

Chapter 10 - No time to waste

The next day I spent the morning and early afternoon doing nothing but watching the news stories unfold. I was sore from digging through rubble, but mostly I was just shell shocked. My life had changed so much, spun on its head and thrown into the thick of a reality that was already proving to be very dangerous. I was lost in a fog.

The previous night continuously flashed through my head the entire day. I had stood up to the Abomination, someone who could chuck cars and punch through steel plating. My armor had a chance of blocking bullets but there was no way my insides would have survived getting punched by the Abomination. Or the Hulk for that matter. Looking back on it I was satisfied with my actions, but terrified at what I had done. I had put an arrow through someone's skull, without a second thought. Who knows if what I knew about the Abomination was true, who knows if he was as big of a threat as I thought he would be.

"You did the right thing." Ema said, going through news reports about a different incident with the Hulk. "Reports are saying he killed twenty-eight people last night. He needed to be stopped."

"I don't disagree." I assured her, absentmindedly shuffling the Deck. "I'm just not happy about how easy it was."

"This doesn't strike me as easy Carson." She countered, floating over to me. "You feel remorse, guilt, but you knew it needed to be done."

I eventually nod, taking a drink before carding the empty beer bottle and tearing it. With a sigh I laid back on the couch, content to spend the day unwinding, slowly coming to terms with what I had done. Eventually the conversation turned to what we would do next.

"We are definitely on General Ross's radar now." I lamented, happy for even a slightly different topic. "Especially since he is going to assume I have the Abominations corpse, even with the cellphone footage of me tearing the card."

"What does that mean for us?"

"It means that we need to move quickly. My identity might still be a secret but eventually it's going to come out. This reality doesn't seem to care about secret identities very much, it certainly doesn't follow the normal superhero rules."

"There aren't many super heroes to compare with." Ema pointed out.

"It doesn't matter honestly. Now that I'm on the board, eventually someone is going to put pressure on me. I guarantee if Hydra still exists they are looking into me, as is Shield, General Ross, really anyone who is anyone is wondering what I am and how I'm doing this stuff. Hell I bet you Wakanda is looking into me to figure out if I'm using their technology."

"While I'm sure some of that is true, you shouldn't let that make you paranoid."

"I'm not." I stayed simply. "I know they are and I'm not going to freak out. At least not externally. No, we need to act quickly, go through another few build cycles and find someone who is willing to protect us from all those people."

"That's quite the turn around from your original opinions."

"I think with one or two more build cycles we will be a real force to be reckoned with, especially if we don't hold back the money we still have. How much do we have left anyway?"

"One thousand one hundred and fifteen dollars. Not counting the change."

"That's more than I thought..." I admitted, starting to chew my lip as I thought. "Okay, here is the plan. I'm going to use some of that money to try an idea I've been bouncing around since I made the martial arts ring."

Ema paused and focused on me, part of her frame spinning as she waited for me to continue. After organizing my thoughts a bit I began explaining my theory.

"So I'm pretty sure the ability to wear these rings and tap into the knowledge they contain is partly because the rings are so strongly about being worn." I explained, spinning my class ring on my finger. "But my martial arts and movement ring has some traces of other stuff. I think the reason I seem to be adapting and changing with the martial arts ring is because my class ring had a bit of learning concepts, which interacted positively with the learning in the book."

"I suppose that makes sense. As much as anything to do with your cards does."

"Exactly." I added before continuing. "But besides that, what I think this also means is that if I create an object whose purpose it is to make me stronger, or faster and I combine it with a ring..."

"Then putting on the ring will affect you like that object would."

"Exactly!"

"Well... it follows all of the rules we have found so far." She admitted.

"So far." I repeated with a lopsided grin.

It was true that there were probably things about the cards we hadn't discovered yet. I had been doing my best to think creatively, and I could feel myself getting better and better at thinking in terms of what my cards were capable of, but it would still take time. For now, I had an experiment to run.

"Do me a favor and stay here Ema? Keep an eye on the news, let me know if anything pops up. It's a poor cover for actual intelligence resources but it's gonna be all the warning we get if someone manages to do some facial recognition or if Hydra has a pocket psychic or something."

Eme turned to me but I cut her off before she could say anything.

"Yeah I know, I need to be careful not to slip into paranoia. I'll be careful"

She nodded, turning her frame back to the laptop. I quickly threw on my jacket and headed out into the city. Time for another shopping spree.

----- *A few hours later* -----

By the time I got back to the apartment it was getting dark and I had spent another six hundred dollars. With only a few bags to show for it.

"I'm back." I called out wearily. "I don't know how rich people do it, spending so much money like this hurts my soul.."

"But you were able to get everything that you needed, correct?" Ema asked, floating into the kitchen, scanning the bags as I walked.

"I think so. I kind of struggled on this one to be honest."

"How so?"

"Well the hope was to make something that would make me faster, but it turns out there are very few things that would do that and would also fit what I can use for this."

