

Quest Academy: Chapter 51 (2,271 words)

Sal sat cross-legged on the large recliner in the Sky Lounge. It was the premium study area that he had seen on his way to the skills registration when they first started. The views were incredible, with towering glass panes that revealed the cityscape as far as the eye could see. Huge energy barriers that reached into the sky created a grid like wall in the distance. He knew that they'd be coming close to one of those barriers in the days to come as the reclaimed zones had only been freshly liberated from the demons. It wasn't difficult to determine which areas had been freshly reclaimed, since the buildings that might have once been skyscrapers were now husks of their former glory. In time they'd be developed back into something habitable by the restoration guilds, but as they were now, they stood as a testament to the ravages of the demon war.

Barry sat opposite him in the same cross-legged position and went through the instructions again. "When you activate the power, it's going to draw on your mind. Half thoughts and concepts will try to materialise and it will feel overwhelming at first. Keep your eyes closed and put your hand out in front of you. I want you to imagine a ball resting in your palm. Visualise the details of it, but don't tell us what it looks like. You won't need to channel too much power to be able to manage it, so only give it a trickle of essence."

Before Sal closed his eyes and followed the instructions, he saw Divinity sat on another recliner across from them with her arms folded. The disapproving look she wore on her face made her stance on Sal's decision very clear. He wanted to try Barry's method for image training, especially if it could eventually allow him to do sleep-training. Sal wasn't naive though, he knew it would take a lot of time and effort to get even close to that sort of thing. Divinity hadn't offered to coach or guide him with knowledge of the future, so he guessed that he'd have to learn through trial and error. With that thought in mind, Sal closed his eyes and activated Barry's weave. It had been a pain to replicate as it was ridiculously complex in structure, but he managed it after a few attempts. When Sal pushed his essence through the weave, it activated and sent a lurching sensation of vertigo through his entire body. Before Sal could topple to one side in a daze, Barry's hands found his shoulders and kept him upright.

"Too much essence, put in about five percent of what you've just activated." Barry's tone was reassuring and Sal was genuinely surprised at how encouraging he was as a teacher. Pulling back the essence, Sal followed the instructions and only let a tiny fraction of his essence enter the weave. The lurching sensation evaporated and Sal felt like he was back in control of his own body. With a nod to Barry that he was fine, he focused on the next part of the test and imagined a ball resting in his palm. Sal decided on a purple ball with white circles on its surface. It was easy to visualise and Sal wondered what the next instruction was going to be.

"Excellent work, Sal. You're doing great. Keep your eyes closed for now, and follow my instructions. You went with a purple ball with white circles, but only across the surface area you can see. I want you to imagine the ball is elevating over your palm, and rotating in the air in front of you." Barry sounded happy with the progress which spurred Sal on. He did as he was told and was surprised at how difficult it felt to visualise the sequence of circles on the ball. Sal's solution was to rotate it very slowly as he added each new circle manually with his mind. The elevation and rotation wasn't an issue at all, but the pattern on the shape was what gave him grief.

"In time, you'll be able to make texture maps that you can apply to your illusions. They're like skins that you can recycle for different things. Right now though, you're creating one from scratch and it's going to feel painstakingly slow because you're wrapping it on a curved surface. Try keeping the ball moving, but instead of white circles, make white lines that are equal width apart. Lines will be easier to connect." Barry guided Sal excitedly. His voice was betraying how much he was enjoying the lesson.

Sal couldn't tell if Barry was just eager to talk about his ability with someone, or if he just had a knack for teaching people. Either way, he was a surprisingly decent mentor and offered advice at a very manageable pace. Sal wondered if he would be this patient with someone learning how to use the Appraisal skill. He hoped he would as he thought back to the Crafting class where he helped the students with their patterns. It had been a fun experience to teach others, and he wondered if Barry felt the same way about this.

"Don't get distracted, the ball will start to distort if you let your mind wander too much. Eventually, you'll be able to do this subconsciously, but at the start you're going to need to dedicate a lot more concentration to keeping them active." When

Sal nodded in understanding, Barry continued. "So, you've made a ball. How confident do you feel that you could make this ball instantly if I asked you to make on on your left hand?"

To answer his question, Sal raised his left hand and imagined a duplicate of the ball in his right hand. A laugh from Barry indicated that he had been successful. It barely pulled any of his essence to create the two of them, and he wondered just how efficient the ability was in it's essence-consumption.

"Excellent, now keep those two thoughts in mind as we go to the harder part of the test. Keep imagining the balls in your hands as you open your eyes." Barry's voice held a slight tremor of trepidation as he spoke.

Sal pushed all other thoughts out of his head as he focused only on the balls in his hands. He visualised the room and the space that they were in and slowly opened his eyes. Instead of looking at Divinity or Barry, Sal only focused on the balls in his hands and their image. He was greeted with a single rotating ball over his right hand and its twin resting in the palm of his left hand. Sal felt like they would disappear if he looked away from them so he continued to visualise them as much as possible.

"Incredible progress. Okay, here's your next test. Keep visualising them, but raise your hands." Barry was clearly excited, but Sal didn't have the mental capacity to acknowledge it or feel proud of himself. It was taking all of his concentration just to keep the illusion active. Following Barry's instruction, Sal elevated both of his palms and expected them to phase straight through the illusion. To his great surprise, the balls moved with his hands. The levitating one was now much higher in the air and Sal raised his hand up before lowering it down, watching the ball follow his movements.

Barry just shook his head, a wide smile on his face. "Okay, you're a fast-learner. I'll give you that. You instinctively mapped your illusions to your hands, so rather than them appearing in the space you specified, they're anchored to your movements. Remember how I threw the knife into the crowd earlier? I want you to throw one of the balls, but imagine that it is no longer tethered to your hand. It'll require you to visualise its trajectory."

Divinity suddenly perked up from her seat. "You threw a knife into a crowd?!"

Barry waved his hand at her like it was nothing and focused on Sal. "There are two likely outcomes here. Just to prepare you for the failure. When you sever the connection, the ball will remain static and you won't be able to move it around with your hand anymore. Second, you might lose control completely and the illusions will disappear. Both of these are normal and come down to a lack of control. I don't expect you to be able to do it on your first try, so don't get discouraged, okay?" Barry was unrecognisably supportive, almost to the point that Sal was suspicious of his motives.

Sal concentrated on the invisible essence that connected the illusion to his hands. It took him a few attempts to visualise it, but it was much easier on his right palm that had the elevated ball. The thought of being able to throw the ball was combining three actions all at the same time. Rather than overthinking it, Sal thought it would be best to fail fast by just trying it out. He could always try again later. With that in mind, Sal focused on bringing his left hand back and made a throwing action with his hand. It was more of a toss, and he severed the connection from his hand to the ball and imagined the trajectory going across the room.

Divinity gasped as the ball left Sal's hand and flew through the air. Barry grinned as a small trash can appeared on the floor, catching the ball perfectly. "Bullseye!"

Sal could only stare in shock, not sure how he had managed to do it on his first go. He turned to Barry with a frown. "Are these my illusions or yours?" Barry put up his hands defensively and gave Sal a genuine smile. "I promise on my powers, that was all you. I just put in the trashcan for a bit of flair at the end." Barry paused for a moment as he looked over at Divinity. "He's picking this up way faster than I had expected. I'm thinking we should speed things up." Divinity didn't give him much of a reaction, but the remnants of her surprise were still on her face. That alone warmed Sal's heart as he played around with the second illusion in his right hand.

Sal paused as a thought came to him. He looked down at his right arm and saw nothing there. Barry followed his gaze in confusion before a broad smile crossed his face. "Oh, you mean this?" Barry twisted his arm and a series of green runes appeared from his wrist to his elbow, all rotating in an unknown sequence. "It's an illusion, too. There is no visible indicator of when I use my ability, so I created one. Thought it might be a good trump card for the future. Casting illusions without any sign that it's coming from me."

Divinity let out an exasperated sigh. "Is there anyone you actually trust? You sound more and more shady every time we talk to you." She looked over to Sal for support, but he understood where Barry was coming from. It gave him a competitive advantage if people didn't know when he activated his powers. Barry just shrugged and gestured at the ball floating in front of Sal. "I'm literally showing you both how I control my power, and you're going to learn all the limitations that come with it. Isn't that a huge sign of trust?"

Divinity faltered at that which made Barry's smile even wider. Sal on the other hand experimented with changing the anchor between his palms. Rather than having the ball rooted to one or the other, he tried to imagine a space that acted as the anchor, like a large magnet that could pull the ball back if it got too far. He wasn't sure what it would do, but he was curious about it. The intent was there, but it required more essence that Sal happily fed through the weave.

Barry was about to continue when the illusionary ball shot out of Sal's hand and started bouncing around an invisible space. Sal panicked and tried to tie the anchor back to himself, but he forgot to specify his hand. The ball latched onto his essence and started to slowly orbit around him. He couldn't see the ball when it moved behind him, but he knew it was there as he still had a firm visualisation of it. When he glanced over at Barry with a sheepish grin, he was met with an astonished expression.

"You're able to control it without looking at it? Already?" Barry asked in disbelief as he got to his feet and watched the ball moving behind Sal's back. Sal nodded slowly and tried to explain what he tried to do. Barry just sighed as he looked over at Divinity. "Is this how it felt when he used your power?"

Divinity laughed and shot Sal an apologetic look. "Something like that. He's a fast learner."

Barry sat down heavily and crossed his arms, staring at Sal without saying anything. Eventually a smile found its way back onto his face. "Okay then. Today's lesson was for you to be able to throw the ball, and I was half expecting you not to get as far as visualising it with your eyes open. I can see that we need to refine your pacing, so I'll increase my expectations." Sal felt a sense of dread at how Barry was speaking.

"I hope you're prepared." Barry's words had never sounded more threatening.

Quest Academy: Chapter 52 (2,405 words)

Three days had passed since Sal had started learning how to control illusions with Barry. He was lucky that the nightmares didn't come for the last two nights, but he did get a fierce leg-cramp the previous night. His daily workout routine was getting a little easier, and he didn't feel the aches and pains nearly as much. When it came to his progress with Barry, he was learning a lot more than he had anticipated. His control of the illusions had grown considerably, but it was still nowhere near the point that he could activate it with instinct alone. The other thing that made it difficult was that he needed to refresh his hold on the weave each time he met with Barry as it was too complex to memorise. That understanding made Sal curious if he should create something and put the ability into it. Divinity made him swear that he wouldn't step foot into the workshop until he had resolved his nightmare issue.

With that thought in mind, Sal had created a different kind of blueprint for the first time. He drew out the weave of the skill as he saw it in Barry, attaching it to all of his open gates. While the drawing of the weave came naturally to him, the physiology of how it existed within a person was much harder to map out. Currently, he was taking a break in the canteen and having some food. His eyes tracing across the lines he had drawn earlier. Sal didn't know if he'd need to study biology to get a better grasp of the human body, or if it was even necessary at this point. Skill Master didn't seem to work like Mythcrafter, as it didn't offer any suggestions to him as he drew out the weave. It was a little disappointing, but Sal didn't mind, he just needed it to memorise the weave and that would be enough.

After he finished eating, Sal pushed his plate to one side and looked around the canteen. It was the first day of the excursion recruitment and tables were filled with people chatting to each other, trying to team up for the next few weeks. It was a terrifying prospect to think that the people recruited now would be standing side by side in a Tower in just over a month. Divinity had been unsurprisingly approached by nearly everyone in the top ranks, but she insisted that she'd be creating a team rather than joining one. Barry was of the same opinion, and Sal respected that. They were both Controllers, so it made sense for them to take on the leadership role in assembling their teams. Sal's performance in the Silver Cohort during the tournament had made him quite a popular choice too, with many lower tier teams

reaching out to him to fill the final spots on their team. Since he was a Support, many of the teams wanted to add him in as a candidate that was capable of pulling his weight.

There were also a few others that had actively avoided him. Since Chatfield explained that the rankings of the teams would set expectations, many teams didn't want to have a high-profile Support that would increase the expectations for little reward. Divinity had suggested that they sit down later that evening to map out the best options for him, but mentioned that a few interested parties would make themselves known during the afternoon. She was very cryptic and wouldn't answer any of his questions, so Sal just resigned himself to finding out the old-fashioned way. On the table beside his sketches lay the small metal case that housed his visor and revolver. Students had been given permission to carry weapons around with them to familiarise themselves with having them equipped. Using them against each other was strictly forbidden and a ridiculous number of white-uniform attendants were dispatched to ensure no fights broke out.

Sal studied the sketch in front of him for a few moments before finally placing the pen down on the table. He wasn't going to get any farther without some help, and even though he knew it was going to get him a few odd looks, it was worth the risk. Sal reached down to the side of the chair and picked up the small metal case that housed both his revolver and his visor. Upgrade had improved it for him, so it could house all his cartridges too. Placing his thumb down on the lock mechanism, he heard a gratifying click sound before the case opened up. Sal didn't bother looking around to see what sort of reactions he was going to receive. He was already pretty accustomed to getting odd looks for having a completely different uniform to everyone else. What difference would it be if he had a glowing red visor and a revolver?

Lifting it up to his face, Sal turned his head slightly to secure the earpiece of the visor. He hadn't actually worn it since the day in the Dungeon because of everything that had happened, but he couldn't afford to waste more time. With everything coming up, he wanted to have as much information as possible. Sal smiled as the visor flashed upon activating. He immediately looked down at the sketch in front of him to see if Analysis had anything to say about it, and to his surprise, it started processing. Sal gently tried to nudge it with his intent by imagining the weave of Barry's ability, and it seemed to do the trick. A humanoid overlay appeared in front of Sal's vision, which showed how the weave didn't line up at all. Sal discarded the page

and started again, mapping out the different internal essence gates with his pen. Unlike other skills that he had inspected, Barry's weave didn't have a tethering point for activation. Sal, Divinity and Quest all had abilities that attached to the eyes, while others had them attached to hands and legs. Barry's seemed to be almost exclusively in the brain. The location was similar to Erika's ability that Sal had only recently inspected.

