

# Quest Academy: Chapter 1 (2,246 words)

"Well now, if it isn't the man of the hour? Looking deceptively fresh for someone that should be horribly hungover!" Upgrade teased as she caught sight of Sal in the workshop. At her words, Martin and Gosia perked up and noticed his arrival with smiles on their faces. Sal couldn't tell who it was that started it, but a small smattering of applause welcomed him to his work station. It was embarrassing, but there was no mockery in any of their expressions. Upgrade, who would normally be the first to poke fun at his expense was giving him a warm smile as she made her way to his table. "I wasn't able to watch the fights live, because they wanted to hold me in the infirmary for a bit. Heard you were incredible though! Quest promised to send me the footage after your scores were tallied, so I'll be watching it later." She grinned as propped herself up on one of the work stools near his desk. "I told you it was going to be a shit-show and you'd be just fine."

Sal barely heard what she had said after mentioning the infirmary as his eyes widened. "Did you get hurt? I saw the footage of the raid and you were incredible! I had no idea that Forge could be that terrifying, but the way you two worked together when clearing the dungeon floor was amazing." Upgrade's smile just grew wider as she waved her hand away as though it wasn't important. "Just picked up a few scratches here and there, nothing to worry about. It's been so long since I was out in the field that they wanted to make sure I was okay. Have to say though, it's nice to know that I haven't lost my touch!" Sal nodded in agreement as he exhaled slowly. "You were like an Offence class out there, just killing them left and right. Weren't you scared at all? I can't see myself ever fighting on the front lines like that." Upgrade's smile faltered for a moment as her right eyebrow cocked up at that question. "Like an Offence class? Don't throw me in with those barbarians, thank you very much. Sure, I was scared... but I had my team with me, so that did a lot to calm the nerves. Supports like us can still be fantastic on the field, it just doesn't mean that we have to like it. Don't fall into the trap of thinking you're not fit for that type of thing, you won't know until you've fought your first demon."

Sal shuddered involuntarily which got a light laugh from Upgrade. She leaned closer to him and waved her hand in front of his face to get his attention. "You know, for someone that essentially crushed the other teams in his cohort... you're still second-

guessing everything, aren't you?" There was no mockery in her tone, but Sal couldn't help but feel that there was a twinge of disappointment in its place. Without giving him time to respond, Upgrade got to her feet and stood in front of his work bench with both of her hands placed on its surface. "Let me reframe it for you. If you were capable of handling a situation, that would protect someone you cared about, would you do it?" Without any hesitation, Sal nodded. "Of course, anyone would." Upgrade grinned as she held his stare for a few moments. "Exactly. I merely handled a situation..." Upgrade raised her right hand and pointed directly at Sal. "To protect the people I care about."

Sal's face started to turn red at the realisation, but Upgrade put him out of his misery with a grin. "As much as I love tormenting you, are you here to be sentimental on your day off, or are you here to do some crafting? This is one of the rare days where we're free from countless first years asking a million questions, so please don't ruin it for me." With an awkward cough, Sal gestured towards the blueprint room. "I'm here to do some designing. What are you working on?" Upgrade glanced over at the blueprint room with a grimace. "There's someone using it at the minute, and while there's plenty of space for you to work beside them, I'd rather you didn't meet them for a while. How do you feel about going through the class project proposals with me? We can check the feasibility of their suggestions, and I'll count it as credit towards your grade?"

With a slight shake of his head, Sal withdrew the small tracker that Quest had given him the previous night. "I don't know how long I'll have this for, so I want to get working on making my own version of it as soon as possible. Could I just get some of the equipment from the blueprint room and do my work out here?" Upgrade glanced at the tracker in his hands and frowned. "Why would you need to use a tracker? You already have the Appraisal ability, which makes it redundant." Her eyes narrowed for a moment as she looked at the tracker more carefully. "Wait... Quest gave it to you? It probably has his System ability tied to it. What are you hoping to make from it?" Sal shrugged his shoulders as he looked at the compact tracker in his hands. "I met Professor Beck last night, and he got me to replicate his Analysis ability. It was way too much for me, and I could only understand fragments of it with this tracker. I want to design a solution that will use both System and Analysis at the same time, so I don't need to keep the power active. It'll be helpful for when I start the Analysis Class, or at least I hope it will."

Upgrade bit her lip as she turned back to the blueprint room. "Okay, you can go in there, but just don't engage in conversation with him. He's preparing for his next assignment and is in a particularly foul mood today." Sal looked at her warily and chose his words carefully. "You're making him sound super ominous. Does he have a name?" Tapping her finger on the desk surface, Upgrade gave Sal a sideways glance. "He has many names. Special Forces, working in the Hunter Bureau and a visiting lecturer for the Academy. He just returned from the excursion with the second years and it was apparently a disaster. I imagine that him seeing a carefree, bright-eyed student right now that's working on something other than killing demons... it's unlikely to fill him with confidence in our next generation of Heroes."

Sal's eagerness to enter the blueprint room was evaporating by the second. The tension he could feel from Upgrade was filling him with a sense of dread, but he needed to get a blueprint written up for the tracker so that he could improve on it in time for his first class in Analysis. Sensing his apprehension, Upgrade sighed and started moving in the direction of the room. "Come on, I'll go with you. Leave the talking to me." Sal got to his feet and followed after Upgrade, sparing a moment to wave and smile at both Martin and Gosia who popped their heads up from their desks to say hello. When they were only a few feet away from the door, the sounds of cursing became audible. For them to get through the apparently soundproof walls, it suggested that their mystery occupant was likely shouting. That deduction was confirmed the moment the sliding door opened, with a stream of curses blasting out dramatically.

"If you're here to tell me to quieten down, you could help me instead." A haggard voice called from one side of the room. Sal looked at him as he entered and was surprised to see a man that couldn't have been much older than Upgrade rifling through countless sheets of blueprints. His hair was sandy brown, and his face was covered in stubble. His blue eyes were made all the more striking by the dark bags underneath them. If Sal had to guess, he'd have said the man hadn't slept in the last year. Upgrade stepped in front of Sal and blocked his view of the man. "What do you need help with?" With her free hand, she gestured for Sal to move to one of the nearby tables. As Sal moved toward a free bench, he glanced back just in time to see a flash of red light appear around the haggard man's arm. "You could help me understand why your department is producing concepts far beyond their capabilities, and completely overlooking the basics! One of most glaring flaws of the excursion was how ill-equipped every student was, and I'm starting to get a better grasp of why that is. Are you encouraging the crafters to make magnum opuses? Why is there an

exoskeleton suit blueprint and a grappling hook, but nothing for basic defences? Is this truly the standard you've curated for your third years?" His voice became more frustrated with each and every topic, but Sal's eyes were locked onto his arm that was still glowing red.

