

## The Albatross

I was born forever ago on The Metal, only it wasn't known as The Metal back then. We were just Satellite AU, a housing fixture out on the far reaches of colonized space. The Courts said that our placement was going to be a tether station some day, that it was going to hold a series of planets in orbit with gravimetrics and magnetization or some scrawl that I didn't understand and still don't. For the longest time, we were ourselves, billions strong on AU. We thought The Courts had forgotten about us, that it'd just plain slipped, so we made ourselves an island. Everyone here was here because they were fucked up or poor or just had no place else to go, so we played pretend, like we had what we wanted, like living here was our choice, and for a while, it worked. Forever's a long time... Everything comes around. Maybe the tether file had been sealed or pushed away for a thousand cycles, but it dropped out of our minds until the construction fleet showed up one day, replacing living quarters with spires and towers, connecting rods and tubes. That was forever ago, too. I don't remember how long it's been since we went from being AU to being just The Metal.

'Born' isn't really what they call it when you pop out on a satellite. The Uppers call it 'spawning.' People spawn in gutters and people spawn on the streets. Someone is *born* in a birthing wing. My progs didn't have the luxury or credits for something like that. Just gushed me out wherever. They loved me until my feature freeze – I chose twenty, because I didn't ever want to look different. They loved me until they realized the only thing they loved more than me was how much they hated each other, taking off to opposite ends of civilized space, leaving me with a couple of credits and a job reference.

Everyone on The Metal dreams of taking a shuttle and landing a job up on Clarion or Jupiter or Salerion. That's what they call 'making it' these days. We make just enough credits doing whatever to keep ourselves steeped in drink and pills, never enough to get out like they say. Giddy and I, we lived reckless and stupid. I've been put back together more times than I can count and Giddy keeps coming up with new ways to try and bring us closer to Death, even though Death is a shitty shipman myth. The shipmen say it's when you just turn off. The shipmen say it used to be like sleep, something people did forever ago, before the bots in the blood and the immuno and the freeze-in, before the upgrades and shift-focus. They say it's like getting into a cryo-tube, only you don't get to pick a memory block to watch. It's just shutting down.

Giddy and I made it up to Clarion one time – I came into a couple of credits when I came above quota every day at the rivet-center, so we hopped a bus and pretended like we belonged in the lines of hovers and the natural grass. Everyone could tell we didn't – the pallor of our skin, the way

we talked, how easily we broiled in the light of Ulysses. Fuck em'. They didn't know. They had everything. They looked down on The Metal like it was an abomination. A blight. We held those three planets in hard orbit and they treated us like a nuisance. They have everything they've ever wanted, yearned for nothing, and because they didn't know struggle, they made one up. They made us villains.

To them, we were a foist, a puppet show. They could change their Idents anytime they wanted, Court approved, because they had the credits. They could change their history and their appearance and they could buy memory implants and they could become new people. Our faces on The Metal don't look right, because we can't afford any of that shit proper. We've got disgraced cutters who are so strung out on Euphoria that they barely hold a scalpel straight, we've got old Meds who wouldn't even be able to diagnose a laser burn, we've got the dregs of the dregs. We change ourselves as much as we can, we mimic what we can't have. They mock us. They see us as a pile of disease and filth and getting wrecked and fucking. So what if we are. At least our skin isn't bronze.

When Giddy and I visited, we rode up to the top of Galileo Spire. Tallest sky-finger on Clarion, with an atmo-deck for star watching and bullshit of the sort that the fucks on The Uppers liked to do because they could. We lived in shadows and runoff, in the puddles and piles of their atmospheric compressors, ankle deep in shit-water half the time because their engineers couldn't be bothered to fix the tanks right. We went up to the spire, and he had me tie a shower hose to his waist.

"Watch this," he said, grinning big and stupid, his face crooked and scarred.

He reached down, and powered off his boots, and floated careless and free into the sky. He floated like that, umbilical and attached to the railing for a couple of minutes before sending a transmiss into my cheek comm, asking me to pull him down.

I pressed down on his shoulders while he reengaged.

"I've always wanted to do that," he said.

"Did it hurt?"

"Being in space? Nah. Cold enough. Couldn't breathe, but after a minute, you get used to it. One of these days," he paused, "I'm going to do it for real. Anywhere is better than here. Even if all I do is float until the snap-back."

I met Marla through Giddy, forever ago. Back then, my face was still on straight. I hadn't had much change besides my eye colors and I ran with pneumonia for a while. I had my vocal chords tweaked. Nothing to fuck up my glamour too bad. Marla was still roofing with her progs. They spawned her on The Metal when it was The Metal, and she found Giddy when he was busking, trying to sing in The Center. Giddy then didn't look like Giddy now. Ever since she ghosted, he's been obsessive about changing the way he is. We all scan him, too, even though it's an asshole move. The general rule is, don't scan. That's how to get the truth, and no one wants that. The illusion of freedom. The illusion that we're like Them is too important. It's the rest of ever. Try and be happy.

Marla liked me because my face was on straight and because I didn't give half a shit about anything she said. She'd tag with Giddy when we'd do vapor runs or head to the pill factory; after a while, I could count on seeing her outside of the rivet-center when I'd get off, and she'd heel with me until we hit La'alo for some huff, where I'd go to block my brain from being such a piece of shit.

