

THE LAST FALL

Only thirty human life forms called the hilly landfills composed entirely of gray dust home. The destruction of civilization on planet Earth as William Adams and the remaining twenty-nine survivors knew it began with a series of inevitable showdowns.

First humankind versus humankind- then humankind versus nature-and most recently humankind versus cyberspace... With it's seemingly weaker opponents underfoot, humankind stood alone in a vast empty winner's circle sought its next contender, but somehow puzzled to find no readily available challengers.

Will didn't feel like a monster, but with each of their elaborately designed black jumpsuits and masks he thought they all resembled images of what primitive humans thought space creatures looked like centuries ago. Their wardrobe left no parts of the skin exposed. Even the oxygen masks could not be removed entirely since oxygen was scarce. Round, dark tinted goggles allowed one to see out, but not in.

He stood in the midst of the remaining twenty-nine surrounded by their residential dwellings, which were an enclosed group of metal rectangular shaped vessels.

Once again they were trying to use the Atlas- a small communication device made of a simple black box that fit neatly inside the palm of a human hand. When functioning properly, it would project a holographic image of the one to be contacted. It was their last hope and one of the only remaining connections to those who lived on colonies on other planets.

Long ago after voting amongst to decide who would be their small group's leader, they chose Johnson, a man who claimed to be the oldest of them all.

Holding the Atlas high in the air, he now stood in front of them, gazing into each of their faces.

"We will try again until we finally make contact with the others!" He placed it into his palm and switched the unit on. Will felt a soft hand glide into his own. He knew it was Audrey. Like many of the others, neither had any surviving family members and despite being ten years apart- he being the younger, they had fallen in love, each having shared their catastrophic experiences together. In his mind, fate made it clear that they were destined to remain by each other's side – Earth or no Earth.

Moments later images of flicking light shot up from a tiny opening on the device. The group gasped. Audrey squeezed his hand and he could feel her excitement pulsing from her gloved hand to his. Seconds later an image of a man's face without any mask appeared.

"This is the KAIROS aircraft – have we made contact?" The man asked, as the image blurred and flickered. "Is this Earth?" Will could feel the tension in the air rising as murmuring amongst them started.

"Yes- this is Earth! We need evacuation assistance immediately! There are thirty human life forms left! We've been trying to contact anyone out there! Help us please!"

"We confirm – our crew has been searching for any remaining survivors on Earth. We may have enough fuel and supplies to land only once – in two days at the start of the autumn equinox. We can only accommodate twenty-nine others – not a person more. Our colony is currently focused on populating the new world and they are only accepting women of a certain age. All of your men may come, but women over the age of twenty five cannot."

The murmuring crowd behind him grew louder as the sensation of his heart sinking within his chest grew stronger. Audrey removed her hand and she faced him.

"I'm not going to be able to leave Will... I'm thirty-nine- nowhere near twenty-five- and we have more than twenty nine people..."

Johnson peered over worriedly at Audrey.

"I'm sure we can fit just one more person." he said. The holographic man shook his head and responded, "We cannot – I'm very sorr-" The image cut off as it flicked again.

"We will arrive on Earth about three miles north, on the verge of night and day- when the equinox begins. At that time the atmosphere will allow us to enter. We must leave and prepare for our departure."

Not long afterwards, the image disappeared, leaving them all in a state of panic and chaos.

It was all going to be over soon. If all goes well, they would finally be able to leave Earth for good. Everyone except Audrey.

He could not leave her there to rot in this wasteland alone. There had to be a way...

She gazed up at him and he almost thought he could see her tear filled eyes beneath her goggles.

“You should go Will. I have no other reason to live-”

“No!” He pulled her away abruptly. I’m not going if you’re not going.” She continued to sob. He thought for a moment- and then an idea emerged into his mind. If one other person were eliminated, then Audrey would have a better chance of taking that person’s place and board. It was not guaranteed to work, but there was a slight possibility. It would be worth taking a chance to find out

He wrapped his arms around her and squeezed her gently.

“Don’t worry...Everything is going to work out. You’ll see...”

* * *

It was difficult to decide who he would chose to eliminate. Out of desperation, they were forced to form close bonds with each other, however none were as dear to him as Audrey.

On that day, he waited until the final few hours before the KAIROS aircraft was scheduled to land.

He had to be swift.

With their bare necessities, each person began to make their trek on foot to wait to be escorted to their final home.

After slipping a glass syringe filled with a clear, liquid into his hand, he was ready. Once a person was contaminated with the solution he knew they would not allow them to board. The person would die soon after. They kept such a poison on board

as a biological weapon. Thankfully he was able to grab a tube before they packed it away.

He had already shared his plan with her, and although she objected, they were willing to try anything. She stayed behind and hid herself from the others as the procession through the swirling gray dust solemnly went by. He followed closely behind, watching his victim carefully.

