

Chapter 14 - Joy ride

We didn't end up leaving for a few hours after I was done, mostly because it was too early to be driving around in my suit. I spent most of that time pacing, fidgeting and desperately trying to distract myself, failing miserably. When we finally left I ended up riding a few miles away from the apartment before pushing the truck out of its card in a surprisingly wide alleyway. I quickly got changed, only hopping into the truck when everything was on. When I climbed in, the first thing I did was push Ema out of her card.

"Damn... this looks sleek." I said, running my hands over the dashboard. "I wish I had checked the other interiors so I could tell which cars influenced this."

The dash was half polished wood and half black leather. It was all pristine and comfortable, giving the vibe of a custom luxury interior. I looked along the dash, checking out all the features the truck had.

"Glad all the bells and whistles carried over. It even kept the heated seats" I said with a smile, leaning back with my hands on the wheel. "So, up for a short cruise around before we find a place for me to practice?"

I asked Ema, turning to see the floating construct scanning the seat. She turned and focused in front of us through the windshield.

"You realize people are probably going to see us?" She pointed out. "Even with how late it is. Even if you have your costume on, it's a lot of attention. Your description was on the news, people are going to notice."

"Yeah, I know." I assured her. "But staying unknown forever was never really an option. Besides, my identity is still a secret... I think. I'll only be driving this when I'm wearing my costume."

Ema looked at me for a long moment, her frame spinning and moving as she did. Eventually, after about thirty seconds she spoke.

"Just admit you want to drive the truck."

"I want to drive the truck." I admitted easily. "I mean I haven't even driven it yet!"

"That actually reminds me... How are you going to drive it?"

"I have my license, I know how to drive."

“I know that.” Ema assured me. “I ment how are you going to drive this truck... without any keys?”

My eyes slowly widened and my jaw dropped, before I looked down at the steering wheel. Sure enough there was an obvious slot for a key at the base of the steering wheel. I let out a long, frustrated growl and leaned back in the seat, rubbing my eyes with my hands.

“Son of a bitch!” I angrily grumbled, resisting the urge to smack the steering wheel. “I just want to drive! I haven't had a car I could use in years! How the hell am I going to make a key for this thing?”

“Oh well! You should probably just card the whole thing and tear it up!” Ema suggested with false ignorance.

I turned to her, my frustration on pause as I processed what she said before rolling my eyes.

“Okay, clearly you thought of the solution already and now you're just fucking with me.” I said accusingly. “Cmon, spill already.”

Ema laughed, bobbing softly as she did, her frame spinning in random directions. Eventually she calmed down and stopped spinning.

“Look up!”

“What? What do you-” I started, looking up and noticing the sun visor wasn't flush with the roof of the truck. “Oh you have got to be kidding me...”

I reached up and pulled the sun visor down, a set of keys falling into my lap. I grabbed the key, turning it over in my hand. It was a single key, no key ring or anything. Without making a sound I slid it into the keyhole and turned it. The truck roared to life, sounding like a cross between a powerful truck engine and a supercar.

“Holy hell I can't believe that worked.” I admitted, flopping back against the large seat. “What are the chances?”

“Extremely small.” Ema answered. “I think that the combination process had something to do with it.”

“It could have been the repair tablet.” I suggested. “We did hit “repair all” for all of them. Could a missing key be considered a missing part?”

“Get the tablet out and we can find out.”

I nodd, pushing out the repair tablet and hooking it up to the dashboard, letting Ema access it as I pulled out of the alleyway. The truck pulled forward much faster than I anticipated, but I managed to control it, getting used to its superior handling relatively quickly as I pulled down the streets of New York. It seemed like the truck anticipated each turn the handling was so tight and steady. The tires didn't slip or screech, even when I pushed it by taking corners fast or sharp. Eventually I pulled onto the highway, opening up and pushing the gas pedal down.

"Holy shit!"

I yelled as the truck leapt forward, the speedometer climbing quickly and showing no signs of stopping. Sixty, seventy, eighty, ninety, a hundred, I could feel the truck's acceleration starting to slow as the speedometer needle tapped a hundred and twenty. I knew I could go faster, push it for more, but I slowly let off the acceleration, my speed going down until I was at a reasonable seventy miles per hour.

"That was exciting." I said after a long moment of silence. "I guess combining those extra engines really gave it a boost, that acceleration felt more like a zippy car than a big truck."