"But you still think you've got what you need?" Ema asked.

"Yeah. I've got a combo that should work."

I dropped the bag onto the table and started opening up the bottles of vitamins and supplements. Many of them had images of people running on the boxes or bottles.

"I bought as much vitamin stuff made for runners as I could. I think combining one of each together should create something useful."

I started taking vitamins from each bottle and combining them, putting my words to practice. Eventually I held the first version in a D rank card.

"Alright, this is pretty much what I was looking for. This pill will temporarily increase my running speed and endurance a very small amount for a certain amount of time. Which means if I combine it with a ring or whatever I should get a tiny boost."

"I didn't think you were looking for a tiny boost."

"Well no, but there are a bunch of vitamins in each bottle so I can make a bunch and combine them to increase it's potency. And I think I can turbo charge it."

I pull out a bag of caffeine tablets and put them on the table before leaving the room and coming back with a box of leftover capacitors from the other day's building. When I sat down on the couch I took a tablet and a capacitor and combined them, before mixing it with the super running pill. I smirked slowly before showing the C rank card to Ema.

"This will make me a bit faster with marginally better endurance for a while, as well as giving me a slight;y greater boost when I first take it. They all blended together surprisingly well."

I started the process again, repeating it until I had sixteen separate pills, combining them all down to one single amalgamation.

"Well I hit the wall of diminishing returns pretty hard there. It's still a C rank and the last combination was barely any different from the one before. It's a much bigger boost all around though. Better than I thought, worse than I hoped."

"But sufficient to test your theory, correct?" Ema asked, still watching me work.

"Yeah, plenty for that."

I pull out a Stark branded fitness watch, bought from a pawn shop. It was in pretty good shape save a couple of scratches.

"That doesn't look like a simple ring." Ema pointed out.

"I know, but this will give me something to compare it against as well as testing another theory. I think that layering many related concepts is more erratic but produces better results, while mixing singular concepts is pretty predictable but less potent."

I pulled the bracelet into the card and combined it with the pill, nodding and putting the result onto the table before starting the process all over again. I ended up using almost every single pill, tablet and vitamin this time, combining it with a simple bronze colored cuff bracelet. I held up both cards for a moment, getting a feel for them both.

"Well I was right on both accounts. Both of these give the wearer a noticeable boost in speed and endurance, while also giving me a bigger boost on command." I explained with a big smirk. "The cuff is much more simple but less effective while the fitness watch is more complicated but more potent."

After another moment of examining the two accessories I combine the fitness watch with a larger capacitor before combining the cuff and the watch together. I examined the card before grinning and showing it to Ema.

"B rank! This is gonna be good!"

I pulled the new object out of the card, turning it around in my hand. What was once a simple rubber watch was now a metallic brass cuff with a sleek digital screen. I pushed it around my wrist and actually felt it connect to me. I could feel my fatigue slowly vanish, the soreness in my arms and legs fading to almost nothing. I couldn't help but grin, rushing from the room to grab some jogging pants and a long sleeve t-shirt. I quickly put on my armored under layer and threw on the other clothes before heading back to the living room.

"I'm gonna go for a run. You want to come?" I asked my companion, who nodded and floated over to me.

"Are you sure? It seems a bit late..."

"I'm wearing my armor and I'm carrying the deck. I pity the mugger who thinks I'm an easy target."

"That's fair enough." She admitted, sweeping over the room to me. "I will accompany you, but from high up enough that I won't be seen."

"Good idea, I'll bring my bluetooth earpiece."

Five minutes later I was standing at the entrance of the apartment building, slowly playing with the cuff. Eventually I slid it onto my wrist again and pulled my armor over it, grateful the cuff was tight enough that it fit.

"You ready?" I ask Ema through my earpiece. "I'm gonna start at a light jog to test my endurance before testing my top speed with some sprints."

"Ready when you are."

With a smirk I started jogging, leaving my apartment behind. By the second block I had to stop myself from laughing. My body felt light and responsive, the pace I set easy to the point of being boring.

"Going to speed up a bit." I warned her before jogging faster.

The new pace was much more interesting, and while some would have called it a light run, felt as straining on my body as I would normally have expected the first one to be. I could feel the embers of fatigue starting to rise, but the burn was slow, manageable.

"That's about a mile Carson." Ema stated.

This time I couldn't help but laugh. I kept going and going, each reminder of distance making me smile. Eventually, when Ema called out my tenth mile I stopped and sat on a nearby bench. The fatigue was heavy and unignorable now, but not so bad as to completely disable me. In fact as I sat there I could feel the fatigue already fading, both the immediate strain and loss of breath as well as the much more deep seeded exhaustion that stuck around. After around five minutes and a bottle of water from a card I was ready to go again.

"Alright Ema, time for the sprints."

