

Chapter 38 (2,255 words)

Rochelle's grappling hooks entered the swirling mist at specific angles that allowed them to work with the current, adding devastating force as they clasped at the Switcher hiding from within. Surges of essence coursed through the metal, refuelling both Rochelle and her coat. Any time the Switcher attempted to reposition, the hooks would disengage and repeat the tactic. It was death by a thousand cuts with the Healer making instantaneous judgements, plucking away at the Commander's reserves and never giving it a chance to retaliate. Whenever a tendril lanced out of the black storm to stage an attack, a hook would alter its trajectory or halt it completely with a grapple.

Vanessa and Sophia stepped away from the mist, ensuring that there would be no friendly fire. Either they didn't have much faith in Rochelle's control, or they simply wanted to reassess their strategy. Fabi's spikes continued to lance up from the ground wherever the mist halted for a second too long.

The moment Sal saw that there was nobody within the mist, he activated the Tempest Function and sent the disco ball of death directly into the centre of the storm. A part of him wondered if it would be able to determine a target within the cloud of essence, but he didn't need to wait long for an answer. Bolts of lightning pierced out in every direction, almost simultaneously, as though the ball of lightning had determined everything around it to be a target. Each skewer of light cast an eerie shadow across the gladiator arena, with each blotch of evaporating Switcher being surrounded by flashes of purple tinted light.

Sal didn't leave it as that as he sent through his own arcs of lightning, aiming directly at the ball to allow it to redirect the additional essence at will. Whatever was happening was definitely weakening the Switcher, evidenced by the fact that it launched itself away from the grappling hooks, stone spikes and the ball of lightning. It collapsed to the ground in a sickening sludge as it tried to compose itself, pulling at any demon corpse it could latch onto, likely to absorb back some strength.

Fabi grinned as she outstretched her hand and placed her thumb downward, aiming at the ground. "Karma is a bitch."

Sal didn't notice it at first until the final flash of the Tempest Function illuminated the space. It was enough clarity within the darkness to see the Realm Matriarch towering over the weakened Switcher Commander, primed to feed.

Vanessa looked concerned as she stepped forward. "Wait, shouldn't someone with Assimilate take the final hit?"

Sal shook his head. "No, she earned this one." He looked around to see both Slinky and Jackal harvesting materials on the ground, grateful that they weren't going to deprive the Realm Matriarch of the final kill. It wasn't exactly a sentimental thing, since there was a good chance that the spider would get a good ability out of it.

Petro watched the last moments of the Switcher Commander as the Realm Matriarch savaged it with leg stomps and its mandibles. "And... it's dead. Well done, everyone."

"How do you think they'll react now that their Boss is dead?" Sophia asked as she looked up to the other caverns warily, as though expecting an all out brawl to break out.

"I'm more than happy to bring the fight to them." Vanessa said as she tapped her collarbone, highlighting a rippling of yellow before the suit went back to a slate grey. "This thing just feeds me stats whenever I'm getting kills, and it's pretty damn intoxicating. I feel like I could just fight non-stop for weeks."

Villa walked over to them, looking at the Ethos Blade in her hand with a thoughtful expression. "You've convinced me. No wagers, deals or trades." She smiled at Rochelle, gratefully before nodding and looking at Petro and then finally at Sal. "The Healer I stepped into this Dungeon with is completely different to the one I'll be stepping out with. I watched the theatrics with the gun and couldn't for the life of me figure out what was going on, but I get it now."

Petro grinned as he winked at the exhausted Rochelle. "See? There was a silver lining to all that pain you went through."

"Yay." Rochelle deadpanned as she pulled off the eye-patch, holding it out to Sal so he would take it from her. "I'd like to never wear that again." When Sal accepted the eye-patch, she then removed the psionic blocker and offered it, too. "I didn't feel like this did anything, either. Thanks for the loan, though."

Sophia pointed at one of the still formed tendrils. "I'm thinking that it was only able to establish a Psionic connection through touch, which is why it was grabbing the demons."

Sakura shook her head slowly. "But that wouldn't explain why they're just standing around instead of attacking." She pointed at the visible demons that were rooted on the spot, as though waiting to be called upon.

While the group discussed the phenomenon, Fabi sidled up next to Sal with an excited smile. "Do you think that the Realm Matriarch will get that tendril ability? It would be pretty sick if she could rein in her meals from afar."

Sal checked the visor to see if there were any updates coming through, but there was still nothing popping up on the screen. Since he had a bit more time now, he decided to investigate and immediately saw the problem. Anything that referenced materials had been hidden, except for the rogue interruption from the Creation Engine proposing research.

All of the data from the Realm Matriarch, including damage and battle statistics had been drowned in a sea of material acquisition updates. The popup-priority was seemingly tailored to rare materials being acquired rather than the danger that the Realm Matriarch was experiencing. He could now see

the update regarding two Capacitors being offline, which made sense since they were built into the legs that were torn off.

"Looks like all she needed was space to breathe." Fabi practically cooed like a proud parent as she signalled for Sal to take a look at what was happening. She led him over to the Realm Matriarch who was in the process of reattaching one of the missing legs. It was an act of contortion, and Sal wanted to move forward to help, but Fabi stopped him.

