

## Chapter 69 (2,479 words)

Sal turned his head wearily as the door opened, his eyes squinting in an attempt to see through the fatigue. "Hmm?" Had he just been napping? It was tough to know. Rochelle's suit was definitely more essence intensive than any of the other builds, since each individual component needed to be completed one by one. Integrating them with each other through the Synergy ability was definitely a challenge, but he managed it. A seven-piece set. Heels, pants, torso armour, brace, backpack, mask and gloves. All of them were resting on the floor, glowing brightly with an vibrant red-hue.

Maxine stood in the doorway, a mixture of confusion and disbelief colouring her expression. "The interview is happening soon." She looked between Sal, Rochelle and Fabi who was fast asleep, her crossed arms cradling her head. Rochelle was laying on the floor, her green eyes locked onto the glowing mask, as though worried she might miss the transformation.

"Did you not sleep?" A hint of anxiety crept through Maxine's tone as she looked at Sal apprehensively. "I feel like this is one of those things I was supposed to stop from happening."

"You're fine, don't worry." Sal smiled at her as he gestured to the floor. "We've got something to cross off the list, though. This is better than me doing interviews... probably."

Maxine nodded slowly as she stared at the glowing pieces of equipment. "I wanted to ask you, what is the policy for threats against your life?"

Sal blinked in surprise. "What?"

A smile tugged at Maxine's lips, which she failed to suppress. "It's just that Divinity was threatening to kill you last night. Something about making Rochelle into a Lord-Killer."

Rochelle bolted upright, staring at Maxine with wide-eyes. "No way."

"Yes way." Maxine finally let the full beaming smile break through. "She wouldn't give us more details, but she was very freaked out. It took us like ten minutes to calm her down and determine that you weren't going to turn into a Calamity." Her giggle was infectious, but her words were more than a little unnerving.

"Vanessa was prepared to hunt you guys down and put a stop to the build. I think Upgrade was a little upset that she didn't get an invite... but she reasoned that you probably wanted to make something stupid that she wouldn't approve of." Maxine continued like it was a normal conversation. "You might want to let her know that you didn't intentionally exclude her."

Fabi sat up, blinking rapidly as she wiped at her face. Turning in her seat to look at Maxine, she seemed confused for a few seconds. "When did you get here?"

"About a minute ago." Maxine answered as she looked at Fabi and then back to Sal. "Actually, give me a second."

Before Sal could ask what she meant, Maxine had disappeared. Her activation speed was insane. There was zero doubt in his mind of who would win if they were to spar. In the time that it would take to summon Jackal, she'd have an eternity to take him down. Sal looked to Fabi, who was still staring at the empty space that Maxine just occupied.

"She was just there, right?" Fabi asked as she stretched her arms overhead in an elaborate yawn. A satisfying series of clicks ran through Fabi's spine as she smiled contentedly. "Oh, I needed that."

Rochelle glanced in Fabi's direction. "Need some healing?"

"Nah, just a vat of coffee and I'll be back to normal." Fabi frowned as she looked at the blueprint in front of her. "It looks like I drooled all over the vending machine design. Lovely."

Maxine suddenly reappeared in the centre of the room with a cannister of Alex's coffee draped over one shoulder, secured by her right hand. In her left was a stack of four foam cups. "You guys look like you needed it, no offence."

"Never Offence." Fabi said with a tired smile. She pointed at Maxine and continued in a caveman like voice. "Only Controller."

Sal rolled his eyes as he got to his feet. "Thank you, Maxine." He slid out one of the cups from her stack and handed it to Rochelle, before repeating the process twice more, once for himself and the other for Fabi. "What was this about an interview? I thought we were going to wait for Alex and Anderson to give their verdict?"

Maxine nodded as she pulled her arm around to bring the cannister into view. "Those interviews happened this morning, with Proof coming out as the clear favourite. Since he was onsite, he asked if there was any chance that he could meet whoever else was a part of the interview process." She lifted her foam cup to her mouth where she bit into the side of it, allowing her to use both hands to pour coffee for Sal. If Sal thought she'd wait until the cup was gone before she continued speaking, he would have been wrong.

