

Chapter 32 (2,540 words)

"Welcome back, did you guys have fun?" Upgrade asked as she stood up from her bench with a stretch. With a half-yawn she made her way over to where Blathnaid and Sal had just entered the private room, when she suddenly stopped dead. "What on earth is that abomination?" Her weary gaze sharpened as it locked on the fluffy black and white duffel bag that was slung over Blathnaid's shoulder.

Blathnaid grinned as she practically danced over to Sal's bench. "I made it during the Scavenger Run. But we got so much cool stuff. Come have a look!" Blathnaid started pulling out the vials of Prowler blood, the claws and the ingots of metal.

Upgrade looked a little skeptical until she saw the illustrious Prowler hide that was practically gleaming in the low-light. "Whoa, did you skin that?"

Blathnaid nodded as she continued to unpack their goods. The black fur coat that she was going to customise for Darren was next, and it only caused Upgrade to scrunch her nose in distaste. Blathnaid took out the remaining two phones that they had decided to keep before stepping back triumphantly.

Upgrade smiled at her eagerness. "A very good haul. You should be proud of yourselves. Did you not put anything towards your rank?" She picked up the vial of blood with a frown. "Who taught you how to siphon off blood?"

Sal side-stepped the conversation and moved up to the simulation machine eagerly. He had been thinking about it the entire journey back on the train. The weave that he wanted to test out. Conquest, Concept and Absolute Counter, blended with his Skill Master ability. There was no guarantee that it would work, but he was unnaturally excited to try it out.

"Not even a hello?" Upgrade pretended to be wounded as she held a hand to her chest.

"Hello, Upgrade." Sal shot her a smile as he took off his jacket and slung it over the table beside the simulation device. "Anything exciting happen when we were out?"

Upgrade nodded as she gestured to a small chest that was near the door. "Alex popped by with samples he'd like you to procure. His instructions are in there with them, and the scrawl of text is practically indecipherable. I'm not sure he even knows how to write."

Sal nodded as he began to roll up his sleeves. "Guessing you didn't hear anything back from Quest about upgrading the workshop?"

"No, not in the last day, Sal." Upgrade snorted as she closed the door to the private room, locking it behind her. "Go play with your weaves while I have a proper catch-up with Blathnaid, here." She gave him a shooing gesture with her hand, but the gentle smile on her face showed she wasn't upset at all.

Sal moved over to the terminal and started searching for the Skill Master ability on the system. It was going to be an interesting one to see because he didn't actually have a visualisation of his own weave. Skill Master from his perspective was more like a spool of thread that he was able to call upon to replicate the abilities of others. It didn't take long to scroll through the list of Replicators on the system as there were less than fifty in total. Considering the thousands of Heroes and Students, it was quite a low number.

When Sal loaded up the profile, the threads burst to life and reshaped themselves into a stable weave. Even from his position at the terminal, Sal realised that there was a problem. More specifically, there were two problems.

The weave was riddled with inefficiencies, that was the first issue. Secondly, his ability wasn't telling him how to improve it. None of the feelings that he had with the other weaves were coming to him. It was like he was looking at a random collection of threads. Was there some sort of blocker where Skill Master wouldn't activate on itself? Sal had no idea as he approached the weave in confusion.

Before he could even lift a hand to start moving the threads around, his gaze focused on the humanoid torso in the distance. After a moment of hesitation, Sal went back to the terminal and brought up his own profile in the torso. If he was going to improve the weave, then he'd do it against his own profile. It was a long-shot, but if he could increase the profile to a stable synchronisation, would they be able to imprint the new weave layout for him?

As the threads holding Skill Master fell limp, Sal walked over to the torso with a conflicted expression on his face. He was now doing this with a blindfold on, or at least that was how it felt. The green and red lights would be the only indicators of if he was going in the right direction, and he needed to apply everything he had learned from the previous weaves if he wanted to have a shot at doing this right.

Reaching in to look at the weave, he could see that it was a bit of a mess. The complexity was much higher than the vast majority of weaves he dealt with, which only spiked his anxiety that much more. A part of him wanted to use the visor to try and get a competitive advantage, but he stopped himself. This whole project was designed to increase his mastery of using the ability.

Sal took a breath and pushed all the disruptive thoughts to one side. He had a weave in front of him and he needed to fix it. That was it. Without the innate sense telling him what was wrong, he made judgements based on what he had done before. The first thing to do was memorise the

thread which was a little harder than usual due to the complexity. He managed it after a few minutes and had a fairly good idea how the weave operated. Now all he had to do was start moving threads.

The red lights that followed had never been more demoralising, but Sal persisted as he experimented with the weave in every way possible. He had created a foundation for the ability that incorporated all of the available gates, but there were far too many overlaps with the aggressively large weave. There was so much thread required to just complete it, that there was barely enough room for anything else to coexist with it. It was remarkable that he had somehow managed to fit the Mythcrafter ability into such a tightly packed space. When the next red light washed across the room, Sal held onto that thought.

How did his Mythcrafter ability operate within the Skill Master weave? Looking within himself at his own weave, he could see the familiar thread that he had been using for years. Mythcrafter was completely independent and floated in his subconscious perfectly. Rather than using the thread to make a shape, he willed his subconscious to let it go and stop holding it.

The thread didn't budge from his grasp and stood upright like an inquisitive snake awaiting instruction. Sal used the thread to recreate the Skill Master ability he had memorised, wondering if he'd be able to determine anything different from doing it within his subconscious. It took a while to organise the shape, but it felt... wrong. Not the inefficiencies or flaws this time, but that it felt fundamentally wrong to his core. With a sigh of frustration, Sal just let it go from his mind. It didn't take a genius to figure out that the Skill Master weave wouldn't let itself be used to improve itself.