Pushing those thoughts aside, Sal busied himself with his work, marking out all the different essence gates. It was only when he was tracing the lines between the gates that he realised that he wasn't replicating Barry's body. Sal saw that there were only half of the gates activated, revealing the internal structure to be his own. That wasn't ideal, as Sal wanted to study Barry's ability as it worked on him, but he guessed he wouldn't be able to do it until he analysed Barry with the visor. An hour passed by without Sal noticing. His sketch had become much more detailed than the previous iteration and was essentially a template for him to apply the ability weave. When it came time to drawing in the weave, Sal hesitated and wondered if he should instead take the blueprint and save it to one of the light benches, so he could use the template again and again. Barely half a second later, Sal shook his head and started to draw out the weave. He could always make another one. Sal smiled as the visor planted the weave over the body, allowing him to trace it out with ease. It took nearly another hour of careful tracing until the weave was fully planted into the template. There was no physiological information displayed and the drawings merely existed in the constructed silhouette of Sal's body, latching only to the different essence gates. It was rough, but Sal was happy with it.

Before his pen could make contact with the table, Sal's visor flashed and started processing the final image. A screen appeared and Sal wondered if it had just used Analyse on the target.

Design Type	Ability Implant Blueprint
Skill Name	Illusion Rating: X
Skill Categories	Psionic, Energy Manipulation
Skill Mastery	0%
Skill Efficiency	100%
Mental Compatibility	61%
Physiological Compatibility	81%
Evolutionary	Yes
Potential Cap	XV
Natural Synergy	Materialise Creation Sleep Indexing Deduction

Sal's back straightened as he stared at the information in front of him. He had only drawn it to better familiarise himself with the weave, and used the technique that Upgrade had shown him with the blueprints. Yet he had somehow managed to create a template for an ability implant? Those were the very thing that students in the Saviour class would be accessing at the end of the semester. Sal glanced through the numbers to try and make sense of them. Had his Skill Master ability finally reared its head at some point throughout the process? His best guess was that the visor channelled his Skill Master ability to better trace out the details. Maybe he wasn't able to access it without the visor?

Sal's eyes kept tracing back to the categories section. He had only ever seen people with one category for their skill, yet Barry had a combination of two for Illusion. His perfect rating was incredibly impressive, but the fact that it had another five levels it could climb was even more of a shock. Skill Efficiency of one hundred percent was likely because Sal replicated the perfect version of the ability, but it didn't explain the compatibility sections.

Compatibility is the combination of Physiological and Mental suitability. It is calculated by assessing the current capability of the implant target.

Low Physiological scores indicate that the target would be at risk of personal injury from activating or using the ability.

Low Mental scores indicate that the target would be unable to handle the processing requirements for using the ability.

These scores can be improved with both mental and physical training, but only to an extent.

It is advised to not proceed with implanting an ability when scores are below 75% in either category.

Sal was delighted that the visor answered his question, but after reading the text his smile faded. "Is it telling me that I'm too stupid to use the ability?" Sal muttered to himself as he looked at the sketch in annoyance. It was incredible to have a breakdown of the damage that could be done to him based on the abilities he replicated, but there just wasn't enough context. Was it because Barry's ability was at such a high level and he had acclimatised to it over the years? Would it be more manageable if Sal pushed the rating down to a lower level of the ability? All he needed to do was add a few knots to the weave and it would reduce the quality of the ability.

With a sigh, Sal activated his Skill Master ability and looked at the weave to see if there was anything he could do with just the template in front of him. The visor flashed rapidly causing Sal to close his eyes out of reflex. When he opened them again, the flashing had stopped, and he was met with a single line of text.

Optimising Blueprint with Skill Master Ability.

Sal froze at those words as the visor started to rearrange the drawing in front of him. With trembling fingers, Sal picked up the pen and followed the instructions that he was given. He re-mapped the entirety of the weave with a new design that optimised the use of the essence gates that Sal had available to him. Sal ignored the cramping in his fingers as he continually mapped out what the visor was showing him. He

desperately wanted to know what the outcome was going to be. In his haste, he made a few mistakes, but the visor wouldn't proceed with the design until he corrected them. It was almost like a stern teacher that was hovering over his shoulder at all times, which was annoying, but came with results.

Less than twenty minutes later, Sal was left holding his breath as he waited for the visor to process the finished product. It normally didn't need any time to load, but this instance must have been causing it some issues. Sal drummed his fingers along the surface of the table as he picked up his pen and then placed it back down again. It was exciting, but his anxiety was amping up dramatically.

Blueprint Optimisation Complete

Sal exhaled violently as the screen appeared before his eyes. It was not what he had been expecting in the slightest.

Design Type	Ability Implant Blueprint
Skill Name	Illusion Rating: VI
Skill Categories	Psionic, Energy Manipulation
Skill Mastery	0%
Skill Efficiency	100%
Mental Compatibility	100%
Physiological Compatibility	100%
Evolutionary	Yes
Potential Cap	XV
Natural Synergy	Materialise Interface Concept Deduction

Sal's gaze immediately took in the most important details. His compatibility scores had maxed out, so that the ability was completely safe to use in his current state. It

had only degraded the ability by four ranks to balance things out, but that grade was still really high. Another factor that Sal took great interest in was that the natural synergies changed. Was it because his natural abilities were in Replication and Invention? Mythcrafter and Skill Master had different categories, so did that change what abilities would best suit him? Interface seemed relatively easy to understand since it would allow him to make his status screens visible when it paired with Illusion. Deduction he had already used with the monocle, and it would likely make him ridiculously fast with processing illusions.

When he saw Concept, he was immediately reminded of Chatfield who was able to create weapons and equipment that he saw. It was a step away from Illusion, but a step closer to Mythcrafter. Sal guessed that Materialise had something to do with making the illusions real for a period of time. He went through the different segments again, looking at it proudly. He just needed to keep the blueprint safe so he could try replicating the lower tier ability in the future.

Illusion (R:6) Blueprint has been saved.

Sal stared at the text in disbelief for a while, finally understanding just how powerful his visor truly was. He was so lost in his own thoughts that he didn't notice the person that sat down in front of him. It was only when she spoke that Sal snapped out of his daze.

"We need to talk." Healer-Bitch said as she stared at Sal with a conflicted expression.

Quest Academy: Chapter 53 (2,393 words)

Sal didn't recognise her at first, probably because she wasn't standing over him trying to hold his essence ransom in exchange for payment. The memories of her trying to squeeze him and Divinity for Q-Cred in exchange for her healing services washed over him and Sal could only cross his arms as he looked at her. His visor on the other hand, thought that it would be a great time to use Analyse.

Name	Rochelle de Verdon
Alias	None
Class	Healer
Profession	First Year Student, Quest Academy (Purple Cohort)
Rank	Guild Association: None Hunter Bureau: Current Rank 0 Quest Academy: Current Rank 118th
Accreditations	Challenge Crests: 0 Certifications: <ul style="list-style-type: none"> • First Aid Foundation Grade - LN: 12,888 • Revival Foundation Grade - LN: 314
Ability	Skill Name: Transference Rating: III Skill Category: Energy Manipulation Skill Mastery: 92% Skill Efficiency: 88% Progress to Next Rating: 71% Evolutionary Capability: Yes Potential Cap: XV Natural Synergy: Regenerate Amplify
Essence	Essence Type: Light Essence Gates: 70 Essence Absorption Rate: 4% Essence Control: 89% Essence Refinement: 97% Essence Calibration: 12%
Physical	

Strength Rating: I Mobility Rating: II Speed Rating: III Fitness Rating: III Current Status Effects: Injuries: None Illnesses: None	
Reputation	Hunter Bureau: Unknown Guild Association: Unknown Quest Academy: Known Doom Society: Unknown Bastion Families: Regarded
Threat Level	Analysed Equipment: 0 Analysed Martial Arts: N/A Analysed Movements: N/A Analysed Techniques: N/A Analysed Body Composition: II
Wealth	Q-Credit: 18

Sal didn't say anything as he looked through the list of details that appeared in front of him. He could tell just with a glance that she wasn't doing well at the Academy. Her physical prowess was worse than when Sal started, and her lack of essence absorption explained why she leeches off others instead of using her own. Worst of all was her account balance. She had only managed to accumulate eighteen Q-Cred in the last two months. Sal spent more than that on a single Purple Punch during Skills Registration.

Sal blinked away the information as he looked across at her. "What can I do for Rochelle de Verdon?" The effect was instantaneous as her shoulders bunched up and she pushed herself away from the table as though to create space between them. Her green eyes were panicked as she stared at Sal as though he were a demon.

"How do you know my name?" Her voice had an edge to it, but it was barely audible over the tones of panic that was consuming her. She looked like she wanted nothing else but to stand up and leave the table, but there was something keeping her there.

Sal waved his hand like it didn't matter. "Would you prefer if I called you Healer-Bitch? It doesn't roll off the tongue quite as well, but it does paint a pretty accurate picture." Sal watched as her expression darkened. He didn't feel the need to step on eggshells when she was the one that had wronged him. He had a lot to get through and stuff to prepare, so he was happy to have this conversation or whatever it was, cut short. "Why are you here? Are you looking for Q-Cred again? I don't see your goons with you."

Rochelle grit her teeth for a moment before forcing herself to calm down. "I came to apologise for what happened before." She shook her head and relaxed her shoulders, before moving her chair closer to the table. From the look on her face, she didn't want to apologise one bit. "I'm not going to make excuses for what I did. I was worried about making it through the semester and thought it was really unfair that people like you who placed well in a race got Q-Cred. I let those feelings get in the way of rational thought, and made a mistake."

Sal smiled at that. "You don't want to make excuses, but then immediately make an excuse. I know you only have eighteen Q-Cred to your name right now, so I know you're not lying about being poor. But what made you think that extorting people was the right choice? You're a Healer. Everyone is going to want to recruit you. You could have just weathered the storm and eventually the Q-Cred would roll in as Guilds would try to enlist you."

Rochelle shook her head. "This is a waste of time. I don't want to have to go through all of this." She started to stand, but the moment she left the chair, she forcibly sat back down in it. Anger crossed her features for a split second before she regained her composure. "Sorry, let me try that again."

Sal looked in confusion at Rochelle and decided to focus his visor on her again. Something seemed to be wrong, but he couldn't pinpoint exactly what it was. When the red screen flashed, Sal could see Rochelle's weave clearly. He made a mental note to save it, which the visor did in a heartbeat.

Transference (R:3) Raw Structure has been saved.

Sal raised an eyebrow at that. It wasn't a blueprint this time, but rather a structure? Was it because he didn't map it out in his own body? It didn't matter right now, he'd think about it later. His visor looked beyond the weave and looked at the essence around Rochelle herself. It was clear that the stats weren't lying, she had the worst battery out of anyone he'd looked at so far. If Sal was to hazard a guess, he'd have said that she went through a core break herself. Her internal gates were almost non-existent. Sal knew she had seventy of them compared to Barry's ninety, but she was barely using two of them. Was she even going to her skills class?

Just as Sal was about to ask her a question, he saw a foreign essence surrounding Rochelle's head. Focusing in on it, he could see that it was tethered to another student that was sitting a few tables away. Sal turned to look at them and was surprised to see Erika Clifton looking at Rochelle intently. Sal froze at the implication that immediately crossed his mind.

"Rochelle, by any chance are you being mind-controlled by Erika to apologise to me?" Sal threw his suspicion to the table, which caused Rochelle's eyes to widen in shock. Sal couldn't blame her, he knew her account balance, her legal name and now he was able to piece together that she was being forced to do something. From her perspective, it must have looked like he also had some kind of foresight ability. Without answering, Rochelle tapped the table once which Sal took as an indicator that he was correct.

"Why would Erika want you to apologise to me? She must want something from me." Another tap on the table. Sal glanced at the finger in surprise and then looked back at Rochelle. "Guessing she's stopping you from talking about it?" Another tap. Sal shook his head and looked over at Erika.

"This will be so much easier if you just come over and join us. Can you also let her go, please? It's actually painful seeing her trying to be nice." Sal called over to Erika who looked startled by the discovery. Sal turned back to Rochelle with a sigh. "I don't know if that was actually a real apology or not, but I'll forgive you for now. Looking at your ability and how you process essence, I can only imagine what sort of corner you felt like you were pushed into."

The moment that Erika's influence evaporated from Rochelle, the Healer slapped her hand down on the table and gave Sal a murderous look. "It wasn't a real fucking apology. You turned me into a damned pariah in my cohort. Those guys went and

told everyone that I'm a fucking Vampire, that I leech away essence to kill people. Not a single person wanted me on their team, and now, even when the opportunity to form up with different cohorts comes about, guess what? Everyone knows that I fucked over two out of the top three in the entire year. Nobody wants anything to do with me!"

Sal didn't know what to say to that. Erika made her way over to the table and sat down in the seat next to Rochelle. She placed her elbow on the table and cupped the side of her face, watching Rochelle go on her tirade with a bored expression. Rochelle glanced to her right and saw Erika looking at her lazily, and it seemed to unlock a whole new level of anger.

"Erika offered me a place on her team. I know the rumours about how she controls her team with her powers, but I didn't care if it meant I'd get through this semester. But she had a condition." Rochelle's anger seemed to boil over as she locked eyes with Sal. "I had to apologise to you and make nice. That was her condition."

Sal looked to Erika with a raised eyebrow, but she merely shrugged in response. Rochelle clenched both of her fists on the table as she looked between them. Tears of frustration started to form at the edges of her eyes, and she shuddered in anger. "I don't care what I have to say to make this right. Just help me get through this semester and then we can go back to hating each other."

Erika sighed as she sat up properly. "This is why words are useless." She pointed at Sal. "He's already forgiven you after seeing how desperate your stats are." Erika moved her hand and pointed at Rochelle. "She feels guilty about what she did and is desperately trying to come across as strong and capable. She's currently neither of those things."

Sal gave Erika a sharp look. "So you can read minds as well as control them." He didn't even wait for an answer as he activated Analysis.

