The Serpent Underneath

by Julie A. Fragoules

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"Look like the innocent flower, But be the serpent under't."

- Lady Macbeth (Macbeth: Act 1, Scene 5)

Before

On the horizon before them civilization shuddered, like a mirage dancing in waves of heat above a desolate highway, before shattering to pieces against the sunset of humanity's greatest achievements and ambitions. There were people who saw it coming, though, and not just those unhinged few on society's fringe. Many saw danger approaching, people like Alexandra Segreti, who worked in national emergency management. People who understood the frail nature of a complex modern world, not merely the social and economic framework that kept their modern amenities and security intact, but also the physical infrastructure that kept an immense population warm, medicated and fed.

Most people, though, remained willfully ignorant, oblivious to the consequences of their failed ideologies and a lack of resiliency in the systems they relied on the most. Though a growing sense of anxiety spread, most considered a complete collapse unfathomable, as if stores would always be stocked with food and gas stations flush with fuel, as if electricity would always flow freely, their many methods of transportation and communication, their access to safe water, to hospitals and sanitation, their laws and order, *their world*, would always continue, not devolve into the cold darkness of desperation and depravity.

Alexandra and her family prepared for a future when they

would have to provide for themselves, when depending on the systems of civilization would no longer be possible. And yet, as society tumbled quickly toward that impending cliff, even Alexandra failed to foresee the extent of societal deterioration to come. At the time, she considered the approaching election a last frail hope, the last chance for the survival of the world she knew.

She had believed that an election could still make a difference, that it could change their nation's course and save the foundations of freedom. But even a victory at that stage amounted to little more than tying off a severed limb. They were still bleeding, still dying, in a nation that once towered in splendid luxuries beyond the imagination of most others. They had still brazenly discarded the sacrifices of their forefathers and failed to take responsibility for the consequences of their own ideological and political avarice. This was the world she saw: dangerous, reckless and frighteningly foolhardy.

Reflecting on these events, as she often did in the difficult years that followed, it was clear enough that it didn't matter which party or candidate took the helm. Neither side possessed the slightest desire to alter their nation's course, to give up even a fraction of their own power to prevent collective calamity. The few exceptions amid that madness, the honest players with good intentions, had little impact on the disastrous ambition of the political establishment. As the collapse neared, Alexandra continued to work for a government which too often failed to represent its people's interests or follow the dictates of its own laws. And, as the nation bled out, her family searched for a way to survive, to salvage some fragment of their lives and their heritage by preparing for the dark times to come.

It was a day some months before the final crash that would prove unexpectedly crucial to Alexandra many years down the road, the catalyst of events with consequences she could never have predicted. That fall day, her exposure to the working

conditions in the aftermath of the recent hurricane had taken its predictable toll, starting with a sore throat and moving rapidly to a vicious, flu-like malady. This left the raven haired 38-year-old feeling constricted and fuzzy-headed, balanced with the unexpectedly pleasant effects of her chosen medication, which provided a dissociative effect when taken in heavy enough doses.

With long flowing hair falling about her shoulders, Alexandra was a natural beauty, her high cheek bones, thick lashes and golden skin. She sat in a Disaster Recovery Center in an unremarkable strip mall in Laplace, Louisiana, conversing with coworkers about the senselessness of their government's rapid degeneration into bureaucratic morass.

"Our leaders insist on making decisions with the forethought of a five-year-old," Alexandra commented dismissively, "So what do you expect? We're inviting ruin."

It was easy for Alexandra to philosophize, given her pleasantly compromised condition. She enjoyed the refracted state of mind the medication imbued for the way it rebounded her thoughts in unanticipated angles, distancing her from the true gravity of their conversation. It was but a temporary reprieve from the realities of the near future and at the same time her physical condition darkly foreshadowed the disease and illness that would plague their lives as the systems of society began to fail.

This day, though, pharmacies still seemed to populate every corner and she had greedily quadrupled the suggested dosage of the medication just to get through the workday, to speak without erupting in a fit of coughing. As she sat in that Center, debating the anticipated outcome of the election with a handful of surprisingly like-minded coworkers, it still never occurred to her that this would be their nation's *final* Presidential election; that it could all come down in such a sudden, thunderous cacophony of destruction, much like the collapse of the once magnificent World Trade Center towers. Right then, though, she was still watching the

smoke billow out of the buildings, never imagining it could collapse so completely.