Upgrade's eyes fell to the blueprints on his desk and her smile tightened. "Those aren't third year designs. You can find those on that shelf over there. There are more practical examples with realistic build quality." She moved to the blueprints in question, but the man just raised his hand to stop her. He had finally locked eyes with Sal on the other side of the room, and it only seemed to annoy him further. "No classes today, kid. Make yourself scarce." It was an order more than a request, and Sal felt incredibly out of place in the very room he had come to love. He started to pack up the equipment that he needed, but it wasn't fast enough apparently. The haggard man got to his feet and marched across to Sal, where he grabbed his arm. "I don't have all day, so come on." Sal watched as the runes on his shirt flared to life and activated their protective functions. What should have been enough to throw the man across the room, did nothing more than knock him back a step. Before Sal could apologise for his shirt, a pulse of red energy swept through the man's grip and shot around Sal's torso. Sal tried to remove his grip, but it was deceptively strong on his arm. "Relax kid, I'm just having a look." His voice wasn't as rough as before and he looked to be deep in concentration as he studied the shirt. Sal noticed that his eyes were tracking the pulsing red light as it moved. Upgrade appeared by Sal's side and pulled the man's grip off of him. "With all due respect, Captain. You're going too far."

Frowning slightly, the man took a step back and pulled the pulse of red light back into his arm. "Why is a first year wearing an Epic Grade shirt?" In a flash of red light, his entire torso was covered in a glowing replica of Sal's shirt. Without waiting for an invitation, Sal activated his eyes and locked onto the shirt to see what had happened. It didn't seem like it was possible.

Name	Argento Shirt (Concept)
Origin	Essence Construct
Age	Temporary Summon
Grade	Epic (Middle)
Dimensions	Chest 42 inches   Neck 17.5 inches
Materials	Refined Concept Essence
Attributes	Defiant - Shirt negates piercing and blunt damage. Chance to reflect damage. Synergy - Abilities are shared amongst set items. Chameleon - Shirt morphs to match the ability essence of the wearer.
Abilities	Defiant   Synergy   Chameleon
Power Source	External Essence
Evolution	No
Quality	Perfect
Condition	100%

Sal's eyes widened at the results. He had somehow created a temporary replica of the shirt, and it had all the same abilities as his own. It had only been a few seconds of him investigating it and it created a perfect copy. Sal desperately wished that he had the analysis ability trained up, because he wanted to know everything about this man and his power. Upgrade was able to help him out with the identity question as she stepped between them. "Captain, this is Salvatore Argento. He's one of our first years." Upgrade turned to look at Sal with a forced smile on her face. "Sal, this is Captain Chatfield. He's going to be one of your lecturers in the future." Sal offered his hand, but Chatfield just stared at him as though he had two heads. "Salvatore Argento. You're the Team Captain that won in the Silver Cohort, right?" Sal's hand paused in mid air as he stared back at the lecturer in surprise. Upgrade looked up at the ceiling and sighed in exasperation. "The blueprints that you were going through

were made by him. He's still learning the basics, so you'll have to forgive his naiveté with build design." Chatfield didn't seem to care as he moved around to look at Sal from a different angle. "So you were a Support Class and not a Controller?" When Chatfield's eyes met Upgrade's, he snapped his fingers and the ethereal shirt disappeared from his torso. He grasped Sal's extended hand and muttered darkly. "You should enjoy your day off, Mr. Argento. It's going to get a lot more hectic from here on out."

## Quest Academy: Chapter 2 (2,594 words)

"I should apologise for him, and tell you that he's not normally such an asshole... but as time goes on, I'm starting to think that he probably is." Upgrade explained as the blueprint room door closed behind them. Chatfield had practically snatched the third year blueprints from her hands and retreated back to his work station, pulling at the tubes and muttering to himself. Sal was happy to be free of the awkward tension and shuddered involuntarily once they had made it a few paces away from the room. With a glance to Upgrade, he shook his head in confusion. "I know that some of the faculty are a bit eccentric, but isn't he a bit much? What does he teach?"

Upgrade looked around the workshop for a moment in thought before she turned around and gestured at Room 17, where they had worked on the Legendary Sniper Rifle. "Let's talk in there, and you can set yourself up to do some design work. I just need to get my things." Sal wasn't sure if she was ignoring his question or just wanted some privacy to tell him more about the mysterious lecturer. He didn't question her further and made his way to the room, pausing momentarily to turn on the lights. When they finally illuminated the room, Sal was relieved to see that it was exactly as they had left it the previous week. He wasn't sure if they'd be able to retain a monopoly on it when the second years started filling out the workshop, but for now it felt like it was his. Sal placed the blank sheets of paper down on the table and arranged the etching equipment alongside it.

"Don't even think about taking the couch, I'm calling dibs." Upgrade said with a smile as she walked through the door, dumped her stuff roughly on the table and then dove onto the couch all in one motion. With a relaxed sigh, she gestured towards the door with a pained expression. "Close that, will you? Can't let the others see me slacking off." Sal smiled as he activated the sliding door, closing it to the outside workshop and giving them a sense of privacy. Upgrade lay on the couch and looked at the ceiling for a brief period before she turned her head to look at Sal. "Chatfield is the best Controller I've ever seen on a battlefield. He's gotten pretty much every accolade you could imagine when it comes to combat, and holds the most records for tower clearances out of any member of faculty." Upgrade's voice was devoid of emotions as she stated the facts about Chatfield. "When he was an active Hero, he was in the top one hundred and had his pick of teams. If you had Chatfield as your

controller, you'd win. It was just a certainty that everyone accepted. He would use whatever means necessary to win the day, and bring everyone back alive. You'd think that having him here would be a massive boon for the Academy, but it's literally anything but."

Sal couldn't help but laugh. There was no way that the haggard man in the other room was someone that impressive. Sure, he had seen unlikely people with extraordinary powers, but Chatfield looked like he was burned out and exhausted. His ability looked to be interesting, but from a combat perspective, Sal couldn't understand how useful it would be for a wider team. Upgrade shook her head. "I sense a non-believer! Can't blame you, he's like a husk of his former self right now, but I guarantee you that he's still just as capable. He's just back from assignment yesterday and he's already preparing for a portal dive with a strike team. Usually, he'd come into the workshop to see if we've new designs that he can use his Concept ability on. Gives him a wider arsenal to play with. Judging by his stress-levels at the minute, I'd say that he's in for a tough dive."

Sal placed the tracker on the desk in front of him and activated his Mythcrafter ability. He wanted to give it a proper appraisal before finding ways to upgrade or reconstruct it. Without glancing over to Upgrade, he asked his initial question again, hoping for an answer. "So, what does he teach? Is it a Controller Masterclass or something?" Upgrade laughed at that and shook her head as she half-heartedly pulled the blanket over her body to make herself more comfortable. "Teach is a strong word. He effectively subjects people to situations where learning is a bonus. That excursion he came back from was an intensive tower clearance. He didn't just assign teams to clear out floors, he ran them through the entire tower which grows in difficulty with each ascending level. Students that had fought demons in controlled environments were essentially thrown into the deep end with that excursion. Quest fought against it, but he was overruled by the Guild Association. They want Heroes, and Chatfield's methods, whilst horrible, have the best results."

Sal's concentration shattered instantly. "A tower clearance? They're just second years! Was there any casualties?" He couldn't wrap his head around what he was hearing. It sounded positively insane to send rookies into a tower, even if just to clear a floor or two. But to take on an entire tower? With Boss fights scattered throughout it? There's no way that they'd be fit for something like that. Upgrade gave an exasperated sigh as she looked back at Sal. "Didn't you listen to me? Chatfield brings everyone back alive. He's the Golden Boy of the Guild Association, and he's the best in the business."



