

Chapter 22 (2,432 words)

Sal shivered as the wind slammed against his face, forcing him to squint his unshielded eye. He tried to keep his coffee sheltered with one hand as he approached the train station on the other side of the amphitheatre. It was suspended so high in the air where the wind was at its most powerful. Sal was learning the hard way that there existed pockets of space that weren't protected by essence barriers, which caused him to zig-zag his stride in the hopes of finding reprieve from the onslaught of the elements. After a few paces, he felt the wind dissipate immediately and sighed in relief. Looking up at the surrounding towers, he wondered if they had been designed in a way that protected the interior plate that held the amphitheatre suspended so high off the ground. He wasn't an architect or engineer, so the math was completely alien to him.

"Sal! We're over here." Blathnaid's voice called out from the platform.

Sal glanced over to see her waving a hand in his direction. She was wearing the blood-red tracker outfit and had a black backpack slung over her shoulder. Beside her was another first-year that looked to be twice their age. A tight black beard and thick arms made him look more like a bodyguard than anything else. His crossed arms didn't do anything to dispel his imposing appearance. Sal saw how he moved ever so slightly in front of Blathnaid as though he were protecting her from something. Without giving it much thought, Sal let his visor analyse the man.

Name	Darren Lenihan
Alias	Dazzler (Nickname)
Class	Controller
Profession	Current: First Year Student, Quest Academy
Rank (Hero)	Hunter Bureau: Current Rank 7,291 Quest Academy: Current Rank 16
Accreditations	<p>Challenge Crests: 3</p> <p>Enrolled Specialist Classes:</p> <ul style="list-style-type: none"> • Masterclass Field Extraction • Masterclass Subterfuge & Disguise • Intermediate Coaching & Leadership <p>Enrolled Classes:</p> <ul style="list-style-type: none"> • Warzone (Field, Survival, Combat) • Analysis & Demonic Behaviour • Skills • Resilience • Administration <p>Certifications:</p> <ul style="list-style-type: none"> • None
Ability	<p>Skill Name: Configure Rating: XIV</p> <p>Skill Category: Body Manipulation</p> <p>Skill Mastery: 100%</p> <p>Skill Efficiency: 96%</p> <p>Progress to Next Rating: 87%</p> <p>Evolutionary Capability: No</p> <p>Potential Cap: XXV</p> <p>Natural Synergy: Integrate Harmonize</p>
Essence	<p>Essence Type: Body Manipulation</p> <p>Essence Gates: 100</p> <p>Essence Absorption Rate: 63%</p> <p>Essence Control: 97%</p> <p>Essence Refinement: 100%</p> <p>Essence Calibration: 98%</p>

Physical	Strength Rating: XIII Mobility Rating: XV Speed Rating: XV Fitness Rating: XIV Current Status Effects: <ul style="list-style-type: none"> • Injuries: None • Illnesses: None
Reputation	Hunter Bureau: Known Guild Association: Known Quest Academy: Known Doom Society: Known Doom Council: Known Bastion Colonies: Known Ameye Locomotion: Known
Threat Level	Analysed Equipment: II Analysed Martial Arts: N/A Analysed Movements: N/A Analysed Techniques: N/A Analysed Body Composition: XV
Wealth	Q-Credit: 2,133

Sal parsed through the information at a rapid pace and decided internally that he'd need to reset the parameters for Analysis. There was far too much information being thrown at him and it was starting to get fatiguing going through it all. The reputation thing didn't really add much value to the profile at the moment. Then, just as Sal had that thought, the reputation section disappeared from his view. Experimenting a little more, Sal willed for the Threat Level component to disappear too. The visor itself would alert him if there were any threats incoming, so he didn't need a report of someone just standing in front of him. He could do a specific threat analysis in the future if he wanted to read someone's body language or to try and detect lies with deduction. It disappeared just like he had hoped. Sal quickly went through the other sections. He was happy to keep the Essence, Physical and Accreditations components, and the Q-Cred one was nice to have. Even though it felt like a massive breach of privacy.

