

Chapter 40 (2,132 words)

"Uncommon-Grade?" Upgrade repeated the words in disbelief as she held up the regular brick. "And it has Harden? Isn't that a little bit overkill?"

"We could always use them as weapons." Vanessa chuckled as she experimentally applied pressure to one of the bricks they had sourced from the Tartarus Vault. The same ones that Bumble had been using to reconstruct the nearby building. Her smile faltered ever so slightly as she looked at her hand strangely. "This is... pretty durable."

Sal was only half-listening to their conversation as he went through the sequence of events through Prime. Bumble had initially taken care of the surrounding trash, rubble and debris. Prime activated the Creation Engine to repurpose the Common-Grade refuse, which coincided with the sudden surplus of Scuttler Chitin. Sal read through the report and could see that Prime had calculated the material-gathering rate and predicted an oversupply. That caused a chain reaction which resulted in the Scuttler Chitin being incorporated into the repurposing task.

Apparently, the off-cuts that had been bagged at the entrance had been repurposed into a bonding agent for the bricks. To the naked eye, the bricks looked to be fused together, but his visor could see trace lines of sealant between them.

According to Prime, the proximity to an active Dungeon had deemed any planned Repair work to be insufficient. With that logic in place, Prime placed greater importance on Upgrade's instruction than it did on material stockpiling. There was going to be an overflow of materials across both respective Arsenals and the Tartarus Vault, so Prime determined that Bumble should use the available materials to evolve. Twice.

Sal had very mixed feelings about the logic sequence. Prime had essentially made a judgement without consulting him. There hadn't been any harm in this particular instance, but it didn't mean that the next one wouldn't be a disaster.

Fixing the place up had been Upgrade's words, likely meaning Repair, but Prime had interpreted the instruction differently... which is why they had a barrier array that was borderline overkill, and a ground-mounted turret cannon that was definitely overkill. Each of the proposed buildings in the area redevelopment plan were being designed to withstand an outbreak and protect residents. Some of their proposals for the Darwin Redevelopment Plan had been used by Bumble. Prime then used the build data to better refine the simulations being carried out via the Command Centre back at Mythic HQ.

"You look like you're doing a lot of thinking." Fabi said as she came over to join him on one of the many broken walls facing Bumble's redevelopment. "The taxi is on its way, but we should have a few minutes if you want to talk. Everything okay?"

Sal nodded slowly. "Yeah, I think we're good."

Fabi didn't look particularly convinced, and just when he thought she was going to drop the topic, she pivoted with a different question. "How do you feel about Bumble going rogue and making all these build decisions?"

"Prime was behind it." Sal answered with an exasperated sigh, shaking his head. "I don't think you could even call it a misinterpretation, because it seems like it just side-stepped the instructions I've given it in the past and just did what it wanted." Putting a hand to his face to stop himself from getting worked up, he smiled bitterly. "Sorry, just a little frustrated that I can't put proper protections in place with it. The results are good this time, but we've no idea what will happen next time around."

Fabi didn't say anything for a few seconds, seemingly deep in thought.

"I know the answer is probably for me to learn EssPro and just put in the work." Sal muttered as he looked at her finally. "I'm just so busy and I've got zero affinity for the topic. I can't handle that sort of logic the way you or Anthony can."

"I respectfully disagree." Fabi smiled while raising a hand. "But I'm not going to lecture you or tell you to work on something that you hate. I'm just thinking that there has to be another solution. Didn't Prime send you messages through your visor?"

Sal nodded as he held the visor in his hands. "Yeah, but the information was coming through too quickly and distracting me, so I filtered out the noise and ended up missing a lot of important context. Prime shouldn't have done anything without asking for consent, but the Realm Matriarch has all three of us as its creators, which puts Upgrade's instructions to its offspring, Bumble, at the same level as mine. Prime used an interpretation of her request as permission."

"That's... quite convoluted." Fabi agreed with a groan. "But I think the answer might be a simple one. Why do you need to read what's on your visor?"

Sal stared at her for a few seconds not saying anything, because he really wasn't following her train of thought.

"Eyes are for seeing, right? And you're going to be using All-Sight, which invalidates a lot of the visual functions of the tracker. Prime has far better computational power than Cipher, too. The other abilities are probably easier to replicate now with Skill Paragon, so... why be limited to technology that isn't serving its purpose anymore? You could just get an earpiece to let Prime talk to you when you're in a Dungeon. Bite the bullet and give it a voice, so you can be very clear with your instructions." Fabi grinned at him. "That's how Doc Ameye talks to Protocol and Vulcan."

"I'll... think about it." Sal agreed as he looked at the visor, weighing up her words. "I was thinking about making an upgraded visor, so maybe it's not the worst idea."

Fabi looked at him for a few seconds. "It feels wrong that you're sitting here looking upset when we've just taken out a Switcher Commander." She pointed at Bumble who was using his tail like an essence-fuelled blow-torch, securing an ornate metal door with stained glass fixtures into the front of the building. "Just watch him for a few minutes and enjoy the satisfaction of a job well done. I don't think I could be upset when I see how happy he is to craft."

