

Encounter: Albie, My Love
Mikala Ash

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Albie, My Love

"Rise and shine, my sweet darling."

Albie's chirpy voice roused me from a deep, deep sleep.

"Up and at 'em"

"Yeah, yeah," I mumbled and buried my face into the pillow, heady with his scent. "Five more minutes."

We replayed this little charade every morning, and have done for five years now. I could have stayed in bed for the day, but I never did. I was not a lazy bones, there was just too much work to do.

I flashed back to the orgasm that had sent me off to sleep, and a memory-wave washed over my body, submerging me beneath a warm bath of love. My inner thighs were still sticky from that climax, the biggest in recent memory, and I smiled at the vivid memory of the sweet nothings Albie had uttered just before I fell over the edge.

Eventually I threw off the sheet and hauled myself out of our bunk. The air smelt of sweat and sex -- the scrubbers needed cleaning again, and I made a mental note to do so before I went to bed -- though the hot stale air served to keep me eternally horny, a state I very much enjoyed.

I pushed off and glided over to the cubicle we misnamed a bathroom, and gave myself a whore's bath, the best you can do in zero-G and in the cramped confines of our ship.

Albie was outside, in the hold, suited up against the harsh vacuum in which our tiny vessel swam.

I suited up and joined him, giving his helmet a gentle pat as I floated past. "Big day," I said and opened the outer hatch to the darkness of the backside of our little world.

We'd won this little asteroid in the Minor Planet Lottery of '07, an expression of rank desperation on our part -- we bet everything we owned except the ship on ten tickets -- and the gods had smiled. She was a little gem of a Class M asteroid, chock-a-block full of nickel, platinum, cobalt, rhodium and even gold.

But every silver lining has a cloud, and hers was a highly eccentric orbit that took her from the chilly Oort Cloud at the edge of the solar system, to the baking hot space inside the orbit of Mercury. That's where we were now, the ship automatically keeping station in the shadow, using Albie's Rock (that's what he called it, since it had been his idea to sink everything into the lottery) as a ten kilometer wide shield while we mined our fortune from its ancient surface.

Admittedly her orbit made extracting her riches difficult, but I had a plan, which would, in a few years, make it so much easier. I jetted my way across the jagged surface of the mass driver. During the night the little furnace mill, situated on the terminator and fueled by sunlight as Albie's Rock slowly rotated, had burned off the worthless slag and delivered a hundred kilo ingot of semi-pure metal ready for launch.

I ran the sensor over it. "Whooo boy!" I hooted into my helmet mic. "Oh, this is a beauty. A hundred grandaroo at least!" I imagined the broad grin on Albie's face. I'd checked the rates before I'd climbed into bed for a night of sex, and at a one-oh-seven standard dollars per gram, this little package would net us a tidy little sum -- enough to pay the interest we owed on the ship at least. Albie had always been a gambler at heart -- he sure took a gamble marrying me -- and the idea that this bet had come good... well, it warmed my heart to think of him winning after all these years.

I manhandled the ingot over to the mass driver's cradle and centered it. I attached the ID transponder which would let the company receivers at Station One, located at Earth's leading Lagrange Point, identify it as ours, and credit our

account once the ingot was caught and melted down to be separated into its component metals.

I checked the mass driver data screen and confirmed its calculations. The computer took a star fix, determined our position relative to the Sun and Earth, and then, using my little adjustments, timed the launch precisely so that the recoil -- Newton's second law in practice -- for every action there is a reaction -- would alter the orbit of Albie's Rock a tiny, tiny bit, so that eventually, after a couple of years of ten daily launches, circularize the orbit, bringing it closer to Earth so I will be able to sell it to the company at an inflated price. The company values convenience just as it does metal.

I flicked the Launch Initiation switch and pushed myself away. "Get ready, Albie," I said. "Launch in ten seconds."

I licked my lips in breathless anticipation as the launcher counted down and silently the ingot, sitting on its cradle, accelerated away along the magnetic rails. A kilometer later the cradle stopped suddenly and the ingot, with the little transponder blinking red, sailed off into the blackness of space.

The mass launcher's radar confirmed that the ingot was on course. It automatically sent the course data to the company so they could track it all the way home.

"Okay, I'm coming back for breakfast, then I have to fix that sensor on the furnace. Can't have that breaking down, now can we?"

Albie was waiting for me in the hold, with that damn faulty welding unit in his hand. I scowled at him and went past without a word.

The closed-loop synthesizer was acting up again, so breakfast was tasteless. I decided the mill furnace was more important so I went back out to fix it.

"I wish you hadn't started with that fucking welder," I chided Albie as I passed him. As usual he didn't respond. It was a touchy point with me.

It proved to be a long, long day, but we launched a dozen ingots, I fixed the sensor, and before dinner, I fixed the closed-cycle synthesizer, so my recycled dinner actually tasted like chicken -- but doesn't everything?

While I ate I reflected on our lives out here. It was lonely, for sure, and being this close to the sun receiving regular news broadcasts from Earth or Venus was out of the question, so we were cut off completely, but the routine, the constant necessity for maintenance and repair kept me busy, and tired.

Nighttime was best, after the work was done. I always looked forward to settling in, soft music playing, gentle fingers on my clit, with the welcome stink of sex filling the cabin.

"Oh, Albie," I gasped as another climax scudded through my exhausted body and I sank into welcoming arms of sleep.

Not tonight though. Troubling dreams killed my usual deep exhausted sleep. Nightmares of the worst kind, surreal images which were actual memories, and a black hole of despair exploded out of my chest, shattering my heart into a million little pieces, and each little piece as black and empty as space.

"Gotta fix that fucking welder," Albie was saying, over and over and over again.

My pathetic reply, "Sorry sweetheart, I didn't get to it yesterday."

"Lazy bones," he replied, kissing me on the lips. "I'll do it."

Over and over again, a snatch of good natured banter that drilled incessantly through my cortex like a knife.

Lazy bones... lazy bones... lazy bones...

"Rise and shine, my sweet darling."

Albie's recorded chirpiness didn't motivate me like it usually did.

"Up and at 'em"

It was the second anniversary of the accident, and I didn't want to open my eyes and see Albie waiting for me in the hold. I had to go out there. There was work to do, but today I just didn't want to go outside.

I don't remember suiting up and opening the hatch and joining my love in the hold. I was just suddenly floating before him. The opaque visor of his helmet was lowered as it always was when he was welding. It had been like that for two years. A faulty relay, a power surge and the welder had flash fused Albie's lower half to the deck. He'd died instantly in a silent blast of heat and light.

Lazy bones... lazy bones... lazy bones...

I flipped up the visor and gazed inside.

"Albie, my love," I said to his empty eyes. "I can't stay long... there's too much work to do..."

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