That deathly appearance of his should be all the evidence you need of how painful clearing that tower with the students was. My guess is that he equipped all of them with gear using his concept ability. It would explain why he's cursing so much and trying to find good protective equipment in those blueprints."

"Can his Concept ability create items from blueprints?" Sal asked in disbelief, but Upgrade shook her head again. "No, that would be insanely overpowered. He tends to commission anything he likes the look of, and then he recreates it with his ability. That's why the unrealistic build qualities are such a frustration for him. He needs blueprints that can actually be made into equipment with the resources we have available. He'd probably shit himself if he saw that Sniper Rifle you made. That'd be a fun sight." Her chuckle was devious and Sal couldn't help but laugh. In the momentary silence between them, Sal focused on the tracker and pulled up its details with his Appraisal ability. He wanted to know what he was working with. The visor was a smoky black colour and seemed to be inserted directly into the silver casing that clipped over the right ear of the user. Sal's eyes picked apart all of the details of it in just a few minutes and he was strangely disappointed by the lack of information his eyes were giving him. When he compared it to the details he got when using the Analysis ability, there were so much more secrets that his eyes weren't telling him. The shattered crown he appraised for Divinity had insights about the materials, and the potential evolutions of the piece. Sal's frustration at the lack of information only fuelled his desire to craft something spectacular.

Name	Quest Tracker
Origin	Crafted
Age	5 years old
Grade	Unique
Dimensions	Visor: 2 inches tall, 2 inches wide   Ear Enclosure: 4 inches tall, 2 inches wide.
Materials	Refined System Essence   Obsidian Glass   Infused Silver
Attributes	Appraisal: Allows user to inspect items up to Unique Grade.  System: Allows user to interpret abstract information from essence signatures.  Network: Allows user access to a network of information databases that improve System.
Abilities	Appraisal   System   Network
Power Source	Enhanced Core
Evolution	No
Quality	Good
Condition	79%
Value	Est. \$140,000.00 - \$160,000.00

"Judging from your lack of response, I'm guessing you're already started on that tracker project?" Upgrade asked from her blanket cocoon on the other side of the room. Sal raised his hand with a thumbs-up gesture, as he started to activate the blueprint part of his Mythcrafter ability. He had to fight with it a bit to show him the current blueprint rather than the upgraded versions. Sal needed to give the tracker back to Quest in the same condition that he got it, so he wasn't going to risk damaging it or screwing it up. For that reason, he was going to build one from

scratch and see if he could replicate the System Essence from Quest with the current Tracker, or asking the Headmaster to gift him some of the ability. Sal suddenly paused as he thought about that for a little longer. Why did he need to ask the Headmaster when he could just replicate the ability himself? It was strange that he hadn't thought about it until now. It seemed so simple and Sal immediately thought there had to be a catch. With a glance up at Upgrade, Sal threw his question to the room. "You know the way I can replicate abilities?" Upgrade made a noise for him to continue, so Sal followed through. "Well, what if I just replicate an ability and use that essence in my crafting? I need to have Refined System Essence to create another Quest Tracker. Would that work?"

Upgrade sat up and looked over at Sal with a stricken look on her face. "Wouldn't it just be Refined Skill Master essence? I mean, that's your actual ability... but then again, you create abilities by using their weave. So, would that not make it a new ability altogether? I don't know enough about the ins and outs of it, but I think Lombardi should have a smarter answer for you. You know what I'd suggest already, you should just try it and see what happens." Upgrade threw the blanket to one side and got to her feet before joining Sal at the table. She looked at the tracker with a thoughtful expression. "If you're able to replicate essence signatures, and imbue them into your works... then the versatility of what you can create will be incredible. My first vote would be for you to take Alex's essence so we can make a coffee machine and make him redundant." Even though she was joking, Sal suddenly realised what she meant. He had only been thinking in terms of equipment, where she had gone down a commodity route. Sal didn't want to dwell on how much Q-Cred he had poured into his coffee habit, but the thought of how much he'd be able to save or even earn by creating a coffee machine was incredible.

"Didn't you use that girl's ability for the Arm Guards? The Barrier ones you used in the competition?" Upgrade asked suddenly. "How did you know that the result would have those effects? Most of the time, it's like a roulette when getting traits for equipment, but you got it the first time for each of them." Sal thought about it and shook his head. "The Mythcrafter ability did all the hard work with that. I just thought about what I wanted, and it told me the materials to use. When I didn't have the right materials, my essence filled in the blanks. Just like when I made Hannah's Barrier Gauntlets with crap materials." Upgrade gave Sal a confused look and shook her head. "It doesn't work that way, Sal. You can recall blueprints, right? Bring up one of an item you made without the right materials, or the person's essence. Tell me what

you see." Sal thought about it for a moment and went through the different designs in his head until he settled on the Shield Guards.

Name	Shield Guard
Origin	Crafted
Age	New
Grade	Uncommon (Upper)
Dimensions	Length 8 inches   Circumference 9 inches (Adjustable)
Materials	Refined Mythcrafter Essence   Infused Iron
Attributes	Barrier - Creates a protective shield in front of the wearer. Impact - Negates incoming attacks with chance to reflect damage.
Abilities	Barrier   Impact
Power Source	Basic Core   External Essence
Evolution	No
Quality	Excellent
Condition	100%
Value	Est. \$3,000.00 - \$4,500.00

Sal read through it line by line until Upgrade stopped him with a raised hand. "You said Refined Mythcrafter Essence, yet the trait has nothing to do with Crafting, Appraisal, Restoration or Upgrade. I think that it might be using your own essence as a substitute for whatever essence type you need for the finished product. That's the only way that it could result in you getting the Barrier trait, which is something you designed it for. You already said that you didn't take it from that Hannah girl for this project, so maybe it's storing the traits you've already interacted with?" Upgrade spoke as she paced around the table, thinking aloud. "Infused Iron doesn't have enough properties to give you anything more than the Impact trait, so it has to be

down to the essence. Obviously there are a few factors at play since a lot of the components were made by other crafters here in the workshop, but it doesn't explain how your equipment is getting the exact traits you're hoping for."

Sal nodded in understanding, but he couldn't help but feel a little out of his depth. He had thought it was normal for crafters to fill in the gaps with their essence. Upgrade paused as she rounded the table for the second time. "Here's a test. Why don't you design something with a trait you've never encountered before? Did you study Chatfield's weave at all? Try to make something with his Concept ability." Glancing around the room, her eyes landed on the tracker. "Perfect. The blueprint you're making for the tracker. Instead of making it with Analysis and System, which you've already seen. Try to make it with Concept, which you know nothing about."

