

Quest Academy: Chapter 26 (2,356 words)

With just the virtual blueprint as his guide, Sal snapped his mechanical arms into place with the now instinctive leashing of essence. Upgrade had been right about it needing practice, and then it would become second-nature to him. He tethered his essence to a fresh core as he placed the materials he'd need in front of him. It was almost a third of all the Scarlet Screen that had been gifted to him, but that didn't matter to him. Sal just needed to follow the instructions in the blueprint and he'd be fine. Making an intentionally low-grade Tracker with the materials was going to be a challenge, and using just his essence for every part was going to be even harder. A small part of him wished that he had Martin and Gosia to help him with the smaller pieces, but he wouldn't have a team helping him forever and Sal knew he needed to learn how to do all of this himself. The ear-piece part was where he started. It was going to be constructed with Moonsilver and it required almost a full stack of the material. Over a dozen wafers of the material were propped within reach as he started to bend the material between his clawed fingers. He just needed to get the rough shape of it before he added more layers. It was going to be two pieces that secured around the Scarlet Screen, and he'd be fusing them together with essence.

Sal was grateful for the Monocle and its Calm effect. None of the uncertainties that usually popped up were present, and he was filled with a wholesome sense of calm. With a smile on his face, he continued to shape the Moonsilver into the shape he wanted. Whenever it got too thin, he'd add more of the shimmering metal. It was almost hypnotic to watch as his mechanical hand melted the material down with essence and guided it to fill in the gaps. Mythcraft was acting like an invisible barrier around the proposed shape, allowing the molten Moonsilver to fill the essence-like mould completely. His mind was telling him the ideal temperatures and his hands adjusted it instinctively. Sal's left hand started to repeat the process with the backplate of the tracker, halving the time that it would take if it did them separately. The essence consumption was much higher than usual, and on par with the amount required to forge the Legendary Sniper Rifle. Sal could only guess that it was because of the higher-quality materials needing more essence to be broken down and refined. Just to be on the safe side, Sal tethered to an additional core. He didn't want any volatility to occur that might upset the process. When he was sure that the Moonsilver was formed correctly and met all the blueprint requirements, he left them cooling and picked up the Scarlet Screen.

According to the blueprint, he was going to need to layer them on top of each other to increase the efficacy. Sal didn't hesitate as his hands moved almost automatically on the first layer. He pieced together the shards of various sizes until they were in the shape of a large square. Next, he used his essence to fuse the shards together, creating a much larger sheet of Scarlet Screen that he could work with. It would reduce the overall fragmentation than if he just congealed them all into a ball and then tried to smooth it out. When the sheet was complete, Sal cut out the

blueprint instructions before changing his mechanical attachment to the engraver. He needed to add runes to each of the five thin sheets of visor, and all of them were going to be different. The engraver needle glowed with Mythcrafter essence as Sal got to work tracing the necessary runes. It was a very delicate task as the sheets were almost as thin as the needle itself and going too hard on the engraving would potentially snap them. It was the most nerve-racking part of the whole thing, but Sal was completely at ease as he seamlessly moved from engraving to engraving without batting an eyelid. When they were completed, he didn't hesitate in stacking them together.

Sal compressed the five sheets down until they became a singular layer of Scarlet Screen, using his essence to blend them into one unblemished piece. Next, he curved the piece while it was infused with his essence, achieving the angle he was looking for. It would insert between the ear-piece components and wrap around the front of his face to cover his right eye. Sal carefully shaved away the excess from the visor, using an attachment he didn't even know the name of. It was on his hand and the Mythcrafter ability knew that it was the best tool for the job, so Sal didn't question it. He ensured that it would fit his face by holding it up in front of him, and making sure it didn't cut into his nose. It was probably the first moment of personal customisation in the whole process, which made Sal smile in satisfaction when it was shaved down to be a perfect fit. Another reason he was happy was down to the clear runes he could see overlapping throughout the five engraved layers. Checking back on the Moonsilver, Sal could see that they had successfully cooled. There were no imperfections on the surface, but Sal inspected them closely before continuing. The next part of the process involved polishing the Moonsilver to ensure that there was no dirt that would interfere with his engravings. It took very little rubbing with his mechanical hand to reveal the lustrous misty glimmer of the Moonsilver, and Sal leaned down to get back to work. He placed the virtual blueprint over the cast pieces of Moonsilver and it gave him a bright line to follow with his engraver. Sal followed each of the lines to perfection, going over them twice to ensure they were done properly. It was only his second ever evolutionary rune, but unlike the Sniper Rifle, this one seemed to take the first time he applied it. Sal knew that could change when he poured his essence into the finished product, but that was something he'd worry about in a few minutes.

With a glance at the blueprint, Sal smiled as it became time to put the pieces together. The blood-red visor nestled into the carved groove on the Moonsilver. Rather than clunking on the remainder of the ear-piece, it was designed to slide into place. Sal was rewarded with a satisfying click when the pieces combined, securing the visor between them. It still wasn't done though, as he'd need to blend the pieces together with his Mythcrafter essence. Just before he was about to put the finishing touches on it and inspect it, Sal became aware of the limited essence in the core he had just tethered to. With a raised eyebrow, he moved his connection to the next one and was relieved to see that the reserve was almost completely full. A flash of Appraisal told him that they were Rare-Grade cores, which answered a lot of his silent questions. He was used to operating with an Epic-Grade core for crafting, which explained the lower

output. Sal placed more Moonsilver and Scarlet Screen beside the Tracker, just incase it needed more materials for the final form.

Just looking at the design, Sal was skeptical. It looked incredibly premium and he couldn't believe that it would come out at the Uncommon-Grade. He had no choice but to put those thoughts aside as he threw his essence into it. His mechanical fingers started to massage the essence into the various cracks that had separated the components. The shaved edges of the visor became polished as Sal's essence glided over it. It was an agonisingly slow process, but Sal didn't feel any urgency as he continued carefully. From his infusion of essence, he could tell that the evolutionary rune was working perfectly. The potentially problematic runes in the visor were also operational and working smoothly. If they had been flawed, it would have required him to start the whole thing again. Eventually, Sal had to admit that there were no more improvements that he could make. With a relieved smile, he stepped back and let go of his essence. His mechanical suit reverted to his Epic-Grade uniform with fingerless gloves and he finally noticed that Upgrade was in the room.

"Ah, you've arrived for the best part!" Sal announced with a grin, but Upgrade just looked at him quizzically. Sal wasn't sure what he missed, but Chatfield came to the rescue with a chuckle. "She's been here for the last two hours, Sal."

Sal blinked as he looked back at the still glowing and very much vibrating Tracker on the table. "Sorry, I was just kinda lost in the process. Did I miss anything?" Chatfield shrugged as he leaned back on his stool and gestured over at Upgrade. "Nothing really, we were just having a chat about the proposed changes to production for the first years. Then a back and forth about how... what was the word you used? Unhinged? Yeah, that was it. How unhinged my proposal is for the first year curriculum." Chatfield looked at Upgrade as though asking if she'd like to refute his comment. She just rolled her eyes and moved closer to the table, staring at the glowing Tracker. When she glanced over at Sal, she had a tight smile on her face. "What happened to us using proper procedures for crafting? No blueprints or any sign of the printers being used."

Sal gestured at his right hand with his left. "Did you see how great my control was of the mechanical arms, though? I think that's great progress!" Before Upgrade could utter a response, the Tracker stopped glowing and revealed its result. It took everyone by surprise, and Sal had to do a double-take to verify that it was the same thing that he had created. What had previously been an impressive looking Tracker with a shimmering ear-piece and blood-red visor, was now just... a dull grey device with a smokey red lens curled around the front. Sal didn't hesitate as he looked at it with his Appraisal ability.

