

## Chapter 39 (2,931 words)

It took just over an hour for the Realm Matriarch to finish her Restructure, and Sal was honestly relieved. Maybe it was the increase to Perception, but he was keenly aware of the growing frustration within the group. His mother went from being accommodating, to muttering about wanting a shower, to borderline passive-aggressive commentary. Vanessa seemed to be in the exact same camp, but did a far better job of biting her tongue. Villa maintained a very threatening silence, which only made Sal nervous. Upgrade and Fabi were very much invested in the spider's recuperation, so they were on Sal's side of the fence, with Petro acting as mediator. Rochelle and Sakura didn't exactly care either way, since they were free to lounge around and relax.

"If you needed us to wait longer, that's fine." Sophia said as she gestured down into the abyss that led to the fourth floor. "We can take the spider when it's finished whatever its doing. Really, I don't mind."

She did mind. Sal was certain of it, and no matter how many times he had tried to explain what was happening, the words didn't seem to register with her. He was used to this, though. "We planned on leaving it here if she was fit to keep fighting. Her essence absorption is at a steady rate and both of her batteries are back online."

What he didn't tell her was that they would have been down there for almost a full day if he had his way. The Realm Matriarch was able to keep a sizeable chunk of Demons at bay with her Subjugate ability, but there was no feasible way for her to control the entire Dungeon. All of the materials she had consumed were perfect for creating additional drones, and if they waited for that backup to be produced, his mother would have killed him.

Vanessa was vigilant as she led them through the wreckage of their earlier battles. Everyone was desperate to get back into clean air, and as extensively discussed, have showers. Rochelle looked to be running on fumes, with her eyes drooping as she walked forward like a zombie. If anything tried to attack her, she probably would have just let it happen.

"She looks stronger than ever, so there's nothing to worry about." Fabi said in a chipper tone. "Thanks so much for waiting with us. The Realm Matriarch was really vulnerable while she carried out those repairs, and now there's a good chance she'll be feeding us materials non-stop."

Vanessa nodded from the front of the group. "And I can pop in from time to time to check on her."

"And I'll go with." Upgrade added, as if to allay Sal's fears, or just to mollify Sophia.

Sal knew his mother felt guilty about her tetchiness, and it was clear that everyone was doing their part to try to convince her that she hadn't bullied them into an early departure. Petro just smiled at the antics as he put an arm around her waist, walking in step with her.

"I had a great time." Sakura said as she took out her tablet and wiggled it for Sal to see. "I'm going to blitz past Alex in the Legion System Rankings with all the progress for my Assassination Path." She smiled proudly at the tablet screen. "I got to use so many new techniques from this thing!"

Fabi blinked as she looked at Sakura. "You're not wearing a tracker, though? How can it verify your progress?"

"Trust based, I imagine?" Sakura shrugged as she pocketed the tablet. "But I've already inputted that we were doing this as a group, so I'll still get merits because we took out the Boss."

Villa squinted at her pocket for a second, before pulling her gaze up to stare at Sakura. "Show me that, would you?"

Sakura pulled the tablet out, activated the screen and passed it over to Villa. "You can navigate back to see the stuff that it already gave me a passing grade on. It retroactively assessed my modules and masterclasses, and fast-tracked me to the practical stuff."

Villa's frown deepened as she flicked through the data, page by page, going so far as to look at the far more advanced tasks that Sakura hadn't attempted. Sal was sure that she was going to criticise some aspect of the training, which wouldn't be all that surprising since she was someone that valued lived experiences far more than classroom environments.

"And it choose the path for you?" Villa asked as she handed it back to Sakura, still looking visibly confused. "Or did you select it yourself?"

"There are multiple paths that can be chosen." Sal answered with a shrug. "But to get the best analysis of your current state, we'd need to give you a test run in Athena. It's essentially an assessment tool to gauge your potential, providing a developmental plan to get there. You can drop by the academy whenever you like and we'll get you set up with a profile if you'd like."

Villa nodded slowly. "I'd like that, thank you."

Sophia cleared her throat. "I'd highly recommend it."

That was enough to set Petro off with a burst of hearty laughter, earning him a slap that he was unable to avoid. He took it in his stride, with a guilty grin. "I'm sorry, but you'd recommend it? The same woman that accused it of treating her like a child?"

Sophia's teeth grit before a guilty smile tugged at her lips, the tension around her melting away as she shook her head and gave Villa an apologetic look. "It's still learning how to deal with Body Manipulators. You should have a far more straightforward experience, like my idiot husband had."

"I look forward to it." Villa said tentatively, clearly trying to figure out if she was being mocked or if there was a joke she wasn't aware of.

"Want to take bets on if Bumble salvaged your bike for parts?" Upgrade asked in a chipper tone, which had the immediate effect of contorting Villa's expression into one of raw fury.

