

The Stayers

By:

Patricia Thorpe

Captain Holland was on the observation deck when the alarm sounded, a bray of static that pierced his eardrums. He swore under his breath. His heart dropped in his chest, settled in his stomach and for the first time in a long time, he prayed. He didn't turn as O'Hare approached, intent on staring out of the long windows into the gray. O'Hare's reflection in the glass was a ghost image, pinned next to Holland's.

"See anything?" Holland asked.

O'Hare's ghost head signaled no. "Nothing. Yet."

It was the "yet" that got him. "Hope," Ammy said time and again, "There is always hope." Holland wasn't so sure he believed that anymore. In the glass, Holland saw O'Hare watching him. Instead of saying more, he stared out of the dirty panes.

Ammy called them "airplanes." She said when she was a child, before The Clypse, airplanes used to lift from the ground and carry people from one place to another. "I was on my way to Sney," her story went, "when The Clypse happened." She was supposed to fly in one of those airplanes with her mother, father and baby brother. "They all gone now," her story finished, "there's just me." At that point, the old woman would tickle the child closest to her and say, "And all of you!" The children always giggled and asked for more. Holland had first heard Ammy's story when he was three, or maybe four. He'd been listening to it for forty-seven years.

Airplanes. Holland turned the word over in his mind and wondered what they had looked like in The Early. What he saw now were monstrous humps of black dust and debris; decaying, ancient, rusted skeletons of the great ships they once were.

"See what's coming?" O'Hare asked.

Holland switched his gaze from a rusted fin jutting from a mountain of soot to the landscape beyond. Thin gray light came through the glass. In the distance, thick, black clouds were gathering. Lightning streaked, but there was no sound. Yet. That word again.

“Maybe it’s just the storm,” O’Hare suggested. “Maybe it isn’t a signal.” Holland wondered if it was hope he heard in the younger man’s voice. Was O’Hare starting to doubt, too? Was he starting to question the price to be paid? Holland thought about asking, decided it was better not to know.

“We need to go,” he said. “She’ll be waiting.” Without waiting for a reply, Holland turned from the window, and after a moment, O’Hare followed.

They found her in C. She was standing in the center, a sea of people around her. Children were closest to her, sitting in a ring at her feet. Her presence struck Holland. As ancient as she was, she had bearing. Ammy was taller than any other woman in the cluster. Her long thin body was a ruler of pride, her face mapped by deep creases. The locket hung around her neck, the chain swayed slightly as if moved by a wind no one else could feel. How old was she? A hundred? A hundred and ten? Whatever her age, she was the last of the original Stayers. The only one to remember anything of The Early.

Her eyes met Holland’s. “Captain,” she said. “A signal came.” Despite the softness of her voice, her words carried and a ripple went through the crowd. Outside, lightening flashed again, this time, followed by a hollow bang of thunder.

Holland nodded. “It may have been a signal. But it may also have been the storm.”

As if to punctuate his words, lightening flashed and now he could hear it. A piercing whistling, sharp and rising, followed by a whoop and roar of wind. Rain thudded against the thick glass, slashed against the concrete. Thunder boomed and a baby started to wail.

Ammy studied his face. “The storm does not make signals,” she said. “One came. Chengdu heard it.”

On cue, a tall man in a trades uniform stepped forward. His voice rang out, sure and true. “Me and Orlando were working in E and we both heard it. It came through the speaker.”

Holland’s jaw tightened. “How long did it last?”

The man’s brow furrowed. “It was still coming when we sounded the alarm.”

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It was strange to pass through D, the childcare and education center, and not hear the incessant chatter of the littles, but all the children were in C with Ammy. What Ammy called a “teddy bear” was lying on the floor, threadbare and desolate. Holland picked it up, put it gently

on a bolted down stool. The plastic seat was peeling and buckled. The educators' books were lined up on a shelf under the window. Most of the books were barely legible now, the ink faded and rubbed away by hundreds of eager fingers turning pages. Holland wondered what would happen when the words were completely wiped away. How would they teach the littles then? He pushed the thought from his mind. As if he could pick up on Holland's musings, O'Hare muttered, "Used to be my favorite." He picked up a thin paperback, worn to tissue, and put it on the counter. Holland didn't need to see the title to know what book it was. *Catcher in the Rye* had been his favorite, too.

They made their way down the ramp under the sign that read ER IN AL E. As soon as they came to the T intersection, Holland could hear it. A high, breathless cackling. The sound echoed down the hallway, bounced off walls. Although he didn't need to hear anymore, he continued on to the vast open space used to house their food stock. The fragrant smell of tomatoes, peppers, basil and rosemary filled the air, but Holland, who usually reveled in the scents, barely noticed. The keening captured all of his attention.

