

Chapter 35 (3,041 words)

Sal was a little nervous as he waited in the canteen. He pushed his empty tray a little off to the left and centred his tablet in front of him. All of the information was laid out perfectly and he was pretty sure that he had covered all potential bases. The bag at his side held the Stalker Corset neatly folded. It had been a much easier concept when he was suggesting it to Blathnaid, but now that it was a reality, he was starting to doubt himself.

Blathnaid had stayed true to her word and had been able to replicate the Stalker Overcoat as the Stalker Corset. It had the exact same attributes, but actually looked far more stylish if he was being honest. Maybe it had been the introduction of Void Metal to make the grommets, as they had run out of the ingots made on the Scavenger Run. The Prowler claws were used as the bones that gave it the structure. The contrasting shades of ethereal green and black gloss made the material look poisonous to the touch. Sal had expected Blathnaid to make threads at the back for tightening it, but she had created clasps with some of the Prowler claws.

If Sakura and Darren both did a runway, wearing the overcoat and corset, it wouldn't even be a competition. The corset was clearly made with a lot more finesse and design quality, and Sal guessed it was because Blathnaid leaned more towards women's fashion.

Sal straightened the tablet in front of him again. He also tapped the screen to keep it active. It listed the improvements he had made to the Void weave, which he hoped could be a potential bargaining chip with Sakura. Combined with the corset, he'd be essentially helping her with both her internal power and with equipment for out in the field. He wasn't going to try and withhold the advancements with her power, but rather talk her through it and explain how it worked. Since she knew he had the Skill Master ability, and that he was a Mythcrafter, he wanted to keep her on his side.

The secret of him being Myth was possibly one of the worst kept ones, but it still wasn't public knowledge. Sakura was in talks with Shade at the Delver's Guild, and Vanessa had warned him previously that he needed to keep on Sakura's good side as she would be reporting on Sal to Shade. It was in Sal's best interests to pull Sakura away from Shade, or at least to control the narrative that was reported to the Guild Master.

Sal looked up to see if there was any sign of Sakura, but she hadn't arrived yet. He had been so nervous that he had arrived twenty minutes early to the meeting. She had agreed via message that she would see him in the canteen, but it had been a concise message with little to no clues in how she was feeling about it.

As he sat there waiting, he thought about Upgrade. She had sent both him and Blathnaid a message to say that she would catch up with them the next day, but when Blathnaid had

revealed the Stalker Corset to him the following afternoon, there was still no sign of Upgrade. He hoped that everything was okay, and felt responsible for causing a rift between her and Chatfield. With what he knew of her, there was a high chance that she had taken it upon herself to go and talk to him face to face.

"You wanted to see me." Sakura spoke from the seat directly across from him. She had a bored expression on her face as she leaned an elbow on the table, cupping the side of her face with her palm.

Sal visibly flinched as he looked at her in shock. He hadn't noticed her approach, but to miss her sitting across from him... was either a testament to how stealthy she was, or a serious issue when it came to his own perception. As he fought to keep his breathing under control, and steady his heartrate, Sal tried to smile at her. "Sorry about that, was just lost in thought... eh, thanks for meeting with me."

Sakura didn't make any reaction to his words as she stared at him lazily. "Are you being bullied?"

Sal paused at that. "No? Well, not that I know of." He was a thrown a little off-guard by the question. "I wanted to talk to you about your ability, if that was okay?"

Sakura sat up slowly and crossed her arms, slinking back into the chair as she kept her eyes locked on Sal. "If you're thinking about replicating it, I wouldn't advise it." She sighed as she held her hand up to show him her pale skin. "Nullify allows me to cut off essence, which is fatal to Demons, but it has drawbacks. You essentially get hit with the dregs every time you use it, and it takes a lot of self-awareness and mental fortitude to work through dregs in any scenario."

That was news to Sal. When she had killed the Commander during that raid, had she been hit with the dregs in that moment? In that battlefield? He had experienced it and it had knocked him unconscious for hours. How was she able to continue fighting and moving when experiencing the dregs?

"Was that everything?" Sakura asked as she placed her palms on the table. "Or did you have any other questions?"

Sal faltered for a moment, this wasn't going the way he had anticipated. Rather than trying to tease out information, he decided to be as straight-forward as possible. "You know that I'm a Mythcrafter, don't you?"

Sakura held his gaze for a while before slightly nodding. "Correct."

"And you're potentially joining the Delver's Guild upon graduation?" Sal ventured further, wondering how to pierce through the air of indifference she exuded.

"Potentially." Sakura agreed.

