

Chapter 13 - Getting metaphysical

We didn't get back home for another two hours after I finished the truck, as I was forced to wait for the bus before riding my bike the rest of the way. To say I was more than a bit annoyed was an understatement. I barely paused long enough to push Ema out of her card before collapsing into bed and sleeping until noon. When I woke up I was bleary eyed and tired, but still in a better mood than I had been earlier, even more so after I sat down on the couch with a large mug of coffee.

"Are you feeling better Carson?" Ema asked, floating around me.

"Yeah, thanks. I just needed some sleep." I explained, letting out a sigh. "Any news about last night?"

"None so far. It makes me wonder if they are keeping it under wraps to scoop up as much of the connected people as possible." She said before continuing. "There was a lot of information in that office, locations, times, prices. Not to mention all that cocaine."

"Yeah, I have a feeling we stumbled into something big." I admitted, leaning back on the couch. "I think laying low from the crime fighting might be a good idea, at least for a bit. That's an actual option now that we have the repair tablet."

"If we are laying low, what is our plan?"

"Well first I'm going to be spending about half of our money on accessories. I think I'm gonna try making one to increase my strength as well as something to heal me if I get hurt." I explained, taking a sip of coffee before continuing. "I want to spend the rest of the money on a shit box car, something that would be worth a bunch when it's in perfect condition. We can sell it online to make more cash."

"That seems like a good idea. Do you have a car in mind?"

"Nope. I was hoping you could do some research while I go out and do some shopping." I asked, looking over to her. "It also might be a good idea to start looking into someplace we can set up, a garage or something. If we are going to be using car repair as our money maker we need a place that looks capable of that. If nothing else than to convince buyers they aren't buying stolen cars."

"Sure, I'll find us a car as well as a place. How much are you willing to spend?"

"Well the car needs to be under two grand." I answered. "But the garage should be able to hold at least two cars comfortably, as well as all of the tools. It's going to be expensive as hell in the city as well. But like we said, with the repair tablet we can make as much as we need."

“Within reason Carson. If we start flipping cars like crazy someone is going to notice.” She pointed out. “But that’s for the future. I will start on the research. Shouldn’t be too hard to find a wreck or something that we can sell for ample funds.”

“Keep it to older cars. If we start repairing modern Ferraris and Lamborghinis people will pick up on it pretty quick I think.”

“Very well.” She agreed, turning back to what was quickly becoming her laptop and getting to work.

I stood from the couch and stretched, heading to get ready for my shopping trip. It didn't take me long to get showered, dressed and out the door, though I did delay my shopping to stop by a nearby sub shop for lunch. While I ate I also did my research into what I would use to make my next set of accessories. I decided that since money was a significantly smaller problem now it was time to do a little experimenting, namely settle if something needed to actually work to hold a concept.

The first place on my list was a store I never thought I would ever step into, a holistic medicine shop. I took one step inside and was nearly blasted back out by the herbal scent of hanging, drying herbs and burning incense. I was greeted by a young perky woman with a wide happy smile. After a few minutes of polite conversation I purchased some red jasper, an onyx crystal, some smoothed stones of serpentine and basalt as well as clear quartz crystal and a garnet, all rocks or crystals known, in certain circles, for healing and strength. I also purchased a fist sized bottle of supposedly special spring water, one that apparently had healing properties, as well as a whole box of small corked bottles. I also purchased several bundles of dried plants and herbs, all of which were supposed to be either healing or strengthening. By the time I escaped I could hardly remember what the first bundle was called, never mind what it did. Luckily I would be able to tell what concepts it held even if I had no idea what it was called.

Once I was free of the shop I turned into an empty alley, sticking my hand into the bag and carding a random stone. Looking at the card it appeared I had snagged the onyx chunk, and I smiled as I studied its concepts. It held the normal stone related concepts of course, but also contained strength, control and stamina. An interesting blend and something that would hopefully work well. I couldn't help but wonder if buying it at this type of shop had somehow influenced its concepts. Either way it was time to move on.

After dropping almost three hundred dollars on rocks and plants and a bottle of water I headed to another health shop, the same one I had gotten my running supplements and vitamins from. Thankfully the clerk didn't recognize me and I managed to grab several bottles of vitamins and supplements for strengthening muscles as well as a bottle of vitamin c tablets, a bottle of aspirin and two large tubes of neosporin. I paid almost six hundred dollars for all of the supplements, which took a while as the manager was called to examine the cash.

When I was finally finished at the health store I headed to a nearby pawn shop, dropping another two hundred dollars on a second simple cuff as a spare and a necklace with the caduceus staff on a thick metal chain. Unfortunately there was nothing matching a symbol for strength so I headed to a jewelry store that wasn't too far away. They had a much better selection but everything was much more expensive. I managed to buy a silver lotus flower cuff that was a bit feminine but not enough for me to even come close to caring as well as a decent sized ankh charm for a bracelet, dropping four hundred dollars for both of them.

Still not satisfied, I headed off for another jewelry store... and another. Eventually I managed to find a gold phoenix cuff. I spent around three hundred dollars on the gold cuff, getting quite a few stares when I paid in cash.