It was a signal.

But was it proof of life beyond this cluster? Holland didn't know anymore. He was tired. Exhausted from hoping, but more, tired of The Service.

A voice came from behind them. "The Service will take place tomorrow," Ammy said.

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Holland pushed the food around his plate. His wife pretended not to notice. She told him about her day as an educator, a story about a little who wanted to know if trees were dinosaurs. At last, Atlanta put her hand over his. He lifted his eyes to meet her blue ones. "It will be okay," she said, but he could see the doubt and fear. "She'll be all right. It's her first Service." As if that would bring protection.

Their daughter was reading when Holland went to check on her. "You take after your mother," he said. She looked up from her book, startled, then grinned at him. "At least I don't take after you," she teased. Something in his chest loosened and he laughed. He sat beside her, put his arm around her and pulled her close. She let him, resting her head on his shoulder like she used to when she was a little.

"Denver," he started, but she stirred and put her hand up to his mouth.

"I know what you're going to say, Dad. You don't have to use words."

He closed his eyes and held his daughter, wishing to God that the signal had never come.

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In C again. Ammy stood in front of the windows, surrounded not by littles anymore, but by The Contenders. Fit, strong and trained, they waited to see if it was their turn to be called as the Explorer. Now that she was of age, Denver stood among them. Holland felt pride as he looked at his only child. Pride, yes, but fear was the greater emotion. O'Hare's son, Orlando, was next to her. Across from them was his nephew, Frisco. So young, Holland thought. They're so young.

Ammy grasped the locket, and pulled the chain over her head. The heart-shape at the bottom of the necklace swayed. Behind her, the sky was lightening. Black was split by steel gray. The sun was beginning to rise. Holland's heart beat faster. It was almost time.

"We are the Stayers," Ammy began as she launched into the Service Scripture. He didn't listen; he'd heard these words so many times they were embedded in his brain. Instead, he looked at the locket around Ammy's neck. It used to open to reveal "photographs," images of Ammy's parents, but time had scoured the images away and now the only reason to crack it open was to select the Explorer.

The contenders formed a circle. Ammy stood on a table in the middle, high above them. She held up the chain. It caught the sun, cast a beam. Slowly, Ammy opened the locket wide, two hearts now, joined by a V. She attached the chain to the hook in the ceiling and gave the chain a push. It spun in a circle over the bowed heads of The Contenders. The locket twirled light. It slowed, slowed more as the arc approached Denver. Panic punched a hole in Holland's gut but when V in the heart shape came to rest, the beam it cast didn't rest on Denver. It landed on Orlando. Relief sagged Holland's spine.

He heard O'Hare's sharp intake of breath and felt a wave of guilt and pity. He tried to catch O'Hare's eye, but the other man was staring at his son.

Ammy opened her arms and Orlando went into her embrace. She kissed the top of his head as the crowd broke into cheers and applause. Holland walked away.

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The party lasted well into the night. There was singing and dancing, the wine jug passed from hand to hand. Orlando was congratulated and toasted. Young women took turns dancing with him and Holland wasn't surprised to see O'Hare's son slipping away with a lovely brunette.

Enjoy it, son, Holland thought bitterly, she's likely your one and only. Your one and only. Was that a song from The Early?

When the sun came up again, by tradition, the only ones to see him off were Holland, O'Hare and Ammy. Orlando's eyes were puffed from drink and lack of sleep, but the boy exuded a feverish excitement. Holland supposed he could understand it, in a way. The boy was venturing Out. He was one of the few to walk onto what Ammy called "the street." He'd breathe air that wasn't manufactured, he'd feel real wind, he'd walk on sand and gravel instead of concrete. For a moment, Holland envied him. It didn't last. How many had been selected at Service? How many sent out as Explorers? Holland didn't know. But one fact pulsed red in his mind, obliterated all other thought. None returned.

Orland was shifting foot to foot, eager to get started. Beside him, O'Hare stood expressionless. Ammy was giving the boy last minute instructions. West, this time, as the last Explorer was sent east. Rest during the day, walk at night, look for signals and signs. Send word when another cluster was found.

Holland marveled at the choice of words. *When* a cluster was found. Not *if*.

Finally, Ammy's words faded away and Orlando lifted his gear. O'Hare hugged his son, whispered something in his ear. Holland shook his hand. Then they walked away, leaving the boy alone. Orlando would go through the doors by himself.

They made their way to the Observation Deck, where they could watch the teen take his first steps into the unknown. As they stood in front of the windows, waiting for the boy to emerge, Holland said softly, "I'm sorry."

O'Hare turned to face him. "For what? There's always hope."

Holland didn't reply, but one word banged in his head and settled in his heart.

Yet....