"If that little shit doesn't want to become scrap, you better hope not." Villa responded fiercely through grit teeth.

As they neared the exit of the Dungeon, Sal looked at the report from the Realm Matriarch. Everything was back online, and the Restructure process had been successful. Vantaplate was thankfully assessed by the Creation Engine, revealing a little more about the sensation he and his father felt. It was like something of an innate stealth ability, disguising its presence through both camouflage and Psionic interference. A quick test of removing his hat, and by extension his Psionic ward, Sal was incapable of perceiving the Realm Matriarch. His visor was able to make out a vague outline of it, but with none of the clarity he expected. Appraisal or Analysis would be next to impossible on the material.

When the Realm Matriarch finished its upgrades, it seemingly deactivated the Vantaplate effect so it could be perceived by everyone. There were so many incredible implications, and Sal felt far more at ease about leaving the spider in the Dungeon. If it could keep the disguise effect up, then it would drastically improve its survivability when creating drones.

Additionally, Sal had finally found a material that made perfect sense for his new gear. If he could get Jackal to evolve to its next form with the Vantaplate, he wouldn't need to worry about anyone perceiving the Blight Core. It would drastically improve his combat capability, too. If he made a full set of gear with the material, then he wouldn't need to worry about Skill-Paragon or Mythcrafter being assessed by others, either. Just having the Realm Matriarch choosing it, told Sal that it was strong enough to endure a few Commander hits, too.

"You'll send the production method to me, right?" Sal asked Upgrade again, hoping for a better answer than the last time he had tried it.

"Only when I know that you've gotten some sleep." Upgrade answered with a smile. "Fusion works in mysterious ways, and your Creation Engine would spend hours going through countless useless permutations in trying to recreate it. You should just rest up, and let me send it to you in the morning." She paused for a second. "Or evening. You should probably sleep in. I don't think it's even night anymore."

"We're about to find out." Vanessa smiled as she guided them off the stone staircase and out of the protective layer of barrier that led to the trash left by the previous tenants. "Good morning every-"

Vanessa froze as she looked around in confusion. "Did we get teleported to a different exit? It felt like a regular Dungeon barrier, though?"

Sal winced at the sudden burst of sunlight that assaulted his eyes, which Perception made a thousand times worse. His jealousy of Body Manipulators reached a whole new level.

"My goodness." Sophia sounded genuinely surprised as she patted Sal's shoulder hesitantly, as though telling him to take a look.

Blinking his eyes furiously, internally screaming at Adaptivity to activate and save his eyes. It didn't work, but he did finally regain his sight after a few seconds. With a sigh of relief, he looked around to see what the fuss was about, only to be rendered speechless.

"Where did the trash go?" Villa asked with a raised eyebrow. "I know it was dark, but I don't remember those arches." She was looking up at the rounded arches that were staggered out from the entrance to the Dungeon, each growing in size as they moved outward.

Fabi seemed to be inspecting the mechanical apparatus embedded into the sides of each arch. "Are these... a barrier array?" Her jaw slackened as she looked at the connection points in disbelief. "Four airlocks within, what? Thirty feet?!"

"Or the paving." Petro muttered as he looked first to the freshly paved path that led to the Dungeon entrance.

"Really? Paving and arches?" Sophia asked them with a dry laugh. "Neither of you are going to look at this monster of a thing?" She gestured broadly at what could only be described as a turret cannon, not too dissimilar to the ones they mounted atop skyscrapers. This one, however, was at ground level and aimed directly at the entrance to the Dungeon.

"Where is my fucking motorbike?" Villa's voice sounded almost panicked as she looked at the complex machinery that made up the cannon. "Because if it was salvaged for this thing, I'm going to lose it!"

Sal wasn't prepared for this. Bumble, which was definitely the little guy's name now, had been hatched? No, *produced*, with just a Repair ability. Repair shouldn't have been able to recreate an environment that never existed in the first place. Liberties would have needed to be taken, far outside of what Repair should have been capable of.

"I see him." Rochelle muttered as she raised a hand to lazily gesture at the first floor of a nearby wrecked building. "He's over there behind those wrecked blocks."

Villa whipped around and visibly relaxed at the sight of her motorbike, parked up and gleaming in the morning sunlight. A temporary shelter had been erected overhead to keep it safe. It looked like a frayed canopy or tarp, controlled by an archaic brace-like system mounted above the door and window of the half-ruined building. Oddly enough, there was a faded logo on the material. Was it formerly a shop-front?

Sal took a step closer, reluctant to move away from the cannon-thing, but eager to figure out what Bumble was up to. The answer became evident a few seconds later as an entire wall suddenly started to manifest in a series of clunks and pops. It wasn't the speed that was impressive, but rather the

immaculate detailing, with practiced extrusions throughout and an eye-catching uniformity. Red and slate gray bricks had likely been shaped by Bumble, before being assembled at a blistering pace.

