

## Chapter 14 (2,331 words)

"Ooooh, let me think." Martin swivelled in his chair as he rotated to face Gosia. "I could go for a Chinese. You feeling it?"

Sal had decided to ask the other crafters on his way to the Credit Floor. Martin and Gosia were the first on his route, with Alex and Forge being the others that he thought might want something. Since it was his treat, he thought it would be a good idea to build as much goodwill as possible. Especially considering that Alex might have an alchemical solution to the Gallant issue. If there was a concoction that could increase Gallant's Mastery stat, that would be a massive help in advance of the Tower. Even as he thought of it, a part of his brain dismissed the idea because there was no way Prestige and Gallant wouldn't have exhausted all the common options available to them. But maybe they didn't know the root cause of his issues with the ability? That was the angle that Sal was going with as he looked over to see Alex pottering away with a few different vials, a bored expression on his face.

"We had Chinese food three times last week. Can we please have something a little less greasy?" Gosia pleaded as she looked from Martin over to where Sal stood. "Like literally anything with some steamed vegetables. Something fresh would be magic. There's this amazing little pop-up vendor that does the absolute best dressings. All essence-grown produce and they're made right in front of you. What's the name of them? Roland's?"

"Royce." Martin corrected her without looking up. His demeanour had changed drastically since his food option was vetoed. "I think her son is a First-Year. Has the exact same ability as his mother, but not exactly how he's going to get passed the Evals. Can't really see a food vendor making much of an impact on the battlefield."

"Martin!" Gosia glared at him before giving Sal a sympathetic look. "You could ask Greg if he has a menu for Royce's. They do other stuff too, but you won't regret trying them out. I promise."

"Thanks Gosia, anything in particular from that menu or will I just get a bit of everything?" Sal asked as he took note of the name. He had already met Anderson Royce, and guessed that his parents ran a restaurant. It was one of the few examples he had seen of a parent and their child having the same ability. He had thought that Erika and Neuro had been an anomaly, but maybe it wasn't the case.

"Anything with mushrooms for me. Martin hates them though, so anything without them for him." She practically beamed at Sal as she gave Martin a knowing look, as if daring him to correct her.

Sal smiled as he made a note on his tablet. "Steamed vegetables, something with mushrooms and something without. Gotcha."

He told them that he'd be right back and moved over to where Forge was seated with his arms crossed in front of him. The Master of the Workshop looked positively exhausted as he stared into space ahead of him. Sal was almost reluctant to strike up a conversation with him as he looked like he didn't want to be disturbed, but to Sal's surprise, Forge blinked suddenly and turned his head in Sal's direction.

"Mr. Argento. What might yourself and Upgrade be cooking up in that room?" He looked past Sal to the door that was locked. "Seeing Quest down here is usually a good sign. I wish he'd stop by more regularly." Blinking his eyes a little more aggressively, Forge sat up and cracked his knuckles. "Guessing it's one of those hush-hush matters relating to your ability?"

Sal laughed with a shake of his head. "Not this time, well... at least nothing to do with Mythcrafter. I'm learning how to use my innate ability, Skill-Master. It's a Replication ability that lets me work with skill weaves."

Forge clicked his fingers which produced a very impressive snap. "Yes! Upgrade was working on the simulation orb. I worked on the arms for it, it's a very impressive piece of machinery. I hope it's going well?"

"Very well, but it's time consuming. I'm getting food for everyone to keep us going a few more hours. Would you like anything? We're getting stuff from Royce's?" Sal offered with a smile.

Forge snorted as he shook his head. "Thanks, but I'll pass. Rabbit food isn't really my thing, but I appreciate the offer." Hiking his thumb over his shoulder to a cluster of second-years, he gave Sal a softened expression. "If you're looking to make some friends though, you might want to ask that group if they want anything." A wry smile pulled at his lips as his voice lowered into a whisper. "They've already eaten."

Sal just laughed. "You're really just a con-man, aren't you? Besides, don't you think I have enough friends?"

Forge tilted his head as he straightened his back. "You can never have enough. There are a lot of lecturers and external crafters that know you, but not many of your peers. Could be worth extending an olive branch and getting to know them a little better." He paused for a moment before adding another nugget of advice. "Maybe get ahead of the resentment they'll undoubtedly feel when you hit Saviour Class."

"That sounds like a them problem." Sal answered as he looked over at the group Forge was talking about. They wore black uniforms with purple shoulders, indicating that they were Supports. It was three guys and two girls, all seated around two combined workstations. One of them in particular looked familiar and Sal felt a slight tightness in his chest as he recognised the

guy he had pushed a few weeks ago. He was the one that had accused Sal of getting preferential treatment and monopolising Upgrade's time.

Forge shrugged as he got to his feet. "Up to you, of course. Just trying to make your time here as easy as possible. It's very hard to hate the hand that feeds you." He waved his hand vaguely with a smile. "Or whatever that quote is supposed to be."

Sal watched as Forge moved through the workshop, checking-in on the remaining groups of students that were pulling a late night. It was admirable to be honest, and also a little sad to watch. Sal had seen that man wielding a giant hammer, smashing through a wave of demons to protect the students at the academy. He was the very definition of a Hero, but right now, he looked like a tired parent that hadn't gotten a good night's sleep in years.

With a momentary glance to the group of students, Sal swallowed his reservations and put a smile on his face as he moved over to them. "Hey. I'm putting in an order for Royce's. Any of you want anything? It's my treat."