"You're lucky no one saw that." Ema pointed out. "You don't exactly have the registration papers to show a cop if you get pulled over."

"Yeah, you're right." I sighed, nodding my head in agreement. "Lets pull off, I'm gonna get a late night snack and then we can find an abandoned lot or something to see how my rings work."

Driving for a little while got me off of the highway, and it wasn't much longer after that until I pulled into a twenty four hour drive through. I had Ema order for me, taking the bag of food and the chocolate shake from the wide eyed and stunned worker. Both Ema and I laughed at her expression once we pulled away.

"That was a bad Idea." Ema pointed out, still chuckling. "But it still might have been worth it."

A short drive and half a box of fries after that I was sitting on the tailgate, munching on a burger as Ema went through the paint options for the repair tablet. We were parked in an abandoned lot on a mostly empty street. Only a few street lamps worked and most of the buildings seemed abandoned.

"A dark green color fits the motif so far." I pointed out, nodding at her design so far. "The Deck seems to like the color, and I have to admit, green and gold looks good."

"Of course it does." Ema agreed with a faux haughty tone. "It is the most elegant color combination."

"Of course, of course." I agreed with a chuckle before recalling what I had originally gotten the tablet out for. "So was it the tablet that made the key?"

“Yes, it was.” She responded, not looking away from the tablet.

“Well just warn me before you accept the new look. I want to see it.”

Eventually I finished my late night snack and stood up from the tailgate. I surveyed the abandoned lot. It had a fair bit of trash and scrap, with grass growing in patches all over. It was dotted with a few large rocks and several concrete barriers that had once blocked off the entrance.

I flicked the strengthening cuff out of its card and after a moment of hesitation clipped it onto my arm. At first I didn't notice any change. There was no rush of energy like the runners cuff or spark of knowledge like my other accessories. I could feel nothing different until I started to move. Every movement felt lighter, easier. I had gotten used to the weight of my armor and my stealth suit over time, my body working hard to compensate for the slight loss of maneuverability and speed. Now it felt like I was naked, with nothing obstructing me or holding me back.

I walked slowly to the nearest large rock, bending down and hefting it with both hands. It pulled from the ground with a grunt, and I stood frozen in place as I held a rock that clearly weighed as much as I did with little trouble. I could feel its heft, bearing it easily, especially with my runners cuff soothing any fatigue my muscles felt. With another grunt I braced, hefted the stone up and pushed it away as hard as I could, throwing what was easily a two hundred pound stone across the lot, smashing into a rusted tangle of metal fencing.

“Ema, did you see that?” I asked, turning to look at her.

“I did.” She responded simply as she floated around me, scanning me in detail. “It seems to have a similar effect as your runner's cuff. No increase in muscle mass, no difference in oxygenation, just a flat boost to strength.”

I nodded and lifted another stone, this one even larger. It was difficult to wrap my arms around, but I managed. With a grunt I lifted with my legs, pulling the stone out of the ground before changing my stance and throwing the rock further into the lot. Again I could feel the heft, feel the fatigue being washed by my other accessory, but the strain was manageable. I could lift more.

“How do I find the upper limit?” I asked out loud. “I need a set of proper weights.”

“A twenty four hour gym membership might be a good idea.” Ema suggested. “You could go in early in the morning.”

“Or I could just buy my own set of weights.” I pointed out. “Not now, things are still tight. But pretty soon that won't be a problem any more...”

I walked over to the pile of metal scrap and pulled out a thick piece of rebar, rusted but not compromised. I braced myself and flexed, almost dropping the metal rod when it bent. It wasn't easy, but it wasn't pushing against my limit.

"I'm pretty sure it's brought me up past peak human." I said, tossing the bent metal back into the pile. "The question is just how far above."

I looked around the lot again, eyes locking onto the concrete jersey barriers, specifically the one that had been pushed out of the way at some point, perpendicular to the rest of them. It had two rods of rebar sticking out of the top, hooked and bent down the side. I walked over to it and with a grunt bent the rebar into perfect handles. I bent at the knee, wrapped my hands around the newly made handles and lifted. I grunted when the barrier didn't budge, straining and flexing. I stopped after a moment of effort, leaning on the concrete barrier as the strain faded away. I took a few deep breaths, put on a serious face and changed my stance. With a grunt I lifted again, straining and pulling. I could feel the sweat forming on my face, the tension in my body starting to hurt. But it moved! I could feel it shift, moving slightly in place as I pulled and pulled. With one final push, slamming against my limits to push past them the concrete block shifted again, this time slowly pulling off the ground. It was only by an inch or so, hanging for a moment before my muscles gave out and I collapsed against the concrete block.