Sitting to her left was a fairly remarkable young man named Nathan Hambrice. Having barely escaped his teens, Nathan represented a rare combination of good looks and unpretentiousness that made him the darling of his elders and the subject of his peers' admiration. He sported medium length, slightly wild dark hair, a strong jaw and the most arresting eyes, grey bleeding into a black outline, his joyous nature giving them a luminous, silver cast. Nathan was the type of guy who befriended everyone, regardless of social stature or age, and proceeded completely oblivious to his own natural charm and attractiveness. He wore a traditional, made in China, navy-blue FEMA shirt, the Homeland Security emblem in red, white and blue on his left chest, and casual khakis, while Alexandra and her other co-worker, a plump, gray haired retiree named Janis Smith, stuck to civilian attire, at most donning a FEMA jacket or hat when a show of the agency insignia was required.

"My parents raised me to be self-sufficient and to help others in need," Nathan said. "I don't understand how so many people can allow themselves to become dependent on others for their most basic needs. It seems like a trap to me. But I still can't believe we'd let society fail completely. Human beings are resilient and Americans are not the kind to just give up. We'll turn things around, even if we have to go through a depression first!"

"I'm afraid that most parents these days may not be like yours," Janis countered. "That idea of independence just isn't taught, not like when I was young. My grandparents grew up in the Great Depression and they never let my parents forget how hard things could be. They passed that on to me."

"In a way, though, that was good," Nathan enthused. "You appreciate hard times, no rose-colored glasses. My generation, jeez, we like to think slow internet speed constitutes hard times!"

"Your generation isn't that different from mine," Alexandra countered. One couldn't help feel more cheerful in Nathan's presence, which, combined with Alexandra's efforts at self-medication, left her in an unusually upbeat mood, especially considering the foreboding nature of the subject matter at hand. "Humanity has a rotten track record but a very short memory!" Alexandra said. She sighed, feeling her words echo through a fractured reality before reaching her ears. She strived to focus her dancing vision but full clarity of sight and sound was presently beyond her. Her thought process, however, continued mostly intact and unmaligned. It was her interface with reality with which she struggled, but she tried to focus her mind outwardly again. She knew she shouldn't work in such a compromised condition but she wouldn't allow some common illness to keep her from her obligations.

"Still," Alexandra continued. "I fear your optimism is unrealistic. Except for those in the military, most people my age and younger have lived their entire lives without direct exposure to war or subjugation, the kind those in the third world or dictatorships experience on a daily basis. Sure, there are pockets of conflict and violence here, as horrible as anything we might imagine, but on the whole Americans think that losing electricity and garbage pick-up for a week or two after a disaster is something that will never happen, *should* never happen, as if modern society is above that.

"But we're not," Alexandra went on, smiling. "As I think you know from doing this job, a serious breakdown can occur from all manner of inciting events, natural or man-made." She didn't smile often in general conversation due to her reserved and serious nature in public and she refused to plaster on a smile that she didn't feel. Today she imagined it must be the medication that made the exchange exceptionally enjoyable, which made her ponder the consequences of long-term use.

"That's true, I guess," Nathan admitted with the enthusiasm of fresh insight. "A lot of us are just not exposed to the kind of hardship the poor across the world experience. We have such a naïve impression of the world sometimes, but," and a smile lifted his lips, "isn't a little radical optimism in humanity part of what makes us, *us*?"

The two women chuckled, charmed by his zeal. Then sadness rippled through Alexandra and she shrugged. "I don't know, kiddo. We may have gone too far. I think our leaders actually believe the best way to get out of debt is to spend more money. It's insanity. They're oblivious to how an economy actually works because they have deluded themselves into believing that they are just *so intelligent* that they can see beyond common sense and basic mathematics."

Janis scoffed, "As if you can improve the standard of living by mandating higher wages! They're just costing kids their jobs and raising the prices of everything."

"If that worked they could just mandate that everyone make fifty dollars an hour and no one would ever have to struggle again," Alexandra remarked. "Money represents wealth, and has value only so far as it represents production or services. Digitizing and adding more money to the pool doesn't increase the overall value. In fact, it dilutes its value. You can't *create wealth* by printing more money."

Nathan listened intently but Alexandra wasn't sure he was convinced. Still, he was respectful and at least open to the information they were attempting to impart. People like Nathan, the young, were the ones who would pay the price for the mistakes of their elders, she thought sadly.

"At least you're prepared," Nathan commented.

Alexandra nodded, the motion making her awareness wobble a little. "My family and I are more prepared for a breakdown than most," she admitted. Her thoughts drifted. Her

family weren't survivalist in any traditional sense, just people trying to develop the means for self-reliance. Having foreseen the inevitable consequences of their nation's reckless disregard for economic reality, they each downsized to reduce their financial obligations and consolidated their resources onto a reasonably isolated mountaintop in the hills of western North Carolina where various members of her family acquired adjoining acreages on a spring-fed creek.

"The satellite view on Google Earth was just incredible, how the creek and then steep cliffs surround most of your mountain and then with the river right there. The pictures are just beautiful," Nathan enthused. "The creek and the farm that runs along it."