Sal wasn't in a negotiation at all, which was the hardest point. He needed to be able to walk away from this, to have his own leverage, but he was too invested in the outcome. It didn't matter if she didn't join his Guild, but he didn't want Shade knowing about his Mythcrafter capability. He also didn't want Sakura to experience the same treatment that Vanessa had endured when she had gone to the Delver's Guild.

"What would it take to make you reconsider that stance?" Sal asked slowly. He didn't want to make the first offer, and instead wanted to hear what Sakura actually wanted. That would give him something to work with.

Sakura smiled, revealing a perfect set of white teeth. "Are you trying to get me to keep a secret?"

Dangerous territory. Sal nodded his head. He was prepared to at least show some of his cards to see how she would react. "The Argento Auction has had some run-ins with Shade over the last number of years, where he has operated in bad faith. He has exhausted quite a lot of Appraisers in the city and has a poor track-record when it comes to the survivability of his teams."

Sakura tilted her head as she sat up properly, the smile on her face turning almost predatory. "So, that was just words. What is the secret you're trying to hide?"

Sal spread his hands wide. "Just wouldn't want to see you become a casualty of someone's greed." He looked at Sakura carefully, trying to weigh her reaction. Her smile remained as she shook her head.

"Fluffy platitudes won't work. Try again." She tapped the table with a single fingernail. Her eyes not leaving Sal's face.

Sal frowned as he glanced down at the tablet in front of him. Would vulnerability work? Appealing to her Heroic nature? He decided to give it a try. "I don't want people to know about my Mythcrafter ability. You know about it because of the Doom Council and from being very observant. I'm worried you'll leak that information to people."

Sakura nodded. "That's better. Now, why would you think I'd tell Shade all about your Mythcrafter ability?" Her expression didn't change at all, and her tone was controlled. There was no indication that anything had changed, yet Sal felt that he was in dangerous territory.

"Because he asked you to keep an eye on me." Sal responded quietly.

Sakura stared at Sal for a few more moments before her smile grew wider. "Did he? I don't seem to recall."

Sal was exhausted by this back and forth. Getting information out of her was practically impossible, and every sentence he uttered felt like he had been lured into a trap. It wasn't a negotiation, but rather an inquisition. "I started working on your ability, and found a way to bring out its full potential." Sal decided it was best to switch topics.

Rather than keeping things vague, he activated the screen on his tablet and slid it across to Sakura who didn't even give it a passing glance. Her eyes were still locked on Sal as she tapped the table with a fingernail.

"When you get approved for an implant as part of the Saviour Class. I'd suggest you get your existing weave remapped to that." Sal continued, his confidence growing with each word. This was finally his domain and he knew what he was dealing with.

Sakura's eyes glanced down at the screen and she finally lifted the single fingertip that was tapping, and used it to scroll through the breakdown Sal had written up. It contained the report about the Void skill, its description and how it compared to her existing Nullification ability.

Sal had to give her credit. Sakura was a professional at keeping her emotions in check. Nothing changed in her appearance as she read through the information. When she was done, she looked at Sal carefully.

"Why are you showing me this?" There was a slight change in her tone, but Sal couldn't identify what it was. She slid the tablet back across the table, and Sal was surprised to see that it landed in the perfectly symmetrical position it had been in before.

Sal sighed as he decided to abandon his negotiation tactic. If he wanted to work with Sakura at some point in the future, he couldn't afford to play these mind games with her. Bartering with people was fun, but when the stakes involved his personal privacy and her personal development, it became a more serious topic that deserved more compassion.

"The secret I would like you to keep is that I'm a Replicator. My ability is Skill Master and it allows me to create new ability weaves. I can also help refine them, to bring out their maximum potential." Sal tapped the screen and looked down at the report on the Void weave. "When I made this, it was with your profile and your essence gates in mind. Your body is capable of handling the Void ability, and if the implanting process follows this method, you'll be able to become an even more formidable Assassin."

Sakura nodded at that, her smile slowly fading from her lips. "And just what would you like in exchange for this supposed upgrade to my ability?"

Sal frowned as he shook his head. "That part was free." He looked at her reaction carefully, but it was impossible to determine how she was feeling. "You made a joke when we first met that you'd join my Guild if I set it up. I wanted to ask you if that was something you'd actually consider."

Sakura's face finally displayed an emotion, and it was one of pity. She looked at Sal and finally gave him a gentle smile as she sat up properly in her chair. Leaning forward ever so slightly she shook her head. "I'm in high-demand. Shade is one of many Guild Master's frothing at the mouth trying to get me, and I'm playing the game with all of them. Leveraging which ones can give me the best resources, and which ones will give me the promises of advancement." She tilted her head ever so slightly. "I only looked at the Delvers Guild because I know it would be easy to get an Officer position there. They've given me a Rare Grade piece of equipment, just to open discussions."

