

We landed about a twenty-minute drive from the bowling alley. We could have flown there, but I figured it was a bit less conspicuous to show up in a truck than to appear from nowhere. Besides, there was nothing wrong with a nice slow drive through a small town. I pushed out my normal truck, which was not only fully repaired outside and inside but also now contained some inconspicuous enhancements, just in case. We both climbed in and I pulled us out of the parking lot that the landing pad was close to.

“What happened to Big Green?” Natasha asked, buckling up as I pulled out into the road. “Do you still have it?”

“You mean the super truck?” I asked, looking over the redhead, Natasha nodding in confirmation. “That’s as good a name as anything I guess. Yeah, I still have it, but I don’t keep it in the Deck anymore. I’ve learned a lot about how the Deck works since the early days, which kind of made it obsolete. Plus I’ve gotten my hands on much better ingredients since then.”

I pulled out onto a main road, which was pretty empty all things considered. It might have been early evening on the east coast, but people were still working on the west coast.

“Like what?” Natasha asked, her eyes following buildings as we drove past.

“Well... For one, trying to make something that can do everything can make some interesting things, but specializing is how you make truly powerful creations. The super truck-”

“Big Green.”

“Big Green is better than basically anything on the market in every way, to a significant degree, but I easily built a faster car by combining just a few fast cars and fast car parts,” I explained. “Plus I learned a lot about enhancing parts themselves, rather than combining whole things together.”

We continued to chat as I drove, the topics changing naturally, both of us making comfortable small talk until I parked the car in front of the bowling alley. The parking lot was mostly empty save for a few cars along the far end, which was a good sign. I stepped out and waited for Natasha, who hooked her arm in mine.

We headed inside, looking around the building as we entered the darker interior. It was clean and well maintained, and while it was mostly empty, there were still a few people on the lanes, as well as staff at the front desk. I could hear the sounds of an arcade, which came into view from around the corner as we got to the front desk.

We talked to the front clerk, paying for the day. When they asked what size shoe we were, both Natasha and I assured him we were already wearing bowling shoes, both of us shifting our normal shoes into bowling shoes as they came around to check. After confirming that we did bring our own they let us through, thanking us and wishing us a fun time.

"It's been a while since I've been to one of these," I admitted as I started the score-counting computer up, marking our names on it. "Before my parents passed, at least."

"It's been longer for me. I remember..." She trailed off, her eyes moving as if experiencing a memory. "Well, not for a while."

Not for the first time I wondered what Natasha's history was truly like. I assumed that there would be some similarities to the comic book version, but most of it had to be different, considering how young she was here.

I put my hand on hers and gave it a gentle squeeze before I stood and looked down the alley.

"So... do you want to go first?"

We spent the next hour or so bowling, quickly finding that I had been correct. With all my enhancements it was difficult for me to bowl anything short of a strike when I was focused. Unfortunately for me, Natasha quickly realized that and went out of her way to distract me, especially toward the end of the second game and into the third.

I ended up winning our first game handily, winning the second game by a much shorter margin, and shockingly losing the third. I could also feel myself blushing, as Natasha's outfit had shifted subtly several times during the last round, and she had developed a verbal tic that had almost resulted in me putting a bowling ball through the ceiling. She couldn't help but laugh when we finally finished but apologized for her underhanded tactics by kissing my cheek.

After the third round of bowling, we headed into the arcade. I had noticed on a bathroom break that there was an entire section of about ten pinball machines, which I had always loved. At first, I was pretty sure Natasha was just humoring me, but after I challenged her to beat my high score she seemed to be enjoying herself. We took turns back and forth, though, to Natasha's frustration, she never came close to beating me. I made a mental note to add an arcade to the research center. After spending about a hundred quarters we left, hopping back into the truck and leaving for dinner.

A short drive later and we both had subs from a well-rated sub shop and a large bucket of fries to share, which we happily ate on a bench overlooking a large park.

"People watching must be a totally different thing for someone with your training," I commented after a woman walked past, walking her dog.

"Your not wrong," She said with a smile. "But it's not exactly difficult, you could learn most of the tactics we use. It's just about using your head and spotting patterns."

