

Chapter 67 (2,021 words)

"Essence-construct-whip-thing?" Barry repeated Rochelle's words in a deadpan tone. "I know I wasn't there, but come on, that's a little bit of an exaggeration, surely?"

Barry had finally taken a break from his personal project, and had graced them with his presence. It felt more like an infliction, though. Rochelle had been explaining that she would prefer to have metal whips rather than the one they had seen the Elite Switcher use.

"Ripped off two of the Realm Matriarch's legs." Fabi stated with a knowing smile. "You haven't met her yet, have you? Sal told me that you're fond of spiders."

Barry couldn't suppress the involuntary shudder that swept through him. "I don't know what his fascination is with them." His gaze swept away from Sal and moved to Rochelle. "I hope you know that your beautiful coat was a result of Blathnaid and Upgrade. Having Sal make something for you, and not Daedalus, it's going to look sinister. A life-sized Jackal suit. That's my prediction."

Sal frowned as he looked at the drawing in front of him. "I can't even argue with that."

Rochelle shook her head. "I like the design. It looks sturdy."

"That's certainly one way of putting it." Fabi chuckled as she shook her head. "You're going to be like an armoured spider knight. It feels a little removed from the Healer designation, though. At best, I'd call it a Controller or Offence suit."

"It's ninety-percent black, isn't it?" Barry grinned as he watched Sal's reaction. "I can't imagine that you're sticking with the white and red combination."

"There's some green in there, too." Sal murmured as he made a few corrections to the drawing, respecting Rochelle's requests. "Metal coils, with better strength than the existing grappling hooks... but lightweight and faster. I'll need to get the Creation Engine working on those requirements." He picked up his visor to send on the request.

Barry sighed as he got to his feet. "You're no fun when you're concentrating. Want me to get you guys coffee? Tea?"

Fabi shook her head with a smile. "Thanks for the offer, but I'm good."

Barry cast a sideways glance at the steaming cup on Sal's workbench. "I can't believe she uses her ability to just bring him coffee. I was the one that introduced them..." He shook his head with a chuckle as he pulled open the door. "Call me when you're ready to talk about the next steps for the training facility."

Sal didn't answer him as he raised a thumb upward from his seat. Barry nodded at the others as he left them to their work. Fabi returned to her desk to finish the tasks she had set for herself. A resigned sigh

escaped her lips as she pulled out her tablet, sliding her left hand into her hairline and cupping her forehead with her palm before she started reading through her messages.

Rochelle seemingly sensed the change in atmosphere and was about to move back to the original seat she occupied, but Sal caught her attention and gestured toward a stool nearby.

"Sit here. I want this build to be customised to your wants and needs, rather than having you adapt to what I end up making." Sal explained as he pointed at the design. "You've given me a lot to think about with the coils, so let me hear the other ideas."

Rochelle nodded as she looked at the design. "Does it need to be bulky?" She glanced at him curiously. "Fabric feels like it would be easier to move around in, and if I'm going to pick up stats that increase my movement... I'd probably end up feeling trapped in a case if you built it that way."

Sal looked at the metal plating along the lower half of the build. "I didn't actually account for the natural muscle growth. My sleeve has gotten tighter since I've assimilated strength stats."

Rochelle frowned. "Wait, how bulky are we talking?"

Sal glanced at her slender frame for a second before turning to look at Fabi. He gestured vaguely at Fabi's physique without saying a word, hoping that Rochelle would catch his meaning.

"Sweet." Rochelle said as she nodded enthusiastically. "I'm very okay with that."

"Consider me flattered." Fabi spoke without looking up from her tablet.

Sal chuckled quietly as he looked at the design. "Okay, so lets see if we can make a flexible material fabric that uses Vantaplate. Switchers are naturally adaptive, so I've got high hopes that we can make a fun material that suits our needs." He removed the bulky plate that encased the legs of the design, leaving it blank for the moment as he tapped at the feet with his stylus. "Heels were probably a stupid idea for Dungeon terrain."

"Keep them in." Rochelle stated as she pointed at the design for the metal coils. "If I'm controlling four of these coils, then I'm likely going to be off the ground in most battles."

"I was going to build eight, just so you have room for growth over time. I don't want you to outgrow this suit." Sal chuckled as he moved his stylus away from the feet, glad that something had been approved.

Rochelle frowned as she shook her head slowly. "That's going to be problematic. I don't think I'll be able to do more than six. Unless I locked four in place for positioning, and then alternated the other four... I can't see a method where it works like we're intending. I'd need to either be moving or fighting, but not at the same time."

Sal nodded as he made a note of her concern. "They'll be retractable and deployable, coming from an integrated backpack. If you only want four, you can leave the others dormant."

"That works." Rochelle said as she looked at Sal's back. "Is the integrated backpack going to make the Challenger Crests?"

Sal paused as he looked at his drawings, wondering how the hell she had come to that conclusion. "I'm not following, Rochelle?"

