

## Chapter 13 (2,175 words)

Rather than jumping straight into the weaves like was his first instinct, Sal tried to apply the lessons he learned from crafting with Upgrade. For that reason, instead of obsessing over the terminal, Sal was seated at one of the workbenches with a stylus and a sheet of paper. To his left was his open tablet with the entire list of abilities that Quest had sent to him. It was going to be a bit of a slog, but Sal was prepared for it. Ever since his conversation with Divinity about how he treated her powers, he was reluctant to ask her to look into the future for him. This was one of the times where he was severely tempted to do so, but refrained from trying to take the shortcut. She was out in the reclaimed zone with a team trying to fend off ambushers. The last thing that she needed was for him to be asking her for favours from the comfort of Quest Academy.

Sal went through the list and started taking down names of the different abilities that sounded like they might be useful. It was all guesswork at this point though, but he needed to try. Instead of looking at it from an essence category perspective, he just went with the names to begin with. Adapt and Harmonize were two that stood out the most so far.

[Adapt: Allows user to rapidly learn new skills and techniques.]

[Harmonize: Grants the user an innate proficiency in essence management and control.]

The learning part from Adapt sounded really promising, and the innate proficiency part in Harmonize made it a main contender. Sal went through the list to find another ability that might create the perfect grouping. He was also counting on his Skill-Master adding some proficiency for ability control. With Brophy's temperament and the frequent outbursts, Sal was tempted to just throw in the Calm ability to see if that would keep him in a passive state, but it didn't really fit the brief. Another thought that had popped into his head was to incorporate Mind Master, the ability that Erika had. If Brophy could control his own mind, he could be able to side-step his trauma and utilise his powers.

He didn't even write them down on the page. Sal sighed as he scrolled through the list, adding more names and their descriptions, and looping them with other abilities as potential combinations. A humourless laugh eventually escaped his throat as he looked down at the most recent notes. Without even trying, he was pretty sure he had discovered the evolutionary path for the Adapt ability, with Hone being it's predecessor and Integrate being the evolved form after it.

[Hone: Grants user an increased capacity to learn new skills and techniques.]

[Integrate: Allows user to treat newly learned skills and techniques as innate capabilities.]

As far as Sal could tell, it was like a hyper-efficient muscle-memory system that potentially operated like Absolute-Counter. It would be cool being able to learn something new and being able to perform it at a really high level. If it was in fact an evolutionary path, and all the abilities carried over into the Integrate ability, Sal was definitely going to incorporate it into a weave. He continued to scroll through the different abilities, making notes of ones that looked like they could fit in with a Mastery ability. There was one called Intuit, that was a little underwhelming. It felt like a diagnostic ability that helped people understand abilities and status conditions. It might have been an earlier version of the Analysis ability, but Sal couldn't really tell with a glance. He made note of it and moved onto the next one. Surge was a fun one that allowed a person to surpass their own limits for a short period of time. It looked similar to Overcharge which was Anthony's ability that only worked with equipment.

Hours passed and Sal was still nowhere nearer to a conclusion, but he had discovered a number of really interesting skills. It would need a lot of testing to see how compatible they all were with each other, and that thought alone was exciting. His focus had moved away from the internal-focused abilities to the external ones. There were so many Controller abilities that he had taken note of that looked really interesting, particularly for their area of effect range. The logic behind using them was that they might be able to manifest as area wide effects that could benefit a wider team. Gallant was an incredible team-player during the exercise and had so much knowledge that he could share with the others, but his ability sounded like it was suited more for single-target battles. If Sal was able to incorporate a wide area effect, it might encourage Gallant to remain as a team-player when he regained control. Sure, it was really presumptuous of Sal to think that he could change Gallant's fighting style by altering the nature of his ability, but it was something worth considering.

The other reason Sal had been looking at them, and truthfully, the main reason... was that he wanted something for himself that would give him more versatility out in the field. If essence was no longer an issue for him with the coat, and he could activate a high-powered weave, then there was no reason to shy away from the really destructive ones. Just like before, he was pretty sure he had unconsciously discovered a family of abilities. He looped them all together to test his theory out later when he started playing with the simulated weaves.

[Domain: Allows user to alter the essence category in a target area around themselves.]

[Killzone: Allows user to weaponise essence in a target area around themselves.]

[Conquest: Allows user to claim the essence in a target area as their own, cutting off essence access to any entity in the area around themselves.]

Conquest sounded incredibly badass, especially when you considered that Demons were almost entirely made of essence. It would essentially make any area around the party a complete killing ground for anything that entered the space. Or at least that was how Sal interpreted it. Killzone sounded very similar to Catalyst, the ability that Prestige used during the excursion. Since Innovate and Upgrade were so similar, Sal wondered if this was just another instance where two

abilities felt like they were related. Either way, he made notes of them and continued on with his research. Well, he tried to at least. The idea of having a protective area around himself at all times, that would kill demons that approached felt like an incredibly overpowered ability. He absolutely wanted it for himself.