Name	Erika Clifton
Alias	Reserved Title: Queen
Class	Controller
Profession	First Year Student, Quest Academy (Gold Cohort)
Rank	Guild Association: None Hunter Bureau: Current Rank 8,754th Quest Academy: Current Rank 2nd
Accreditations	Challenge Crests: 2 <ul style="list-style-type: none"> • 1st Ranker (Win Quest Academy Race) • Gate Destroyer (First to Achieve 60 Gates) Certifications: 0
Ability	Skill Name: Mind Master Rating: XI Skill Category: Psionic Skill Mastery: 100% Skill Efficiency: 79% Progress to Next Rating: 8% Evolutionary Capability: Yes Potential Cap: XX Natural Synergy: Swarm Dominate Subjugate
Essence	Essence Type: Psionic Essence Gates: 120 Essence Absorption Rate: 42% Essence Control: 100% Essence Refinement: 97% Essence Calibration: 96%
Physical	

Strength Rating: III Mobility Rating: IV Speed Rating: VI Fitness Rating: VI Current Status Effects: Injuries: None Illnesses: None	
Reputation	Hunter Bureau: Well Known Guild Association: Well Known Quest Academy: Well Known Doom Society: Regarded Bastion Families: Well Known
Threat Level	Analysed Equipment: 0 Analysed Martial Arts: N/A Analysed Movements: N/A Analysed Techniques: N/A Analysed Body Composition: V
Wealth	Q-Credit: 2,110

Sal couldn't tear his eyes away from how many gates Erika had access to. Lombardi had said that there were only sixty gates when they joined, but Rochelle had seventy, Barry had eighty and Erika had over a hundred and twenty? No matter what way he tried to understand it, he couldn't get his head around it. He wanted to ask her, but she was staring intently at him as though deliberating on telling him about her abilities. Mind Master didn't make much sense to him, but the naming convention was very similar to his Skill Master ability. He was able to do incredible things relating to skills, so did that mean that Erika was able to do the same with minds?

Erika's lips curled upward as though she was amused. "That Tracker is preventing me from hearing anything going on in that head of yours. Where did you get it?" Sal couldn't be sure if she was fucking with him. She wasn't above using her abilities to deceive others, especially if Sal considered what lengths she went through to get Rochelle to apologise. There was no way that was from the goodness of her own heart. Sal decided to not trust what she was saying to him, and to operate under the

suspicion that she would be able to control his mind or thoughts at a moment's notice.

"I made it." Sal answered curtly as she looked between the two girls. "I don't mean any offence, Erika, but I highly doubt that you took time out of your day to help Rochelle. Her apologising to me isn't going to change anything, so why don't you just tell me what it is you want?"

Erika turned to Rochelle and gave the girl a withering look before giving Sal her full attention. "Apparently my methods for the tournament weren't as flawless as I had anticipated. There's too much focus on teamwork and cooperation for me to come out on top. Since you can't team up with people from your own cohort, it looks like the dream team of you and Divinity is being split up. She's also a Controller, and there's no need to double-up on roles, which leaves you."

The silence that took over the table was palpable. Sal couldn't believe his ears and had to lay it out in plain terms to see if he was following her train of thought. "You're suggesting that I join your team? With Healer-Bitch?"

Erika nodded and gestured at Rochelle. "I've already secured our Offence Class. Healer-Bitch, great name by the way, takes Healer spot. You're in Support, which leaves us with a Defender to find."

Sal exhaled slowly as he finally clicked the pieces together. "Of course. And you want me to enlist Hannah?"

It made sense. Hannah was going up the leaderboard since she got her gauntlets. Having her barrier protection would give them a lot of versatility, if it included healing from Rochelle. With Erika as the Controller, and a half decent Offence, they'd have a hell of a team. Sal just didn't know how he was going to have a conversation with Hannah after everything that happened with the Bastion stuff. Her words had stung and Sal wasn't ready to have that conversation with her.

Erika just looked at Sal with a raised eyebrow. "Who is Hannah?"

Quest Academy: Chapter 54 (2,717 words)

"Wait then, assuming that I go for this." Sal began, trying to get his thoughts in order. "What makes you think that we'd work as a team? Is this just another case of you mind-controlling everyone towards victory? I don't intend to be a pawn in someone else's game." He looked at Erika for any signs of her true intentions, but even with the Deduction ability in his visor to give him the clues, he came up with nothing. She just sat there as though bored by the whole set of events. Rochelle had her head bowed as she was looking at her hands. Sal felt sorry for her, she was somewhat trapped as a victim of circumstance and her only chance was a team with Erika. It was completely her own fault, but Sal's empathy didn't discriminate.

Instead of answering, Erika stood up to her impressive height and leaned across the table to pull at the metal box that contained his revolver. She turned it so that it was visible to Rochelle. "You have long-range capabilities, and you have an impressive suit of Epic-Grade armour. Your Tracker can help you break down information on targets, which gives you the same versatility as many Controllers, Offence and Supports. You make complete sense as a recruit and can add value to multiple functions." Without turning, she jutted her thumb in the direction of Rochelle. "While I'm starting to like Healer-Bitch as a name, the Vampire moniker was the one that caught my attention. Rochelle, despite her protests, is able to siphon off essence from opponents to heal our team. If she's able to target demons with her ability, it'll allow us to have her operate as both Offence and Healer."

Sal frowned at that. "You seem to be putting a lot of focus on offence capabilities, is your recruit for that position not able to cut it?" Erika's face broke into a smile as she nodded her head. "Correct. Brophy, or Broken Brophy as he's fondly referred to, is top of his class in literally every subject that doesn't require the use of an ability. He's essentially a walking bag of essence without a single way to output it. He'll be useful from a martial perspective, but we can't count on him for anything flashy or destructive. My thoughts are to have him on the team as a battery pack for our hungry little vampire."

"Stop calling me that!" Rochelle snapped as she whirled around at Erika with a terrifying glare. Erika didn't even bat an eyelid as she looked at Rochelle. "Head down

on the table." Rochelle couldn't fight whatever it was that compelled her to do as she was told and Sal watched in a grim fascination as Rochelle's face planted against the surface of the table. Only her shoulders struggling for control gave any indication that it was against her will. Erika looked at her handiwork and smiled. "Good girl. Now, hush, the adults are speaking." With that, Rochelle's mutterings of rage ceased immediately and to all that would look over, it appeared that Rochelle had just decided on an uncomfortable nap.

"Aren't you being a bit excessive?" Sal had no loyalty to Rochelle, but it was hard to watch her being used like a puppet. Erika shrugged and waved her hand like it was nothing. "Her opinions don't matter right now. She needs a way to get her rank up, and I need a Healer. I can find others, but she has limited options. If she wants to leave, I won't stop her. What do you think Rochelle, do you want to stay?" Erika leaned her face down until it was inches from Rochelle's. "Or do you want to run away?"

Rochelle's voice came out in an almost mumbled whisper. "I'll... stay." The struggling in her shoulders turned into more of a tremble, and Sal couldn't stand to watch it anymore. Erika was coming across more like a villain than a hero. No matter what her powers were, there was no reason to be using them on a classmate like this. "Erika, could you please let Rochelle go and stop interfering with her? I'll consider the team thing if you just stop using your powers, okay?"

Erika's eyes narrowed as she looked at Sal, her face still incredibly close to Rochelle's. "You're softer than I thought, and my expectations were already very low. But, suit yourself." With nothing but a smile, Erika moved away from Rochelle and the Healer gasped as she almost flung herself off the seat. Whatever incendiary words she had been practicing in her head were cut off as she bit her lip. Clearly she thought better of insulting Erika or putting a toe out of line.

Sal was feeling a little overwhelmed with everything that was happening. Erika was by far one of the most powerful students at the entire academy and she wanted to team up with him for the Tower run. She was volatile and borderline unhinged, but she was powerful and had a practically flawless record. Underneath the terrifying persona, was a tactician that hated failure. Sal didn't like how she treated Rochelle, nor did he particularly appreciate how she spoke about that Brophy guy. No matter what way he framed the situation in his head, there was no way they'd have any semblance of team chemistry. That weak structure was why she was seeking him out.

Versatility in a Support would be a massive boon for these exercises. Sal thought about what he wanted to do for a little longer, but eventually came to a decision.

"After thinking about it. I don't think that this is a fit for me." Sal knew that he didn't know that many people in the other cohorts, and that throwing away this opportunity would likely come back to bite him in the ass. Yet, he didn't find himself liking Erika. She was so used to getting her way and being in control, that he decided to remove himself from the equation.

Erika's expression didn't falter in the slightest. She just raised an eyebrow as she stared at him. "What would make it a fit?"

Sal exhaled loudly as he gestured at Rochelle. "I don't feel safe knowing that the person responsible for keeping us alive likely hates the both of us. She has reason to hate you, because of how you treat her like a toy. She blames me for everything that happened to her, so I can't rely on getting healing from her when I need it." Erika nodded at those observations, and Sal continued. "You're the primary problem, though. I don't trust you. Your powers are one thing, but your personality is another. I can't tell if its you putting on an act to keep people away, or if you just treat everyone like they're tools to be used."

Erika smiled at that, but it wasn't a friendly one. "You don't trust me? I know a lot of things about you, Sal. All those meetings we've been a part of, the things I've seen and heard. Even Rochelle here saw you do something that wasn't very Appraiser-like. I keep your secrets, yet I'm not trustworthy?" Erika shook her head slowly from side to side. "No, Salvatore. I think I'm very trustworthy. My power allows me to plant memories into your mind. I could make you think we've been friends since childhood. I could empower you to become the greatest Hero the world has ever seen." Erika turned to Rochelle. "Or, I could make you courageous enough to confront the fears you've been facing."

Her blue eyes locked onto Sal. "I use my abilities when the circumstance calls for it. Now, lets try that again. What needs to happen for you to join my team?"

Sal sighed as he folded his arms. "First thing. Our team. If I join this, it's not yours. It's a collection of people with their own aspirations. A team needs to work together, build trust in one another and support them. There is no hierarchy in a team, just

roles that need to be carried out efficiently and effectively. Our team of Supports won in the Silver Cohort because we trained hard together."

Erika gestured at the revolver in the case. "You also had the connections to get yourself kitted out in great equipment. If you join **our** team, would we be able to use these connections to get equipment?" As Erika was speaking Rochelle looked around the place to distract herself from the conversation. Her eyes eventually landed on the blueprint that Sal had been mapping out.

"Can I look at that?" Rochelle asked suddenly as she pointed at the blueprint. Sal didn't hesitate as he slid it across to her. He already had it saved in the visor, so the sketch itself didn't really matter to him anymore. He guessed that she wouldn't be able to determine much from it without context, so he was happy to let her see it. A small part of his brain worried that she might be petty and destroy it in front of him.

Erika frowned at the interruption but didn't say anything about it as she looked back at Sal calmly. "Your value isn't necessarily in the equipment you bring to the table, but it helps. I want you for your abilities and experience. What will it cost to bring you to my side?"

Sal laughed at that. "Bring me to your side? How do I know you're not doing this to piss off Divinity?"

Erika's smile returned as she tapped her long nails against the surface of the table. "I don't have any animosity towards Divinity Khan. She has a competitive advantage from being able to see into the future and course correct. But when it comes down to capability, she will undoubtedly see a future in which I take the top rank in the academy." After a moment of silence, Erika got to her feet, surprising both Sal and Rochelle. "I have a Defence Class to recruit and can't spend my day sitting here having a back and forth. You may not like my personality or my methods, but you can't reject my results. Think about my proposal, and let me know by tomorrow."

With that, Erika strode off through the canteen. A whole section of people in chairs moved their seats forward to clear a path for her, all in immediate succession. Sal sighed as he turned back to Rochelle who staring back at him. Before he could say a word, Rochelle filled the space, but not before checking that Erika was well out of range. "Ugh, I told her that you would never be on a team with me." Rochelle took a relieved breath as she leaned in closer to the table. "It was like she didn't care at all

what I did to you, because she said she'd make it work. Apparently, that method was to mind control me into drooling on a table! No matter what I said to her, she just stonewalled me and told me that I needed to follow the plan and do everything she said."

Sal burst out laughing and nodded. "If it's any consolation, I'd have you on my team before her."

A radiant smile transformed Rochelle's face as she placed the blueprint down on the table. "I'm genuinely sorry about before." She looked away for a second and took a deep breath, as though psyching herself up. "Any chance we can start over?" Rochelle pointed at the blueprint. "I can detail my ability out for you if it makes us even?" Her green eyes were wide and she looked incredibly hopeful. Sal didn't need her to do anything as his visor and ability would have been able to make short work of it. But just looking at her trying to extend the olive branch, Sal slid over a fresh piece of paper and rolled the pen over to her. "Sounds like a deal to me."

Sal's humouring smile slowly evaporated as Rochelle's hand moved rapidly over the fresh piece of paper. Whatever he had thought he managed with his own sketching, this was like watching a master at work. Rather than drawing the weave, Rochelle focused on the threads and how they moved essence. She detailed a series of calculations that could only have been made up with the speed she produced them. Sal wasn't going to put any faith into what she was presenting, but he had to admit that she was ridiculously talented at drawing. A chunk of time passed before Sal was allowed to see what was going on. Rochelle had taken one glance at Sal's stare and used her arm to shield her work. A cheeky grin crossed her features and Sal couldn't help but laugh at the childishness of it all. Eventually, the sound of scratching pen died and Rochelle moved away from the drawing. It was packed with a series of details and numbers that made zero sense to him. He didn't hold much hope, but he activated his visor to check it with Analysis.

Transference (R:3) Raw Structure is being updated.

Transference (R:3) Raw Structure has been updated to:
Transference (R:8) Essence Structure and Calibration Method

Essence Calibration and Essence Refinement have been improved

Rochelle's bright smile grew even wider when she saw the stupefied expression on Sal's face. "Pretty cool method, isn't it? My essence absorption rate is atrocious, so I worked on developing an efficient method to refining what I could get. It's much easier when you can heal any fuckups during experimentation!"

Sal couldn't find the words to respond to her. Her drawing had just been processed by his visor, and it had improved how he processed essence? There were too many questions running through his mind, but the biggest one was how an external device had somehow changed his internal state. His essence was linked to the visor, but for it to help him in such a way... he couldn't get his head around it. Did this mean that he'd be able to improve himself just by using the visor to read things? Would he be able to use it to learn martial arts? Sal's head was swimming with concepts that felt so alien to him.