I found myself pausing outside my final destination, the large doors of a church. I took a deep breath and opened one of the doors, stepping inside the quiet interior. The pews were empty save for a few people who had their heads down in prayer. I made my way down the center aisle, making my way to a priest as he tended to something, his back to me.

"Uh.. excuse me Father." I asked quietly, getting his attention.

"Hmm? Oh, what can I do for you son?" He asked, turning to face him with a smile.

The man was older, with short white hair and face that spoke of experience and wisdom. He was dressed in his black suit and clerical collar.

"I.. have a bit of a weird request." I started, taking out the bottle of spring water. "Could you bless this water for me?"

The priest reached out and took the bottle, looking at it closely before bringing it up to his nose and sniffing the cork. When he noticed my confusion he chuckled.

"You would be surprised how many people think that drinking blessed vodka would be funny." He explained as he walked away to grab a book from a nearby shelf. "Could I ask what this water is for son? You don't plan on desecrating it?"

"No Father, I..." I started, trailing off as the priest opened his book and placed the glass bottle on a table. "It's for healing."

"Ah, very well. Why don't you have a seat, this will take a minute or so."

I nodded and took a step back, bowing and walking back to the front seat. I watched the priest as he walked away to do his blessing. I twiddled my thumbs and tried hard not to stare at the other church goers. I was never really one for faith or church, but I was pretty sure this would have concepts that I needed. Eventually the priest returned, handing me the bottle once I stood.

“Thank you Father.”

“Of course, it's part of my duties after all.” He said with a small smile. “I pray it brings the healing you seek.”

I nodded awkwardly before turning to leave, stopping by the exit to slide a hundred dollars into the collection box. As I left and the large doors closed behind me I let out a sigh. Considering the horrors that existed in the Marvel universe, entering a church was an actual risk, especially as someone doubting his faith. I took a deep breath and stepped away from the church, distracting myself by planning the route home.

----- *An hour later* -----

When I finally locked the door of my apartment I had mostly recovered from my brush with faith. I headed immediately to the living room, pushing bags from my cards and plopping down on the couch.

“Welcome back Carson.” Ema said in greeting. “How was shopping?”

“It was... weird. Wait till you see some of the stuff I bought.” I said, pulling out my purchases. “Even got some special spring water that I got blessed at a church.”

I watched as Ema froze and slowly turned to me, giving all of the strange things on the table a scan before focusing on me.

“You got holy water?” She asked. “Do you really think...”

“This *is* a Marvel universe, so I honestly wouldn't be surprised if holy water healed slightly on its own.” I pointed out before continuing. “But even ignoring that, it doesn't really seem to matter if it does or doesn't. I guess because people think it does and treat it like it does then it holds that concept.”

“You tested that?”

“Yup, I checked after I got it blessed.” I confirmed. “It's healing alright, as well as protection and purification.”

“I am not sure how I feel about that.” Ema admitted.

“Yeah, you and me both. Lets just hope I dont piss our lord and savior Morgan Freeman off.” I said with a smirk, organizing the table into my two categories, strength and healing.

“Indeed.” Ema replied simply before turning back to the laptop. “What are you going to build first?”

"I think I'll start with strength." I said, pulling all of my purchases closer.

I started dividing everything into two groups, a cuff and a stone for each, evenly dividing the plants I had gotten from the first store and the supplements and vitamins I had gotten from the second between the two as well. I began combining the herbs, pills and supplements. Doubling, tripling and quadrupling until I had all of it down to one dark green pill and a deep red pill. I carded both and nodded.

"So good so far." I said happily. "None of the negative concepts are interacting enough to actually affect anything."

I combined the chunk of onyx with the green pill, before combining that with the lotus symbol cuff. I pushed the cuff out of the card and turned it in my hands. What was once just a silver carved cuff was now accented with dark onyx with a green tint coming through when the light caught it just the right way. I carded it and put it into the deck before combining the red pill with the chunk of basalt, resulting in a dark red stone, smooth to the touch. I combined that with the golden phoenix cuff, pushing it out of the card. Once again the stone accented the thick bracelet, filling in the gaps and recesses of the jewelry piece with deep red stone.

"Take a look Ema, two cuffs of strength." I said, holding both of the cuffs out to her.

"Hmm... You played heavily into the symbolism." She observed.

"Yeah. Got some stares and weird looks for my requests at the jewelry stores." I admitted. "But both the lotus and the phoenix represent strength in some way, in different cultures."

"How well do they work?" She asked, floating over to my shoulder.

With a completely necessary flourish I carded both of them, examining the information I felt through my sixth sense.

"Well they are both B rank, and both increase my strength to slightly different degrees. The phoenix cuff also seems to encourage some sort of survivability, while the lotus cuff increases my resilience. But they both seem safe, no hidden drawbacks or backlash for use. Which is good because when I combine them..."

I combine the cards, examining the resulting B rank card with a small frown.

"Damn, I was really hoping for an A rank." I admitted. "Still, I can't complain about the results."

