

## Chapter 20 - Upgraded

I spent a better part of two hours randomly walking around the city, making sure I wasn't being followed. I took the opportunity to contemplate how I would solve the money tracking problem, coming up with a possible solution, even doing some shopping so I could test it when I got back. When I got back to the apartment I let out a sigh of relief and pushed Ema out of her card before heading to the living room. I stripped and carded my deployable armor before putting my casual clothes back on, flopping back onto the couch.

"How did it go?" Ema asked. "You seem-"

I answered by flicking a card onto the coffee table. Suddenly the huge stack of money appeared, some of it falling off the far edge.

"Oh... looks like it went well then."

"Except we can't spend any of it." I explained. "At least not until I can figure out how to do it without getting caught. They keep track of serial numbers, Agent Coulson confirmed it."

"Which means they would know where you have been shopping." she continued. "Is that such a bad thing? You're already wearing your disguise most of the time you go out shopping anyway."

"I know, it's more that they will be able to find out what I'm buying." I explained. "I might be able to slip it in once, maybe twice, but eventually buying three dozen umbrellas and cornstarch is going to tip them off that I'm not exactly enchanting things at an altar."

"Is that such a bad thing?" She asked. "It's not like they don't know you're making this stuff."

"Yes and no. It's not a bad thing because yes, they already know what I'm doing, the fact that I'm doing it with random stuff you can buy around the city would just be icing on the cake."

"But...?"

"It's a weakness and a strength, one I want to keep from them for as long as possible. It's a strength because if they don't know I can do it I can use stuff they won't ever expect me to be able to. If Shield takes me into custody 'for my own protection' they would be worried about me getting my hands on esoteric stuff, not the butter knives from the kitchen, or the cleaning supplies from a cart. If they do know how this works it becomes a solid weakness because all they have to do to make me powerless is strip me and keep me from getting my hands on anything. Before they would be worried about me getting my hands on fire, or raw metal or anything, after they would know exactly how to make me powerless."

“Maybe you should reconsider permanent enhancements then?” She suggested.

“I haven’t ruled them out or anything.” I admitted. “But I have no idea how concepts will work when I ingest them. I need to test it first and I obviously can’t test it on people. Eventually I’m going to see about getting my hands on some lab rats or something. Until then all we can do is mitigate the weakness relying on items has.”

“Fine, then what are we going to do about the money tracking?”

“I did a little shopping when I was out. We are down another seven hundred by the way.”

I started going through the bag, showing eighteen simple money clips and a huge stack of gift cards I bought. With a sigh of exasperation I carded all the money again, leaving the wads of cash that fell onto the ground. I put all of the stuff onto the table, carding each of the money clips separately and examining them.

“I think, conceptually, this might work.” I said eventually. “But I have no idea if it will interact properly with card scanning machines.”

“What are you trying to make?” Ema asked, floating in her usual spot.

“Well, these are all reloadable gift cards.” I explained, holding eighteen carded money clips. “And these are all money clips, which carry and store money. I hope that by combining them I’ll be able to make a card that holds my cash and will let me spend it like a normal card.”

“But most of that info is kept by the companies making the card.”

“Exactly. I might be able to make a card that holds all my money but I have no idea if it will work when I want to spend it. I know the Deck has done some crazy stuff but... Even if it does work by some miracle, using it might throw up every red flag the banks or whatever look for.”

“What are your other options?”

“I could give up hiding how my powers work and buy whatever I want. I could say screw it, make the money card and use it. Or I could go back to making my own money with the repair tool.”

“Well we should scratch the first one.” Ema responded. “If the second one results in them catching on that’s one thing, but there is no reason to do that from the get go.”

“Alright, sure. That just leaves using the card or not using their money.”

“I think you should try the card.” Ema said after a long moment of thinking. “Put some money in, if it fails then we can reconsider our options and if it gets some people’s attention then so be it. I

know you wanted to stay anonymous for as long as possible but now it's getting in the way of your building.”

“What about making our own money?”