Rochelle slid the newly constructed blueprint towards him, the smile not leaving her face. "If we're starting over fresh. I'm Rochelle, but my friends back home called me Roche." She offered her hand across the table, and her smile faltered while Sal was busy reading through the information on his visor. When he saw the hand outstretched, he smiled and took it.

"Salvatore Argento, but everyone calls me, Sal." He laughed at the silliness of it all and was about to ask a question about her design when she raised her hand to ask him something. She actually looked conflicted and Sal wondered if she was going to ask for some Q-Cred. He didn't know if it was just a cynical streak from growing up in the Auction, but he was rarely proven wrong about people. If she asked for money, he'd probably give it to her, but never see her as a friend.

"Can I heal you?" Rochelle asked out of the blue which completely caught him off guard. All he could do was point at himself, and Rochelle nodded. "I can tell from your drawing that you're trying to figure out why your ability is overloading your eyes. I can't give you the answers, but I can regenerate what's broken."

Sal suddenly remembered how she remarked about his eyes the first time they had met. When he took her power he had restored them with her ability, but he didn't

question what was causing the issues. Was his Mythcrafter ability not aligned to his capability? Just like how Barry's version of Illusion was too much for him to handle.

"I promise not to hold your health ransom this time." Rochelle added with an awkward smile. Sal laughed as he spread his hands wide. "Okay then, put if you find something to heal, I'll actually pay you."

Rochelle's eyes widened at that and Sal couldn't even get his next words out before her eyes illuminated into a glowing ethereal green.

Quest Academy: Chapter 55 (2,306 words)

Sal blinked his eyes a few times as he turned over in bed. The sunlight was coming in through his dorm window and he realised that he had managed to sleep peacefully the entire night. No nightmares, or rogue cramps somewhere in his body had managed to improve his psyche more than he could have imagined. The other pleasant sensation in his body was how well-rested he felt. Rochelle's healing had managed to find a whole range of issues, if she was to be believed. He didn't doubt her for one moment, because when she started listing the minor injuries she came across, Sal identified them within his own body. He guessed that he had been attributing them to the exercises he did in the morning, and assumed that they'd just vanish over time.

His eyes though were a completely different story. When Doctor Bob had ran a test on him in the Doom Society, he had felt his eyes water at the sudden burning sensation at the back of his sockets. Rochelle's healing had not only caused a much more intense burning, but it also came with an accompanied sense of capability. It was really hard to describe, and it wasn't like his vision was impaired or anything before, but the time in which it took him to activate his ability had shortened drastically. It was a wonderful experience and Sal felt in peak form afterwards, but it did come with the realisation that there was definitely an imbalance with his body and his abilities. His eyes were gradually suffering from injuries because of his repeated use of the Mythcrafter ability. Sal wondered if the headaches he got as a kid were his body's way of telling him that it was dangerous to use the ability for prolonged periods of time?

Sal looked out the window at the city below. They had another day to complete their teams. Then it was the weekend, and then they'd be heading out on their first excursion week. Classes taking place in a reclaimed zone. It sounded insane just thinking about it, but the normal sense of dread that Sal usually felt was nowhere to be found. With a smile, Sal got out of bed and kicked his shoes out of the way. He needed to get his exercise routine done before he thought about anything else. If he procrastinated, then he'd only end up not doing it and feeling guilty for the rest of the day. Each of his movements were fluid and practiced. There was none of the tremors in his body that he had ignored over the last week. Rochelle was worth every

part of the fifty Q-Cred he had sent her. Her reaction to it was absolutely priceless as she nearly broke down in tears in front of him.

Sal decided that he would be using her services more regularly if it meant keeping him in perfect condition. The thought had crossed his mind of creating some kind of incubation tank, or like a recovery booth with Rochelle's powers, but the cost alone in making something like that would be astronomical. It didn't stop him from sketching out the idea though.

Dropping to the floor, Sal placed his hands down on either side of his shoulders and started to push himself up off the ground. His hands and toes were the only thing touching the ground as he pushed himself up, before controlling his body in lowering to the ground. When his nose touched the floor, he pushed back up and repeated the process until he could barely move his arms. Towards the end of his set of push-ups, Sal gave more and more thought to the recovery pod idea. Just like how you shouldn't make a shopping list when you're hungry, you definitely shouldn't design an expensive recovery pod when you're hurting.

As Sal turned his body and got ready to do some sit-ups, he thought to Erika's proposition to form a team. It wasn't nearly as bad as he thought it would be, and now that he and Rochelle had an amicable sort of relationship, he was happier to join the team. The unknown factors of that Broken Brophy guy and the mystery Defence class made it a little harder to calculate. Sal had no choice when it came to Anthony, Blathnaid, Jack or Barry. Yet, that team became incredible with the right formations and training. Sure, the equipment had helped, but Sal would be able to make equipment for any team he was on. Sal crunched his body forward and winced slightly as his tired muscles reminded him that he was indeed alive.

Rochelle was an interesting factor though. If Sal could create something that would give her access to essence reserves, then she'd be a huge resource on the battlefield. It was so funny to think that he had actively disliked the woman only a few days ago, but now he was thinking of how he could harness her ability for his own benefit. Sal laughed at that thought and regretted the action immediately, his body crumpled to the floor and he was left wheezing on the ground, looking up at the ceiling. When he had first started this routine, he needed to use the soft mattress to bounce into the position. Those sit-ups hadn't really helped his development in the slightest. In less than an hour, he was finished with his routine and happy that it was out of the way.

Lots of people talked about how exercise made them feel great, but Sal definitely wasn't in that camp.

After a long shower, Sal restored his uniform and got dressed for the day. He was going to stop by the workshop to finish the designs for Chatfield as he had left the man waiting for far too long already. Sal picked up the metal case that contained his visor and revolver and made his way to the door. It was still the early hours of the morning so he had pretty much the whole day ahead of him. He knew that he should be thinking about the feasibility of joining Erika's team, but realistically, there weren't many reasons for him to say no. His mind did question what he could potentially squeeze out of her as payment for joining the team. It would be nice to have a Mind Master owing him a favour.

Sal's journey to the workshop wasn't eventful in the slightest, with practically nobody in the corridors or elevators. The lobby itself was practically dead when he walked through it, save for the few vendors that were setting up their booths. He wasn't going to cheat on Alex by getting his coffee elsewhere, and Sal questioned if he even needed it at this point. It was such a foreign experience waking up in the mornings without exhaustion and aches.

When he moved through the doors to the workshop, he was met with the familiar buzz of activity. Some of the regulars looked like they had been there from the previous night, while some of the second year students looked to be getting an early start to their day. By the frantic sounds of them rushing around, the second years still had classes and the early hours were the best time to get extra work done.

"Hello Stranger." Martin called from his workbench. A crooked grin was on his face, as he waved. Sal smiled and walked over to him, curious to see what he was working on. Martin had been invaluable when they printed out the components for the Legendary Sniper Rifle, but Sal realised that he didn't know much else about the man. Sal didn't even need to activate his ability to identify the project because he had seen the blueprint weeks ago. A miniature version of the combat drone was resting on the desk. It was separated into multiple parts but didn't have any mechanisms. If Sal was to guess, it was a rough design rather than a prototype.

Sal gestured at the tiny device. "Did Upgrade enlist you into making the drone? It's a lot smaller than I expected, but looks great."

Martin laughed as he shook his head. "Nah, this is just a little personal project. Wanted to make a toy drone for my nephew, just something that flies around a bit and comes back." He gestured at a tiny circular device that rested beside the toy drone. "He wears the bracelet, and the drone will always come back to it. This design is a mock-up of what it should look like before I get into the essence-programming. Might need to wait for Upgrade before attempting that though." He chuckled as he looked up at Sal. "Glad to see you're back by the way. I know Upgrade was worried she pushed you too far with that Dungeon stuff."

Sal faltered at that. He hadn't really had a conversation with Upgrade in the last few days since they had returned from the Dungeon, other than telling her that he needed a break from crafting for a bit. Sal needed to tell her that he was fine, because he didn't want her feeling guilty about something that had actively helped him. "Where is Upgrade? Is she around?"

Martin snorted. "At this hour? Are you crazy? She hasn't pulled an all-nighter in weeks, so I can only guess that she's still sleeping in her bed. Give it a few hours and she'll likely poke her head into the room." He gestured at the room that Sal usually worked in. The cutting words of that second year suddenly flooded back into his head. His accusations that Sal was getting preferential treatment and was using limited resources that he didn't need. The memory of that along with the potential of Upgrade misunderstanding his absence was starting to weigh down on him, and Sal realised just why he had needed a break from the workshop completely.

Martin gave Sal a sideways glance. "If you're worrying about Upgrade, don't bother. We grilled her a bit when we found out what she did, but it was probably for the best. I can't imagine it was easy, but I heard you did a great job in there. She was practically boasting about how quickly you picked up the basics."

Sal smiled at that. "Thank you, Martin. I still want to tell her that things are good with us. I wouldn't want her feeling guilty about all of it." He was going to leave it there, but decided that he wanted Martin's opinion on the room stuff. With a gesture to Room 17, Sal grimaced ever so slightly. "A second year came up to me and told me that I shouldn't be using the rooms in the workshop as a first year. That I'm taking away resources from them. I'm kinda inclined to agree, since I have the tools in my equipment." Sal held up the fingerless gloves to Martin, but the older crafter didn't even bat an eyelid.

"Those students can get fucked, Sal." Martin shook his head as though the topic exhausted him. He sighed and pointed at a cluster of students standing around a single desk. "There's a lot of inferiority complexes when it comes to crafting. You see someone produce something good, and you feel that you're terrible. Some students end up clinging to strange excuses like needing additional resources or certain equipment. If he or she needed the multi-tool from Room 17, they could have easily reserved one of the other rooms that had one. The fact that they decided to pick a fight with you over it, tells me that their problem wasn't the multi-tool in the first place." Martin glanced at Sal with a sad smile. "They've likely just hit a wall with their own crafting and looking for someone to blame for their own shortcomings."

Martin's words took a massive weight off Sal's shoulders as he looked at the group of students. They looked to be arguing over what he could only imagine was a group project. "Thank you, Martin. I needed to hear that." Sal admitted with a smile.

Martin chuckled again as he folded his arms and leaned on them. "Anytime Sal, one of my favourite hobbies is deflating those bastards that think they have it all figured out. I'm always here to help those that can ask for it. The ones that feel their entitled to it, those are the ones to avoid."

"I'll keep that in mind." Sal said as he turned back to look at Martin. "Have you had any issues with your powers, since... you know." After getting the insights from the visor, Sal now understood how dangerous it was to unknot weaves in other people. He knew he had been lucky with Upgrade, but to have that same luck for both Gosia and Martin, it was likely pushing his chances.

Martin tapped his chest and smiled. "Working better than ever, with absolutely no downsides. I had a couple of headaches at first, but they passed almost immediately. Think I just needed a bit of time to calibrate to the new essence, but it's been a massive help to me ever since." Martin picked up the small toy. "I can make stuff like this without having to worry about if it's being too ambitious."

Sal sighed in relief. He'd check in with Gosia when he next saw her, but he was just delighted by the fact that Martin was completely unscathed. "I'm going to do a bit of design work in the blueprint room. Will you tell Upgrade I was looking for her when you see her?"

Martin nodded with a smile. "She'll be delighted to see you, I'll tell her where to find you when she gets in."

Quest Academy: Chapter 56 (2,277 words)

Sal sat in the blueprint room undisturbed for a few hours, and he managed to blast through the design work with ease. With his visor attached, he was able to bring up each of this armour set designs and add in the evolutionary trait. Doc Ameye's suggestions had proved invaluable and he positioned each of the runes in the optimal spaces along the different sets. What was most interesting about them was that Sal had expected to put individual runes on each component, but the Mythcrafter ability and visor showed him that he could create one rune that was only activated when the set pieces were worn together. It would reduce the speed of evolution, but ensured that the set would grow at a steady rate.

When it came to materials, Sal had way more context than before which allowed him to pick the best combinations. All of those materials that he had analysed with the visor were finally coming in useful. Natural synergies appeared, similar to Moonsilver and Scarlet Screen, and Sal made note of them. Since the designing and material selection was so straight forward, Sal decided to create armour sets that would suit different fighting styles. Heavy, Medium and Light armours. Metal, Leather and Cloth. Everything was basic in design, but it didn't matter. They just needed to be functional rather than stylish. If they were durable and they had the potential to evolve, that made them fit for purpose.

Sal didn't know what cost each of the materials were, but the visor had created a tier system for each component. Sal could see stuff like Void Metal was low on the list, with Dreadcloth being significantly higher. Hellfire Titanium was middle-tier, which was concerning to Sal because the Credit Floor had been charging quite a bit for a single ingot. He'd need context from Chatfield about prices to know what would be the most cost-effective materials to use for mass production. When the first set of blueprints were done for the Cloth Armour set, Sal desperately wanted to try crafting it to see how it worked out. Instead, he saved the blueprint into a file and sent it over to Blathnaid, asking her if she'd be able to craft it from the instructions provided.

If she was able to make it, then it was undeniable proof that he was on the right track. He needed each of these designs to be accessible enough for students that were learning how to craft from scratch. If they could cut out the patterns, and stitch

them up in the right way, apply the runes and follow the procedures, then it would be a success. He was about to move onto the Medium armour that he was hoping to try making with Faux Bovine Leather, when his tablet started to vibrate on the table.

Sal tapped the screen and saw that it was a message from Blathnaid. He checked the timestamp from when he sent it over and it had only been a few minutes. With a frown, he wondered if the design was too complex for her to interpret.

Hey! Yeah, I'd be able to make it, but can I play around with the design? It doesn't look fitted and wouldn't look remotely flattering on anyone but you.

Sal laughed as he shook his head in wonder. Was it a false confidence or was he just underestimating her? He was about to reach over to reply when another message came through from her.