Gritting his teeth, Sal went down to his desk and picked up his visor. He had changed his mind about using it, and wanted to understand what was happening with the Skill Master weave.

"Everything okay, Sal?" Upgrade asked out of concern.

Just as he was about to wave her off, he remembered her concern about his frantic episode the other day. Taking a steadying breath, he looked at her and forced a smile. "I've hit a bit of a roadblock when trying to fix my Skill Master ability. It won't activate on itself, and I can't even do the forms internally."

Upgrade nodded in understanding as she patted an empty area on her desk. "Come over here and tell me about it."

Sal looked at the visor in his hand and then at the mass of threads leading to the torso. He didn't want to waste time with chatting and instead wanted to fix the problem. If he could just nail down the foundation, then it would allow him far more potential than before.

"It wasn't a question, Sal." Upgrade insisted with a wide smile. "When we hit roadblocks, we talk them through. You might have an epiphany by the time we're done. So come over here and tell me all about it."

Sal's shoulders slumped as he dropped his visor back onto his bench and moved over to Upgrade. Rather than sitting on her desk, he pulled over a stool and sat down heavily, hunching forward. Placing both of his hands at his temples, he massaged at them for a moment before wiping down his face with his palms. "Right... so, where do you want me to start?"

Upgrade shrugged as she looked over at the simulation device. "Why are you getting so worked up over your own weave? It works perfectly fine as it is."

Sal looked at her for a moment with a frown. "No, that's not the problem." He faltered for a moment as he tried to gather his thoughts. "I set out to experiment with weaves, to see if I could recreate the sensation that made Mythcrafter. All with the safety of the simulation device."

Upgrade nodded quietly as she listened.

"The problem is that Mythcrafter was made with the Skill Master ability. I need to use it as a component to blend the other weaves together into something new." He raised a hand and gestured wildly at the limp threads across the room. "But it's not working at all. I can't even look at the weave and intuit what's wrong with it. My fixes that worked for the other weaves aren't achieving anything other than red lights."

"Who says you need to use Skill Master to make the weave?" Upgrade asked with a raised eyebrow. "Experimentation is healthy, especially in a safe environment like this, but when you convince yourself of absolutes like, 'It can only be done this way', you'll lose sight of what's possible." She stretched her arms over her head and stifled a yawn before continuing. "Besides, you're going to have it harder than anyone. When everything you've touched has turned to gold, it's natural to come to the conclusion that everything you touch in the future has to turn to gold, too. Failure is a massive part of the process, and it leads to iteration and prototyping."

Sal started to shake his head when Upgrade interrupted him with a laugh.

"It's not advice Sal, it's common sense. You have a limitation right now, and that's completely fine. If you can't use the weave in the way you thought you could, find a solution that allows you to side-step that requirement. In crafting, you find a substitute material that you can use. Rather than focusing on the outcome, try focusing on the process. Improve it as you work, and the results will come in time."

Sal raised his chin and looked up at the ceiling for a few moments as he took in Upgrade's words. Everything in him wanted to rebel against what she was saying, and he recognised it as

arrogance. It was the belief that the visor would solve his problem and show him what needed to be done. If he insisted on pushing through with that method, he'd only be proving her right.

"Okay, how about this?" Upgrade started as she perked up. "Talk me through what it is you're trying to achieve. That skill you're trying to create. Tell me about it."

Sal brought his head back down and looked at Upgrade before nodding numbly. "Sure. It's a blend of Concept, Absolute Counter and Conquest. I thought combining them together would allow me to make an ability that incorporated the essence constructs that Chatfield's Concept can make, with the retaliation of Absolute Counter, in a wide area of effect from the Conquest ability."

Upgrade tilted her head to one side. "Is that all? She laughed at the scope of Sal's plan with a shake of her head. "Okay, Sal. Without making any comments on what you're trying to achieve... let's look at some of the factors that we do know. If you look at Restoration, Appraisal and Upgrade, do they sound like they would combine to create a crafting specific ability?"

Sal paused for a moment as he took that in. "No, actually. They don't." She was right. Restoration and Appraisal didn't really have anything to do with the Mythcrafter ability. Upgrade as a weave gave him the blueprint, and maybe Appraisal helped him understand what worked, but that was a stretch. Mythcrafter being born from those weaves didn't really make that much sense.

Upgrade nodded slowly as she continued to hold Sal's gaze. "So, with only one example of how your ability works. Why are you expecting a wildly different outcome, and presuming that Skill Master is a given in whatever you make?" She gave him a gentle smile and pointed at the terminal. "You've already completed dozens of weaves without using Skill Master, and they work perfectly."

Sal sighed as he rested his palms on his knees. "You're saying I shouldn't try refining the Skill Master ability, and just go back to fixing the profiles like before." It was a disappointment, but he guessed that she had a point.

"Fuck no." Upgrade laughed. "I'm telling you to stop dwelling on things that are out of your control right now. If it's a blocker, side-step it. Try making a weave without Skill Master and see what happens. You won't know until you try."

Sal smiled, but didn't feel any real relief. "Honestly, I was kinda hoping that I'd be able to register a better version of Skill Master so there could be other people with my ability."

"Ugh, please no." Upgrade shuddered. "One of you is definitely enough." She gave him a playful wink before jutting her chin towards the terminal. "Now, I've a jacket to finish. A massive pain in

my ass made a bet with me, so I can't spend all day chatting. Get lost and make some miracles happen."

Sal chuckled as he got to his feet. Upgrade had a definite talent in cheering him up. He had nothing to lose from trying to make the weave without the Skill Master ability. All he had to do was iterate until he got the result he needed. "Thanks Upgrade. I appreciate it."

Upgrade just waved him away without looking up from her desk. "It's been a couple of days since you've shocked me. We're overdue another Salvatore Argento miracle."