

Chapter 21 (2,392 words)

Sal continued working away at the weaves for the rest of the day, smiling happily whenever he was rewarded with a green light. The profile improvements had ended up being a lot more gratifying than he expected, because each and every one of them had a name attached which made it more personal. When he went up to the terminal to check on the next profile, he could see a counter in the top left corner that was tracking the newly added weaves. He tapped on it just in time for a green light to bathe wash across the room. Sal saw the number he had selected increase by one as the announcement came through in a robotic voice.

[Skill Profile: Dustin Farrows]

[Weave Stability: 94%]

[Category: Psionic]

[Name: Nightmare]

[Grade:19]

Sal ignored the message as he had with many of the others. Unless the description sounded particularly interesting, he didn't really pay them much heed as he continued working. The screen on the terminal loaded for a moment before populating a dropdown list with all of the profiles that he had successfully worked on for the day. It was quite a number, and Sal had to mentally discount Fabi Maccles from the list as he counted the names on screen. Twenty-three people had their weaves improved in a single day, and it was more than enough to bring a wide smile to Sal's face. He had managed to make a lot of progress with Quest's task, and had worked across a whole series of essence categories. Quest had even said to him that he would be paid in Q-Cred for each successful weave he improved, as well as for any new weaves he discovered. Even if they were on par with the Appraisal fees, Sal would have essentially paid for the jacket he commissioned with Upgrade.

"Great work today, Sal." Blathnaid called out as she packed up her belongings.

Sal turned around from his place at the terminal and smiled at Blathnaid. "Sorry if the lights were annoying. How did your work go?" His eyes traced across her workstation and he was happy to see that it was covered in fabrics and metals. It was a little concerning that both Blathnaid and Upgrade had spent a few days on the design stage. He had never dedicated that much time to any of the projects he worked on, and had only ever used the Blueprints as a proof of concept or a template to work off. He couldn't imagine how much they could have possibly iterated in two days, when the designs he saw at the start were so good.

Blathnaid smiled sheepishly as she shrugged. "Guess you'll just have to wait and see how it all turns out. I can't imagine you'll have that long to wait though, Upgrade is already finished tuning up the stuff I made today."

"Is that so?" Sal asked of Upgrade, but when he turned to where she was normally seated, she was nowhere to be found. Her desk was completely bare, which left Sal stumped.

Blathnaid's laugh caught him off guard. "Wow, you really were in the zone. She left this afternoon, like five hours ago. How did you not notice?"

Sal just continued to stare at the empty space for a moment before blinking and turning back to Blathnaid. "Not going to lie, it's pretty concerning how much I don't notice when I'm in the zone. Sorry if I ignored you at any point!"

Blathnaid smiled and shook her head as she slung a backpack over her shoulder. "Don't worry about it. I was talking to myself most of the time." Just as she checked to see if she had forgotten anything, she looked up at Sal with a curious expression. "By the way, Darren offered to take me on some Scavenger Runs. There's one tomorrow and I said I'd go to it, I can ask him if he has another slot free... if you'd like to come along?"

"Darren?" Sal asked in confusion, when he suddenly remembered the Bastion target. Darren Lenihan, or Dazzler according to his profile. He was the Controller on Blathnaid's excursion team. "Wait, I remember him. He's taking you on a Scavenger Run... and you're up for it?"

Blathnaid nodded eagerly. "Yeah, it's apparently a great way to get materials. He wants me to craft him some stuff and offered to run me through some Dungeons, but I went with the Scavenger Runs as a safer bet. They typically have waiting lists, but he's connected to some people that got him passes for the one tomorrow."

Sal thought about it for a moment before finally nodding slowly. "Yes. I'd like that actually. Could you see if he could get me a place?"

Blathnaid's smile was bright as she gave him a quick nod. "Leave it to me. He'll absolutely say yes, he's really cool like that. Anyway, I'll see you tomorrow, okay? I'll text you when I hear back from Darren. It'll be an eight in the morning start if it goes ahead, so don't stay here too long." She wagged a finger at Sal accusingly before laughing and saying goodbye.

Sal looked at the time. It was close to nine in the evening and he didn't even feel tired. Sure, he was hungry and could absolutely do with a coffee but he caught himself in that very thought and mentally rebuked himself. He wasn't going to pull an all-nighter this time. Sergeant Head's words were still fresh in his mind, and Sal understood that there was no longer a mad rush or panic for him to achieve everything all at once. He was going to have a good night sleep tonight. Rather than going to the canteen to see if he could get food, he eyed the leftover casserole from the night before that was still on his desk. It wouldn't be fresh, but it would keep him going for another weave or two. No matter how much restraint he had, Sal didn't want to end on twenty-

three weaves. If he could push it to finishing on twenty-four or twenty-five, that would feel like more of an accomplishment in his eyes.

With that thought in mind, Sal went back to the terminal and started looking through the available profiles. Rather than leaving it to chance, he wanted to search for a specific type of weave. Of all the essence categories that Sal had encountered, he hadn't done any that used the Body Manipulation category. He wanted to see how Vanessa, Darren and Lucia operated and what their weaves looked like. The added benefit was that Body Manipulators had a naturally high essence gate count. It would give him a lot of room to breathe when working with their weaves. Sal set the filters and ignored the names that came up on the screen as he went through them. When he found one with a ridiculously high internal gate count, he loaded it up and made his way over to the torso.

