

## Chapter 18: Confessions

"Do you still trust me? Because you're giving me an expression that says you don't trust me anymore." James laughed as he squatted at the edge of the bathroom, avoiding the sprawled out form of Khance, who glared at him from the toilet bowl. Sweat lined the Paragon's brow as his shoulders shook uncontrollably. Before he could say a single word, he began heaving once again as a surge of toxins exited his system. With a reassuring smile, James rolled another bottle across the floor, which came to a stop at Khance's thigh. "You're getting the fast-track recovery with this. It'll hit you like a cargo truck, but it'll do the job quickly. You can probably guess why A-Classers don't use this method... it's apparently not that pleasant."

Between gasps for air and vomiting, Khance whirled around to give James an incredulous look. "What the fuck do you mean, apparently? I thought..." He caught himself mid-heave and clutched at his mouth before redirecting back to the toilet bowl. James did his best to make soothing sounds, but it only got him a withering look from the suffering Paragon. "Okay, no more soothing." James laughed. "I've never done this purge before, but I've held countless hands of people going through it. There were so many overdose cases out in the slums that this sort of thing was almost like a weekly occurrence. People in the apartment buildings, or in the arcades, or even queueing on their way to the medical facilities. I'm pretty sure I saw someone collapse when I was at the citizenship office... it's rampant out there. They don't have the money to go to a specialist, and they don't have the time to wean themselves off whatever addiction is killing them." James picked up one of the empty bottles from beside Khance. "This stuff is so good that it literally kills everything bad or harmful in your system. It's like a wonder drug that nobody wants to buy because of how fucking horrible the experience is. It's kept in circulation because it keeps the E-Classers alive."

Khance's expression softened ever so slightly, but it was really hard to tell between the strained groans of discomfort. James got to his feet and gave Khance an apologetic smile. "When you drink that next bottle, you've probably got a few seconds to switch positions and get onto the toilet..." To say that Khance looked broken and betrayed was an understatement. James leaned over and clapped him on the shoulder. "Drink up! The faster you get better, the faster you can beat me up for this horrible experience." With that said, the Wildcard moved towards the door. Glancing back, he watched the sulking form of Khance drink the entire fresh bottle in one go. Knowing what was to come, James quickly stepped outside and closed the door behind him. "Jackal, play music... any type, I don't care, but make it loud."

*Would you like me to monitor his vitals as you listen to music?*

"Yes, please." James answered as he moved to the kitchen to wash his hands. He knew they were clean, but he somehow needed to wash off the experience. It reminded him too much of back in the slums. The lack of sanitation, and the expressions of hopelessness and misery. Wincing slightly at the memories, James moved his hands away from the dispenser and waited for the dryer to kick in. Unfamiliar music started playing in the background and it immediately caught James' attention. The beat was fast, and the vocals were amazing. It was a female singer and he could only describe the theme as epic. Rather than interrupt the song to ask what it was, James walked to the living space of the apartment and slid onto the couch. He closed his eyes and simply enjoyed the experience with a wide smile on his face. It was one of the rare occasions he had time to think and appreciate his journey. There was nothing immediately on fire that needed his attention, and he wasn't being dragged left and right to go to meetings or attend appointments.

There were still things that needed to be done, like selecting a new Brand Manager and fixing up the apartment out in the slums. But all of that could wait for a while. James exhaled slowly as he thought about the situation with Khance. It was the first time that he felt useful and needed in years. Sure, sometimes he would bail Milly out of a tough situation by playing in at the cafe... but this was different somehow. He was going to help him get better, even if it took weeks or months for him to recover properly.

As the music continued to play throughout the evening, James ended up falling asleep on the couch. It was a few hours later when he awoke with a start, only to find a blanket draped across his torso. In a moment of bleary confusion, he idly wondered how Jackal had put a blanket over him, when he suddenly remembered his new houseguest. Whipping off the blanket, James rushed to his feet to check on Khance, only to see the Paragon sitting on the other end of the couch, a bemused expression on his face.

"What, were you worried I'd make a run for it? You can ask Jackal. I haven't left the building. Not because the doors are locked or anything... I just decided not to." Khance idly gestured around the room. "But don't get me wrong, I was very tempted to do some shopping. How do you live like this? You don't even have a table and chairs for meals? No art or decorations. You literally have a kitchen, a rig, a bed and a bathroom. We really need to get you something that makes this place yours."

Instead of answering, James stared at Khance, looking for any sign of side-effects from the cleanse. The Paragon merely returned his stare with a slight smile. "Are you shocked that I survived? I wanted some painkillers, but Jackal refused as they contain

some of the same ingredients as Softeners. So here I am, drinking water." His grim smile eventually broke into a genuine grin as he took a swig from his mug. "I never want to do that cleanse again. The fifth bottle was the worst... it's just endless sweating!" James blinked at those words, not sure if he heard his friend correctly. "You drank all of them? You finished the set?" Instead of answering, he just raised his hand and pointed at the ceiling. James tilted his head in confusion, but it was Jackal who ended up answering his original question.

