

Chapter 68 (2,750 words)

"How is the fit?" Sal asked tentatively as he held up the next piece of proposed armour. "Since you won't have a method of quick switching the gear through Arsenal, I don't want to make it skin-tight. You'll need a way to take it off, so be as honest as possible."

Rochelle frowned as she experimentally lifted her knee. The matte leather looked like it should have been restrictive, but her movements were fluid. There wasn't so much as a ripple of the deep black material, but Sal wasn't going to take appearances as fact. She twisted and turned before planting her right foot forward and lunging forward. A surprised eyebrow raise was followed by a bright smile. "It feels really good."

Sal sighed in relief as he nodded in understanding, mentally checking off the trousers of the build. They were high-waisted, as per Rochelle's suggestion. She felt that they made her look that little bit taller, which sounded ridiculous, but Sal didn't question it. Right now, they were simply a prototype. Stylistic choices would come later for the real thing.

"It feels really cool, by the way." Rochelle mentioned as she stood upright, gesturing at her thighs. "Temperature, I mean. I don't know why, but it feels like my body-heat isn't affecting them at all."

"Good to know." Sal muttered as he made a note of it on his tablet. "And was it the same with the chest piece?"

"Not really?" Rochelle tilted her head as she thought about it, almost doubting herself. "It was just that it was too tight, but we covered that already. The sleeves were perfect, though." She added that last part, as though scared of criticizing the build too much. "What's next?" Her attention shifted to to the table, her smile hopeful.

Sal moved to the table where the collection of components were waiting for the fit-test. Many of them were prototypes, but some were farther along in development. His gaze landed on the mask-concept, which was eerily villainous. Picking it up, he handed to the very excited Rochelle. She had fallen in love with it at first sight and was dying to try it on.

"It doesn't have the embedded Reign Guard for the visor functionality, but the inhaler apparatus is built around the mouth." Sal explained as he handed it to her. "You need to be able to talk when using it, and we've got a test cannister of Maestro Mark that Alex converted into aerosol format. I know you're excited about this, but if the design isn't practical, you have to tell me."

Rochelle nodded eagerly as she turned the mask over with her hands. "I'll be careful."

"Pinch the faceplate with your palm and it'll open." Sal instructed her, making a gesture with his own hand, opening it and closing it.

Rochelle's excitement only seemed to grow as the helmet cracked open at her touch. Although the hinges weren't visible, two flaps extended outward. Leaving her with a mask that would snap back to encase her head when positioned over her face. With her hair already tied back into a ponytail, Rochelle used her left hand to drag the tail lower, lining it up to the designed orifice. Sure, it was a potential weak spot of the armour, but Sal wasn't going to demand she shave her head for the sake of a helmet.

Lifting her head back, Rochelle grinned as she pressed the mask to her nose. The effect was instantaneous, with the flap-like latches snapping into place around her ears and encasing the back of her head. She held that pose for a few seconds until a faint trail of yellowish white vapour escaped from the mouth area of her mask. When she turned to look at Sal, he inadvertently took a step backward.

A single line went from one temple to the other, pointed downward to the bridge of Rochelle's nose in a sort of faint 'v' shape. It was just an empty space right now, but it would hold either Reign Guard or something similar to Scarlet Screen to make her visor the best it could be. That visor was the only discernable feature at first glance. There were no indentations along the the oval shape, but Sal knew that there were imperceptible vents to allow for breathing.

Rochelle glanced over her shoulder, down at the ground, as though expecting to see some of her red hair sheared off and deposited on the floor. When there was nothing there, she reached a hand back to reposition her ponytail, or just to check that it was still there. It was.

Sal smiled as he started to shake his head in wonder. "You look absolutely terrifying."

"I love it." Rochelle said, her voice coming through a little muffled. "I thought I'd feel claustrophobic in this thing, but it's actually amazing." She tapped her nails against the exterior, experimentally. Clicking noises that were followed by an excited giggle. "Is it bad that I'm more excited about the mask than the rest?"

Sal chuckled as he lifted up the back brace with both hands, not loving how heavy it was. "I don't think this one is going to change your mind. It's going to feel like a burden for a bit, but we'll be able to adjust that with abilities like Feather."