She looked at him in confusion. "You said it earlier, the shards that will hold the captured essence. Isn't this design the adaptation of the Mythic Guild uniform that Blathnaid was showing us?" She pointed at the grooves in his drawing. "They look like the slots for the Challenger Crests that they made from Skill Stones."

Tilting his head to one side, Sal could see where the confusion had come from. Yet, it opened a completely different avenue in his mind. "Fabi."

"Hmm?" Fabi asked as she glanced up from her tablet. "How can I help?"

Sal took a steadying breath. "Rochelle might have just solved our problem."

"Which one?" Fabi laughed as she looked at Rochelle expectantly. The Healer had no idea what she had just caused, so she just gave Fabi a clueless shrug.

"Skill Stones." Sal said finally as he swept a hand through his hair, laughing at the ridiculousness of it. "Rochelle could imbue the captured essence into Skill Stones. Which are only functional in the uniforms that we design. Rather than giving someone a permanent uplift in attributes, we could give them the Challenger Crests with the imbued stats."

"It's a good idea, but it would be very disconcerting for the user. It's insanely hard to manage a sudden uptick of proficiency in a particular stat." Fabi said as she thought about it.

Rochelle, to Sal's surprise, was the one to counter. "An Adaptability Crest would help with that, making them acclimatise to the changes in a fraction of the time."

Sal was becoming very attached to Rochelle's misinterpretation. Challenger Crests, the awards they received from faculty and the Guilds. It was already an established practice where they were granted based on exceptional merit. Anthony had honoured that tradition by shaping the modular skill stones to resemble them. Upgrade's design of modular armour allowed for the technology to be born through Daedalus and Prime. Now, they had Rochelle who could potentially use the Capture ability to create custom skill stones... that could contain abilities, stats or techniques.

They wouldn't need to worry about someone growing too powerful through the use of consumable shards. They could simply make them non-consumable, and fixed. If those were brought to the market, then it would allow for the societal benefits without any of the danger. Surely they could create a failsafe in the equipment that could prevent misuse.

"Explain your thought process." Fabi laughed as she stared at him. "You've got a happy-goofy smile, and I want to know which dots you're connecting."

Sal smiled as he tried to formulate his thoughts into something that didn't sound insane. "What if we created our own Mythic-Guild Challenge Crests? Scrap the whole idea of the blueprints and gear in the vending machines. What if we produced a uniform with multiple slots for crests, and then just sold the crests? Through the vending machine, obviously. I'm not scrapping that concept."

A wide grin appeared on Fabi's face as she nodded, encouraging him to continue. "I like this."

"Rochelle would be able to make them by imbuing stats into them. We could manage the ability crests that get distributed, so we wouldn't need to worry about them being consumed. People could mix and match, trade amongst themselves and make builds that suit their needs." Sal explained as he glanced at Rochelle who looked hopelessly lost. "This removes a lot of the danger."

"And earns a lot of money." Fabi added with a laugh. "Man, this could be insane! What if you had some of the ability crests as special prizes in Barry's training facility? You could put them in as rewards for the Legion System, which syncs up perfectly with the vending machines. People can redeem their progress tokens for stat crests of their own choosing."

"I love that idea." Sal breathed as he nodded along enthusiastically. "You'd have so many people going to the training facility to try and win them. Having it established in the Harbour District would bring so many people there."

Rochelle smiled as she folded her hands and looked between them. "I'm not taking credit for this idea, by the way. I just glad I was wrong in a good way."

"In the best way." Fabi corrected her with a grin. "I was about to strangle Sal when he suggested scrapping the vending machines, but he saved it quickly." She laughed as she looked towards the ceiling, leaning her back against the glass, deep in thought. "Sal, you okay with me brainstorming a bit?"

Sal nodded. "Please."

"I'm graduating in a few days." She said through an amused smile. "So, I'm about to have a lot of time on my hands... in a very empty workshop in Silver Sanctuary. I was going to try and build up the Macclemark brand."

"Ooooh!" Sal laughed as he clapped his hands together excitedly. "Are you thinking of special edition uniforms with more slots and built-in capabilities?"

"Exactly that!" Fabi answered, the smile never leaving her lips. "I'm not arrogant enough to call them luxury products, but allowing for more slots would make them ideal for specialists or those that seek more complex builds and versatility. Crests could always be transferred between uniforms, which makes them a great investment. If everyone agreed, and the team got their share for the original design... I'd be very interested in working on this."

"I'm already imagining the Mythmark version." Sal admitted with a chuckle. "Okay, this needs to happen."

"So... is this suit not happening?" Rochelle asked awkwardly, pointing at the drawings. "You don't need to worry about me. It sounds like your new idea is much better." She tried to smile reassuringly, but Sal's laugh made her falter.

"None of this is possible without your suit. So, lets make sure it's incredible." Sal reassured her as he picked up his stylus, his excitement getting the better of him. "This is the first Mythic-Grade suit I've ever done, so I'll be trying my best."

Rochelle's jaw dropped as she stared at him in horror. "Mythic-Grade?!"

Fabi's cackle was diabolical.