Sal moved Refine down to second place on his list and put Conquest at the top of his desired abilities. Since it utilised atmospheric essence and was a part of a controlled area, Sal smiled as he tentatively added in a few other abilities alongside it as a possible combination. Conquest, Concept and Absolute Counter. Okay, that last one was very much out of place, but Sal had a funny thought while he was idling away at the abilities. What would happen if he could control an area of the battlefield that was protected by Conquest, reinforced with weaponry crafted by Concept and activated them as a defense with Absolute Counter? It was stupid, but Sal was curious if it could work. He had no idea if Concept would be able to work independently without someone wielding the weapons themselves. But what if he used Concept to create an anti-demon turret? Would that work like the turrets that fired on any demons that came too close?

Sal drew a small question mark beside the combination, but added his notes as to why he thought it might work. It was his non-combative nature talking, but he was comfortable with that. If he could make an ability weave that didn't require him to use his reaction speed, then it would be invaluable out on the battlefield. When Sal caught himself tapping the stylus against the page, he forced himself to move onto a different combination before he started obsessing over a method on making the dream ability work. He closed out of the Control category and went looking at Psionics instead, hoping that there would be something in there that would stand out to him for Gallant's ability.

Maybe an hour or so later, Blathnaid walked past him and made her way to Upgrade's desk with a stack of blueprints under her arm.

Sal glanced up from his own scribbles to see what was going on, grateful for the break in monotony. He hadn't managed to find anything that interesting for the last while, and had ended up making wild combinations in the hopes something would stick. All it was doing was making more work for himself, but he didn't really mind.

"I'm happy with the designs if you'd like to take a look at them?" Blathnaid asked as she held up the tubes for Upgrade to inspect. "I know we're pressed for time on this, but would it be okay if I clocked out early? I'm pretty exhausted."

Upgrade nodded with a gentle smile as she took the tubes from Blathnaid. "Of course! We should all wrap up soon. I'll have a look at these before we finish, but you can head on to bed and we can chat about it tomorrow?"

Blathnaid gave her a grateful smile as she waved at Sal before heading out of the workshop.

When the door closed behind her, Sal looked over at Upgrade with a guilty smile. "Is it bad that I forgot she was in here with us?"

Upgrade laughed as she shook her head. "You get used to the breathing and the stylus scratching, but the best work is done in solidarity rather than alone." She popped open one of the tubes and withdrew the blueprint with a sigh. "Let's see what she's been working on for the last few hours..."

Sal perked up from his own workstation and instantly regretted it as his back reminded him that it both existed and hadn't moved in a long period of time. With a wince he stayed where he was. "Anything promising?"

Upgrade frowned as she opened up the next tube and laid it out on top of the first one. "If I'm honest, I thought her initial designs were already up to par, so going to these lengths is just a bit excessive." The frown intensified as Upgrade opened the third tube and unfurled the sheet of paper. "You have to appreciate that she can't visualise improvements the way we can with the Upgrade and Mythcrafter abilities. She's doing all of this from instinct and the few classes that she's had with me since the semester started." Shaking her head, Upgrade's furrowed brow lightened a smile started forming on her face. "But no matter how much I look at them, they're still the instincts of a First-Year. Her production quality might be very high, and her attention to detail is wonderful... but she's still thinking like a Tailor."

Sal massaged his lower back as he got to his feet and moved across to Upgrade's station. "Any chance you could put in a request for some comfy chairs? You know for the Mythic Workshop?"

Upgrade chuckled. "They're uncomfortable for a reason. We don't want people living in here." She gave Sal a wink and a slight smile. "Some people just can't take the hint and persevere."

"Speak for yourself. I know for a fact that there's no way you're calling it early tonight." Sal retorted as he crossed his arms and looked at the door where Blathnaid had just left. "I don't think I've ever seen you leave here at a reasonable hour."

Upgrade sighed as she opened up the last of the tubes Blathnaid had given her. "If I leave now, I'll miss whatever late-night food delivery you're paying for. You didn't forget, right?"

Sal glanced at his workstation and realised that it was definitely time for him to step away from it for a while. "Do you want me to head up to the Credit Floor to see if I can put through an order?"

Upgrade folded the page with her fingers, so she could see Sal clearly over it. "If I find out that my food went cold because you were too busy batting eyelids with Vanessa, I'll gut you." She released the fold and let the page spring back up to its full height. "But yes, if you go up and talk

to Greg or one of the people on the night shift, they'll show you the menus we typically use. I like spicy food."

Sal nodded as he made his way to leave. "Any other dietary requirements?"

Upgrade didn't look away from the blueprint as she answered. "Some sort of salad would be nice, too. Feel free to go wild, it's your treat."