

Chapter 33 (2,217 words)

Another flash of red light washed through the room, almost like the signalling of disaster with how frequently they were appearing. Sal had stopped noticing them a few hours ago, and was now in the middle early hours of the morning, alone in the room as he wrestled with the weave in front of him. He had taken Upgrade's advice on how to make the weave without Skill Master as a component, but no matter how perfectly he created the three weaves of Concept, Conquest and Absolute Counter, they wouldn't work together. He was grateful for the fact that Skill Master was helping him refine the abilities, but when it came down to combining them, it seemed to be staying quiet in his subconscious.

Sal had tried seventeen different permutations, of using each of the weaves as a base, then trying to change their placements and trajectories. At no point had he thrown in the towel or equipped his visor to see what was going on. This was a challenge to himself, and whilst Upgrade might have suggested he give up and try something else, Sal refused to side-step until he had exhausted all of the various combinations that sprung to mind.

It was after another red flash that Sal had an epiphany. He was trying to replicate a product that came from emotional desperation, with a rational solution. Mythcrafter was formed out of fear and needing to make it work. He thought about recreating the circumstances that led to Mythcrafter being formed before immediately pushing the thought out of his head. It was a ridiculous strategy and a definite sign that he was tired.

Nearly all of the weaves he had worked on had eventually yielded results, but his efforts in creating a combination had all been failures. Sal stood there quietly as another red light flashed around him, signifying that the weaves weren't compatible. He was tired after an early morning going to the Scavengers Run, and an action packed day. If he was being honest with himself, he was running off fumes at this point. It was time for bed.

Sal sighed as he rubbed his face with his right palm. There was plenty of time for him to figure this out and he didn't need to solve everything in a single night. At least that's what he told himself in an attempt to feel better. The reality was that Sal was frustrated. Not the frantic state he was in previously, but rather that he was genuinely stumped at how to proceed.

One thing he was certain of, was that he didn't want to walk into the workshop tomorrow and see the messy amalgam of threads waiting for him. Sal decided to unravel the combination and separate the threads so he could approach it from a different angle tomorrow. He took out the Absolute Counter weave first and untangled the threads from the other two.

A green light flashed around the room, and Sal laughed as he looked at the threads for Absolute Counter. The simulation orb clearly had terrible standards if it was classifying the mess he made

as a weave. However, even after a few moments of silence... there was no announcement declaring the result. Sal rubbed at his eyes as he moved over to the terminal and was surprised to see that it was processing the result, and taking its sweet time with it. Had he overloaded the simulation orb with his different combinations?

Either way, it wasn't a problem for tonight. If it was going to take its time like it did with Fabi Maccles' profile, then he'd just leave it to run until morning. With a quick glance around the room, Sal smiled as he saw an incredibly dapper version of the black fur coat hanging on the wall. The puffy collar had been tamed by a neat row of Prowler claws, and it looked like Blathnaid had used some of the blood for making runes, as there were pulsating tendrils of green light coursing across the fabric surface.

Sal didn't have it in him to Appraise the new coat, but he guessed that it was likely a Rare Grade just from appearance alone. Picking up his jacket, he glanced at Upgrade's desk and was disappointed to see no signs of the coat he had commissioned from her. Blathnaid had made the one for Darren in a day, and Upgrade had close to a week to make something. He tried not to think negatively as he trusted both of them to deliver something great, but he was hopeful that he'd see some progress on it while they were all operating in a shared space.

Shaking his head, Sal opened the door to the workshop and peered outside. All of the benches looked to be vacant, and it was quite a sobering thing to think he was the last one there. He locked the door behind him with his Q-Card and made his way back to his dorm like a zombie.

Tomorrow would be a better result.

Sal blinked a few times as he walked through the workshop the next morning. Well, morning would have been a generous statement as it was closer to mid-afternoon by the time he managed to make his way to the private room. A few waves and greetings were exchanged as Sal reached his destination. Sure, there was a little guilt welling within him that he had spent a full nine hours sleeping, but the rational part of his brain insisted that he needed it to recuperate.

"Whoa, did you take a half-day or something?" Upgrade laughed as she saw his bedraggled appearance. Her smile remained fixed on her face as she gave him an appraising look. "Looks like a well-earned night sleep. I'm taking credit for your breakthrough by the way."

Sal chuckled as he took off his coat and hung it up by the door. "If you were hoping for a breakthrough, you're going to be sorely disappointed. The machine was working overtime to calculate Absolute Counter. I think I put it through its paces a little too much last night."

Upgrade looked at him with a confused expression. "Absolute Counter? The machine said it was a completely new weave, so I thought you had figured out the weave thing."

"It was called Dominion. And good morning, Sal." Blathnaid perked up from her workbench with a wide smile on her face. "Let me know when you have a second, I'm dying to know what way the coat worked out." She turned on her stool and outstretched her hands at the creation he had seen the night before. "I think Darren is going to love it!"