“What do you mean?”

“Well... like that guy, over there,” She said, nodding to a guy sitting on a distant bench, reading a book. “He is killing time, waiting for something or someone, and they are probably late”

“How could you possibly know that?”

“He keeps checking his phone and looking around,” She pointed out, and sure enough he pulled out his phone and looked at the screen, putting it away right after. “And it's been getting more and more frequent for the last fifteen minutes.”

“Huh... alright, not that complicated I guess.”

We spent the next forty minutes finishing our food and people-watching. I would make a strange and frequently outrageous guess, and Natasha would follow it up with a much more realistic assertion. I definitely didn't use some of Marvel comics' stranger backstories for a few comic book characters as creative inspiration. When we were done eating Natasha slid closer and leaned against me, her head on my shoulder. Eventually, she changed the subject from people watching.

“Alright, so what is the surprise?” She asked, pressing closer as I put my arm around her. “Not that I haven't been having fun, because this had been great.”

“Well I don't want to spoil the surprise, do I?” I asked. “We just need to go someplace I can travel us.”

“... Maybe in a few minutes.” She said after a long pause. “I find myself unwilling to get up.”

I couldn't help but chuckle as we relaxed, sitting together on the bench. We enjoyed each other company for a while longer before we finally got up and left, heading to a secluded corner where I traveled us away.

Our final destination was the same location that we had used for the flying trip, the large shooting and testing range that Tony had helped me purchase. It was in the middle of nowhere, which was handy when I used a dozen LPM's to turn it into a massive racetrack. The outside ring, which wasn't really a ring but a massive loop of asphalt that was filled with turns and angles, surrounded an internal offroad race track, with bumps, hills, and jumps. The outside track was just under a mile and a half long, while the inside track was just under a mile. From where we landed you could only see a short bit of the track, however.

“Wait... Really?” Natasha asked, peering down the track. “A racetrack? That was definitely not here last time.”

“You sure? It would be easy to miss that much asphalt, wouldn't it?” I responded teasingly, before chuckling and shaking my head. “No, I built it yesterday.”

“Ridiculous, that you can just do things like that,” Natasha said, shaking her head in disbelief. “So what will we be driving?”

“Well, during my time away I experimented a bit with cars, beyond Big Green, to see how far I could push certain aspects.” I explained, turning back and making my way to the garages.

Natasha followed behind me as I made my way to the first garage, tapping on a security panel, the large doors opening in sync. Inside were two pairs of two different cars, as well as two pairs of two different motorcycles. All of them were conceptually crafted, meaning they didn't match any normal car precisely.

“These are the results of those experiments. I've kept adding to them as I went along, so they are the best I could get without starting to push the boundaries for what could be considered a ground vehicle.”

The first pair were reminiscent of a classic Mustang, with a dash of Bugatti Veyron, because those cars were the primary bases, and where they received most of their general parts. When I was crafting the original I was focused on pure acceleration and speed, working in as many enhancements to that effect as I could find. Its paint job was white, with a thick red stripe that ran from front to back along the entire car. Dark red lighting leaked out of the seams in its body, and glowed against the ground, which I knew grew brighter, but was still somehow dark as the car moved faster. I was pretty sure the glow came from some of the more esoteric additions I added to the engine system, combined with the arc reactors I used. It had plenty of extra upgrades, including handling and durability, but overall it was a speed demon.

The second pair of cars were all about handling, and looked very similar to a modern Porsche 911, though they were a bit less back-heavy. They were painted navy blue, which faded to a lighter shade by the back base, the color shifting subtly as you walked around them. These cars were only slightly faster than Big Green, but they could weave and maneuver in ways that had required some intense problem-solving. Its tires gripped so well that I needed to add a system similar to what I used to make artificial gravity in my ships, to prevent people from getting light-headed when they turned. It could, after all, make a hairpin turn at full speed. It required precise reflexes to drive properly and was a lot to get used to.

The motorcycles were pretty self-explanatory. One was clearly a derivative of a dirt bike, with just a bit of extra bulk around the seat. It was designed to be an off-road vehicle, something that would make driving on bumpy, uneven terrain easy.