Sal and his father were both transfixed on the process unfolding before them, from the outer walls being erected line by line, to the stained-glass windows being fitted whilst the bricks fused into the frame. He didn't need the visor to see that the materials were far more resilient than they appeared. "How many hours were we in there?"

"Roughly ten." Petro answered, not taking his eyes off the progress of the building. "Which doesn't line up with the progress we're seeing right now. Maybe the cannon and barrier system gave him some trouble."

"Upgrade, what happened to the few upgrade tasks you gave him?" Sal asked in a strained voice without turning his head.

Upgrade appeared by their side, biting her lip. "Yeah... about that. I think we may have fucked something up."

"You don't say?" Sal laughed as he gestured wildly at everything around them. "I'm not angry, but I'm very confused. He's supposed to be the worst drone we can make! He only had Repair!"

"Had, is the operative word." Upgrade smiled with a raised finger. "Turns out that, eh... they don't level up like Jackal, you know, through kills."

Sal looked at her calmly. "How do they level up, Upgrade?"

"By having access to advanced materials." Upgrade answered sheepishly. "And the Realm Matriarch gives them all access to the Tartarus Vault by default."

Sal was suddenly reminded of the Creation Engine making new materials for some unknown reason. He had assumed it was because Arsenal was overflowing, but there was a more likely suspect.

"So, he's upgraded from Serf." Sal nodded with a laugh, before catching his father's raised eyebrow. He tumbled over his words slightly in trying to explain. "We're changing the name, don't worry. It was just a thing because of Sovereign, that all the terms are Nobles, Knights and stuff... It won't be Serf in the future."

Upgrade enjoyed the awkward rambling as she watched for any signs of Bumble. "So, you'll see for yourself soon enough, but there was a slight deviation with Bumble. Serf becomes Citizen, which then becomes Soldier." She pointed at the beautifully crafted wall that likely hid the little drone. "But, he hasn't picked up any combat abilities in those two evolutions."

"TWO?!" Sal almost shouted in surprise. "He's a Soldier? It took nearly ten hours to build him, how did he get all this done and go through two completely different evolutionary cycles? Hell, Jackal took forever to go up a single stage and it didn't even do all that much."

"No idea." Upgrade shrugged uselessly. "But I can tell you that you don't need to worry about the naming conventions. Bumble is registered as a Craftsman, not a Soldier. He's got Reconstruct, Upgrade and Repair as separate abilities."

When the sounds of popping finally ceased, Bumble emerged from the vacant rooftop of the three-storey building, climbing carefully across his own work before sliding down the wreckage of a building that had yet to be started. The colour scheme was the same, but that was where the similarities ended. Essence cores were fused into the centre of each plate along his tail, each one glowing vibrantly to indicate his battery level. His stinger had been repurposed into that of a multi-tool, but somehow able to transform like Upgrade's old crafting gloves.

"And I don't think we can call him a little guy, anymore." Upgrade said before exhaling slowly, her eyes wide with a blend of excitement and anxiety.

Sal watched as the full-sized Scuttler approached them, his pincers clicking affectionately. Some half-formed bricks clattered to the ground from the interior of its right claw, indicating that he stopped working halfway through the build to greet them. Every black leg was sharpened like a blade, yet didn't so much as scuff the paving that it tread upon. Was it a trick of weight distribution, or simply the materials that went into the reconstruction?

Bumble paused in front of Sal in a clear display of anticipation, which slowly shifted to dismay with a slump of its entire body. It looked disappointed with the lack of acknowledgement, so instead of waiting there, it just scuttled off to one side, its claws drooping low.

"Sal, come on. Tell him he did a good job!" Fabi complained as she rushed over to Bumble with her arms outstretched. A collection of high pitched clicks and blade clattering was her reward as the enormous yellow shell bobbed back and forth. Fabi grinned at the Scuttler drone. "You're the best boy, aren't you?"

Upgrade shook her head slowly. "We're really going to have to figure out how they're showing so much personality? Do you think Prime is giving them behaviours so people won't be scared of them?"

Sal was staring at the floor, his visor had finally picked up on the phantom material that had made it so resilient. It was a compound, definitely made by the Creation Engine, and it made his heart sink.

"Bumble." Sal's voice cracked before he forcibly cleared his throat. "Did you reinforce the construction materials with the Scuttler Chitin we've been gathering?"

Fabi's praise ended abruptly as she stood upright and looked down at the drone in horror. She bit her lip after a moment of deliberation before bending at the knee again. "You just made a little mistake, didn't you? A really expensive and hilarious mistake. Yes, you did, didn't you?"

Petro patted his son on the shoulder with a proud smile. "Welcome to the unending joy of being a parent."