"We love it," Alexandra smiled. Her parents, brothers and their families were doing their best to emulate the skills and mindset of their elders. Their now deceased grandparents had survived the Great Depression because they knew how to raise and preserve their own food, how to hunt and clean animals and mend their own clothing. They had a cellar to take shelter in when tornadoes threatened and knew better than to build in a flood plain. Being prepared and self-sufficient was just a matter of course, but Alexandra and her family had grown complacent with the ease that came with modern life. It was similar to the reason people in tornado country stopped building storm cellars and why people started building houses closer and closer to the water. Hubris and complacency.

Her family relearned those valuable lessons about how to cultivate the land and preserve food. They accumulated extensive stores of staples like beans, rice and flour, devised alternative fuels and developed the skills and methods necessary to persevere in the absence of regular commerce and infrastructure. And they ensured their capacity to defend these resources and themselves against others who had not similarly prepared, but she didn't tell Nathan

about that. She suspected his youthful optimism might preclude an appreciation of the dozens of firearms and tens of thousands of rounds of ammunition they had accumulated. If civilization crumbled, their preparations would not make life easy, but she believed they just might make survival possible.

"I'd like to see your family's land someday," Nathan said. "And even though I can't imagine a *total* collapse, I do wish I was better prepared for whatever might hit next."

"It's not too late to start," Janice, told him. "You don't have to be a *Doomsday Prepper*, just work to become more self-sufficient. Worry about preparing for hardship, not the end of the world. Learn how to cook from scratch. Learn how to defend yourself."

Nathan nodded but he lacked enthusiasm for the idea. "We have emergency kits, try to avoid processed and prepackaged foods, but I just don't like guns," he admitted.

"You don't have to *like* them," Alexandra countered, since Janice had broached the subject. "Just learn how to use them, just in case."

Alexandra was well-experienced in the mindset of preparedness, having worked in emergency management for many years. She labored primarily in the field of hazard mitigation, which focused on taking actions to build stronger and reduce future disaster losses. Unfortunately, she pondered, one could not elevate a home high enough to avoid the deluge from this coming storm.

"I do believe things are going to get worse, to what extent I don't know," Janis put in. "But there will be hard times ahead."

"And you know how most people react to an impending hurricanes or winter storms?" Alexandra remarked, "Emptying food shelves in a panic and then reacting with outrage when the amenities on which they have come to rely are dealt even a brief interruption." She knew it was those great expectations - that order would be restored and that the government would be there to

rescue an overpopulated and unprepared nation - that would be most people's undoing.

Nathan nodded, taking in their words with serious consideration.

Their conversation came to a halt then as a frail woman made a slow and labored approach to their table. She eased into a folding chair across from Nathan, his warm smile drawing her in. She was likely in her 80s by Alexandra's estimation, with deep wrinkles and small raised bumps on her aging skin, its color stretching from rich mahogany to yellowed brown. Her coarse, black hair was overtaken by a blend of grays that, race aside, reminded Alexandra of her deceased grandmother.

While Nathan immediately put her at ease, her underlying distress remained palatable. With a few basic questions, he was able to elicit a fair understanding of her circumstances. Flood damage to her home was quite severe and she did not have flood insurance or money for repairs; however, she had no intention of living anywhere else. This was far from an uncommon scenario. At that point in life, Alexandra couldn't blame her, but knew her options would be limited by the regulating powers of the local and national government.

"Before repairs can be made to your home, you will have to obtain a permit from the local building office or hire someone to do so," Nathan explained. "They will determine whether it can be repaired or, if the damage is too extensive, it may have to be demolished. Even if you are allowed to repair or rebuild, you will likely be required to bring your house up to the new Base Flood Elevations and meet all current building codes."

"Which would likely mean elevation of the structure," Alexandra added, knowing their terminology was often confusing to those not regularly exposed to it. She continued trying to master her distortions and focus on work.

"And who gonna pay for that?" the elderly lady countered.

"Those *jackasses* in D.C.?"

"Do you have flood insurance?" Nathan asked, desperately hoping to avoid deviation into politics.

"Honey, I *had* flood insurance 'fore they jacked my rates!" she countered. "I *have* ta eat. Don't *have* ta have insurance. Can't afford ta just build a new house. *That* not gonna happen!"

"All you can do right now is to try to take one thing at a time. Have you been able to get the house cleaned out? Is there mold present?" Alexandra asked.

"Well," the lady responded, "Did my best cleanin' up and some kids from the church hauled out da nasty stuff."

"Are you still living there?" Nathan asked.

"Let me tell ya somethin'," the lady became determined. "I's *born* on this land. My mother and her mother *born* on this land. No way I let anybody force me off it!"