After a while, I could count on seeing her outside of La'alo, waiting for me to finish getting fucked up so she could keep walking with me, back to my flop, and we'd say nothing. Just walking in noise and noise and noise. I'd keep my hands thrust in my pockets, my face buried in some scarf, and she'd walk just like me.

After a while, I could count on seeing her outside of my flop, and then inside my flop, and then, without warning, I loved her. I hate that it happened. I promised it never would. The way my progs took off, the way The Metal existed, I swore that nothing would click like that. Nothing was beautiful. Except Marla.

She never went to the cutter either. Mainly, she changed her hair color, her eye color if she was feeling it. Her hair came down to her shoulders and her chin was flat at the bottom, and her nose was wide and her mouth was small, and nothing about her was beautiful but everything. She looked at me like I was the answer to everything.

She loved hearing stories about AU, about how things used to be, forever ago. She loved hearing about my progs and the shit they'd throw at each other. To her, I existed as a living tapestry, a breathing history of our world as it was. We disappeared into each other on whatever, whenever, and we listened to my landlord fight with the guy who lived above me.

I was born forever ago on The Metal, but when I was with Marla, everything felt *new*.

I wanted us to last, but forever is forever, and who the fuck has time for that.

Gradual breakdown. Like the snap-back, everything comes to an end one day or another, but this came slow. Everything felt new, sure. After a while, we both realized that nothing really was. Just like life on The Metal, it was an illusion. A glamour. The cracks spread out until the entire thing shattered.

"I'm thinking about heading to Clarion," she told me one day, our fingers interlaced. I just had my cheekbones cut up for the first time. Never liked them anyway.

"What for?"

"Work. Marco says there's an opening at one of the spires for processing. Says the pay is shit but they'll house me and feed me. After a few cycles, they'll probably let me shift around. Wouldn't that be a kick? And then we'd be able to buy new faces and fuck like we'd never met before. That'd be pretty."

"What about here?"

"What *about* here? Do you trust me?"

I did the one thing I shouldn't. I froze.

She cleared her shit out of my flop and said goodbye to her progs, took the next shuttle out. I gave her some starting cash and wish of good luck, and with that, she took off. I watched the afterburn of the shuttle disappear, the glow turning to vapor turning to mist turning to the regular shit at Near Station, and I sat down on the bench, thinking about how much of her infinite life she had wasted on me.

We kept in touch for a while, a few cycles, anyway, sending each other daily comms about what happened in our days, but it didn't take long for me to start repeating. Rivet center, La'lao, flop, some Giddy here, some Caldo there, some Marco in between, and she'd talk about processing, and then about a new position, and another. Her vids dressed her in clothes that fit, tailored to her shape, the shape that I knew so well, pressed tight against her skin and my fingers, and then the comms stopped being daily or weekly or even by cycle.

By and large, I trained myself to forget about her. About the way that she made me feel. About the way she made things seem. I promised myself that I'd stop thinking about her. I told myself that nothing was beautiful, that nothing ever was beautiful.

Except Marla.

In the end, above all else, it was never anything but her.

I see it now. As if I hadn't seen it then.

When I met her for the first time, I tried to deny it. She changed it. She changed me.

I tried to look her up on Clarion. Couldn't. Didn't go by 'Marla' anymore. Her progs said that she upgraded, got a new Ident, that they lost her. Giddy says she spaced. Marco says that she's back on The Metal with a new face. Caldo says she shuttled off to a different satellite, a whole new world with whole new problems. Her bosses wouldn't tell me shit. The right call, anyway. For a few cycles, I'd think about her, where she lived, what she looked like, who she was with. I don't know if she thinks it, or if she ever felt this strongly, but I have seen Death. It came to her and me, to us both. It killed the one thing that made this place free, and I wore it around my neck every day. It turned my home into a prison.

My face became crooked from all the cutting, and my eyes crossed and got fixed, La'alo shut down and reopened and shut down and reopened and life was a repeating opera. The same steps, the same beats, nothing ever changed.

I'm tired.

I'm so tired.

The shipmen talk about sleep, and I think I finally know what they mean, to need to disappear from life for an instant.

So I stand on the Galileo Spire, and I stare up at the stars. I think that Marla is somewhere on Clarion with me, and I think that she's back on The Metal with the rest, and I think that maybe, just maybe, she's somewhere up there.

I reach down, and sigh. I turn the dial on my boots, one hand on the railing. I can feel myself drift upwards. I can feel it, and I can feel my fist wrapped around the metal bar, the only thing separating me from an eternity above, my own tensile strength.

I let go. I have to. I never noticed the cycle until it was broken, but I saw it when it came back again, and I could not tolerate it.

The wind rushes past me for a few more seconds until there is no more wind. My lungs ache when there is no more air.

I lost her, and as I float out, just a piece of shit from The Metal, formerly from Satellite AU, I think about what Giddy said. Anywhere is better than here.

Even after I drift pass Ulysses into the cold, she keeps me warm.

I want to see Marla again.

The universe is infinite, and so am I.

On a long enough timeline, I'd say my odds are pretty good.

I mean, forever is a long time... and everything comes around.