

Chapter 34 (2,762 words)

Despite the slight frostiness with Upgrade, Sal distracted himself by adjusting the Dominion weave. Lowering the grade of it had been a massive factor in boosting the synchronisation rate, and after about an hour of fiddling with it, he finally got a hit.

[4 compatible users found]

[Closest Synchro Rate: 79%]

Sal frowned as he listened to the verdict. With only four people being compatible, and the highest synchronisation rate at seventy-nine percent, it meant any increases in the rate would further reduce the amount of people that could feasibly use it.

The other issue was that he couldn't make it work with the humanoid torso. It essentially ruled out his own suitability for the weave, which was a massive disappointment. Just because he could replicate the weave with his Skill Master ability, and activate it, didn't mean it was compatible with him.

"Hitting a blocker?" Upgrade asked without looking up.

Sal didn't react immediately as he looked between the terminal and the simulation orb. The bladed arms were still rotating around the glowing sphere and Sal watched it for a few turns before sighing in defeat. "Looks like I can't use the Dominion ability. Only four people are suitable and the synchro rate is below eighty percent."

"Have you looked at the people that are suitable?"

Her question caught him off guard, and Sal turned around to look at her in confusion. "No? I don't really think it matters, does it?"

Upgrade cupped her chin with her palms as she stared at Sal for a few moments. The silence was a little unnerving before she spoke. "What are you hoping to achieve, Sal?"

Sal blinked as he returned her stare. "Improving the weaves on the database, and creating new ones. The more people that can use them, the better."

A smile appeared on her face as she nodded. "Good. Now, while I have your attention. Blathnaid asked you very nicely when you came in to Appraise that coat. She's too polite to ask again, but I'm curious, too."

"Ah." Sal inwardly cursed at himself as he shot Blathnaid an apologetic glance. "Completely slipped my mind, sorry about that."

Blathnaid held her palms up and laughed. "Don't worry about it, you looked super busy and I didn't want to interrupt."

Sal rubbed at his eyes as he moved over to where the coat was hung on the wall. A niggling thought was in the back of his head, and he wanted to address it sooner rather than later. He looked at Upgrade and chose his words carefully. "Why did you ask me about looking at the compatible people?"

Upgrade raised an eyebrow as she shrugged. "Was just worried you might have been obsessing over an implant for yourself and losing sight of the bigger picture."

Sal frowned. "Would it have been so bad if that was the case? I already told you that I wanted to experiment with making new weaves."

Upgrade stared at Sal for a few moments before shaking her head with a sigh. "Sal, I'm annoyed at how you spoke about Captain Chatfield earlier. He brought you into that Dungeon to help you... and I thought you understood that." She waved her hand as though she was done with the topic. "Look, just forget about it."

Sal most certainly wasn't ready to drop the topic as he turned around completely to face her. "Chatfield agreed with what Erika did during the excursion. Said he'd do the same thing in those circumstances." He took a steadying breath to avoid getting worked up, and he controlled his voice as he forced a smile onto his face. "I'm very grateful for the help that both of you gave me in that Dungeon, but I don't agree with Supports being expendable." He desperately wanted to add a barb to the end of that sentence, suggesting that he would have hoped Upgrade would agree, but he stopped himself. She didn't deserve that.

Upgrade stared at Sal as her expression darkened. "He said that?"

Sal's pent-up resentment evaporated on the spot as he saw the anger blooming on Upgrade's face. He thought it would be a disservice to omit the details, so he added more context. "Apparently, Erika was instructed to protect me. Chatfield expressed regret that she hadn't done her job, and while he did say he'd do the same thing, he added that he would have had me transform my clothing into the black armour."

It felt wrong. Sal had basically accused Upgrade about snitching to Quest when they had reunited after the excursion, and now he was standing there, explaining his grievances against Chatfield, who was just doing his job. Sal didn't have to like the guy, and while he told himself

that he was just stating the facts so Upgrade wouldn't think he was being a dick, it still didn't feel right.

Upgrade looked positively terrifying as she got to her feet. She clenched her fists at her side before a mask of calm washed over her features. The forced smile on her face was scarier than her true emotions, and Sal took a tentative step backward. He desperately wished he had the visor equipped, because while he could identify rage, he didn't know where it was being directed. Had he fucked up?

