

## Chapter 41 (2,262 words)

"How are you feeling?" Sal asked Rochelle quietly while the taxi took off. She had apparently reached her limit, and didn't even have the energy to crawl into the back seats of the taxi. Vanessa and Sophia had taken that honour, with Sakura and Upgrade situated opposite them.

Petro and Fabi sat in the next section, side-by-side, facing both Rochelle and Sal across a small table. His father had his tablet out, and was already straight into work mode, looking up listings for any Shard sales through his network. Fabi was leaning back into the seat with her eyes closed.

Rochelle considered Sal's question as she propped her chin up with her palm, her exhausted gaze set on the barrier array outside. With an exhausted sigh, she offered a non-committal shrug. "Pretty good, I guess? I'm just tired, but today was a good learning experience."

Sal wasn't sure how to proceed. He didn't want to press her on that dangerous new method she was working on in the Dungeon, but he desperately wanted to know how she had performed so well during the fight with the Commander. There had to be a nuanced way that he could bring it up without making her uncomfortable.

"Oh." Fabi seemingly remembered something as her eyes opened and locked onto Rochelle. "What sort of gear are you thinking of getting? I heard you were getting something with Assimilate for your stats?"

Rochelle faltered at that, pulling her hand away to shake her head. "No... I'm good." She gestured at her coat. "I've got a Legendary-Grade coat that is more than enough, and I'm grateful for the stats that I got with Mr. Argento's help. That's more than enough for me."

"Bullshit." Vanessa said from the back of the taxi. "Petro, can you tell her that her gear is an investment in the survivability of our Guild?"

Petro glanced up from his tablet with an encouraging smile. "Vanessa is right about that. The more capable our Healers are, the better our chances of survival become."

Upgrade sat up in her chair, looking over the headrest to make eye-contact with Rochelle. "I made that coat with Blathnaid, so you're not going to offend me by trading it in. It was never designed for a Healer in the first place! We could make something so much better."

Rochelle was clearly not ready for the bombardment of opinions, and Sal fully expected her to shut down the conversation. If it were him, he'd have just gone very quiet or said something to deflect to a different topic. Rochelle took a very different approach.

"I love the grappling hooks, but they're too slow." Her first sentence got Upgrade to fully turn in her chair, kneeling on the leather with her arms draped around the headrest, an excited grin on her face.

Rochelle frowned as she thought about it. "I can't explain it properly, but there were so many instances where I felt I could have stopped attacks, or pulled people out of harms way... but I just knew that the grappling hooks would be too slow. They limit my arm movements, but are amazing for traversal outside of Dungeons. I had the best time with them in the Tower Trial."

She looked at Upgrade thoughtfully. "I wouldn't be able to function without the internal cores in the coat, either. They can be a pain in the ass when they're full, but without them, I'd be useless." Rochelle shrugged again as she glanced at Sal with a grin. "We both know there's no chance I'd have gotten into the Saviour Class without the coat, so don't even deny it."

Sal was about to deny it, but Fabi cut across him with a question of her own. "Other than the speed of the grappling hooks, what are the other limiting factors?"

"The fact that there are only two." Rochelle answered immediately. "If I use one to pull essence from a target, then I'm left with only one to play with. I need to make the choice of traversal, or doubling-down and using both hooks to attack a single target. I've got nothing to protect me while they're deployed."

"Oh, and if the reserves are full." Rochelle added with a chuckle. "That limits my choices to transferring the essence to someone else, otherwise I'll be paralysed while it brute-forces my unopened gates."

Fabi nodded enthusiastically. "So, you're going to need a suit with multiple light-weight grappling hooks. We'll need them to move fast, and it also needs to have the Assimilation ability. What else?"

Rochelle hesitated, as though finally aware that this wasn't just a hypothetical assessment of her needs. Maybe it was just the fact that she heard her own request back, that she realised how much of an ask it truly was.

"She'll probably need a visor." Upgrade added with a grin. "Just so she can see through walls. Sal should be able to make something that won't interfere with her new Perception stats."

"Might as well add a built-in coffee machine." Vanessa added with a chuckle. "When people with low stats start building them up, I'm noticing a pattern of discomfort, pain or exhaustion. Rochelle hit all three at multiple points throughout the Dungeon."

Petro smiled at the suggestion as he placed his tablet down on the table and crossed his arms, giving Rochelle a thoughtful look. "I'd wager that Alex could whip up something to mitigate the side-effects, but I suppose you'd need to have your own Arsenal to keep all of the elixirs at the ready. Something preventative would be better, as it's unlikely that the demons will hold back when you need to drink it."

Sal blinked in surprise, wondering if this was what Divinity had predicted. Fabi seemed to reach the same conclusion as him, her bright smile growing wider.

"What am I missing?" Petro asked, noticing the reaction.

"We developed a mask." Sal started to explain. "It vaporises Elixirs and allows them to be inhaled safely, which would work in a combat scenario. I showed you a very early concept of it during the break."

Vanessa's expression scrunched in disgust. "Vapour coffee? Hard pass."

"I'm sure Alex will see it as a challenge." Upgrade chuckled as she nodded along to everything that was being said. Her attention was fixed on Rochelle, though. "Sorry to drag you back to the hooks, but how many do you think you could control?"

Rochelle didn't answer immediately as she thought about it. Finally, with a resolute nod, almost to herself, she spoke. "Comfortably, I would say three to four... but if you were to actually go to the hassle of making it, I'd ask for more since I think my capability will grow with practice."