"Hmm? Nah, we've just ate-" The guy that Sal had pushed turned around and stopped speaking mid-sentence. As the gears in his head turned, the other people on the team filled the empty space.

"I think we're good. Thanks for the offer." One of the girls said, her eyes taking in the Epic-Grade equipment he was wearing. With a nudge to the girl beside her, she gave Sal's clothing a meaningful look, as if telling her to check them out.

The other two guys just made non-committal noises through smiles as they turned their attention back to the table. The blonde guy continued to stare at Sal with a conflicted expression before sighing and shaking his head. "Thanks for the offer, we're all good here."

Sal forced a smile and gave them a nod before turning around to move in Alex's direction.

"Sorry about before, when I was a dickhead to you and that girl." The blonde guy called out after him.

Sal turned to see all of the group members looking at the blonde guy in confusion, then turning their attention back to Sal. He wasn't exactly sure what to say, but the blonde guy continued before he had a chance to respond.

"We hit a bit of a wall with our project and I took it out on you. It wasn't cool, and I'm sorry I acted that way." He spread his hands and exhaled loudly. "I tried to apologise sooner but you all left on that excursion. Forge said it wouldn't be a good idea to disturb you while you were working on the Appraisal projects, but I'm glad you came over."

Sal suddenly understood why Forge had wanted him to extend the olive branch. He had even covered for Sal's work in the locked room, by claiming he was working on Appraisals. Sal had expected a frosty reception when he approached the guy, but this was much a very pleasant surprise.

"Water under the bridge. I never did catch your name by the way, I'm Salvatore Argento, but my friends call me Sal." He offered his hand, and practically heard Nova in the back of his head mocking him for the corny introduction he did every single time.

The blonde guy's eyes widened ever so slightly. "Wait, like the Argento Auction?" He took Sal's hand and gave it a firm shake before turning to his group. He gestured at the girl who had been nudged in the side. She wore twin braids that came all the way down to her mid-section. "This is Anna Kay."

"Konijnendijk." Anna corrected him immediately, as though this was an ongoing rite of passage. She looked at Sal for only the briefest of moments before turning her gaze back to the doodles on a page in front of her.

"It's impossible to pronounce..." He laughed awkwardly in Sal's direction before pointing at the two guys that were standing on the opposite end of the bench. "That's Zac and Paul. You'd think they were Offence Classes, but I promise, they're actually Supports." He tried to make a joke, but it just resulted in a pair of scowls being directed right back at him. "And this is-"

"Erin." The blonde girl with piercing blue eyes answered for herself as she looked at Sal. "I like your equipment. Where did you get it?"

The blonde guy frowned as he looked quickly between Erin and Sal. "And I'm Jules, sorry for the long-winded introduction."

Sal gave them a collective smile and had nodded each time a new name was called. He looked back at Erin and realised he should probably be careful with his answer. "I had it commissioned with Q-Cred." With a look to Jules, Sal tried to explain before there were any misunderstandings. "My parents do run the Argento Auction, and I was acting as an Appraiser when I got here. The Reavers gave me a lot of contracts and I had Q-Cred to burn."

Erin's expression didn't falter as she continued to stare at Sal. "Epic-Grade is a bit heavy duty for First-Year, don't you think?"

Jules' face showed that he wasn't pleased with how the conversation was unfolding, so he tried to laugh off Erin's comment like it was a joke. It earned him a withering look from Anna Konijnendijk.

Sal didn't back down from Erin's stare but kept things cordial. "Well, it's a bit embarrassing, but Professor Sinclair's demonstration kinda made me want to have the best protection possible." He tapped at his chest with a nervous chuckle. "I'm told it can repel a Prowler attack, but I never want to find out if that's actually the case."

Erin's face broke into a smile as she laughed good-naturedly. "I think we all tried to craft a countermeasure for that in First-Year." She glanced at the others who smiled knowingly. "Anyways, it was nice to meet you. Thank you for the offer, we'll take you up on it another time or loop you into one of our own orders. Sound good?"

Sal smiled and wished them luck. He didn't want to offer help with Appraisal or anything like that as it felt like they hadn't yet gotten to that point. It was a good introduction, and he had managed to resolve the issue with Jules. Overall, it was a good encounter. As Sal made his way over to Alex, he caught sight of Forge smiling at him from across the room as he helped a group of Second-Years.

"He finally approaches." Alex called out dramatically as he lounged across his desk. "Martin and Gosia gave me the heads-up already. Royce's is fine, I'll take their spring rolls, hummus and pitta breads. Also a boxyty with seasoning."

"A boxyty?" Sal repeated slowly, not even sure it was a word.

"Potatoes my good man. Roasted, deep fried, in a box, covered with only the best herbs and spices. Get one, you'll thank me later." Alex shot up from the desk as he described it, his arms wide for emphasis. "Don't bother getting any drinks, I've got us covered. Are we all eating together in your super-secret-private-meeting-room?"

Sal shrugged as he gestured at the mass of empty workstations. "We could probably eat out here."

Alex frowned. "But how will I get to see all the shit you're working on in there? I have needs, Salvatore. I want to know what's happening at all times. Tell me some secrets!"

Sal added Alex's order to his notes as he moved towards the elevators. He could still hear Alex's voice following him the entire way there.

"Oh, I see how it is. I'm good enough to make you all coffee... but the moment I try to be a part of the cool club, I'm thrown away?" His voice was melodramatic, but Sal could hear the jovial tone mixed in with it. "You will rue the day, Salvatore Argento. RUE!"

Sal genuinely wondered if there were any sane people in that workshop, or if being crazy was just a part of being a Hero.