

I'm in Love With My Car

Lou sighed, wiped the sweat out her eyes, and took a swig of warm beer. *Fuckin' Freddie*, she thought, *what'd Roger ever do to you?* Lou had come back from her last delivery of the day to find a long scratch down the side of her car and a hastily (and probably drunkenly) scrawled note propped in the windshield. "Now you got an excuse to spend more time together—Fred".

Lou made a slight adjustment to the micro-sander and started smoothing out the narrow trough that Freddie had dug into Roger's chassis. From the car's interior a metallic purr travelled through the multi-point speaker system. Lou chuckled. "No worries, Rog. We'll have you fixed in no time." She could have used a nano-swarm to do this kind of work; those little mites would have smoothed the cut, filled it with a bonding agent, and even matched the existing paint job to the pico in just a few hours, but it wouldn't be nearly as satisfying for her or for Roger. The car's AI seemed to enjoy the personal attention and Lou found doing this kind of work with her own hands therapeutic. It was this, go find Freddie and use the sander on any delicate bits she could find, or get into a fight at the local pub. She decided that she'd rather spend the night in the garage than in the poke.

Last night she and Freddie had "The Fight"—the not-unexpected spectacular end to their relationship. She had seen this coming for a long time; after all, it wasn't exactly the first time this had happened. Most of her relationships ended in "The Fight". This usually involved a long list of grievances comprised of the exact things that Lou had explicitly warned them when they first got together. After a couple of weeks they always started to give her static. "I wish you could stay longer this time." "Do you have to go to the garage right now?" "Do you have someone else at your other stops?" "Maybe I can come with you..." This last one always put Lou into a cold sweat.

There was no way anybody was going to come with her. First of all, most people seemed to forget that her job did have an element of danger. Driving across the irradiated desert between cities was not a cart-ride across the city park. Foremost were the dangers of the terrain. Most of the roads between the major cities had been bombed into rubble which then eroded over time and were then warped by particle storms into rock formations and other track hazards. On top of that were roaming bands of armed and angry 'taints, cyclonic pocket storms, and even other couriers that weren't above positioning a well-placed rocket into a rival's treads.

Second, she *liked* driving alone. Just her and Roger against the world. She felt most at peace trekking across the wasteland with her metal-plated protector, confidant, and best friend. She enjoyed the time she spent with her lovers but her runs belonged to her and Roger. Once, a lover of hers actually tried to stowaway in one of Roger's storage compartments. Roger had detected Ani's heat signature and notified Lou of the intruder, but Lou was so angry that she left her in the cramped space for the first leg of the run. When she got to her first stop, Lou pulled the frightened and dazed girl out of the compartment, let her throw up, gave her the tongue-lashing of her life, and left the rad-sick idiot at the stop to find her own ride home.

Roger emitted a low warning buzz. "Oh, sorry Rog. Thinking about Ani again." A contented whirr issued from the speakers. Lou could have enhanced Roger's AI programming to include speech, but none of the voices seemed right. No techie could ever match the complexities of the "Roger voice" Lou carried

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in her head. Otherwise, the “car” was a state-of-the-art all-terrain/multi-element transport. Metal plating protected Lou from the irradiated particles that still blew across the wasted landscape outside of the municipal safe zones. “Smart” life-support systems protected her from the remaining bio-chem elements that also thrived outside the cities. Roger was also outfitted with a micro-cath/nutrient injection system and contour custom seating for those long hauls. His electric motors took energy from an array of solar paneling as well as particulate converters that turned the radiated air into useable energy. He was as self-sufficient as a vehicle could be, just like Lou. Roger didn’t need a vox. She could always count on Roger to tell her what she needed to know, to listen to her ramblings, and to leave her in the silence that she needed.

“Need a hand with that?” Lou turned and smiled at the familiar voice.

“Hey you! No, I’m almost done. But you can get me another beer. This one’s gone pissy.”

Len was one of the Company techies that ran the garage. He and Lou often went out for beers when she was in town. He was always willing to get dirty and help any of the couriers with the “mech” work. They got together once, after too many beers, but being a Company man, he knew the score and never gave Lou any grief about it. Thinking about Freddie and Ani made Lou appreciate his no-strings friendship even more.

“Bar fight or lover?” Len asked, handing Lou a cold one.

“Ex-lover.”

“The usual?”

