

## Halcyon Days

*“my heart is like a rainbow shell  
that paddles in a halcyon sea;  
my heart is gladder than all these  
because my love is come to me.”*

- Christina Rossetti, *A Birthday*

They say: human beings are just the universe in miniature.

Think about it.

The wiring of their brains mimics the pulse of the stars, a crystalline map, communicating through tenuous connections of dark matter.

The colours of their irises, quietly mixing, are photographically no different from clouds of nebulae. Entire galaxies contained in their eyes.

Carbon, hydrogen, nitrogen, oxygen, sulfur – they are sublimated and sublime at once.

They are the universe, condensed into matter.

And when they die, they return to stardust. The inevitable heat death of the universe. It's beautiful, in a way.

But I didn't always think so.

~

Did you know that when two objects composed of the same metals find each other in space, they form permanent, unbreakable bonds? I didn't. I found out the hard way.

I met Astrid completely by accident. I had been roving past the Proxima Centauri sub-station, in search of a fuel stop. My next job was supposed to take me to the surface of Mars, so I'd made a quick stop-gap on Proxima to refuel – but that all changed the moment I saw her.

She was standing outside the pump station when I pulled in, in a candy-apple red space-suit, her head encased in a smooth, transparent sphere. I could see that underneath, she had platinum-white hair, cut short, bright brown eyes, and she was chewing a wad of gum, blowing elastic pink bubbles and popping them with her tongue.

She glanced up when I stepped out of my craft, and her eyes immediately bee lined for my leather boots. *Space cowboy*, she was probably thinking. *Bandit*. Far from it. The truth is, I'd looted them from the unconscious body of an actual bandit, who'd been poaching in unsanctioned space at the edge of Uranus. He was a soft target – hardly even worth the amethyst payout from the syndicate.

I was a freelance bounty hunter, working for Nova, the biggest organized crime syndicate in the galaxy. A bunch of glorified diamond-smugglers, that's what they were to me, but they paid okay, and in this economy, you took what you could get and you ran with it.

The fuel station store-front was composed of so much neon signage that it physically seared my eyes to look at it. My species, Galileans, have always had sensitivity to light, and this store was one gigantic lens flare. But I braved it, eyes watering as I groped blindly for the fuel pump and slotted it into the tank.

There was music playing in the store behind me – a catchy disco-pop song that made my arm jiggle without my consent. I fumbled the handle of the gas pump and it came loose from the tank, spitting droplets of jet fuel everywhere. It glistened against the tarmac, catching the neon lights and reflecting them in vaporwaves of pink and teal.

“Ouch!”

I had bent over to mop up the spill and cracked my skull against hard plastic. Reeling back, I squinted to see the girl in the red suit, kneeling on the tarmac with an oil rag in her hand, cleaning up my mess. She glanced up and gave me an apologetic grin, shaking her head.

“It's volatile, this stuff,” she remarked cheerily, standing up and tossing the soiled rag back into its bucket. “It'll combust if you so much as look at it the wrong way.”

I nodded dumbly, noticing the way the neon bounced off her helmet, a teal glow cast over her skin beneath the plastic casing. She was in primary colours, I thought – red and blue. An emergency, flashing a warning right in front of me. I didn't pay attention. If I had, maybe things would have been different.

As it was, I tried to act casual, leaning back against the pump meter, obscuring the screen with the gem total. “Do you, uh, work here?” I asked, crossing one boot over the other, then quickly uncrossing as I almost overbalanced. She didn't notice, leaning past me to return the fuel pump to its holster – I caught a whiff of what I thought might be cherries, a fruit I hadn't tasted in forever. She turned back to me, dark eyes glinting with amusement.

“Nope. My brother does, though.” Snapping her gum, she gestured towards the window of the fuel station, and I turned, catching a glimpse of a scowling, beefy guy with a bandanna and a face full of piercings, before I hastily looked away. “He’s a delinquent, and dumb as rocks, so I’m helping out for the day. Someone has to make sure he doesn’t get himself killed.”

“Cool. Well. I should, ah, pay for this, right? He doesn’t look like the type to let me off with a drive-by.” I chuckled nervously, digging through my pockets for change. I came up with a handful of opals instead – leftovers from my last paycheck.

The girl’s eyes popped, and her demeanour shifted – she seized my hand and shoved it roughly back down by my side, crowding me up against the fuel meter.

“Are you insane, flashing those around here?” she hissed, her eyes enormous under her helmet. “The guys my brother runs with – they see those, they’ll have your nuts up in your throat before you can say ‘ballsack.’”

“I’m not human, in case you hadn’t noticed – I don’t *have* nuts, so I’m not worried,” I informed her, trying to side-step around and make it into the station. “And what else am I supposed to pay with? Everywhere else uses this currency.”

“Not Proxima,” the girl said exasperatedly, blocking me with her arm before I could sidle round her. “You pay with zirconium chips or not at all. And you *never* let anyone know you have that kind of coin.” Her eyes panned over me, taking in my livid green, speckled skin, my liquid black eyes, and landing on the hand holding the opals. “Jeez, where’d you blow in from – Pluto?” She said it like it was synonymous with *Stupid Town*.

