

Chapter 31 (2,261 words)

"Ah, Mr. Argento. Hopefully you can put us out of our misery here." Matron gestured for him to stand beside her. She held a tablet in her hand and was scrolling through the page as with a frown on her face. Her tone was much friendlier than at the start of the day, but the expressions of anxiety that Darren and Blathnaid were sharing made Sal cautious.

Sal moved closer to Matron, and she turned her tablet to face him.

"These numbers aren't adding up for your profiles." There was no accusation in her tone, but rather a statement of fact. She gave him a quizzical look, as though it was an invitation to clarify what was going on.

Sal smiled as he looked through the numbers on the screen. "They look right to me. Is your question about the items we've been selling? I would have imagined that Blathnaid and Darren told you how we came across those boxes." He looked over at them and they both gave him a curt nod before turning their attention back to Matron.

They had all agreed on the way back that they wouldn't try to hide anything from the Scavengers, because as far as they knew, it could have been a test that was planted by them. It was unlikely, but not impossible.

Matron shook her head as she gave a half smile. "No, nothing like that. I've already told your team that you've profited off someone else's stupidity or managed to find a treasure trove. Scavengers Network will get its cut as those materials come into circulation, so we get paid regardless." She pointed at the figures on the screen in front of her. "My question is about these mark-ups. Are they factually correct?"

Sal scanned them again to be sure before nodding. "Yes, they're all the agreed prices."

Matron blinked in surprise before a hearty chuckle followed. "Well... that sure is something. You've managed to make quite a healthy mark-up on your goods. I'd argue that you could have squeezed more on these three watches, but you did very well with the phones. Well done."

"Thank you, Matron." Sal answered earnestly. He gave Blathnaid and Darren a smile, and they looked to be incredibly relieved that there wasn't an issue.

Matron clapped her hands together as she looked at Sal. "So, what way would you like to end your first Scavenger Run? You can go and chat to the Credit Floor Rep to see if you can move more of your loot, or you can cash-out now."

Sal looked at both Darren and Blathnaid and determined that Darren was close to dying of boredom. The Controller had humoured Sal's adventure into the markets, and whilst it had been lucrative, it likely was boring as hell to wait and watch the entire time. Since he had already sold off a few of the newspapers, the Credit Floor would likely lower the prices for a surplus. It wouldn't be the worst idea for him to hold onto it for a later trade.

"I think we'll cash out, Matron. What is the process?" Sal made the decision as he took out his Q-Card to complete the transaction.

Matron held up her two hands in a crude imitation of an old-school scale. "You can cash out for Q-Cred, split three ways on your team. Either the total amount, after the Scav Tax, or a portion of it." She raised one hand and lowered the other. "Alternatively, you could choose to reinvest in yourself and donate that Q-Cred to advance your rank. Typically, we see people cashing out a round number and using the remainder to boost their ranks."

As Sal looked at Blathnaid to gauge her opinion on the matter, Matron continued as she pulled out her tablet to consult it again.

"With the full tally of your transactions, we're looking at... twenty-three thousand, four-hundred and eighty Q-Cred." Matron looked at the number with a grin before whistling. "Eh, I hate fractions. That's going to be seven thousand, eight-hundred and twenty-six, each way."

"Fuck off." Blathnaid blurted out before she could stop herself.

Matron laughed as she held the tablet aloft. "And would you believe me if I told you that this is a pittance to what the other teams brought in today?" She paused for a second as though weighing her thoughts. "I will say though, that this was one of the best showings we've had from a Junker team in a long while. Normally we have to have a chat with the groups to see if they're okay with newbies going up the ranks, but Mr. Argento has already got himself four recommendations. They'll be applied to your team."

Sal smiled at that. He had guessed three, but four was a nice bonus.

Matron looked at him first. "So, how much would you like to cash out?"

Sal didn't hesitate as he shook his head. "Nothing. You can use it all towards my ranking up." He had made the decision on the train, that whatever he managed to get would go towards increasing his rank. The reason were the auctions he'd have access to in the future. Rare materials and the opportunity to pick up vacant properties was very appealing.

Matron grinned as she tapped her screen a few times. "As you're the lowest rank, you're going to be hit with a twenty-five percent tax on your yield. Which we'll deduct first, one thousand,

nine-hundred and fifty-six. Leaving us with five thousand, eight-hundred and seventy. If you put all of that into your rank, then the first two thousand will bring you up to Junker V, and then a five hundred nominal fee to progress into the Scrounger rankings. With three thousand and three hundred remaining, you'll be Scrounger III and thirty percent of the way to Scrounger IV. How does that sound?"

Sal couldn't wipe the smile off his face. If he thought of the Scavenger hierarchy as twenty-five steps, he had managed to get to the eighth already. Not only that, but having gotten past Junker V, he'd be eligible to get a Challenge Crest that would add to his rank at Quest Academy. He owed a lot to Blathnaid for getting him his opportunity.

Matron turned to Blathnaid. "And your decision?"

Blathnaid clenched her fists for a few moments before answering. "I'd like to take out five hundred for myself, and the rest can go towards the ranking." She looked conflicted by the thought, and Sal guessed that she didn't want to fall behind him in the rankings if they'd be teaming up together. Five hundred was a substantial amount at the Academy and would allow her to go on outings and other activities that would help increase her rankings.

