

## Exile

An old woman on a self-imposed exile is confronted by the results of her creation that destroyed mankind.

And there he was. He towered above her but she held the sharpened rake in front of her, a warning of what would happen if he took another step. She tried to contain her shaking arms.

It had been three years since Dagny had seen another person. The place in the dark wintery North that she'd chosen for her exile was already long abandoned; the only signs of life were the fish and the birds. Her lifeline to the world was her touch screen device. And then one day, everything stopped. Suddenly there was no more radio or television. The Internet lasted only a while longer. That was two years ago.

Coward whimpered behind her legs. He'd attached himself to her the day she left and was named for his inability to stand up for either of them. He did nothing to help and ate half her food, but a bond had quickly formed between the two. He was hers.

The man coolly assessed the rake, then Coward, and then her.

'I'm not here to hurt you,' he repeated.

'Where did you come from?'

'I've been tracking you for a while. You've been a hard woman to find Dagny Ballard.'

Dagny stepped backwards on the ice, Coward shuffling along with her.

'I won't ask how you know my name. You come alone?'

The man nodded and stepped forward. Dagny thrust the wet metal spikes closer to his neck and they glinted in the cold half light of dawn. Her watery blue eyes dared him to take another step. He raised his hands in defence.

'I won't come any nearer. Yes, I'm alone.'

'And are you?' Dagny asked grimly.

'Am I what?'

‘Don’t bullshit me, man. You know what I’m asking.’

He nodded and revealed a blue tattoo inside his wrist.

‘I’m a Slavanoid. But I’m also human. Let me help you.’

He circled around her and neared the hole in the ice she’d created earlier. The line she’d attached was jerking wildly, but Dagny had bigger problems than a broken reel. She braced the rake ready to strike, but all he did was pull the line out the hole. A gleaming silver fish came with it, and Dagny’s heart leapt despite itself. It had been two days since she’d caught something. The Slavanoid swiftly flicked the line and the fish’s head was dashed against the ice. It reminded Dagny of what he was capable of and all of a sudden she felt exposed.

‘Gather my things and come with me.’

‘I’ve told you I won’t hurt you.’

‘Yeah, well I haven’t made my mind up that I won’t hurt you. Do it.’

He wrapped the fish in an old cloth and packed her meagre items away in her backpack. He was about the right age for a Slavanoid, in his mid thirties. His race was undetermined, but that had nothing to do with why he was what he was. No, he was chosen for another reason. He stood up and turned around.

‘Which way?’ he asked.

‘Forward,’ she said with a prod of the rake. ‘Then left at the tree line.’

They moved forward. Coward scurried along beside her, looking up at her for guidance, but Dagny’s eyes scanned the trees. Their best hope was to follow the tree line back. There was no way she was going into that forest if there were more of his kind in there. She steered them towards the shore, around the black patches that indicated thin ice. It was dangerous crossing this section of the lake but it was the quickest way to cover.

‘Why are you looking for me?’ she asked.

He glanced over his shoulder but kept walking.

‘When was your last contact with NexGen?’

‘I’m asking the questions here. Just talk.’

His shoulders stiffened, she could tell she was annoying him. Good.

‘The month you disappeared there was a call for a public trial. All existing employees of NexGen were held accountable for unsanctioned gene editing and manipulation of what were colloquially referred to as the ‘Slavs’.’

Dagny knew all about that.

‘Old news, fella. Why do you think I left in the first place?’

‘Well do you know what happened at those trials?’

‘They were punished?’

‘Executed, yes. All employees.’

Dagny felt a shiver that had nothing to do with the cold. All of her friends were dead. Richard from Research, her incompetent assistant Lila, Jorge from Floor 26 who would exchange a mild flirtation with her. When she left she knew she’d never see them again, but the news of their deaths...

‘Stop!’

He stopped and turned back towards her. She swayed as she felt a wave of grief and guilt engulf her, but tried to regain her footing. She was too old and in too much danger to be mourning dead friends. His arms automatically reached out for her but she raised her rake once more.

‘You’re straying us onto the path,’ she said shakily. ‘Stick to the tree line.’

