

Chapter 23 (2,238 words)

"Where do you see that?" Sal asked as he flipped through the pages of the dossier. After about ten minutes into their journey, a uniformed member of the Scavengers visited their carriage with a stack of folders, not dissimilar to the one he received for the Administration class from Jez.

Blathnaid turned her own dossier and pointed at the page. "Here, it's all the membership perks and details of costs." She turned it back around and started reading through it quietly before frowning. "I don't know what they mean by license discounts."

Sal moved to the page she had been talking about and scanned through the contents. "Probably for the upcoming Evals. Supports are encouraged to do licences so they're more appealing to the different companies and guilds outside of the academy."

"Evals?" Blathnaid repeated the word as she glanced up at Sal in confusion.

"Evaluations. Third Years are going to be doing a load of tests in front of the Guilds Association and Hunters Bureau, as far as I'm aware. Quest said that it would be their last chance to prove themselves before going into their final semester." Sal glanced through the description of the section Blathnaid was looking at and smiled. "Quest said that First Years are able to do a single licence test for free, but it looks like the Scavengers take a chunk of the cost for subsequent ones if they align with the areas they're looking for."

"Appraisals are here." Blathnaid perked up as she flipped her dossier again to show Sal. "Looks like you'll be able to get the discount from them."

Sal laughed as he shook his head slightly. "Dad got me licensed when I was twelve. I've already got the Master accreditation for Appraisal, but might push for the next tier with the freebie."

Blathnaid frowned. "Feels like a waste though, doesn't it? Why don't you just replicate another ability and get certified with it for fun? Might open some doors in the future." She offered a slight shrug and a conspiratorial smile before burying her face into the dossier again.

Sal smiled as he flicked through the different benefits of a membership. It would apparently give them the Junker title as the first rank in the Scavengers Guild. Contributions and success in scavenging would increase their ranks through Scrounger, Delver, Reclaimer and Raider. With five levels to each rank, there would be something like twenty-four promotions required to reach the top.

Even though Sal was curious about what he could get at the later levels, he focused on the Junker rank and what benefits were available immediately. They seemed to be discounts for

trading in a thing called the Scav Network. It looked like a variation of the Credit Store that accepted both Q-Cred and Dollars. There was an increase in Hunter Bureau rank, but it looked to be quite minuscule at the Junker level. He'd be able to sell surplus goods that he scavenged for Q-Cred payments, but Sal guessed he'd end up using any surplus for crafting.

"Oooh, they offer Mentorship for a fee." Blathnaid exclaimed as she glanced up with a smile. "I wonder what sorts of stuff they teach. Probably really useful for the licenses I'd say."

Sal nodded as he read through the list to find where Blathnaid currently was. "Deconstruction, Restoration, Assembly, Repair and Appraisal. It's all listed in the bottom column. Contributions of those abilities to the Scav Network apparently build merits and bonus reputation towards rank increases." He frowned at that. "I'd prefer payment, personally."

Blathnaid laughed as she read a section aloud. "Merits are a form of acknowledgement that can be redeemed for goods and services within the Scavenger Network. They are also integral for Trainee Scavs seeking to increase their rank." She looked up from the page to smile at Sal. "Sounds like a cult, doesn't it?"

Sal didn't register what Blathnaid said immediately as he had found something he was very interested in. "Scavenger Auctions. There are two sections here, for materials and... properties? Do you think they actually sell buildings and stuff in this Scav Network thing?"

Blathnaid inhaled sharply as she looked at it. "Sal, they've a minimum deposit of ten thousand Q-Cred for even looking at the properties. You also need to be at Reclaimer rank with them to access that auction by the looks of it. What would you want a destroyed building for, anyway?"

Sal grinned as he kept reading through the auction information. "Well, if I'm going to be a Guild Master someday, I want to have my own place. Might as well start looking at properties and plan for the future. There's no harm in window-shopping."

Blathnaid snorted. "You'd be buying a lot of windows for sure. Have you seen the state of some of them?" She gestured out the window to one of the many destroyed blocks of buildings on their train route. "It might be prime real estate at some point in the future, but it would take a mountain of money to get stuff like that anywhere near useable."

Sal followed her gaze and smiled. "A mountain of money... or a mountain of essence? If I get the right people for the job, who knows? Maybe it won't be too far in the future." Sal thought of Fabi Maccles and her Fabricate ability. Even Blathnaid's ability could potentially recreate the same effect if she had enough essence and her weave was in top condition.

Blathnaid gave Sal a serious look. "Are you really thinking of making a Guild?"

"That depends. Are you going to try and talk me out of it if I say yes?" Sal countered with a smile. He didn't even have so much as a potential name, or a plan of how he was going to make it all happen. But the fact that he wanted it to happen was a good start.

"I'd try to talk you out of it if you made a Reclamation Guild. Your power is way too valuable to waste on the frontlines." Blathnaid spoke seriously as she clenched her fists, as though readying herself for a fight. "You can help so many people with your ability, and making a Guild feels like a waste of that potential."

Sal smiled as he looked at Blathnaid calmly. It was a very different feeling compared to when Erika told him he was making poor choices with his ability. Sal could see the concern in Blathnaid's eyes and he took a more gentle approach in his answer. "I want to make a Guild that will let me craft and help people with my abilities. A Tier One Support Guild that can make the best equipment, and the best Heroes."