Name	[Sealed] Visor [Unsynced]
Origin	Crafted
Age	New
Grade	Uncommon (Lower)
Dimensions	Visor 2.5", 4" Earpiece 4", 3.5"
Materials	Infused Moonsilver Scarlet Screen Refined Mythcraft Essence
Attributes	[Sealed] [2/16 Unlocked] Analysis - Ability to interpret visual data and information. Synergy - Abilities are shared among set items.
Abilities	Analysis Synergy [Sealed] [Sealed] [Sealed] [Sealed]...
Power Source	[Unsynced]
Evolution	Yes - 0%
Quality	Perfect
Condition	100%
Value	Est. \$32,000.00 to \$48,000.00

He had somehow managed to get it to the Uncommon-Grade, but there was so much information that his Appraisal wasn't able to pick up. The fact that it had an evolutionary trait was the biggest relief. Sal looked at the design and was very underwhelmed with how it looked. A small part of him regretted the decision to have it synchronised with a weapon. If he had just ignored all that, and the fact that it was a test from someone he had never met, he'd have at least a Rare-Grade or Unique-Grade tracker with an internal core. Sal couldn't help but wince at the estimated value of the piece, as it took nearly ten times the amount of materials as the Monocle, and came in at an estimated third of the price. Sure, it might be worth more if it evolved, but as it was right now... it felt like a waste of resources.

When Sal turned to look at Upgrade and Chatfield, they were looking at the Tracker in awe. Chatfield was holding a Concept version of it, that he created with his own power. He was turning it over in his hands with wide eyes. Sal guessed that he was just as shocked at how it had come out, but the Monocle was telling Sal a different story. Judging from Chatfield's

expression and body-language, he was delighted. That was something that came as a surprise to Sal who had this one chalked down as something of a failure.

"Sixteen?!" Upgrade repeated, and Chatfield just nodded with a laugh as he turned it over in his hands. Sal wondered if he had an innate ability to understand the concepts he replicated. Upgrade whirled around to Sal with a wide smile on her face. "Sixteen! Sal, this is insane." Sal looked between the Tracker and Upgrade, not sure he was following. The abilities were sealed though, so it would take an age to unlock them and he didn't even know what order they would come through in. Additionally, without the power source to synchronise with it, Sal had no idea how long it would take to gain the required essence.

Upgrade just stared at him for a moment before reaching out and plucking the monocle from his face. "Hope you don't mind, but I don't think we need you under the Calm influence for this. Do you understand what sixteen ability slots mean?" Sal blinked a few times and shook his head, both to signal that he didn't know, and to get his senses back. Upgrade grinned as she shared a knowing look with Chatfield. "If you count each level within the Grades as an ability unlock... your sixteenth ability will be when the Tracker evolves to the Mythic Grade. We've never seen a Legendary-Grade with more than ten abilities! This is incredible, Sal."

Sal looked at the Tracker in a whole new light as his senses finally returned. A wide smile crossed his face as Chatfield's voice pierced through the room. "Should we order food, or are you going to make that gun on an empty stomach?"

Quest Academy: Chapter 27 (2,483 words)

Despite Upgrade's protests, Chatfield eventually won out with his reasoning. With lowered chopsticks, he gestured over at the Tracker that rested on the table. "He has the Analysis ability in this new Tracker, but it can't be operated properly without a tethered power source. It's going to be useless to him until he pairs it with the gun. The whole purpose of today has been to get Sal his Tracker so that he can use Analyse on the materials I brought over. We don't have enough quantity of them for him to learn their uses through crafting, so we need that Analysis ability for this to work."

Upgrade didn't look to enthusiastic about pushing Sal to continue crafting. She continued to eat the sushi in front of her with a frown. Their conversation had been a back and forth about the potential of the Tracker in the future, and Sal had started to slowly appreciate that it was a hell of an investment in the long-term. Chatfield glanced at Upgrade to see if she had any thoughts, but when he was met with only silence, he continued with a meaningful look at Sal. "Just seeing that you're able to bring quality materials to such a low-grade is excellent. We could end up equipping the Saviour classes with high-quality low-grade sets, that would enhance their capabilities in the future. It'll really depend on how long it takes to absorb the required essence to move to the next stage, but if it's a set amount..." Chatfield looked away for a moment as though he was doing an internal calculation. "If it was a set amount of essence per evolution threshold, then it wouldn't even be a case of attuning over time. I was looking at this wrong, thinking that it would evolve in line with the wearer... but what if we equipped our frontline teams with those sets? They could smash through the thresholds and force the evolutions at a rapid pace."

A sharp clicking noise drew both Chatfield and Sal's attention to Upgrade who tapped the tips of the chopsticks together again. Using them almost like an extension of her own hand, she pointed at the Tracker on the table and attempted to dampen Chatfield's surge of excitement. "Before you rush to conclusions, we need to see what we're dealing with. It might be capped at a set rate of essence over time, to ensure that the evolutions are gradual and consistent. Personally, I think your idea would cause them to break. A single hit from a Leecher would probably halve the condition value of that Tracker, so getting established Heroes to equip them out on the field could end up destroying them."

Chatfield tapped the table in front of him as a smile appeared on his face. He was clearly enjoying their back and forth. "But what if they only needed to push to the first evolution? It might not be on a determined path. Sal said it himself that he had no idea what order the abilities would unlock. What if the pieces adapted to their environment and gained abilities that would be suited for the battlefield? If that were the case, it would be the best course of action to

Sal raised his hand at that point to catch Chatfield's attention. "Sorry, that's not what I meant. I already inscribed the runes that I wanted the visor to unlock. They're embedded in layers of Scarlet Screen, and should activate when it reaches a certain grade of evolution. I don't think that the Tracker will evolve into a completely different item based on the amount of essence it gets. I think it's on a set path, but I just don't know what it looks like right now." At those words, an awkward silence fell across the room, with the only sounds coming through being Upgrade's chopsticks as she continued piling sushi onto her plate. Sal had been so absorbed with the crafting that he hadn't really paid attention to his own appetite, and despite his hunger, the sushi was definitely not hitting the spot. Vanessa had told him to expand his diet to feel the full effects of the training regimen, but there were limits to how willing he was to change his tastes. When he looked up at Chatfield, Sal wondered if he had built up enough of a rapport with the man to get an insight into his plans.

"So, what were the unhinged plans for the first years? I'd like to say I'm just curious, but I'm somewhat invested." Sal laughed awkwardly, trying to get a read on Chatfield's reaction. He wished that he was still wearing the monocle to know what the man was thinking, but it turned out he didn't need it. Chatfield was more than happy to explain his thought process.

"Unhinged was Upgrade's term, not mine." Chatfield's tone wasn't harsh as he spoke and there was the faintest hint of a smile on his face. "To be very blunt, the progress rate of students isn't at a high enough level. Having you fight each other in tournament style battles has merit, but the war isn't against humans. I want to alter the trajectory of your development, and expose the first years to demon combat as soon as possible. The excursion that I ran for the second years was, for all intents and purposes, a complete shit-show. They have so much to learn, and they only have two years left to course correct. I want to bring the first year cohorts on the same excursion in the next month or so. We're going to either challenge the base floor of a Tower or we'll take turns in clearing low-level Dungeons." Chatfield locked his gaze with Sal's as he spoke. "It's the only way to prepare you all for the realities beyond. Coddling you within these walls for the next year doesn't help anyone and will actually stunt your growth. The details are still being finalised, but it's likely going to be announced during a Quest assembly in the coming weeks."