I've attached a quick sketch of how I'd tailor it for someone like me. More often than not, it will require less material to make these sets for women. If you make them all for a tall man, it's going to create a lot of waste. Check the patterns and tell me what you think. My best guess is that you could cut down on material spend by at least 20% with this design, and even higher if you tailored it for the average builds and kept tall people like you as the exception rather than the rule.

Sal tapped the attachment and saw a hastily constructed silhouette of a woman's body with the armour design. The waist and chest was much tighter than in Sal's design and it looked to be very minimalist. Sal's had covered pretty much every visible inch of skin, but Blathnaid's was a lot more revealing in nature. No matter what way he looked at it, Blathnaid's looked way more sleek and fashionable. Another vibration caught him off guard and Sal moved back to his messages.

Here's what I'd do for the male one. I noticed that your designs lacked a lot of basic functionality like pockets, so I added them in. If they're going to be used for field exercises or battles, then it'll be important to have them. You could also add in a harness into the chest design to allow weapons to be carried on the back, or maybe something held on the hip. It wouldn't require more material, but just a few tweaks to the design.

Sal couldn't help but laugh. Blathnaid was completely right. He hadn't considered any of those factors and had just designed the set for the skills they would yield,

rather than ease of use and basic functionality. Sal clicked into her attached image and was met with another sketch that highlighted all the points she made in her message. Sal immediately saw the value in her design as it would give him a place to holster his revolver and have pockets that would allow easy access to his bullet cartridges. When the next vibration came through, Sal had to admit defeat. He wasn't a tailor and it absolutely showed.

If you want, I can come over and do some sketches with you? I already have my team sorted so I'm just chilling for the rest of the day.

Sal sent her his live location and told her to knock on the door and he'd let her in. Other than the few instances in the crafting class, Sal hadn't seen Blathnaid work. Thinking about it, Sal realised he'd never seen her using her ability. It was a tailoring one if he recalled correctly, and he found himself curious about what it could do.

Rather than moving onto the next set of designs like he had intended on, Sal took Blathnaid's suggestions into consideration and remapped the design with her changes. He added the harness, pockets as well as the belt attachment for holding a side-arm. Sal tried to think outside the box when it came to the functionality of the set. It was cloth, so it wasn't going to be worn by Offence or Defence based classes, which left him with Controllers, Healers and Supports. The versatility needed by Supports, in having a lot of the team equipment meant that it would require a lot of added functionality. Mythcrafter understood his intentions and proposed he use Faux Bovine Leather that had a high chance of producing the Feather skill, which would reduce weight and increase jumping and mobility capabilities.

Sal frowned as he looked at it, wondering if that would classify the set as a medium armour set rather than purely cloth. If it was inexpensive, then it wouldn't matter. Sal wasn't attached to the idea of just having a cloth-based set. It was purely down to making something that would be comfortable to wear and offered protection for each of the classes.

A knock on the door snapped him out of his reverie, and Sal grinned as he opened the door, expecting to see Blathnaid. However, it was Upgrade on the other side of the door waiting for him, with two coffees in hand. She looked somewhat surprised to see him in such good spirits. She offered him one of the cups with a smile. "Martin said you walked straight in here and didn't pay a visit to Alex. Thought I'd get you one while I was on the way."

Sal took the cup from her and stepped to one side to let her through. "Thank you. I was starting to get the craving!" He realised that he likely needed permission from Upgrade to have someone else use the Blueprint room. He didn't want Blathnaid to get in trouble for joining him in an area that was usually reserved for seniors. "Would it be okay for me to invite Blathnaid McClean here? She's helping me with the designs for the Chatfield armour sets."

Upgrade stopped as she looked off to one side. "That name sounds familiar. Why do I know that name?" She placed her coffee down on the table and looked over at Sal in confusion. "Have I met her before?"

Sal nodded with a wry smile. "I'd hope so, she's in your Crafting class." They had only had a few classes so he didn't expect Upgrade to have memorised each student already. Just as Sal was about to provide more context, Upgrade clicked her fingers with a laugh.

"She's the one that threw the Controller in the team fights?" Upgrade's eyes lit up as she looked over at Sal for confirmation. When he nodded, she laughed even harder. "The Tailor versus the Controller! All of the crafters that went to your tournament wouldn't shut up about it, which made me sick that I missed it!" She chuckled a bit and waved around the empty room. "She's more than welcome to join us. I can even get her a card if she wants to use here more regularly. Same rules apply though. No liquids until she's trustworthy, and no playing around with the original blueprints in the rack."

Sal was relieved to hear it. He took a sip of his coffee before looking at Upgrade. "I'm sorry I wasn't here for the last week. I needed time to decompress from the Dungeon and there were so many things happening all at once that I couldn't focus on anything. I appreciate what you did for me, and while I hated every moment of it, I feel better for having done it." Sal moved around to the blueprint table to avoid making eye contact with Upgrade. "Just wanted to say thank you for what you did and that I've no hard feelings."

Upgrade stepped over to Sal and tapped his table to get his attention. When he looked up at her, she gave him a bright smile. "You're welcome, Sal. I hope you've come to terms with how incredible your crafting capability is. You were able to clear a Dungeon by yourself with a weapon you made over the weekend. I'll only have hard

feelings if you come to me with feelings of inadequacy again. You've got an incredible gift, but its your personality that makes it truly wonderful."

Sal felt his face growing hotter as he cleared his throat. "Blathnaid is going to be here shortly. She's going to help me with this design, but I've already made some improvements. What do you think?"

Upgrade looked at the upside down design and paced around the table to get a better angle. She was deep in thought when another knock came at the door. Upgrade was about to move when Sal gestured that he'd get it. With just a wave of his hand, he indicated that she could keep looking at the design.

Sal opened the door to reveal a flustered looking Blathnaid. Sal was about to ask what was wrong, when he spied the same blonde second-year student standing behind her with his arms crossed. It was clear in an instant that he had said something to Blathnaid. When Sal looked at her to see if she was okay, she just looked pissed.

"I just asked him which room you were in and he went off on a tirade." Blathnaid muttered as she slipped past Sal to enter the room. She evidently wanted nothing to do with the second year and was happy to have an escape. Sal wanted to tell the guy to fuck off, but Martin's words were the ones that bubbled to the surface. That second year was likely just lashing out because he thought things were unfair. If Sal was going to be labelled as an outcast, he'd at least give them something to talk about.

With a surge of essence into his gloves, Sal activated the transform effect, turning his hands into a set of impressive mechanical claws. Sal didn't bother holding back as the rest of his body turned into a suit of black plated armour. His visor was still equipped and he could only imagine what he looked like to the second year at that very moment. "Do you still need a multi-tool?" Sal asked as he extended his right claw forward.

The second year's face paled instantly as he tried backing away from Sal. His urgency caused him to fall over himself to the ground, drawing the eyes of everyone around them. But when the other second-years looked over, they could only see Sal with an outstretched hand and their classmate sprawled on the floor. Sal had deactivated his armour almost immediately after speaking. He didn't want to do this to intimidate

him, but rather to show that he wasn't some spoiled first year that could be picked on. "Stop treating me like I'm the problem. If you need my help, ask for it. Understood?"

The second year nodded as he pulled himself further away from Sal. The last thing he saw before the door closed behind Sal, was the girl he had just berated.

She was giving him the finger.

Quest Academy: Chapter 57 (2,826 words)

Name	Blathnaid McClean
Alias	None
Class	Support
Profession	First Year Student, Quest Academy (Silver Cohort)
Rank	Guild Association: None Hunter Bureau: Current Rank 0 Quest Academy: Current Rank 391st
Accreditations	Challenge Crests: 0 Certifications: 0
Ability	Skill Name: Construct Rating: III Skill Category: Invention Skill Mastery: 100% Skill Efficiency: 37% Progress to Next Rating: 92% Evolutionary Capability: Yes Potential Cap: X Natural Synergy: Concept Rarecraft Appraisal
Essence	Essence Type: Invention Essence Gates: 60 Essence Absorption Rate: 22% Essence Control: 14% Essence Refinement: 61% Essence Calibration: 43%
Physical	Strength Rating: I Mobility Rating: III Speed Rating: III Fitness Rating: III Current Status Effects: Injuries: None Illnesses: None

Reputation	Hunter Bureau: Unknown Guild Association: Unknown Quest Academy: Known Doom Society: Unknown Bastion Families: Unknown
Threat Level	Analysed Equipment: I Analysed Martial Arts: N/A Analysed Movements: N/A Analysed Techniques: N/A Analysed Body Composition: II
Wealth	Q-Credit: 1,486

Sal frowned as he looked at Blathnaid's stats. His visor flashed with more information and as he scrolled through it, he found himself feeling sorry for her. Her best stats were in the physical category, as her ability and essence proficiencies were really low. Sal glanced back at her ability and saw that it was Construct. He couldn't recall having seen it before and focused on it to see if the visor would give him more context.

"You okay there, Sal?" Blathnaid asked with a concerned expression. She was standing beside Upgrade and it looked like their small talk had run its course. Upgrade gave Sal a slight smile as she shook her head.

"He's using his visor to check you out. He hasn't learned etiquette on asking permission first." Her tone was lighthearted so Sal didn't have to worry about having accidentally offended her. Blathnaid on the other hand was unashamedly curious. In less than a second, she was up close and staring at the tracker.

"What can you see with it? Is it Appraising my uniform or something?" The excitement was clear in her voice and Sal couldn't help but laugh. He lifted it off his head and presented it to her.

"See for yourself! It uses Analysis to read loads of stats about people." He didn't want Blathnaid to feel uncomfortable and decided that the best way to explain himself was to show her what it did. She was more than happy to try it on, but only after a lot of smoothing back her hair. Eventually, when that failed, she ended up standing beside Upgrade and asking her to put it on her head. Sal could only laugh at the scene, as

Upgrade expertly wove a braid with Blathnaid's brown hair. When she placed the tracker on her face, he wondered what she would see.

"Ah!" Blathnaid suddenly gasped as her exposed eye widened in shock. Before he could ask what she saw, she was turning to look at Upgrade and the result was way more dramatic. "You've so many accreditations! Wait, I'm sorry for looking!" Blathnaid's hand came up to block her view from Upgrade who just laughed.

"I don't mind. What do you think of it? Amazing, isn't it?" Upgrade asked with a smile and Blathnaid could only nod silently as she looked around the room. She wandered for a bit, inspecting the furniture and her own clothing before her eyes caught sight of the blueprint on the table.

"Whoa..." Blathnaid's voice became almost like a whisper. "This is cheating." She looked up at Sal with a half accusatory stare. "Like, I can see everything I'd need to make this without a deconstruction."

Sal's ears perked up at that. Was this something to do with her ability? He moved closer to look at the blueprint and gestured at it. "You're seeing the same breakdown of how to make it? The Mythcrafter ability isn't in the visor, so you should only be seeing the drawing itself."

Blathnaid shook her head as she gestured at the chest piece drawing. "My ability is called Construct, which allows me to assemble things. When I break things down, my ability remembers the pattern and I can recreate it with the same materials. It takes effort though and a lot of essence, but I really enjoy it. This though." She tapped the drawing. "Is skipping the first step of deconstruction. The tracker is showing me how I can construct this with just my essence and materials, I don't need to have deconstructed it."

Upgrade smiled as she joined them at the table. "You're selling yourself short there, Blathnaid. Construct is a lot more powerful than that."

Sal looked between them and realised that this information was also news to Blathnaid who was staring at Upgrade in confusion. It wasn't that she was being modest, she didn't understand what the Crafting Lecturer was talking about.

It was only when Upgrade met Blathnaid's eyes that she frowned in disbelief. "You know that you can just create things with raw materials when you have the pattern, right? There's no need to create the individual components."

Blathnaid's first instinct was to laugh, but it died after a few seconds when she realised that Upgrade wasn't joking. Her brow furrowed as she shook her head. "I think you're confusing it with another ability, maybe? If I have the pattern and the right cuts of material, I can assemble it. I couldn't just put my hands on a bolt of cloth and turn it into a jacket. That would be crazy!"

Upgrade's expression softened. "Have you ever tried?"

Sal watched as Blathnaid's last remnants of composure withered away. She looked to Sal for backup, but he could only shrug uselessly. "Why don't you try?"

Blathnaid was about to say something when Upgrade raised a hand to interrupt her. "Nope. Whatever misbelief you're about to spout, I don't want to hear it. Crafters learn things by experimentation, so wait here." Upgrade pointed at her as she spoke. "I'm going to get a few things for us to test this out, understood?"

Blathnaid nodded and stood awkwardly as Upgrade tapped her card against the door and exited the room. A moment of silence passed before Blathnaid whispered in Sal's direction. "Is she usually this scary?"

Sal snorted at that. "This is nothing. You never want to see her when she's scary."

Blathnaid laughed as she sat down on one of the nearby stools. Putting her hand on the edge of the table, she pulled at it and spun herself around on the top of the stool. "So, did you find a team yet? There's not much time left before we have to submit them." She reached into her trouser pocket to produce her tablet. "I can never remember their names, but they seem pretty competent. I'm their Support, obviously." Blathnaid's expression crunched ever so slightly as she squinted at the text on the screen. "Juan Clarke is our Offence. He's super strong and apparently just punches the shit out of things. Seemed like a nice guy, but everything around him breaks. He sat down in the canteen and you'd swear that the chair reacted like it was an attack."

Sal couldn't imagine what it would be like to try and control a physical-based ability like that. Speed was one thing, but strength... you'd probably end up mangling every door handle you tried to pull.

Blathnaid continued with her list. "Our Defence is another guy, from the Purple Cohort, and his name was weird... ah, Richdolphus Ironblood! Goes by Rich, which is thankfully much easier to remember. Same for Saccade Croix, goes by Cade. He's actually super nice and is our Healer from the Black Cohort."

Sal didn't recognise any of the names and really hoped that Blathnaid had managed to find a decent team. If they just dragged her down, then there wouldn't be much he could do to keep her from relegation at the end of the semester. "What about your Controller? Anyone good?"