Blathnaid's smile returned, but she looked somewhat conflicted. "Ah, it's like that then. You're going to entice the top rankers to join you by making them Mythic Grade equipment? Sounds like you've thought about this a bit."

Sal laughed as he shook his head. "Maybe that will happen, but not for a while. I'll focus on building something up with my friends in mind. So, what do you say? Would you join me if I started one?"

Blathnaid stared at Sal for a few moments before her lips thinned. "No, Sal. I don't think I would." She tried looking at her dossier to continue reading, but after a moment, she let it drop to the table with a frustrated sigh. "I mean, I'm grateful for what you've done for me. I really am, but I don't want to be in a Guild because I'm friends with the Guild Master. I want to work hard to earn my place wherever I go."

"Blathnaid, I didn't mean it that way." Sal tried to explain, but he was met with a raised palm.

"Don't apologise. I know you didn't mean anything bad by it, and it's a lovely thing that you've asked me." Blathnaid started as she looked out the window to avoid Sal's eyes. "You helped me access my powers, and pulled me up through the ranks with the tournament result. We've trained together and I know without you and Divinity, I wouldn't have gotten this far."

She fidgeted a little as she glanced towards Sal with a smile on her face. "But when I went into the forest on the excursion... I was so much more. My ability let me create a shelter for us, out of rock. I was able to fashion equipment with wood and clay. I constructed a well with just essence, giving us access to fresh water. I felt useful and capable in that team, Darren's right-hand woman. I was able to call the shots on how we made our camp, and it was amazing."

Her smile grew wider as she picked up the dossier and held it up for him to see. "I've been given an opportunity to prove myself, and I want to take it. I don't know if I have what it takes to be a Hero, but I'm going to try my best. If I only stick to you and Divinity, I won't be pushing myself to be the best that I can be. That's why I can't accept the secured future of being in your Guild, because I need to keep clawing at making a better future for myself."

"Whoa." Sal answered with a gentle smile. "You could have just said no."

Blathnaid laughed as she tried to swat at Sal from the other side of the table, but he easily dodged it. "You're the worst." When her laughter died down, she smiled and gave Sal a sideways glance. "Besides, if I manage to fuck up everything, I'll come crawling back and ask for a low-level position at your Guild. I promise."

"I'm afraid I can't do that." Sal chuckled. "Lowest position is reserved for Barry. He doesn't know that yet, but I'll have to break it to him eventually."

Blathnaid snorted at that. "As if. Barry is going to get snatched up by some Guild in a heartbeat. He's a talker and will be a ridiculously good Controller. Don't tell him I said that, but you have to agree. He'd be wasted in a Crafting Guild."

Sal looked at the dossier in front of him, specifically at the entry about the property auctions. It was fun to dream. "Well, I'll just have to make a Guild that Barry and Divinity wouldn't feel bad about joining. Same with every other heavy-hitter we come across between now and then." He glanced up at Blathnaid with a smile. "And I didn't want to take you into the Guild because we're friends. When I get permission to use my Skill-Master ability, I want to push your weave to the limits of its capability. We can get Vanessa or Darren to unblock your gates, and then I can give you the best weave possible... and we can see about restoring some of these buildings, or making something even better."

"You really do think a little too highly of me." Blathnaid laughed as she returned to looking straight out the window. Not before Sal saw her cheeks reddening ever so slightly. The visor picked up her embarrassment without a hitch.

"No Blathnaid, I think you just don't think highly enough of yourself." Sal answered earnestly. "We'll see what the future holds, but just humour my plan for now. We've a lot of equipment to make before any of this can be a reality."

"And a lot of shit to scavenge, apparently." Blathnaid tapped the dossier with her left hand as she continued to stare out the window at the destroyed buildings they shot past. "But, you know... when you get permission to use Skill-Master, would you help Jack get a hold of his ability?" She looked at Sal with an awkward expression. "I haven't told him anything about what you did with my weave, but he's pretty damn suspicious after seeing me do a complete one-

eighty in terms of capability. I know he wouldn't say anything, but I didn't want to break your trust."

Sal blinked in surprise. "Of course I will. I want to help as many people as possible, and our Tournament team will be first on the list. You, Anthony and Jack. I want to make us an unstoppable force for whenever they decide to resume the Inter-Cohort Tournament."

"You're forgetting Barry." Blathnaid chided with a laugh.

"Barry doesn't count." Sal argued. "His weave is perfect and there's literally nothing I'd be able to do for him, other than mapping out how his weave can evolve. I just don't want to inflate his ego by telling him that."

Blathnaid nodded in agreement. "Very fair. I'm looking forward to seeing the others when they get back. It's only going to be a few more days, but it already feels like a lifetime since we've seen them."

Sal sighed as he took out his tablet and waved it in front of Blathnaid. "I've been so caught up with everything that I keep forgetting to reply to people. It's going to be a lot easier to keep in contact with them when they can just show up at my door or find me in the workshop."

Blathnaid stared at Sal for a few moments before shaking her head with an awkward laugh. "Your friends sure are lucky to have you, Sal."