

Wildcards - Chapter 25: Prime Evil

A chilling laughter echoed throughout the Tomb of the Paragons. The cutscene had activated the moment that the raiding party had entered the final chamber, and now millions of viewers were watching it for the first time. The camera panned rapidly along the ground, following what looked like a plume of smoke that was actively gathering and absorbing the shadows as it swirled across the stone floor. The contorting abyss of smoke and shadow grew louder and more chilling as it gained more mass. Eventually a clawed hand emerged from the smoke and scraped loudly against the stone panels on the ground.

The shrill tone, combined with the continued laughter was panic inducing. Another clawed hand appeared, followed by arms, and then a torso. Soon, a towering humanoid figure stood at the centre of the room. The laughter ended abruptly as the creature floated towards an elevated dais in the middle of the chamber. Upon it, was an intricately carved throne, made completely of stone. The shadows seemed to settle on the chair, and resumed a humanoid figure... this time adorned with flowing black robes, etched with runes. Piercing yellow eyes revealed themselves from the shadowed cowl the creature wore.

The camera lingered on the figure for an additional moment, only to reveal that the creature was clutching at it's chest. It seemed like it was wounded.

"Approach me... Paragon!"

Once the voice sounded out, everyone watching and listening to the stream knew immediately who the creature was. It was the Prime Evil. One of the two Greater Gods that presided over Abidden. He was also the recurring antagonist to the Paragons over the last decade. He had single handedly managed to defeat each of them over the years. He eventually had to be retired because fans associated his appearance in Raids as a death sentence to a particular Hero or Paragon.

His presence in that very moment, confirmed the fears of so many viewers. An eerie music flowed throughout the chamber, which signalled the end of the cutscene.

At no point during the cutscene did the Prime Evil acknowledge the other raid members that had entered the chamber with Helena.

A guttural laugh escaped through the shadowed cowl that draped across his head.

Claw-like skeletal hands gripped at the throne as the Prime Evil stared intently at his prey.

"I won't repeat myself."

The Prime Evil warned Helena.

Quentin steadied his breathing as he watched the cutscene unfold. This was what they had been working towards for the last few weeks and it was by far the most stressful thing he had ever done, which included launching the game in the first place. A part of him expected that the investors would have someone come to the studio, kick down the door and have him detained for even threatening their Golden Goose.

He knew that they would be running around like headless chickens, trying to save their own asses from the eventual fallout of the unfair dismissal trial. What was more than likely happening in that very moment, was a junior employee of a corporation watching the stream... seeing what happened and reporting it to their supervisor, and then that supervisor taking it to their boss until it finally reached the top. The corporate hierarchy was for once a saving grace in buying Quentin time.

On the screen, the cutscene had ended and many of the Heroes stood around awkwardly as though waiting on commands from Helena. Even Bartleby lowered his warhammer as he watched the Celestial Archer for some form of guidance. Swarms of creatures moved around them cautiously. It was clear that they were waiting on an order from the Prime Evil to start their attack. Yet, Helena did nothing, she just continued to stare at the injured God in front of her. When she did finally open her mouth to speak, it felt like the whole world was listening to hear the words.

"I will approach."

#Penta-Price gasped as he stared at the last Paragon. His reaction was mirrored by the millions of viewers that were watching the same sequence of events. Helena, the Celestial Archer... never negotiated with the Villains. She was actually quite famous for her quick decisions and no-nonsense approach to playing the game. The forums, chat rooms and private servers dedicated to the highest paying subscribers practically exploded in that moment. Conspiracy theories flowed like water and everyone came to the same conclusion. In the studio, it was the shoutcaster that said what everyone was thinking.

"She's being sacrificed to save the Heroes."

The anguish in his voice was palpable. He genuinely seemed to be crushed by the revelation and Quentin guessed that his sentiments would be shared by nearly the majority of viewers watching online. The incredibly high viewership tapered off at that moment, accompanied by a sharp dip downward. They had just lost about eight percent of their viewers after Helena spoke. It was either people that couldn't stand to watch it happen, or people that rage quit out of the stream. Thousands of comments poured in, some saying that it was about time and good riddance. Others were just as dismayed as the shoutcaster.

Quentin leaned over and took the flask from beside #Penta-Price. After a quick swig, he quietly cleared his throat and gestured towards the light. The shoutcaster just nodded as he tapped an option on his interface.

The light came on to indicate that the CEO was now live on air.

Abidden Zoetic Enterprises has reached a new frontier in Virtual Reality Gaming. We have created an unparalleled entertainment platform that hosts incredibly talented celebrities that come from diverse backgrounds and skill sets. There are more S-Class and A-Class citizens in our exclusive playerbase than ever before and Abidden has thrived as a commercial success on the basis of their contributions. My vision for Abidden had always been to give everyone the opportunity to share an adventure within our immersive world. I believe the game has lost sight of that goal over the years and we have lost some incredibly talented players to make room for more commercially viable sponsorship opportunities.

Quentin's voice didn't hesitate at all during his speech. His eyes were watching Helena slowly walk up to the Prime Evil. She was doing her part perfectly, so he needed to do his own piece just as effectively.

The price of our success was the Paragons. In a recent board meeting, I was instructed that it was time to retire Helena from the game. It was only then that I realised how far we had fallen. I look at Abidden now and I can't actually recognise the game... At some point we lost our way and became a multimedia platform. It became my decision that I could no longer be a part of Abidden Zoetic Enterprises in its current state. I can't bring back the Heroes we lost, nor can I revert the game to a time that I was proud to be its creator.

What I can control... is everything else!