Blathnaid nodded with a wry grin appearing on her face. "Yeah, he's the one that put the team together. Body Manipulator called Darren Lenihan, but everyone calls him Dazzler. His team were at the top of the tournament, and he had already picked out most of the team. I'm super lucky they even considered me to be honest, you should have seen my face when they approached me! I thought they wanted Barry."

Sal felt a knot forming in his stomach. Blathnaid didn't know anything about the Bastion threat at the academy. Darren Lenihan was the name of the Controller that Bastion were looking to recruit, and Sal knew he had been at a couple of meetings already. The question was if Darren was a threat to Blathnaid right now, or if it would be fine going forward.

Dragging her finger along the screen, Blathnaid read out more names. "Barry's team also managed to get a Healer. Girl called Graya Moon, think she's in a relationship with my Healer, Cade." She stopped abruptly as though she had an epiphany. "Two Healers in a relationship, do you think that their kids would become super-Healers?"

Sal laughed at that, which was enough for Blathnaid to dismiss the thought and return to the list. "Kellen Balistae from the Black Cohort. Barry referred to him as a walking human shield, but I think Kellen is down as their Offence Class? There was a guy with a crafted guitar, Ogden. No idea what he does, but he's apparently a Support. Barry didn't look too fond of him. Their Defence is a guy called Neb Ursa, he has an ability similar to Sinclair where he can turn into a bear!"

Sal shook his head at hearing all the names. Blathnaid's at least sounded more promising if the names were anything to go by, and it was good that both teams had a dedicated Healer. Sal was also inwardly happy that Barry managed to get the Controller role on his team. If that Ogden guy was down as their Support, Barry had secured Controller.

"Hope I'm not interrupting?" Upgrade proclaimed from the door as she carried half a dozen wound bolts of fabric under one arm and a small container of metal studs and zippers in the other. Blathnaid looked up from her tablet and Sal got to see in real-time how her eyes lit up in excitement at the materials, but then how the anxiety came crashing through as she realised what was about to happen. Upgrade laughed as she saw her expression. "Don't go making faces like that or I'll end up thinking I'm the bad guy here."

Blathnaid nodded and got to her feet, stepping back so Upgrade could deposit all the materials down on the blueprint table. Sal was happy to see that Upgrade placed everything around his sketch, rather than dumping it directly on top of it. When everything was arranged, Upgrade turned and looked at Blathnaid with a smile. "I want you to look at the blueprint in front of you, or pattern. Whatever you want to call it. Focus on it and imagine that the materials here the exact components you need. Don't think about anything else, okay?"

Blathnaid looked at them apprehensively as she took a step forward, but Upgrade shook her head and moved in front of her. Blathnaid was clearly unprepared for Upgrade to grasp her shoulders, as she let out a slight gasp. Upgrade gave her a reassuring smile. "Trust me, I overthink everything too. I always need to make everything perfect, so I understand exactly what gears are turning in your brain right now. If nothing happens, then at least we'll know and I'll drop the topic. Sound good?"

Blathnaid gave a nod and a small smile found its way onto her lips. She shot a look over to Sal who just gave her a thumbs-up in response. Upgrade released Blathnaid's shoulders and moved around the table to give her more space. There was still an element of hesitation, but Blathnaid did as she was instructed and focused her ability.

Sal activated his Skill Master ability and watched as Blathnaid's weave ignited with essence. He almost had to do a double-take when he saw the absolute clusterfuck of knots in her ability. It was practically impossible to see a single straight line that

wasn't somehow mangled. Sal desperately wished he had his visor on to see how many of them could be undone safely. He couldn't imagine how Blathnaid had been managing to live with her ability in such a state. The inspection that he had done on her before was much more impressive now that he had the context of what it looked like. It also felt like an important lesson in a way, that if he had just trusted in the visor, he likely would have assumed that Blathnaid had no real shot of getting much stronger. Sal sighed as he deactivated his ability. He needed to find a way to calibrate the visor to his Skill Master ability, to get a better representation of what could be improved with his power.

Blathnaid winced slightly as she drew her hands back from the materials. Sal was going to say something encouraging, but Upgrade stopped him by giving him a slight nudge with her elbow. Without a word from them, Blathnaid tried again. Her expression was one of hyper-focus, and Sal could see a slight shaking in her arms as she gave it her all. It was a tense moment that stretched on forever, with Sal only realising how much time had passed when he saw the beads of sweat dripping down Blathnaid's forehead. He gave Upgrade a look as if to ask permission to stop her from continuing, but Upgrade just shook her head.

Then, slowly but surely, a dull light appeared at the centre of the table. Sal looked at Blathnaid's face, but there were no emotions present, only focus. Upgrade smiled broadly as she leaned in close to Sal, her voice a barely audible whisper. "Best. Lecturer. Ever."

Sal smiled in return but was mostly interested in what was happening on the desk. He couldn't see clearly because the blueprint desks were angled upward on the side farthest from the seat. It gave easier access when sketching larger projects. All they could see was a light illuminating Blathnaid.

Another few moments of awkward silence followed before Blathnaid's hands started to move. She was still in a state of complete focus and Sal wondered if it was similar to how he looked when he had the monocle equipped. Sal walked quietly to one side of the desk to get a better vantage point and Upgrade did the same on the other side, both being careful not to disrupt Blathnaid's flow.

Sal was surprised to see that the entirety of the materials were glowing and Blathnaid's hands were pulling tufts of the illuminated cloth and massaging it between her hands. She pulled it in different directions and stretched it out, but Sal

couldn't make out any of the details. It just looked like she was constantly pawing at a ball of light. It went on like this for another five to ten minutes before Sal could discern some shapes. No matter what way he tried to imagine it, the balls of light weren't big enough to be a piece of equipment. Did that mean she had failed? He looked over to Upgrade to see if she had any idea what was going on, and to his surprise, she was beaming at Blathnaid's progress. Sal tried to understand what it was that he wasn't seeing, but even activating his Appraisal ability gave him no suggestions. Mythcrafter also had nothing to report, and without his visor equipped, Sal was left to wait for the final verdict.

That verdict ended up taking close to an hour to arrive, but Sal didn't mind. It was genuinely fascinating to watch Blathnaid work. The only downside was how much of an impact it was taking on her body. There were times she had to stop mid-process to catch her breath, or when her hands started shaking uncontrollably. Sal was certain that there were tears forming at the edges of her eyes, and it was killing him to watch her suffer in pain. As soon as he got the visor back from her, he would find a way to alleviate some of the pressure from her ability. With what looked like a hundred knots in that tangled ball of a weave, he'd find something that would make her life easier.

And then, Blathnaid finished. With a step back, she looked at the glowing cube in front of her and staggered back onto the awaiting stool. She missed the seat and lurched to the right, but Upgrade caught her before she fell. Sal was at a complete loss for words as the glowing stopped and his eyes started appraising her results.

Quest Academy: Chapter 58 (3,011 words)

Sal's eyes were going haywire as they tried to pick apart the materials to appraise them. He looked around at Blathnaid to see how she was doing and it looked like she was on the verge of passing out, with Upgrade cradling her. When Sal made eye contact with Upgrade, she gave a slight shake of her head.

"She's just pushed herself too hard. Judging by how she's still conscious, she's no stranger to the dregs." Upgrade's voice was strained as she gently rubbed Blathnaid's shoulder. "She'll be fine with some rest. We should have done this in Room 17 and put her on the couch. I don't want to move her from here while there are students milling about outside. Lock that, will you?" She jutted her chin towards the door, careful not to disrupt Blathnaid in her arms.

Sal didn't need to be told twice as he rushed over to the door and tapped the lock option on the terminal. When he turned around, he could see that there wasn't really a way to remove the visor from Blathnaid without moving her head. He'd leave it until later to get it back. "Should we have given her a core to use?" He asked lamely as he watched on with concern.

Upgrade shook her head. "I doubt she has the control required to tap into a core. How she managed to make something with such a trickle of essence is absolutely beyond me, but it's a testament to her grit. With proper development and training, she'll become a hell of a crafter." Upgrade rubbed Blathnaid's shoulder a little more. "You hear that? You're going to have to train extra hard to keep up."

Sal laughed as he shook his head. "Your bedside manner is atrocious." He moved out of range of Upgrade's swatting hand, and stood to the side of the reshaped materials. Sal frowned as he realised that it wasn't just a cube of fabric, it was folded layers. Lifting the first piece up, he was surprised to see that it was a hooded cowl in a deep red fabric. Turning it over in his hands, he saw that there were glowing threads embroidered into the material, making the shape of the evolutionary rune. He dropped it and picked up the next piece which was a long trench coat, made with the same deep red colour. The shoulders were squared, with a folded lapel and black buttons running down one side. It was incredibly light to hold, and when Sal turned it

around he froze at the sight of the evolutionary rune. It was embroidered in black threading, which pulsed softly as though reflecting light from an unknown source. Next was a set of trousers made with the same red material and black runes. True to her word, Blathnaid had created pockets in the coat and trousers. The hood looked particularly menacing, and the black and red contrast made it look like it would be worn by some kind of regal assassin.

"Need..." Blathnaid's voice was bleary as she tried to get out of Upgrade's arms. "Shoes. Need to finish... the shoes." Upgrade stood with her and helped her maintain balance. It was only when Upgrade followed her movements that she saw the completed gear on the table. Her eyes widened as she looked at Sal in shock. "She actually completed them?"

Sal nodded as he moved the cloth equipment off the blueprint. Checking them off the list, he smiled. "Three out of four pieces. Shoes aren't done, but they look to be started. I don't know how she managed to do it, but it looks like the embroidery is infused with essence?" Sal held up the trousers to show Upgrade who almost dropped Blathnaid by reaching for them.

With a sigh of frustration, Upgrade tore her eyes away from the equipment and focused her attention on getting Blathnaid back into a seated position. She used a gentle and reassuring voice that Sal hadn't heard before.

"Just rest up here for a moment, you don't need to worry about the shoes. I'll finish them off for you, okay?" Upgrade waited until Blathnaid nodded her head in agreement before continuing. "Do you feel like this every time you use your ability?"

Blathnaid nodded her head slowly, wincing slightly at whatever discomfort it caused. Upgrade reached up to her head and gently took off the visor, pulling away at the strands of hair that had intertwined with it. Without looking, she held it out for Sal to take, which he gratefully accepted. Upgrade crouched down so she was eye-level with the seated Blathnaid. "Do you avoid using your ability because it feels like this?"

Blathnaid shook her head slightly and Upgrade smiled. "Stubborn, I like it. Do you think you can stay awake for a little longer?" When Blathnaid bobbed her head, Upgrade patted her knee before standing back up and moving to Sal. Her voice was quiet as she spoke, none of the amusement from earlier on her face. "Remember what you did for Martin, Gosia and myself?" She wriggled her fingers as though she

was undoing a knot. "I know that Quest said that you couldn't do it, but I think you need to make an exception with that girl. She's more determined than she is capable, which is dangerous."

Sal nodded his head and surprised Upgrade. "The visor can tell me the knots that are safe to undo, but it has to be kept a secret. I can't talk about it much, but Quest was super annoyed about how I can interact with weaves. I don't want to get on his bad side."

Upgrade's smile was wide as she gave Sal a playful nudge. "Look at you! I don't see you for a week and you turn into a little rebel." Her eyes eventually fell onto the clothes draped across the table. "The workmanship is actually incredible on these. I'd go so far as to say that they're on par with Gosia." Upgrade closely inspected each of the seams and could only marvel at the result. "The seams are purely aesthetic, it's fused with essence! Who the fuck goes so far to add detail and style to something that just needs to be functional?"

Sal clipped the visor over his ear and activated his Mythcrafter ability. He decided that it would be best to wait for Blathnaid to gradually recover before he undid the knots in her weave. If she wasn't able to communicate with him about how she was feeling, then he'd potentially risk harming her. So instead, he was going to work on the appraisal to see how Blathnaid did in the end. His visor flashed as he activated his ability, and a detailed breakdown was presented to him, with more information than usual. He had to thank Analysis for bolstering the Appraisal ability.

Name	Hunter's Trench (Set 1/4)
Origin	Crafted
Age	New
Current Grade	Common (Lower)
Restored Grade	Common (Lower)
Potential Grade	Unique (Upper)
Dimensions	46.8" Length 20.8" Chest 20.8" Hip 28.3" Sleeve
Materials	Void Metal Twill-Woven Cotton Refined Construct Essence
Runes	Evolutionary Rune: Essence Absorption will result in an increase of Item Grade over time. Self-Replenishment Rune: Slight increase in Essence Absorption.
Attributes	Resistant: Increases toughness of the material, protecting the wearer from external attacks. Synergy: Abilities are shared among set items.
Abilities	Resistant Synergy
Power Source	External Essence
Absorption Rate	80% Passive 20% Active
Evolution	Yes - 0%
Quality	Perfect
Condition	100%
Value	Est. \$12,000.00 - \$15,000.00

Name	Hunter's Breeches (Set 2/4)
Origin	Crafted
Age	New
Current Grade	Common (Lower)
Restored Grade	Common (Lower)
Potential Grade	Unique (Upper)
Dimensions	25" Waist 35" Hip 28" Inseam
Materials	Void Metal Twill-Woven Cotton Refined Construct Essence
Runes	Evolutionary Rune: Essence Absorption will result in an increase of Item Grade over time. Self-Replenishment Rune: Slight increase in Essence Absorption.
Attributes	Impact - Slacks negate fall damage and incoming attacks. Chance to reflect damage. Synergy: Abilities are shared among set items.
Abilities	Impact Synergy
Power Source	External Essence
Absorption Rate	80% Passive 20% Active
Evolution	Yes - 0%
Quality	Perfect
Condition	100%
Value	Est. \$9,000.00 - \$12,000.00

Name	Hunter's Cowl (Set 2/4)
Origin	Crafted
Age	New
Current Grade	Common (Lower)
Restored Grade	Common (Lower)
Potential Grade	Unique (Upper)
Dimensions	32" Circumference 13.5" Length
Materials	Twill-Woven Cotton Refined Construct Essence
Runes	Evolutionary Rune: Essence Absorption will result in an increase of Item Grade over time. Self-Replenishment Rune: Slight increase in Essence Absorption.
Attributes	Perception: Wearer is hyper-aware of their environment and can assess threats. Synergy: Abilities are shared among set items.
Abilities	Impact Synergy
Power Source	External Essence
Absorption Rate	80% Passive 20% Active
Evolution	Yes - 0%
Quality	Perfect
Condition	100%
Value	Est. \$16,000.00 - \$18,000.00

Sal was floored by the fact that they were only Common Grade items. Their presentation looked incredible and he had a hard time believing that they were ranked so low. Compared to the things he had created with evolutionary runes, the cap on the equipment was far lower, coming in at a maximum of Unique Grade. He

wondered if it was down to the metal and fabric choices that Blathnaid had used, or if it was just a limitation of her power. Maybe the set would increase if he completed the shoes that she had started to fashion? Despite those thoughts, Sal was impressed that she had managed to tailor the designs to what she had envisioned. He always made things as they were presented by the blueprints, with the exception of Hannah's Gauntlets.