"Holy shit... I did it!" I said excitedly, turning and plopping my ass to the ground, my back against the barrier. "I lifted it!"

Ema flew closer and began scanning me, a familiar white light tracing over me as I recovered. When the scan was done she bumped into my head, letting out a frustrated huff.

"You did lift it a few inches." She agreed, continuing harshly. "In the process you pulled half of the muscles in your body! You almost dislocated your fingers and you have microfractures all along your legs and arms!!"

As she admonished me I could feel the aches and pains slowly becoming more apparent as my excitement wore off. My legs ached and throbbed slightly and my arms felt heavy and useless. My fingers hurt to move, the joints tight and achy as I tried.

"Yeah... I can feel it now." I admitted sheepishly.

"You need to be careful. While you are obviously stronger, the cuff clearly doesn't increase your durability enough to compensate when you really exert yourself!"

"I guess that's next on the list." I mumbled to myself, tilting my head back.

"I suggest you try on your healing necklace Carson." Ema suggested. "Otherwise you're going to be in a lot of pain."

“Yeah yeah, time to prove I'm not evil.”

I flicked a card out and caught it as it returned, pushing the necklace out into my hands, regretting the flare almost instantly as my sore body objected heavily. After a moment of groaning I lifted the necklace up and slid it over my head with a bit of difficulty. Once it was around my neck I couldn't help but let out a soft sigh as the growing dull ache in my bones began to fade. \

“Ooohhhh yeah, that's the stuff.” I mumble, the ache in my muscles slowly fading as well. “I'm pretty sure it works. Unless I'm hallucinating.”

“You can feel it working?” Ema asks as she scans me again, white beam scanning over my closed eyes.

“I can feel the injuries fading, slowly but surely.” I answered. “No glow or pulse which is good. I think I could also feel it judging me when I first put it on. I passed obviously, everything is feeling better.”

“That's because they are fading.” Ema confirmed when her scan was done. “And in the same way your other cuffs work. No increase of cell division, no immune response, nothing to indicate an increased rate of healing. Your body is just being fixed.”

“That's good.” I responded before biting my lip. “I'm... Gonna have to test for more severe injuries, you know.”

“How severe?” Ema asked, her frame flicking back and forth nervously.

I flick out another card, pushing out the now quadruple stacked pocket knife. I flicked it open with one hand and held it against my palm. I took a deep breath and sliced myself open. I gasped, closing the knife to examine the cut. It went much deeper than I had intended, clearly underestimating the cutting power of the modified knife. Blood pooled and dripped down my hand, making a small puddle between my legs.

A moment passed, then another... and another. Just before I could start to panic about the necklace not working on self inflicted wounds, the cut started to itch and ache. Slowly the cut pulled together and scabbed over, all in the span of five minutes. I softly poked at it, hissing softly at the dull ache. Together me and Ema watched as the wound tightened and normalized, the scab slowly peeling off and falling to the ground, revealing smooth skin underneath. The entire ordeal was mesmerizing, the human body on fast forward. It was like watching-

“Huh. That was new.”

I was standing and in a fighting stance before my brain even finished registering the new voice. The knife was open again, held in a loose stance as I eyed up the new arrival. A dark shape sat

on the furthest jersey barrier, just covered by the shadow cast by the nearest building. Slowly he stood and stepped into the low light, revealing a man of average height and build, with dark blonde hair, dressed in some sort of lightly armored combat harness with subtle purple accents. The most interesting part was the quiver strapped to his back, the fletchings just barely visible.

“Uh... Hey, yeah it's new to me too...” I responded, slowly dropping my combat stance and folding my knife closed. “Can I help you...?”

“Clint. I work for Shield.” He admitted easily, pausing as if expecting a response.

“You uhh... can call me Maker.” I offered after a long pause. “Not ready to be on a first name basis, sorry.”

“Fair enough.” Clint responded, getting a bit closer while clearly doing his best to seem non-threatening. “We have been trying to get in contact with you for a few days now. You're surprisingly hard to track down.”

