

Chapter 66 (2,514 words)

"Why is he not asking for help?" Fabi mused as she cast another glance to the transparent cube across the Saviour workshop. Barry could be seen experimenting with illusions, his Mythical Veil Arachne cane in hand. "I can't for the life of me understand his process. Did you approve of that visor, or did Daedalus just make it for him?"

Sal glanced up from the section of Vantaplate he had been shaping. "Hmm? Oh, the visor? He said he needed something to help him build out the plan." He placed the sleek black material down on the workbench. "I think he got a little spooked when I told him that Prime wanted access to his designs."

"I thought he'd be delighted to have the work taken off him." Fabi muttered as she continued to watch Barry, looking for any sort of clues into what he was doing.

"Probably suspects that he'll get a lesser cut of the profits if Prime does all of the heavy lifting." Sal chuckled as he glanced to the reference blueprint to check his progress. "Barry is stubborn, so it's best to just leave him to it. If he has a question, he can always ask us."

Fabi nodded slowly before tearing her attention away from the rapid-fire illusions that were being created and cancelled within seconds. "I'll admit, I do envy his visualisation prowess. It's like he has your Prototype ability, but with a complete mastery over it."

Sal tapped at the screen of his tablet that held down one of the corners of a curling blueprint. When he saw the time, he frowned. "Rochelle will be here soon, so I'll need to slip into hermit mode for a bit."

"Go for it." Fabi waved at him, relinquishing him from the barrage of questions. "I've gotta compile a load of research papers to send off for final grading." A chuckle escaped her as she remembered something. "You got a credit for the Arachne Titan breakdown, by the way. Harlan loved it."

Sal smiled at her as he switched off the screen of his tablet. "He mentioned that when I met him in the staff lounge. Hopefully he'll be entertained with the research Blathnaid generates from the Harvesting Station."

"Wonder how she's getting on with that." Fabi muttered as she glanced at all the other empty rooms in the workshop. "It would be nice if they did their work here. I'd love to see this place full before finishing up."

Sal was about to respond when Rochelle's red hair appeared through the transparent wall as she ascended the stairs uncertainly. She cast a glance around, as though making sure she was in the right space, before her gaze locked onto Barry across the way. His performance was seemingly transfixing, causing her to jump slightly when she turned to see both Sal and Fabi smiling at her through the glass.

"Sorry." She mouthed before opening the door. "I'm a little early because I hadn't visited here before. It's a lot different to what I had imagined."

"If it's not used, I fear this place will be turned into another sparring area for the Saviours." Fabi smiled as she gestured to a free seat. "Feel free to relax, I think Sal has a few more bits to complete before he's ready to start dressing you up."

Rochelle took a few tentative steps forward, glancing at the plates in front of Sal in confusion. "I can come back later if you're not ready? I've got stuff to go over with Grant, so it's really no trouble."

Sal folded his arms and leaned them on the table. "I'd rather you stayed, because your opinion matters the most when it comes to this build." He smiled warmly at her before glancing to the open door. Fabi caught his meaning and moved to close it over before Rochelle could apologise.

"So, we've got a few different options on the table." Sal continued as he glanced down at the blueprints in front of him. "And all of it stems from the research you've been doing with Grant. I don't know all the details, but Prime was able to piece together some conclusions. Those papers you've constructed have resulted in a Crafting breakthrough for the Mythic Guild."

Rochelle's eyes widened. "It must be a coincidence." She glanced at Fabi uncertainly, as though the third year might back her up. "I was working with Grant to create a new meditation system, allowing for assimilated stats to better settle within a person. He can bestow abilities through Replication, and I needed to understand how he was able to tailor an ability to an existing essence profile. How do the gates line up, and how does he make it all fit."

"I didn't talk about assimilation with him specifically, just incase you didn't want him knowing about that." Rochelle added quickly, looking at Sal to make sure she hadn't screwed up. "I just felt like it was the natural progression of my research into essence flow, and I'm struggling to figure out how it might have led to a Crafting breakthrough."

