

HERE THEN GONE

by Degen Hill

ANNA

Anna Saarinen had always known she would die. It wasn't something she incessantly thought about, but it was there, always at the back of her mind. For better or for worse, she also knew how and when. These days, everyone knew, that's just how things were. One way or another, life had to come to an end. When the Exodus Project was introduced over a century ago, it capped life at 75. Death was still an inevitable fact of life, except now it was regulated. With only 75 years to live and a known Deathday, life on Earth changed.

Much like breathing or drinking water, death was also a fundamental aspect of life itself – or at least that's what the slogans from the Exodus Project had said. "The ultimate sacrifice" they preached, making the case that the collective was more important than the individual. It was pointless to advertise it, Anna thought, since getting the chip, or Exo as most called it, was mandatory, but the necessity to maintain order remained. Anna understood the logic behind Exo, but her morality constantly wrestled with her rational reasoning. A constant back and forth, a mental duel of two opposing forces. She believed, even if she accepted Exo as "necessary," five years old was too young to get a chip implanted into a person's spine. She remembered some clinical study stating that a child's bones were softer, allowing the chip to unobtrusively adhere to the spine as the bones grew. Absurd, she thought.

At one point or another in her life, she had fallen on both sides of the issue. Pro-Exo – it was necessary to regulate death and reduce the population in a world with finite resources. Anti-Exo – it was morally wrong to end someone's life at 75 using a microchip to shut down the central nervous system. Back and forth she went, with her thoughts evolving as the years went by. At 74 years old, there wasn't much point engaging in debates about Exo. Whether or not she agreed with it, she had accepted it, or at least come to terms with it. For Anna, her life in Finland was the only one she'd known. Her country had embraced the Exodus Project, hailing it as a "necessary and effective means towards global prosperity" when it was first introduced. Anna didn't share the same sentiments.

Anna had led a good life, or at least she believed it to be. Deep down, like any person, she had thoughts about unfulfilled potential and wondered if the choices she made were the right ones. Had she said everything she'd wanted to? Did she love the people in her life as much as they deserved? Was having a daughter the right thing to do?

In the end, she thought, people aren't much more than a memory in the minds of others. We live on through how we're remembered. Anna always wondered how long the memory of her would remain after she'd gone. Would she always be remembered? Or would someone eventually say her name for the last time?

She mulled over these questions as she sat quietly in long white robes contrasting with the dark wooden deck that sprawled out across the beach and into the ocean. The cool air of the evening blew across her face and played with her grey hair that still had streaks of blonde in it from her youth. Anna's blue eyes looked out across the Baltic Sea that seemed to move in a way she had once described as organized chaos. Laughter filled the air, and the faint light from the candle-lit torches provided just the right amount of light.

She began to tap her foot, bouncing her knee up and down in a constant movement to alleviate the anxiety that was building. No matter how many times people told her not to do it, old habits were hard to break.

"Is this how you'd imagined it?" asked her husband Matias, his hair still thick, but now white and softer than when they had met. She looked at his face with his strong jaw and the same sparkle in his eye that she fell for decades ago. She'd imagined this day many times, her Deathday, when she would cease to exist. It was hard to answer his question. She'd fallen in love, married, had a child, traveled, and now, was any of that "meaningful"? The question ran through her mind, louder than the surrounding noise.

She thought of the many conversations she had had with Matias, asking him what the point of any of it was. They had talked for hours about the meaning of life, and how Exo had affected how humans viewed the hours, days, weeks, and months that constituted one's life. She remembered a fierce debate they once had concerning the value of a long life compared to one of quality, and the discussions they'd had about enjoying their days together rather than simply "passing the time" until there was no more time to be had.

"No," she said, "it's better." Matias placed his hand on hers as the waves continued to crash upon the beach. The sun was setting, and the sky transformed into an array of yellow, orange and red that reflected off the blue water. Anna looked out across the sea while she clasped her husband's hand.

Had she lived a meaningful life? The question seemed to repeat itself in her mind. As a veterinarian, she'd seen life slip away right through her hands, but she'd also saved countless lives, bringing her joy and a sense of hope. She remembered her friend from university, Helga, had once asked her why she wanted to be a vet.

"Humans have a controlled lifespan, and animals don't. I want to do everything I can to bring as much life to this world as possible. Because out of everything in this world, they're the innocent ones, and they need someone to care for them," Anna responded.

She'd also raised an inquisitive and independent daughter, Olivia, and created a life she felt was worth dying for. Once more she turned to Matias and said, "I'm genuinely happy."

"That's all I've ever wanted for you," he said, squeezing her hand ever so slightly.

Coming to terms with her inevitable death had been something Anna struggled with throughout her life. Even now, in her old age, her rebellious spirit had contemplated if suicide would somehow be a more honorable death, to know she was making the choice instead of some system designed to create the perfect utopian society.

However, she had decided to let nature run its course. Nature, she thought, now included a high-tech chip implanted in her neck that would shut down her nervous system leading to her immediate death. No matter how much she disagreed with Exo, it still seemed better than taking her own life.

