

Chapter 16 (2,221 words)

"I'm not sure if you understand." Sal tried to explain as he dug his fork into the casserole type thing he had ordered for himself. "Mastery is an ability I've yet to see, like as an attribute or anything. My visor picked it up when analysing Skill-Weaves. You're saying you can make something that could increase a person's inherent mastery of their own skill? Not like Purple Punch or Sleeping Tiger?"

Alex raised an eyebrow and straightened his back with a smile on his face. "You knew about Sleeping Tiger? I'm impressed." He looked at Sal a little more closely without saying anything for a few moments before continuing. "Analysing skill-weaves. Are you a Replicator? I had you pegged as a crafter with how quickly you fell into this crowd." He swept his hand around the table to where the others were sitting, when suddenly he turned his head slowly and put two and two together. "Unless... you replicated a crafting ability?"

Forge snorted and gave Alex a sad smile. "You should ease off on the tonics, Alex. Look at his eyes." He waved his hand in a circle in front of Sal's face as though making it as simple as possible. "He's an Argento, of the Argento Auction. An Appraiser. They see things... and he just said it himself, he's yet to see an ability called Mastery."

Alex frowned as though all of his fun had just been trampled on. "Well then, Mr. Argento of the Argento Auction House. Let me be the one to tell you that I very much do understand. I've been making shitty tinctures that boost all sorts of stats since I got here. Mastery is a simple one, depending on the duration you're going for. Are we talking a few minutes or a few hours here? Anything more than that will cost you the equivalent of a scholarship, and it's just not worth it."

Sal leaned a little closer over the table as he looked at Alex. "The thirty that you quoted me. How long would that last?"

"Fifty." Alex corrected him. "Replicators are more useful to Alchemists than Appraisers. Discounts are for people that can be useful to me."

Sal smiled warmly as he spread his palms on the table. "Okay then, the fifty you quoted. How long would that last? Humour me, what would the next two grades up from that cost and what would the duration difference be?"

Alex glanced between Upgrade and Forge who didn't say a word. He grinned as though he was finally being allowed to play. "Standard tincture at fifty will give you about ten minutes of a twenty percent boost. It won't exceed your limits though, so don't go thinking you can unlock a hundred and twenty percent of your capability. That's not how it works." He placed his fingers in front of him and started counting them down. "Now, if you wanted that to be an hour, you're

talking about roughly two hundred Q-Cred. You want it for... clearing a Tower? Well, that number will top out at roughly a thousand Q-Cred, but will give you a full twenty-four hours of the day, and then some.... depending on your digestive system and how you administer it." As if to answer the unspoken question, Alex tapped at the veins in his arm and then at the side of his neck.

Sal nodded as he did some quick math in his head. "What's the highest percentage increase you can get with it? Twenty won't cut it for what I need."

Upgrade abruptly got to her feet with a glazed expression on her face. She dropped the empty cup in front of her and moved in the direction of the private room where the simulation orb was kept.

Alex watched her leave with a grin on his face. "See that? That's the sign of a happy customer. She's likely off to make something incredible with the burst of inspiration she just had." He gave Sal a meaningful look as he spoke.

Sal just laughed as he shook his head. "I've been getting coffee from you for the last four months. I don't need any sales pitches. I know you're good at what you do. I just need to know what potency you can get to, so stop trying to increase your worth with things that don't matter."

Forge chuckled as he crossed his arms and watched the exchange with a smile.

Alex tapped the table with his index finger as he feigned dismay. "Ahh, you're spoiling it. Come on... what do you want me to tell you? There's a difference between what I can do and what I'm willing to do. It's a very different situation where I can reach up to a shelf and give you a tincture, to when I need to sit down and make you something from scratch. You're paying for my expertise here, and I don't have enough information to give you quotes."

"Sure you do." Sal corrected him. "You've a buyer asking for the highest possible grade of Mastery improvement. Tell me the highest you can achieve and what it costs, and we can proceed with the dance from there."

Gosia decided to perk up at that moment to point at Sal. "He's actually a good dancer. Were you here for that, Alex?"

Alex gave her a quizzical look before turning his attention back to Sal. "I can get you to ninety percent safely. Everything after that is experimental. Duration is just down to the quantity of ingredient I use, which is what throws the price up. The tricky part is that for me to get to that level of quality, I need to be meticulous and spend a shit tonne of essence and time taking care of it. That costs me a lot more than reaching up to a shelf."

"I'm not making an offer, I'm asking for a price." Sal insisted with a smile.

Alex slapped both hands against the table in quick succession as though he was trying to make a beat before he raised a single hand and pointed at Sal. "Twenty minutes at ninety percent will cost you twelve hundred Q-Cred."

"Ah, I guess you can't do what I'm looking for. Thanks anyways." Sal said with a sigh as he got to his feet and started packing away the casserole for later.