"I understand," Nathan's sympathy for the lady's circumstances was genuine and he knew her options would be limited, given her advanced years and lack of funding for improvements. "Well, right now the best thing you can do is to talk to your local building office and see what they have to say, see if they have inspected your house and see what they're going to require. Then make the best decision for you. And there are a variety of volunteer organizations that may be able to help."

"Along with whatever assistance you may receive here, there may also be grants available to help with elevation or relocation, but those will come through the state," Alexandra explained in what felt like a circle of words which she hoped came out as intended. "So, you would need to ask your local officials if they have applied for any grants and make sure they know you're interested and need assistance and to keep you in mind in case they do get funds at some point in the future."

The lady shook her head, disgusted. "Would'na flooded, not fer da levy! They been trying to control this river since I's a

child. The good lord controls that river! All we do make things worse."

Alexandra nodded solemnly.

Nathan wrote several phone numbers down for voluntary organizations who were helping people repair their damaged homes, along with some groups and agencies that assisted the elderly. As he explained these potential avenues of assistance, Nathan walked around the table and helped her stand. She laced a frail arm through his and they made their way over to another table where representatives from one volunteer group were present.

As Alexandra watched, she wondered how many of the nations' elderly were facing their waning years without the comfort of family, of children, to help them through it, depending instead upon a government incapable to managing its own affairs. She also wondered how many people like Nathan were still being produced today, under the tutelage of modern American schools and the latest young batch of unprepared parents.

"I always imagine my own parents when I see an elderly person having to go through this all on their own," Janis said quietly once the lady was out of earshot, almost reading her thoughts. Alexandra nodded. Janis had been toiling on her government computer, working on another family's flood insurance claim issue, though she had also clearly paid attention to their conversation. "With the new laws, there's no way she's going to be able to afford to keep living there," Janis commented sadly.

"They'll have to drag her out screaming and scratching," Alexandra countered with admiration to the elderly lady's spirit.

Janis just shook her head. "No, they'll wear her down."

Alexandra knew she was right. Sooner or later the lady would give in. Alexandra could not help but wonder what would happen to people like her once the nation's financial fallacies started catching up with them, when the social 'safety nets' truly fell through. She gazed into the distance, thinking about the future

as a series of coughs battled through her defenses. It dawned on her that day, absently observing it all in her chemically-fueled haze, that they would witness the collapse of civilization live on television and social media, every horrible occurrence, every grandmother, every child, rapt in fear and brutality, captured in words and videos echoing through cyberspace; the innocent and the fragile falling prey to the desperate and the damned, with no one there to save them and scarce few capable of saving themselves.

It took many more months to come to fruition, for the great house of cards that had become their system of commerce and government to fall in a heap of debris but, as order faltered and as violence spread, people posted accounts of the events live. Alexandra, like millions of others, watched and read in horror. Publication of the spoken word was no longer about professional journalism or great literature. It was about recording history while trying to survive it, though a great many, as it happened, would not survive. It was the excited utterance of their expiring civilization. But the digital format was fleeting and most of those records only briefly graced the nation's computer screens before disappearing forever, an earthquake of power system failures rumbling through cyberspace as society buckled.

Nathan would not be there to see it, however. That evening after they closed the doors, Nathan hopped in his little compact rental car and headed back to the Hampton Inn in Metairie, only to be side-wiped by an eighteen-wheeler. It did not kill him, but Nathan survived many hours of surgery only to lapse into a deep and seemingly endless coma. Alexandra was the one driving with a chemically induced buzz, yet *he* was the one who ended up enmeshed in a twisted mass of metal. It devastated everyone who knew him, even those only briefly exposed to his warm and generous nature.

His parents and high school sweetheart, who was

apparently also his fiancé, flew in from Virginia to sit by his bedside and watch his too still form. As his parents watched their child fade into the hospital bed, a part of themselves surely faded with him. Alexandra often thought about them, later, thought about Nathan. In the years that followed, Alexandra wondered if maybe he had been the fortunate one, spared the ugliness that would become their world, sleeping through it, oblivious to the nightmare of the outside reality. His family moved him to a facility in Texas and provided for his long-term care. At the very least, Alexandra thought, he was in one of the only places that proved capable of maintaining any kind of medical care, though that was no guarantee. Things were fractured everywhere.

He didn't have to see the desperation that gripped the masses of starving, angry and terrified people and what otherwise peaceful human beings were willing to do to feed their families or escape the agony of starvation and hypothermia. The carnage was amplified in the densely populated cities where needs quickly outstripped supplies. The stock market fell within the space of a day, the collective toil and savings of a nation wiped out in a single blow, a sudden blast of cold reality that chilled modern civilization to its core. Humanity was laid bare, a fragile creature at the mercy of natural forces it could no longer control and base motivations it could no longer suppress.

