

## Chapter 12 - Built for tough, like a rock

Ema and I stood on the raised platform for a full minute, appreciating our victory and looking down at our reward. Eventually though we needed to get to work.

“Okay, I’m going to go over the warehouse floor. See what’s worth taking and what’s not.” I said, turning back to Ema. “I want you to scan the office. This strikes me as a much bigger operation so I want to leave as much of the paper trail as possible to the cops, so I only want to take the cash. We saw them pay the delivery man with a wad of cash, so there has to be something here.”

“Of course.” Ema agreed with a nodding bobble before turning and heading back to the office proper.

I immediately headed down to the work floor, taking a look around before letting out a deep breath and heading to the aisles of car parts. I slowly walked through the aisle, checking out the selection. At the end of the aisle sat three massive engines on wooden pallets, two of which were all wrapped up in a plastic wrap like material. I quickly carded one of them, studying the concepts.

“Huh...I wish I knew anything about cars.” I said, mostly to myself but my earpiece carrying my words to Ema.

“You should have made a car repair ring.” Ema pointed out. “You already have the books from the chop shop.”

I stopped, my brain grinding to a halt before I let out a long groan and slapped my forehead.

“Now I feel like an idiot.” I grumbled, reaching out to the other two motors and carding them separately. “How did I not think of that?”

“It didn’t occur to me either.” Ema admitted. “Hindsight is 20/20 I suppose.”

“Well... If you find a piece of jewelry tell me. I have them all bagged together in a card.” I admitted.

“I’ll keep that in mind.”

I nodded and turned back to the aisles, walking back through, carding and uncarding random things to check out their concepts. I ended up snagging three mufflers, a set of four heavy duty

shock absorbers, and an entire two racks of tires, combining them all into four tires stacked into one card. The tires ended up being a B ranked card.

“Holy hell. I just made a set of B ranked tires.” I said to Ema, turning the card in my hand. “I guess that's what happens when you mix a half dozen different types together. Though who knows what type of car they go on now...”

Eventually I had cleaned out anything useful from the aisles, having grabbed anything that had any useful concepts. I was heading to check out the tools spread across the warehouse when Ema spoke up.

“Good news is I've found plenty of evidence that this whole operation is illegal.” She said before continuing. “Not that we weren't already pretty sure. They take cars from around here, repaint them, sometimes add parts and upgrades and ship them across the country so the car is out of the region where it's being looked for.”

“They ship them across state lines?” I asked, a little shocked. “Dumbasses! Now the FBI is gonna get involved... Ema when you're done scanning up there do a scan of the building for internal security cameras. I don't need the FBI having video recordings of me.”

Done with the parts I started going through the tools stationed all through the illegal shop. I grabbed three tool chests, all stuffed with tools, as well as a welding kit, plasma torch with accompanying tanks, and nearly a dozen different tool sets. I was planning on selling most of them, already going over plans to go to several pawnshops when I carded a vehicle diagnostic tablet. I froze as I held the card in my hand, examining the concepts.

I quickly pushed out the bag of Car repair books, carding one and holding it in my hand, a smile growing on my face as I compared the two. I quickly combine all of the books together before combining it with the diagnostic computer, my smile even bigger now. In rapid fire I begin combining all of the tools I could get and had gotten my hands on, clearing out the entire warehouse of every tool not bolted to the floor. I even grabbed the various types of painting equipment from the isolated room, running back and forth. Next I rushed back through the aisles, grabbing every part I could find, carding and combing them as I went along.

After clearing out a significant amount of what was left on the shelves after my initial pass I combined the car parts with the car repair tools, before combining the result with the vehicle diagnostic tool. I couldn't help but laugh as I examined the result.

“What is it?” Ema asked, floating next to me now.

“It's my first A ranked card!” I explained happily. “And to think it only took an entire warehouse full of car parts and tools.”

“I know, I was watching you build it.” She pointed out. “What does it do?”

“It’s a vehicle repair tablet.” I explained. “I’m pretty sure that it will repair pretty much anything given enough time. I jammed it full of so many things it shouldn’t even need parts, though making new parts out of nothing will probably slow it down a whole lot.”

“That... That is impressive. How long does it take to repair something?”

I looked up from the card and looked around the shop, walking to one of the nearby cars. Its tires were all missing, as was its hood. I pushed the device from its card, grabbing the beefy wires and connecting them to the side of the car. The plugs slid in as if there was a slot for them, despite there being no such holes. The screen of the diagnostic and repair tool blinked quickly, flashing through a long list of parts. Several parts blinked red and were tagged with “Missing”. I clicked on one of the tires, and a slowly rotating image of a tire appeared on the screen, as well as a button labeled “Begin Fabrication” with a timer of thirty minutes next to it.

“Two hours to break the laws of physics and make four tires out of nothing... That’s pretty good.”

I said with a smile, before backing out and scrolling through the list of parts needing repair, clicking and checking out a few. “The hood would take an hour to fabricate from nothing, while fixing the crack that’s in one of the engine’s pistons would only take ten minutes...”