“Yeah...but the vandalism’s new. I ought to bill him.”

“Forget it. Roger probably appreciates the attention anyway.”

Lou leaned back and rested against Roger’s side as Len pulled up a short stool.

“Funny, that’s what he said.”

Len raised an eyebrow and barked a laugh. “He shoots, he scores!”

Lou threw a greasy rag at him and took a long pull off the beer.

“You know, wanting to take a swing at me I can understand. But Roger? He wouldn’t hurt nobody. He could’ve triggered the electrodes and fried that suit within an inch of his life. But Rog just took it. Fred didn’t need to do that.”

“Jealousy is an ugly thing. Besides, he knew that taking a swing at you wouldn’t have ended well. He’s blowing off steam.”

Lou curled her knees up to her chest. “That’s what I don’t get. The same thing happens every damn time. It’s not like I lie to them. If anything, I’m brutally honest about myself.”

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Len gave her a look of mock-surprise which resulted in Lou flipping him off before continuing.

"Seriously. I'm a courier. I love it and I don't stick around any longer than I need to get the next parcel. And I tell them all this before things get started. Then when it's over, they act all shocked, like what I said didn't apply to them."

"Like they would be one to finally tame the great Tallulah Jane Henry."

"Exactly. Christ, I'm not out to hurt anybody, but I got needs just like anybody else."

Len nodded. "Sure. And they got needs too. Maybe what you need is a luber instead of a friend?"

Lou made a face. "Waste of money and time. Those skanks aren't any fun...all business and show and no taste. I got equipment for that kind of thing."

"Then it's not just sex but it's companionship you're after. A connection, even it's minimal. I get it."

"Which is why you're probably the only man that I've slept with that I haven't also drop-kicked."

Len raised his beer in a mock salute. Finishing his beer, he leaned forward on his stool. "Seriously, though. Like you said, this always happens. You're not looking just for a lay, but you're *not* looking for love. The thing is, most people who aren't just looking for sex generally *are* looking for love. It's rare and everybody's looking and looking hard for it. Your problem is that you've got too much self-respect to go to a whore and you've already got the love. So what do you have to offer these people?" He rose to fetch more beer from the fridge at the back of the garage.

"What the hell do you mean 'I've already got the love'? Christ, Len. What's wrong for looking for a friend who also wants to have some fun now and again?"

Len handed her another beer and settled down on the stool again. "I got no beef with that, in theory. And most of the time the people you hook up with don't either. At first. But then you make that connection and people want more. Need more. I'm just saying I think you get those needs met already so you can't meet people in the middle. "

"And from where, oh Zen master of the heart, do I get these needs? My career?"

Len tilted his head side-to-side. "Kind of. But why do you think Fred keyed Roger?"

Lou turned and looked at the sanded chassis. "A symbol of my career? Because I have mean left hook?"

Len shrugged. "Or he attacked the car because he's jealous of the car. "

"Roger. You're saying I get my needs for love met by Roger. That's nuts."

"Don't worry, I don't think it's so nuts. "

Lou raised her raised her eyebrows skeptically.

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"Hear me out. I'll bet one of the things that 'always' happens is they start complaining about how much time you spend in the garage, right."

Lou nodded. "Yeah, but I have to. I've got to keep Roger in top shape to survive out there. I can't have him go glitchy on the job. Neither of us would make it otherwise."

"I totally understand. But it keeps you away from them and makes them jealous, right? Your time is short between runs and that makes *their* time even shorter. But you have to take care of Roger. Even though I bet that sometimes you just come in here, have a beer, and hang out to get out of the pressure cooker, am I right?"

Lou shrugged and nodded ruefully. "Ok, I'll give you that. Sometimes I don't *have* to come but I *need* to."

"Right. Now, here's my theory and it's worth exactly what you paid for it. A loving relationship is when two people take care of each other. They have to in order to make it in this world. They not only have to but *want to*. But it all comes down to taking care of each other, giving each other what's needed."

Len finished off his beer, rose, and tossed the empty bottles in a bin. "If what you and Roger do isn't love, then my pet theory is shot all to hell. And I'll owe you a beer next time you come through."

As Len walked out, Lou turned back to Roger, brow furrowed as she readjusted the micro-sander. Roger whistled a question at her. Lou smiled and patted his plating. "Don't worry, Rog. I'll take care of you. You and me against the world, right?"