Relative to the age of civilization, it had not been so many years before that bathrooms were holes in the back yard, farms were tilled by horse-drawn implements and water was pumped from the ground by hand. These elements of a preindustrial age were not so far removed from the skyscrapers, commercial airlines and mocha lattes as most preferred to imagine. Even those with some inkling of the darkness to come failed to fully envision just how deep the black soul of dominion and helplessness would run when the power grids and everything that depended on them began to fail. The unimaginable became inescapable and the means of

civilization gave way to a desperate preindustrial existence, before the long road to rebuilding a semblance of stability could be set upon.

And amid it all, beneath the darkened skies of humanities greatest fears and most vile proclivities, a single light, pure and innocent, entered Alexandra's world. Her child, her daughter Haven, began life as so many others were facing the end of theirs. To Alexandra's great sadness, Haven's father would never return from his military deployment overseas and his daughter would never experience the great nation that once flourished beneath the banner of liberty. Alexandra knew the future would not be cast by the hands of her generation. If hope were ever to take root again, it would be in the hearts of those they handed this calamity to: the young like Haven who would know no other world than the mess their parents left them. It would be up to the next generation to begin anew, for it would be decades before new versions of civil society would emerge from the mayhem to reestablish order.

#

Chapter 1

The Insects March Along

Twenty Years Later

The spring air cooled as the afternoon sun ducked behind a patchwork of clouds in a desolate countryside, marked by wildly overgrown scrub brush, small twisted trees and weeds springing determinedly though the cracking pavement that once carried travelers to destinations along the eastern coast. A cluster of workers, garbed smartly in khaki uniforms bearing black and fluorescent green markings and dark glasses that obscured their tense, young faces, cautiously eyed a line of wretched human beings as they approached the entrance to the weathered remains of what had once been a fire station.

After a close examination and with gloved hands gripping ugly, black rifles, they motioned each person forward. A dog's howl in the distance only heightened the young workers' vigilance as they prodded people forward with their weapons, maintaining a menacing presence despite their true fear of these people, fear of their potential for disease, the filthy attire and almost feral disposition that seemed so foreign to them.

One by one the tattered dregs of this untamed landscape approached and were allowed to enter the door. Among those in line was a somewhat bewildered young girl of ten, undersized for her age due to malnutrition, with brown hair tied into a pony tail and clothes that had been sewed together by hand from various scraps and rags. On her face a poorly healed scar stretched from eyebrow to ear, drawing closer scrutiny of the guards. Walking behind her was a middle-aged man sporting an extra layer of dirt invading every crack in his callused hands, with roughly cut hair and beard and coarse, sun-browned skin. Only a few yellowed teeth showed as he said something to the girl, her tiny hand wrapped around the fingers of his. A piece of pink cloth trailed from the grip of her other hand, some sort of talisman in a time when toys were few.

As the girl approached the wary guards she sniffled, a sign of something as minor as a cold or an early sign of the illness they feared the most. Diego, a guard with short, curly dark hair and emotionless face, poured water from a container into a tin cup and handed it to her. The girl's wide blue eyes looked from one of guard to the other and then to the cup of water as she licked her lips from thirst. Her hands shook as she struggled to pull it to her waiting lips but as the refreshing liquid neared, a violent compulsion overtook her and she forced the cut away as though it were poison. The cup ricocheted off of the ground, the precious water splattering in slow motion as the guards stepped back and directed their weapons toward the girl. Her companion tried to pull her away from them, placing himself before her, repeating the words, "She's not sick!" again and again.

The other outsiders scrambled away from them, suddenly rapt by terror of the fragile little girl far more than the armed men. Reacting by trained instinct, Diego fired two shots into the man's chest while the other guard, Sangria, a dark-skinned, muscular beauty with clipped black hair just long enough to cover her skull

and angle around her face, fired two more into the small chest of the girl, whose fragile body flung to the ground, suddenly motionless. There was screaming amid the gunfire but no one protested the act of the armed workers. Everyone knew that a fear of water was an early symptom of the contagion and they also knew there was no cure for the horrifying affliction which turned animals into snarling demons, intent on violence and mindless rage and provided humans with an equally horrifying death, a manic, drooling, writhing nightmare of madness and agony. The afflicted could not have been more terrifying had they truly been sent forth from hell by the devil himself instead of simply falling prey to a completely natural viral infection, reality proving ever more disturbing than any monster imagined by humanity.

Other young guards converged on the scene, encouraging the group of outsiders with guns and sharp commands to return to order and remain still. Despite his hard exterior, Diego blinked away tears as the others dragged the two limp forms aside. If the female guard was affected by the event, she did not make any display of it, hiding behind cold eyes. There was crying and whimpering around them but the guards lined the people back up. Diego refilled the cup in case it again proved necessary and restarted the process.