Now, here, surrounded by her friends and family, with the cool night air and the warm glow of the floating fire orbs on the perimeter of the deck, Anna felt whole.

"It's only three months," he had said. "I'll be with you again before you know it." Anna had always felt guilty about leaving her husband alone in the world, if only for the few months until Exo took his life as well. She wasn't sure if life inherently had meaning, or if Exo had somehow forced her to seek meaning due to her inevitable death. If she had grown up in a Pre-Exo world, she might have died alone in bed one day, taking all the things she wished she had said or done to the grave with her. Now, with her life down to a few hours, she felt content with the life she'd led, knowing at this point it was futile to continue second-guessing all the choices she made.

Soft music and laughter filled the air as Anna stood with Matias by the deck rail that overlooked the sea. People were drinking wine, dancing, or sitting with each other sharing memories about those who had lived before them. For a time, Anna stood with her husband and silently took in her surroundings. She felt peaceful as if this were exactly where she was supposed to be.

She turned towards the party and clinked her glass of vodka with a fork to grab everyone's attention.

"First, thank you, everyone, for being here this evening. Deathdays aren't always easy to get through, but I'm honored that you're here with me tonight. I've had a lifetime to ponder how Exo has impacted our lives. Like many of us, I resented it. I was angry. Which is why I found it difficult to reprimand my daughter for similar sentiments when she was younger." The audience laughed, having experienced similar feelings about Exo at one time or another.

"Today, however, I've accepted my death. Whether natural or induced, my death was inevitable, as is all of ours. Knowing when I would die has been a blessing and a curse. It's allowed me to be here, with all of you, and it's allowed me to live the life I wanted. But it's also taken away part of the mystery, the intrigue, and thrill of living. I love all of you so much. Don't think of my death as a passing, but a new beginning. One day, we'll all be gone, but it's up to us, now, to leave an indelible mark on the world and those close to us. Seize life and live."

The crowd raised their glasses in honor of Anna, and she raised hers as well.

Time seemed to stand still as the party carried on. Anna talked with her friends and laughed at the memories that others shared. It was as if her life were flashing before her eyes, somehow physically manifested in the room before her. Olivia was here, as were her friends and the gifts they had brought – scrapbooks, old photos, memorabilia from her younger days, and stories, which, for Anna, were the greatest gifts of all.

From behind, Olivia placed her hand on her mother's shoulder and said, "It's time."

With the guests still chatting away, Anna made their way down the stairs onto the beach with her husband, daughter, and younger brother. It was almost midnight. Anna turned to face the three most important people in her life.

She stared at her daughter's long brown hair that was beginning to show hints of gray and her green eyes before embracing Olivia in a hug, trying to hold back the tears. As Anna let go, she grabbed both of Olivia's hands and said, "I'm so proud of you and who you've become. You're everything a mother could want in a daughter. It's been such a pleasure getting to know you and watching you turn into such a beautiful woman. But don't miss me too much, you've got a long life to live." She squeezed Olivia's hands as a tear rolled down her daughter's cheek.

Aleksi locked eyes with his sister and smiled. "You challenged my beliefs and made me a stronger person," said Anna. "Growing up with you and being as close as we've been as adults has made me a better person. Thank you." Anna grabbed her brother as the two siblings embraced in a hug. Aleksi, not one for emotions, moved to wipe a tear as Anna looked at Matias.

"You're so beautiful," he whispered, once again intertwining his fingers with hers. Matias softly kissed her cheek, and as he pulled back, she placed her hand on his cheek.

"Be strong without me," she said, staring into his eyes. "I'll always be with you."

"And I'll always love you." Matias turned to look at her, his blue eyes, still as sharp as when they first met, gleamed in appreciation. He put his hand over hers and smiled. No words needed to be said. Ever since they first met, they both knew this day would come, and through their shared life together, they had loved each other deeply and completely.

Anna walked along the beach until her feet touched the water and made her way towards a small white boat that seemed to hover over the surface of the water. Once inside, she turned towards her family on the beach and said, "In another life." The boat automatically stirred to life and headed out to the sea, moving smoothly across the surface of the water. Anna looked back towards the beach and could make out the silhouettes of the three people she loved most in this world.

There was a smell in the cool air that reminded Anna of Fall, something she couldn't quite describe. She remembered the heat of summer fading as the nights became cooler and the wind crept in. Her mind flashed to her first Fall semester at university. There was something so exciting about the New Year. Fresh faces were eager to meet like-minded individuals, old friends swapped stories from the summer, and everyone was back to working towards their goal of graduation. Fall brought hope. A new beginning. That was where her friendship with Helga had started.

"I'll call you later mom, I promise!" Anna had said before the call disconnected.

"My mom's the same way," said Helga who was sprawled out on their couch, flicking her wrist to aimlessly scroll through the channels on the TV projection on the wall across from her. "Always wanting to chat."

She stopped on a news report detailing the latest global population updates and their impact on the world.

"Norway has experienced a 10% decline in its population, on track with what experts predicted before the Exodus project was implemented."

