAM! GET THE FUCKING CLEANING CREW IN HERE NOW!"

The Paragon scratched at the stubble on his chin as he mulled over what James was telling him.

"I don't see what the problem is? From what I know of Nox, she's the honourable type. Kell vetted them all so I couldn't imagine her cutting you after the first day... maybe it's just a slap on the wrist and telling you she expects you to do better? Either way, you can't do anything about it, so why worry about it?"

Don suggested as he took a sip of the drink in front of him.

James looked at both men for a moment before he sighed. He was hoping for a clean cut answer and advice, but they were both in agreement that he should just stop worrying about it. As if reading his expression, Don continued.

"Okay, if you're that worked up about it... why don't you just change things up when you log in tonight? You've already seen what we can achieve in a day, you could turn it all around and get your name up in the leaderboard!"

Billy nodded in agreement from the other side of the table. He kept stealing glances at Don with a wide smile on his face.

James slumped back in the chair in exasperation. He couldn't find the words to explain how he was feeling, but he tried anyway.

"I don't know how to do that, Don. I genuinely thought I did well yesterday. I started doing the role playing thing, talked to the people in Rayth and unlocked information about my quests and stuff. I have at least five steps and a few weeks of grinding ahead of me before I can get my ship!"

Don was about to take a sip of his drink when he paused and looked at James with a confused expression.

"What do you mean, five steps?"

James raised his hand and started counting off the conditions he needed to do with the Dread Faction to construct the Shipyard.

"I need to recruit an artisan, then a craftworker. I need like 25k gold to construct the shipyard and also need to have the loyalty of the town. In the middle of all of that, my faction is heavily in debt and we're hostile to another faction in Rayth."

When James finished counting all the different factors, he sighed and placed his face in his hands before mumbling.

"There's no way to do all of that in one day."

Don laughed as he gestured at the drink in front of him.

"I really like this. Could we get another round?"

The Paragon asked of Billy, who practically leapt up from the seat and rushed out to the main bar area.

Don watched him leave with a smile on his face.

"I like him, he seems like a good friend!"

James looked up and smiled wryly in response.

"Yeah, he's one of the good ones. I don't know how to break it to you though, he's a Greaves fan through and through."

Don snorted.

"How come you didn't invite him then?"

James merely shrugged in response before winking at Don.

"I doubt he'd have come."

Don leaned forward against the table as he gave James a meaningful look.

"Then you're underestimating him. He'd be here if you called him."

His earnest tone surprised James, but Don already changed the conversation.

"Myself and the other Paragons are playing the game efficiently. You're not. That's the key differentiator between us in the rankings right now."

James remained quiet as he listened to Don.

"That town you're in, Rayth? Okay, lets imagine you need to kill the Mayor of the town."

James nodded for Don to continue.

"The way Abidden works, is that it will provide you with the stepping stones around that quest. You'll receive a quest to understand his schedule. You'll get a quest to gain the right poison or the perfect weapon for the job. You'll get a side-quest to infiltrate his offices or another side-quest to bribe his security guards. Do you see where I'm going with this?"

James' nodding came to an abrupt halt at the question. He shook his head as he thought about it.

Don however didn't provide him with the answer, he just waited for James to take a guess.

"... the game will provide different options for different play styles?"

James ventured awkwardly, but Don shook his head.

"No, it's worse than that. The game creates the illusion of steps that you need to achieve. You don't need his schedule, a poison, a bribe, an infiltration... you just need to kill him. What stops you from walking up to him on the street and stabbing him?"

Don's smile grew wider when it suddenly dawned on James.

"Okay, now how would you look at your situation now?"

The Paragon asked him with a gesture, as if waving for him to take over.

"I need a ship. I don't need to build it... I can just get one from somewhere else?"

"Ding. Ding. Ding. We have a winner!"

Don laughed as he slapped the table in quick succession.

"But I've no idea where to get a ship on the Island..."

Before James could continue, Don waved for him to stop talking.

"You're not utilising the Loremasters either. You just jumped into the game without thinking... and I can't blame you, I would have done the same. Lets look for it."

The Paragon tapped his wrist and made his screen large enough for James to see it. He opened his Loremaster folder and ran a query for the terms, 'Ship' and 'Rayth'.

After a few moments, a series of texts appeared in front of both of them. Most were relating to the history of the pre-existing shipyard.

"Nope, nope... nope."

Don swiped through the articles until he paused at one of them.

"Here you go! There's a ship... oh, there's a lot of them!"

James looked at the article in disbelief.

"Where did you... wait? Is that what I think it is?"

Don looked at the image closely before nodding.

"That would explain the difficulty rating, I guess. But hey, it looks like there are others."

The Paragon laughed as he pointed at the top of the article where the difficulty rating was clearly shimmering.

"How much do you want to get on that leaderboard?"

James stared at the article for a few more moments, a plan beginning to form in his head as Don continued to offer advice to him.

"Khance and Kincsö used the guide to jump from Standard to Unique. Khance is too weak, so he relied heavily on Helena and Kincsö to do the fighting on his quest. He needed to get a Grimoire, which practically makes him a one-man army. They had to endure wave after wave of enemies in the depths of the underworld to get a hold of it, but they got it. Kincsö needed to Assassinate a series of Politicians across the Kingdom. Normally that would take weeks of travelling and research, but Helena has a Dragon and fire killed the Politicians just as easily as knives and poison could have. Since she had already murdered two Heroes during the raid, Kincsö was on the cusp of ascending to Master rank."

James finally understood the point that Don was making. Jackal had even spelled it out for him earlier in the apartment. Helena was helping the Paragons move up to higher ranks. Coupled with the Loremaster guides, it looked like they had created a comprehensive path for themselves.

A sudden roar of dismay erupted from the bar area, which caused both men to hop to their feet.

Don was the first through the door, but James was only half a step behind him. In front of them stood Billy, who was gripping the bar in anger. His eyes glued to the screen in front of him.

The excited chatter of #Penta-Price ended their confusion.

Jageranimus extends his kill count! Greaves is down and will be out of the game for 24hrs. This makes it two Paragons down and three to go for the Celestial Crusader!

"Two down?"

James asked Billy in shock, who turned around and gestured vaguely at the screen.

"Khance was the first to go down. That new bastard waited until Kincsö logged out before he attacked."

Don laughed awkwardly as he turned to James.

"Looks like you might have the time to catch up to us."

James didn't share his friend's amusement. His eyes were on Jageranimus. The man that had sworn to ruin him.

"I'm sorry, Don, I'm going to have to go. I need to make a plan."

The Paragon turned around with an excited expression on his face.

"You know... I've been waiting to hear those words again for so long!"