Ideally, he'd like to get a fit test with the armoured chest piece, but Fabi had taken it to another workshop room to make the adjustments. It was a time-saving exercise so that Sal could continue testing out the fit for the rest of the gear. Rochelle had so many great notes for him, that the drawn-out process was worth it. The experience was making him keenly aware that the customers were sometimes right. If Rochelle was going to be using this gear for years, he wanted it to be perfect.

Rochelle turned and stretched her arms outward. "Ready when you are." She laughed, which didn't sound too healthy from the spurts of vapour and muffled voice.

"I'm going to need to make some adjustments to the mask. It won't be much use if people can't understand you when we're in a Dungeon. You also shouldn't be constantly inhaling the Maestro Mark." Sal cautioned her as he placed a palm on her upper back, indicating that she should lean forward. When

Rochelle wordlessly replied, he rested the brace on her shoulders, quickly draping the adapted Vantaplate material over her shoulders.

"It's like a weird corset." Rochelle observed as she started pulling the fasteners to mould the fabric to her body. Each strap that was pulled was withdrawn into a hidden pocket, only leaving a small leaf that could be pulled again to release them. Sal was happy for her help, and the process moved very quickly. Her current uniform wasn't nearly as thick as the proposed torso armour, but it was still a valuable comparison.

Sal took a step back as he watched Rochelle complete the process. The material was like a metal poncho that draped down over her lower back and behind her knees like a trench coat. It protected her neck and entire torso whilst being structured to share the weight of the metal coil attachments across her whole body. Each fastener being pulled tightened the shape of the brace, fitting it to Rochelle's slender form. "How is the weight?"

"Tolerable, but not great if you need me running long-distance." Rochelle answered as she lifted the back lip of the poncho, which she had requested as a form of hood. It was a good way to cover off the only weak-point of the build, preventing anyone from aiming for the hole for her ponytail.

Sal glanced back to the table where Rochelle's sleeves and pointed heels were resting. He ignored them as he looked at the rucksack that rested upright. "Do you want to try it with more weight?"

"Go for it." Rochelle said as she turned around, finishing the last of the straps on her waist, tugging it extra tight to ensure it was secure. "I'm stronger than I look."

Sal snorted at that, which caused Rochelle to tilt her head. He waved his hand at her like it was a joke. "You look plenty strong right now, trust me. We're absolutely going to need some colour to remind people that you're a Healer. I'm hoping the Venomstone will soften the look a little during the Mythcrafting process."

"I hope it doesn't." Rochelle said as she turned to look at her reflection in the glass wall. "If the grappling hooks work as well as you think, then I'm going to be tearing through Demons like they're butter. I'd rather they didn't see me coming."

"Well, about ninety percent of the materials used on this build come from Switchers. The Creation Engine made that leather with similar properties to Vantaplate, so you're going to be pretty obscured when you're out in the field." Sal explained as he looked at the material thoughtfully. "When I start refining it all with essence, then the true capabilities of the build will come through."

"Less explaining, more grappling hooks!" Rochelle laughed as she extended her arms excitedly, already tilting her torso forward in preparation.

Sal let out an exasperated sigh before smiling to himself. "Suit yourself." He said as he lifted the rucksack from the table and repositioned it to face Rochelle's upper back. "You can hold onto one of the workbenches to brace for the weight if you want?"

Rochelle nodded as she moved over to the nearest workbench and gripped the sides. "I really appreciate all of this by the way. I know you prefer to work alone."

Sal frowned at that. Was that the impression people had of him? He tended to do his own thing, but it wasn't because he didn't like people. There were a few times that he had done collaborative builds like the Sniper Rifle and the Elixir Machine. If you counted the times when it was just him and Fabi, there were plenty of examples. If you counted the times where he worked with the members of the Mythic Guild, there was only one. That was a problem.

"You're very welcome. I'm enjoying myself, don't worry." Sal said to her in what he hoped was a reassuring tone. "Let me know if it's too much to bear. All we need to know are the measurements, and then you're free from it, okay?"

Rochelle nodded quietly, indicating that she was ready.

Sal opened up the rucksack from the front. The smooth exterior was designed to rest against Rochelle's body. As for the mechanical interior? It comprised eight separate docks of coiled metal and a built in production station that was infused with the Capture ability. From a design perspective, it was a masterclass of efficiency and precision. Sal knew that, not from experience, but from the fact that Daedalus had constructed it. He was happy to do all of the designs, but certain tricky elements were better solved through outsourcing. It was him that had implanted the Capture ability through Skill Paragon, so Sal liked to think of it as a team effort.

