*Carina Stopenski: Outer Limits*

This story follows Hydra, a trans girl from Earth who decides as a teen that her dream is to become a part of the Haidean Academy, an institution of intergalactic preservation, as a means to avenge the disappearance of her older sister at the hands of the interplanetary government elite. The Academy is on the planet of Olys, which has been at war with the planet of Antitanica, and the Captain of the Academy, Pluto, has a curated team of hir best fighters to lead the charge, a unit called the Plutonian Polycule. The novel is broken into three parts: Hydra's time on Earth pre-transition, her time in Olys manufacturing artificial hormone replacement therapy in an intentional community of intergalactic ex-pats as she awaits admission the Academy, and her time as part of the Plutonian Polycule, fighting the Antitanic army while trying to track down her sister, maintain meaningful relationships with her romantic partners, and finally end this war for good so she can finally see her father again. **The segment attached is in the middle of the third section of the novel.**

**----**

**Excerpt from *Outer Limits***

There is a calm before the storm. I am constantly reminded of this phrase—my father used to say it all the time. I know that it’s cliché and it doesn’t really work if there is chaos everywhere, but right now, I tell myself: *there is a calm before the storm.* I don’t know if this’ll work. I don’t even know if we’ll be alive next week, or maybe this is all a hoax and the fight is for no good reason. I can’t be the judge of that. All I can do is try to keep it together in this lull of silence. Whether this quiet is a harbinger for disaster or peace, I can’t decide for us. But I can decide to stop being a coward, and maybe that’ll make the change we need. The fate of Olys is in the hands of a pack of teens, led by young adults that barely know what they’re doing. Even the Captain is only in hir late thirties. We haven’t seen the universe yet. We haven’t watched the worlds around us die and crumble and be turned to floating ash. We haven’t felt the heavy weight of trauma like the elders have. But we have come to the Haidean Academy to show our worth and potential, and I will be damned if that all goes to waste.

Nix, Kerberos, and I enter, saddling up into our Vessels at top speed. Kerberos has had less than ten sparring sessions, and even they’re suited up before I am. We mean business.

“Hydra, what are you doing?” Charon growls. “This is between me and Styx, we got in this mess because I was defending you!”

“Will you just listen to me for one second? Please!” I rarely lose my temper, but I’m pretty close to it now. I watch what I say, as the Captain is still analyzing our movements from the viewing section. “Look, we know the two of you won’t fuse on your own. But maybe if we all fuse together we might get somewhere.”

Styx lets out a single hearty chuckle. “Bold of you to assume I would be interested in fusing with *any* of you if I won’t even fuse with Charon. You think that a group of five would hold up? I don’t care how stable the three of you were before me and Kerberos got here, but no fusion is as stable a two-person fusion. Do you want power, or do you want a fusion that is actually functional?”

Kerberos steps in between Charon and Styx, facing the latter with a stern grimace on their face. “Listen, bud, I’m not too keen on you assuming just because we came in at the same time that I’m going to be your lackey. We have totally different politics, you and I, and not once have you made an effort to even ask me how I’m doing that day, or what my background is like. Christ, we share a fucking room and you don’t even say goodnight! Do you understand how frustrating that is?”

Styx stammers. “I, um, I didn’t think it meant so much to you.”

“Fucking human compassion means a lot to anybody!” There’s a tremble in Kerberos’ voice, part fear, part pure rage. “I swear, I bet that Nix and Charon and Hydra have the same amount of kindness in their pinky fingers than you have in your whole body! You’re just a big bully and no one will have any respect for you until you decide to be a team player!”

Tension lays over the room like a blanket. Everything is covered in the heavy weight of anger. Every sound feels hostile in the still air, and my voice is no exception. “We need to do this. It’s the only way. Okay? So we need to do this as a team. Kerberos is a hundred percent right. We need to be unified. That’s the only way. Do you think that I *like* that there’s a slight chance we’ll get blasted into oblivion? We can’t leave a single stone unturned when lives are on the line.”

I grab Nix’s hand, then Charon’s. Kerberos goes to Nix’s other side. We leave an empty space in our circle for Styx to step forward.

“Styx,” Nix whispers. “We need you. Please.”

By some force stronger than all of us, he steps into the circle, linking fingers with Kerberos and Charon. His face contorted in a mix of confusion and guilt, he lets out an exaggerated breath. “I’m not doing this because I want to. I’m doing it because I have to.”

We close our eyes and open our chest capsules, radiant light escaping from the cavities. We walk toward each other, and soon, our flesh begins to dissipate as we form into one.

One enormous, glittering mega-mecha.

Shimmering iridescent under the harsh light of the mecha silo.

We did it. No bumps. First try.

I hear the Captain say, “magnificent” before I catch a glimpse of our reflection. This beast of a Vessel fusion has to be double the size of when I fuse with Nix and Charon. It’s hulking, a rainbow of gleaming chrome, streaks of so many colors through the shining metallic exterior. It reminds me quite a lot of the fusion I had seen at my start at the Academy, but something about ours felt fragile, vulnerable, susceptible to downfall.

Inside, I feel the gentle embrace of so many hands. My body is cradled in the presence of others, floating through the space like a dandelion wisp in an earthly field—not necessarily ripped from a root, but gently drifting through a current of wind. I open my mouth and I am flooded with warmth, heavy breath hitting my tongue as the machine does its work. We figure out our configurations slowly, but soon, we move through the silo with grace, much to the Captain’s surprise.

