

Chapter 15 (2,350 words)

Sal unpacked each of the cartons and slid them across the combined workbenches to the respective owner. "Spring rolls, hummus and a boxty. That's Alex."

"Sick bastard." Upgrade shuddered as she watched the tray slide across to the very excited Alex.

Alex held up a large decanter filled with a questionable red liquid, and cocked an eyebrow at Upgrade. "Want to try that again? I brought out a premium elixir for tonight, but if you'd rather sit in your ivory tower and judge the culinary arts of boxtys, then I can put it back." He made a show of sliding one of the plastic cups into another cup to reduce the amount. "It would be a shame, too. This bad boy sparks inspiration. Would have thought that sort of tonic would be ideal for a bunch of tired crafters."

Sal just chuckled as he sent the mushroom dish to Gosia and the one without to Martin. Upgrade was handed a large bowl of salad and spiced cheeses that were fried. Greg on the Credit Floor had given him the tip-off that it was a favourite of hers. Despite Forge saying that he didn't want anything, Sal ordered a range of sharing platters that came in large black trays. There was more than enough to feed them all three times over, because Sal was trying to play it safe. All the side-dishes of rice, pasta and potato were placed in the centre as Sal finally took his seat, folding away the packaging as he gestured for everyone to dig in and get started. Forge came over to have a look and was eventually convinced to pull up a chair and join them.

It was an odd looking arrangement as they had pushed together four of the workstations to make enough table space. Alex had made a bit of a fuss that they weren't eating in one of the private rooms, namely the one that Upgrade and Sal were occupying. He dropped it after just a few moments, which told Sal that Alex was more than likely just provocative for fun.

Upgrade made a point of staring Alex dead in the eye as she took his cup and raised it for him to pour her a drink. She maintained the glare until he finally conceded and poured some of the red elixir into her cup. The moment he pulled the decanter away, a bright smile appeared on her face. "Thank you, Alex. Now, keep that boxty away from me. The herbs make me sneeze."

Sal accepted the red liquid from Alex and looked at it carefully. He was wondering if it was actually an elixir or if they were just messing with him, or if it was some kind of in-joke he didn't know about. Lifting it to his nose to smell it, he was surprised that it was virtually odourless.

"No, no Sal. Like this." Alex corrected him as he lifted his own cup and drank from it. "Give it a bit of practice, you'll get the hang of-"

Upgrade's hand shot out and smacked Alex's shoulder, causing him to spill some of the red liquid over his shirt.

"I'll admit, I probably deserved that." Alex sighed as he put the cup down and started dabbing at his collar with a napkin. "But for real, it's not poison. Try it and tell me what you think."

Sal smiled at the back and forth between them as he raised the cup and took a tentative sip. He had assumed there would be alcohol in it, or some kind of acidic flavour based on the colour, but nothing prepared him for the assault on his senses. A spark shot through him, connecting dots and making him realise that Alex hadn't been bluffing. It really did boost inspiration. Lifting the cup again, Sal took a healthier swig of the liquid and felt a wave of clarity wash over him. It was hard to describe, but it was similar to when he had used the Deduction ability on the Visor and the Monocle. Where it had been a calm and calculated affair, this was anything but. It was like a whole set of fireworks were going off in his head, connecting ideas that had earlier seemed foolish. Combinations of skills that he thought were unrelated, were actually... compatible? He knew they were, and when he sought to understand why, his mind showed him the curvature of countless weaves he'd inspected throughout his life. All stored away in his brain that he completely forgotten about.

Alex grinned as he looked at Upgrade. "I'll never get tired of that reaction. Look at him solve the problems of the world. You ready to try yours?"

Upgrade frowned at Alex as she eyed the red elixir in her cup. "What sort of dosage did you pack into it?"

Alex shrugged really slowly and raised his hands while trying not to smile. "Since it was a group of veterans that have built up a bit of an immunity to my tonics, I thought I'd amp it up a little."

Upgrade stared at him until Alex eventually broke with a sigh.

"He'll be fine. It's just a taste of the Grand Design. Enough to make him have a few breakthroughs, but nothing that will drive him loopy." He gestured at himself with a flourish. "Trust me, I test all of them on myself first."

Sal suddenly took in a giant breath and steadied himself at the table, causing everyone to flinch in surprise.

Alex whipped his head around to look at Sal. "Oh yeah, don't forget to breathe! Very important thing. Keep doing that. Good job."

Upgrade's teeth were gritted as she looked at Alex and then at Forge. "He gave him some Grand Design!"

Forge raised an eyebrow at Alex before looking at his own cup more closely. "I won't say no." With a single swig, he downed the entire glass and relaxed with a bright smile. "Alex, you truly are an incredible artist."

Alex gave Upgrade a bright grin as he mocked her through mime, mouthing the words 'Artist' and gesturing at himself as though in disbelief.

Sal was feeling so many things all at once that it was impossible to keep track of it all. He was looking at all of the things he had crafted in the past and realised how their fundamental designs were flawed. When he looked around the room, he thought of all the ways he could have improved his conversations with them in the past, using the context he learned about them later. The elixir was brute forcing his mind into improving every thought that appeared in his head. He needed to channel it towards a singular purpose for it to roam freely and be constructive. Sal thought to his biggest problem at the moment, the fix for Gallant's ability. When the image of Gallant appeared in Sal's mind, his brain took an unexpected turn and instead produced all of the telltale signs of why Gallant shouldn't be trusted. The anger, the mood-swings, the masking, the threat level spikes, and the fact that Prestige didn't want him to be fixed or cured. Sal couldn't for the life of him understand where all of these thoughts were coming from, but they ambushed his mind and threw ideas at him, of how he could remove the threat... of how he could tie up Gallant's powers completely so he could never recover them.