“It appears that I can interact with it as well.” Ema said, flying down closer to the screen.

The screen changed, flickering to other parts before accessing a color change screen, flickering through different colors, patterns and styles for the car, the timer going up and down the more or less complicated her selection was. Eventually she exited the painting section.

“That is truly potent.” Ema said when she pulled back. “The depth and breadth of its function is incredible.”

“Well don’t forget, I just put an entire warehouse into making it. I don’t know much about cars but I know tools and equipment add up fast. There has got to be around like... twenty five grand in here.”

“That is true...” She said, trailing off before continuing. “Either way, I found where they keep the money.”

“Oh! Lead the way!” I said, pulling my newest toy into a card.

I followed behind her as she led me back up the stairs to the office-like area. She flew over to one of the largest cabinets and hovered next to it.

“There is four thousand seven hundred dollars in this cabinet.” She said, floating next to a beefy steel cabinet.

I make my way to it and give the handle a tug, frowning when it doesn't open.

"You didn't happen to find a key in your scans did you?" I asked. "I kinda don't want to bring this one back."

"No, but then again I wasn't actively looking for a key." She admitted. "Did you thoroughly search the man who was up here?"

"Enough to find his knife." I answered.

"What about your bolt cutter?"

I stopped trying to pull the door open with my bare hands, letting out a long sigh and thumping my head down against the cabinet.

"Dammit, I really need to get my head in the game." I admitted, mostly mumbling to myself.

I pushed out the modified bolt cutter, pushing and grinding at the seam between the doors, trying to slide the cutting end in. Eventually after some struggling I managed to slide it in and snip through the locking mechanism. The cabinet doors swung open with a soft squeak of metal. There, nestled on one of the higher shelves, was a huge stack of cash. The rest of the cabinet was filled with a few dozen boxes of ammo and more than a few guns. The bottom shelf held a series of white, relatively rectangular packages, secured by plastic wrap and duct tape.

"Holy hell! Now I'm really glad I didn't bring this home!" I exclaimed when I noticed the bottom shelf. "That's a lot of coke. They must smuggle it around as well."

I quickly card the boxes of bullets as well as the guns, happy to see that boxes of the same caliber stacked together. With a thought I call the whole deck to my hand, scanning through the cards.

"Damn, this is the fewest empty cards I've ever had." I said, pushing the deck back into a pocket. "I gotta make the habit of emptying the deck of random stuff next time I do something like this."

The last thing I do is grab the stacks of cash, taking a look around before looking back up to Ema.

"You made sure there weren't any security cameras, right?"

"Correct, there are no interior or exterior security cameras." She confirmed happily. "Are you prepared to leave?"

"I am, though there are a few last things I want to take." I admitted, walking through the now much more clear warehouse. "These guys helped people steal and get rid of cars, so it's only fair I used theirs to make myself a new ride. I desperately need a better way to get around long distances."

"Oh, that would be handy." Ema agreed.

We made our way out the front door, walking into the parking lot. It was still pretty dark out, the street lamps being the only source of nearby light. The parking lot was sparsely populated, one vehicle per worker. I snagged all seven, getting three trucks, two cars and two motorcycles. I had to pause and shake my head after the final one.

"It definitely takes effort grabbing something that large." I admitted, making my way to the front gate. "I should really find out what my absolute limit is."

"That might be a good idea, it's definitely information you should know."

I nodded my head and pushed out my bike, hopping on and leaving the warehouse behind. Ema followed alongside me, keeping up with my steady but relatively slow pace.

"Ema, do me a favor and call the police." I asked as we turned down another street. "No reason to make anything up this time, just tell them what we found. And when you're done, find us a place where I can do some experimenting. There is no way I'm riding my bike all the way back home."

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

I pushed the last motorcycle into a parking spot, the most hidden spot in this tiny tucked away lot next to an abandoned gas station. I stepped closer and hooked the diagnostic and repair tablet to the side of the motorcycle, scrolling through the damage. I tapped the repair all button and nodded at the time in the corner.

"This one will take forty eight minutes" I said to Ema, looking over my shoulder, before laying the tablet on the seat. "Shortest one yet."

I fought off a yawn and walked to the corner of the building, back to my chair, plopping down with a sigh.

"The other motorcycle was short as well." Ema pointed out from around the corner, tucked up next to an old busted security camera as she kept an eye out. "So far no one has even looked over here. Even so, I still think it's a bit silly to be doing this while it's light out.."

"I know I know." I admitted. "I just got a bit excited about finally having something to drive around. I just didn't do the math in my head."

After arriving here from the warehouse I took the chance to examine all of the vehicles I had taken. While they had all looked to be in okay condition, almost all of them had carried a concept of used and worn down. After hooking one up to the diagnostic and repair tablet it was clear why. Dozens of parts were worn, some even near failure, and though the car would run fine I could tell that combining over a half dozen “just fine” cars wouldn't have the result I was hoping for.