Once all of the outsiders were similarly scrutinized and allowed to enter, several guards established a perimeter around the building, vigilant of any threat, while others went inside to ensure no threat emerged from the outsiders, any of whom might well be infected but not yet displaying symptoms or might be otherwise prone to violence. The test merely verified the existence of an infection in those who were already beginning to show major symptoms. The disease itself could not be detected by any means they had available to them until it was too late.

#

The overcast sky heralded a gathering gloom and a chill wind lashed the flag of the New Republic in the grass field outside as Haven stole a glance out of a small window of their temporary Mobile Administration Center. Haven was one of the young workers, a lean, lengthy eighteen-year-old woman with coal black hair, just long enough to be pulled back smartly, exposing high cheekbones, a golden complexion and beautiful, deep brown eyes. Observant by nature and relentlessly curious despite the inherent risks, Haven covertly considered the varied inhabitants in the large room that once housed fire trucks.

Bright fluorescents hung over a cluster of chairs where a tattered collection of people waited, stark faces masking fear and smoldering animosity. Others sat at two lines of metal tables, trying to absorb their altered fates as their options were explained and documentation completed with subtle indifference by fresh-faced government representatives who always kept their distance from their subjects. The room still simmered with the tortured awareness of the shots fired outside and the inescapable knowledge of the circumstances which most likely necessitated such calculated violence, even though Haven and the others had not witnessed the event.

An awkward mix of monotony and dreadful apprehension permeated the air as the workers operated amid potential exposure to the deadly contamination to which these people were prone, a virulent strain of fatal madness passed through the exposure of saliva to a body's openings or the slightest break in skin. Beyond the flu-like symptoms and the fear of water that emerged after the disease had fully taken hold, there was no way to know who might be infected, meaning the young workers' incursion into the untamed territories of the New Republic came at a tremendous individual risk, the kind to which very few among them were exposed. If they exhibited symptoms after returning to the safety of

the *Community*, they would be quickly isolated and the infection contained, or so they were told. There had not been a major outbreak behind the *Community's* walls since her arrival, though stories still circulated about previous events, especially before animals were banned.

Each of the workers, their well-ordered cleanliness contrasting markedly with the people they processed, dressed in crisp khaki pants and tan polo shirts featuring the black and neon green emblem of the New Republic and sat across wide tables that kept them a safe distance from the outsiders. The tables wrapped around the room, creating a boundary separating the two groups while guards walked among the outsiders, ensuring compliance. Sitting at the back of the room, gazing intently into his electronic screen, was the leader of this young group of workers, a darkly handsome man with a most disturbing ability to inspire and intimidate, power laced up in charisma. He sported short black hair, slicked back impeccably, with eyes as black as volcanic rock and features of Spanish and perhaps a South American blend.

Adrien Damaso was one of the youngest to hold such a position, being just 31 when he obtained it and 36 now, but what he lacked in age he made up in confidence and a delicate touch of sadism, judiciously expressed. He seldom openly scrutinized his wards as they diligently performed their required tasks, but he always *saw* everything, as if instinctively able to sense every movement in the room, every sideways glance or moment of weakness, eliciting reverence and fear in equal doses. Few were so unfortunate as to glimpse his darkest gaze, drawn from the profound extents of his mind, to see beyond the cool, stoic expression and quick smile he commonly presented as a means to an end, but all sensed a certain level of treachery in his deliberate manner and manipulative charm.

Despite the inherent danger, Haven could not help but be drawn to him, to that stillness in his eyes that stretched deep into

his soul. Haven was unique among her peers. She was more reserved even when off duty than her fellows and potentially more dangerous to the system that ordered their lives. She had been raised by outsiders, her mother and her mother's family, and infected by the corrupting information of the past, exposure to which most within the *Community's* walls were carefully sheltered.

She enjoyed a perception engendered by her uncharacteristic upbringing which exposed to her truths about the world around her that others failed to see, or perhaps just neglected to acknowledge. She couldn't really be sure what her fellows comprehended because discussion of such things was a danger too frightening to risk. And while she could not say just yet if Adrien was simply brilliant, evil or both, she knew he was different and that alone, in a culture of conformity, was intriguing. Though Adrien's icy depths were usually stealthily camouflaged, Haven would sometimes catch what felt like a glimpse of his true soul behind that normally placid exterior, a slightest smile in the creases of his eyes at the most inappropriate of moments and sometimes, with it, a breath of pure malevolence. And yet he was always the embodiment of confidence and self-control, something she could not help but envy.