When he believed no one was watching, Will burst into a forced run, holding the syringe high into the air and thrust it forward. His victim, a young man spun around, letting out a startled cry and leaped out of the way. The syringe missed and landed into Will's leg. Startled the crowd had already dispersed and a few pushed him angrily to the ground. As he removed the syringe he could feel the concoction beginning its flow through his bloodstream. Within seconds a loud noise was heard overhead and he knew immediately that the KAIROS had arrived. In a panicked frenzy the others ran towards the noise, leaving him behind. He felt his legs grow heavy and he tried to call out for help, but it was too late.

He saw the aircraft take off into space moments later.

They were gone – and neither he nor Audrey were with them. Using all of the strength he had left he went to find Audrey. She ran to him with outstretched arms and embraced him sobbing.

“Audrey, I'm so sorry...” There were no more words to share. They both knew the end was near. His even closer. They made the decision to walk for as long as they could in any direction, hoping to come across anything- perhaps other signs of life. Will grew weaker with each step.

After what seemed like hours the terrain before them began to change and they were walking across what appeared to be a meadow of low grass. They looked ahead of them and saw a sight they thought they would never see in their lifetime.

It was a single, living tree.

As if it were the autumn season many of its leaves were missing. The fallen leaves lay around its thick trunk like a sea of red, orange, and yellow. They moved closer, each taking in it's beauty. They both believed that this was the last remaining tree on planet Earth. As they approached it, they moved their hands across it's rough and sturdy bark.

Will could feel tears stream down his face. It was one of the most beautiful sights he had ever seen. In the planet's last century, trees of this magnitude were rarities. As he felt the poisonous serum continue its' course through his weakened body he crotched and lay down in the pile of leaves. He knew it would be his final resting place. Audrey joined him, also laying on her back at his side. As she held his hand, they looked up staring into the sky above in silence. It was in that moment they believed they were the luckiest two human life forms on all of planet Earth.

For close to an entire year only thirty human life forms called the hilly landfills composed entirely of gray dust home. The destruction of civilization on planet Earth as William Adams and the remaining twenty-nine survivors knew it began with a series of inevitable showdowns - humankind versus humankind- humankind versus nature-humankind versus cyberspace...

In the end, the strongest prevailed, and with its seemingly weaker opponents underfoot, humankind stood alone in a vast empty winner's circle. Seeking its next contender, but puzzled to find no other challengers.

At least, that's the way he saw it.

As a result of the Earth's surface and atmospheric destruction, there was no accurate way to tell day from night, or to determine the seasons. Reduced to a fuzzy ball of light underneath a filmy haze of pale beige sky, the sun remained steadfast and continued to complete it's daily rounds. However it's warmth was useless. They had seen no visible vegetation for months, nor were there any other visible life forms to appreciate it. All that remained was a hollow strange peacefulness...

Will didn't feel like a monster, but with each of their elaborately designed black jumpsuits and masks that left no parts of the skin exposed, he thought they all resembled early images of what primitive humans thought space creatures looked like centuries ago. The oxygen masks could not be removed entirely since oxygen was scarce. Round, dark tinted goggles allowed one to see out, but not in, and several thick black tubes flowed around the head like black snakes from the back and front. They were embedded with wireless microphones and headset transmitters that allowed them to communicate with one another clearly and effortlessly.

He stood in the midst of the remaining twenty-nine surrounded by their residential dwellings, which were an enclosed group of metal rectangular shaped vessels. They were each placed in a circular fashion strangely similar to the way pioneers arranged their cloth covered wagons in order to create a protective barrier against any predators or unwanted visitors. He visualized this and the image of the ancient relics from a bygone era made him feel anxious as he realized humanity's top priority had been narrowed back down to achieving only one goal-it's most primordial of all instincts and desires - survival.

Once again they were trying to use the "Atlas"- a small communication device made of a simple black box that fit neatly inside the palm of a human hand. When functioning correctly it would project a holographic image of the one contacted

similar to video footage. It was their last hope and one of the only remaining connections to those who lived on colonies on other planets. Thankfully the colonists had been spared, and now he and the others wanted nothing more than to join them.

Johnson, a man who claimed to be the eldest of them all, became their group leader held the Atlas high in the air.

"Let us try and try again until we finally make contact with the others!" He placed it into his palm and switched the unit on. Will felt a soft hand glide into his own. He knew it was Audrey. Like many of the others neither had any surviving family members and despite being ten years apart- he being the younger, they had fallen in love, each having shared their catastrophic experiences together. In his mind, fate made it clear that they were destined to remain by each other's side - Earth or no Earth.

"I think we are getting closer." Her voice was nearly a whisper. Moments later images of flicking light shot up from a tiny opening. The group gasped. Audrey squeezed his hand and he could feel her energetic excitement pulsing from her gloved hand to his. Seconds later an image of a man sans an oxygen covered mask appeared before them.