Sal couldn't help but stare at him in shock, which caused Upgrade to laugh. She gestured at Sal with her chopsticks and looked at Chatfield. "Okay, now imagine that reaction multiplied by a thousand students. Many of which are more vocal than Sal here. The original curriculum was designed to ease the students into that environment, rather than just throwing them into the deep end. If you're not careful, we're going to have a horde of students dropping-out before they learn their own strengths." Upgrade raised her hand to stop Chatfield from interrupting her. "No, I mean it. There are so many students that take time to come into their powers, and if you give them this shock right out of the gate, they'll give up before they have a chance to flourish. Even if you tell me that they're not cut out for it if they drop-out now, I'd just like to point out that

I wouldn't have lasted as a first year with your curriculum. It was only when I got to second year that I understood my powers and how valuable they could be to society. I wouldn't be a lecturer here if your plan was in place during my time at the academy."

Chatfield sighed as he leaned his head against his palm. He gave Upgrade a sidelong glance before shaking his head. "I understand you completely. Not everyone learns at the same pace, and the new proposal won't fit everyone's capabilities. That's why we'll need buy-in from all the faculty to ensure the talented individuals that need more fostering are given those supports. Since you were one of students that needed more time, hopefully you can recognise the other 'Upgrades' within the first year cohort. Our proposed changes to the curriculum are necessary and we unfortunately need to cater to the majority to get the best results. I'll be happy to listen to any recommendations you come up with to place a spotlight on the Support departments that might convince more students to stay." Chatfield sat up and gestured towards the door that led out to the workshop. "My idea for the production of armour sets with Sal here, was to give the Supports a lifeline when it came to the demonic combat assessments. If a Support is able to craft the way we need them to, and they're hitting quotas, they'll be safe from expulsion. Even if they're not hitting the mark in the combat and survival oriented classes."

Upgrade's eyebrow cocked at that and she scoffed at Chatfield in disbelief. "You're saying that you planned a lifeline for the Support classes in advance of your curriculum proposal?" Even without the monocle, Sal could hear the barbed tone. He started to wonder if Upgrade was actually supportive of Chatfield's plan or if she was just telling him that so he wouldn't worry. Chatfield turned in his stool and aimed a wry grin at Upgrade. "Why is that so hard to believe? I don't want us to lose talent, nor am I here to punish anyone. We're not preparing the students enough for the war, and all I'm doing is putting steps in place to help us reach our goals. All of us, including the Supports. Offence, Defence and Controllers can thrive in the combat assessments, and Healers will be fast-tracked as an absolute necessity. It's only logical that I'd try to find a solution for the Supports who would willingly camp in this very workshop until they graduated. They need to know how to defend themselves, and some of them might even flourish out on the field. We could always do with more versatile people."

Upgrade seemingly lost her appetite as she placed her chopsticks down on the plate, before pushing it away from her. Her face was showing a mixture of emotions, but judging from the tightness in her jaw, frustration was one of the main ones. Sal couldn't foresee them agreeing any time soon, so he tried to steer the conversation in a different direction. Looking to Upgrade, he voiced an idea that he was playing around with in his head. "I was thinking of using the Epic-Grade core as the primary component of the gun. Fashioning it into a revolving cylinder, with hollowed out chambers." It turned out that the question was the perfect distraction as Upgrade turned her attention to him with a curious expression on her face.

"Wait, why would you waste an Epic-Grade core on that? There are more effective ways to infuse essence into bullets, like what you did with the barrel of the sniper rifle." Upgrade was

visibly confused, and Sal tried to explain the haphazard thought that had popped into his head. After he had seen the tiny material fragments he was going to inspect, he wondered if they could be fashioned into bullets for the revolver. He wasn't sure how it was going to work and he didn't want to actually fire the materials, but rather use their individual effects. "What if we created cartridges or housing units for each of the fragments in that chest? I could make it that the Epic-Grade core would act as a catalyst for whatever properties we slotted into the chamber. Like... what if we put Moonsilver in as a cartridge? Maybe it would fire an essence bullet with a calming effect. I don't want to make the materials into actual projectiles, but like small cores that change the effects of each shot. Ideally, I'd be able to make the revolver and then the cartridges could be separate things I create as I discover new materials. It would add a lot to the versatility of the gun, and I'd be able to change the load for whatever situation I'm going into."

Upgrade blinked for a moment before she gestured vaguely at the open air in front of him. "What are you waiting for? Check it out. See if that's possible." She was immediately on her feet and walking over to the stacks of blueprint pages. Without any pomp or ceremony, she pulled one of them from the pile and slid it in front of Sal. "I know you don't need to do this, but I won't be able to understand everything that's going on in your head. Sketch it out and talk me through it." Chatfield watched carefully from the other side of the table. He didn't want to be the bearer of bad news, but felt that he needed to remind them of what needed to be done.

"You currently have an unsynced Tracker. Whatever design you go for needs to be synergistic with the Tracker, otherwise it's just a waste of resources. Your concept sounds interesting, but very ambitious. I'd rather that you worked with the materials you have and the blueprint that's available to you already from Quest. There's no need to overcomplicate this, as it's just the next step in understanding the materials you'll need to assess for the armour sets." Chatfield's voice was calm, but it was clear to Sal that he was concerned by the sudden change in project scope. Before Sal could apologise for the derailing, Upgrade stepped forward and gave Chatfield a level stare. "I don't mean to overstep, Captain. As the Crafting lecturer and Sal's mentor, I'm fully behind him flexing his creative muscles like this. If you'd rather get some rest, we can call you when it's done." Her voice and demeanour both screamed that she absolutely meant to overstep. Chatfield sighed resignedly and crossed his arms, but made no attempt to leave or dissuade Upgrade. Instead he just waved for Sal to proceed.

Sal gave Upgrade a small smile, and she rewarded him with an etcher. "Don't miss anything. I want as much context as possible, so draw everything your beautiful mind comes up with. Got it?" Sal's smile turned into a grin as he activated his Mythcrafter ability and got to work with the design. His intentions were wild, but the ability managed to understand them as they fashioned the Epic-Grade core into the rotating cylinder of the revolver. Just as Sal reached for the monocle on the table, Upgrade grasped his wrist and gave him a playful smile. "Augmenting your abilities is fine, but you don't need that piece of glass to make this. You've got the skills yourself." Sal smiled sheepishly as he withdrew his hand and looked back into the space in front

of him where the images of the revolver were moving around slowly. Upgrade leaned slightly closer to him and spoke in a quieter tone. "Besides, you're a pretty shit conversationalist when you're wearing that thing."

Quest Academy: Chapter 28 (2,606 words)

The rhythmic sounds of Upgrade's snoring was oddly soothing, and Sal couldn't help but laugh inwardly at the irony of her previous statement. He was the bad conversationalist? She was the one that went to sleep only a couple of hours after making that direct statement. Sal glanced up to see Chatfield slumped over on the stool, using his crossed arms as a pillow. He wasn't nearly as audible, but was definitely asleep. Both of them had insisted that they'd be fine and they were just closing their eyes for a bit, but that was an hour ago when they were still trying to pay attention to what was going on. Sal had gone to the trouble of draping a blanket over Upgrade and clearing away the sushi plates. After a while, the smell of the raw fish had started to distract Sal so he took it out of the room and disposed of it properly. He genuinely thought that it would be late in the evening, but he wasn't prepared for the fact that it was the middle of the night. With just a quick calculation, he realised he'd been crafting straight for over fifteen hours, and didn't feel any real fatigue. Maybe it was the fact that he'd been tethering constantly to the different cores and preserving his own internal essence, or maybe it was the results of his training exercises. Either way, Sal wasn't about to question it.