“Callisto, actually,” I replied, insulted, finally managing to dodge around her outstretched arm and starting to walk away.

“Fair enough,” she said to my retreating back, “typical Galilean.”

“What’s that supposed to mean?” I snapped, wheeling around, almost tripping over in my oversize boots.

“You know,” she said, waving a red glove nonchalantly, “prissy, naive, stargazer-type, hoarding jewels like dragons, and totally out of touch with reality.” She looked me up and down, almost flirtatiously. “Haven’t you *heard* of the Nova syndicate? They’d eat an innocent thing like you alive.”

“Really?” I tilted my head in what I hoped was an off-the-cuff way. “What if I told you I had not only *heard* of Nova, but that I was involved with them?” I raised my eyebrows for emphasis. “Intimately.”

A smile played at the corners of her mouth, though she tried to suppress it. “I’d say you were full of shit.”

I smirked. “I’m gonna go in and pay for this. While I’m transacting with your charming brother, feel free to peek at my flight logs. Satisfy your curiosity.” I strode away, into the fuel station, picking up a carton of black milk before paying at the counter. I paid with zirconium. I’m not that reckless.

When I came back to my shuttle, the astro-girl was standing at the wing, arms folded, her lips pressed in a thin line.

“So,” she started.

“So,” I parroted.

“So,” she said, pressing the button to lower the ramp. “What are we waiting for?”

~

Astrid was a tough girl. Tough to get to know and even tougher to love. We had a whirlwind romance, and I cherished her more than any jewel. She was hard in all the places I was soft, unyielding where I was malleable. She was a manic pixie in the worst way, Tinkerbell on ecstasy – she lived to get into trouble, and she knew *exactly* how to make me melt.

“Did you know that the destination planet 55 Cancri e is literally *made* of diamonds?” she said one day, closing the book she was reading with a snap and propping her moon-boots up on the dashboard. I was in the pilot seat, steering us through a particularly chunky asteroid belt, enroute to a gig just outside of Jupiter’s outermost ring.

“Yeah?” I said distractedly, trying to program a new flight path and take a sip of milk at the same time, all the while in constant turbulence. It wasn’t going well.

“Yeah. We should check it out. It’s illegal to mine, obviously, but it has a few days a year that are completely unmonitored. If we can time it right with the moon cycle, we could get planetside and back off before anyone sees us. Just a couple of dumb tourists, stealing rocks.”

I wiped the milk moustache off my upper lip and cast a glance down at my rickety dashboard, missing buttons, and stained flight notes. “We’d be a whole lot richer.”

“Damn straight,” she agreed. “No more repo jobs, no more bounties. Just you and me, baby. And a couple of diamonds.”

“I don’t know.” I fiddled with the flux lever. “It’s kind of against my alignment.” She rolled her eyes and huffed a breath, making her fringe flutter.

“Seriously? Lifting a few gems from a planet that’s constantly crapping them out is out of *alignment* for you?”

“Bounty hunter, remember?” I pointed at myself. “I *catch* folks like the ones you’re describing. Nova wouldn’t appreciate one of their own going rogue. And I think they’d be slightly suspicious if I up and quit and start jetting round the multiverse in the lap of luxury. They’ve never exactly paid me well.”

“Boring.” She exaggerated a yawn and opened the book again, flipping through a few pages before she turned back to me, a mischievous grin on her face. “What about a trade?”

I groaned. “What?”

“A trade. You take me to Cancri e, just to look around...” she paused, wiggling her eyebrows, “and we can do that thing you like so much.”

“Damn it.”

~

“This has been the worst trade deal in the history of trade deals, maybe ever,” I grumbled from behind dark sunglasses as we skimmed across the surface of Cancri e in a rented hovercraft. Astrid’s book wasn’t lying - in the daylight, the planet was scintillating, its entire atmosphere composed of diamond. The ground was diamond, the rocks were diamond, even the waterfalls that cascaded over the diamond cliffs were in the process of crystallizing into rock, each facet catching the sun and refracting it into arcing rainbows.

I never thought I could get sick of rainbows, but it was happening. My eyes were weeping, even behind the sunglasses, not used to taking in this much light at once.

“Please,” Astrid scoffed beside me. “My hands are still cramping from that last round. You’re insatiable. You got the better end of the deal.”

“That’s not exactly accurate, since you made me lose to you nine times,” I countered acidly.

“Not all of us spent our teenage years spamming pinball games on Neptune instead of whacking off. Space Invaders is fucking hard. I would’ve quit in the first five minutes if you hadn’t let me win.’ She elbowed me in the ribs, and I nearly doubled over, laughing in spite of myself.

“Stop the shuttle,” Astrid shouted suddenly, and I braked hard, tailspinning in empty air. “Look!”

I followed her eyes to a small, crystallized rock-pool next to the cliff. Chips of diamond were flaking off the surface, like a rime of ice, mesmerizing in the light.

“We can’t.” I put the hovercraft in gear. ‘It’s illegal.’ Astrid put her glove over my hand, shifting the clutch.