Without another word, Sal activated his Mythcrafter ability and tried to do exactly that. He was seeing multiple variants of the existing design, but that didn't matter. He was willing the design to focus on the Concept ability that he had seen, but there was no basis for it to work on. No matter how many times he tried to will the construct to create the Concept ability, it failed to produce anything. Upgrade smiled at the frown that appeared on Sal's face. She had finally found their answer and a limitation to his ability. "Now think of something you haven't crafted before, but have a knowledge of. Try to create the tracker with Divinity's ability. Sal's eyes widened as he followed Upgrade's instructions, only to find that the Mythcrafter ability responded instantly and showed him an Oracle Tracker that would be able to look into the future. "I can see how to make it!" Sal breathed out excitedly, but Upgrade snapped her fingers in front of him, destroying his concentration and bringing him right back to reality. When he blinked and looked at her for context, she gestured at the tracker in front of him. "Even though the sky is the limit for your ability, I'm not letting you cut any corners. We're going to break this down with the basics and you're going to learn how to craft the right way. Understood?" Sal smiled in return as he gave her a nod and got to work.

## Quest Academy: Chapter 3 (2,614 words)

"Tell me, Sal. Do you understand why it takes most Crafters months on end to create a piece of equipment?" Upgrade asked as Sal continued to sketch out the details of the Tracker blueprint. He gave her a glance and saw that she was seated on the table, looking at his blueprint. He thought about the question for a moment, and shrugged. "They're really meticulous in crafting every component of the piece?" Upgrade shook her head with a slight frown. "No, that's not it. Most of the crafters don't have crafting related abilities. They're learning through practice and effort, which is a slower but rewarding path. If I asked you to stitch two pieces of leather together or to smelt an ingot, you'd likely have no idea where to begin. That's not a criticism of you or your ability, it's just an observation that you should be mindful of. My ability was hated by my peers when I studied here. Upgrade as an ability takes the painstaking work of others and upgrades it with essence to turn it into something even better. The craftsmanship gets lost somewhere along that journey and I don't want you to be blind to the effort that goes into this profession." It was clear that Upgrade was choosing her words carefully, but she was invested in this topic and Sal got the impression that she wanted to talk to him about this for a while now.

Upgrade pointed at Sal's chest with a smile. "Your ability is the blend of Appraisal, Restoration and Upgrade. You're able to see every detail that you set your eyes on, which would take countless years of studying to learn without the skill. Restoration allows you to use your essence when bringing an object back to the best version of itself. Upgrade, in a similar way, allows you to channel your essence into improving an existing object. All those skills were professions, long before they were essence-based abilities. The teachings that we give here, are the fundamentals of those professions and that's why it takes our Crafters a long time to produce pieces of equipment." Sal looked at Upgrade, not sure what he was supposed to say in this situation. Did she want him to apologise for having an ability that allowed him to skip a huge part of the grind? Upgrade shook her head as though she had just read his mind. "I'm not trying to make you feel bad, but rather, I want you to understand the incredible gift that you have. An actual Crafting skill, which allows you to use essence to make mechanisms work, blend materials together, remove impurities, enhance performance... those factors alone make you incredibly valuable to society. The fact that you can potentially create up to the Mythic Grade is a whole new beast

that we're going to explore in the months and years to come." Upgrade sighed as she pointed over at the Tracker. "Now, we find out that you can replicate essence and incorporate them into your designs? You're no longer bound to the logic that we thought was irrefutable. Materials were the limitation of our designs, but you're able to bypass those limits with essence. I'm genuinely happy for you and excited to see how far you'll go, but I don't want you to look down on your peers."

"Is that what you're worried about?" Sal asked in confusion. "I'll somehow outgrow this place and resent everyone that can't do what I can?" He chuckled at that with a shake of his head. "I'm not wired that way, Upgrade. If anything, I'd rather make items that solve problems rather than creating things that set me apart from everyone else. That Sniper Rifle was a fun thing to build, but I wouldn't have been able to make it without the help of experienced crafters. Right now, I'm putting my ability in the back seat and trying to create this blueprint the old-fashioned way. Just as you taught me. I'm here to learn, so don't worry." Sal tried his best to explain his stance, but he was genuinely confused with Upgrade's sudden shift in tone. He didn't want to leave the thought in the back of his head to fester, so he decided to just ask her outright. "Did I do something that upset you? I didn't mean to."

Upgrade's trademark grin appeared on her face again and she waved her hand as if to dismiss the topic. "Sorry, I'm just repeating the words that I was told when I first started. I was a bit more hot-headed than you and I definitely wanted to leave my mark. I don't think I properly understood the meaning until I was sitting on the other side of the desk. You're going to be thrown into the Advancement course for Crafting, which means that you'll be attending some classes with second and third year students. They have a very different mindset to you, and they'll have a very different skillset too. You'll want to break the system when you see what it's like, but for a lot of those students, that system is all they have."

Sal put down his etching tool and just looked at Upgrade, waiting for her to continue. With a laugh, she hopped off the desk. "Sorry, didn't mean to make that sound so ominous. The senior crafters tend to take little to no risks, which makes a lot of their projects safe bets. They'll be averse to trying new things, so you're likely going to be met with a lot of resentment from them if you try to disrupt the status quo. Ingenuity and imagination are secondary to feasibility and protocol. This whole workshop is going to transform tomorrow when they return, and you're probably not going to like it. My attempts at a serious conversation just now were all a primer for that experience. So, to sum up. Please don't hate them for being boring and

methodical crafters. They're trying their best, the only way they know how. Got it?" Sal nodded and picked up the etching tool. "Got it, but I think you're overreacting. I'm not really the type to step on the toes of others, so I doubt I'll get into much trouble with the other students coming back to the workshop." Upgrade just smiled at that as she picked up her stuff from the table. "We'll see!"

With that, she left Sal in the room to work on his design. As much as Sal wanted to just throw himself back into the sketching of the blueprint, he couldn't help but think about what Upgrade had mentioned. Were the other students really that bad? Was he going to end up resenting them in the long run? With a shake of his head, Sal tried to focus on the task at hand. He reasoned that he'd deal with whatever issues came up from the second years when they actually happened, rather than worrying about it now. Activating his eyes, Sal looked at the Quest Tracker in front of him and restarted his drawing.

Despite the fact that it used only a few materials, it was still a complex construct, with very fine runes engraved all over the silver surface. His normal vision wasn't able to pick up the details on the smoky black visor, but the Mythcrafter ability could see the embedded runes clearly. Each of them were pulsating with an incredibly efficient weave of essence. Sal stood there for close to an hour, marking down everything that the blueprint in his head had to offer. He double checked everything before finally putting down the etcher and taking a step back with a steady breath. With that done, he started to think about what he wanted from his own Tracker. The Analysis ability was a no-brainer, but he didn't need the Appraisal skill to be in there. System seemed to be very useful, but he wasn't sure if he'd be breaking rules by having access to the Academy's network of information. He had to admit that the idea of having Divinity's power tied to it was tempting, but Sal knew first hand how chaotic it could be to constantly see into the future. He'd be second guessing everything and he wasn't prepared to live like that.

Sal made a few notes at the side of the blueprint, putting down ideas of which abilities would work best with it. He went through the list of everyone that he knew, and wondered if there was a particular skill that would be useful to add to the Tracker. After a few minutes of debating what to do, Sal shook his head and smiled to himself. He was unconsciously doing the one thing Upgrade constantly warned him against, being too ambitious with his designs. He only really needed the Tracker to work on Analysis, so it didn't need a stack of additional abilities. If he could focus on that one attribute and pump everything else into the grade of the item, maybe he'd



be able to get something close to the one that was on the table? That was his thought anyway, so he got to work and activated the Mythcrafter ability again. Sal almost sighed in relief as he stopped holding back the Upgrade side of the ability. It had been gnawing at his subconscious the entire time he had been drawing the blueprint, and finally letting it free was incredibly liberating.