When he re-entered the room, he inspected the disassembled parts of his new revolver. He used the Hellfire Titanium that had been provided for his Tracker as the Mythcrafter ability strongly suggested it for the gun, and Sal was more than happy to oblige. Surprisingly, the Lords Crystal was suggested for the majority of the firing mechanism and Sal thought the material was specifically oriented towards Psionic-based abilities. Maybe it was because the materials were in front of him, but Sal went through the motions and used all the suggestions that his ability gave him. The barrel had been an interesting one too, which was made almost entirely of rolled Moonsilver. He had to engrave a series of grooves into the sheet of metal that would be on the inside of the barrel. According to the blueprint, it was to create a spiral effect and increase the range of any fired shots. Instead of blending the edges of Moonsilver together with essence, Sal was prompted to use a straight thin strip of Scarlet Screen along the top of the revolver for both sides of the Moonsilver to adhere to. The front and rear sights were made of Scarlet Screen also and managed to line up perfectly. Sal didn't want to think of how much of a nightmare it would have been to create it without the mechanical claws and his abundance of essence. It really gave him an appreciation for the crafters that didn't have his ability, that fashioned these items with trial, error and skill.

Sal picked up the grip and sighed quietly. He had wanted to hold back a chunk of the Lords Crystal for Divinity's Crown, but it was being prompted as a main component for the grip of the gun. Thankfully, the Hellfire Titanium was required for the frame, trigger, cylinder and trigger guard. Sal had no qualms with using the more common material as it didn't feel like a huge loss. A moment of turning the grip in his hands, Sal wondered when he started classifying the Hellfire

cylinder that had once been his Epic Core. The self-replenishing rune had been masterfully reapplied between the grooves of the cylinder. The ejection rod was made with Moonsilver and applied a gentle casing around the core. Each of the chambers in the cylinder had been bored out with a combination of a tiny drill attachment and Sal's essence. They were widened and polished before Sal had to insert tiny needles to draw engravings the size of his smallest fingernail in each chamber. The firing mechanism had over twenty parts, including bolts, springs, sliding pins, screws and studs. Sal went through each of them as though he was on autopilot and made a mental note to thank Martin for his help with the Sniper Rifle mechanism when he next saw him. Since it wasn't intended to be a combustion type weapon, most of the mechanical parts shouldn't be necessary, but the blueprint was making a gun that had the versatility to operate with either the essence cartridges or regular ammunition.

Sal winced ever so slightly as his index fingers started to emit tiny essence-based lasers of light. The erratic flashes as they expertly sliced through the large chunk of Lords Crystal was fascinating to watch, but included a lot of sparks. It was the first time he had ever seen his mechanical arms using attachments like them, and it was a massive drain on his essence compared to the other attachments. Sal didn't dwell on it as he fashioned the grip for the revolver. It was a milky white that almost looked like it was made of pearl. A few holes were drilled for the screws to be put in place, and Sal was almost ready for assembling the entire thing together. Where most of his other inventions had been straightforward, this one was by far the most difficult and nuanced. Normally he just threw essence into it and hoped for the best, but the revolver had so many moving parts that needed to work harmoniously. One of the funniest moments was the effort that it took to load the spring he had created out of Moonsilver. It had never been compressed before and despite his mechanical claws being incredibly proficient, the spring wanted to wiggle every way other than how it was intended. After picking the spring from the ground for the fifth time, Sal finally got it secured around the centre pin. The puzzle continued for another hour with Sal having to glance at the blueprint almost three times for every action he took. When it was finally assembled, Sal pulled back the hammer and heard a satisfying click. He aimed at the ground and applied a little pressure to the trigger, but nothing happened. After more pressure, Sal sighed. There was something blocking it or he had screwed up somewhere. He tried to take manually release the hammer, but it froze in place too. Sal fiddled with the revolver for a few minutes, but in his frustration he ended up scoring one of the screws with the wrong attachment on his hand. At that very moment, Upgrade snored particularly loudly and rather than finding it soothing or endearing, Sal was annoyed. His tiredness was finally catching up with him and he found himself getting angry at the fact that they had ordered sushi earlier instead of something he enjoyed. All of the little things that normally wouldn't phase him, started to bubble up to the surface of his mind and he knew that there was very little he could do to get back into the zone. He was about to call it a night and give up when he spotted the Monocle resting on the table.

Sal glanced up at the clock in the room and saw that it was already morning. Thankfully, it was the weekend and he was only eating into his Sunday by spending time in the workshop. There

wouldn't be classes for another day, so he had plenty of time left to get the gun finished. All of the excuses that Sal wanted to tell himself felt both justifiable and petty at the same time. With a resigned groan, he plucked the Monocle off the table and placed it onto his right eye. It took a little bit of raising his eyebrow and letting it settle for it to become comfortable, but it was absolutely worth it. The calming effect that came with it almost made Sal want to laugh at how silly he was being. A smile crossed his face as he slowly pried out the scored screw and restored it back to its proper shape. All of the components inside the gun were operating as they should, but they were quite stiff. Sal turned away from the table and started to rummage through the different storage areas in the room, looking for the solution that made him want to laugh out loud. He had no doubt that Martin had already known to lubricate all of the components in the firing mechanism before they assembled it. It didn't take long for him to find a small canister of oil that had a nozzle for spraying and an attachment for more delicate administration. Sal got to work by applying a thin layer to all of the parts that would be moving or potentially coming into contact with ammunition. As he went through it, the hammer clicked back into place and the trigger became less stiff. Sal used a tiny scrap of cloth to wipe the metal down until he was finally satisfied. His eyes were telling him that it was ready for Appraisal, but he didn't want to spoil the surprise before he poured his essence into it completely. While it might have been operational or functional at the moment, he hadn't refined it with his essence to check all the runes were working as intended.

With the monocle in place, Sal checked the levels of the three cores he had tethered to and calculated that there would be plenty left over from the refining process. Well, as long as it wasn't more demanding than the sniper rifle. With a casual glance up to see if Upgrade or Chatfield were awake, Sal noted that they were still fast asleep. Smiling softly, Sal let the effects of the Calm ability wash over him once more and felt the smile fade from his lips. His mechanical arms readied themselves as he turned the revolver over in his fingers. Essence pooled in his chest, mingling with the essence from the tethered cores. He waited until his own Mythcrafter essence had successfully diluted the foreign essence before he proceeded with funneling it into his target. Sal narrowed his eyes as he looked for any defects that appeared on the surface of the gun. His essence flowed through the weapon like water, filling any cracks that it came across. Each of the runes that he had carved into the metal shone vibrantly as they temporarily activated under his influence. Sal was most interested in the intricate weave he had wrapped around the outside of the barrel and across the frame and grip. It was the evolutionary rune and it looked to be completely fine. The blueprint had advised on making the version with a long barrel to ensure that there was enough surface area for the evolution rune to activate. When he was satisfied with it, Sal moved on to the cylinder and the individual chambers. That's where he ran into his first problem, the chambers hadn't taken the etchings as well as he had hoped and Sal knew that it was inevitable since he couldn't exactly see what he was carving when he did it. Thankfully, his essence was able to course correct the damage and apply a fresh rune on the remnants of the previous attempt. It took a large chunk of external essence to smooth over the failed attempt and then even more to manually dig through the fashioned core, but he managed it eventually.