"He failed to mention that part the last time we spoke." Upgrade's words were venomous as she snatched her tablet off the table and looked at it for a moment. "I need to make a call. I'll be back in a minute." After storming across the room, she tapped her card repeatedly against the sensor before the door finally opened.

When the door closed behind Upgrade, Blathnaid audibly exhaled. She looked at Sal with wide eyes before a nervous chuckle escaped her. "I think you just became an accessory to murder."

Sal stared after Upgrade for a few moments. Whatever way he had envisioned the conversation going, that wasn't it. He really hoped that he hadn't made things worse for himself, as Chatfield was going to be the person orchestrating the Tower exercise. It was a simple question of if he wanted to preserve a civil relationship with Chatfield, or if he wanted to maintain his friendship with Upgrade. It wasn't even a real choice in his head, as Upgrade won in every category.

Turning back to Blathnaid, Sal switched topics. "Let's have a look at that jacket. Can you talk me through it? It looks incredible."

Blathnaid practically beamed as she whirled around in her stool to look at the coat hung up on the wall. "Prowler Poncho doesn't have a good ring to it, but I didn't want to name it a trench coat. Went with 'Stalker' as it sounded much cooler." She picked at one of the sleeves and raised it slightly. "I've been mapping out a load of runes that Jack made for me. I thought they all had to work independently, but he somehow blended them all to create shared effects. So, we have material bonuses and amplifications from the various runes."

Sal just smiled as he listened to Blathnaid talking about the coat. She was clearly gushing about it, and proud of what she had accomplished, but the information she was giving him wasn't all that useful for the Appraisal. That didn't matter though, and he happily played along. "Is that the green glow from the Prowler blood?"

Blathnaid's eyes lit up as she nodded. "Sure is! Since you're supposed to make runes with essence, I thought it might be better to use an essence-rich liquid that was compatible with the other materials. I've incorporated the Prowler hide, the claws and the blood into the coat. I've no idea if it will give off much of a bonus, but guessed it was worth a shot."

Sal laughed, which caused Blathnaid to look at him in worry. He realised that she was anxious and quickly corrected himself. "Sorry, I'm not laughing at the method. It's just a really cool glow that it gives off. I wouldn't have thought about material compatibility."

Blathnaid's worry vanished as a relieved smile reappeared on her face. "Don't do that to a girl. You made me think I fucked up massively." She laughed as she stood up from the stool and pulled at the collar of the jacket. "The issue was with the claws. I had no idea how to incorporate them as weapons, so rather than trying to make something for the sleeves, I made them a design feature around the neck to contain the puffy fur collar."

"Not going to lie, it's going to make him look like a Supervillain." Sal joked as he watched the ethereal green glow emanate across the surface of the fabric. The contrast to the glossy black finish was stark.

Blathnaid snorted. "Yeah, especially when he gives us that trademark scowl. I still think it's going to suit him though."

"What do you make of him giving you all that Q-Cred from the last run?" Sal asked coyly, but Blathnaid just swatted him away as though it wasn't worth talking about.

"Ugh, don't get me started. I hate feeling indebted to someone, and this is... a lot of debt." Blathnaid sighed with a wistful shake of her head. "Just means I'm really going to have to give it my all at the Tower. Can't have him thinking I was a shit investment after all."

Sal was about to answer when he suddenly froze. His gaze was locked onto the jacket in front of him and his mouth just opened and closed. "Eh, Blathnaid..." He started awkwardly. "How long did it take you to make this?"

Blathnaid tilted her head as she ran the numbers in her head. "I'd say a good day. Maybe nine hours, but most of that was sketching. Construct moves a lot faster now than before."

Sal stared at her for a moment, finally realising what Upgrade felt when she interacted with him. "What grade do you think this is?"

With a laugh, Blathnaid winced. "Eh... I'd love for it to be Rare, but I'd be happy with Uncommon if the evolutionary rune worked." She hesitated, as though doubting herself. After a quiet moment of reflection, she shook her head. "No. It's Rare... I'm sure of it."

Sal shook his head with a grin. "Wrong on both counts." His eyes were locked onto the coat as he Appraised it quietly. There was no mistaking it, and he had no idea how she had managed to

do it. Was it down to the quality of the materials she used? The synergy of using Prowler components? There was no telling how it worked.