"Alex is showing him the Elixir Machine, giving him a few test trials on the Refiner Station." Maxine said with great difficulty, mumbling more often than not. "I can tell Alex likes him, because he didn't even say anything when I took the coffee."

"That's actually a pretty glowing endorse-" Fabi started before a loud pop drew all of their attention to the centre of the floor.

Rochelle's head snapped to the mask, looking more than a little crestfallen when it wasn't the one to be finished processing. Her disappointment lasted only a few short seconds until her gaze landed on the heels. Referring to them as simply heels was a disservice. Venomstone had solidified into an emerald-style resin finish on the underside of the sole, a black inverted spire jutted down from the heel in what looked like a structural anomaly. Vantaplate casing reached all the way up to the knee section, which

made the heels feel more akin to fashionable boots. Flexibility was immediately apparent with how the material had folded in on itself like a soft leather.

"Oh." Maxine said as she stared at the boots for a few seconds. "Can you make those with yellow instead of the green?" She looked at Sal curiously before adding the context in a sheepish tone. "They'd match the plates made by Adeptus."

"Yep." Sal answered as he took a sip of his coffee. "But they're mostly designed around fall-damage mitigation. With Venomstone being a central theme throughout the synergised set, I needed to put it everywhere. I'm sure we could use some quartz or something to get the yellow."

Fabi smiled as she leaned over her workbench to get a better look at the boots. "They look so impractical for a Dungeon, but I have to agree that they look pretty sick." She chuckled as she sat back down. "I wouldn't want to stick one of those heels into a Demon. There's a very good chance it'll get stuck."

Rochelle didn't seem to care as she reached forward to pick them up to get a better look at them. In the moment that her fingers touched the Vantaplate material, another pop sounded out. She didn't even hesitate as her trajectory altered in a flash to clutch the completed mask like it was an infant in peril. "YES!"

She checked her ponytail quickly before compressing the face of the mask, opening it with a pneumatic hissing noise. Nobody got a good look at it until she had it pressed against her nose. When the flaps closed around her head, an eerie green glow illuminated the visor. "I love it!" The voice that came from her was dramatically altered because of their improvements. What had been intended as a test to increase vocal clarity, had somehow turned into a voice modulator. Rochelle's voice was deeper and more resonant, but her laughter sounded a touch sinister.

"Wow! Is this why you wear a visor so often?" Rochelle asked as she reached a hand in front of her face. "I can see everyone's essence flow."

Rochelle faltered when she looked at Maxine and then at Fabi. "Whoa... I knew I was lacking compared to others, but this is a bit ridiculous." She glanced at Sal, her mask tilting slightly. "Okay, I feel a little better."

"Thanks." Sal smiled as he shook his head. "Both of them had complete reworks of their weaves and internal essence gates. You shouldn't compare your progress with them."

Fabi nodded in agreement. "I practically slept through the whole process during the Gala. I'm not exactly someone to look up to."

"Sal helped me cheat with Athena. I fainted immediately and got the dregs." Maxine said with a raised hand. "So, yeah... not much of a role-model either."

Another pop signified that an additional piece of the gear had completed. Sal was going to wait until everything was assembled to do a proper Appraisal. He needed to see how the essence flowed between them to know if the Synergy ability had taken proper effect. There was still some work to do with creating

the Challenger Crests that would slot into the torso piece. Capture sounded like it would be able to create them, but Sal wanted to be prepared just incase. If they went to a Dungeon and Rochelle had nothing to imbue, then it wouldn't really be much of a test.

Sal idly sipped his coffee as he watched the next two pieces finish their processing. He had dozed off shortly after finishing the final piece, and by his own guesstimate, the brace would be the last one to complete. Rochelle picked up the pants with one hand and the gloves with another. Her mask was tilted towards the heels, as though debating on if she should start carrying everything.

"You can use my room to change if you want?" Fabi suggested as she pointed through the glass wall of the Saviour workshop. "You already know the way, and the door should be open."