So, one by one I hooked each car, truck and motorcycle up to the repair tablet and let it run, slowly repairing them to perfect off the factory line perfection. The first one finished was the largest truck, a dark blue behemoth with a thick bumper guard in front, massive towing winch on the back, big spot lights on top and all the bells and whistles in the interior. When it was done I carded it and my desire to repair it was immediately validated as it had gone from C rank all the way to B. Gone were all of the negative concepts it had carried, replaced with being finely tuned and in perfect condition. None of the other cars reached B ranked, though they definitely improved.

Each vehicle required about two hours to completely repair to perfect condition, with the first motorcycle only taking about an hour. At first I had practiced my martial arts, stretched and worked out. Eventually my mental energy flagged enough that I pulled out what was quickly becoming my stake out chair and napped, Ema waking me up to switch around the repair tablet. When the sun started to come out I changed back into my normal clothes, keeping the armor on underneath.

“Have you put any thought into how you're going to combine them?” Ema asked through my earpiece.

“A bit. I'm pretty sure I'm aiming for a truck as the end result.” I said, my eyes closed as I leaned back in my chair. “Now that my money problem is more or less solved with the repair tablet we are going to start leaning pretty heavily towards preparedness. Having a truck with everything and the kitchen sink in the back will really help with that.”

It had taken a depressingly long time for me to realize that with a tool that always fixed cars and took no investment beyond the initial purchase was only a few steps away from basically printing money. Ema laughed at me when she realized I didn't immediately put that together when I had made the tablet.

“Not a bad concept I suppose.” Ema agreed. “What order are you planning?”

“I'm thinking that I combine a motorcycle and a car twice, then combine each of those with a truck, and then combine all that with big blue.” I explained. “That should make sure the truck aspect is as dominant as possible while still combining as much maneuverability and speed as possible.”

I open my eyes as I explained, taking out my phone and scrolling through some news sites. Nothing had popped up yet but I hadn't really expected anything, I was mostly just trying to kill my boredom.

"I also need to try adding the extra parts I took." I added a moment later, eyes still on my phone. "I'm pretty sure that because being parts is such a major concept with them they should just slot in as a base improvement."

"Maybe you should test that on one of the other cars." Ema suggested. "Rather than risk messing up the final product."

"That... Is a pretty good idea." I admitted before standing up with a groan.

I quickly combined one of the three mufflers I had carded with one of the cars, pushing it out into the parking lot. I walked around it, inspecting every nook and cranny before standing back

"It looks the same as far as I can tell." I said, pulling it back into a card. "Put it definitely has a quiet concept now."

"Sounds like it worked." Ema suggested.

I nodded and plopped back down into my chair, closing my eyes. I drifted off for what seemed like a moment, only to get woken up by Ema.

"I believe the last motorcycle should be done by now."

I nodded and stood, stretching myself out as I did. I couldn't help but smirk when my stretching was quite a bit more impressive than it used to be. I easily pulled the tablet off the motorcycle and carded them both, before combining both of the motorcycles with both of the cars. The result was two three wheeled cars, sleek and in mint condition thanks to the repair tablet. I carded them both again and combined them both with the two trucks, pushing them both out again to see what I had created.

They were both back to four wheeled vehicles, and they both had truck beds. They looked sleek, lower to the ground than most trucks but still higher than most cars. I carded them both and combined together, resulting in a B ranked card.

"Perfect!" I said happily before combining the final two cards together and pushing it into the lot.

The final product had definitely lost some of the original truck's massive size, gaining a sleekness that was very unique but that I really liked. It was a lighter blue than before and a bit lower to the ground, but was anything but small. The sleekness of the cars and motorcycles had transferred to the truck, the hood curved and brought to a smaller grill, the wheel wells curved and extended away from the front hood. The front grill was marked by a star, just like the star on

the back of the deck, the symbol repeated on the hood ornament. It reminded me heavily of a beefier version of the old fashioned classic truck.

“Damn.. that looks good...” I said. “Ema, come check it out.”

Ema returned a short moment later, floating around the truck and scanning it before returning to my side.

“I quite like it as well. It will be interesting to see what kind of things you can add to it in the future.”

I nodded, reaching out and carded it again, combining the engines, mufflers, the high quality tires and the shock absorbers. The rank of the card stayed the same, but I could feel its concepts morphing slightly with each addition, getting quieter, gaining power, speed, handling as well as general durability and stability. With a big smile on my face I pushed the truck back out, walking around it, taking in every angle.

“Not a bad result...” I said, looking up at Ema. “Hop in, let's go for a ride.”

“That might not be the best idea.” Ema said, floating in front of me before I could reach the driver side door. “At least not during the day.”

“Why not? Aren't you interested in how she handles?”

“I am. However, this vehicle is very noticeable.” She pointed out. “We are going to get noticed driving this around. People will be staring, maybe even taking pictures and then probably posting those pictures on social media...What happens when someone connects you to the car?”

“Oh... god dammit.” I cursed. “What if I wore the suit?”

“That's a little better, but it's still a lot of attention we don't need.”

I sagged and nodded, kicking a rock across the parking lot before putting my hand out and carding my new truck without looking.

“Alright... Find us the nearest bus stop then.”