I chuckled, moving to sit back on the barrier I had been trying to move a few minutes earlier. I barely resisted the urge to show off by bending the steel rebar back into place. Clint sat down on a closer barrier, facing me.

“That doesn't surprise me.” I responded. “After what went down in Harlem I assumed it was only a matter of time before someone came looking.”

“Actually we've been looking since your little jog through Stark Expo. When someone shows up in a suit like yours we tend to take notice pretty quick.”

“Damn... I hadn't thought of that.” I admitted. “Well I appreciate the soft approach at least.”

“You didn't take anything. And besides that bastard Blonsky you really haven't hurt anyone yet.” Clint explained, scratching his cheek. “Which, by the way, I have standing orders to ask you to return his corpse.”

“It's gone.” I answered. “I destroyed it.”

“How?” He asked simply.

I pause for a moment before summoning an empty card to my hand. I twirled it in my fingers, showing off that it was a card before throwing it to him. Unsurprisingly he caught it easily, examining it closely before looking back at me. He started when I tugged the card from his fingers and back into my hand, my other hand holding the deck.

"This is called The Deck. It's my pride and joy." I bent over and grabbed a piece of trash, quickly pulling it into the card I held separate in my hand. "It's bound to my soul, meaning it won't work for anyone but me, and will cease to exist when I die."

I flick the now full card back at him and he easily catches it again. He studies it again, looking at me with a skeptical face. I tug the card back and tear it in half. Then to prove my point I stand and pull the concrete barrier into a card. He gaped for a long moment before regaining control of himself.

"That's... impressive. I've never seen anything like that." He admitted, eyes still a bit wide. "So tearing the card... destroyed the object?"

"Yes. Before you panic it can't pick up living things." I assured him, pushing my stake out chair out of its card before sitting down in it. "It's got its own limitations. Either way you can tell your boss or whoever that his corpse is well and truly destroyed."

"Good." He answered with certainty. "I may have to follow orders but letting people experiment on, even replicate that? I can't see that going well."

"Yeah, that was my thought process as well." I agreed, before continuing. "Can you tell me, you said his name was Blonsky? Was he... did he volunteer or...?"

"As far as we can tell he was a volunteer." He explained, expression softening. "A lot of details are being obscured however. But... I can tell you that in the same scenario... I would have probably done the same thing."

"Thanks. I just... didn't know if maybe he was a victim driven insane or something like that."

I shook my head slightly, breaking myself from my melancholy thoughts. I focused on Clint, watching him for a moment.

"Could you tell me where the Hulk went?" I asked.

"While you were helping first responders put out fires and pull people out of the rubble he and Betty Ross disappeared." He answered casually. "My handler says Shield knows where they went but I don't have the clearance to know where."

I smiled to myself, nodding happily. The fact that they disappeared meant Hulk probably turned back into Bruce. The fact that they disappeared together meant that they were probably together now. That was good, Bruce and the Hulk both deserve someone to help support them. After a moment I focused back on Clint.

"So, Shield is looking for me? What do they want me for?"

“Well... about thirty minutes ago it was to confiscate what we thought was a civilian with some sort of high tech suit and a few fancy arrows, maybe offer you a job if you were the one who built it.” He explained. “Then I watched you chuck around a giant rock like it was a basketball. Not to mention the healing, and the fancy card trick... I’m going to have to talk to the mission lead. This is a bit out of my wheelhouse.”

“I can imagine.” I said with a chuckle.

“Would you be willing to meet again, maybe with the head of the mission here as well?” He asked. “He will be able to make more unilateral decisions than me. I’m just the bow and arrow guy.”

“I... I think I would be okay with that.” I agreed after a moment of thinking. “Here, at around the same time?”

“That works for me.”

“Good. If that’s all, I think it’s time for me to get out of here.” I said, standing up and carding my chair. “It was good talking to you Clint. I suppose I’ll see you tomorrow.”

Clint stood and after a moment's pause put his hand out for me to shake. After another moment staring at it I shrugged and put my hand in his, giving him a firm but hopefully not bone crushing handshake. With a nod he stood back and turned, walking back into the darkness, leaving me alone. I put my hand up for Ema, who wordlessly floated to my hand, letting me card her with a flourish. I was gone a few moments after that.