Alex slapped the table again. "Did I say twenty? That was for the hour. I suppose I could give you thirty minutes for lets say... seven hundred and fifty? It's a lot of currency on materials, and... the time, ya know?" His eyes narrowed as he watched Sal continue to pack up the food. "Look, I'm trying to give you a deal here. I just need a bit more information on what exactly it is you need. If it's for clearing the tower, and it's more heavy duty stuff... we could work out a payment plan? You wouldn't need to give me all the Q-Cred upfront, and could space it out over your time at Quest Academy. I've done that sort of deal with a few people in the past and it works well."

Sal shook his head at smiled at Alex. "I know I come from the Argento Auction, but have you forgotten that wealth doesn't matter at Quest Academy? The amount of Q-Cred I could have earned so far in the last few months is a few hundred at best, and I'm here, treating you to a meal and your best offer of help is to gouge me over the rest of my time here." Sal chuckled as he spoke. "Thirty two months left before graduation. Best offer I'd give you is twenty Q-Cred a month for that duration, if you kept throwing in the free coffees."

"Twenty?!" Alex screeched as he shot up out of his chair. "Are you even aware of what ingredients go into a Mastery elixir? We're talking otherworldly shit here, and it doesn't just grow in your back garden. It comes at an absolute premium because it can't grow this side of the portals. That's right, you don't see it in Dungeons or Towers either, all of this stuff is Portal produce." Alex looked around the table as though trying to get the support of the other crafters, but none of them made eye-contact with him, with the exception of Forge who hadn't stopped smiling since earlier. Alex pointed at Sal as he looked at the others. "Will someone tell him that this isn't me being the bad guy, here?"

Sal looked at Alex with a feigned expression of confusion. "You just said that it was seven hundred and fifty, and I said twenty a month for the remaining thirty two months. Is six-hundred and forty that insulting of an offer?" He paused in his packing away of the food as he pretended to look for a compromise. "Okay, I didn't want to do this... but I guess I could ask my father to source those ingredients through the Auction House, see if we could get some form of discount. I'd need small amounts of each of them though to give to my father for quality control and to ensure we're getting the real stuff from vendors."

Alex's expression did a complete one eighty as he sat back down with a thoughtful look on his face. "That sounds very... good. I'm open to that. You just need bits of materials and you'll be able to source the rest?" He drummed his fingers against the work surface as he glanced at Sal for a moment, then at Forge, then back to Sal. "What if there were other materials I was looking for?"

Sal nodded in understanding. "Of course, I'd be happy to get my father to look for them too. But our agreement would need to change, as its then a mutually beneficial one."

"How do you mean?" Alex asked as he stared at Sal.

"Well, you could consider your payment from me, the access my father gives you to under the table vendors." Sal smiled innocently as he shrugged. "Just means there's no monthly fee. You buy your materials at a discount, and you produce the elixirs I need." Sal laughed as he held up his palm to placate Alex who looked ready to hop up again. "Obviously, I'll be paying for the ingredients I'll need for the Mastery elixir, but everything else you want is out of your own pocket. I'll liaise with my father and act as middle-man for free."

Alex did get to his feet, but he wore a smile on his face as he stretched his hand out to Sal. "I think you've got yourself a deal."

Sal looked at the hand and smiled back at Alex gently. "Handshakes mean something, Alex. When I have the ingredients from you, and their market values, I'll shake your hand then. Not before."

Forge's chuckle acted as the backdrop for Alex sighing in defeat. "You really were raised in an Auction House, weren't you?" He scanned the table for a moment before popping the lid back into his decanter and lifting it like a precious child. "Anyway, I have some ingredients to go and gather. Enjoy the rest of your Grand Design, and we'll discuss the nitty gritty details later." Just as he was leaving, Sal called out to him.

"Just out of curiosity. How would a Replicator be of use to an Alchemist?" He framed it like a joke as though he was trying to understand it, and Alex was clearly convinced of his identity as an Appraiser.

"It's obvious, isn't it?" Alex laughed as he looked around the room to see if anyone fancied venturing a guess. When none were uttered, he smiled. "Most Replicators make their money with the Refine ability. It works a treat with tinctures and elixirs because there's no stats to make random. Either the duration goes up or the proficiency. Both are an absolute win." He shrugged as though it was no big deal. "But Replicators can't get me ingredients, so maybe we'll cut some slack for the Appraisers of the world." He thought about it for a moment and then winced ever so slightly. "Well, maybe."

When Alex was well and truly out of earshot, both Martin and Gosia leaned forward in their chairs as though waiting for a big reveal. Forge looked at Sal and smiled. "So, go on then... tell us your angle. We promise not to tell him."

Instead of answering, Sal pulled the packaging up from the ground and placed it on the table. The logo on the centre of it was clearly legible as 'Royce'. When Martin and Gosia gave him blank expressions, Sal smiled as he tapped the packaging. "Anderson Royce is a First Year at Quest Academy. He's able to grow resources with only the smallest amount of them. Who wants to bet that his power would be able to grow otherworldly produce?"

Forge's smile faltered ever so slightly. "That's a big risk to be betting everything on. His power might not be up to task."

Sal's smile didn't falter, and instead grew wider. "Well, if that's the case... we'll just need to improve his power until it can make what we need."