"Smart." Sophia smiled approvingly. "Salvatore, would it make sense to give her a drone, too?"

Rochelle surprised everyone by shaking her head. "No, I don't think so. My focus should be solely on the people I'm responsible for. Giving instructions to a drone, or reading updates would be a distraction for me. I'd rather give everything I have to the hooks."

"Vantaplate could be a good metal to use." Sal mused as he glanced at Fabi. "It would make it harder for Demons to perceive her on the battlefield, too. Couple that with how resilient it is, she'd be the equivalent of a moving fortress."

"And the hooks could be controlled through Psionic Essence." Upgrade added with a smile. "If they're able to follow her mind rather than her motor control, then it would ease up the mental exhaustion."

Rochelle's brow furrowed as she thought through the concept. It looked like she was going through some unseen calculation, before finally surfacing with an expression of incredulity. "If that was the case... I think I could control four, comfortably."

"Capacitor?" Fabi suggested as she gestured at the coat Rochelle was wearing, her question aimed at Sal. "It would help with the overflow problems, as long as you gave it a lot of reserves."

Sal looked at the Arbiter's Judgement carefully, it had been a while since he had done an Appraisal on it, but the fact that he knew what to look for made it that much easier. There were seven key abilities, but all of them were at a pretty low Factor. Hunt only gave a chance to lock onto moving targets. Embed allowed Rochelle's hooks to latch onto things until she manually recalled them. Siphon allowed for the transfer of essence between her and her target, with Tether allowing her to send essence to another target. Cultivate took the overflow of essence and used it to unlock internal gates while Feather reduced the weight of the coat and grappling hooks.

Finally, Sal saw Reserve, the one he was looking for... and it had not aged well. It was likely an earlier Factor of Capacitor, and was constructed using five Premium Cores. Rochelle constantly battling the full reserves made a lot of sense when he thought about it. An Obsidian Hulker during the trials, and the Death Net on their outing with Paradox. Both nearly crippled her as she acted as the essence conduit. Despite the coat being Legendary-Grade, it had the same downside as the Legendary Sniper Rifle. Lots of low Factor abilities versus a few high Factor abilities.

"I'm thinking of trying to push for Reactor instead." Sal said after a few moments of quiet deliberation. "Rochelle is already thinking of the future, and I should be doing the same. We can try Vantaplate and Venomstone as the primary materials for the suit, but I'll need to find a light alloy for the hooks. Something strong that can bend like a whip. Adaptive might be good, too. There's a wealth of Switcher materials in the Tartarus Vault, so I'm sure we'll be able to create a suitable material."

Upgrade let out an exasperated sigh. "I'm only doing this for Rochelle, but I want you to know that I'll be very disappointed if you don't get some sleep."

Sal was curious what she meant, when he got the notification on his tablet that she had sent over the ratio calculation that Fusion used to create Vantaplate. "Oh, nice! Thank you!" He caught sight of his mother's expression of disapproval, so quickly added. "I'll only look at it after I shower and get some rest."

A smile tugged at Sophia's lips, as if to say that she didn't believe him, but she didn't cause a fuss. Instead, she decided to give a little insight. "You know, with a little bit of practice and a better communication system... I think this could be a very lucrative training Dungeon for the Guild. I know that your father would be more than happy to have a few more turns in there to build up his attributes, and I'd be more than happy to chaperone alongside him."

"Seconded." Vanessa added with a grin, tapping her collarbone to cause her bodysuit to ripple from grey to yellow, before reverting back. "If anything, I think it's a good testing ground that will show people what they're lacking. That might better inform their gear choices."

Upgrade nodded in agreement. "Scuttlers are going to be a challenge for people that can't move fast or hit hard. Michaela and Seth would be a good combo to bring in next time, since I'm sure he'd be happy to build up his stats. I don't think there's anyone else in the roster with that equipment, though. We might need to change that up."

"I think it might break Blathnaid's heart if we take the uniform project away from her." Sal chuckled as he looked at Fabi for backup. "I'm not going to outsource them to Daedalus or the Arkwright. I'm going to try and design Rochelle's suit myself because I've a feeling I'm going to learn a lot."

"Happy to consult." Fabi grinned, while looking over at Upgrade to see if she was going to help, too. "I've a feeling that Psionic controlled whips will end up being a fun problem."

"And I'll console Blathnaid." Upgrade added with a wry smile.

Sal looked towards the back of the taxi. "So, Sakura... what gear would you like?"

Sakura looked at him with barely concealed confusion. "I already have the Shade Walker outfit from the outing with Paradox. I don't need anything else since it's perfect for Stealth."

"Are you sure? Because I thought you might want a better knife." Sal smiled as he idly gestured out the window. "You saw the Ethos Blade that Villa used, the one that's pretty much unstoppable that can be recalled back to the user?"

Sakura hesitated, biting her lip. "Well, it is a nice blade..."

"I'll add it to the list." Sal smiled, grateful that he was able to do something for her. "Thanks for all your help today, I really appreciate it."

"You do know that I'm getting paid, right?" Sakura asked, looking around her to make sure that she wasn't crazy. "I had fun, and got to refine my techniques. That's reward enough, so you don't need to make something fancy for me."

"We raised Salvatore in an Auction House." Sophia gave Sakura a sympathetic smile. "Despite the fact that he knows the value of pretty much anything he looks at, he's still generous to a fault. You're not going to win this, so you might as well just tell him."

Sakura returned Sophia's smile as she conceded, turning her attention to Sal. "I'd love a new knife, please."