He wondered if he'd be able to parse the Essence category into something that made more sense in a quick instance, but keeping the option to look deeper if necessary. Since the visor had deduction, it should be able to function the same as the simulation orb, where it breaks down information and delivers it in a more understandable way. Anyway, that would be something he'd experiment with later. He was happy enough with the more condensed view of the Analysis.

The nice thing about having the visor respond to his thoughts was that the entire decision making process and wondering had only taken a few seconds. Neither Blathnaid or Darren were giving him funny looks. Well, Darren was very much paying attention to the visor and the outfit that Sal was wearing. The visor indicated that it was a mixture of surprise and approval. Sal would have been able to determine that by himself though.

"Darren Lenihan, my friends call me Daz or Dazzler." He unfurled his crossed arms to offer a handshake.

Sal gave Blathnaid a curious look, and she just shook her head, as if to say that this was all Darren. A massive part of Sal wished that Lucia had never confronted him about how he introduced himself to people because he was hyper-aware of it every time now.

"Salvatore Argento. You can call me Sal." It even felt wrong saying it differently, but Sal pushed those thoughts aside as he accepted the handshake. Even if he hadn't dispelled those thoughts, his mind would have been forced to divert all its attention to survival as the iron grip locked onto him. It wasn't an aggressive encounter, but rather a stark contrast to the difference in strength between the two first-years. Darren Lenihan was ridiculously strong, and he wasn't even trying.

Darren gave him a curt nod as he gestured behind him to a gathering of Second-Years. "We're going to be heading out to a newly reclaimed zone with them. Is this your first Scavenger Run, too?"

Sal nodded as he glanced at Blathnaid, who also nodded. Her hands were clenched and Sal could see a slight tremor in her shoulders. Was she nervous or excited? It was hard to know. The visor told him that it was the latter, which brought a smile to his face.

"Okay, well I'll take care of your registration. It costs Q-Cred to get a membership with the Scavs." He plucked his Q-Card out of his back pocket and held it in his right hand. "You'll be responsible for your membership fees going forward, but this one is on me."

Sal raised a hand. "I don't mind paying for us. How much is the fee?" He looked over at Blathnaid to see if she was aware of any of this, but she looked just as surprised as him. There was nothing in Darren's demeanour that looked suspicious so Sal didn't think he was being conned.

"It's one hundred and twenty five Q-Cred per licence. They'll be able to explain the benefits a lot better to you, but it gives you all sorts of perks. You can't go up the ranks with them unless you're a part of their organisation. Higher tiers get better benefits." Darren explained with a sigh as though it was exhausting for him to recall all of the information. "You don't need to worry about paying for it though. I said to Blathnaid that I'd help her get some materials, since she offered to make me better equipment before the Tower." Darren gestured at Sal, the Q-Card still

in his hand. "So, it doesn't cost all that much for her to bring a friend along. I'm happy to pay for the two of you."

Blathnaid's cheeks started to go red, which clearly made Darren feel uncomfortable.

"Anyway, the train will be here soon to bring us to the site. I'll meet you there." Darren said as he looked squarely at Sal, giving Blathnaid the quickest of glances before he turned around and stalked off towards the rest of the group.

Sal smiled before he took a long sip of his coffee. Glancing at Blathnaid's face, he couldn't help but laugh a little. "I think he likes you."

Blathnaid just gave Sal a light punch on the shoulder as response. "Don't start. He just needs some help making equipment." She watched as Darren started speaking to another student across the platform. "He's a good guy, but not very expressive. Really helped me during the excursion."

Sal's smile didn't leave his face as he followed Blathnaid's gaze to where Darren was standing. She didn't know that Darren had been picked out by the Bastion as a person of interest. The fact that he was a Controller in contention for the Saviours Class was a potential issue, but Sal had to trust in Blathnaid's judgement for now. It wasn't going to be of much help to think that everyone was out to get them.

Blathnaid let out an aggravated sigh as she turned to look at Sal with an exasperated expression. "Why did you have to say that you think he likes me? That's all I can think of now!"

Sal shrugged with a laugh. "Well, isn't it great? He's a Body Manipulator, so you can just tell him your type and he'll be able to transform into it. Sounds perfect, no?"

Blathnaid just stared at Sal as though he was insane. "That's like cheating on them... with them! Can you imagine how it would feel being told to change their appearance for someone?"

