

Chapter 70 (2,618 words)

Sal's eyes fluttered open, causing him to squint at the massive window that bathed his room in sunlight. His hand patted the duvet cover in search of his tablet, curious to know what time it was. Following Maxine's advice, he had returned to his dorm and had one of Fabi's pre-prepared meals before throwing himself into the shower and resting for a few hours.

"Just under six hours?" Sal said as he blearily gazed at the number on the top right hand corner of the screen. "Ugh." He lifted himself into an upright position, discarding the covers as he looked around the room in confusion. His uniform was strewn across the floor, showing the trail where he had shed the pieces on his way to the shower. A quick restoration would bring it back to a freshly pressed state.

Rubbing at his face, Sal let out an exasperated groan. Did he feel better after sleeping? Yes, he did. Was he a touch frustrated that he had been babied into doing it? Also, yes. Maxine was just looking out for him, so he wasn't necessarily angry at her. She was just being cautious and he couldn't fault her for that. If they had gone out to test Rochelle's suit without him, then he'd be annoyed. There were plenty of EssPro tasks left to complete, so Sal rationalised with himself that he wouldn't be angry if they had taken care of those issues while he slept.

Getting dressed, Sal used the Restoration ability with just a few clicks of his fingers. The clean clothes felt nice, but he only really started feeling human after washing his face in the bathroom sink. His hair was getting a little too long for his liking, but that could be handled during the break between semesters.

As soon as his shoes were on, Sal pocketed his visor and tablet and made his way through the dorm. Rather than going out to the hallway, Sal made a beeline to the doorway to the Saviour Workshop. A quick swipe of his Q-Card gave him entry, and he half expected to see everyone waiting for him. It was only when he was halfway up the stairs that he realised that Fabrizia, Maxine and Rochelle weren't in the room they had commandeered. Barry was still practicing with his own visor and the Mythical Veil Arachne cane, his illusions looking akin to some of the Commander variants that Sal had faced during the outbreak. It made Sal curious, but he didn't have the time to ask his friend about his progress. There was a Mythic-Grade set of gear somewhere in Quest Academy, and Sal needed to find it.

Retracing his steps down the stairs, he plucked his tablet out of his pocket and shot a quick message to Fabi.

Salvatore: Hey, I'm awake. Where are you guys, now?

He stared at the screen as he walked, but no reply came through. It was only when he got to the elevators out in the corridor that he switched tactics. Maxine was the most clued in member of the Mythic Guild, so she would obviously know what was happening.

Salvatore: Hey Maxine, I'm awake. Where is Rochelle? I want to get a look at the finished suit.

When he got into the elevator, he pushed the button for the lobby. His plan was to make his way to the Mythic Guild Headquarters. Ideally to find Rochelle, but also to check in with Alex and Anderson. The interview with Proof had already happened, and Sal had been prevented from meeting him earlier. Even though he was feeling refreshed and well-rested, there was a niggling annoyance in the back of his mind.

Maxine: I'm in the Guild Headquarters. Have you had breakfast? Coffee doesn't count.

Sal couldn't help but smile as he started typing out a lie. Rochelle had already ganged up on him and sided with Maxine. She was the culprit that forced him to eat vegetables, and now she had a visor that could absolutely detect lies. With that thought in mind, Sal deleted his intended sentence and responded honestly.

Salvatore: I ate before going to sleep, one of the meals Fabi made for me. Not feeling very hungry at the moment.

Maxine: Are you feeling better after the rest? I'm sorry that I was a little forceful earlier.

Salvatore: I feel good. Don't worry about earlier. It would have been irresponsible to go to a Dungeon in that state, even if it was just to fight Leechers.

Maxine: Glad to hear it. I forced Fabi to sleep if she wanted to go to the Dungeon with us this evening. Rochelle is getting some rest, too. If everyone is in good shape, I don't see why we can't test it out in a Scuttler Dungeon. I'll see you soon. Oh, and don't be too surprised when you see who is here.

Sal blinked in surprise as he stared at the words. He had completely misread Maxine's concerns. She wasn't prohibiting him from entering a Leecher Dungeon because he was tired. Rather, she had intended on arranging a higher-tier Dungeon for a proper test of the equipment, and needed them to be in perfect shape.