"You're spacing out. What are the results?" Upgrade poked Sal gently on the shoulder to remind him of her presence. Her eyes were locked on the pieces of equipment, and she looked just as confused as Sal. "They look really good, but I think it's just that the craftsmanship is really high rather than them being a good grade? I'm not feeling much essence from them at all."

Sal nodded in agreement. "They're Common Grade. The evolutionary rune is functional and they can get up to the Unique Grade over time. I just can't get over the fact that they look so good. She used her essence to change the colour of the fabric and created all sorts of designs on them to make them look appealing. I think she also made them in her own size?"

Upgrade grinned at that and gave Blathnaid a glance over her shoulder. "She understands that buyers want fashion over function at the lower tiers. This stuff would sell faster than an ugly Uncommon Grade set."

Sal chuckled at that. She wasn't wrong. "The Argento Auction had lots of cases like this too. Something with a cool name would end up selling for well beyond its value. I always put it down to buyers wanting bragging rights rather than having something useful. My favourite example was the Doom Scythe, which sold for an outrageous price."

Upgrade's eyes widened. "Oooh, what's that?"

Sal snorted. "An agricultural tool that has a high chance of corrupting crops it harvests. It's useless for its properties, but the name alone managed to keep the bids coming through. Even if it was used as a weapon, unless the target was a plant or vegetable, it's useless."

Upgrade smiled as she stared at Sal, waiting for him to make the connection. He gave her a puzzled glance for a few moments before realisation finally clicked with him.

"Leechers!" He gasped as he turned to her. Upgrade rewarded him with a slow clap and a good natured smile. Sal laughed at himself for that and shrugged. "Okay, you got me. It has its uses for combat, but would you spend a quarter of a million on an item that could just kill a few Leechers?"

Upgrade's smile faltered as her eyes widened. "Fuck off! Nobody would spend that much money on a weapon for Leechers, did it have something else that was of

value?"

Blathnaid suddenly groaned as she got to her feet, interrupting their back and forth. When both Sal and Upgrade turned around to see her, they were met with a frown. Her eyes were locked onto the equipment she had made, dissatisfaction written all over her face. "Looks like I didn't get to the shoes." She made a step towards the table, but Upgrade intercepted her.

"Absolutely not. You're still recovering from the dregs." Upgrade stood directly in front of Blathnaid's field of view, forcing the girl to look up at her. Blathnaid's expression became conflicted as she tried to protest.

"Please, it's almost done. I need to finish it." It wasn't even a protest, it was borderline pleading. Blathnaid tried to reach towards the equipment but Upgrade caught her hand and gave her a stern look.

"You're not using anymore essence today. It's an admirable trait that you want to see a job through to completion, but it's incredibly reckless when you don't know your own limits. You've hit yours today by achieving something incredible, so don't push your luck by trying to inch closer to perfection." Upgrade released Blathnaid's hand and put an arm around her shoulder. "You've just proven that we can create evolutionary equipment with basic materials. Void Metal and Prowler Hide are common enough resources that we should be able to provide large amounts of it to our Crafters."

Blathnaid still looked conflicted, and it seemed like Upgrade's words weren't really getting through to her. Upgrade noticed it too, so changed her tactics.

"Blathnaid, you've just given Supports a fighting chance against relegation." Upgrade smiled at her as she spoke and the effect was instantaneous. Blathnaid's eyes snapped away from the equipment and locked onto Upgrade's face in disbelief. She turned to Sal to see if he heard the same thing, and all she got was a grin in return.

"But without the patterns, I wouldn't have been able-" Blathnaid started before Upgrade cut her off.

"Bullshit. What part of those sets look remotely like the patterns Sal created? You went rogue and made a whole new design based on your preferences. I can tell with just a glance that you're both practical and a perfectionist. Sal's pattern didn't fit with your style, so you made your own." Upgrade laughed as she picked up the Hunter Cowl from the table and held it in front of Blathnaid's face. "You created equipment that people will be proud to wear. Not just for its effects and potential, but for how it looks."

Blathnaid's face went red as she started to apologise, but Upgrade cut her off again.

"Nope. Never apologise for something like this. You're more stubborn than this idiot." Upgrade hiked her thumb over her shoulder in Sal's general direction. "Own

your successes. This is something you've done with your own power, and you should be proud."

Sal stepped closer as he lifted the Hunter Jacket up. "Don't you think you should try it on?" He held it open by the shoulders so Blathnaid would be able to slide her arms into it, but she hesitated as she looked at it. She was conflicted about something but was clearly uncomfortable in speaking about it.

Blathnaid bit her lip as she looked at Upgrade tentatively. "How will this stop Supports from getting relegated?" There was hope in her eyes and judging by the tremor in her voice, she was clinging to the hope that it wasn't just words to make her feel better.

Before Upgrade could respond, the door slid open to reveal Chatfield looking rather flustered. He held up a keycard in his hand and gave them an annoyed glare. "Why did you lock the door?" He entered the room and closed the door behind him, looking as though he was about to share his thoughts when his eyes caught sight of the Hunter Jacket in Sal's hands.

Anything Blathnaid wanted to say died on her lips at the arrival of Chatfield. She had seen him at the assembly and clearly had no understanding why he was suddenly in the workshop. She looked at Sal in a panic, but he just gestured to her that it was fine.

Sal picked up the cowl and pants from the table and delivered them with the jacket to Chatfield who had started to smile.

"Are these what I think they are? What materials did you use?" Chatfield asked as he looked at Sal, but rather than answering on her behalf, Sal turned to look at Blathnaid.

"Go on, Blathnaid. Tell Chatfield what you made these with?" He smiled the entire time, but felt a pang of guilt at the stricken and panicked look on Blathnaid's face. She was very much out of her depth.

Chatfield pieced the meaning together and his eyes lit up. "You got a first year to create them instead? Excellent! Proof of concept at this stage really pushes us ahead. Let's see what we're dealing with." A purple light pulsed from Chatfield's hands into the materials and a broad smile crossed his face. "Void Metal and Prowler Hide... and it can evolve all the way up to Unique?"

Blathnaid's face went pale at the verdict, her eyes locking onto the equipment. She had no way to appraise what she was making, nor did she even understand the runes she embroidered into the designs. This was her first time hearing the tangible results of her efforts.

Chatfield didn't miss her reaction and laughed. "Very cruel, Mr. Argento. You didn't even tell her what she made? Should I assume you didn't tell her what this means?"

Sal laughed and gestured at Blathnaid. "We tried, but it might sound better coming from you."

Blathnaid looked between them in confusion, it was clear that this was a dizzying experience for her, especially since she was still recovering from the dregs. If Sal had to guess, he'd have assumed she would remember this more like a fever dream than anything else.

Chatfield walked over to Blathnaid and handed her back the equipment she made. "You've just pioneered the first step in making our Support Classes invaluable, not just to Quest Academy, but to humanity at large. What's your name?"

Any colour that remained on Blathnaid's face disappeared at those words as she stammered a response. "Blathnaid... Blathnaid McClean." She looked at Sal and Upgrade for help, but they just watched with smiles on their faces.

Chatfield chuckled at that as he reached into his coat pocket. "Well, Blathnaid Blathnaid McClean. Welcome to the task force." He seemed to enjoy his own joke as he presented her with a Challenge Crest. "I hope you'll continue to work with us in creating more designs like this?" Chatfield flung another crest in Sal's direction, who caught it deftly from mid-air.

Blathnaid stared at the crest in her trembling hands before looking at Chatfield with a small frown. "I don't deserve this..."

Chatfield laughed as he turned to Upgrade. "Any chance you could drill some confidence into her? We've a lot of work to do."

Quest Academy: Chapter 59 (2,249 words)

Chatfield and Upgrade went out to get them some coffees, which left Blathnaid sitting in the chair behind the desk. Her eyes were still locked onto the small fabric crest clutched in her hands. Sal could appreciate how much of a whirlwind the entire day must have been for her, as she was unwittingly looped into Chatfield's machinations. What had started as an experiment to see if she could utilise the full capability of her powers, had turned into a proven hypothesis for Chatfield's proposal. Now, she was left with her own thoughts as she held the Challenge Crest.

"You feeling a bit better?" Sal asked as he leaned on the desk opposite her. "Sorry if it felt like we ambushed you with all of this. Chatfield is pretty intimidating, isn't he?"

Blathnaid nodded at that before glancing up at Sal. "He's going to take this back when he realises I couldn't complete the set." She laughed humourlessly as she placed the crest onto the table beside the Hunter set. "Or when he realises how weak I am with my power." Her tone was resigned and Sal couldn't help but feel sorry for her. Her power was limited because of the knots in her weave, and it was holding her back. To her, it would likely feel like failure and not working hard enough. Sal knew that nothing she did was likely to change the results of her weave.

"About that." Sal started off tentatively. Upgrade had given him a pointed look as she left the room with Chatfield and Sal knew what she meant. With a cautious tone, he gently tested the water with her. "What if I told you I was able to help you out with your power? Nothing dramatic, but just a little lift in your current capabilities."

Blathnaid gave him a skeptical look before shaking her head. "I've already thought about equipment that would boost my proficiency. I made a whole set of tools specifically around tailoring, and while they help, they don't matter when my internal essence is so low. I need access to more reserves to make the designs the way I want, and even if I could tether to an external core, it wouldn't be my essence in the end and would likely ruin my flow." She caught herself by the end and gave Sal a reassuring smile. "I'm sorry, but this is something I've known all my life. I don't mean to be negative, I know you're just trying to help."

Sal didn't let it go though as he leaned further over the table. "Humour me. Would you let me try something? All I'd ask is that you keep it a secret."

Blathnaid stared at him for a moment before shaking her head. "I trust you Sal, but you need to give me more information than that. I don't want to try any drugs if that's what it is? I know you manage to stay up all night somehow, but that won't work for me."

Sal smiled and gestured at himself. "My ability isn't Appraisal. I took that ability from my Father when I was a kid. It's actually something called Skill Master which allows me to replicate the abilities of other people." Blathnaid's reaction wasn't as surprised as he had expected it to be. Before he could continue she pointed at the doorway with a look of confusion.

"You took Upgrade's ability, didn't you? That's why you're able to craft all these things and make blueprints?" She didn't look annoyed, but instead looked confused. She was half right, and Sal knew he needed to explain before she jumped to more conclusions.

"Yes, but I also took Appraisal and Restoration. Both from my parents. When I combined them all, with Upgrade's ability, it created a whole new ability called Mythcrafter. I'm able to craft things up to the Mythic Grade, but it's being kept as a secret from people so that the Guilds don't try to steal me away." Sal gestured at the blueprint and the equipment on the desk. "Chatfield enlisted me to help him create designs that could evolve over time, so we could increase the standard of equipment at the academy. He has a whole big plan for it, which was why he was so happy that you managed to create all this."

Blathnaid stared blankly at Sal before a grin appeared. "So all that equipment we used in the tournament was made by you? That sword that Anthony uses, too?"

Sal nodded and pointed at his eyes. "My Skill Master ability doesn't just apply to me. I'm able to interact with the internal threads of others, similar to a Body Manipulator. But instead of manipulating the body, I interact with the ability."

Blathnaid's grin disappeared as her jaw hung open in shock. She couldn't formulate any words as she stared at Sal in horror.

"Which is why..." Sal started as he pointed at Blathnaid. "I would like to try and help you with your ability. It's not invasive and you won't feel any discomfort or pain. I've already done it with Divinity before, but that was by accident before I knew what I was doing. I did it with Upgrade and helped her past her dependency on an external core. She knows this secret too, but Chatfield doesn't."

Blathnaid suddenly bolted to her feet and grasped Sal's hands. "Please! Yes. I trust you." Her eyes were wild, almost desperate as she clawed at his hand. All the composure that she usually had was gone, and Sal was alarmed at how quickly she had turned around on the idea. He wanted to explain more about the calculations from his visor, and reassure her that it would be safe, but Blathnaid didn't look like she cared about any of that. All that existed in her eyes was a pleading desire to have her ability improved. When he saw the tears starting to form at the edges of her eyes, Sal realised that he had just been dangling a carrot in front of her and he felt like an asshole.

"Let's get started." Sal responded with a slight croak in his voice, gesturing for her to take her seat. He wanted to help her as much as possible, and whilst he had promised Upgrade that he would only undo a single thread or two to give her more access to essence absorption, he decided that he'd give her as much help as was safe to do so.

Blathnaid sat down and waited expectantly, not sure what she needed to do. Her shoulders were trembling and Sal knew that it wasn't fear from the bright smile on her face.

Without wasting any time, Sal activated Skill Master with his visor. That knotted tangle of web appeared in front of him and he started studying all of the different knots on the outside of the weave. Percentages appeared in front of him, showcasing the minor improvements and risk factors. Sal reached forward and started to unravel some of the outliers, being careful to double check that none of them posed any harm to Blathnaid. The first knot was tight, despite the fact that it was on the edge of the weave, but after a concentrated effort, it finally came free. Sal noticed that the percentages around that knot changed to reflect the new output of the weave, increasing the positive outcomes and minimising the risk. In contrast, some of the knots in the centre had their percentages drop. It felt more like a puzzle than a solution, with Sal having to pick the most optimal knots to target.

