

Chapter 30 (2,611 words)

"You're saying you made this?" The Scavenger didn't look convinced as he inspected the ingot that Sal had made from the compacted metal they found in the wild. "Looks to be devoid of any infusions, so I can only really make an offer based on the weight category." He shook his head and bit his lip as though it was breaking his heart to have to take it from Sal. "I think I could get a buyer for this, since it's roughly formed and has a few impurities. Credit Floor wouldn't be likely to look at it. If you've more of them, I could throw in a package deal and give you a decent price. Twenty Q-Cred a piece, Two-fifty for ten."

Sal reached out his hand and the Scavenger's smile widened.

"Pleasure doing business with you." He reached for his card, but Sal shook his head and lifted the ingot from his grasp.

"I'm just a lowly Junker, here with my friends for a good time." Sal said as he weighed the ingot in his hand and gave the Scavenger a meaningful look. "I'm here to learn how this market works and who would be good people to develop beneficial relationships with." Pointing at the visor on his face and then moving his finger slightly to the left to highlight his glowing silver eye, Sal smiled. "I've been so caught up with the excitement of everything, that I forgot to mention that I'm an Appraiser. So exited, that I didn't hear your first offer. What was it again?"

The Scavenger's face broke into a wild smile as he chuckled. "Not going to lie, thought that headpiece was just for show. But there's no mistaking the silver eyes... nice job in not name dropping your daddy."

Sal just kept the smile fixed on his face as he continued to make a show of weighing the ingot in his hand. Negotiation was like a dance, and while Sal could have stormed off in search of a better deal, it was better to see the barter through. If he got a more competitive deal, he'd work on it until he was satisfied. Perceived value was a big component of any barter, and a massive chunk of the fun was in creating the illusion of need. He was on the back foot though, because he didn't know the exact usefulness or value of the chunk of metal in his hand.

"Now that you mention it, I can sense some infused essence." The Scavenger agreed, the wild smile not leaving his face as he gestured for Sal to hand the ingot back over to him.

Sal complied and pretended to look shocked by the revelation. Not too much that it would be mocking, but enough to play the game. "What about the impurities? Are you seeing them, too?"

A good natured chuckle was his response as the Scavenger turned the ingot over in his hands, not even looking at it. "You know what? I can't see them anymore. It completely changes the

price now that I think about it. I'd probably go up to eighty a piece... but might part with a hundred if they came in a batch."

Sal nodded earnestly. "Ah, that's an issue. I was planning on holding onto half for the Credit Floor. Since my team made these and we're pretty much guaranteed to get more on the next Scavenger Run, I'll want to ensure I'm getting the best price possible."

With that, the implication was made clear. If Sal waited for the Credit Floor and found that the value of the metal ingots was far higher, then it wouldn't incentivise him to deal with this Scavenger ever again, and cut him out of any potential profits. The big question was how much was the Scavenger willing to part with to ensure Sal gave him everything? The second question was how much Sal valued the essence and labour required to make them.

"One forty. Each." The Scavenger looked Sal directly in the eye, the smile had vanished in an instant. "But if I see you handing any of them over to the Credit Floor, I'll treat it as bad faith."

That was it. Matron had said that the fastest way to ingratiate themselves with the Scav Network was to build trust and play by their rules. Sal didn't care if it was a con, or if he was getting a bad deal in the eyes of his opponent. A hundred and forty Q-Cred for a few minutes of essence refinement was very much worth it.

"I've six in total, but I have four for sale..." Sal tilted his head slightly to the side and leaned closer to the Scavenger, who mimicked the motion and turned his ear to listen better.

"But I'm holding onto two of them for crafting. I can guarantee you that neither of them will touch the Credit Floor table, as I'd love to operate in good faith with all my new friends here. How does that sound?" Sal asked in an almost conspiratorial tone, hoping to drag the Scavenger back to a more jovial attitude. Ultimatums were useful as they let you know exactly where the lines were in a negotiation, but they were also a massive risk. Using one too soon could blow up any chance of a deal. Sal didn't need to reveal the fact that he had two extra ingots, but by doing so, he'd be able to earn some trust and give a useless 'secret' that could be perceived as an offer of leverage.