Sweat dripped down Sal's face as he concentrated intently on the task at hand. With the sniper rifle it had been much easier since he removed the modularity by fusing it all together. This weapon wasn't going to have the Cleanse ability any time soon, so Sal had to ensure that each piece worked as it should. He felt sorry for the other crafters that had attempted to fix the Sniper Rifle. It must have been an absolute nightmare trying to make everything work in sync. Sal spent close to an hour going through each and every component, strengthening the pins and reinforcing bolts. It seemed like every individual piece of the revolver was hungry for his essence, and he had no idea why it was so demanding. Sal had been under the impression that the high-quality materials would lessen the demand on his essence, but it seemed that theory was wrong. He fell into a rhythm of checking and refining each piece he came across. Every subsequent check had revealed another component that needed attention, until he finally reached a point where there were no obvious improvements to make. Sal had done a full sweep eight times already and the ninth had been the one to come back with the all clear. With a glance up at the blueprint, Sal saw that he was finally done. Not to be complacent, Sal took a steadying breath and forced himself to run the tenth check. Where the water-like essence had previously deviated to fill the cracks in his designs, this time it flowed seamlessly over the weapon without a single drop moving towards the revolver. Sal was about to use his hand to wipe the sweat from his brow, but stopped at the last moment when he saw the mechanical claw up close.

Sal tried to push his essence into the weapon, but there was nowhere left for it to go. He didn't let the revolver rest though, as he still had one final step to complete. His mechanical hand picked up the Tracker and placed it beside the still glowing revolver. Sal pulled a strand of essence from the completed synergy rune on the revolver and traced it across to the same rune on the Tracker. He was relieved to see the essence stick to it and activate the engraving on the Tracker. The only problem was that the Tracker was completely devoid of essence and Sal had to grasp at the remaining cores in the chest. If he didn't have the monocle equipped, he probably wouldn't have noticed until it knocked him unconscious, but the siphoning had ramped up by a huge amount. The Tracker was using the connection to the revolver to pull essence into itself, but since the revolver was still connected to Sal's internal core, it pulled the excess requirements from its host. Sal barely managed to tether to the remaining cores before he bottomed out his own reserves. The strands connecting the revolver and tracker had been as thin as hairs were now thicker than shoelace. Sal watched as the essence shot across the construct in bursts, pumping essence into the Tracker until both pieces of equipment glowed contentedly.

Sal cut off his essence connection with the tethered cores and deactivated his mechanical arms. He pulled the monocle from his eye and almost collapsed as a wave of fatigue overwhelmed him. His knees were the first to go as he scrambled to hold onto the edge of the table. With wide eyes, he tried to figure out what had happened but the darkness he was all too familiar with threatened to knock him out. Sal gripped the edge of the table and forced his body to comply

with sheer willpower. There would be no appraisals happening until he got some rest, but he at least wanted to see what they looked like.

Quest Academy: Chapter 29 (2,500 words)

Sal was breathing heavily and grimacing as he tried to keep a hold of the table. His body felt like it was shutting down regardless of what he tried, and it was a terrifying sensation. The last thing he wanted was to collapse on the floor and to have Upgrade and Chatfield worrying about his health. He didn't want to gain a reputation for not knowing his limits and pushing himself too far. With gritted teeth, Sal forced his essence to connect to the cores in the hopes that it would help him recover, but the connection did little to ease his suffering. A few moments of tortured breathing continued before Sal reached down to adjust his knees so that he could sink down to the floor without landing on his face. When he finally managed to get into a kneeling position, Sal let go of the table and sank backward to sit on his heels. Raising his chin, he looked up at the ceiling of the room and ran through the last few moments to determine what had happened.

After a few minutes, his breathing returned to normal and the previously encroaching darkness had finally started to recede. Sal reached up to grasp the edge of the table and slowly got back to his feet with a relieved sigh. His eyes caught sight of the Monocle on the table and he wondered if it had been disguising his incredibly fatigued state. The only other thing he could think of was the sudden lurch of essence pulled from his body during the pairing of the revolver with the tracker. Sal closed his eyes and focused on his internal core, curious to see if there was any clues there about what was happening. After a few moments of quiet meditation, he saw his threads in place and they looked to be quite healthy. Each thread connected to their respective gates harmoniously and Sal was left even more confused than before. When he opened his eyes, he came to the conclusion that he was just exhausted. It wasn't an essence related issue this time and all he likely needed was rest. It took great effort for him to avoid making eye contact with the revolver and tracker, but he knew it was for the best. If he started inspecting them now, it would lead to an Appraisal and he'd immediately start using the tracker on that crate of materials. Sal saw that there was enough space beside Upgrade on the couch for him to sit down and lean his head back. It wouldn't be comfortable, but it would be enough for what he needed. It was only when he started towards to the couch that he realised how sluggish his movements were. A random thought popped into his head about making a device that would heal fatigue or accelerate his rest periods. He wondered what sort of abilities he'd need to manage something like that, and what kind of materials it would require. As Sal sank back into the couch, his thoughts were completely forgotten as he slipped immediately into a deep sleep.

When Sal awoke, he felt something was wrong. He had gone to sleep in an upright seated position, but was waking up horizontal. There was a slight pressure on his upper chest and what felt like a pillow cradling his neck. From the slight movements of his arms, he could tell that he was covered in a blanket. Sal opened his eyes and was not prepared to see Upgrade's face inches from his own. Her right hand was placed on his chest, and he realised that his head was

ago." Her tone was teasing and she gave him a mock frown before patting his chest reassuringly. "Imagine my surprise when you cuddled up right next to me."

Sal felt his face burning with embarrassment as sat up abruptly. He mumbled an apology to Upgrade, but she just leaned her head closer to him again with a grin. "Sorry, what was that?" Sal threw off the blanket and got to his feet, ignoring Upgrade's laughter as he blearily looked at the table. Chatfield must have moved the visor and revolver at some point as they had changed location from where he left them. Sal was inwardly grateful that Chatfield was nowhere to be seen, as it would have been doubly embarrassing to have him witness using Upgrade like a pillow.

Upgrade yawned audibly, stretching her arms over her head before she got to her feet. "You sleep okay? Looked like you were having some pretty rough nightmares for the last while." There was no hint of teasing in her tone, and Sal just shook his head in response. Even if he did have a nightmare, it was very rare that he'd remember them. His dreams were nowhere near as vivid as what others described in their own. Upgrade's frown came into view as she stepped around to the other side of the table, facing Sal. She looked at him with a raised eyebrow and gestured at the couch. "You were thrashing around a bit and I tried waking you up, which is why you were draped over me like that. When you calmed down, you looked peaceful, so I just let you sleep." She paused for a moment as though she were lost in thought. When her eyes refocused on Sal, she smiled. "I hope you know you can talk to me if there are things weighing down on you. I don't want you burning out anytime soon, so if there's anyway I can help keep that head of yours in good shape, let me know."

Sal returned her smile as he glanced over at the couch. "Don't worry, you'd be on my list of people to tell if I was struggling with something. I don't know what that was though, so I'm not going to dwell on it." Sal's attention came back to the table and his smile grew into a wide grin. "Besides, we've something much more fun to look at. Did you check it out?" Upgrade just shook her head as she placed her elbows down on the table and leaned forward to get a better look at the revolver. "I didn't get a chance yet, but it looks damn impressive. Did you do an Appraisal on it yet, or were you waiting for us to wake up? Chatfield should be back in a bit, he had a meeting he needed to get to. The Hunter Bureau isn't the type of organisation you keep waiting."