Just to make things easier on himself, Sal moved the Tracker to the other side of the table so it wouldn't interfere with his eyes. When he looked down at his drawn blueprint, Sal let his power find all the defects in the design and let it roam free. He picked up the etcher and started to make a list of corrections to the original design, removing redundant parts that he wouldn't need and reinforcing certain areas that would accommodate the Analysis ability. Mythcrafter was able to pinpoint each of the conflicts between the attributes and Sal only had to allocate more space to the dominant attribute he wanted. It was a slow process, but it was also quite fun. He was being prompted with all sorts of materials that he had never worked with, but they had somehow been catalogued in his brain from previous appraisals. Each time a new material was checked against the blueprint, a series of outcomes were generated. They didn't account for build quality or human error, but rather stated the facts of what was possible. Sal was reminded of the ability telling him that the Legendary Sniper Rifle could successfully hold an evolutionary trait, and it had turned out to be right. He had no reason to doubt the ability now, so he just took down each of the best combinations that Mythcrafter showed him.

"Hellfire Titanium and Lord Crystals. What are the chances they sell that on the Credit Floor?" Sal muttered to himself as he wrote down the best combination that he had seen so far. He incorporated the Analysis essence into the hypothetical design and it adapted ridiculously well to the Lord Crystal. Apparently, it would give him a massive boost to his Essence Control as well as a minor amplification to Psionic based skills like Analysis. The Hellfire Titanium on the other hand, bumped the final product up a few grades just by being there. It had to be a very premium material to be able to push its way up the grades like that. Sal decided that there was no harm in chancing his arm and seeing if he could acquire any from the Credit Floor. Without looking away from the design, Sal pulled out his tablet and navigated to Vanessa's name. He tried to open his messages, but from the sound of ringing, he guessed he was calling her instead.

"Hey, not like you to call. What do you need?"

Vanessa's voice came through clearly and Sal was inwardly relieved that she went straight to business. He checked his notes before speaking. "Hey Vanessa. Just in the middle of a design for a personal project. Materials that I need are called Hellfire Titanium and Lord Crystals, does the Credit Floor stock anything like that?"

"I can answer the Lord Crystal question immediately, that's a no. It appears on a few Appraisals we get, but the benefits of it as a component far outweigh its value as a raw material so we don't tend to break it down. You could try to bid on a few different items that contains the Lord Crystal, but they go for pretty high prices, even for you. I'll ask around and see if there are any good listings, but you might want to ask the other team captains from the tournament. There was a crown there that had the Lord Crystal. Only other thing I can think of is asking Jez. He has a lot of backroom deals happening all the time, and might be able to pick some up for you."

Sal grimaced as he crossed out the name on his list. "And what about the Hellfire Titanium?" He figured that he'd try to get Obsidian Glass to match the current Tracker, as it would likely be more common. From what he knew, it wasn't a portal material. Hellfire Titanium on the other hand, definitely was something from through the portals. He wasn't going to hold his breath for its availability, but Vanessa managed to surprise him.

"We actually have quite a few ingots of that in reserve. It's not cheap though, you'd be looking at around two hundred and fifty Q-Cred per ingot. However, if we were buying it for Myth... that could be something we could throw to the Reavers Guild. I've been keeping them in the dark and sweating for a while now, and they're eager to close the Guild Partnership deal with us. You winning your tournament only added to your value with them, so let me know when you want to make a decision and we can go through it together."

Sal grinned at that. He was worried that he was going to have to negotiate with Vanessa for a better rate on the ingots, but there she was, proposing they offset the cost completely by getting the Reavers to pay for it. "Don't suppose the Reavers would have any access to Lord Crystal that they'd be willing to part with?" Sal didn't really have anything to lose from asking, and it seemed that Vanessa shared the same opinion.

"Let me check in with them. I'll tell them that we're close to the deal, but that Myth is distracted with a new project and blocked with those two materials. Let's see what they come back with, and then we can finalise the agreement with them. Just a word of warning, I've spoken to Villa a few times over the past few weeks. She's at her breaking point, so after this, we'll need to give them a decision otherwise, she's likely to murder me in my sleep. We don't want that to happen, do we?"

Sal laughed as he hovered his finger over the disconnect button on the tablet. "No, Vanessa. We certainly don't want that. Thanks for your help, I'll talk to you later." When Vanessa's voice left the call, Sal tapped the button and pocketed his tablet. The only downside to their tactic was that he'd have to put his design on hold until they came back with a verdict. Sal looked at the design again and smiled. He was genuinely excited to start working on it properly.

## Quest Academy: Chapter 4 (2,639 words)

"Could you maybe just write a little quieter?" Barry groaned as he cupped his face with his palms. The canteen was practically devoid of students and Sal had found Barry seated in a corner feeling sorry for himself. Judging by the assortment of empty containers around him, he had tried to buy some miracle cure for his hangover. "Discover any cool effects?" Sal laughed as he gestured at the litter on the desk. Barry didn't even look up as he shook his head, a pained sigh following quickly afterwards as he regretted the sudden movement. "The coffee doesn't do anything for hangovers. I could barely eat the food stuff, but all it did was make me feel stronger or faster. Useless! Why can't someone invent a hangover cure? Have you tried Healing? Maybe put that on the list." Barry crossed his arms and cradled his head on them like a makeshift pillow.

Sal thought about it for a moment before writing down Healing as a potential attribute for the tracker. He had already incorporated a similar trait into that exoskeleton design, and he now understood that it was because of the interaction with Healer Bitch. "How would a Tracker benefit from a Healing trait? I'd probably just be able to see that you're really hungover?" Sal asked aloud which just elicited another painful moan from Barry. It sounded somewhere between despairing and frustration. Without only the slightest wave of one of his hands, Barry mumbled his thoughts. "Restoration knows how to fix things, why can't you just combine it with Healing? You've made new skills before, why can't you just create something?" He was just throwing the comment out there, and didn't see the look of shock that crossed Sal's face. Surely, it couldn't be that simple. He had made a weave internally during the skill registration, but there was no way that he'd be able to do that again without an insane amount of internal essence. "I'd have no idea where to even start with that, to be honest. I'd need like a list of compatible skills that had good synergy..." Sal suddenly froze before quickly reaching into his pocket to retrieve his tablet. He flicked past all his notifications and navigated to the messages he received from Quest. It only took him a few moments to get the list that Quest had sent him a few weeks ago.

