

Passage III, Flag 5

...she had never in her wildest imaginings expected they would ever send a female outside the zone.

As she adjusted the helmet and goggles on her head, the transport slowed suddenly but didn't stop, and without warning, it started to speed up again just as Heather flipped her switch and was ejected. If she had ejected when it was going full speed, she would have been blown back into the transport and exploded on impact. But instead of worrying about missing her death by a tick or two, Heather focused on the tight grip she had on the ball in her fist. She opened her eyes and was pleased the goggles she wore were working at top performance level. She had heard some horror stories about faulty gear. She almost dropped the smooth piece of rubberized material she clutched in her fist that Matron had hid in a deep pocket of her uniform.

Heather was literally flying, her long jacket keeping her afloat. She grabbed the edges of both sides to guide herself gently down as she looked for the throughway she needed. Then she saw it, barely. PASSAGE III, Flag 5, DOCK, was what it should have read. It was instead: P S III, F 5, D. At least that was what she could make out in dirty gray letters that were once white. Breathing was nearly impossible and she felt she choked in wet fabric. Certain she had blacked out, Heather's body careened forward, mindless and powerless. Then she flopped to the ground, sliding across a gritty plank.

Somehow she managed to land on part of a moving platform, which took her from the dock entrance and slid her through to the other side. She could see hazy shapes that looked like

soldiers' boots lining the end of her passage just up ahead. She looked at the ball in her hand. It was an image of her mentor, Molly. Quickly, she held it up to her ear.

“Be well,” the message ball said. Angry that there was not more to the sphere, which she had squeezed and sheltered on this bizarre trip, she shook it and brought it to her ear again. “Be well,” it repeated.

Heather shoved it in her pocket, got to her knees to meet the troops of the way station, wondering why matron had so carefully placed the object in her pocket. Merely a sing song ball with frivolous sentiment that sounded nothing like the Molly she once knew. As was custom, once Heather left Molly's domicile and office, she rarely saw her again. Her mentor had been in the crowd when she had earned her Captain's shield. Molly could have attended her partnering ceremony, but she had been absent. Some foolish desire to see her Mentor there that day had marred an otherwise pleasant ceremony. Colm was the most handsome of every male there, and she felt grateful to have him selected for her. His eyes lit up the moment he saw her as well. He had immediately taken her hands into his and had pressed her fingers to his lips. His desire to bring some sweet connection to the otherwise generic proceedings touched her immensely.

Her birthers had made it to the mass ceremony of fifty partnerships. Through the crowd, Anastasia had smiled at her briefly, but Dylan had pushed his way through to hug her fiercely, before letting go. Then she had been led away by Colm, who had given her his name, making her Captain Heather Staman. She had taken just one orb series off from her duties, which upset Colm, but it would be a pattern of their relationship. He would lead for a time, but then Heather would command herself through her work function. Perhaps though, it was merely her training and the system that was leading her, she thought ruefully, not her own desires. Bitterly she

thought of her training and how it had formed her allegiance to the Powers, to her role, even when it cost her partnership it's deserved peaceful times.

And after all this distance, Molly sent a ball of simple sentiment to get her through the most terrifying mission report of her career.

“Sergeant!”

Heather straightened, still heaving from the thick air. It felt like a heavy cloak around her throat, invading her nostrils, clogging her lungs. She wanted desperately to cover her face with her hands. Saluting, briefly, and then wrapping her arms behind her back, she instinctively reached for her Health Lock. She cringed. Of course it was no longer there, and she was left to finger the outline along her wrist instead. Counting was all she could do. How many miles? How far away? How long had she taken? Count the details of the environment. Accept that you are here. Own your space. Cement was used to pave pathways along the areas still controlled by the outreach of the Powers. On either side of it stood ten soldiers dressed in combat gear, saluting her.

Directly in front of her stood a male just a bit shorter than her, wearing a cap, white button-down shirt, beige shorts, and big brown boots. She believed they were called hiking boots, as they registered somewhere in a catalog of the Ancient History she had read once. More amazing, she had never seen a male other than Colm's bare legs before. Long hairs caressed his bulging calves, and small spots careened against his pale skin. A sure sign of radiation poisoning, she thought.