“It's up to you Carson, but I don't think that your business model was nearly as sustainable as you thought.” She pointed out. “It is fine for making some quick cash, especially if we are careful, but setting up a shop and magically fixing cars is a good way to get caught.”

I let out another sigh, before nodding.

“Yeah... that might have been a pipe dream.” I admitted, rubbing my face. “Alright, let's see if this even works.”

I combine each of the money clips with a single gift card, then combine that with a second gift card before combining them all together into a single card. Like usual I was getting serious diminishing returns by the end, but I hoped that it had been enough. I pushed out the plastic card and checked out both sides. It was a little heavy, and comparing it to my debit card showed that it was just a bit thicker than a normal card as well. Shrugging I stood, walked around the table and picked up a stack of fifties. I folded the stack and pushed it against the plastic card ... and it vanished.

“How do you get it back out?” Ema asked.

“I... don't think I can.” I said, flipping the card around. “The clips had the right concepts but I think it got overridden by the gift cards... I can tell it has five thousand dollars in it though.”

“Well... Let's test it out tomorrow then.” Ema suggested. “It's getting late and you've been running around all day.”

“Yeah... Alright.” I agreed reluctantly. “I'm ordering chinese.”

----- *The Next Morning* -----

The next morning I got up early again to brainstorm with Ema, my well used notepad in hand. We discussed my tentative ideas for Clint's new glasses as well as how we could make an expanded storage.

“Why have you never attempted to make one before?” Ema asked as I started talking about potential solutions.

“Because storage is a very simple concept. Stuff fits in space.” I explained, chewing on the end of my pen. “It’s not scalable. Things like protection, strength, durability, healing, those all get more potent when you combine things together because adding more of those concepts improves the concept. Storage is just.. Stuff fits in space. You can't really scale up the concept that a box holds as much stuff as it fits because even if you combine the box with a shipping container it's the same concept, the new box holds as much stuff as it fits. If I had access to something with weirder concepts, like magic or some sort of space bending object I could maybe use that but I obviously don't.”

“So what we need is something that expands that space.” Ema said as I nodded my head.

“Exactly, and I can’t see finding that concept anywhere, not anywhere normal anyway.”

As we sat together silently I started doodling in my notebook, letting my mind wander, occasionally trying to come up with a new idea. After I finished my third doodle patch design I looked around the room, my eyes falling on the end table next to the couch. Sitting there, right where I left it, was the base to the statue I had used to make Ema. It was a circle of metal about four inches in diameter that rose up into a bubble, with material missing that fit the bottom of the statue so it could sit in it. An idea came to my head and I reached over and carded it, my eyes going wide.

“I think I have an idea for your improvements.” I said, holding the card out for her to see. “We were worried that combining you with something would change you, right?”

“It was a concern, yes.” She admitted.

“Well then let's not. Instead, let's make you something to pilot, instead of changing you directly! We will use your old base and combine it with a bunch of stuff to make it the controlling part of a bigger creation.”

“What kind?” She asked. “Maybe your truck?”

“Do you want to be a truck?” I asked, raising an eyebrow.

“No, that would be useful but... limiting.”

“The base has a concept of being a mount, but it’s more specific than that.” I said. “I think that if I combine it with a few emeralds we can make it work. It should connect it to you considering that's fifty percent of what you are.”

“Emeralds?” She asked, clearly a bit skeptical. “That's going to be incredibly expensive.”

“Oh I know, but luckily spending a fuck ton on emeralds with the cash from Shield will enforce the illusion I’m doing something special, especially if I buy some other gems as well. Then I can test the gift card on some other stuff I’ll need.”

“What about Agent Barton's equipment?”

“We already have a solid few ideas for his glasses.” I explained. “We can brainstorm more tonight and go shopping tomorrow morning. Your upgrade is much more important.”

“Well thank you Carson.” She said, bobbing slightly. “I’m going to stay here, keep brainstorming and maybe think of what kind of... creation I want to pilot.”

“Alright Ema, sounds good.”