A red light flashed immediately, causing Sal to frown as he stopped in his tracks. Why was it producing an error already? He hadn't even gone near the weave. When Sal went back to the terminal to inspect what was going on, he saw an error message displayed on the screen.

[Test Apparatus Unsuitable]

Sal tried the next profile on the list and waited to see that it loaded correctly. He was rewarded with another red flash and the same error code.

[Test Apparatus Unsuitable]

Next Body Manipulator profile did the exact same thing, with the same error popping up, this time with some additional context.

[Test Apparatus Unsuitable. Please attach remaining testing components.]

Sal looked at the humanoid torso and wondered what it was talking about. Even if it was only to sate his own curiosity, Sal looked at the humanoid shape and activated his Mythcrafter ability. The problem became apparent immediately as his ability showcased how he could improve the existing design by adding limbs to the construct. "So, Body Manipulation weaves require the full body." Sal muttered with a sigh. It made total sense, and he was surprised that he had managed to get through so many weaves without it being a factor. He was left with the decision of eating his leftovers and heading back to his room, or changing the parameters and working on a different weave.

It only took him a few minutes to decide, and Sal cleared the queue on the terminal of all the profiles he had just attempted to refine. Instead, he entered it into sandbox mode, and targeted the terminal's attention to the freestanding threads that had hung limply in mid-air. It was the end of the day, and Sal wasn't going to finish it with disappointment. He had a few weave

concepts that he wanted to try, and decided that now was as good a time as any. Looking at the terminal, Sal brought up three weaves from the database and activated them all at the same time. He saw each of them taking shape beside each other and it brought a wide smile to his face. He was going to find out if he could reproduce the moment that created the Mythcrafter ability, but this time with three abilities that he'd never used before. Sal couldn't tell if they were compatible, but there was only one way to find out.

[Conquest]

[Concept]

[Absolute Counter]

Sal was going to try the theory he had the other day about having a domain of essence under his control, that would allow him to automate a turret made from Chatfield's concept ability. It was ridiculous, but he wanted to give it a try.

Stepping over to the weaves, Sal didn't bother correcting their flows. He would know if they were compatible without making them the best versions of themselves. So, rather than wasting time by learning everything about each of the abilities, Sal just started inspecting them to see if there were any similarities he could use to construct a base foundation. The short answer was no. After about ten minutes of going through the weaves, Sal couldn't find any common ground between any of them. Sal closed his eyes and looked within himself to try and remember how he had done it before.

There had to be something that could connect all of the abilities, and Sal was determined to find it. Looking at his own weave, he started to create the shapes of Conquest, Concept and Absolute Counter with his own thread. He wasn't going to activate it, because that would be the definition of asking for trouble. But by the looks of it, nothing would happen even if he tried to push essence through it. The weave wasn't making sense at all as he moved through the shapes, creating perfect imitations of them.

Thinking that it might have something to do with the quality of the weaves themselves, Sal started correcting them in his mind's eye. He had thought it would be a time-wasting exercise, but he was running out of options for why it wasn't working the way it was supposed to. When they started shaping up and looking like stronger weaves, Sal tried again with his own internal thread to replicate them properly. It was only then that he noticed a fundamental difference between the artificial weaves and the one that he had been making within himself.

"I'm actually an idiot." Sal berated himself with a humourless laugh as he opened his eyes. Skill-Master was the glue that kept the weaves together in the first place. It was the foundation that he had been instinctively utilising, and he was mimicking the things that worked in his own body to improve the weaves of all the profiles he had been looking at. Quest had even told him that Mythcrafter was made with Appraisal, Restoration, Upgrade and Skill-Master. Combining the

three different weaves wouldn't work without the addition of Skill-Master, which meant that simulating them with the artificial threads was never going to work.

"Unless..." Sal looked at a set of threads that weren't in any shape. "We create the Skill-Master weave and incorporate it into the design?" He spoke aloud under his breath as he tried to get his head around it. Sal knew that implanting was now a reality, and he wasn't sure how he felt about other people having the same power as him. It was a selfish thought, and he was aware of it, and he told himself that he would be able to just erase it from the terminal after he was done with it. Now that he wanted to set up a Guild, would it be foolish to invite competition where other people could use his power more effectively and reach the top?

As soon as Sal had that thought he laughed. Healthy cynicism was a trait he picked up in the Auction House, and it helped him understand when he was being an idiot. If Quest Academy could give other people the Skill Master ability, then it wouldn't take sixty years to upgrade everyone's ability. Hell, he'd be able to teach them how to use it, and potentially even learn from their discoveries too. There was no downside to it, as long as Sal kept working hard, he would make a success out of whatever he put his mind to.

With a glance to the clock, Sal saw that it was now well after ten in the evening. His experience told him that if he picked up the threads again, he would be there until the early hours of the morning. Rather than making the decision for himself, Sal took out his tablet and left it to chance. He opened his messages, somewhat hoping to find nothing new, but there was a single unread message from Blathnaid.

Blathnaid Clean: Darren got you a place on the train! See you tomorrow at seven fifty. Meet us at the train station!

Sal sighed as he walked over to the terminal and shut it down. He picked up his jacket and the casserole leftovers as he locked up the private room for the evening. When he glanced back at the door, he promised himself that he'd test that weave straight after the Scavenger Run.