Before Sal got started with the appraisal, he remembered the sensation of extreme fatigue from a few hours ago. With a glance up at Upgrade, he decided to tell her everything about it to see if she had any insight into what had happened. Sal went through everything, making sure not to leave out any details. When he finished, he was glad to see that Upgrade looked somewhat bewildered. It meant that he hadn't screwed up by missing something obvious.

Upgrade looked at the revolver on the table and then back at the visor. "Ah! I think I know what happened." She tilted her head slightly to one side as she gestured at the visor. "You put in the synergy trait at the very end and let it activate?" She was looking expectantly at Sal who merely

noded in response. Upgrade smiled as she tapped the visor meaningfully. "Synergies can only exist on an equal basis. If one of the pieces is a Rare Grade and the other piece is Uncommon, it won't work as they aren't capable of synergising. Rather than failing outright, I think your ability understood the issue and fixed it." Upgrade slid the visor across the table to Sal. "That is no longer an Uncommon Grade item. My best guess is that it forcibly upgraded so both pieces of equipment were on equal standing. Since your internal core is totally fine, it likely used you as the conduit for essence transfer between those cores and the visor. You were essentially the vessel for the essence, and I'd say your monocle calmed your senses to the point that you didn't even notice it happening."

Sal stared at the visor in disbelief. He hadn't looked at it properly since he had crafted the revolver, but now that he was more awake he could clearly see that it had changed in appearance. There was only one way to know for sure, and Sal activated his ability with a smile. "Let's find out if you're right."

Name	Scarlet Moon Visor [Set 1/2]
Origin	Crafted
Age	New
Grade	Rare (Lower)
Dimensions	Visor 2.5", 4" Earpiece 4", 3.5"
Materials	Infused Moonsilver Scarlet Screen Refined Mythcraft Essence
Attributes	[Sealed] [5/16 Unlocked] Analysis - Ability to interpret visual data and information. Insight - Wearer can analyse patterns and predict outcomes. Deduction - Wearer can rapidly process real-time information. Lock - Guaranteed to track sighted targets. Synergy - Abilities are shared among set items.
Abilities	Analysis Insight Deduction Calm Synergy [Sealed]...
Power Source	External Essence [Scarlet Moon Revolver]
Evolution	Yes - 3%
Quality	Perfect
Condition	100%
Value	Est. \$85,000.00 to \$105,000.00

As Sal stared at the results, he finally started to realise just how overpowered this set was going to become. With his jaw wide, he glanced up at Upgrade who was waiting expectantly. Sal could barely find the words as he looked over at the monacle. "That monacle is a lower Unique Grade, and it has four abilities unlocked. This visor is a whole grade lower, at the lowest form of Rare Grade, and it has five abilities unlocked." Sal's mind was whirling at the revelation. He took a step back from the table and looked back at Upgrade in shock. "The shirt you made has four, and it's an Epic Grade, two whole tiers above this. The Siphon Blade that Blink uses in the Reavers Guild, it has four abilities and is at the same level as this... how is this even possible?"

Upgrade clapped her hands together excitedly as she moved around the table to stand beside Sal. She picked up the visor and turned it over in her hands. "I tried telling you about this yesterday! It looks like it's picking up a new ability with every grade level. If that sixteen number

is accurate, then it means you'll eventually get it to Mythic Grade, or Legendary if my math is wrong. Either way, that's an insane achievement! Are the abilities good?"

Sal had to refocus to read the information on the visor, which was a little more challenging as Upgrade was constantly turning it around. "Analysis, which is the one we knew was there and the whole reason for the visor in the first place. It has Insight, Lock and Deduction... two of which are on the monocle. That Lock ability is probably the same as the one that we put on the Sniper Rifle, but it's much more potent. I would need to check, but it looks like it's a more powerful variant."

Upgrade nodded with a grin. "Which leaves Synergy as the last one, which binds the visor to your revolver. Okay, that's enough stalling. It's time to appraise the gun. I need to know!" She placed the visor down and waited expectantly for Sal to continue.

Sal was more than happy to oblige as he was more than curious himself. He picked up the revolver and was struck by how impressive it looked. A singular red streak connected the sights at the top of the barrel, clearly the influence of the Scarlet Screen that joined the pieces of Moonsilver. The body of the gun was a vibrant silver that shimmered under the light. It was like the mist effect from earlier was somehow trapped beneath the surface. Sal started the Appraisal and inwardly hoped that it would be just as impressive as the visor. He was not disappointed.

Name	Scarlet Moon Revolver [Set 2/2]
Origin	Crafted
Age	New
Grade	Rare (Lower)
Dimensions	6 inches barrel 11.5 inches length 5.5 inches height 2.1 lbs weight
Materials	Infused Moonsilver Scarlet Screen Refined Mythcraft Essence Hellfire Titanium
Attributes	[Sealed] [5/16 Unlocked] Tether - Shots tether the gun to its prey, siphoning target essence with every shot. Leech - Synergised equipment will benefit from absorbed essence. Burst - Greatly enhances shot potency by utilising stored essence. Reaction - Essence based bullets will have increased effect Synergy - Abilities are shared among set items.
Abilities	Tether Leech Burst Reaction Synergy [Sealed]...
Power Source	External Essence
Evolution	Yes - 3%
Quality	Perfect
Condition	100%
Value	Est. \$120,000.00 to \$165,000.00

When Sal finished reading out the results, he was surprised to see that Upgrade looked disappointed. When he frowned, she put up her hands and smiled reassuringly. "Sorry, I think I was just expecting something a little more dramatic after the visor. That Sniper Rifle had Hunt, Headshot and Grounded which are all fantastic. You still have one that amplifies shot damage, which is great, but I was kinda hoping that it would have something really useful." Upgrade tried to change the topic and gestured at the revolver. "It's really great though, five skills and the evolutionary potential to get to the pinnacle of grades is fantastic. Hard to believe that the estimated value is so low, though."

Sal chuckled at that. "It's a set item, and they're valued individually. You shouldn't really pay much attention to the value part, as it's all incredibly subjective and only an estimate. With the

amount of abilities, it would absolutely make a fortune at an Auction House." His smile faded ever so slightly as he looked at it again. It was better than he had expected and he wasn't at all disappointed in the results. Burst added shot potency which would be good, and maybe it would stack with the Reaction ability, too. Tether, Leech and Synergy were all necessary for the revolver to function and grant essence to the visor. Sal laughed as he shook his head, finding the whole situation ridiculous. "Even if it's not a heavy-hitter now, we've another eleven abilities to unlock that might make it more fearsome."

Upgrade grinned and gave him a nod. "That's the spirit. Now... I don't think that Chatfield will mind us skipping ahead, but do you want to start analysing the materials in that crate?" Sal didn't need anymore prompting as he lifted the visor and placed it on his right ear, smiling broadly as a series of runes started to activate in preparation. Before he could say a word, Upgrade's stats appeared in front of him.

Quest Academy: Chapter 30 (3,353 words)

When Sal had first used the Analysis ability it had been an overwhelming experience. Quest's Tracker had provided some logic to the chaos, and gave him a few additional pieces of information in a sea of numbers. Sal couldn't be sure if it was down to the Deduction ability, or if it was just Analysis at play, but the newly crafted visor was capable of controlling all the data in a seamless manner. There were countless conclusions being made in front of his very eyes as the visor calibrated to the information on screen. Graphs and numbers were overlaid on the screen, pointing out all of Upgrade's features and making calculations at lightning speed. None of the hardship was placed on Sal's mind as it worked, since the visor did all of the heavy lifting by itself. All he had to do was watch in a stunned silence as each field started to populate at random. He felt a smile tugging at his lips as the newly acquired information started sorting itself into various sections, similar to the Appraisal skill. Most impressive of all, was that it had only taken a few seconds for more than half of the report to complete.