Before Sal could say anything, Sakura continued. "I respect your privacy, and keep your secret safe. But if I could offer a bit of advice to my junior..." Her expression darkened as her eyes locked onto the tablet. "Don't ever lie to someone about their power, ever again. Leverage only works when it's real. And even I can tell that your report is a fabrication. There's no such thing as the Void ability."

Sal sighed inwardly as he made a decision. As long as Quest didn't know, he'd be fine. "Okay, since you're good at keeping secrets... tell me how you feel." Sal instructed her as he activated his Skill-Master ability.

Sakura stared at him in confusion, clearly not expecting that kind of response. She was about to excuse herself, and even started getting to her feet when Sal reached across the table and made a movement with his hands.

Sal watched as her perfect appearance shattered. The precise control she employed to maintain her passive expression disappeared the moment he unknotted a segment of her weave. It had been a different sensation for Blathnaid, Martin, Gosia and Upgrade. Sal had no idea if she would even feel the change, but with the days he had spent working on so many weaves, in addition to having a full understanding of Sakura's ability, it was done in an instant. He didn't even need the visor for this as he knew exactly what he had done. The grade had gone up, so it would have likely been a noticeable shift.

Sakura staggered for a moment as her hands gripped the edge of the table. Her eyes were wide as she stared at Sal with a burning intensity.

As much as he wanted to be cool and composed for this moment, he was genuinely terrified. He had just played around with an Assassin's weave, without permission, and without explaining

what he was doing. Maybe it was time to give her some context so he could avoid any misunderstandings that may lead to his death.

"Your ability went up a single grade. You have quite a few bottlenecks, but you should find it somewhat easier to use now." Sal tried to give her a reassuring smile, but it was hard enough to just make eye-contact with her. Her jet-black hair fell over her pale face as she stared down at the table.

"That's... a neat trick." She eventually breathed out. Her hand shot forward at an unbelievable speed, so fast that Sal didn't have time to flinch backward. He could only watch as the tablet was snatched back by her. "This, is a real thing? You're saying you can get me this Void ability with your Skill Master ability?"

Sal nodded. "I could do it myself, but Quest has forbade me from using it on people until I have full control over it. I'm able to do the simple stuff really easily, but to remap your entire weave against your gates would be a lot more dangerous."

Sakura continued to breathe a little heavier as she placed the tablet back on the table. "Okay then, if that was for free... why are you not using it to bribe me?" She was looking at Sal strangely. "Like... that's how you bribe people. Give them that, and they'll join whatever guild you make. Even if it's a day-old, tier ten trainee guild."

Sal's eyes widened as he raised a hand. "Ah, almost forgot. Here's the bribe." He reached down beside him and pulled up the bag, sliding it across the table to a very bewildered Sakura. "It should be better than that glove Shade offered you, and an example of what we'll be able to make, even with low-grade materials."

Sakura finally got her breathing under control as she opened the bag and withdrew the neatly folded corset. Her eyebrow shot up as she realised what it was. "You're trying to get me to wear this?"

Sal put his palms up in front of him defensively. "Don't misunderstand! We were just constrained by the materials we had left. I've added the Appraisal forms beside it." Sal gestured at the papers that were still in the bag. "For full disclosure, my friend Blathnaid made this with the materials we secured on a Scavenger Run the other day. I altered her weave in a much more dramatic fashion than yours."

Sakura stared at the documents and her eyes widened. "First strike on an enemy..." She started to mumble as she went through them. "It has stealth?!" Her face lit up in excitement as she turned the corset around in her hands. "Fucking hell, this is how you bribe someone. This is perfect!"

Sal couldn't help but smile as he watched her gush about the corset, constantly switching from holding the fabric, to consulting the appraisal documentation. The wide smile on her face faded ever so slightly after a few minutes, probably when she weighed up her options.

"So, what's the angle? I join your Guild and I get the Void ability and this Unique-Grade equipment?" Sakura asked with a slight frown. "How many people do you have picked out for it so far?"

Sal smiled as he shrugged. "This is a very new thing for me, so I had hoped to figure it out before you graduate. As it stands, you're the first person to actually show an interest. I could probably rope Gallant into the line-up, and maybe Blathnaid, too." Sal laughed at the horrified expression on Sakura's face.

"You know it takes months to even get approval, right? Even if you have a roster, the funds and a sponsor... it takes time to get approval." Sakura faltered. "Wait. Did you just say Gallant?" Her eyes widened ever so slightly before a grin appeared on her face. "Okay, that might change things."