His journey across the amphitheatre was almost eventful. A full crowd were stacked in the stands, all watching a ranking battle taking place. It was nowhere near as impressive as the ones he had witnessed alongside Fabi, but the streaks of fire battering against an erected shield of stone was eye-catching at the very least. Neither combatant were ones he recognised, so Sal kept his head down and moved in the direction of the workshop.

A few people smiled at him as he passed, and he gave them polite nods as he moved to the elevator. It was a touch longer of a wait, but he had plenty to think about. Who was at the headquarters? Did his father decide to come over? Villa was a good choice. They should have concluded that negotiation already, and he didn't have an update from his father on when the team would be transitioning across from the Reavers. Villa was a Vice Captain, so there was likely a lengthy notice period, a non-compete clause to navigate and a decent buyout of her contract. Those conditions would likely be mirrored across the team she intended on taking with her, and it was a problem Sal was happy to have outsourced to his father.

Maybe it was Coach? He had been sent out on a scouting mission after all, and maybe he wanted to pop over to gloat about the capabilities of Proof? Sal was in no mood for a hard negotiation, so he quietly hoped that it wasn't him.

Sal barely paid any attention to the news reports that surrounded him in the elevator cubicle. His mind was distracted with the mystery of their guest. Quest might have heard about Rochelle's suit design and came over to investigate. Having the headmaster there wouldn't have been much of a surprise, though. Since it was Maxine that said it, did it mean that Enigma was there?

As the doors opened to the floor that held the workshop, Sal's eyes widened in realisation. Viv made the most sense. The Alchemist Hero that he had met in the faculty lounge. Maybe she had arrived to give Alex a hard time?

Those thoughts fuelled Sal's imagination as he walked through the workshop. Countless second and third years were hard at work on their final projects for the year. Many of the first years looked to be relaxing, which didn't feel right by comparison. Jules and Erin were deeply rooted in concentration and didn't even notice him passing their workbenches.

Sal smiled as he swept a gaze over the items they were working on. Had he used Mythcrafter, there was a good chance he'd understand what he was seeing... but it didn't feel right to snoop on their projects. Left with just his own knowledge and instincts, Sal guessed that Jules was rewiring an advanced-looking circuit board. There were at least fifty wires all converging on a single core at the centre. Erin was finely shaving a crystal shard, lifting it and carefully attempting to slot it into a recessed groove within a transparent enclosure. Streams of essence were emanating from the rectangular construct, causing droplets of condensation to form within the construct. It blurred his view from the rest of the interior, but it was interesting to see, nonetheless.

He continued through the space until he passed Forge, who looked remarkably dishevelled. "You doing okay?"

Forge nodded with a rogue chuckle. "Surviving." He waved in the direction of the door that led to the Mythic Guild. "Don't keep them waiting. Upgrade is practically bouncing around up there."

"That good?" Sal asked, already suspecting the answer.

"That good." Forge confirmed with a chuckle. "Let me know if you'd like me to tune that Psychokinetic workflow. I'd happily throw in a freebie for all the help with the Sky Legion Scanner."

"I'm still sending the invoice for the Mythic Guild's services." Sal grinned. "But, thank you."

Forge laughed as he continued on his way, moving over to a third year who looked like he had lost the will to live, his hands clutching both sides of his head.

Sal didn't see anyone else on his route and got to the stairwell in quick time. He bounded up the steps two or three at a time, his Q-Card at the ready to enter the headquarters. To his surprise, the doorway

was already open as if waiting for his arrival.

Maxine stood at the entrance with a coffee cup extended. "So, would you like the good news, or the bad news?"

Sal faltered as he took the cup from her. "Bad news."

Maxine nodded in understanding as she pulled out her tablet, tapping at it a couple of times before looking back to his face. "So, you've pretty much used up all of the allotted time for personal projects. Even though it serves the Guild with a high operational impact, Rochelle's suit wasn't actually a priority. You're going to need to work on your other commitments now that you're well rested."

Sal stared at the coffee cup in his hand, wondering if he had just walked into a trap. "Wait-"

"You need to start working on the Death Net." Maxine said simply as she beamed at him. "You're well-rested, already ate and have a coffee. The Dungeon I've booked isn't for another three hours, giving Rochelle and Fabi plenty of time to get enough rest. It should also be enough time for you to ease yourself into work."