Darren raised his hand and caught Matron's attention. "While you're on Blathnaid's profile. You can transfer a hundred and twenty-five to my account, so she can pay me back for the membership fee."

Sal just stared at Darren, not sure if he was being petty or if this was just his personality. Blathnaid didn't look fazed by it, and just nodded at Matron to indicate that it was fine and she should go ahead with it.

Matron didn't look particularly impressed, but passed along the money as instructed. She looked at Darren with a tight smile and tapped the tablet. "So, what way would you like the split?"

Darren smiled as he gestured at Blathnaid. "I told you when I got here, that my only goal was to get crafting materials for Blathnaid to make me equipment. I didn't anticipate making any Q-Cred out here, so I'd like you to transfer my entire cut to her."

Blathnaid looked at Darren like he was clinically insane. "No way. You're not doing that! Are you crazy?"

Matron agreed with Blathnaid as she looked at Darren skeptically. "As far as grand gestures go, this is a bit much. Are you sure you don't want to think about this a little more?"

Darren shook his head and ignored Blathnaid's protests. "She's the Support on my team and we're going to a Tower in the next few days. All I did today was run around, jump a bit and use

some strength. If she gets a high Scavenger rank, then it could give her a Challenge Crest and push her into a higher rank at Quest Academy. I don't want to take the risk that she doesn't make it to the next semester. I need her on my team."

Matron frowned as she looked at Sal in confusion, as though asking if he was onboard with this plan, too.

Sal was still grappling with the enormity of the decision. When he thought back to his first conversation with Kane and Hannah, he saw how they had made a big deal over the vendor coffees costing a few Q-Cred. Rochelle had resorted to nefarious means to increase her Q-Cred and survive at the Academy, but Darren Lenihan was parting with enough currency to guarantee him a place on at least three Masterclass courses. It didn't make sense for anyone to be that selfless. Even if he was infatuated with Blathnaid, there was no way he didn't understand how much Q-Cred he was throwing away.

"Darren, you won't be able to do Scavenger Runs with us if you're still in the Junker rank." Sal tried to make sense of it. "What if you use the two thousand, five hundred to get to Scrounger I?"

Matron nodded in agreement. "It would put Miss Clean at Scrounger V, and eighty percent towards paying the nominal fee for Delver I. And if I may offer some advice." She looked past them to the market stalls and smiled. "A boon like this on your first run might feel uncommon, but there will be more of them. Scavengers conduct all sorts of fuckery out on the runs and we're very aware that these drop points exist. We have a few veterans that put them in like prizes, like they're giving back to the community and helping out the newbies that are being thorough."

Darren frowned at that and shook his head slightly. "I heard those second-years. They were looking for those particular lockboxes. I'm afraid it wasn't anything to do with chance."

"As much as I'd love to humour your conspiracy theories, sometimes it's the simplest solution." Matron added with smirk. "You said that the heads were removed from those Prowlers? Well, that just tells me that whoever went out there had a very specific thing they wanted. Everything else they found was likely packaged up and hidden for someone else to discover. Hell, I've done it myself countless times. Nothing like a good treasure hunt to build excitement for the lower tiers."

Matron tucked her tablet away as she brought her attention back to the three of them. "Just some advice from someone that's been doing this for decades... remember the feeling you experienced when you discovered those lockboxes. In the future when you're on the first run of a zone, you'll have loot that isn't useful to you, but could be life-changing to whoever finds it. Maybe package it up and hide it for someone else to find. Pay it forward."

Blathnaid smiled brightly at that. "I love that idea." She shared a guilty look with Sal and Darren. "I was convinced it was all a giant conspiracy or something, but it's just Scavengers helping out the lower tiers?"

Matron smiled warmly. "That's it. They might look like a rag-tag group of people, but their hearts are in the right places. This is a fun hobby for a lot of them and it stopped being about the money years ago. Our membership fees and nominations are in place to deter people that don't think the same way as us. But seeing a young group of students pouring substantial earnings into their ranks is a very good show of faith."

"The vendors definitely get a kick out of the negotiations." Sal agreed as he turned to look in Ian's direction. The Scavenger from the fabrics stall was no longer hanging around him. "I had fun talking to them."

Matron chuckled at Sal's observation. "Fun is subjective. For those that love doing the runs, and for those that love selling the gains. We even have people that gain their ranks from buying and selling here at the market, never stepping foot in the reclaimed zones. There's something here for everyone."

Darren cleared his throat and apologised. "I'm very sorry to interrupt, but the next train is coming soon and I think we should get back."

Matron raised a finger in the air and shook it. "Ah, before I forget. I need your Q-Cards." She moved over to one of the nearby tables, and started opening containers left and right. "We never seem to run low on these ones." She chuckled as she turned back to face them with three badges between her fingers. "Two Junker V's and a Scrounger V."

As each of them exchanged their Q-Card for the associated crest, Matron put them through the registration machine. With a few colourful curse-words and aggravated tapping of the console, Matron turned around with their Q-Cards in hand. "Each of your ranks have been successfully updated. Congratulations on an excellent run, and we hope to see you again soon."

Blathnaid grinned in response as she grabbed an arm of both Darren and Sal. "We're absolutely going to be back! Thank you so much!"