“Our guest has never seen a man with freckles and Khaki shorts,” he said. “And my great-great-granddaddy’s favorite fishing cap. No one’s takin’ it off my scraggly head, except my own gnarly fingers, I can tell ya that.”

His officers chuckled, and he laughed with them! Though, make no mistake, he even outranked Chief. The commander was making a statement. He was beyond uniforms and Social Fabric. Based on his black shield, he was Number Three. Four passages, denoting the four points of the compass, led to their own series of flag departure points. This commanding officer before her held together this whole eastern province—Passage Number Three—of Safe Zone II. And yet, he seemed so relaxed, certainly nothing like Heather would have imagined. Not that she had taken time to think of to whom she would report once outside Safe Zone I.

“At ease, mates. Time to get yourselves in order. As for the lass, here, let’s get the sergeant some grub. You know she’s either upchucked whatever was in her system, or is about to shove it out the other side.”

They scattered in different directions, and she was left alone with the commander. Standing on a piece of concrete, surrounded by what some would call air, with several tunnels dug into heaping mounds of jagged-edged stones, Heather felt her head spin. He reached around her waist, but she was too weak to defend herself. She had heard rumors that commanders took whatever they wanted, whenever and wherever. They were the ultimate warriors who kept the peace between two disparate sections of what was left of the universe as they knew it.

Nine hundred and sixty-two thousand and five beings in the two zones were counted at the end of the annual census. That was down from last annual’s count of just over one million beings. And much lower than the high twelve annuals ago of three million and twenty-six

thousand beings. Unrest over the numbers was growing. Rumors that people were hiding from the annual count were rampant. But where were they? Or was the race just rapidly dying out despite forced partnerships and recapturing beings to be raised by breeders? The Powers were losing their battle of procreation. Meanwhile, the numbers did not reflect the healthy genetic percentage, which was at an all-time high. But that fact would do little to allay the riotous claims. The Powers were forcing the race to slowly die out, because of their crazed indifference to the worth of any creature which had less than perfect genetic markers.

Talk of the Powers no longer issuing census reports was rampant. Rumors outside Safe Zone I were that revolution was brewing. The outliers were refusing to provide genetic material from their forced males. Since the population was shrinking, they wanted the immigrant cut offs to be lifted. Why should they be kept from Safe Zone I? Many of them had ancestral claims they wanted filled. Waiting lists were overflowing with beings anxious to leave the anarchy and enter the sanitizing dome, to come under the rule of the Powers. And most importantly, they wanted the land, domiciles, the right to rest at orb end peacefully. They were tired of battling each other, which they tried to protect themselves against the sun and moon. And who was holding all the sides together? The commanders and the troops on the ground in between. Heather heard they couldn't be trusted, yet there was no else to count on in this gray area between the zones.

So for their bravery and strength, commanders could take females when they wanted, break rules others strove to follow. And if their troops wanted in on the action, they would turn the other way. While Heather's gold shield would help her greatly, it didn't protect her from every sort of malice. They knew she could live and complete her mission even if she was raped. So she squeezed her stomach and legs together, awaiting the onslaught, bracing for the touch of

his cracked hands. Who would believe her? His mission was greater than hers, and things were unraveling.

Lately the Air Room briefings would start with news that another riot had been quelled. But there became clear patterns of behavior, similarities in weapons. It had to be manufactured by the same core elements. The riots were no longer isolated outbursts performed by frazzled individuals, but rather they were building in intensity, showing communities working together to overthrow the Powers and take down the immigration walls. Aggressors and agitators were touting the Ancient History and calling for democracy and presidential elections. The numbers of resisters were growing, threatening to keep their own babies, claiming the system wasn't working, as more were dying than thriving. Her head was whirling with data from so many different sources, and she was not sure if she would be able to stand much longer. Then commander stood right in her personal space, yelling something at her. Swaying in the heat of the impossibly dense air, she saw him so close to her. This was it. He was going to tear her garments off and take her, naked, on the dirt in front of his underlings, to prove his might.