"Any idea why they have personalities?" Sal asked with a smile. "Because I've been trying to figure out how it happened, and I can't for the life of me think of a reason."

Fabi shook her head. "I was asking Upgrade about it earlier, and she's just as puzzled as we are. I thought there would be a behavioural protocol, but even that wouldn't account for it. My best guess is probably nonsense..." "I still want to hear it though." Sal said while looking at her. "You know far more than me, so I'll take even the nonsense guesses at this point." Fabi smiled at that and eventually continued. "Well, you used the Arkwright to pretty much synthesise the pinnacle of evolution for each demonic core within a family. Leechers are the weakest on the chain, which might be why Jackal's Blight Core isn't showing as much personality as Slinky's Void Seeker. Voiders are generally more intelligent, so the core itself might have granted aspects of autonomy or personality aspects. It would certainly explain why Slinky doesn't always listen to Upgrade when Voiders are around."

"It's a fun theory, but it doesn't really account for Bumble." Sal pointed at the drone that was scaling the wall at a ridiculous pace to enter through the unfinished roof. Not a single scuff mark was visible across the perfect brickwork, highlighting just how durable the new material was. "He was made through the Realm Matriarch, and there was no pinnacle core crafted from hundreds of Scuttlers."

"Maybe the Dungeon Heart is filling in those gaps?" Fabi offered with a shrug. "There's so much that we still don't know about them, since most of the research with them is handled by Doc Ameye with Project Leviathan. And before you ask, I have no idea what it is." She laughed at Sal's expression of disappointment. "What is it going to take to cheer you up? Do I need to make more of that chicken you like?"

Sal finally broke into a hearty laugh as he shook his head. "No, I still have plenty in my fridge... but thank you. Really." He let out a sigh as he got to his feet and dismissed the visor into Arsenal. His Tempest Marshal attire had already been sent back, leaving him in the Shade Walker set. "I appreciate you listening to me mope about stuff when everything around me is objectively going great. Sometimes I think my brain just invents things to be annoyed about."

"Pity parties are necessary every now and again." Fabi added with a grin of her own. "But we should all be proud of what we accomplished today. Lots of materials, good training as a team, and probably a load of sweet new abilities for the next batch of Princelings." She let the implication hang for a few seconds, and let out a delighted cheer when Sal re-summoned the visor which he handed to her.

"The main highlight is an ability called Incorporate. It's a Factor 4 ability that works similar to Subsume, but rather than taking abilities, it's taking the properties of materials. Just like how the Switcher Commander stole the Realm Matriarch's armour." Sal explained as Fabi started to look

through the details with her mouth agape. "If we make a new drone with that ability, it should be able to take the armour of whatever it kills."

"But it didn't kill the Realm Matriarch." Fabi exclaimed with a wide grin as she pulled off the visor excitedly. "What if we just get a drone to use Incorporate on a Shard? It'll be unstoppable!"

"Shard? Like the Borough?" Sal asked in confusion, not following her.

Fabi stared at him for a few seconds, her smile not fading, as though curious if he was messing with her. "Shards are the scales of the Dragon that Chronos locked in time?"

Petro approached them with a easygoing smile. "Taxi has arrived. Is Bumble coming with us? Because you'll need to put him into Arsenal."

Sal started to nod, and then shook his head, realising that there were two questions. "Wait, sorry... Dad, we're going to leave Bumble here." He looked to Fabi. "Shards, you said?"

Fabi nodded slowly, a dawning realisation on her face. "Wait, you really don't know about them?"

"How much would one of them cost?" Sal asked his father, ignoring Fabi's question for the moment. "The ones from the Dragon?"

Petro blinked in surprise. "I mean, I could ask around... but most of them are collectors items at this point. They're typically owned by the families of those that were lost in the fight against the Dragon. As a material they're exceptionally brittle once separated from the host, but their resistance to essence is unparalleled. You'd have a hard time processing it, even if we could secure one."

"Is he taking it?" Upgrade called from the side of the taxi, clearly informed to ask by Sophia who was first to get into her seat. Rochelle, Sakura and Vanessa were already in, too. Villa waited by her motorbike, as though eager to see them off. Her gaze alternated from the taxi to the cannon, as though waiting for an opportunity to check it out properly when everyone left.

Sal got to his feet as he gave his father an apologetic smile. "We can talk about it later."

"Good man." Petro smiled in return. "It's been a long day, and we can discuss the particulars of everything once everyone is rested up." He looked back to Upgrade and waved at her in the negative, indicating that Bumble wouldn't be joining them. "And the gremlin will be in much better spirits after she has her shower."

Sal laughed as he looked back at the continued progress on the wrecked building. Apparently it wasn't stopping at three floors, which was a surprise. By his vague guesstimate on the progress he had seen so far, it would only be a day or so before the unit started resembling something closer to a complete build, and there was no telling what the surrounding area would look like when the drone finished. No matter how efficient it was, an entire block of twenty buildings would probably take longer than a month.

"Don't worry, we'll be back to check on him regularly and we can see how the Realm Matriarch is doing, too." Fabi reassured him as she stood up too, and patted him on the back. "I'm excited to see how much he can transform the place."