He nodded and turned away again. As she wiped away some hot tears, Coward head-butted her thigh as if consoling her in his own pathetic way. She patted his snout and followed the Slavanoid once more.

‘The problem was,’ he continued, ‘the executions didn’t finish with NexGen.’

‘What do you mean?’

‘Certain Slavs have risen to power since you’ve been gone. Have you been keeping up with the news?’

‘Sure, I check my Facebook feed every morning.’

He chuckled, despite himself.

‘Well, those networks no longer exist. Human input is no longer a valid contribution.’

‘Why did it go silent?’

‘Why did what go silent?’

‘The Internet, the news... The last I saw everything was heading towards an understanding. The Slavanoids were given citizenships and rights. One of you held a Senate seat for Christ’s sake. What happened to everyone?’

They’d reached her hut. It was a ramshackle shed left by a fisherman who gave up the sport decades earlier. She’d lined it with old rags and branches, and managed to survive three winters despite its leaking roof and rat roommates. He stopped and turned to her.

‘The people responsible weren’t enough. All of humanity had to be wiped out to pay for what they’d done to the Slavs.’

He turned and crossed the threshold into her hut. Dagny stood, her heart beating violently. So that’s what happened. She knew it. Deep down, that hunch was there. There was no way the world could shut up all at once. Something had wiped it

out. She scurried up the steps behind him and shut the door, Coward slipping in before it closed.

‘You killed innocent people?’ she panted.

He turned and Dagny realised how close they were. She brandished the rake in front of her again, not that she’d have much room to swing it.

‘I didn’t,’ he replied. ‘We all did.’

‘How can you wipe out everyone? At once?’

‘Thanks to your gene editing there were certain illnesses we Slavs were invulnerable to. It was just a matter of introducing it to the water supply once we’d discovered that.’

‘Stop calling it ‘my’ gene editing. Do you remember me examining you? I was nowhere near the Slavanoids. I worked in Research & Development.’

‘But it was your idea, wasn’t it? Your proposal that led to the Slav program?’

It was more a statement than a question. He stared at her; his face was blank. There was no hostility, no pain. He betrayed nothing. Like the soldier he was made to be.

‘So that’s why you’re here. Every last one of us must pay.’

‘I’m not here to kill you, Dagny. I’m here to collect you. We need your help.’

Dagny shook her head and stared down at Coward. The Slavanoids didn’t need help. Their whole point is that they were self-sufficient and skilled. They were created as part of an initiative to curb the lower classes. Every orphan under the age of five gene edited to become a useful member of society. But then the orphans weren’t enough. Targeted research sought out inefficient bloodlines and began seizing their children, and the term ‘useful’ became a phrase used by politicians, the government, and eventually the military. What began as a simple exercise in trying to better a

child's chances in life became an all out military operation to create super soldiers.

No, they didn't need any help from her.

She leapt forward and thrust the rake to his throat. The Slavanoid grabbed the metal spikes in defence and pushed back, and Dagny cried out as the rake handle cracked into her sternum. Coward leapt up and barked madly at Dagny's cry. The Slavanoid kept pressing, the spikes were cutting through his lean fingers, and bright red gore oozed down the silver metal. He didn't flinch however, and Dagny realised that he could've killed her at any point if he wanted – his strength was ten times what hers was.

'Slavanoids don't need help!' she shouted over Coward's noise, 'If you're going to kill me, just do it!'

Coward nipped at the Slavanoid's feet, his wild barks were distressed and deafening. Dagny forgot the pain in her chest out of concern for Coward. He was barking viciously in her defence. Maybe it was the smell of the Slavanoid's blood but all of the fights that Coward never fought were consuming him now in his desire to protect Dagny. The Slavanoid kicked him away and kept Dagny pinned back.

'I'm not here to kill you Dagny! The Slavs are dying!'

He gave her a final push that sent her sprawling, and Coward leapt towards the Slavanoid, his teeth bared. The Slavanoid struck out an arm that connected with Coward's head. Dagny heard a sharp crack and Coward dropped to the floor, dead.