"Wait, what?" Blathnaid frowned as she looked between Sal and the coat. "There's no way it's common."

Sal hiked his thumb over his shoulder to his desk. "Pick up my visor and have a look for yourself. I will say though, you're going to get a surprise."

Name	Stalker Overcoat
Origin	Crafted
Age	New
Grade	Unique
Dimensions	Chest 46 inches Neck 18.5 inches Sleeve 26.4 inches Length 54 inches
Materials	Refined Construct Essence Prowler Blood Prowler Claws Prowler Hide Black Bear Fur Infused Iron Alloy Essence Core
Attributes	Pack: When moving as a group, movement speed is increased. Stalk: Allows user to approach targets without alerting them. Stealth: Allows the user to conceal their presence by staying still. Exploit: Allows user to make the first attack in combat.
Abilities	Pack Stalk Stealth Exploit
Power Source	Enhanced Core
Evolution	Yes - 0%
Quality	Excellent
Condition	100%
Value	Est. \$125,000.00 - \$160,000.00

As Blathnaid fumbled with the visor, her face grew red. "I triple-checked everything and it worked perfectly, so I don't know what went wro-" Her words cut off as the visor locked onto the coat. She didn't move from the spot she occupied and simply stared at it in shock.

"Going to go out on a limb and say that Darren made a very good investment." Sal chuckled. "There's no telling what way it's going to evolve either, but with the current options, I'd say that he's definitely going to end up as some kind of Assassin if he uses it."

Blathnaid started to move forward in a state of wonder. Her arm lifted as she caressed the sleeve of the coat. She stood like that for a few moments, as though lost in thought, when her eyes suddenly widened. "It's better than mine!" Her realisation caused her face to go red as she looked at Sal. "Do you think he'd know if I just switched it with a shittier one?"

"Depends, do you have enough materials to try another one?" Sal laughed as he knew she wasn't really being serious.

Blathnaid tilted her head as she looked at the duffel bag on the floor. "I could make another one like this, but it would need to be for someone far more petite. Same runes, materials, but different design. Maybe a vest or corset. Can't imagine he'd be happy with either of those options, though."

Sal thought about that for a second before a smile crept onto his face. "If you've got time and you're confident, I'd buy the corset from you."

Blathnaid stared at him before her eyes narrowed a bit. "I'm going to guess that you don't know what a corset is..."

Sal snorted as he shook his head. "It's not for me. There's just someone I want to keep on my side, and this would be the perfect way to get in their good graces."

Blathnaid smiled at that and shook her head. "Give me the rest of the day and I'll get something for you. No payment though." She pulled the Scrounger V Challenge Crest out of her pocket and waved it for Sal to see. "This one is on Darren. I felt bad that he didn't split any of his share with you."

Sal laughed. "It was obvious what he was doing though. I respect him for it."

When Blathnaid cocked an eyebrow, Sal could see the challenge in her eyes.

"No no, I'm not saying he was trying to buy your affection or anything. He just knows that I'm third in the overall rankings, and very much in the safety zone when it comes to the end of the semester." Sal pointed at the Challenge Crest in Blathnaid's hand. "You now have one from Chatfield and you're at the top of the second tier at the Scavenger's Network. That gives you a Hunter's Bureau Rank, too. There's a very good chance with the performance in the excursion, that you're in the top ranks now."

Realisation dawned on Blathnaid's face as she stared at the badge in her hands. "Whoa..." She blinked quickly before shaking her head. "Not going to get my hopes up with Saviour class or anything like that, but if half of what you said is true, it's pretty damn cool."

Sal agreed. "It really is. I'm delighted for you."

Blathnaid stood there for a second before pocketing the crest and removing the visor from her ear. "Go back to your simulations, I've a corset to make. Who is it even for by the way? I can't imagine it would really suit Hannah or Divinity."

"It's for Anna Sakura." Sal said with a sigh. "She's on track to join a Guild that has a pretty shitty track-record, in exchange for Rare Grade equipment and a fast-track through the ranks."

Blathnaid's eyes widened. "She's a Saviour, Sal. Are you really going to try and recruit her for your own Guild? She's a third year and going to graduate next semester. I don't mean to sound like a bitch here, but you might want to aim a bit lower."

Sal smiled as he shrugged. "So what? Just means I need to speed up my plans a bit. I'll have a Guild set up by the time she graduates."