Barry propped his chin onto his wrists as he looked at Sal in confusion. "Did you just go really quiet or did I lose my sense of hearing?" Rather than answering, Sal

continued to scan through the list in front of him, a wide smile appearing on his face as he found a whole new range of possibilities. Barry watched him for a few more moments before he coughed dramatically. "Your Team Captain needs some sympathy, that's a direct order." Sal laughed and gave Barry a passing glance before his eyes snapped back to the list. "You're not Team Captain just yet. You can throw your authority around when we get to the inter-cohort competition, okay?" With a sigh, Barry pushed his hands against the table and sat back in his chair. "I'm going to try some water this time. It'd be pretty pathetic if I squandered all of my new Q-Cred on nursing a hangover. Do you want anything?" Sal shook his head as Barry wearily got to his feet. Just as he was about to move, Sal glanced up at him. "Sorry, yeah actually. Can you get me a coffee, I'll pay you back later." Nodding his head, Barry shuffled off in the direction of the vendors, making pained noises as he went.

Smiling to himself, Sal navigated to the Analysis ability on the list and looked for what synergies were listed there. To his surprise, there was a whole breakdown of it that showed all of its documented aspects and variations. He wondered if this was because it was a module that was taught at the Academy, or if Beck had decided to create a comprehensive breakdown of the skill? Sal's eyes moved down the list and started to wonder just how powerful the Analysis ability truly was.

#### Analysis Categories:

- Vital Scanning
- Technique Reading
- Threat Identification
- Weakness Detection
- Power Level Measuring
- Enhanced Perception
- Enhanced Probability
- Enhanced Deduction
- Body Language Analysis
- Status Reading

#### Analysis Synergies:

- Interface Creation
- Interface Manipulation
- System
- Indexing
- Networking

### Analysis Complements:

- Appraisal
- Investigation
- Perception

A few of the names on the list required Sal to look up the terms to see what they actually did. Many of them looked like they covered the same thing, and he wanted to be sure that they were actually different. Vital Scanning sounded pretty self-explanatory in that it would allow him to see the vitals of whoever he was looking at. It would be very useful for a Healer, but maybe he'd be able to see the remaining health of an enemy if he had it incorporated into the tracker? Technique Reading was one he had to look up, and was surprised to see that it broke down the movements of opponents he watched. If they were using Martial Arts, he'd be able to predict their movements and understand the style of fighting they were using. He saw there were a list of synergies available that matched his 'Replication' category, but Sal didn't want to fall down that hole of researching skills he didn't need right now. Threat Identification was what Beck had asked him about the other evening. Sal hadn't been able to assess the threat level, but apparently it was a whole skill in itself. Weakness Detection was exactly what it sounded like, and would be very useful in learning how to take down opponents more efficiently. It would probably also help him identify the blind-spots of his team and help cover them.

Sal was engrossed in the task and didn't even notice when Barry had come back and placed a coffee in front of him. He was hastily writing out notes of which abilities would be must-haves for the Tracker, and which ones he could probably do without. Rather than interrupting Sal, Barry leaned across the table and started reading the list with his chin propped up lazily on the palm of his right hand. A few more moments of silent scratching noises passed before Barry made his opinion known. "It looks like you've come up with quite the shopping list. It doesn't seem very likely that you're going to be able to mash all of them into the Tracker, does it?"

With a frown, Sal's eyes turned purple as he activated the Mythcrafter ability and flicked through the different blueprints that he had memorised. "The Legendary Sniper Rifle had seven abilities, with most of the Rare and Epics having only around three to four. I don't think I'll be able to make something that uses all of them." With a blink, Sal's eyes returned to their silver colour as he gave Barry a grimace. "Even if I could combine a load of them into a single skill, I think that the grade of ability

would end up pushing the material and craftsmanship requirements up dramatically. I'm still only getting my bearings with crafting, and while there have been a few incredible outcomes, I wouldn't have been able to do it without the team at the workshop. This is a personal project that I want to do myself." Barry nodded as he took a drink from his glass of water. He looked off to one side for a moment and then back at Sal. "Do you need it to be incredible right now?"

Sal gave him a quizzical look as he leaned back and sipped his coffee. "Well, obviously I'd want it to be the best it can be. I don't want to waste the materials that I get for it." Barry waved his hand as though Sal was missing the point. "You're able to upgrade and repurpose things, right? Why don't you just make something basic... like really basic, and just improve it over time as you get stronger and more capable in your skills? It's not like you're in a race or anything. You just need something that can help you use the Analysis ability, right?" Sal paused and bit his lip before answering. He gave Barry a level stare before his shoulders slumped in defeat. "Okay, yeah... I know I don't need it to be incredible right now, but I just kinda want to make something amazing. That sounds arrogant, doesn't it?"

Barry grinned as he raised his glass to Sal's cup. "He finally admits to being just as flawed as the rest of us! Cheers to being a conceited piece of shit!" Sal just laughed as he tapped his cup against Barry's glass. "I wouldn't say conceited, just... ambitious? Like, I've never had an ability that allowed me to create things, and now I've gotten all this potential and capability. I don't want to just sit on my hands and let it go to waste. It's exciting being able to see all this incredible equipment that I could probably make!" Sal explained his reasoning as he pointed at his notes with an excited grin. Barry just nodded as he reclined in his chair with a sigh. "You're not really wasting your talents though. You've already made a weapon that can turn into a Mythical Grade at some point in the future. If I was you, I'd just be dialling it all back and selling common shit that could evolve into Mythic Grade. All you'd have to do is sell people on the possibility of it evolving, and then the onus is on them to make it happen. Not you."

Sal just stared at Barry in surprise. "That's it. You're a genius, Barry!" Sal immediately started adding new notes while Barry stretched out with a yawn. "Glad you've finally noticed. So, just so we're on the same page, what specifically makes me a genius in this instance?" Sal gestured at his notes and barely glanced up to meet Barry's inquisitive gaze. "Evolution. I could create the blueprint of the perfect Tracker, that has all the abilities I want it to have. Then I just need to devolve the design of it

through each of the grades until it's at a level I can comfortably create. The materials would still need to be incredible to support the final evolution, but the crafting requirements should be much more straight forward." Barry placed his glass on the table with a heavy sigh. "I really don't want to burst your bubble, but there's a flaw in this plan. How will your Tracker gather the essence required to evolve? It's not like it can kill demons and siphon them dry. You don't want another instance of the shirt sapping all of your internal essence." Sal winced at that and gave Barry a deadpan look. "Who told you?"

Barry grinned and tried his best to look innocent. "That's not important. What will you do about the evolution?" Sal continued to stare at him for a moment before finally relenting. "I don't know yet, but there has to be a way for it to work. Mythcrafter will likely find the solution, but maybe it could be gathering atmospheric essence? The Sniper Rifle used the most outlandish tethering ability that sounds ridiculous. Just locking onto the target with bullets was enough to siphon off essence. Maybe the Tracker could lock onto opponents and drain their essence?" Barry snorted at that and shook his head with a laugh. "Yeah, your Vital Scanning would be pretty hilarious if that was how it levelled up. Just imagine you're checking to see if someone is okay and you accidentally kill them by siphoning off their last remaining essence?" Before Sal could say anything, Barry pointed at one of the abilities on the list. "What does Indexing do?" Sal grimaced at the thought of accidentally siphoning essence from the people he looked at with the Tracker. He moved through the list and navigated to the Indexing ability. "Subcategory of Knowledge Manipulation? Encodes and preserves any and all sources of information. Allows user to recall information of anything they've seen in perfect detail." Sal looked up at Barry. "Do you think that's Recall's ability? I met him at the Doom Society and he did something like that with Divinity's power." Barry only offered a shrug in response as he gestured at Sal. "You sure that you don't already have it? You're able to look up all the blueprints with Mythcrafter despite them not being in front of you? Sounds like a memory ability is incorporated into it somehow."