Sal was a little surprised at how different her research was to Prime's interpretation. He decided to press a little more, just to see if there really was an overlap. There was a looming sense of dread building within him that Prime was using Rochelle as an excuse to delve into the Bastion Loyalist research. "So, you didn't look into the solidification of essence?"

Rochelle froze on the spot, staring at him like he had just slapped her. "But those were just hypotheticals that I recorded in my Legion System Path. I wouldn't classify any of it as research." She seemed a little panicked at the implication that Prime had been actioning her brainstorming sessions.

"What was the idea?" Fabi asked in a gentle tone, attempting to ease Rochelle.

Rochelle looked at her hands for a few seconds, thinking through the hypothetical. When she looked up, it was to where Sal was seated. "It's nothing that groundbreaking to be honest. You know I have an awful absorption rate that makes me dependent on siphoned essence. When we were in the Dungeon with your parents, I tried to streamline the assimilated attributes to my detriment."

She smiled faintly before offering a shrug. "But it created an imbalance that I hadn't anticipated. If I had been given more time to work with the assimilated essence, I truly believe I could have refined it perfectly... with zero loss. I noted that idea in my Legion Path, suggesting a method to preserve the assimilated essence in a solid form that could be consumed over time. When I told Grant, just to get his read on the theory, he said that abilities like Crystallise and Solidify might be able to help. They apparently have a decent synergy with Transference."

Sal sighed in relief as he nodded gratefully. Prime hadn't taken extreme liberties, and Rochelle was indeed the architect of the Capture ability. Well, the groundwork that led to the discovery. That made things far easier for Sal to process. "Thanks for explaining that, Rochelle. Prime believed that we should incorporate those abilities into your new suit."

Rochelle stared at him. "What?"

"It's going to place an immense burden on you, though." Sal explained as he glanced at Fabi to see if she was still onboard with him explaining everything in detail. When he got a silent nod of approval, he continued. "This breakthrough could allow for you to capture assimilated essence and create shards that can be consumed by others. Depending on the complexity of the suit, there's even a possibility that you could capture the abilities of defeated Demons." Sal waited for a few seconds to let her absorb the information. "And it would allow for people to potentially gain a skill implant by consuming those shards."

Rochelle blinked a few times, not saying a word. The imbalance of stats had given her a ridiculously high perception, so she could likely see that Sal was being earnest. That probably made the whole thing a harder to process. "You're saying that I'd be the only one that could do this?"

Fabi cleared her throat to get their attention. "If you were to have this suit, you'd become an absolute powerhouse. There would be nothing stopping you from hoarding all the accumulated essence and building yourself up to unfathomable levels." She held her hand to one side, as though signifying that it represented the first choice. Her other hand went to the other side. "Additionally, it would make you the greatest asset to Bastion. You could give them the powers that they desperately want, and the tools to increase their power without stepping foot into a Dungeon, Portal, Red-Zone or Tower."

Sal would have framed it differently, but this was Fabi's condition. His visor had once shown him that the DeVerdon Family were highly regarded by the Bastion Colonies. The known descendants and loyal supporters that were left behind all those years ago. Even on the Crusader Ship, Rochelle was listed as a target for the Loyalists. Quest had access to all of those details, as did Robert. There was not a single doubt in Sal's mind that Rochelle would have been approved to become a Saviour, join the Mythic Guild or be allowed near Athena or the Elixir Machine if she was deemed a threat.

Rochelle nodded in understanding after a few moments. "I think it sounds too risky, then." She looked at Fabi earnestly before turning to Sal. "You said it was down to the complexity of the suit, right? If you hold back, then I can't become someone you have to worry about."

"I want to ask you a question, and it's a little delicate. I don't want to cause any offence." Sal started awkwardly, trying to find the right words.