Dagny gasped with horror and scurried towards him on her knees. His head was at an odd angle, and a trickle of blood had escaped his nose. Dagny called his name softly, but Coward didn't respond. Her breathing became ragged, and all of a sudden she was crying. Crying for a dumb dog that never did anything. She buried her face in the nook of his neck, the warmth of his skin still detectable beneath the wiry

fur. The Slavanoid stood in the corner, the rake still in his hands. He watched her impassively and waited until her grief subsided.

When she finally lifted her head she felt his hands on her upper arms. With a firm grip that she had no choice but to obey, he lifted her to her feet and pushed her towards the door. She stole one last look at Coward. His paws were tucked underneath him; he could be asleep for all anyone knew. Dagny dragged her eyes away and stepped out into the freezing cold air.

He marched her in front of him and they walked in silence. The only sound was their boots crunching on the newly fallen snow. It fell fast and heavy now, melting into the hot tears that streamed silently down her face. It wasn't until they'd reached the frozen lake that he spoke.

'I'm sorry about your dog.'

She stopped walking but didn't face him. Instead she stared down at the patches of thin black ice they were heading towards.

'That was an accident, I swear. I didn't mean to hit him, I just meant to push him away.'

She turned and faced him. For once there was emotion on his face. He looked genuinely upset at Coward's death.

'Why are the Slavanoids dying?' she asked.

'The gene editing. Shortened life spans and sterility. We were designed to be efficient, not grow into old people and have children. That would be a drain on infrastructure and society.'

Dagny nodded. She remembered reading that footnote when the final proposal crossed her desk. Her germ of an idea to better mankind was twisted and warped into



this cold, clinical experiment on innocent children. This child that stood in front of her now, thirty years later.

‘We need you. Your original proposal. There was merit in your ideas, and if you work with us, we may be able to undo what’s been done.’

The Slavanoid was now shaking with emotion. Dagny could sense his frustration and his outrage at what his life dealt him, bubbling beneath the surface all this time. She shook her head.

‘What you’re talking about is impossible. It will take years of research and trials to even get close to a solution.’

‘We have maybe six, seven years Dagny.’

Dagny shook her head once more.

‘I won’t do it.’

‘I’m sorry, but there’s really no choice in the matter.’

Dagny looked up and saw the gun in his hand. It gleamed black against his pale skin.

‘We wanted to take you willingly. We sent just one of us. We didn’t want to threaten you. But you’re all that’s left of that idea. You’re essential to our success.’

Dagny was scared, but shook her head. She’d rather die. The Slavanoid sighed and the bullet pierced Dagny’s thigh. She cried out sharply and fell to the ice. It cracked beneath her and she could feel icy water seep into her clothes. The Slavanoid leaned towards her.

‘This will slow us down, but I can carry you for a while.’

His arms slid beneath her and Dagny grabbed him by the neck. She twisted and pinned him underneath her. The crack in the ice gaped open and in a moment they were both thrashing in the water.

Icy needles pierced Dagny's skin, and her breath was ripped from her lungs as the cold overtook her body. She could still feel the heat from the bullet in her thigh, and the pain was intensified by icy water that penetrated her nerve endings in the wound.

Again and again she pounded the icy edge of the hole with her fist. It broke away like soft frosting on a cake, until finally her fist slammed into something solid. Gripping it, she hoisted herself out of the water and dragged her body to more solid ice.

'Help me!'

She turned to find the Slavanoid thrashing in the water; he'd tried going the other way, further into the thin ice. He was struggling to keep above water. She guessed grimly that swimming was something that had to be learned rather than gene edited. He reached out towards Dagny. She panted painfully but remained where she was, watching him drown. And then, he was no longer there.

The water stilled and the ice bobbed back to the surface. Slowly she hoisted herself to her feet. She had to get moving, get warm and figure out what to do. She could survive this, but she hoped against Hell she wouldn't. She turned and began the precarious walk back to the shoreline. She wouldn't help the Slavanoids. Her ideas, her mistakes and her attempts at a better world, would die with her.