"You give your word, and it's a deal." The Scavenger smiled as he offered his hand. "Your secret is safe with me, as long as you let me know what you end up making with it. Might get you a good price on it."

Sal shook the offered hand with a grin. "Deal. Now, would you know which table I should go to with Prowler hides? I've some perfect condition ones that have already been restored."

The smile on the Scavenger's face widened. "You're going to fit in well here."

Sal navigated through each of the stalls, introducing himself to each of the Scavengers that were acting as vendors, trading the spoils of their runs. He never led with his name, but instead with a trade. Phones and watches were in high demand, but nothing moved faster than the newspapers. He made sure to sell the ones that looked the most damaged or were lower value, and kept the better condition ones for the Credit Floor. Each transaction gave him a good grounding on the values he could potentially expect with the Credit Floor, so it was better to err on the side of caution.

He had already gotten the all-clear from Blathnaid on what they were prepared to sell, and what they needed to keep for crafting. It left him a whole range of loot to part with. Each of the phones had been bought between eight and eleven hundred Q-Cred, while the watches didn't go for any less than six hundred. Sal checked the value of the watches from a couple of vendors before restoring them away from prying eyes, the sales price only went up by about ten percent. It told him that whoever was buying it, was factoring in the restoration cost.

The newspapers had netted his team nearly three thousand Q-Cred, which highlighted them as a ridiculously overpriced collectors item. Sal wondered what sort of premium they'd go for when they actually were presented to the end-buyer. He was very aware that he was in a sea of middle-men, all trying to squeeze a profit out of the scavenged items.

When the seller added a fabricated story about the item's origin, and provided Appraisal and Restoration documentation, they'd likely have a very fat margin for themselves. Sal made a mental note of which items would be best to keep an eye out for in the future, as he severely underestimated the value of the papers.

Sal didn't need to check the account as the funds went through. He remembered every face and transaction he made, and was calculating how profitable the Scavenger Run had been. Without the lockboxes, they would have likely ended up with barely covering the cost of their memberships and remained at the lowest Junker rank. That is, if they didn't skin and restore the Prowler hides. Sal was excited to find out just how much they'd earn with trading those.

"Ian said that you were the woman to talk to about hides and fabrics." Sal gestured at the Scav that he had sold the four ingots to, on the other side of the market. It was time to find out what their hard work was worth.

"Ian?" She snorted. "Honey, you likely got scammed by that old bastard. But, I will say, the smartest thing you've done today is coming to my table. Let's get you a good deal so you finish the day well, yeah?" Her motherly tone was laying it on thick as she fussed over a selection of folded materials on the table.

Sal's visor sparked to life as he saw the various materials for the first time. Analysis told him that there was dried Voider skin, Prowler hides, Scuttler shells and Thumper husks. Beside that collection was an assortment of metal bins, containing various bones belonging to Prowlers, Thumpers and Voiders.

"No point in sorting them by demon as they all pretty much give the same benefits." She spoke as though it was a well-known fact. "Instead, they're paired by the quality of the bone. Damage sustained etc." Her hand waved in a circle vaguely as though it wasn't worth his attention.

Sal could tell instantly that the bones all had completely different crafting properties. The bones of the Scuttler had the Reflect attribute and a minor damage absorption buff. Prowler bone added minor agility modifiers and potentially the Stealth attribute. The real question was if this woman knew those factors, or if she was trying to get him to consider the other materials.

"What do you even do with them?" Sal gave the bones a quizzical look and laughed with a shake of his head. "Decoration or something? You'd probably want a skull for that sort of thing."

The woman's smile tightened ever so slightly as she tapped at the hides. Her eyes moved around to look at the crowd that was wrapping up their trades.