Commander pointed at the gas mask on her belt. "Put it on, Sergeant" he yelled. "Then join me in the mess hall. The air is particularly a disaster today. No need to play a toughie here. Save yourself for when you are out there on your own." He turned on his heel and trotted toward one of the tunnels into the mountain.

Suddenly white projectiles were flying through the air. Landing with a slap against the hard ground, they slid across the pathway, from different directions. Recognizing these large fliers with words emblazoned across them, from her mission report, Heather reached for the recording cylinder on her helmet. While she tried to focus on the ones underfoot, Heather had to

dodge the new ones rifling through the air. Absentmindedly, she read the words out loud as she taped.

“We hold these truths...something...to be...something...that all men are created equal...something...the Creator—”

Flushed, she knew these were words from the Ancient History, and wished she had spent more time on the “T’s” and “E’s”; Truth and Equal. Between each word she read aloud to herself, she took quick gasps of air. Then she saw commander was charging her from one of the tunnels. In one swift movement, he grabbed her helmet off her head, and swatted the gas mask at her hip. He stood there with his hands clenched into fists at his waist, wearing his own mask. His voice sounded like it was coming from a hollow bowl on his head, but she tried to show respect.

“Mask, now, Sergeant!”

While she adjusted the cumbersome mask over her head and mouth, the nozzle jutting in between her lips, she felt the whoosh of sanitized air in her lungs. Through the rectangle over her eyes, she watched him replace her feed, with a blank one. She followed him dutifully through a series of tunnels until they were in a dark room hollowed out inside the mountain. Once inside he yanked his mask off, and replaced his cap, dropping her helmet on the resting ledge. A male wearing a gray jumpsuit, signifying he was in training, arrived and put their food trays down before them. He did not speak until they were alone.

“Look, Sergeant, we can’t have that drivel being spread into Zone I. There’s too much unrest right now. Flying pieces of the US Constitution aren’t your mission.”

“Actually, with all due respect, sir, it matches the feed of my mission report.”

“Hogwash. Your job is to tear some poor redhead away from her loving parents and give her to some secret breeder. That’s right. Don’t look at me like that.”

The commander threw his cap down on the table and dug into his food. Heather had never seen anything like it before. There were round hard things with milky shades of color and a thick slab of something brown and sinewy.

“Beef jerky and a so-called apple, love. Eat up. You’ll need it.”

He picked up the metal items outside his platter. He was using them to move through the nutrition to make small pieces and put them in his mouth. Instead of drinking his meal, he was moving his jaw, then swallowing. She began to repeat his motions, but then stopped, searching his eyes.

“Don’t be silly, lass. It’s been fully irradiated. Not very tasty, but useful.”

He stood up and started dropping things on the table. He was done eating in moments. But she was just starting.

“It’s called chewing. Ah—just pick it up with your hands and eat it, for chrissake.” He knocked the metal pieces out of her hand, and she thought she would cry. What did it matter to him? He was just the lawless type in charge of a domain too large to control. She could lose control too. “Ah, shit,” he said.

He pulled out his chair and came around next to her, pulling his cap off.

“Don’t go tearing up, missy. We have a lot of work to do before you throw yourself toward your flag. You’ve done great, you know, getting here in one piece. I mean, this is the outer limit. Passage South One and Passage North Two are bad enough. But East Three? It’s

amazing your transport tube didn't disintegrate around you. Chief didn't think you would make it. But I saw your profile. You're a fighter. And I bet on you, with Molly."

To her amazement, he had the Molly ball from her pocket in his hand. He tossed it up in the air and caught it. Then he squeezed it and put it down next to her. The face rolled around a couple of times before she grabbed it back.

"Don't worry, I wouldn't steal your happy ball. Quite a joker that Molly."

"Yessir," she said flatly, grateful he had distracted her from her tears..

"Well tear into the grub, get a rest on the pallet. I'll leave your tools, map, and my buzzer on the table here for you to review."

He turned to leave. She touched his forearm. "Your cap, sir."

He ran his hands through his tuft of wiry hair that stuck out in different directions. "I'm Harlan Buckley, the Fifth, a nice how do ya do to ya, and all that."

He tipped his cap, righted it on his head, and then he was gone.