She saw a flash of his malevolence now as his gaze fell momentarily on a bulbous male seated across the room, arguing loudly with one of her co-workers whose face reflected no impact, backed by the silent approach of guards ready to defuse the situation with his blood if necessary. The workers often dealt with the angry and vile, but this man was a particularly repulsive specimen, especially for his excessive weight in the face of rampant starvation and dietary neglect. Though probably Adrien's age, the man was his opposite in every observable way, grossly unhealthy and unkempt, with a cocky belligerence reflecting a status he did not possess, battering the workers verbally when most people were afraid to raise a voice.

To a degree Haven shared her leader's distaste for the man but feared what Adrien was actually capable of, the depth of malice which emanated from him toward this man only hinted at in that moment of glaring intensity. Adrien caught her eyes and she returned them quickly to her work. It was neither proper nor prudent to be too observant, to demonstrate curiosity, and her position was too vulnerable to risk attracting attention. Drawn back to him, she found Adrien's eyes stoically locked on hers, though now displaying something other than malice, a veiled expression of interest. Withering beneath his gaze, Haven studiously returned to her work, hoping to escape his attention.

The workers were Assimilation Administrators, each beginning the very first step in processing outsiders, in this case residents of a scarcely populated stretch of Virginia coastline, through the phases of compelled absorption into the *Community*, a process disguised as disaster recovery. The area had been deemed *Green Space* and therefore 'inappropriate' for human habitation, a determination that was not much appreciated by those who lived there, of course. But the New Republic was not one to use direct force to see to the immediate imposition of its goals. Instead, a system of triggers was put in place to methodically nudge the owners off of their land in a piecemeal but deliberate process. Each year the incentives became more difficult to resist.

Homes damaged by events such as the hurricane which lashed this area just days before were to be condemned and the blight of their remains, of one more example of human development, would be removed from the sensitive and protected natural landscape, their inhabitants offered refuge within one of the designed cities. They would not be forced in at this point but most complied, accepting the offer of shelter and food once their own were laid waste. While they were not fully cognizant of the consequences of submission, most remained justifiably fearful of the possibilities.

People who insisted on living outside the walled cities would only be assisted in return for becoming a part of the *Community*, to toil on its behalf and to contribute equally, not just for a particular community but for the whole of the nation referred to as the all-encompassing *Community*. If the displaced residents declined conversion into civilized society, they were left to their own devices, homeless and exposed, no longer allowed to build or live on the land they once owned. It was a gradual but insidious process intended to move all remaining humans in the New Republic into the more densely populated cities, their walls separating humanity from the protected natural landscape that represented the vast majority of the nation. Through this and other programs, all humans would eventually be eliminated from the wild and allowed to exist only behind *Community* walls where they could be properly protected and controlled.

As Haven finished speaking with a grimy, peaked old man in weathered, fouled overalls who moved languidly toward the exit, she observed the others in her pack. That was what they called them, a pack: a young group of Admins, well-trained in government bureaucracy, coercively recruited from the ranks of students across the lands of the *New Republic* at the age of 13 and not to be assigned to a permanent position until the age of 19. Her pack deployed as a team outside of the planned communities, among the very few given that admittedly risky opportunity, to take advantage of nature's wrath in the implementation of Community Directives. Each pack was composed of young people representing an eclectic multiplicity of skin tones, ethnicities and racial ancestry, but the differences mandated by the *Department of Diversity and Fairness* blurred together amid carefully regulated conformity.

Hairstyles varied only in minor degrees. The females wore either short hair or longer hair kept tightly bound, and the men's hair was cropped close in designs which were substantially similar.

Their thick, brown canvas boots were each identical to each other. They each held themselves with the same poise, backs straight in identical burgundy chairs, high-set roosts from which they subtly looked down upon their subjects. Each pack member used identical computer screens and wore their photo identification attached to the same place on their left arms.

Some were shorter than others, some taller, but their muscles were all equally toned, with not a hint of fat. They displayed excellent general hygiene, meticulously maintained, their faces absent of blemish and the faces of the males smoothly shaved, without hint of shadow. The females wore no makeup or personal adornments, for any design would tend to individualize, to separate one from the others and weaken civil society, which was strictly forbidden by the *Community*. To Haven, the conformity was blinding. In fact, for the longest time the faces of her pack blurred together so that she had difficulty grasping hold of their individuality in her mind. She could separate them by races, by gender or color, but, at least in the beginning, it took an extraordinary effort to do so by individual personalities, so routinely and successfully suppressed.

After the first few months' exposure, however, she had begun to truly see the psyche that resided within their careful facades, the frightened, bitter children who confused age with maturity and had never learned how to integrate reason and compassion into the world view they were fed. The other packs were even worse to Haven's way of thinking. Given privilege in reward for obedience and rejection for nonconformity, they chose to forsake independent thought in favor of collective unity, too inexperienced in the world to truly appreciate the cost. They all proceeded through their tasks, following carefully laid out policies in a kind of mind-numbing routine, knowing the day's toil would pass and their rewards would soon be indulged.

