

The Last Story

By Mohammad Khan

On a cloudy day, the tall grasses sway aggressively from a descending hovercraft as it lands in a large crater. The large door opens, gently landing on the fields. Two humans walk out of the craft in steel gray suits and helmets. One holds up a device scanning the area. It nods and they remove their helmets. Their craft pales in comparison to the size of the crater. Green grasslands surround the white dirt filled crater.

“What do you think this is”, says Largoto. “Where are the inhabitants?” Largoto holds his helmet under his arm as he squints looking for signs of life. “I don’t see any reason to remain in this silly form and speak their language if the inhabitants are not here.”

“No. I think I’ll remain in this form”, says Loyola. “Respect the dead. And we might run into a local. Wouldn’t want to scare them off.” She walks around, occasionally sifting through the sand with her fingers.

Largoto takes out his scanner. It starts clicking rapidly. “Whoa, whoa”, says Largoto. “I’m getting radioactivity all over the place.”

“How bad?”

“Nothing we can’t handle” he said with worry and inquisition. “But how did they? I mean what lived here that could handle it.”

Loyola sees a rock protruding out of the white dirt. She walks closer and sees a dark shadow seared onto the rock’s surface.

“I don’t think they did. Or not for long at least.” Her hand sweeps over the shadow trying to smear it, but the shadow remains. “It looks like this was burned onto this rock.”

Largoto walks closer to inspect. “Only an explosion could do that and they must not have known it was going.”

“It was dropped right on top of this being. All that’s left is this.”

“This planet’s a wasteland. There are no survivors.” He starts heading back towards the ship.

“No”, says Loyola. “Our mission was to report what we find.”

“And we found nothing. They’re dead. Every being is dead on this planet.”

“You don’t know that. There could be more in hiding.”

“Fine”, grumbles Largoto. “Let’s search the rest.”

Their craft traverses over the land with ease passing by elk, caribou, vultures, monkeys, tigers, until it stops at an abandoned factory slightly covered in snow. They land in a forest near a bridge.

Largoto walks out to the bridge to a sign marked *Bridge of Death. Chernobyl nuclear disaster*. “We were right”, he starts. “It was a nuclear disaster at someplace called Chernobyl.”

Loyola walks closer to the sign and scans it with a gadget. “The sign is over 300 years old.”

Largoto walks to the the bridge. “This was a bridge of death for a reason”, he says to himself. He walks down the bridge and jumps. “There’s nothing wrong with it. Seems structurally fine.”

Loyola searches for clues from the bridge and sees a building in the distance. “There”, she points. “It could be that building. They could have died from radiation poisoning or burns from that building.”

“They watched a nuclear explosion from the bridge? Surely they deserved to die off. There are no beings there. Let’s go.”

“We need to document why they are gone. It could be the cause.”

“A big bright flash in the sky wasn’t a warning enough? Did that need a sign? ”

Loyola ignores him as they walk back to the craft. She spots something in the grass of the forest. A muddied doll lying with braided yellow hair and buttoned eyes. She scans the doll, her detector clicks rapidly near the doll.

“What is that?”

Loyola holds the doll. “I dunno. Maybe a young one’s toy.” She keeps the doll with her.

They walk back to their craft as Largoto mumbles about the stupidity of the human race.

Their hovercraft wavers as it lands near the Chernobyl power plant. They walk out with their radiation counters clicking erratically.

A large building shrouded in metal stood before them along with a large abandoned cooling tower.

Largoto holds his scanner towards the power plant. “Wow, the structure is extremely radioactive.”

Loyola walks closer to the building with her scanner. She looks at her device. “How old is the radiation? How much decay has happened?”

Largoto pushes buttons on his device. “Uranium approximately 3000 years decayed.”

“The radiation off this building is 5000 years old along with 3000 years.”

“There were TWO nuclear explosions?”

“They seemed to have contained the first one.” She sees a hole into the building and shines a flashlight into the abyss. “Let’s see where it began.” She walks to the mouth of the abyss.

“Why? We know the nuclear explosion killed them off. If not, the radiation poisoning. Our job’s done.”

“But we don’t know why.” Loyola stands at the edge facing Largoto. “We need to know why.” She wears her helmet and heads into the darkness.

Largoto keeps his radiation device on and follows after her.

In the basement of Chernobyl, the walls slowly drip with contaminated water and hallways and rooms have caved in.

Largoto’s radiation detector goes haywire as they peer around the corner. “Hold up”, he says pulling her

back. “We can’t go any closer without risking too much exposure.”

They peer around the corner into an empty room where a large mass of cooled lava sits. The mass was many meters in width and length and much more was frozen on the ceiling and walls.

Loyola scans the mass with her detector. 5000 years old decay.

Largoto points his device to the large mass. “I’m getting large amounts of radiation coming from that thing. Enough to permeate through our suits and do some real damage. We’re risking enough as it is. We need to go.”

They emerge from the abyss of Chernobyl.

“You happy now”, says Largoto agitated. “Exposed us to radiation, but now at least you know.” She stomps in front of him.

“The radiation of the mass was 5000 years decayed. Not 3000 years of decay. They survived the first nuclear maybe they survived another.”

“Fine. We’ll do one last fly through and if we don’t see anything. We’re done.”

The craft glides close to the ground over the grass lands. Herds of antelope, stallions, and other animals avoid the craft. The water parts as the craft zooms across the ocean. Teams of Dolphins travel swiftly beneath the water hunting for food.

The craft shoots upwards into the clouds. A large half-circle structure stands in the distance surrounded by a sea of sand.

“Wait”, says Loyola. “What is that?”

As they approach closer, a structure takes on nautilus design. The lone sands surround the structure.

“It’s magnificent”, says Largoto. He walks around trying to read the inscriptions. “There are drawings on the side of it. Looks like beings working, a ship going upwards.” He continues walking around the structure reading. “They made it”, he said in astonished and glee.

“There are these weird numbers and symbols engraved here”, says Loyola standing at the edge of the nautilus. “They continue to the center.” Loyola takes out her device and scans the engravings, reads it back.

“On July 18, 1969”, says the device in a computerized tone. “Mother Earth sent two of her sons to venture into the unknown of space. The men who went to the moon to explore in peace stayed on the moon to rest in peace. These brave men, Neil Armstrong and Edwin Aldrin, know that there is no hope for their recovery. But they also knew that there was hope for mankind in their sacrifice. In their exploration, they stirred the people of the world to feel as one and in their sacrifice, they bound more tightly the brotherhood of man. Every human since who gazed up at the moon in the nights after knew that there was some corner of another world that is forever mankind. This Nautilus monument stands as a decree to humanity’s cooperative nature in the face of disaster. The Nautilus is one of the oldest creatures to survive the earth’s oceans. It’s spiral design symbolizes humanity’s growth, expansion, and renewal of our nomadic roots. Like the primitive humans who first crossed the seas into the unknown, we have ventured into unknown ocean of space. If you seek the next chapter of human life, it lies above you.”