Sal had intentionally left this trade until the very end because it was a common theme with markets. Everyone had targets they wanted to hit, and last-minute sales could make all the difference. With a lacklustre crowd and nobody queuing up to do business with her, Sal was likely her last chance at making trades before the Credit Floor Rep showed up.

Her fake smile reappeared as she took a breath and laughed. "Ah, yes... more of a byproduct bin. Could give you a good trade value on them. You have anything from the recent run?"

Sal nodded slowly as he looked at the Prowler hides on the table. They were in poor condition, and unlikely to have been seen by a Restorer. His visor noted that the hides were aged in the weeks, which made Sal sure that she was having trouble selling them.

"How much for the hides?" Sal asked out of curiosity as he poked a finger through one of the holes on the fold that had been tucked away. He pretended to wince as he replaced the fold to where it was, hiding the defect from sight.

"They go for two fifty each, but as I said, I'm happy to work something out for a trade." She sounded almost forceful at this point, her hands gripping the edge of the table as she kept looking past Sal to where the Rep would be arriving.

Sal realised in that moment that it was all an act. There was no way that a Scavenger at the Delver Rank, with the authority to open a vendor stall, would be this clueless. He wondered if her

angle worked. Was it to garner sympathy or to avoid new customers? He was curious to know and decided to play her game.

"That goes for two fifty?" Sal laughed as he stared at her in disbelief. "You can't be serious. It's dried to hell, is riddled with holes and practically falling apart."

Just as her face started to go red in supposed anger, Sal pulled out the practically flawless Prowler hide that he had restored during the Scavenger run. "So, by your logic... if that piece of crap is two-fifty, what is this? Two thousand?"

Whatever words the woman was going to choose, she reconsidered them at the sight of the perfect hide. Her mouth dropped open for the briefest moment before she regained her composure. With an almost accusatory glare, she folded her arms. "Ian did this, didn't he? He wanted you to come over here and mock me for having shitty stock?" Her voice was pained, as though she was on the verge of breaking down.

"So, it's the sympathy vote." Sal confirmed his suspicion and started to fold the Prowler hide in his hands. "If you're not going to show me your good produce, I'll stop here."

She stared at him quietly for a few moments until her entire demeanour shifted, casting off the guise of the broke vendor. A wide smile graced her lips and she planted her hands on the stall table and leaned forward to get a better look at him. "Ian warn you, or did you figure it out for yourself?"

Sal just smiled as he continued packing away the Prowler hide. "Guess we're not doing business today, but I'll be happy to chat again the next time I do a Scavenger Run. Maybe you'll have a different display by then."

"Guess not." She responded with the same wide smile. "But, if you'll humour me... what gave it away?"

Sal shrugged indifferently as he stepped away from the stall, the smile never leaving his face. His father's advice practically echoed in his head.

Always leave them curious.

It was no hardship that he wasn't able to check on the prices of the hides, and if he was being honest with himself, Blathnaid would be better off with more materials than less. Just an hour of bartering had left the duffel bag much lighter than when he had started. All that remained were the hides, ingots, claws, vials of blood, a newspaper, two phones and the glock.

Okay, maybe it wasn't that much lighter, but the profits were substantial. Even if the second years had thrown up a fuss, the loot that they had arranged for their fast-track was sold piecemeal to nearly every vendor in the Scav market.

Sal made his way back to Blathnaid and Darren who were locked in conversation with Matron. Before approaching them, he turned in a full circle to appreciate the market in the evening light. There were still Scavs trying to hawk their wares and make last minute deals. His eyes scanned the crowd and two sets of eyes locked onto him.

Ian had been joined by the Scavenger he had just been dealing with. Both of them were looking at him with grins on their faces. It looks like they enjoyed the back and forth just as much as he did, but if Sal was being honest, no matter how fun the market was, it was always going to be a poor imitation to the Argento Auction.