Sal didn't want to blink in case he missed something, and a few moments later his patience was rewarded with a full breakdown of Upgrade's stats. There was a lot of terminology that he didn't understand, but could probably guess. His eyes darted through the information a few times until it stopped adding new fields. It was absolutely overkill and Sal loved it. He finally blinked for a moment before starting to read through the stat screen.

Name	G. Ziemele
Alias	Upgrade
Class	Support
Profession	Current: Crafting Lecturer, Quest Academy Previous: Guild Officer II, The Workshop Previous: Trainee Hero, Independent Previous: Student, Quest Academy
Rank (Hero)	Guild Association: The Invention Tier 5 1,743 Hunter Bureau: Current Rank 10,490 Quest Academy: Final Rank 90
Accreditations	Challenge Crests: 5 Specialist Classes: <ul style="list-style-type: none"> • Masterclass Crafting 1st Class • Advanced Engraving Pass • Advanced Technocraft 1st Class • Advanced Synthesis Techniques Pass • Advanced Restoration & Repair 1st Class • Advanced Ethical Crafting 1st Class • Advanced Coaching & Leadership Pass Certifications: <ul style="list-style-type: none"> • Appraiser Foundation Grade - LN: 841 • Engraver Foundation Grade - LN: 924 • Upgrader Master Grade - LN: 67 • Repairer Intermediate Grade - LN: 4,239 • Craft Design Master Grade - LN: 72
Ability	Skill Name: Upgrade Rating: VII Skill Category: Invention Skill Mastery: 87% Skill Efficiency: 36% Progress to Next Rating: 11% Evolutionary Capability: Yes Potential Cap: IX Natural Synergy: Restoration Epicraft

Essence	Essence Type: Invention / Augmentation Essence Gates: 90 Essence Absorption Rate: 18% Essence Control: 100% Essence Refinement: 89% Essence Calibration: 92%
Physical	Strength Rating: III Mobility Rating: VI Speed Rating: V Fitness Rating: VIII Current Status Effects: Injuries: None Illnesses: Minor Fatigue, Minor Dehydration
Reputation	Hunter Bureau: Acknowledged Guild Association: Regarded Quest Academy: Highly Regarded Doom Society: Regarded Doom Council: Known Bastion Colonies: Known Ameye Locomotion: Revered
Threat Level	Analysed Equipment: III - Current, VII - Activated Analysed Martial Arts: N/A Analysed Movements: VI Analysed Techniques: N/A Analysed Body Composition: VI
Wealth	Q-Credit: 29,248

Sal had literally no idea where to start with unpacking all of the information. There was simply way too much for him to go through and he had to take a break halfway through the list. It was an absolute nightmare and he could only imagine the pain of trying to read it aloud to Upgrade. When his eye traced over the reputation section, it must have taken it as a sign that he wanted to list more of the known relationships that Upgrade had fostered over the years. A list of over thirty different organisations appeared after a few seconds and Sal had to tear his vision away from the constantly expanding section in the hopes that it would stop assaulting him with data. He instead went to the areas that interested him the most, which was the skills area. Sal couldn't be sure, but he thought that his Skill Master ability was giving him a lot more context than he'd have received normally. It broke down each of the different stats for Upgrade's ability and

contained more than a few surprises. The fact that there were grades to each level of skill was news to him, and the ability to evolve them into stronger variants was also new. The synergy data looked really useful for picking skills to later implant, and Sal was already excited to try inspecting himself with the visor. A slight shiver of anticipation crawled up his spine, which he promptly ignored.

Sal looked to the bottom of the screen and was surprised to see that it scrolled up for him automatically, containing a host of unseen information that added to Upgrade's profile. He could see a few things relating to her threat level that surprised him. It wasn't that he was surprised Upgrade was capable, it was more the fact that the visor had understood Upgrade's equipment and her ability to upgrade it for short periods of time. Sal stood there in wonder for a few more seconds, completely blown away by the onslaught of information that was now at his fingertips. He couldn't believe how much was on display in such a short space of time.

"You going to just stare at me all day?" Upgrade laughed as she slapped her hands against the surface of the table in a vaguely familiar rhythm. It snapped Sal's attention back to her and he realised he had completely zoned out. With a guilty laugh he gestured at the visor on his face. "This thing just gave me a full biography of you. It looks like it's read the essence from your Q-Card and then cross-referenced it with the whole System ability that Quest set up. Like, Network and System aren't even on the list of abilities and it seems to be using them? I can't make sense of it but it's incredible." Sal was trying to get his head around it, but he was only coming up with a blank.

"Okay, first of all... I'm going to want to know everything it told you about. I'll be the one to tell you if they're all lies or not, but I can't help but be a little curious. Not sure how I feel about having all of my information gathered and calculated like that." Upgrade crossed her arms and Sal laughed when her threat level increased slightly on his visor. It really was an incredible piece of equipment. Upgrade gave Sal a steady look as she gestured vaguely at the revolver on the table. "Did your gun have an ability listed for 'Shoot'? No, because that's the function of a gun. Your Tracker's function is information retrieval, and since it was based off Quest's design, you likely have functionality that incorporates the Network and System capabilities without actually needing the skills. Imagine if you crafted a radio. If you made it correctly, it would naturally intercept frequencies that are available. You don't need an ability like Transmit to be able to send and receive messages, as it's already in the design of the item. Does that make sense?"

Sal nodded, the smile not leaving his face at all. "That makes perfect sense. I'm surprised you only got a pass in your advanced course for coaching and leadership. Your examples are great." Upgrade's eyes widened and Sal received a flash of warning from his visor that her threat level had suddenly spiked. He barely managed to evade the swipe from her hands as she tried to take the visor from his face. Her expression was a mixture of disbelief and shock, but after a few moments of staring him down from the other side of the table she finally calmed down. "Okay then, what else can you see? You seem to have my academic records, but what else?"

Sal took another step back with his hands raised defensively as he grinned at her. "I'll tell you, only if you promise not to try that again." Upgrade tilted her head slightly. "No deal. Now spill. I want to know everything." Sal hooked his right foot underneath the bar of the stool and slowly dragged it to where he stood out of range. He made a show of moving it farther away from Upgrade as he took a seat. With a gesture for her to sit down, he realised that he might have been pushing his luck. Upgrade stood with her arms crossed and didn't look very amused. Sighing to himself, Sal started to explain what he could see. "You're no fun. Okay, it gives a comprehensive breakdown of your classes and certifications, with all the licence numbers. Your skill is listed with a number of really cool stats, like how far off you are from getting to the next grade of proficiency. It has a list of your efficiencies like essence absorption, mastery, refinement and calibration. Then, after that-

"Wait." Upgrade held up her hand in surprise and Sal was relieved to see that she had finally taken a seat opposite him. She didn't look as annoyed as before, but rather confused. "Proficiency grades? Isn't it a fixed skill? The only change I've felt in the last few years was when you untied that knot in my thread. I've never felt an improvement in the ability before then." Sal shrugged and pointed at himself. "I was thinking that it might be because of the Skill Master ability? Maybe it allows me to interpret skills differently than others. It doesn't look like it's lying though, I can see that your power could be a lot more potent if I was to undo the other knots. Maybe the visor is just giving me a visual interpretation of what I can sense myself with the ability?"

