

Roadside chat

The highway patrol car, milling hidden between roadside billboards, was new, its seats having yet to take on the shape of its regular occupants. It smelled new, of unworn carpet, plastic, and overly filtered air. There was a faint hint of gun oil from the shotgun. It was crisp and clean. Its occupants were only slightly less so, their uniforms close to pressed, but showing the signs of having been worn only for a few days. One was a lean woman with mixed features and skin the color of lightly creamed coffee. Her hair was braiding into a pair of tails that rested like snakes over either shoulder, one of which she was gnawing at absently. Her partner was broad, but trim, all heavy bone and sinew, but little meat. His skin was dark and his eyes seemed permanently exhausted. He scratched absently at his thick, but neatly trimmed beard.

“Stop chewing at them,” The man said as he stifled a yawn.

“Why?” The woman said.

The man tapped his nose without looking at her.

The woman huffed and folded her arms.

“This is cute,” He chuckled.

“What is cute?”

He gestured in her general direction. “I didn’t know you could act like this. Fretting seems so out of character for you.”

“My baby is alone right now,” She said. “How are you so calm?”

“She’s follows instructions better than most kids her age and we told her to stay put.” The man shrugged. “The room is warded from sky to soil and if it something tried, I’d know it.”

The woman nodded and let her braid fall to her chest. After a few moments, she began to play with the other.

“Do I need to take those?” He said.

“You wanna try?” She almost seemed to purr the words.

“You’d like that-” The man stopped as he jerked upright. “They’re coming.”

“Finally,” The woman said, her breath quickening.

“Calm down. I don’t want to die in here,” The man chuckled as he shifted the car into gear.

As predicted, a small box truck drove past the hidden patrol car. It was plain white with not identifying marks or labels. The man flipped on the cars lights and pulled out after, toggling his siren to ensure they were seen. After a moment, the truck pulled over and they in turn, parked behind.

The approached the driver’s side door of the truck, the roadside gravel crunching hard beneath his feet, his hand resting casually on his service pistol.

“Is there a problem officer?” A voice called from the open driver’s side window. The voice was old and gruff, like the man inside. He looked to be in his late fifties. His hair had migrated mostly from the top of his head to his face and the rest to his chest. He was

wearing a t-shirt that looked unusually thick and denim overalls. In the passenger seat was a younger woman, slim but muscular, who was dressed the same. The older man was holding out a pair of IDs, unprompted.

“Hopefully not,” The man said as he checked the IDs. Foster and Hannah. “We’ve had some issues with trucks like this in the last few weeks. We were hoping you’d let us look in the back.”

The man, Foster, grunted and opened his door. “Sure,” he said. As he stepped out of the cab, he had his cell phone out and it was clear it was already dialing. “Sorry, the Boss is to be informed of all delays.”

“That’s fine. Mind having your partner pop the back while you do that?”

“Hannah, come open the back,” Foster called out.

A second click and slam signaled his passenger getting out as well. At the back of the truck, Hannah unlocked the back and pushed up the rolling down, leaving the ground with it and landing lightly inside. The trucks contents were mundane. Stacks of books and boxes filled th truck, along with a large number of trash bags. “Did you call in?” Hannah asked.

“No signal,” Foster said as he turned to look at the man. “This certainly ain’t what your looking for, is it?”

“Just papers, documents, and books it looks like.” The man said with an approving tone. “Where you folks coming from?”

“Washington, just outside of Seattle.” Foster looked at Hannah quizzically. “What’s up?”

Hannah was turning slowly, sniffing the air around her. “I smell sulfur and frost.”

The woman’s face split into a wide toothy grin, as a swirl of multi-hued flame filled the darkness behind her teeth. She launched herself at Foster, now clawed hand raised to strike. Foster, despite his age, was ready and fast, grabbing the woman by her wrists. The difference in strength was evident as the woman began to force Foster to his knees.

Hannah leapt from the back of the truck, drawing a knife hidden inside her overalls, but was intercepted by the man. Lips moving at unnatural speed, he caught her in mid-air with a hand on her face. Hannah’s body stiffened, but her momentum continued. The pair landed against the woman’s back like they had stumbled into a wall. Hannah slashed wildly at the man, slicing open his chest, before she stumbled backwards holding her face and gurgling. Her knife slipped from her hand as she began to violently retch water. It flooded from her nose and mouth, ensuring no air could pass it. She stumbled and fell, clawing uselessly at her throat for a moment before going still.

“Sweetie, I think that knife had something on it,” The man said as he stumbled backwards, clutching the ragged wound on his chest.

“Almost done,” The woman’s voice was overlaid by the by the scream of hot metal on ice.

“What are you doing here, Demon?” Foster growled, his eyes locked with the woman’s.

“Research,” She purred, and with a sudden burst of strength, pushed him to the

ground. As his back touched the ground, she lunged and bit into his neck, the unnatural scream resonating from her mouth now joined by the hiss of searing flesh and burning blood. Then further by Foster's screams off pain. As her teeth met and she pulled away with her prize, blood gushed from Foster's neck in time with his heart. She pressed her body to his, pinning him to the ground. He fought for almost a minute before he weakened and finally slipped away.

"Dar.." The man spat from between clenched teeth.

"Oh, fuck," The woman lept off her victim and to the man's side, laying him on his back. "Give me a moment, Love." The woman leaned in and ran her tongue through his wound, her mouth now glowing a soft, ruddy red. The man's body tensed. The woman sat back and cradled the man's head as he began to sweat and twitch. "Relax. Just relax."

After a moment, the man did as commanded, his form relaxing. He continued to sweat for a few more minutes before opening his eyes and taking in a deep, ragged breath. "Some sort of paralytic. That was a dirty trick," He said, his voice hoarse.

"Well, you did drown her." The woman chuckled. "I'm surprised that worked, honestly."

"I've heard that usually the people they send to do this sort of work aren't the best of the best, but I panic-cast that one." The man touched the wound on his chest gingerly. "Damn, that hurts."

"Be gentle, My love. It can still open."

"I know. I'll fix it on the way back." The man lifted his arm and the woman took hold of it and helped him to his feet. "Grab our clothes and help me change, would you?"

The woman returned to the car and opened the trunk, which contained the bodies of two men and a large backpack. She grabbed the backpack, not bothering to close the trunk again. She helped the man change using clothes from the backpack and then changed herself. "Now what?" She asked.

"Research," The man laughed, slapping the side of the truck. "Close it up, while I undo my chronomancy."

The woman checked the rolling door, then pulled it shut, removing the lock and latching the door. The man walked to the car, his lips moving at unnatural speed. The once pristine vehicle, looking at the world to be brand new, aged in seconds. Minor warps in the metal from years on the road, chips and scraps in the paint, and dirt build up came to be as the man finished his spell. Even the fresh looking uniforms, damaged as they were in the short scuffle, became more worn and relaxed in their piles on the ground. The blood that stained the chest of the uniform the man had been wearing flaked away like dust in the wind. The woman helped the man into the driver's seat before joining him on the passenger's side and then the pair drove off, continuing down the road.