It took me another thirty minutes to get out of the apartment, but when finally I did I headed straight for the hobby store. I bought three big radio controller units and receivers, five video game controllers as well as a bunch of computer part upgrades. It took a significant chunk of the five thousand dollars I had on the card but it was worth it. I dropped even more money on a top of the line cell phone, something I knew that Ema could easily interact with. I also bought a handy messenger bag from a store I happened to see when I was on my way to the jewelry store. I stuffed it with a few stacks of hundreds, giving me plenty of cash to buy stones.

I walked into the store and was immediately greeted by a clerk, a salesman's smile plastered on his face.

“Good morning sir, can I help you?” He asked as I got closer to the counter he was working.

“As a matter of fact I think you can.” I said, smiling back at him. “I wanted to get my fiance something special. I was thinking of buying her a few stones that she could design her own necklace around.”

“Hmmm, well we certainly do sell loose stones. What were you thinking of buying for her?”

“Two emeralds, two rubies and two sapphires.” I answered, doing my best to seem casual. “She prefers the more colorful stones.”

“Of course, of course. Just give me a moment and we can start going over what we have.”

The man stepped away from the glass case counter and left through an open doorway, returning a few minutes later carrying a foot and a half wide wooden chest. Behind him was another worker, carrying an identical chest. They placed them on the counter and the other worker left while the clerk started opening the boxes. A moment later the other worker came back carrying a third box, laying it on the counter as well.

“Now, you said you were looking for two of each, correct?” He asked, lifting up the top of one of the cases and showing me its contents.

The box was velvet lined and divided into shallow boxes, each one containing a small sealed bag, each bag containing an emerald and a small paper card with its details. I looked into the box as the man opened up the other two. The sapphire box was filled with several colors and the ruby had the fewest choices.

“Do you take cash?” I asked as I looked into the ruby container.

“We do in fact.” The man said with a smile, though it was a little thin now. “You would have to wait while we send it through our counter and counterfeit scanner, but yes.”

I nodded and mentally kept track of which stones I wanted before listing them out for the clerk. His eyes went wide as I listed six of his largest and most expensive stones, two identical marquise cut emeralds with four other large cut stones.

“Uhhh yes, alright. That would be... Of course sir. If you would just...”

I reached into my messenger bag and pulled out forty thousand dollars in hundreds, placing them on the table. The clerk gasped and reached out, faltering for a minute before gathering up all of the stacks.

“T-this will take a moment sir.” He said, rushing off to the back of the shop. After a few moments I heard loud, agitated whispering.

I turned around and found a seat, sitting and waiting patiently. Soon I could hear the sounds of a money counting machine coming from the back room. Eventually the clerk returned carrying one stack of hundreds in one hand, a small box in the other.

“Let me get your stones together and I will give you your change sir.” He said politely, if not a bit nervously, putting my chosen stones into the box and handing it to me. I put it into my messenger bag, carding it when it was fully concealed inside. After that he handed me about a thousand dollars back, and was about to open up the cash register to make exact change when I laughed.

“Don’t worry about it.” I assured him, giving him a wave and taking the receipt before heading out the front door. “Consider it a tip.”

When I got into my truck It took me a minute to get over how much money I just spent in a single store. When I had finally recovered enough to drive I made a beeline straight home. When I was finally back in my apartment I was greeted by an excited Ema.

“How did it go? Did you get what you needed?” She asked. “I had a few ideas when you were gone, and maybe one about Agent Barton's second piece of equipment”

“Yeah, I got everything we need.” I said with a smile, kicking off my shoes and heading to the living room. “What were your ideas?”

“Well I was thinking... What would happen if you made a bunch of your transformation cards and added in a way to control it?”

I nodded as she started explaining her first idea, freezing when I understood what she was saying. My mind raced and I nodded as I worked through it in my head.

“That sounds like the perfect solution to the flexibility issue!” I exclaimed. “That's a good plan! And we can work in the remaining tungsten, titanium and molybdenum! Maybe some Aluminum as well to keep it from being too heavy! Okay, we need to plan out the combination order, this one is going to be complicated.”