"We need to see if she can do this by herself. We're not going to always be with her in a Dungeon or in a Red Zone." True to her word, she stood still and watched the Realm Matriarch struggle to reattach the limb. Strands of essence worked almost like magnetism, pulling the battered and scarred metal into position. A flare of steam, not unlike the emissions from the Elixir Machine wafted around the port, pulling the mangled mechanism into place, where it started to repair itself. It was a gradual process, and the leg looked like a shell of its former glory.

Fabi frowned as she watched the process come to fruition. "It's a little slow for my liking, but good to see that she's able to do it. What do you think?"

Still, Sal inwardly celebrated when the leg lifted in time with the others, calibrating movement with the Realm Matriarch experimenting with putting weight on it. A few moments of uncertainty followed before it shuffled over to the other missing leg, this time one from the back. Judging from the location of the wound, Sal guessed that the Switcher Commander had used ambush tactics throughout the fight. Restructure had its work cut out for it on the second leg, which looked to be positively mangled.

"I'm just grateful that she survived the fight." Sal answered Fabi's question as he looked back at her with a grim smile. "I think Restructure is a little slow, but maybe its because of essence reserves? It'll probably take a solid chunk of time for her to replenish the reattached Capacitors, if they're even registered after being reattached."

Sal took a look through the report to see if there were any clues to the repair, and was pleasantly surprised to see a progress bar.

Realm Matriarch [Status Report]

- Capacitor: [Active: 6] [Inactive: 1] [Missing: 1]
- Internal Damage: [Repairing: 16.2%]
- External Damage: [Restructuring: 0.8%]
- Utilising Materials: Vantaplate [12] Adaptium [7] Switcher Core [23]...

"Have you ever heard of Vantaplate?" Sal asked Fabi, but loud enough for Upgrade to hear. "I don't think its from the Creation Engine, since it doesn't have one of those long serial numbers."

Upgrade looked a little surprised by the question. "That was fast." A guilty laugh escaped her as she looked over her shoulder to where Slinky was back to playing in the puddles of ooze. "I used the Fusion ability on a load of the pieces we picked up from that big-ass Scuttler. I only got the update that a new material batch was created a few seconds ago."

She scratched at the back of her neck with her golden hand. "Honestly, it was just an experiment to see if anything could be made with the black sludge and that bluish chitin. There's no telling if its any good, but I really needed the extra space."

Sal knew that the Realm Matriarch was synched with all of their respective subspaces, but it was more than a little surprising that it had prioritised the Vantaplate so soon after its creation. Were the effects just that suitable? "Well, the spider needs twelve of them." Sal said in an apologetic tone. "Any chance you could make more of them?"

Upgrade shook her head slowly. "I don't think you understand, Sal." She laughed as she pointed at her left arm with her right hand. "I had to use Fusion to make space for all the materials the little bastard was picking up. My Arsenal was close to bursting halfway through this Dungeon."

With a frown, Sal checked his own Arsenal and was rendered speechless at the state of the place. He clearly hadn't been paying attention to the load that Jackal was securing, and it suddenly made a hell of a lot more sense why the Creation Engine had started doing rogue experiments. The overflow was very real, and it was a fantastic problem to have... especially when he considered how little they had in reserve for Daedalus' production just before the outing.

"I probably have like forty plates, but would be very happy to make more." Upgrade grinned as she spread her hands. "Might just need to open a Voider Portal to top up the reserves, since Fusion takes a chunk of essence to fire up."

Fabi raised her hand to interrupt them, and without saying a word, she pointed at the Realm Matriarch in confusion.

Sal followed her gesture and could see a slick black metal trickling up the damaged limbs with a steaming hiss. It was like a molten sludge that defied the laws of gravity, seeping into all the exposed gashes along the frame to replace the once glossy red metal. To call it black was actually a disservice to the colour, since there wasn't an ounce of reflection visible on the surface. It looked more like a hollow void of ambiguity. Not a single groove or bend in the metal was visible, like it had been coated by darkness itself. Sal blinked a few times to readjust his gaze, before looking at the other legs for a comparison... only to find it was impossible. When he looked at the red legs, the black ones faded completely from his view.

"I don't know if we should be offended." Fabi laughed as she crossed her arms with a perplexed expression. "This is pretty much the Realm Matriarch telling us that we built her wrong, isn't it? Otherwise, why would she be plating the healthy parts of her body in that stuff?"

Sal watched as the black goop continued to flow over the glossy red metal that was undamaged, as though the spider was seeking uniformity, no matter how expensive the process turned out to be. "We can't exactly blame her, though. Two of her legs were ripped off." He sighed as he shook his head, turning away from the sight to stop Perception going crazy. Something was definitely off about that material.

Petro glanced in his son's direction. "You ready to go, or do you want to leave him to his fun?" He pointed at Jackal who was very much plowing through the remaining Switchers and Scuttlers that were visible through the cave entrances. There didn't seem to be much resistance from the Demons, which told Sal that the Realm Matriarch had likely used that Subjugate ability on them.

"Let's let him have his fun while we recuperate a bit." Sal said as he gestured at the Realm Matriarch. "I'd rather see how this Restructure finishes before we make a decision on leaving her here."

Petro looked in the direction of the spider before pulling his head chin back in confusion. "Is that some sort of deflection material? It feels like its trying to subvert my gaze and make me dismiss it." He suppressed a shudder before pinching the bridge of his nose. "It was already terrifying enough, Sal."

"I didn't pick those upgrades." Sal muttered before he let out a satisfied sigh. "But if it works on the demons, I'm all for it."