When the coils were lined up with the straps from the metal poncho, Sal threaded them through the gaps and secured them to each other. It was a very modular design, with multiple layers to ensure that it could be equipped and taken off with relative ease. Metallic clamps secured the coils to the brace, locking in a satisfying sequence. A ribcage of metal wrapped around Rochelle's waist with the same metal clamps at the centre. Over the shoulders were similar straps of metal that attached to the ribcage. "How are you doing?" Sal asked her cautiously.

"It's bearable." Rochelle answered in a half-breath. "But I won't be moving much if this is the weight."

"This should alleviate some of the burden." Sal said as he pulled at the coils, allowing the automated spools to unravel. The result was instantaneous as Rochelle perked up, her shoulders straightening as she let go of the workbench with a relieved sigh.

"That's... much better." She looked over her shoulder, as though testing the movement... before her mask tilted downward to look at the floor. "They're very long. How are they still unravelling?"

Sal nodded in agreement. "Adaptium is lightweight, and takes on the properties of the material that it adheres to. I would have preferred to use some Stormsteel or Abyssal Steel, but the weight would have been an issue... and there was no chance we'd get the same type of length. According to Daedalus, each spool has roughly twenty-five feet of length."

Rochelle nodded slowly. "That's a bit of a downgrade from the grappling hooks, but if they're faster, I'll make good use out of them."

"When I use Mythcrafter to put it all together, there's a good chance that the spools will take on additional properties." Sal explained as he twisted the metallic coil on Rochelle's back, causing the empty spool to rewind the expended coil. "Most of the time, I just throw essence at the design and hope for the best... but since this is a specialist build, I didn't want to leave anything to chance. If the design is accurate, you should be getting closer to thirty feet per cable. I don't think they'll have the same bludgeoning impact that you're used to. I focused on penetration, so you can embed them into opponents."

Rochelle's muffled laugh echoed through her mask. "Okay, that's not a downgrade anymore. I'll be flying from buildings in no time."

Sal bent at one knee to pick up the head of one of the cables. He held it up for Rochelle to see. "I designed the end point after the Arachne Hatchling legs. They had this curious design that allowed them to embed into surfaces." Squeezing the base of the pointed head, the metal splintered into an angled five-pointed star. "I can't imagine it'll be pleasant if you're attaching this to allies, but I'll trust in your fine tuning."

Rochelle shook her head in what Sal assumed was wonder. Her expression was unreadable, and the Vantaplate in the mask made it hard to see her eyes, even though there was no visor covering them. "Those cables are very thin..."

"Don't worry, they're far stronger than they look." Sal smiled as he wrapped his pointer finger around the entirety of the slim black cable. "There's a thin wire of Venomstone running through the centre of each cable, coated with Adaptium and Vantaplate. There's going to be a Reconstruct feature on the coils, so even if one does break during battle, it'll regenerate over time."

Rochelle twisted her neck to look in the direction of the door. Sal followed her gaze in confusion, and was surprised to see Fabi approaching from the staircase with the torso armour in-hand.

"You heard her coming?" Sal asked her in disbelief. The mask should have acted as a form of dampener while incomplete, but even with it equipped, Rochelle had sharper senses than him.

Rochelle sighed as she nodded slowly. "Yeah."

Fabi practically beamed as she entered the workshop through the glass door. "Whoa! That looks absolutely sick. How are you doing, Rochelle?"

"Very good." Rochelle answered through a waft of Maestro Mark vapour. "I love the mask."

"Me too." Fabi enthused as she held up the torso. "This should fit you like a glove, but I don't want to put you through the trauma of taking everything off and putting it on."

Sal smiled as he twisted all of the other metallic coils, causing the sea of cable at their feet to retreat back to the exposed spools. "I don't need to test the backplate enclosure." He looked back to the table of prototypes before nodding to himself. "I think we're ready to finish this build."

Rochelle gasped as she grabbed at the workbench, the added weight from the retracted cables hitting her all at once.

Fabi was over in a flash to catch her, casting a disapproving glance in Sal's direction. "You couldn't have made them a little lighter?"

Sal grimaced as he reached for the clamps. "Sorry about that, Rochelle."

"Worth it." Rochelle chuckled before gasping at the sudden release of tension. "The... fit is perfect, by the way."

Fabi raised an eyebrow at the muffled tone. "We're going to have to do something about that voice."