The other bike was a road bike, built to go as fast and be as maneuverable as possible. Because of its dual specialization, it was slightly slower than my enhanced muscle car and

slightly less maneuverable than my sports car, but still blew any other motorcycles of similar, normal design out of the water.

As I explained all this to Natasha, doing my best not to brag, she walked around both cars, before looking inside the muscle car. When she looked up at me I flicked out a card, a set of keys appearing halfway across the gap. She caught them easily.

“How dangerous is driving these?” She asked, looking up and down the muscle car. “I’m tougher, thanks to your tattoo, but that only goes so far...”

“They all have enhanced safety features that will keep you safe,” I assured her, walking to the other muscle car. “I tested them myself, slammed into a massive block of steel at max speed. I barely even felt it.”

That protection had only gotten better since I last tried it as well after I worked in a few dozen divine essence crystals into each vehicle. I’m pretty sure these cars would save their passengers from a meteoric reentry from space. And look good while doing it.

“...Alright.” She said, now grinning eagerly.

She quickly got into the car, and I followed suit into mine, rolling down the window, Natasha doing the same.

“Just remember, the muscle car maneuvers better than any supercar you’ve ever driven, but its speed still needs to be taken into account,” I explained. “Probably best to start slow and-”

Natasha started her car up, the engine roaring, despite the fact that it didn’t run on gas or anything for that matter. She looked over at me and winked, before hitting the accelerator and taking off, peeling out of the garage and turning onto the racetrack proper, leaving me behind in the dust.

“God damn that woman is intense,” I said, a huge smile on my face.

I started my car as well, accelerating quickly to catch up. The speed this vehicle was capable of was astounding, and both of us were driving on the race track in a blur. Having tested the track previously I could anticipate what was coming up, which let me catch up to Natasha easily by the fifth or sixth turn.

I followed behind her then, watching her expertly control a car that held more power than anything commercially available. There were three straightaways on the track, and both of us were hitting three hundred miles per hour minimum for each one. By the fourth lap, I was leaning pretty heavily on my own enhancements to keep up with her. I clicked on the communicators built into the car, so we could chat back and forth. We devolved into light-hearted taunts and teasing shortly after.

After driving around the track for a while we switched vehicles. She was grinning like mad when she climbed out of the muscle car, quickly climbing into the sports car and peeling away. She taunted me to keep up with the communicator, and I quickly followed behind. I was grinning as I pulled out to follow.

I had a feeling as we drove that this car wasn't going to last long, mostly because I was pretty sure Natasha was very much underestimating just how sharp these cars could turn. Sure enough, on the third turn she executed a perfect, textbook drifting turn... failing to account for the enhanced grip. Instead, she overturned and lost control. She plowed right into the treeline that ran along the interior of the track, smashing through the trees, the car tumbling a few times before it slammed into a large dirt berm that was part of the interior off-road track.

I chuckled and shook my head, slamming on the brakes, my car going from almost a hundred and fifty miles an hour to zero in only a dozen or so feet. I climbed out of the car and started making my way to her wreck, noticing that she was already moving around inside. As I got closer I pulled my armor around myself, using my strength to pull the twisted car apart.

"See, told you you would be fine," I said, helping her out, my armor fading out from around me.

"Uh... yeah. That was the easiest crash I've ever been in," She admitted, turning back to look at the wreck. "Damn.,."

I handed her my keys, smirking as she looked up at me.

"Get back on the horse, right?"

She smacked my chest but took the keys. I did catch a hint of a smile as we both climbed back into my car.

We spent the rest of the sunlight driving around, eventually switching to the motorcycles, which Natasha loved. I wasn't the biggest fan of them, I could never get over how close you were to the ground, despite the fact that at this point I would probably do more damage to the ground than it would do to me.

When we eventually finished, and the sun was starting to set, I took Natasha back to her apartment roof. There I invited her to Tony's unveiling. I could tell she desperately wanted to ask more questions about the event, but she held back and agreed to be my plus one.

When it was finally time to go, I leaned in and gave her a quick kiss, which she happily returned. Before long I was flying away, circling the city with a smile on my face.