Sal sipped at his coffee and gave Blathnaid a sideways glance. "So, you're saying that who he is on the inside isn't what's important?"

Blathnaid's face went even redder as she raised her hand to hit Sal. He dodged away with a laugh and raised his free hand in surrender.

"Sorry! Just lightening the mood." Sal laughed. "Anyways, I thought this was just like a treasure hunt to find some materials. Membership sounds a lot more structured than I was expecting."

Blathnaid gave Sal a surprised look. "Really? You're not familiar with the Scavs? They're pretty much the equivalent of the Hunter's Bureau for Supports." She exhaled as she shook her head. "Like really, I would have thought that you'd know all about them as an Appraiser. They're like a leading authority on material production and trade."

It finally dawned on Sal as his expression darkened. "Ah. The Scabs Tax."

Blathnaid looked at him curiously. "You mean Scav, right?"

"Sorry, it's just that my father dealt with all the financials for the Argento Auction. He always called it the Scabs Tax, because he said that it was essentially paying people who added no value to the process." Sal's lips took on a wry grin as he recalled his father cursing them to no end. "I doubt he'd be happy knowing that I'm thinking of becoming a member."

With a frown, Blathnaid looked at him and shrugged. "There's no pressure for you to join us if it's against your principles, or you think it would piss off your dad." She glanced in the direction of Darren on the other side of the platform. "I don't have many ways of getting Q-Cred, so I need to take this opportunity with both hands."

Sal shook his head. "No need to worry, I'm going to need a lot of materials in the future. I'll need to get on friendly terms with these guys sooner rather than later." He drained the rest of his coffee before letting out a satisfied sigh. "Besides, I'm really curious what sort of benefits we get by being members."

Whatever Blathnaid was about to respond with, was cut off by the train thundering into the train station at a reduced speed. The thick panels of metal along the side were completely covered in large claw marks and streaks of green blood. None of the turrets looked to be steaming, so Sal guessed they hadn't gone through a Red-Zone in a while.

"You waiting on an invitation?" Blathnaid joked as she gripped her backpack and set off towards the nearest carriage.

Sal grinned, thinking of his father in that moment and wondering how his parents were doing. He needed to give them a call at some point to keep them in the loop about everything. As Sal moved forward to follow Blathnaid, he realised that he hadn't been checking in much with Barry or Divinity. It had been a few days, but he still should message them before they got back from the excursion. He wondered how Divinity would react if she saw him willingly going into a reclaimed zone so quickly after escaping the hells of the forest.

Taking out his phone, Sal opened his messages and started to send a message when he saw the last messages from Divinity.

Divinity Khan: What have you been doing?

Divinity Khan: The entire saviours list is changing dramatically.

Divinity Khan: And don't say it isn't you, because there's a Mythic Guild working out of the workshop with your name on it.

Divinity Khan: Not going to lie, I'm a little upset that you picked Fabi as your Vice-Captain of the Guild. Didn't even consider me for the position? Worst. Friend. Ever.

Divinity Khan: That was a joke. Please stop overthinking it.

Divinity Khan: You can also reply at any point. It's not like I've anything better to do in the forest.

With a grimace, Sal started typing back a reply. His head was spinning with all the messages that Divinity had sent across. Was Quest really going to approve of the upgrade to the Workshop? And he was going to make a Guild, with Fabi as his right-hand person? He hadn't even met her!

Salvatore Argento: I'm so sorry, Divinity. I'm the worst friend ever. Things have been hectic.

Salvatore Argento: It's no excuse though, I promised I'd be better. How are you doing?

Within seconds, Sal had an answer that brought a wide smile to his face. Without asking her to look into the future to see how things would progress, she was already doing it.

Divinity Khan: How can I be angry when there are so many new Heroes in the future?

Divinity Khan: I've no idea what you're doing, but keep it up! Tell me everything when I'm back, okay?

Sal typed out his agreement and that he was looking forward to catching up with her before getting into the carriage. Blathnaid gave him a quizzical look, but just smiled when raised his hand to show Divinity's name on the screen.

A few minutes later, the train started to move and Sal wondered how his first Scavenger Run was going to go.