“Babe, we absolutely can,” she said, and she kissed me on the cheek, putting on her helmet. “We’re stupid tourists. We don’t know the rules. Right?”

“Christ, Astrid,” I sighed, but I lowered the craft into landing mode. I could never refuse her. “Go nuts.”

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Later, when we’d jettisoned Cancri e’s orbit and were flung out into space, Astrid showed me her haul. Five perfect baby diamonds, cupped in her palms like miniature stars.

“Wow,” I breathed, picking up one and turning it over, admiring its symmetry. “Do you know what one single diamond is worth in the galactic trade?”

“More than we could ever dream of,” she said excitedly. “What do you wanna do with them?”

“We can’t get a new ship – nothing that’ll make the syndicate look too closely,” I mused. “But maybe we could get a place. It’d have to be far away, and we couldn’t live there all the time – but we could get a decent-sized dome on Jupiter, or somewhere near a gravity well.” I placed the diamond back in her hand. “Somewhere with time dilation, so we can kick back there for a year and not miss a thing.”

She looked at me for a long moment, her eyes star-dusted. Then she swooped in and kissed me, her lips chapped and sweet against mine. ‘I love you, space cowboy,’ she told me seriously.

“I love you too, you weirdo,” I said, ruffling her hair and smiling, even though my insides were twisting themselves into balloon animals.

~

Two weeks after our Bonnie-and-Clyde diamond-heist, I was loitering in the parking lot of the Proxima Centauri petrol station, feeling like we'd come full circle.

We'd tried to fly under the radar as much as possible – caught crooks for the syndicate, collected bounties and kept our heads down, a crime-fighting duo – and we'd finally been able to visit Venus a few days earlier, choosing a dome right under the constellation of Virgo, our lode star.

We still had four of the diamonds left, and I was thinking about using one of them to buy a ring – I'd never been the rush-into-marriage type, but Astrid was it for me. We were made for each other. Two strange kids, made up of the same elements.

We were back on Proxima to meet with Astrid's brother. She was doing a deal – two of the diamonds for, as she described it, a 'fuck-ton' of lesser jewels – opals, rubies, quartz, things that would arouse less suspicion.

We were really criminals now, Astrid money-laundering in the fuel station, while I waited in the shuttle. I was supposed to stay on board until she'd finished negotiations, but I desperately needed to piss. I jumped down from my craft, the tarmac squishy under my feet after hours in space. I walked into the store, shielding my eyes against the strobing pink and blue lights - and slipped on the floor.

There was blood, gouts of it. Pooled on the linoleum, gleaming in the neon. Sticky footprints tracked away along the milk aisle, shattered glass all over the floor from the tipped-over rack of soda bottles. My heart stuttered to life, and I picked my way over the shards, following in her footsteps. A trap-pop song was playing, a panicked voice rapping over an electronic beat as I swung open the door to the storage room at the back of the store, where the bloody footprints ended in a half-moon.

I smelt sour cherries, and if I'd had nuts, they would have been all the way up in my throat, choking me.

I saw what was inside, and I vomited up my black milk breakfast.

Brain goo blown out all over the store-room floor. Blood oozing from Astrid's brother's ears and pooling beside where he was spread-eagled, the side of his head smashed in, insides out, like a watermelon dropped from a great height. In one lifeless hand, he held a small cap-gun.

Astrid was crouching beside him, two fingers circling the handle of an aluminium baseball bat. Its metal surface was smeared with blood.

She looked up, startled, and dropped the bat with a clang. It rolled away stickily across the floor, blood droplets shining like oil. All I could do was stare.

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Astrid's eyes were dead as we rocketed out of Proxima's orbit, klaxon sirens screaming behind us. She was drenched in her brother's blood – it blended all too well into her red astronaut suit.

“He tried to kill me,” she kept repeating tonelessly. “He was going to take the diamonds, give you up to Nova. It was him or us.”

“I know,” I said soothingly, reaching for her. “It's okay.”

But Astrid was clutching the diamonds in a death grip, and she wouldn't let go, not even to hold my hand.

~

I'm an outlaw now, with a hundred-carat price on my head, courtesy of the syndicate. I'm worth twenty-five diamonds dead, fifty alive. I can never stop running – I can't return to those halcyon days on Venus, or bask under the brilliance of our lodestar.

I guess you could say I'm star-crossed.

Astrid and I weren't unbreakable after all. She wasn't as strong as she fronted. She was my little cherry bomb, and she detonated, not long after she bashed her brother's brain in with a baseball bat.

I don't know what happened to her in the end – just that she took a walk out the airlock of my ship one day, dressed in her red suit, without so much as a goodbye. She might be lying low somewhere in the Tarantula nebula, or bumping rocks off one of Saturn's rings. Or she might be in dead space, breathless, the constellations of her brain gone silent, the galaxies in her eyes burnt out. Sublimating back into stardust, atom by atom.

Wherever she is, I hope she's at peace.

But I have those last four gemstones – her blood diamonds.

And I know exactly what to do with them.