Rochelle grimaced. "You're going to ask about the mood swings in the Dungeon Runs, aren't you?" She groaned as she cupped her face in her hands. "I was such a bitch, and I tried apologising afterwards but it was so frustrating. My eyes are catching every little detail of what they were doing wrong. Inefficient movements, poor positioning, awful reaction speed... things that are likely out of their control. I took some time off and Elina filled in for me, but yeah, it wasn't good." Her expression was pained as she nodded solemnly. "I'll make sure it doesn't happen again. Sorry, Sal."

Sal stared at her for a few seconds. That wasn't his question. "Actually, no... it was about the Bastion Families, thing. My visor picked up on a detail that you were listed as highly regarded by them."

"Well, obviously." Rochelle laughed as though it was obvious. She turned to Fabi, as though expecting the third-year to join in on the mirth. What she received instead was a frown.

Rochelle backtracked as she looked at Sal in disbelief. "I'm a Healer." She pointed at herself, just to make it obvious. "Everyone that's a Healer gets approached after the initial ability registration during the census. You smile and nod, humour them a little and get a nice little care package in the mail. If I was actually interested in Bastion, which I'm not, I'd have signed up to feed them intel on students."

"How... would you even do that?" Sal's mind was reeling, trying to figure out how Rochelle thought this was common knowledge. Sure, he had effectively been raised in a bubble, but Fabi didn't know either.

"By taking the bursary from Syndicate." Rochelle answered with absolute certainty. "Did you not wonder why every other organisation literally stipulates that you're forbidden to work with the Syndicate? The Hunter Bureau bursary is voided if you deal with them. The Syndicate is run by the Bastion Families, and its the worst kept secret in Haven."

Fabi blinked in surprise. "Oh. That actually makes a lot of sense." She looked off to one side, a frown deepening. "Why the hell did they not tell us that?"

"Its very common knowledge to everyone that grew up in Haven." Rochelle said eventually with a guilty shrug. "Like, that's where they do all their campaigning. They're the first to help with repairs and rebuilding after invasions and outbreaks. Everyone knows what they're up to, but its easier to just use them rather than accuse them. If you accept their help, you're pretty much deemed to be in good standing. They've got a large network of businesses, so most people just smile and nod, accepting the hand that feeds them."

Sal just sat back, thinking about everything he had heard. "Why hasn't Robert gotten rid of them?"

Rochelle laughed again, but reined it in when she realised that it was a real question. Coughing awkwardly, she forced herself to be serious. "Because for all the evil associated with the Bastion, the Syndicate has never once put a step wrong. Nothing that can be proved. If Robert were to do anything, then the vast majority of Haven would be up in arms to defend them. Many people think the Bastion

Families have turned a new leaf, and that since they're down here with us rather than gloating from the skies... they're just like us. With decades of charitable work that the Hunter's Bureau failed to prioritise in their pursuit of Reclamation efforts, the Syndicate garnered sizeable support. There are countless people that would argue that they've more than paid off the debts of those that ran."

"And what's your opinion of them?" Fabi asked the question that was on Sal's mind.

Rochelle scoffed as she stared at Fabi in disbelief. "What do I think of the people that gave my name to the Loyalists? Ask Divinity what would happen if they tried to make me a test subject for their experiments. No amount of care packages would ever make me a Bastion sympathiser."

Fabi nodded solemnly. "Sorry for asking."

"I'm glad you did." Rochelle answered seriously. "Both of you." She turned her attention to Sal, a wry smile pulling at her lips. "If this is how you've been treating me when you've suspected I've been a plant for Bastion, I can only imagine how cool the gear will be now that you know I'm not."

Sal grimaced as he looked at the blueprints. "Do you think you could handle the burden? If I made the suit in a way that could capture abilities? You'd be a target if word got out. It's selfish of me to ask, because I think it could potentially do a lot of good... but I don't want to put you at risk."

Rochelle smiled as she got to her feet and made her way over to the blueprints so she could see the drawings. "If you can give me a suit that can keep up with my mind, I'll happily deal with any burden you throw at me."

"Any objections?" Sal asked Fabi straight.

Fabi just smiled as she shook her head. "Absolutely none."