Sal shook his head as he tried to explain. "That's different I think. I've always been able to do that with Appraisal, and it's listed as a complementary skill of Analysis. Maybe that's the crossover? Indexing sounds very useful though, because it wouldn't be limited to just items. I'll have to check and see if that's Recall's ability." Sal started to formulate a plan in his head as he looked at the list of skills. "Thanks for this, Barry. I don't think I would have been able to figure this out without you. You sure you don't want me to make some equipment for you?" Sal offered with a smile but Barry



just gave him a slight shake of his head. "No offence, but I want to master my own abilities without relying on equipment. Maybe that'll change in the future, but for now, I need to learn as much as possible with my own abilities."

Sal smiled at that and couldn't help but respect his decision. "When you change your mind, just let me know. This Tracker idea could end up being the perfect tool for a Controller Class!" Barry nodded in agreement, but his smile was still playful. "See, that's where I think you're missing the trick. You're making a Tracker that gives you all this information, but you're still going to stay in the Support Class? The sword you made is fantastic in Anthony's hands, but what will you use to increase your combat proficiency? No offence, but I don't think you're the upfront and personal type of combatant. Why aren't you making a gun or something for yourself? Throw on an evolutionary trait, and make something that'll grow with you over time?" Sal shook his head with a laugh, and got back to writing notes, but Barry persisted. "The inter-cohort fights aren't going to be easy, Sal. We're going to be up against much tougher opponents and everything from this point forward is going to be much harder on us. You'll need something that can keep you in contention for the Saviours class, otherwise I'm going to end up taking your spot!"

Sal shook his head as he looked up at Barry with a grin. "Didn't you just make the case of how inhumane it would be to have a Tracker that saps essence from targets? But a gun is suddenly the solution to my problems? I've barely seen any of them, let alone fired one... so I wouldn't know the first thing about making one. The Sniper Rifle was different, because it was a restoration and upgrade. I don't know how I feel about using one as a weapon either." Barry crossed his arms and gave Sal a meaningful look, so as a way to placate him, Sal made a show of writing at the top of his notes to look into making a gun with an evolutionary trait. "Happy?" Sal asked finally as he gestured to the words. Barry nodded with a grin. "Overjoyed."

## Quest Academy: Chapter 5 (2,568 words)

"Could you give this to the Headmaster from me, please?" Sal asked Quest's assistant, Joanne. He placed the Tracker on her desk and she looked at it thoughtfully for a moment before recognition crossed her features. "Ah, yes! He mentioned that he had given it to you the other evening. As far as I'm aware, he wasn't expecting it back for a while, but I'm sure he'll be pleased. He's just in a meeting at the moment, but it'll be wrapping up soon if you'd like to wait and give it to him yourself?" She gestured over at the seats in the waiting area and Sal deliberated on what he should do. He was eager to get answers about some of the skills on that list that Quest had given to him. If anyone was going to be able to point him in the right direction, it was the Headmaster. On the other hand, he was going to spend the rest of the day doing some meditation to get ahead in the Skills class. He had let that fall to the side due to the stress of the tournament and all the training that went into it. He wasn't always going to be able to rely on Whisper and Lucia to boost his progression. Sal blinked and noticed that Joanne was looking at him expectantly. With a smile, Sal moved towards the waiting area. "Thank you. I'll wait for him. Just trying to figure out what other things I need to get resolved today."

"So proactive! It's refreshing to see such work ethic in a First Year, but please don't overwork yourself! I see so many talented young kids burning out because of the expectations on their shoulders. Studying here is a marathon and not a sprint, okay?" Joanne pointed at Sal with a mock-expression of suspicion, but Sal just raised his hands defensively. "I don't even like running! No need to worry about me, I promise." That was enough for Joanne as she shot him a warm smile before turning back to her interface. Just as Sal was about to reach into his pocket for his tablet, the sound of raised voices came through the door which caused both him and Joanne to look at it in concern. When he gave her a curious look, Joanne got to her feet and walked over to where he sat and gave the door a sideways glance. In an almost conspiratorial whisper, she started to fill him in. "Some Military hotshot came in about an hour ago and has been tearing into Quest about how we do things here." She crossed her arms and shook her head before turning to Sal with an incredulous look. "If it was left to the likes of him, we'd be a Military Academy by now... and we know exactly how that would go!" Sal just nodded his head, even though he didn't understand what point she was trying to make. If Joanne wanted to vent about her frustrations, Sal

wasn't going to stop her. It was as Jez had said, information was power. Just to ensure she knew she was in safe company, Sal voiced his own opinion. "Military hotshot? Was it Chatfield? Met him for a minute or two in the workshop and he was rude as hell."

Whatever reservations Joanne may have held about keeping her opinions to herself, evaporated in the blink of an eye. "The very same! Didn't even spare me a glance as he sauntered in there. The door wasn't even closed when he started berating Quest for how the second-years did in their excursion with him. I hate types like him, that just swan in and shit over the hard work everyone else is doing. We're already a month into the term and he's talking about changing the curriculum! Can you imagine? Just sweeping everything we've established to one side and replacing it because he says so?!" Joanne's voice was gaining strength with each word and she was practically fuming by the end. Sal doubled down and stoked the fire to find out more. "He's just a professor though? He won't be able to make any changes outside of his own class, right?" Joanne gritted her teeth as she leaned on one foot, her arms still crossed. "I wish! Chatfield holds a stupid amount of sway with the Guild Association and the Bureau, so if he campaigns for change, he'll get his way. Quest is probably doing damage control, which is just infuriating. Nobody knows how hard that man works to keep the students safe!" Just then, as though a light went off in Joanne's head, she realised she was venting to a new student in the Academy. An embarrassed blush crossed her face and she waved her hand at Sal. "Don't worry yourself. Everything is going to be fine. Chatfield and Quest want the best for the Academy, so whatever the outcome, it'll be sure to be in our best interests." Her words held no sincerity and Sal didn't want to make her feel uncomfortable, so he didn't press the issue. "I understand. Quest is a great Headmaster and I trust his judgement." He left the implication that he didn't trust Chatfield and Joanne's smile was reward enough as she returned to her desk. Sal was left even more confused as he waited. Was Chatfield truly pushing for a change to the curriculum? What would it even look like?

A few minutes passed as Sal flicked through his tablet, going over his notes and looking through the list of abilities to see if anything caught his eye. Just as he was going through the details of the Interface Creation ability, the door swung open to reveal a very agitated looking Quest and an enraged Chatfield. Apparently their conversation was still winding down, as Chatfield walked through the doors mid-sentence. "-can't just hope for the best! This is our only way forward, Quest!" Chatfield's eyes caught sight of Sal and his eyebrows raised. "Twice in one day? Are

you following me, Mr. Argento?" There was an edge to his voice that Sal couldn't identify, but thankfully Quest came to his rescue with a strained voice. "He's here to see me. You've said your piece, *Captain*. That'll be all for today." Sal glanced at Chatfield who was still studying him curiously. Ignoring Quest, he finally spoke to Sal. "Word of advice, kid. Switch to the Controller Class, if you actually want to be of use out on the field. A Controller that can equip their team is a godsend in this day and age." Chatfield turned to Quest as he continued. "You might not realise it from how carefree the learning environment is, but we're at war, Mr. Argento." Quest didn't engage with the comment and instead just gestured to the interior of his office. "This way, Salvatore."