Sal shook his head in wonder as he lifted the cup for a sip. "I feel like I was played... again."

"It's a partnership." Maxine refuted his comment like it was a joke. "You'll be more efficient with this schedule, get more work done and reduce the risk of burning out. My hope is that it will alleviate some of the pressure you put yourself under."

Sal looked around the Mythic Guild Headquarters, trying to spy the person that Maxine had alluded to in her message. "I'm guessing that Coach is hiding in one of these rooms?"

"Nope." Maxine smiled as she turned to point at the Elixir Machine. The far end was obscured, so Sal had to take a few steps to the left to see behind one of the erected partitions. "Proof has been working non-stop, free of charge."

Sal witnessed something truly spectacular when Proof came into view. The Absolver, a central part of the Refining Station was in full production mode. When Blathnaid had utilised it, she clearly hadn't been able to unlock its full potential. The evidence was immediately apparent as Sal watched lines of pure essence streaking up through the cylinder, expelling impurities in bursts of smoke that were enveloped by the vapours from Alex's Alchemise Station. It created a rumbling like thunder as the steam attacked the impurities.

Proof was a lithe gentleman, looking to be in his mid-thirties. A resolved expression painted his features as his fingers danced across the interactive screen in the centre of the Absolver. Patterns that looked akin to genetic strains were swapped out and edited in seconds, Proof's glowing fingers dragging nodes and attaching them to separate strains. What was most impressive about the display, was the synchronisation between Alex and Anderson. All three of them worked in perfect harmony, to the point that the workflow practically sang. Explosions of vegetation came first from the Genesis Station, followed by a thumping

noise as the ingredients were sent through transparent tubes to the Alchemise Station. Then, a series of tubes carried the raw product to the Absolver where Proof was refining the elixirs into their perfected state.

"How long has he been here?" Sal asked in confusion.

"Since his interview wrapped up." Maxine smiled excitedly. "At first, we thought he was just hanging around to meet you... but he really got lost in the production and has been taking breaks to give Alex pointers on how the process can be further improved."

Sal was about to whistle softly, but managed to stop himself at the last possible moment. The last thing he needed to do was accidentally deafen their new Refiner. "He sounds like our guy. Are his demands going to bankrupt us?"

Maxine shook her head slowly. "Fabi stated that she'll happily give up her ongoing profit-share of the Elixir Machine, since you have an actual Refiner, now. She justified it by saying that she didn't do much outside of the construction, and the learning experience was enough for her. Apparently, there's more money to be made with vending machines."

Sal smiled as he shook his head. "Looks like I'm going to have to make sure the vending machines are profitable, otherwise she might kill me."

Maxine frowned as she moved in front of Sal blocking his view.

"What's wrong?" He asked in confusion.

She stared at him and pointed at one of the available meeting rooms. "Vending machines sound like a personal project." An amused smile tugged at her lips. "You've got a Death Net to build."

"Shouldn't I go talk to Proof?" Sal ventured, trying to buy himself some free time before he got back to work. "At least to handle the negotiation part and ensure we can get him onboard?"

"Vanessa has already written up the contracts. You'd just disturb their production if you interrupted them mid-cycle. I can come get you when they take their next break." Maxine smiled, her arm still raised and pointing at the meeting room.

"You're a bit of a bully, you know that, right?" Sal said eventually as he took another sip of coffee. "I'll get to work, then."

"Good Guildmaster." Maxine praised him as she patted him on the back reassuringly. "If you get good work done, it'll be so much more rewarding when you get to see Rochelle's suit in action."

Sal chuckled as he shook his head in wonder. "I'm starting to think that Sakura might have been the better choice of Administrator." He winked at Maxine just so she knew that he was joking. Thankfully, there was no need as she let out a giggle.

"This could be so much worse." She smiled brightly at him. "Vanessa said that she'd set you straight if you didn't take care of yourself and listen to my advice."

"Well... that's not terrifying at all." Sal muttered as he opened the door to the meeting room, a stack of fresh blueprints stacked on the polished wood already waiting for him.