"Dominion?" Sal started as he looked between Blathnaid and Upgrade in confusion. There had to be some mistake, because the weave had completely failed. He had plucked out Absolute Counter before calling it a night. Sal thought about it for a moment when his gaze caught sight of a completely new weave standing upright beside the simulation orb.

Without so much as another word, he rushed over to it with a dazed expression. There was no mistaking it, it was a completely functional weave. Concept and Conquest, the two abilities he had tried to combine were working together... albeit in a terribly inefficient manner. Which meant the green light the previous night hadn't been for Absolute Counter, but instead had been for the other two weaves that were still interlocked. As much as he wanted to know more about Dominion as an ability, he instead focused on fixing the problems that were obvious.

Sal couldn't help but smile at what he was looking at. It was a definite proof of concept, and it didn't need the Skill Master ability to work, just like Upgrade had said. He couldn't help himself from wondering how it would work as an ability. He pulled at the threads to give them more room to breathe and move around. The foundation principle was still in place and Sal gave priority to the interior weave, to ensure that it was able to move as fast as possible, while being supported by the rotations of the exterior weave. There were areas that had risks of overlap, and there were plenty of locations that would form knots if he didn't correct them.

It took a chunk of time, but he didn't care at all. It was an opportunity to see a completely new skill. Even if it was shit, and not functional or useful... it didn't matter. It was something he had managed to create just like Mythcrafter. Sal was ridiculously excited by the prospect and he was delighted that his mistake had resulted in something.

As he finished adjusting the last of the threads, he stepped back with a laugh. He looked up just in time to catch the expressions on Upgrade and Blathnaid's faces. They were looking at him in bewilderment as the wash of green light filled the room.

[Skill Registration: Successful]

[Weave Stability: 98%]

[Category: Energy Manipulation]

[Name: Dominion]

[Grade:20]

[Description: Allows user to summon essence-based constructs into a substantial area of effect. Constructs are created by user's will, and can be re-summoned depending on the user's available essence]

Sal's arms shot over his head in celebration as the description sounded out. It would take something extraordinary to remove the grin on his face as he enjoyed the moment. "Thank you!" His voice was aimed at the simulation orb, until he caught sight of Upgrade's stupefied expression.

"And how's that for an Argento Miracle?!" Sal laughed as he brought his hands down to his sides. It was like a massive weight had been lifted from his shoulders. It was possible to create new skills, and he had everything he needed to replicate the process endlessly.

Upgrade just shook her head in wonder as a playful smile appeared on her face. "Don't know why you're celebrating. I already told you I'm taking credit for that one. My sagely advice clearly provided the breakthrough." She laughed good-naturedly as she gave him a mock round of applause. "But I will say, well done. Dominion sounds pretty incredible."

[No compatible users found]

[Closest Synchro Rate: 52%]

Sal's celebration faltered as he looked at the terminal in confusion. He had forgotten about that part. Making new weaves was great, and very exhilarating, but the usefulness of each ability was determined by how many people would be able to use it. Sure, he'd be able to bring down the requirements by breaking down the weave, but a part of him didn't want to touch it. It might sound stupid, but Sal was looking at this weave with a sense of sentimentality. It was his first combination, and he wanted to savour the moment.

"Ah, that's a shame." Blathnaid voiced her opinion from her workbench. She looked between the orb and Sal with a regretful expression before offering her own thoughts. "It would be pretty cool if you could use those weaves in crafting though. Like, I don't know... a totem or something that would give the Dominion effect. That way everyone would get to benefit from it instead of just one person."

Upgrade shook her head at that as she crossed her arms. "A totem wouldn't cut it at all. Since the concepts would need to be constructed, you'd need to have a single person operating it. Otherwise it would descend into chaos." She thought about it for a few moments before shrugging. "The Tracker wouldn't have enough essence to power something like that, but you could probably incorporate tethers or something to increase the effect radius."

"Tethers?" Sal repeated, making sure that he was following what she was saying.

Upgrade nodded. "Similar to how they operate the barriers. Create points that extend the area of effect... but yeah, it's a hard one. You'd need something that could handle a massive amount of essence." She looked behind her to the desk she was leaning on before laughing and rolling her eyes. "Yeah, no. The jacket we're making will be meaty, but it won't be able to pack that kind of punch. If Dominion incorporates Concept as an ability, Chatfield will be able to give you some pointers of how it might be used."

Sal smiled at that and shook his head. "Nah, we can do this without Chatfield. I'm going to break the weave down to a more manageable state. See if we can find something that works a little better, or has a higher synchronisation rate."

Upgrade looked a little regretful about that comment but nodded her head quietly and got back to her table. Just when it seemed like she wasn't going to say anything, she offered another piece of perspective. "You know, he's not a bad guy. Underneath all the bluster and gruffness, he genuinely cares about people."

"Yeah, but he also thinks that Controllers are within their right to endanger their teammates if it leads to victory." Sal snapped back a little too quickly. He caught himself in the moment and shot Upgrade an apologetic smile that he hoped softened his words. "I won't be asking him for help anytime soon."

Upgrade tilted her head and resumed her own work. "Suit yourself, Sal."