*You were asleep for over five hours. I guided Alexander through the rest of the process, which he completed with only a moderate amount of complaints.*

"Thank you, Jackal." Khance responded humorlessly. "But in the vein of being fully transparent, this isn't water. It's coffee. Which seems to be the only drink you have in this house. There is no way I'm going to be sleeping tonight... and you just woke up! So what can we do?" There was an uncharacteristic tone of emotion in his voice that James didn't recognise. He wondered if the Paragon was mocking him, but the earnest smile on his friend's face only confused him further. "Are you feeling okay, man?" James asked as he idly folded the blanket that had been covering him. He placed it to the side of the couch before taking a seat again and looking across at Khance. Something felt wrong and James couldn't put his finger on it. Usually, after a cleanse, the individual would fall into a spiral of despair and longing. They wouldn't have any interest in anything other than sleeping and crying.

Khance sighed as lifted his coffee cup into the air. "You don't even have a table for me to put this on. I have to go back to the kitchen area, or place it on the floor. Are you not upset that you don't have side tables? That blanket on the floor? Why is there no compartment for it?" The Paragon looked around the room and shook his head wistfully. "If you're shy about spending money, don't worry. I'll furnish the place for you. You can't live like this." His eyes started darting around the room, as though he was taking inventory of all the things that James would need to get for the apartment. As his gaze flitted from point to point, James asked his question again. "Alex, are you feeling okay?"

Closing his eyes and leaning back, Khance laughed with genuine mirth. "Am I okay? No... not really. My mind is waking up from a deep dream, and it's asking a lot of questions I don't have the answers to. Lots of introspective questions, many logical ones too, and then there is the guilt and the blame that I'm struggling to rise against." Opening his eyes, Khance turned and tapped the side of his head. "Overthinking everything, and now going over the last few years of poor choices and decisions. Do I deserve to be a Paragon? What was I even running from? Does it matter that I don't get to use Scourge? Am I just a pawn in the greater scheme of things? Is a Softener

addiction even that bad when you really think about it?" He listed off the thoughts going on in his head in quick succession, looking at James the whole time, as if asking him for all the answers. Before James could utter a word, Khance winced as he leaned away from James and shook his head. "I resented you for years. Like, actually hated you without even knowing you."

Surprised at the sudden twist in tone, James couldn't help but dig deeper. "Because I went offline for a decade without a reason? Or something else?" Despite Khance sounding ominous and scatterbrained, James was amazed at how composed he was. With a body that was practically running on fumes, Khance was not only coherent, but appeared as though he was in full control of his mind.

"No, nothing to do with that... It was even before then. I hated and loved Gigatech. My dream was always to be in eSports! But... I was a Vance kid. Vance Technologies, Orphanage of Champions. Well, that's not their slogan... but it probably should be. They invest in and train kids with talent, and then sponsor them when they turn professional." Khance's voice was bitter as he spoke and his hand trembled ever so slightly. James had no idea if it was rage or a symptom of the cleanse. "Every child is given a name beginning with the letter 'A', and then they have a stupid word with 'D' as their middle name. Team Advance became a household name for years, with their members dominating different eSports specialisms. The other kids that are supposedly my siblings, at least the ones that came before me... they got the best slots. If I wanted a future in eSports, I wasn't allowed to even touch their disciplines. I wasn't allowed to take part in anything that might detract from their image. Nobody wanted to be a Healer, so I made it my own. It was a farce. The only way for me to be in eSports, with the backing of my family... was to do everything their way." What had started as bitter became a voice laced with anger and regret. Khance gripped the cup in his hands as tears of frustration welled.

"Ugh, sorry about this." Khance breathed eventually as he composed himself and pinched the bridge of his nose. "Feels pretty disingenuous to sit here in your home, accepting your hospitality and care when I've been harboring resentment." Khance resumed his tired explanation as he gave James a direct look. There was a softness to his expression, but James guessed he needed to get this off his chest so the Wildcard didn't interrupt. "I always wanted to be the strategic one, the controller and shot-caller... but Helena brought you into our team as the Playmaker. I couldn't accept it. You're a smart guy and you really showcased your tenacity at the District One Invitational, but I felt so... wronged. That it was supposed to be mine, but you were given it because I couldn't take it. You came in when I was at my most resentful. People praised me for being at an Intermediate level as a Healer. I would have been in the Advanced or

Professional Leagues if I could fight my way... but as a Healer, I was intermediate in the eyes of my peers." Khance gritted his teeth as he continued. "So then we all deal with the trauma of you dying, and we become famous. My life switches from feeling like I'm owed something to receiving something I know I don't deserve. I'm in a position that I hate, and the reports flood in about Abidden being a reality TV show rather than an eSports game. Vance Group distances themselves from me, and I'm suddenly free to do whatever I want. I get cut from Abidden because of a lack of popularity and I'm deemed a joke as a gamer. Everything I'm known for in Abidden is because of drama, not competency."

When Khance finally turned to James, he was surprised to see a grin on the Wildcard's face. "You know, you're really not reacting the way I thought you would. Aren't you even a little disappointed in me for thinking all of this?" Khance ventured confusedly, but it did nothing to take away from James' excitement. "Alex, you're telling me you were a Playmaker that could have been in the Professional Leagues?!"

"That's all you got from what I said? Didn't you hear the heart-wrenching tale of my deprived childhood?" Khance laughed as he too got to his feet. He was incredibly relieved that he could get it off his chest. Having James move past the fact so quickly was such a warming feeling that the Paragon had no idea how to react.

James merely waved Khance's response away. "Yeah, and I was relegated to the slums for a decade. Nobody cares. Let's get to work!"