Many years ago, this center would have helped eligible

disaster survivors acquire financial aid or various other forms of assistance after a devastating natural or man-made event, but that was well before Haven's time. That was when her mother worked for the former government, before the Great Collapse, the power failures, terrorist attacks and civil conflict that followed. Back when the New Republic was merely a set of policies, much like Franklin Delano Roosevelt's *Great Society;* and back when *mitigation* meant taking action to protect people and property from future hazards, not action to *take* private property and assimilate nonconformists for the good of the society. But definitions changed.

Unfortunately, history was no longer considered socially relevant within the mandated curricula of the *Community* Education System. Haven's fellow workers seemed to know little of the way things were before the nation was shattered and sporadically reassembled, let alone the complexities of such relatively ancient history as the early twentieth century, a time when they were taught that leaders were unconscionably restricted from acting for the good of the people by an outdated Constitution and a short-sighted devotion to the reckless and absurd concept of liberty. To the *Community*, liberty was just another word for selfishness.

Haven was raised differently, covertly so, her small community being far removed from the walled cities and graced with an appreciation of the greater realities of this revised nation. But her coworkers, being carefully conditioned from childhood and fully immersed in the ideological mire, seldom questioned their instructions, apparently believing wholeheartedly in the fundamental fairness and correctness of the New Republic and its web of invasive controls, each designed to protect the public from themselves, from foolish choices, reckless behavior and unhealthy impulses. Haven believed they were not yet experienced enough to reconcile the inconsistencies and failures of this system or, at the

very least, were not willing to risk giving voice to them. To Haven, that was just as great a sin, perhaps because it was one she committed herself.

Her fellow Admins looked on those sorry creatures living outside of the carefully controlled existence of the *Community* as simply too foolish and ignorant to comprehend the better life assimilation offered them, the outsiders' thinking being too infected by corrupt notions of the past to appreciate the benefits of being a part of something bigger and greater than themselves. It was the government's duty to compel these resisting remnants of that failed system through enforced regulatory coercion into the safety and security of the *Community* walls, where they could do their part to contribute and stop abusing the natural landscape.

Caught between tasks, Haven noticed an attractive co-worker with soft, honey brown skin and haunting eyes named Mikaela, stare expressionless into the darkness growing beyond the small window, giving the impression not of one lost in thought but devoid of thought. Perhaps she was unaware, Haven thought, of the source of her emotional dissonance, an empty sea stretching into the infinite horizon. Her attention drawn back with the approach of a new outsider, Mikaela proceeded as if no distraction had occurred, a measure of distaste entering her expression as she attended to the next retched example of nonconforming humanity.

Looking into each of her pack's faces, Haven found little emotion escaped their well-conditioned expressions; a smile here, a note of displeasure or revulsion there, anxiety underlying everything. Their eyes, like those of most people of the *Community*, contained a shadow of indifference refracting through a deep distance. Some were different, subtly more malicious or less, some sharper and more aware, shades of character less obvious to the casual observer. But they were a dangerous lot: even the ones who might be thought of as friends might in the next moment, given a turn of events, be just as likely to sacrifice each

other to the Guard if that action would allow them to escape a similar fate. And her pack was far more kindly than the other packs they interacted with. Theirs, in fact, was a touch removed as its membership was made up of the best of the lower classes instead of the children of those already immersed in the administration of this nation.

While most of her pack made an attempt to smile when greeting the public and drew their faces into an appropriate solemnness as they listened to their sad stories of struggle and loss, most lacked an ability to truly empathize with the outsiders. Groomed into a narcissistic state, they were disconnected and divested from anyone but themselves, and substantially incapable of experiencing sympathy for the plight of people who felt so alien to them. At least that was what Haven came to believe; a prejudice, perhaps, born of her own feelings of alienation in their world, but in the years that she had known them, few had offered evidence for a contrary conclusion.

Unlike the others, she had been raised with her elders, had learned their tales and came to appreciate their experience. Her co-workers were friendly with her but not entirely trustworthy, and she was always aware of the great gulf of perspective and belief between her and others in the *Community*, and all of the risks that reality posed. Theirs was, on the whole, the first generation born and raised behind *Community* walls, with virtually no awareness of the past or understanding of life before the Collapse except the information they were fed, no access to the undiluted philosophies and achievements of their true forefathers, no insight into the actual causes of their failure.

Haven covertly considered a male of her pack as she attended to her digital screen. Tao Mason was one of those, if you looked hard enough, who had something slightly malignant behind his eyes, but still some innocence there as well. A handsome youth with a more imposing stature than most, Tao’s hair was almost as