He forced himself to confront those ideas and challenge them. If anyone on his team was a villain, it was Erika. In hindsight, Sal would realise that thinking of her was the worst decision he could make. All of his interactions with her flashed in front of his mind as he saw her standing awkwardly at the centre of the Sky Lounge, wanting to take the Crown of Thorns as her prize. How he had offered to help her with a solution, how she knew already that he was Myth. She had made Rochelle apologise to him in the canteen, and used that as a condition for her being able to join the team. Images of Neuro's face when he spoke to Erika harshly, and the same tone being used as Neuro's appearance melted into that of Prestige. Another person criticising her when she was trying her best.

"What the fuck is this drink? Why is it trying to make me hate a good person, and forgive a bad one?" Sal exclaimed through the vision as he tried covering his eyes to see if it would help. It didn't and the images kept pouring into his head. Chatfield's expression as he walked away from him at the train station, the pain he made that man feel for making the right call. "Fuck you, it wasn't the right call." Sal grit his teeth as he rejected the thoughts in his own head. How dare his own mind try to sabotage him and tell him what was right or wrong. These weren't visions rooted in facts, but rather an amplified emotional response to the feelings he hadn't been expressing. He was stronger than this, and he was going to flush the thoughts straight out of his brain with willpower alone. Or at least, that was what he wanted to do. What happened instead was that his mind showed him just how strong he was... alternate versions of the past, where he

had acted out of instinct and emotion, striking people down with powers that didn't belong to him.

When he finally surfaced from the visions, he looked across the table to see everyone chatting happily and enjoying their meal. His own hand was held up to his face, a half-drunk cup of the red liquid was in front of him. Hadn't his outburst alarmed them? The shouting or the thrashing around? Was he still in that vision? All those questions swam around Sal's mind as his mind calmed down and processed everything around him. He knew instinctively that the others weren't really reacting to him, and he could see that Martin's eyes were glazed over as he stared off into space. The same was happening with Forge. Had everything he experienced just been in his own head?

"Alex..." Sal started as he placed the cup down on the table. "Just what is the Grand Design?"

Alex smiled at him. "You would have been better off with little sips, but it's more fun when you take a proper mouthful." He winked before getting comfortable in his seat and leaning across the table, a half eaten spring-roll in his left hand. "The Grand Design is a concoction that shows us things we've overlooked. Our subconscious keeps a record of everything we do on a day to day basis, but we're often too emotionally unstable to interpret it all properly. The Grand Design will show you the things your mind noticed that you didn't appreciate at the time. For Crafters, it's invaluable as it shows you the eureka moments that were just out of reach. It will connect the dots between a hypothesis and a fact, utilising the full-extent of your brain to process that information in the space of a few seconds."

Sal gaped at the cup on the table. "And... you made this?"

Alex shrugged as he finished the spring-roll. "Yeah, when you went up to the Credit Floor, I threw it together with what I had available."

"Does it mean that everything I saw was true?" Sal asked tentatively as he pushed the plastic cup farther away from him.

Alex's smile faded slightly as his gaze burrowed into Sal. "Truth is subjective. Your eyes interpreted things that maybe your heart didn't want to consider. I'm no therapist, but I've talked to quite a few of them. When it comes to the Grand Design, the best thing you can do is take the useful components of what you saw and discard the rest. If you want to channel it into your crafting, you need to think of the part you can't understand. That's where Grand Design will help you. Otherwise, it will go off searching for everything else, which can be pretty draining as an experience."

Sal nodded slowly as he tried to gather his own thoughts. The fact that his subconscious mind believed that Gallant was a villain that needed to be stopped, and that Erika was just a

misunderstood Hero. Those things were massive problems because they didn't reflect his feelings at all. He couldn't go down that path of fearing every interaction, or looking for hidden meanings in every little thing. Sure, Erika might not be a villain, but she was still a bit of a bitch for what she did to him. Gallant on the other hand had been a Hero for years, who went through unspeakable amounts of trauma for someone so young. Of course he was going to be a bit rough from all of that. Did that make him a potential threat and a villain? Not necessarily. He had been helping Sal train and was working well as a part of the team. Sal dismissed the thoughts of the elixir and settled his heart. There was no point in looking for hidden meanings, or else he'd end up mistrusting everyone around him. He couldn't live like that. With his mind made up, he asked Alex the question he truly wanted to ask.

"Can you make an elixir or tonic that improves Mastery? Like, innate Mastery over Skill Weaves?" Sal held his breath as he waited for an answer, and he could have sworn that Alex chose to feed himself another spring roll, just to build suspense. When he finally finished chewing, he made a few vague gestures with his hands as though he was weighing up the possibility.

A few seconds later, Alex's face broke into a grin. "I can make it for about forty Q-Cred. But for you, I'll only charge thirty."

Sal just stared at him like he had two heads. Surely it couldn't be that simple.