“I don’t believe it,” zie says, cupping hir hands to hir mouth. “She actually did it.”

I disregard the Captain’s initial lack of support and try to maneuver the fusion around. I feel so many bodies pressing me indifferent positions, but ultimately, I rise, jetting us to the top of the silo. We hang from a beam, shooting launchers at the targets, white hot beams of light streaming from our hands, nearly incinerating the measly wooden boards. Our body grows heavy and I feel my hands tremble, my head tensing, my veins pulsing full of adrenaline.

We flit past the corners of the building with the precision of a dancer, an arabesque here, a pirouette there. Our bodies, one. Our bodies, lifted. Our bodies, united. Finally, some goddamn semblance of peace in the newly expanded Plutonian Polycule.

I try to guess whose movements are whose and find myself remembering that right now we are all one Vessel. My arms twitch as my lips begin to tingle. We swirl into a cosmos of being, galaxies in each of our fingerprints, becoming a body so much greater than any of us were meant to be. In theory, we should be a disjointed mess—fusion doesn’t work well for those in opposition to one another. But right now, all the anger and resentment and hatred has been washed away by a kiss, a touch, a caress. In this massive, beautiful body, we are something so much more powerful than single selves: we are without our own personal flaw.

We clear every drill. Every target. We even do a few flips and spins to show off to the Captain. I don’t know what’s come over us. It feels so natural, so freeing. But I am still so scared.

Someone is drying my tears.

Someone is stroking my hair.

Someone is kissing the palms of my hands.

Someone is holding me so, so tight.

*I want to go home, but I am home.*

I break. I can’t keep up the form anymore, and unless we’re all strong enough to hold together, a fusion is rendered incapacitated. I don’t think anyone is angry with me, though. We did so well, I shouldn’t feel this afraid.

“Excellent work, team!” Pluto applauds as we come apart. A different expression is plastered on each of our faces. Charon looks smug, and Styx looks embarrassed. Kerberos, who had never fused, appears elated while Nix is totally stoic. I can’t tell what my face is like—probably confused? Anxious? I don’t know what happens next. I don’t know who we’re supposed to be now. As the Captain hugs us all close I can’t help but think of how unmoved I had been to the prospect of my death. My new Vessel is finally starting to feel like my body, but it’s not worth celebrating if everyone I care about dies in the wreckage and carnage of war. No matter how intimate or how healing the fusion was, it was preparation for battle. Sure, it was an exercise in trust and love and kindness, but at the end of the day, some of us may not get to go back to where we came from, and that is devastating.

My throat catches. “I love you all so, so much. We can’t fuck this up if we pull a stunt like that in front of the Antitanic army. We’ll be unstoppable.”

As I stare at my team, the Captain clicks hir tongue. “I guess I was proven wrong about what you all were capable of. Hydra, excellent suggestion. Not only did you get these two stubborn boys to fuse, but you showed exactly the reason why I put you all together as my elite team. You should be very proud of yourself.”

I know I should be proud, but it feels so wrong to celebrate. My chest cavity still feels hot, and I press my hand to it. There, that is where my heart is, where my humanity lives. I press down tight and feel my pulse. I ground myself to this moment. Whether Antitanica strikes or not, we have won.

“I need to step outside, though,” I say as I remove my Vessel. “Don’t wait up if you head back to the living quarters. I just want a moment alone, you know?”

“Sure, take your time,” Charon waves.

Nix furrows her brow, worried. “Are you going to be okay? I can come with you if you want.” Kerberos nods beside her.

“No, it’s okay, just need to take a breather,” I answer, wiping at the corner of my eye.

The Captain smiles at me. “Don’t stay out too long, Hydra. I want to throw a little shindig tonight to honor the decision you made. By encouraging the whole Polycule to fuse, you created something I didn’t think was possible in the world of Vessel fusion. I’ve seen those messy fusions before, the ones of curious students, but nothing ever as incredible as this.”

I start to head out when Styx jogs behind me. “Hydra, wait.”

“Yeah?”

“I’m so fucking sorry. I was the worst to you. I’m sorry I’ve made your life hell the whole time I’ve been here. It was super awful of me and I’m going to try to be better about, you know, my word choice and stuff.”

“That’s good to hear, Styx.”

“And you know I’m not a modiphobe, right?”

“I know.”

Styx rubs the back of his head and makes a long grunting sound. “It doesn’t sound like you know. It sounds like you’re just trying to shut me up. But believe me, I’m a good guy. I just don’t want us going into this war blind, whatever’s coming to us.”

“I believe you, Styx. I really do. We give you a hard time because we know you want to be better, okay? If we don’t shut you down every once in a while, you get cocky and forget what you’ve taught yourself. We just want to keep you in check.”

He chuckles. “Well, I appreciate that. I’m glad you’re not really mad anymore. I was so scared you hated me. I’ll see you at home.” He scoops me into a too-tight hug and walks back to the rest of our team.

Home. What a concept. Home is Earth, but home is Olys, too. Home is here in the Haidean Academy, in the Polycule. Home is in every member of my team, each of their stories so different than mine. It was in the Captain’s intuition when zie put us all together. Home is the place I never thought I’d have.

I sit down in the grass and look at the stars. They seem so much bigger out here than they did on Earth. I guess everything starts to feel that way when you’re on the edge of something so much bigger than you ever thought you could be.