Abidden is getting its first ever Expansion, in conjunction with my new company that will be going live today, Vendetta Enterprises. The expansion itself will implement a new feature to the world of Abidden, which we're going to be calling the Vendetta System. Our previous working title for it was *Nemesis*, and it is very true to the name. This system will allow NPCs to level up, advance ranks, earn and evolve classes... just like the Heroes.

There will be no more villain of the week cycle where we create a half-assed narrative around something or somebody you don't care about, only for a Hero to defeat it very convincingly. Instead, we'll be overhauling the entirety of the antagonists within Abidden. It is my profound pleasure to announce the first of Abidden's Game Expansions. Villains.

Further details of Vendetta Enterprises will be released by our Head of Media, Kell Daystar, after the conclusion to the stream. We will also be providing an in-depth walkthrough of the new features of the Abidden Expansion on a later stream with our good friend, #Penta-Price.

You might be thinking to yourself, will it actually be different? Why would you want to watch NPC's fighting against Heroes? I asked myself the same question and found the answer.

Ten years ago, at the Division One Invitational... I took a chance on a Rookie PvP team. They became the Paragons, and we all watched as they fought against the environments created in Abidden. Player versus Player is a fundamental game mode that Abidden has avoided for far too long.

Now, I'm quite terrible at showmanship, so I'll leave this to the most qualified person I know.

Quentin gave #Penta-Price a signal to cut the audio, which the shoutcaster did immediately. Both men watched as Helena strode confidently towards the Prime Evil. The comments that were pouring in were too fast for the eye to see, the streamers hosting their own channels and doing reaction vids were quiet as they watched Helena. The previous eight percent drop was suddenly back to viewing the stream with an additional three percent that they took with them. It was officially the most watched moment in Abidden history, and Quentin found himself holding his breath.

Helena came to a stop in front of the seated God. His piercing yellow eyes were locked onto her, but she revealed absolutely no fear in front of him. Instead, she watched him calmly, waiting for him to make the first move. A single cloaked figure appeared behind Helena while another leaned against the Prime Evil's throne. The Celestial Archer didn't even sense the movement of the figure that flanked her. She had to stop herself from smiling when she realised who it was.

"I have approached."

Helena spat as she spread her arms wide, as if she was openly accepting the fate of being sacrificed to the Prime Evil.

The yellow eyes narrowed before a terrifying laugh burst out from the Greater God. His claw like right hand gripped at the wound on his chest. Without any sort of hesitation, he ripped away the black robes to reveal a gaping wound surrounded by scarred flesh. When his weakness was laid bare, the terrifying laugh changed to a more sinister tone as he spoke to Helena.

"In the depths of hell, I fought an army of the dead. My own powers of destruction used against me in an eternal war of the underworld. Do you know who did this to me?"

The Prime Evil hissed as he regarded the wound on his chest.

Helena merely smiled as she looked at the fissure. She was very familiar with the attack, and had fought alongside its owner for years.

"That would be the God Blade. Kinsco."

Nodding his cowed head, the wounded God waved his hand absentmindedly and the black robes that he had torn off repaired themselves. After that, his gaze returned to Helena who he appraised silently for a moment before speaking.

"I will grant you two choices."

Helena listened carefully as the Prime Evil got to his feet. His towering presence was both intimidating and awe inspiring. His body flowed like smoke towards Helena until his yellow eyes were inches from her own. In the moment before his body reformed into it's humanoid shape, it looked like she was looking into an eternal abyss of endless shadow and death.

"You can fight with the Heroes and die in this Tomb."

Helena wanted to shudder in revulsion. Her senses were being completely assaulted by the Prime Evil's aura.

"Or, you can join me... and your friends."

In that very moment, the cloaked figures pulled back their hoods to reveal their identities. Khance's hair was silver and his eyes were glowing an ethereal blue. Kinsco appeared at Helena's side, her lips were black and her eyes were yellow, just like the Prime Evil. A sound of metal dragging against the floor echoed out from behind the throne, followed by a maniacal deep laugh. The shadows retreated momentarily to reveal the ashen white face of Greaves, his neck and chest covered with chains. To his right was Scarr, adorned in a simple cloth tunic.

Helena could hear the Heroes behind her shouting, but she didn't care to look. Her focus was completely on the Prime Evil.

This was the first phase of Quentin's master plan and she needed to sell it.

"You want me to become your puppet?"

Helena shouted as she gestured at all of her friends.

The Prime Evil's laugh this time was full throated and booming. It echoed throughout the whole chamber and sent a chill down every spine.

"A puppet? No! I want you to become my Disciple!"

Helena looked over her shoulder at the very panicked group of Heroes.

"Your Disciple... to what end?"

The God tilted his head back, revealing a set of glistening sharp teeth... all of which were revealed by his wide grin.

"To restore the balance of this world, and rid it of all Heroes!"

Helena looked around at the Paragon's for a moment before she drew her Celestial Bow. She looked down at it's intricately carved wood and pretended to think about her decision. For dramatic effect, she cast a forlorn expression towards the Heroes who were practically begging her to resist the Prime Evil's offer.

Turning her head in such a way that she knew her hair would flow dramatically, the Celestial Archer dropped the bow to the ground.

Steeling herself, or at least appearing to steel herself, Helena bent down on one knee in front of the Prime Evil.

The smile on her face was genuine and she couldn't help but suppress her own laughter as Khance and Kinsco winked at her.

"I accept."

Her voice was strong as she responded, and the sounds of the God's laughter washed across the Paragon's Tomb.

Smoke and shadow blended together into a vortex that swept around Helena.

Each of the Former Paragons watched as their friend joined the Darkness.

Helena grinned as she saw her last ever notification as the Celestial Archer.

Your Character is being created...