Lauren Kalista
Short Story

0100 hours when the once exuberant city of Knighton was beginning its downward spiral to defeat. The year 3030 marked the worst year in centuries with corrupt, robotically augmented leaders controlling virtually every aspect of living; civilians living every waking hour in fear of their own government somehow finding any reason to get rid of them; military tactics being used on their own people. Certainly, most feared this was the beginning of the end in more than one way.

I was awoken by not only the sounds of sirens that soon escaped before I could visualize what was truly going on, but the sheer sounds of those I once knew pleading for help…which seemed to vanish quickly, as well. I found myself in a cold sweat accompanied by the pumping of adrenaline throughout my body at an uncomforthing rate that my mind couldn’t keep up with. I searched around my being ambiguously trying to grasp what reality had quickly become for me anxiously screaming out for someone, anyone to hear me.

“Alexa, Jenny, Mark, Davis…?” I cried out in hopes of any sort of reply, which lead me to slowly lose hope with each moment of silence that soon enveloped all around me.

Surely, I was sleeping and this was all a nightmare, well…at least that’s what I so desperately hoped for. Frantically, I rushed around the house breaking down any door or obstacle in my way and there was seemingly nothing to be found. The living quarters of my family remained untouched…but there was no one to be found…anywhere.

I returned to my room and with all the doubt in the world and truly trying to resist the possibility of it all being real,
I rested my head in my hands and remained there for what felt like a year. I got up and started the dreadful journey to the outside…each step down bringing me closer and closer to reality. I grabbed my gear off the rack and headed out fully prepared for what I thought was the worst to come.

The society I lived in required all men at age ten to join the forces and it’s now been 8 years since then, and each and every day has been spent practicing drills and training for what they thought was the worst that could happen to society. Well, they thought wrong, and it seemed like they were “preparing” us for nothing at all in hopes of us not being able to retaliate if ever something like the current were to happen.

As I took my first step outside, I did a complete 360 in the middle of the street and was absolutely speechless at my surroundings that were engulfed in smoke and fire with no ability to see a mere twenty feet away in any direction. Again, I called for my neighbors, friends, family which was out of pure amusement, as if anyone were actually going to respond after the thousandth time I called.

Everything was grey and dark but I could tell it was morning by now. I searched house after house endlessly for any sort of sign to what was going on. I approached a house that was almost completely in shambles, not necessarily concerned if it were to collapse on me in any way. I walked through the remains of the house and didn’t recognize it at all…but out of the complete silence I heard shuffling in the distance. Rushing upstairs, I peered through every room, flipping furniture shouting “Can anyone hear me?!?”

In the corner of a small bedroom that looked like it had been torn through already, a faint, fragile voice said “Mom? Dad?”
I removed all the items barricading the little girl behind it as she sat trembling holding onto something that happened to be a picture frame of her family.

“Hello.” I said. “What is your name?”

She remained silent for a few moments as she tried to gather enough gust to answer me when she said “E-Ella.”

I soon realized we were both in the same situation. Our families were long gone, nowhere to be found or heard from, we were alone, up until this very moment.

“Hi Ella, I’m Z.”

She remained quiet for the majority of the time spent together. I took her along with me continuing the search for others for hours on end with no luck of anyone else being alive or simply around still. As we walked up and down streets, it was clear to see the flames growing faster and faster ripping through anything and everything in its path, limiting the number of houses we still needed to check. Occasionally, I would turn around checking to see if Ella was still by my side; she made no noise at all, so it was fairly easy for me to assume she got away. We walked as far as we could before it got dark and as far away from the areas engulfed in flames.

It was a constant battle to keep myself together, without wanting just to give up which seemed like a fair decision before this girl came into my life and now suddenly I feel as if I’m responsible for her and it was my duty to help her which meant resisting the temptation to give up.

I resisted the urge to ask too many questions regarding Ella’s family: if she remembered anything; if she was even okay at all seemed like a difficult question. The few times we did converse, she rarely spoke more than one word in reply.

It was undeniable that our own leaders were to blame for this, and in the far, far distance all that could be seen were the several governmental buildings still standing as if the
surrounding environment didn’t completely shatter around them. I never understood why this happened. To this day, I question why a world so corrupt in its being would torture its citizens and leave them behind.

There wasn’t much of an option regarding where we go to next. Either leave behind everything – not that there was much left to leave – and start new, if possible. Or attempt to walk into the danger zone where we would be risking our lives, not knowing what is to come in any way. Would it even be worth it? Living a life without anyone meaningful in it and forever not knowing what actually happened? It seemed like there was a clear answer we didn’t necessarily want to face.

With everything behind us, and the unknown still on our minds, Ella and I walked hand in hand toward something we weren’t even sure was out there. A new life, a fresh start.

We approached the end of the seemingly never-ending street at the far side of town where we both have never been before. It was still dark, but far less smoky and grey than other places we’d been. On both sides and all around were tall trees of various sorts covering whatever sky was still visible to those below them. All around us the air was filled with pure silence…it was calming but ambiguous at the same time.

Throughout it all, Ella held onto my hand with the tightest grip… as if she were holding on to the past she still hoped would be around the corner somewhere. The end of the street vanished – just ended, and before us was nothing but a few scarce trees and what seemed to be a mirage of a way out of all of this. I thought… could this really be what it looks like? And then I’d try to get a grip of what I was trying so desperately to convince myself it wasn’t.

A way out. A gate that stood alone with no accompanying fence around it. Just a large, tall gate that no one has ever seen or mentioned before. It was foreboding and quite
intimidating as well. We inched closer and closer to it, and before I could stop it, Ella reached out and grasped the handle and opened the left side. I was anxious and somewhat relieved at the same time. She looked up at me in awe, but I couldn’t grasp what I envisioned before me, just behind that very gate. It was a completely different world; it looked bare but so peaceful and untouched. I stood there in the same spot for a while in pure amazement, and right before me I watched as Ella ran ahead past the gate and I gasped with my hand covering my mouth.

She gestured with her hands for me to follow her past this gate. But for the first time since I had found this girl, a smile almost unbelievable came across her face and I was shocked beyond belief. For the first time, Ella was happy; she looked as if she’s forgotten everything she had endured only a few footsteps prior to where she currently stood. I was truly amazed at how free she was and genuinely overjoyed with what seemed like the escaping memories and fears of what used to be reality slowly vanishing in my mind.

It was like nothing I’ve ever seen or encountered in my life. Everything was covered with light and the environment looked like something from above. A polar opposite of the world we’d left behind only minutes ago.

I remained cautious of where I was and where I stepped, and Ella remained in her stance of happiness. Surely, I was happy, but I couldn’t just give up everything…that is for a while at least.

The time is now 0100 hours…the start of the beginning…year 1.

Me and Ella facing the world we’d left behind.