Sal got to his feet and met Chatfield's gaze. "My parents are both proud Support Classes, and the Argento Auction provides a valuable service to the war efforts." He had been caught off-guard earlier in the workshop by the Controller, but he could think clearly now. Sal wasn't going to let him treat the Supports as a useless class. "I'll remain in the Support Class and show everyone like you, just how vital we can be." Maybe it was because Chatfield had been so rude to Quest and Upgrade, but Sal had no intention of saving face in front of him. He was happy to align with the people that put their trust in him. Chatfield's face broke into a grin as he shook his head at Quest. "At least you've learned how to indoctrinate them." With that said, Chatfield left the office without so much as a passing glance at Joanne. Quest watched him leave with a passive expression on his face before forcing a smile in Sal's direction. "Sorry about that. What brings you here, today?" Quest moved back into the office as he spoke.

Sal picked up the Tracker from Joanne's desk and gave her a grateful smile before following Quest into the office. He raised it and held it for the Headmaster to see, only for Quest's expression to turn into a frown. "I didn't need that back so quickly. I was hoping you'd learn how to use it in your upcoming Analysis class. You sure you want to return it?" Quest reclined in his chair with a sigh and turned the seat to face Sal's direction. He gestured for Sal to take a seat and thanked Joanne as she closed the door behind them. Sal placed the Tracker on the desk before taking the offered seat. "I've already analysed it with the Mythcrafter ability and drew up the blueprint for it. I'm going to craft my own Tracker, using yours as a template." Quest's eyebrows shot up at that. "Already? You've barely had it a day. Are you going to make any changes, or recreate it as it is?" He pulled his seat closer to the desk and rested his arms on the surface as he looked at Sal intently. Sal smiled as he walked through the ideas that he had. "I'm not certain about any of this yet, but myself and

Upgrade have a theory that I'm able to imbue crafted items with my Mythcrafter Essence. Any ability or internal weave that I've seen with my Skill Master ability is apparently usable in crafting." Quest's face broke into a wide grin at those words, which surprised Sal. He tapped at his interface in front of him and brought up the list of abilities that they had registered for all the students and faculty. "Looks like Beck's theory was correct! He hypothesised that your Mythcrafter ability is much more powerful than we originally suspected. When he analysed your ability at the meeting in the Sky Lounge, he said that it was truly extraordinary in terms of synergy. Your Skill Master ability already synergised with your Appraisal ability that you took from Petro. Which resulted in you using your eyes to see skill threads!" Quest was typing excitedly as he spoke, and Sal couldn't help but be swept up in the Headmaster's enthusiasm. He didn't want to interrupt him, so just sat and listened.

Quest pointed at something on his screen and turned it around so Sal could see it. "Synergy is something we've been looking at very closely for the last few years with the introduction of Skill Implanting and Imprinting. We wanted to maximise the inherent abilities with the implanted ones, and calculated which ones would work best together. We started with the categories, which seemed to make the most sense, but there were a few that worked together outside of that. In your case, Replication combined with Invention and Psionic? It's new territory for us, but it's incredibly exciting." Quest glanced at Sal and saw the confusion on his face. "Ah, sorry! Got a little caught up there. Where did I lose you?" Sal laughed guiltily as he spread his hands. "I don't have a Psionic ability, so I was trying to think of where that confusion popped up. Mythcrafter is Invention as far as I'm aware, and Skill Master is Replication." Quest clicked his fingers and shook his head. "Not quite! Your Skill Master ability breaks down the barriers between the categories, as you're able to change your essence output. We've already seen you replicate the Analysis and Divination abilities, which both fall under the Psionic category. But what makes me sure that you're able to bridge into the others seamlessly is your ability to change or unknot the skills of others. That should fall under Body Modification, but you did it without touching Divinity... which sounds like Psionic influence, wouldn't you agree?"

Sal nodded hesitantly as he followed Quest's logic. It made sense, but it didn't seem to be that big of a deal. His ability to replicate other abilities across the categories had already been established, so he couldn't understand why Quest was so excited by it. As if sensing his confusion, Quest smiled reassuringly. "You already know it's an incredible ability. What's truly interesting is how versatile it is across the categories. What do you think made the Mythcrafter ability?" The sudden question made Sal

pause for a moment. He knew that Quest already knew the answer, but he decided to humour him. "It was the combination of Appraisal, Restoration and Upgrade." Quest shook his head, which surprised Sal. The Headmaster grinned as he pointed at Sal's chest. "There was already an existing ability that you used to craft the weave. It was combined into the creation of Mythcrafter." Sal's eyes widened at the sudden realisation. "Skill Master?"

Quest laughed at his reaction. "Incredible isn't it? It would explain why you're able to assign recognised skills in your crafting. There should be a number of interesting applications, that we'll have to discover as you continue on your crafting journey. Lombardi and Beck will be better suited to figuring all of this out, but I'm just delighted that the hypothesis is seemingly correct!" Quest looked back to the tracker on the table. "Ah, yes! Sorry, the reason you came here was this. I just derailed our conversation a bit. Is there anything you need from me to make your new Tracker? Perhaps you want to add the System ability to it?"

"Actually, I wasn't sure if I would be allowed to use your ability. From the limited information I was able to see with it, I could see personal details of students..." Sal began awkwardly, but Quest just waved his hand like it was nothing. "Nothing that you could view in the System ability would compromise other students. Simply knowing their aliases, ranks and wealth is stuff you could find out by asking them. So, what else were you thinking of adding? Have you thought about what grade it'll be?" Sal couldn't help but smile at how quickly Quest brushed past his concerns. Taking out his notes, Sal slid them across the desk. "You can ignore the top part about the gun, that was an idea from Barry to increase my combat capability." Quest just smiled as he went through the list, nodding as he read through each line. Suddenly his eyes widened. "Evolutionary trait? That would work very well with Indexing. Great foresight!"

Sal wasn't sure what he meant and asked him to explain. Quest glanced up with a smile. "Indexing with these other abilities, at least to my limited understanding would allow you to create a rigorous database of information. Data has an essence signature, just like everything else. Adding more data to your Tracker would be considered essence accumulation. Just looking at a Demon would give you insight into its vitals, power level, threat analysis, abilities... hell, you'd have a full behaviour report from it. It's a remarkable concept!" Sal couldn't help but share the Headmaster's excitement. It sounded like he'd found a solution to the essence gathering for the Tracker. Quest continued to read through the list with a wry smile

on his face. "Not sure how to break it to you, Salvatore. If you want to collect all of these skills..."

Sal's excitement evaporated on the spot at Quest's next words. "... you're going to have to go on the next outing with the Paradox Guild."