I pushed the cuff into my hand, rubbing my fingers at the intricate carving. In the center of the cuff was the lotus flower, still silver and accented by the black-green onyx. Now it was

surrounded by two golden phoenixes, accented by the deep red stone. It was intricate and colorful, the colors contrasting heavily but still seeming to work together.

“While that looks incredible.” Ema said as she scanned the cuff. “You didn’t spend nearly as much money as what went into the repair tablet.”

“True.” I admitted, fingers still tracing the carvings on the hefty cuff bracelet. “I’ll just have to keep my eye on anything I can add to it. For now, I want to get the healing necklace done.”

I carded the cuff and put it back into the deck, organizing the next set of materials in much the same way as I had the previous build, with only the holy water not in a group. I quickly combined the stones together until I had two, a deep dark swirling stone of red from the garnet and red jasper and a lighter, semi-transparent green stone from the clear quartz and serpentine. I poured the holy water into the smaller bottles I bought, corking all three and setting the larger bottle to the side. I then combined everything together until I had two separate bottles of some sort of mixture.

“Huh... I think I just made two different healing potions...”

“Do you plan on keeping one?” Ema asked, still watching over my shoulder.

“No. They weren’t that hard to make and I think I can bump up their effectiveness if I get some access to some stronger medications.”

I combined each of the bottles to one of the stones, resulting in two larger stones that were vaguely shaped like the bottles and sloshed when I shook them. I quickly combined them with the two healing symbols, and then combined them together. The result was a caduceus staff styled ankh half wrapped around, half set into a hunk of stone. The stone was swirled with green and red and about the size of a zippo, but was silent when I shook it.

“Well... It worked...” I said hesitantly as I pulled it into a card and examined it.

“Is it safe to wear?” Ema asked, scanning the necklace.

“Yeah, there aren’t any negative concepts beyond a few very light ones in the background.”

“Then what’s the problem?” She asked.

“It’s got an alignment requirement.” I explained. “You can’t wear it if you’re evil. I think it will literally burn against your skin.”

“That’s... that’s new.”

“Yeah... I really hadn’t thought about an object I make being fundamentally restrictive about who can wear it. It’s an interesting thought...”

“It could be a handy feature to keep your more powerful objects from being used by bad people.” Ema pointed out.

“Yeah, except evil is subjective. Is killing evil? Cause the bible says it is, but most sane people consider soldier’s to be heroes.” I responded, turning the necklace in my hands. “If someone kills a child to save a thousand people, are they evil? And good people can still be tricked. This necklace seems to go a bit deeper than that, which is good, but it still feels limited.”

“I suppose that is correct...”

“What I need is a way to keep anyone from using my stuff, as well as a way to hand someone an object and know that no one will be able to use it except them.”

I started going through things in my head, wondering how I could use concepts to define something as belonging to one person and no one else. I absentmindedly sent the necklace back into the deck as I get a little lost in this new challenge.

“What about a lock?” Ema suggested. “Combine a lock with something personal.”

“That... might work, hold on.”

I stood and went over to the pile of materials I had been accumulating since all this started, the loose odds and ends left over after I was done creating something. I sifted through and eventually found the lock that I had carded off of the chop shop cash box. I also grabbed one of the small glass bottles before sitting back down at the couch.

“Alright, here goes nothing.”

I pulled out my modified pocket knife and nicked my finger tip, slowly encouraging the blood to drip into the bottle. When it was eventually half filled and my finger stopped bleeding I carded it, studying the card before frowning and tearing it in two.

“That won't work, it's too contaminated by the glass bottle.” I mumbled to myself. “I need to get just the blood.”

I stood and went to the kitchen, grabbing a ceramic plate and coming back, setting the plate on the table. With a grimace I nicked another finger, bleeding onto the plate. Once there is a sufficient puddle of blood I tap it with a finger and card it, nodding as I study it. I take the lock and combine it with my blood and focus on the result.

“Now I have a lock that opens with my blood....” I explained to Ema as I leaned back in my chair. “I wonder if I just spam it with other stuff with the concept of being from me...”

I cut a small lock of my hair, carding it and nodding. I spent ten minutes droolin onto the plate, carding the result and frowning. After tearing the card of drool I looked around the room and grabbed a roll of clear tape, putting my thumbprint on it and folding it over before carding it.

“So my hair and my thumbprint match pretty close to what I need...”

I combine the small lock of hair and the thumbprint before combining the result with the blood activated lock.

“I... I think that this is it.” I said to Ema, holding out a card. “The only thing that might be a problem is if we get a bad match with concepts but it's pretty clean.”

“What will you test it on?” Ema asked, floating at my shoulder and watching me work.

“I'm thinking of using my gloves.” I answered easily. “I could make another pair of those pretty easily, I remember the recipe and it won't be that big of a deal if I can't use them for a few days.”

I pulled out my gloves and combined them with my new creation, smiling as I examined the result. I pushed the card out of the card to examine every nook and cranny before carding them again.

“I'm pretty sure that actually worked.” I said happily. “I think it's time to head out and do a little testing.”