He counted almost thirty knots in total, which seemed like an impossibility compared to the ones he had looked at before. By undoing four of them, he could see a definite improvement but not enough. Sal focused his attention on the centre of the weave and instinctively felt like it was being strangled from the inside. All the weaves he had seen before had the most amount of power in their centre, like a star. If he thought of it like a constellation, freeing up the debris that was orbiting the star helped, but it didn't fundamentally fix the issues. Sal picked the largest knot he could see and saw that it had a slight risk of causing harm to Blathnaid. There was a huge improvement to be had if it worked, but that small chance of it being harmful made him pause. He could have just asked her for consent to take the risk, but he knew in her state that she'd just accept it.

Sal debated it for a few seconds before moving to a safer place in the weave. He didn't want to take any risks with this, and prove Quest right about the terrifying nature of his ability. Pushing those useless thoughts aside, Sal focused his efforts in the centre-most knots, targeting those with a guaranteed success rate. For each one he undid, it changed the success rate of the surroundings. Sal kept an eye on that big knot that he considered before, the risk was reducing, but not near a guarantee. Sal ended up having to redo a few of the knots to keep his target in the positive numbers. It was the end goal from this session, and he had already undone eight in total. By someone else's standard, this would have been a monumental increase in capability, but Sal wasn't satisfied. Blathnaid was his friend and he never wanted her to feel inadequate again.

Yet, he had to admit that he was hitting a blocker. His fixation on that giant knot was thwarting what could have been a perfectly executed procedure. Sal resolved himself and kept working on the knots, reapplying them when they had a negative impact on the giant one. By the fourteenth knot, he had managed to bring the giant one within a couple of percentage points of failure. Any temptation to take the chance was quashed instantly as he experimented with the others. It took a painstaking amount of trial and error before he was finally rewarded with a perfect result on the giant knot. The visor wasn't capable of lying and it finally gave him the green light on unravelling it. Just being able to target it was enough to bring a smile to Sal's face, but that joy was cut short by the complexity that followed. To sum it up, it was an absolute nightmare to work the threads free. All the slack he had gained by undoing sixteen knots had given him some breathing room, but it was persistently trying to remain tied. Sal fuelled more essence into his attempts, and it became slightly easier to pull at it.

Persistence won out before his essence ran dry, and Sal was met with what looked like a reasonably healthy weave. His visor did another check on his work and highlighted a few areas that needed to be knotted to maintain the new capability. He was loathe to put them in place, but the visor instructed that it was the best method. In that moment, as though reading his mind, the visor prompted him with an alert that the target would need to acclimatise to the new level of ability before more knots could be safely undone. It seemed reasonable, and Sal disengaged his power with a sigh. He was grateful that he had propped himself up against the desk, as it felt like it was the only thing keeping him upright. His essence had taken a beating during that whole ordeal, but with a single look at Blathnaid's expression, it was worth it.

Sal used his visor to Analyse the changes and smiled in satisfaction.

Ability	Skill Name: Construct Rating: VI Skill Category: Invention Skill Mastery: 64% Skill Efficiency: 100% Progress to Next Rating: 0% Evolutionary Capability: Yes Potential Cap: XV Natural Synergy: Concept Epicraft Appraisal
Essence	Essence Type: Invention Essence Gates: 80 Essence Absorption Rate: 71% Essence Control: 23% Essence Refinement: 52% Essence Calibration: 58%

Sal went through the list and tried to make sense of it all. He wished that he had saved the previous data to see the improvements, but he could already tell from memory alone that her skill rating had jumped from three to six, which was a massive leap. Her gates had increased by twenty, which was something that confused him greatly. How could the gates change from an ability becoming more powerful? Sal scanned the list and saw that her potential cap had increased by five, and it looked

like her essence absorption rate had skyrocketed. It looked like control and refinement had both decreased, but calibration had gone up?

"This..." Blathnaid's voice cracked as she closed her eyes and concentrated. "I can feel the difference. It's... like there are lights in my chest and I can see them!" Tears flowed down her face as she laughed and explored her internal weave. Sal could only watch on with a smile, happy with himself for being able to help her. It was an incredible feeling and he idly wondered if this was the type of Hero he should be. Someone that helped others reaching their potential?

When Blathnaid finally opened her eyes, Sal met her gaze with a smile. "You've just ranked up your ability. How does it feel?"

Blathnaid grinned in response. "I'll tell you after I fix those shoes."

Quest Academy: Chapter 60 (2,123 words)

"You made the right decision." Erika said as they exited the train station. She had barely spoken a word the entire trip to the reclaimed zone, and Sal was left to sit beside his new team in silence. Rochelle hadn't spoken a word for fear of Erika's retribution, but she stole a few glances in Sal's direction where both of them had shared awkward smiles at the ridiculousness of the situation. Brophy, the team's offence that was apparently broken had tried to start up conversation from the beginning, but Erika had cut that short with a few choice words. Which left Ioseph, who was an absolute anomaly to Sal. He sat quietly and stared forward in contemplation. Sal put him as the strong silent type that didn't want to engage with useless chatter.

"Reading my mind again?" Sal guessed as he carried his metal case in his right hand. He had been wondering if he had made the right choice for the duration of their journey and Erika's statement seemed to confirm she had been prying into his thoughts. "If you keep doing that, I'll start having to imagine things you won't want to see." Sal spoke with a smile and conjured an image of what Neuro would look like naked.

Erika turned around and gave him a withering look. "I'd like to see you tr-" Her face paled as she locked eyes with Sal. Her eyes were shimmering in gold as she seemed to look straight through him. Sal held her gaze and imagined Quest joining the naked party with a glass full of whiskey. Erika gained colour in her cheeks, and he couldn't tell if it was anger or embarrassment. When Sal was about to speak, he found himself incapable of opening his mouth.

"Not. Another. Word." Erika hissed at him as she turned around, her eyes returning to their natural blue. Her shoulders trembled ever so slightly and Sal's face broke into a grin as he witnessed her involuntary shudder.

Rochelle nudged him with her elbow. "You can move around when she's not looking at you. She needs to keep eye-contact when she's making you do stuff. Be careful though, she's able to use reflective surfaces and other tricks to extend her ability." Rochelle touched a finger to Sal's jaw and he felt a trickle of essence relieve the

tension. "If you resist the effects, you'll only end up hurting yourself. Don't ask me how I know that."

Sal sighed as he massaged his jaw, looking at Erika walking ahead of them. It was good to know her limitations, and even better to keep her out of his head. "Thanks for the heads-up and the healing. Don't suppose you know much about the rest of our team? Didn't really get to know much from the train ride here."

Rochelle snorted at that as she turned around and walked backwards, looking at each of the group that walked behind them. "Our Offence Class is the charming Mr. Brophy. Top of literally every class he attends, but you wouldn't know it if you spoke to him. Pretends to be one of us academically challenged people."

Sal turned around in time to see Brophy clutch his chest and give Rochelle a pained expression. "You wound me, Miss de Verdon. I couldn't possibly hope to achieve your level of grace. I feel all too privileged to be a part of this wonderful team." His eyes were playful as he gave her a dashing smile. Sal couldn't help but feel like he found a new Barry, but not in a good way.

Brophy's eyes darted to Sal, that same easygoing smile still on his lips. "And to meet the esteemed Mr. Argento! I should count my lucky stars. I've seen you at a number of functions, but I don't believe we've had the pleasure of a formal introduction?" He gave a good natured laugh as he waved the comment away. "I blame the organisers. Those seating arrangements are barbaric!"

With just a single sentence, Sal recognised him. It was hard not to remember him with all the parading from the Guilds Association. He looked older and more mature, but there was no mistaking his identity. Sal chose his next words carefully as he returned Brophy's smile. "We haven't met before, but it's a pleasure. I recognise you too, but I think I misremembered your name."

Sal saw the flicker of annoyance cross Brophy's face before the smile reignited.

Rochelle pointed to Ioseph who carried a duffel bag over one shoulder. "Mr. Bitterwater, who likes to go by Ioseph. I say he likes it, but I've absolutely no idea. He's our Defence Class and is way more than meets the eye. You wouldn't think he was a Healer, would you?"

Sal had to do a double-take. There was no way this man was a Healer. He had a similar build to Dominic Walters, in the sense that he looked like he could shield their entire team with just his body alone. Muscles that defied logic in a broad frame. His expression was still passive, but Sal guessed that he could tear their heads off if he was so inclined.

"You're a Healer?" Sal asked in bewilderment. He was tempted to take out his visor from the case to verify the claims, but there would be time for that later.

Ioseph tilted his head slightly to one side and gave Sal a bored look. "Something like that."

Sal took stock of his team and sighed inwardly. Eager to please, Rochelle. Legacy Hero, Brophy. Silent mountain, Ioseph and megalomaniac control-freak, Erika. There was infinitely more potential than his original team in the Silver cohort, but Sal would have picked that team over this new one in a heartbeat. If they were being marked on their cohesion and reliance on one-another, then they were absolutely screwed. Maybe their only way of getting through this would be to let Erika control them across the victory line.

Rochelle grinned, completely missing Sal's reservations about the team. "Pretty incredible, isn't it? Ioseph, Erika and you all won in your cohort tournaments. We've three of the top trainees in our team, and our academic ace!"

Brophy laughed at that and gave a mock bow. "You flatter me too much! They're just tests at the end of the day." When he stood upright, he flourished his hand and gestured at Sal. "My curiosity is piqued at how an Appraiser managed to win out of all the people in his cohort! I think that is much more deserving of a praise." His smile grew wider and Sal couldn't help but roll his eyes at the tired joke. He had to endure that same reference from every client that thought they were being funny.

Sal was grateful that he found a kindred spirit in Ioseph who rolled his eyes and lengthened his stride. It wasn't long before he had caught up to Erika, maintaining only a few steps behind her. Rochelle on the other hand had found the joke hilarious. Sal wanted to warn her against encouraging Brophy incase he started making a habit of it, but didn't have the energy.

Forcing a smile onto his lips for the sake of salvaging some form of team chemistry, Sal turned around and distracted himself by looking around the area. The train stop had been on a recently repaired platform, that stood out as a stark contrast to their environment. It was like they had stumbled into a post-apocalyptic world, where overgrowth and scenes of carnage reigned supreme. What had probably once been a populated city district, was now a shell of its former glory. Ruined buildings had crumbled and collapsed in on themselves, with rubble and shattered glass being reclaimed by the mounds of uprooted dirt. Huge fissures in the ground showed remnants of a ferocious battle from quite some time ago, with symmetrical claw marks in the ground, hinting at something terrifying in size. Each of the fissures was as wide as he was, and Sal truly hoped it was from a skill and not a demon.

The streets were wide enough to accommodate the marching group of students, but the atmosphere felt too lively to Sal. It was a monument to sacrifice and carnage, and the chattering and laughing of students only ended up making him feel hollow on the inside. Was it because he had fought the Leechers in the Dungeon? He couldn't tell why he was feeling a sudden sense of melancholy, and he tried to push it out of his head. No matter where he looked, he only saw scenes of devastation and wondered how the Heroes had managed to push the demons back.

Sal had to admit that whilst it was nice being outside of the academy for a change, he wished it was under different circumstances. The weekend had flown by and before he knew it, it was time to go on the excursion. A small smile appeared on his face as he recalled Blathnaid's elation at her newfound capability with the Construct ability. After a lot of goading, he and Upgrade had managed to convince her to keep the armour that she had crafted. It was lower grade than what she had equipped, but had a lot more potential for the future. Chatfield giving his consent seemed to be the pivotal factor, since he had already created copies of the equipment with his Concept ability.

With the blueprints drawn up for a single set of armour and a prototype in place, Chatfield seemed to be satisfied with their efforts. Sal thought he'd need to draw up more variants, but Chatfield surprised him by telling him it wouldn't be necessary. He had what he needed to get approval from the Hunters Bureau and that Sal and Blathnaid had been invaluable in getting it over the line. Sal wouldn't have gone so far as to say that, but he was happy that he had one less thing to worry about. He found himself wondering what impact it would have on the future, if all the students were better equipped with evolutionary armour.

"Hey Stranger." A voice called out from the distance, snapping him out of his thoughts.

Sal turned around and saw Divinity giving him a wave. Behind her was Melanie and Hannah, with only one of them making eye contact with him. He guessed that Hannah still needed time to get over the ordeal with that bastard Controller, but he was happy to see that she found her way onto Divinity's team.

"Two Controllers?" Sal asked with a grin. "Looks like you're just being greedy!" He veered away from his group to speak with Divinity as they both walked side by side.

"Melanie is acting as Support until she has a better grasp of her powers, so it totally checks out. I could ask some questions about your choice in Healer, though." Divinity's smile challenged him as she looked past him to where Rochelle was pretending not to notice.

Sal chuckled at that with a shake of his head. "Check out our Offence Class. That's the real surprise for me today."

Divinity frowned as she looked at Brophy, nothing registering on her face. "Should I know him? He looks very... normal." When Sal didn't answer immediately, Divinity activated her ability and looked directly at Brophy. It only took a few minutes before her expression changed to one of shock. "Oh..."

Sal sighed with a shrug. "There has to be a reason he's keeping a low profile and not showing his power. I'm getting Barry vibes off him."

Divinity didn't answer as she continued to stare at Brophy. Her expression growing more conflicted with each passing second.

Sal filled the silence with the thought that had been bugging him. "Why is he using a fake name? He was plastered over every piece of consumable media as the hope of our generation, but not a single word about him in the last few years. I just can't get my head around it."

Much to Sal's surprise, Divinity had an answer for him. Her eyes returned to their normal blue as she gave Sal a pained expression. "He's here because he can't activate

his power anymore."

Sal turned around to see Brophy grinning like a madman with Rochelle laughing beside him. The Super Rookie that had cleared his first Dungeon at the age of eight years old. Son of the tenth most powerful Hero, Prestige. His Hero name had been selected for him at birth, but now he was pretending to be a regular first year at the academy under the name, Brophy.

"Gallant." Sal muttered in confusion. "What the hell happened to you?"