"This is the KAIROS aircraft - have we made contact?" The man asked, as the image blurred and flickered. "Is this Earth? Have we made contact?" Will could feel the tension in the air rising as murmuring amongst them started. Johnson raised his other hand and gestured for them to remain quiet.

"Yes- this is Earth! We need evacuation assistance immediately! There are thirty human life forms left! We have been trying to contact anyone out there! Help us please!" The hologram nodded.

"We confirm - this is the KAIROS- our aircraft has been searching for any remaining survivors. We are able to land only once - in two days time at the start of the autumn equinox. However..."

The man's voice trailed off, and the expression on his face turned solemn. "We only have enough room and supplies to accommodate twenty nine others - and not a person more. The colony's governing parties are currently focused on populating the new world. They are only accepting women of a certain age. All of your men may come, but women over the age of twenty five cannot."

The murmuring crowd behind him grew louder as the sensation of his heart sinking within his chest grew stronger. Audrey removed her hand and she faced him. He could not see her face, but her body language and the tone of her voice could not hide her sorrow.

"I'm not going to be able to leave Will... I'm close to forty- nowhere near twenty-five..." Johnson gestured to calm the crowd again. He glanced worriedly at Audrey.

"Surely we can fit just one more person on your aircraft?" The holographic man shook his head.

"We cannot - I'm very sorr-"

"Everyone is going to leave this planet!" Will lunged forward, "I'm not going to leave her behind!" The image began to flicker once more and started to fade.

"We will arrive there on Earth about three miles north, on the verge of night and day- when the equinox begins. Then and only then will the atmosphere allow us to enter. Not a moment sooner or later. Now that you are able to use the Atlas you should be able to track the time. We must leave and prepare for our departure."

Not long afterwards, the image disappeared leaving the thirty in a state of panic and chaos. Part of the group dispersed while others exchanged excited conversation with one another.

It was all going to be over soon. If all goes well, they would finally be able to leave Earth for good. Everyone except Audrey- and no one else seemed to care. He grabbed her and held her in his arms. He felt her shoulders rise and fall as she began to sob. He could not leave her there to rot on in this wasteland alone. There had to be a way... She gazed up at him and he thought he could see her tear filled eyes beneath her goggles.

"You should go Will. I have no other reason to live-"

"No!" He pulled her away abruptly. I'm not going if you're not going." She fell into his chest and continued to sob. He thought for a moment- and then an idea emerged into his mind. If one other person were eliminated, then Audrey would have a better chance of taking that person's place and board. It was not guaranteed to work, but there was a slight possibility. It would be worth taking a chance to find out.

He wrapped his arms around her and squeezed her gently.

"Don't worry Audrey. Everything is going to work out. You'll see..."

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It was difficult to decide whom he would chose to eliminate. For both survival and desire for companionship, he formed close bonds with each of the others. However none were as dear to him as Audrey.

He wanted to be swift and waited until the few final hours before the KAIROS aircraft was scheduled to land. All pods were emptied of only the bare necessities an they began to make their trek on foot towards the area where they were to wait t be escorted to their final home.

After slipping a glass syringe filled with a clear, liquid into his hand, he went to find Audrey. Once a person was contained with the solution he knew they would not allow them to board. The person would die in a days time. They kept such a poison on board as a biological weapon. Thankfully he was able to grab a tube before they packed it away.

He had already shared his plan with her, and although skeptical, she was willing to try anything. She stayed behind and hid her self from the others as the procession through the swirling gray dust solemnly wet by. He followed closely behind, watching his victim closely. It would be Ben- a man in his mid-twenties. When he believed no one was watching, Will burst into a forced run, holding the syringe high into the air and thrust it forward. The young man spun around, letting out a startled cry and leaped out of the way. The syringe missed and landed into Will's leg. The crowd had already dispersed and a few pushed him angrily to the ground. As he removed the syringe he could feel the concoction beginning to flow through his blood stream. Within seconds loud noise was heard overhead and he knew immediately that the KAIROS had arrived. The others ran towards the noise,

leaving him behind. He felt his legs grow heavy and he tried to call out for help, but it was too late.

Moments later, in the distance, he saw the aircraft take off into space. They were gone - and neither he nor Audrey were with them. Using all of the strength he had left he went to find Audrey. She ran to him with outstretched arms and embraced him sobbing.

"Audrey, I'm so sorry..." There were no more words to share. They both knew the end was near. He was even closer. They made a decision to walk for as long as they could in any direction, hoping to come across anything- perhaps other signs of life. Will felt weaker with each step.

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Will could feel tears stream down his face. It was one of the most beautiful sights he had ever seen. In the planet's last century, trees of this magnitude were rarities. As he felt the poisonous serum continue its' course through his weakened body he crouched and lay down in the pile of leaves. He knew it would be his final resting place. Audrey joined him, laying on her back at his side. She held his hand and they as they looked up in silence, staring into the sky above, in that moment they believed they were the luckiest beings on Earth.

THE END