Upgrade frowned as she shook her head. "I don't mean to sound discouraging here, Sal. But I think there's a problem with that visor. Lombardi is one of our top people when it comes to skills and I don't think he's ever mentioned the possibility of skills evolving after they've manifested. Maybe I'm wrong, and your visor is right... but if it's actually real, then it's a little terrifying. Don't suppose it tells you how to build the proficiency?"

Rather than answering immediately, Sal tried out something he was curious about. He had been using the visor without activating his own ability. It was such an alien feeling to have information appear in front of his eyes without having any draw of essence. Instead of activating the Mythcrafter ability, Sal used the Skill Master one specifically to check Upgrade's internal weaves, wondering if there was anything different since he last checked. As though interpreting his intentions, the visor activated along with his eyes and Sal was once again rendered speechless by the versatility of the tracker. Where he previously had just seen threads of light, the visor added hard data to explain what he was seeing. It was the replacement of instinct with fact. Each of the knots appeared on the visor like a constellation of stars, with tiny lines drawing out from them. Each line had a percentage of improvement to Upgrade's ability and Sal could finally quantify how much he could safely unknot without it harming her. All of Quest's concerns were valid. There were some knots that would have thrown Upgrade into a serious imbalance if they had been undone, where she wouldn't have been able to fuel her own ability because her

expended essence would drastically overtake her generated essence. From Sal's limited understanding, he guessed that Upgrade would be in a permanent state of suffering the Dregs if he undid them all.

"It works with my Skill Master ability." Sal finally admitted as he worked through his thoughts. His eyes were locked onto the threads in her body as he continued. "I can't say for certain, but it's showing me the knots that can be undone in your ability safely. It's actually calculating the increase in your stats depending on which knot I look at. I don't think it would naturally increase your proficiency though... I think it would raise the cap of your potential." Sal mulled over the numbers for a few more moments, switching his focus to smaller knots that he would have instinctively targeted. It was like a minefield where the wrong choice would result in Upgrade's essence generation falling into negative numbers. After maybe five separate inspections, Sal was left with the thought that he was insanely lucky to have avoided certain disaster when he undid that first knot.

Upgrade's palms stopped pattering against the table as she stared at Sal in confusion. "Every fibre of my being is hoping that you're right, and that it's all this easy and possible. The rational part of my brain is constantly reminding me that you've barely been enrolled for two months and you're bound to screw up eventually. You can craft evolutionary items, implant traits into equipment, unknot the abilities of others... and now, you're able to discern every little thing about people you look at? It sounds crazy when you say it out loud, doesn't it?" Upgrade was shaking her head as looked down at her own palms. "I never thought I would be the type of person that would be jealous of other people. Hell, my ability managed to alienate half of Quest Academy when I was enrolled here. I want to help train you up to be the best crafter you can possibly be, but it looks like we're nearing the end of that road already. Everything you're talking about here is way outside of my skillset. Your Mythcrafter ability managed to produce three incredible pieces of equipment in just a single weekend. A single Rare-Grade would take my top second years at least a month to complete."

Sal suddenly felt a pang of guilt as he looked at the crestfallen expression on Upgrade's face. He thought she'd be overjoyed to find out that her power could become stronger, but instead it felt like he had just crushed her dreams. He didn't know what to do, but Upgrade continued speaking with a shake of her head and a forced smile on her lips. "Sorry Sal, you can ignore that. I'm just a little shaken by all of this. What you've created is incredible, and far beyond any of the expectations I could have placed on your shoulders. Just a few weeks ago, I saw a piece of equipment that is guaranteed to become a Mythic-Grade weapon. That absolutely blew my mind, and it was a joint effort with all of us working together to make it happen." Upgrade gestured at the revolver and monocle that sat on the table. "Now, I'm just thinking that we probably held you back. Two of your pieces here have the potential to get to Mythic Grade, and all it took was some materials and a sleepless night."

Sal sat quietly as he listened to Upgrade. He knew that he hadn't done anything wrong, but it still was a shitty situation. It was horrible to think that he had somehow crushed Upgrade's spirit in the process of making the revolver and visor. An awkward silence enveloped the room and Sal could see that Upgrade was about to backtrack her comments. He didn't give her the opportunity to apologise as he raised a hand. "Can I talk for a minute?" Upgrade faltered at that and he could see in her eyes that she was ashamed of herself. He didn't need the monocle to read those emotions as they were clearly visible on her face.

"I'm absolutely terrified of demons." Sal started with a smile. He could see that Upgrade wanted to interject, but he raised his hand even higher to indicate that it was still his turn to talk. "I've grown up hating my ability. It caused me headaches whenever I looked at myself in the mirror and whenever I looked at powerful people. Sometimes, it would just activate by itself and I'd immediately get a massive fuck-off migraine. That was not a fun time growing up, but it got worse as I couldn't tell people what my ability was. Any time I tried to replicate an ability, I would hurt myself because my body couldn't handle it... or I'd be successful and hated by other kids that thought I was stealing their power." Sal laughed as he looked at Upgrade. "Honestly, I'm not trying to throw a pity party or wanting you to feel sorry for me. I just want you to understand the person I was when I first walked through the doors of Quest Academy. Yes, it's barely been two months, but in that time I've managed to create an ability that is my own. It's not something that I 'stole' from someone. It's something completely new that I created myself. Yes, I did borrow your ability for a bit and yes, I did absolutely trash that machine, but you know what I mean."

Upgrade smiled slightly but didn't interrupt. Sal placed a hand on his chest as he looked at her earnestly. "I'm terrified of demons, Upgrade. I've never aspired to be a Hero, yet I'm surrounded by the most incredible people with such determination and drive to protect others. I feel guilty that I'm constantly hiding away in a workshop, tinkering with inventions and blueprints when I could be out there in the field, learning how to take down demons. Every two minutes, I'm reminded by the lecturers that we're at war and that we're losing. All that does is heighten my sense of dread that I'm not going to be of any use out there. This gun? It was an idea by Barry and Quest, so I could hide in the back of my team and take out demons from afar. I don't even know that I'd have the courage to pull the trigger, if I'm honest. This visor that I'm wearing? It was supposed to have countless traits that I borrowed from Heroes during outings. How many did I go on? Zero. I made every excuse possible to avoid leaving the campus, because I'm a coward. You're sitting over there, telling me that you're jealous? I saw you rush into a dungeon, killing demons left, right and centre. You were fucking incredible, and you're a Support! Just like me."

Sal's throat tightened a bit as he fought to push his emotions down. He let out an aggravated sigh as he shook his head. "I can't for the life of me understand why you'd be jealous. If anything, I'm the one that's jealous of you. I have so much that I still need to learn, and I want you to keep training me. Without your encouragement, I wouldn't have gotten this far. Also, we're nowhere near the end of the road. I don't even know what Ethical Crafting or Technocraft

are, let alone Synthesis Techniques? There are countless things you know that will make me a better crafter, and if I'm able to make something incredible, it'll be because of your help and guidance along the way. Actually, without you, I'd have probably died with that stupid shirt that sucked all my essence dry."

Upgrade snorted at that before she looked at the ceiling and let out an agonised groan. "My life would have been so much less complicated if you had just let me fall on my sword as a failed mentor. But fine, have it your way. Just remember that you asked for this."

Sal smiled as he got to his feet, happy that Upgrade no longer looked upset. Her next words, however, froze him in place. "We're going to go to a Dungeon together, and I'm going to show you how to kill your first demon."