Again I started out slow, pushing myself faster and harder. I could feel every impact, feel the strain building as I ran faster and faster. Eventually I hit my limit in both speed and stamina, forcing me to stop and sit on a concrete barrier next to the road.

"How... How fast was I going?" I asked Ema, glancing up.

"You were hitting twenty-four miles per hour in the last few seconds."

"Holy shit." I said softly, stunned at her statement. "That's incredible."

"It is, especially since it's likely that number will go up." Ema pointed out, continuing when she saw my confusion. "The object you made isn't making your muscles better or enhancing your oxygen intake. As far as I could tell there was nothing different. And yet you ran like an Olympic athlete. That cuff is simply a flat increase to your speed and endurance. Imagine how fast someone who was actually in shape would be."

"And since my Kung Fu ring is already helping me become more fit..."

I trailed off as my thoughts wandered, my breathing slowly normalizing as I rested.

"We need to prioritize another few sets of accessories. Something to increase my strength, maybe my intelligence? Not sure I'm comfortable with that one... Maybe I should do some

research online for some ideas. I bet a D&D manual would be full of things for us to try. As soon as we get some more cash. I think we should make plans to visit that address we found, the one further in state. I have a feeling it's worth checking out and we need to make more of these rings."

"...and if it's not worth checking out?" Ema asked through the phone.

"Then we will spend a week trying to figure out who is our best option to go to for protection while going out at night to hopefully find more resources." I said after a slow pause. "For now let's just set that aside. I have one last thing to test."

I stood up and shook off the last bit of fatigue from my limbs. I could still feel it after the distance I had ran and sprinted, but it was already dull, like day-old fatigue instead of a few minutes.

"Do you know what the effect is?"

"Kinda?" I answered. "It's going to be an increase in speed and stamina, but I'm having a hard time figuring out how much."

I started jogging again, pushing up to steady speed before mentally preparing myself.

"Boost!"

It felt like lightning in my veins, like a blast of pure energy. Suddenly it felt like I was going slow, like even my fast jog was nothing. I pushed faster, shifting to a dead sprint. Faster and faster, gliding across the sidewalk like a rush of wind and momentum. Every movement felt clean, precise, like I had minutes to decide where my feet needed to be, like-

The feeling faded in a moment, an intense shot of exhaustion pushing through me. I tried to slow down, but the sudden and unexpected spike deadened my muscles. I tripped over my own feet and slid across the ground, tumbling before slamming into a light post. I could feel my armor take the brunt of it, though the impact proved that while my armor was tough it didn't do shit against inertia. I could feel the impact almost reverberate in my body.

"CARSON! Are you okay?" Ema called through the earpiece. "Carson!"

"I'm... I'm okay." I managed to groan, sitting up and leaning against the lamp post. "That... that sucked."

"What happened?"

"There was backlash for using the boost... it really caught me off guard."

In truth it had snuck up on me as I had been reveling in the speed I was running and the feeling of energy flowing through me. Now though I could feel the fatigue in all of my limbs, a heavy exhaustion that was only now slowly fading, much slower than the previous fatigue. It felt like I had sprinted further than my original speed test, then kept going.

"Backlash? That's never happened before." Ema commented as she scanned my body. "You're alright by the way, nothing is broken. You're going to be very sore and very bruised tomorrow though."

"Yeah, I can feel it. I'm pretty sure I can compensate, it just snuck up on me." I assured her. "How fast was I going?"

"In the last moment before you stumbled you were going thirty seven miles per hour."

"Holy hell... we really need to prioritize more accessories."

I slowly stood with a groan, leaning on the lamp post before moving to a nearby staircase. I roll up my sleeve and pull up my armor, looking at the fitness watch. The digital screen had three blinking lighting bolts, one of them just an outline. I pushed down my sleeve and sighed.

"The cuff has three charges, I think it will recharge after 24 hours."

"I'm more interested in the backlash Carson! What if any more of your creations are hiding some sort of repercussion for using them?"

I shook my head, pulling the cuff into my deck without looking, summoning the card to my hand. I felt the exhaustion, which was fading a few moments ago, stop and wash over me again.

"Note to self, don't take the cuff off before exhaustion fades." I said with a groan before focusing on the card.

I put it back on after a moment, biting back a sigh of relief. The concepts were extremely complex, I had completely missed them behind the more prominent ones. Even now I could barely feel them.

"I think that there were several concepts that merged together. Side effects from caffeine and the side effects from taking too much vitamins, the electricity from the capacitors and from the watch."

I stood and tested my legs, running through some simple and easy stretches to see if anything pulled or ached.

"I think we found the downside to layering more complicated objects though. The randomness isn't always just weird quirks, sometimes it's limitations and costs for use."

"Be more careful in the future." Ema urged.

I looked up at the sky, spotting a blink of green. I wave and nod, smiling as I finish my stretches.

"I will Ema." I agree, smirking before looking up and down the street. "Now... you wouldn't happen to know how to get home would you?"