Rochelle nodded slowly as she looked at the rucksack component that was already half it's original size. The Mythcrafter essence was clearly doing its job and refining down the components into a more streamlined solution. Sal was capable of seeing the end-state of a build with Mythcrafter, but it was always a joy seeing the outcome in reality.

"Okay, the pants came out very nice." Fabi remarked as she looked at the folded leather in Rochelle's hands. "I'm not seeing much green in them, but I trust its somewhere?"

"Just the buttons, really." Sal muttered as he looked at them with a frown. "I know Blathnaid is going to give me shit for the design, but they're functional and designed to what Rochelle wanted. That's enough for me. If a Scuttler swiped at her, its claw is likelier to break than her legs."

"Nice." Maxine said in a whisper as she nodded enthusiastically. She glanced at the empty coffee cups and started making her way over to fill them. Rochelle refused with a smile, whilst Fabi happily accepted. "I'm going to postpone the final interview with Proof, you should get some rest."

"It's fine, I'll meet him." Sal said with a nod. "But I'd like to be there for Rochelle's maiden voyage with the new suit."

Maxine turned her attention away from pouring a second cup for Fabi, who had swiftly drained the first. "Well, you're obviously going nowhere near a Dungeon until you get some sleep. Proof doesn't need an answer today, either. Holding off on a decision could be good, since Alex might learn more about him during his test with the Elixir Machine."

Sal faltered as he looked at her, pointing at the coffee in his right hand. "Honestly, this is more than enough. We just need a bit of time to wake up properly and we'll be good to go. I'll wrap up the interview and we can set off."

Maxine shook her head slowly. "No." Surprisingly, her voice was firm. All of their interactions thus far had been borderline playful, with Maxine going to great lengths to learn the Administrative role without stepping on his toes, figuratively.

"No?" Sal asked with an amused smile. "Seriously, it was just going to be a Leecher Dungeon. Nothing too strenuous or dangerous. I'll have Jackal there as a precaution, and you can be there too if you'd like."

Maxine placed the cannister down and looked at him carefully. "You haven't eaten, and you haven't slept in over twenty-four hours. Alex's coffee has a limit, which he can tell you himself. I can hear the fatigue in your voice, which tells me that your body needs rest."

Rochelle looked like she was torn between waiting for the remaining pieces, and going to Fabi's dorm to try on the parts cradled in her arms. When she glanced in Sal's direction, she nodded slightly. "Maxine is right. My visor is telling me that you're in pretty rough shape, but that four hours of proper sleep would get you back to a solid baseline."

Sal blinked in surprise. Were they suddenly ganging up on him? He had worked through more exhausted states than this, and there was still plenty to be done. They needed to work on the EssPro for the psychokinetic module that would allow Rochelle to control the cables with her mind. The Psionic ability should already be there, but it would need to be calibrated with EssPro. Then he'd need to ensure that the synergy actually linked each piece of gear to get the best effect. It was his first time making a gear set with more than two pieces.

Maxine folded her arms. "You hired me as an Administrator, and this is me doing my job." She pointed at the seven pieces that were either on the floor and glowing, or held by Rochelle. "The last time you did a Mythic-Grade project this ambitious, you were hospitalised for a month. We're not taking that risk again."

Placing his coffee cup down, Sal let out a resigned sigh. It was probably petulant, but he wanted to tell her that the Pantheon was essentially created in a similar state with Fabi. That was a whole range of Mythic-Grade machines fuelled by coffee and desperation. A glance at Fabi's sympathetic expression told him that he wasn't going to garner any sort of foothold with that argument. "Four hours?" He asked wearily, realising that his tiredness was very much seeping through.

"I'd prefer six, but yes." Maxine smiled happily. "Four will do."

Sal grimaced as he looked at the still glowing articles of gear. "Well, goodnight I guess?"

"We won't go to a Dungeon without you." Fabi said as he made his way towards the door. "Isn't that right, Rochelle?"

"No promises." Rochelle said excitedly as another audible pop echoed throughout the room.