I sat down and laid out all of the things I had just bought, keeping the sapphire and rubies separate. We discussed the order for a few minutes before I started writing it down.

“Okay, the first step is combining the computer upgrade parts to the cellphone to bump up its power and fidelity.”

I quickly combined the cellphone with all of the computer upgrades, the cell phone getting noticeably thicker and heavier but that was fine. I then combined all of the radio controllers together, then the video game controllers. I combined those together, then combined the result with the improved cell phone. The result was an incredibly powerful touch screen controller that was heavy but its primary concept was controlling to a massive degree. Ema could still connect to it though, which was exactly what we needed.

“This... this is an impressive device.” She said, the icons on the touch screen flickering as she explored its functions.

“Well I can make you something like it later, for now, let's make you something real special.”

We debated for a while whether to combine the emeralds to the stand and then add the controller or add the controller and then the stones. Eventually we decided we wanted the emerald connection as strong as possible, so we settled on after. I combined them together and pushed it out onto the table.

The controller had changed to a circular shape, slightly bigger than the base had been but not by much. In the center of the controller was an indent, a perfect fit for Ema.

“Try it out.” I said, gesturing to the controller.

Ema flew closer, hesitating for a moment before slotting herself in. The screen went black immediately.

“Yes, the connection is better, I feel like I can interact with it faster, more directly. Still not as smooth as my own motion, though it's hard to tell with nothing connected to it. It's still a powerful device though.”

“Alright, let's add some emeralds.”

I quickly added the stones, only after debating for a while if we should combine them together first, then combine that. When I was done I pushed it out onto the table again. The device looked mostly the same, though the indentation, which had been black was now the same color as Ema's frame

“Oh! Yes that... that is a much stronger connection. It feels natural, like it's an extension of myself.”

“Fantastic! Okay, let's work on the second part!” I said excitedly, eager to create something for my companion.

I rushed back to the kitchen, rushing through a batch of oobleck and carding it until the pot was empty. When I was done I pushed out the remaining metal stock, carding the pieces I needed. I headed back to the living room and sat at the couch, immediately making my last two sheets of super metal, adding in more titanium stock to make it more flexible. I then combined the sixteen cards of oobleck together once, then combined them with the last of the nitinol. I combined them together two more times. I added a sheet of super metal to each of the two resulting transformation cards before pushing them out onto the table at the same time. The two amalgamations slowly merged together as they went from solid masses of mostly metal to its more liquid state. I quickly carded it before it could shift too much. I now had a single card, a massive amount of transforming, shifting, state changing metallic liquid that was incredibly strong, heat resistant and flexible.

I quickly combined the receiver units for the radio controllers together and combined it with the super metal hybrid I had made. I carded the super controller base and gave Ema a look before combining the two together.

“Well, that's a good sign.” I said with a grin, showing Ema the result. “Your upgrade is the second A ranked card I've ever made.”

I pushed it out of its card onto the table, ready to pull it back in if it started to run, only relaxing when it stayed in place for a few seconds. On the table was a perfect cube of dark gray metal about two and a half feet tall and two and a half feet wide. On the top was a slightly raised circular platform, the same indentation that the controller had in the center..



“Well? It’s all yours.” I said to Ema, gesturing to it. “Take it for a spin.”

She floated over to the large cube and after a moment, slid into the indentation. For a moment she glowed green before it faded and the cube began to shift. It was subtle at first, and lacked any of the unfolding and extending that my deployable armor did. Instead it flowed like a liquid, shifting and twisting. Slowly a shape began to form, morphing into something humanoid. Over the next ten minutes the shape gained definition, the form of a vaguely feminine person slowly getting more and more defined and detailed.

When the form finally stopped shifting and changing it moved slowly, still sitting on the table. The head moved until it was facing me, its face completely blank and its eyes closed. When the eyes finally opened they revealed two large emeralds, marquise cut, looking at me. After a long moment she opened her mouth...

And yelped as the table collapsed, splitting in half and dumping her to the ground with a loud thud.