"How do we even know they're telling the truth?" inquired Helga. "I mean, who is counting these bodies?"

Before Anna could reply, Helga added, "I don't trust it," looking skeptically at the news report. "There's just something about the whole thing that doesn't add up."

"And what is that exactly?"

"It's just a feeling, I can't prove it, but it feels like..."

"A conspiracy?" finished Anna.

"RIGHT!" yelled Helga. Anna laughed. They had been over this several times and with every conversation, Helga's skepticism was matched with a lack of any hard evidence. Anna didn't disagree with her roommate; she too felt something was off with the system. For her, it seemed too clean, too precise, too organized. There were protests when the program was first implemented, but besides those, the Exodus Project integrated into society without a hitch. Suddenly, people were dying, global problems were solved, and people around the world, with the flashing red light in the nape of their neck, seemed to carry on like normal. She'd read history books before: Nothing government related ever functioned this efficiently.

"There's something they aren't telling us, Anna. And I'm going to find out what it is," said Helga, shifting her focus from the TV to the window of their apartment, as if the answer were waiting for her out there.

"Engineer student by day, conspiracy theorist by night, eh?"

"Just you wait. I'm going to blow this whole thing wide open!"

"You ready for class?" asked Anna, knowing the answer before she asked.

"Ethics is so boring, and such a waste of time," she droned, in the way a child protests eating vegetables. Helga was studying mechanical engineering, but nowadays, all university students were required to take an ethics class as part of a new government policy.

"Yeah, why do we have to go again?" asked Anna.

"To invigorate and expand the mind to create tomorrow's future leaders," said Helga, mimicking the address the president had given when he announced the policy.

"But if we don't go, we don't graduate."

"Fine!" she yelled, jumping off the couch and entering her bedroom. A few minutes later, she emerged, compressed her computer into a size that would fit into her pocket and smiled at Anna, "Let's go find out how to make the world a better place."

The two made their way out of their apartment and walked towards campus. They had been living together for over a year now. Anna was thankful Helga was such a free spirit, but she often proved to be a distraction since her classes came so easily to her.

"Tell me again why you chose engineering?"

"Why anything at all? I don't want to be here, but we both know that if I don't get a degree, I don't get access to a bank account my father told me is only for college graduates. So why engineering? Because a degree is a degree and besides, the engineering boys are cute."

"But..." before Anna could finish her follow up question, Helga butted in.

"Do you think we'll talk about Exo again in class today?" asked Helga. "I bet we do. We always do. I'm not an ethic-tician, is that a word? You know what I mean, but I'm sure ethics applies to more areas of our life than just our chip, ya know?" Anna nodded in agreement but presented a counter-argument.

"But in the last decade, what has impacted our world more than the chip? And ethics is, in fact, a huge component of the policy..."

Helga cut her off, "Alright devil's advocate, save it for class."

"I just like seeing you get defensive about it; you're usually so apathetic about everything else."

The auditorium was filling up with students, many of whom had the same sentiments about the class as Helga.

"Five units say it's about Exo," said Helga without looking at Anna, referring to the universal currency the world had adopted decades ago.

"I don't know, maybe today will be something different," countered Anna.

"Bet or no bet?"

"You're on."

Their professor walked in wearing one of his usual flashy colored bowties.

"Hello class and welcome to another exciting lecture of your mandatory ethics class."

"Get ready for it," whispered Helga.

"Today we'll be looking at the global policy of Exo and whether it's ethical to create a global policy that mandates predetermined death."

Helga continued to stare at the professor with a smug look on her face. She held out her phone and Anna reluctantly tapped her wrist phone to hers, digitally transferring five units.

"You'd think you'd have learned by now," said Helga, smiling.

"Along with things like the Geneva Convention and the establishment of basic human rights, there haven't been too many universal policies that apply to everyone, no matter your race, ethnicity, gender, age, or political affiliation. The question before you today is simple: Is it ethical for a government to impose something that will have a direct effect on your life? In the case of Exo, your death."

The usual discussions began with students presenting arguments on both sides of the issue.

"It's necessary to preserve our species."

"Education, religion, language, nationality, these are all basic rights, but life itself isn't."

"It's unethical to kill someone who has not been sentenced to death by a court of law or during military combat."

Anna listened to the students talk, but paid them little interest. This was a frequent topic of conversation ever since she was a little girl and rarely did anyone have anything interesting to say about it. It was bad; it was good – no matter what anyone said, nothing would change, at least, not anytime soon.

What was the point of ethics and morality anymore, thought Anna. Governments around the world had now decided they would play God and had implemented a global policy to kill people. Life was different, and so too were the laws and ethics that governed it. Anna believed the class to be a waste of time. She hadn't expected to learn anything, nor contribute anything. Sometimes, it was just easier to go through the motions until it was over – something many people used to do with their lives before Exo. Now, there was this expectation to be bold, try new things and live life to the fullest. The catchphrases went on and on, but they all meant the same thing: Don't waste your 75 years on Earth.

It seemed contradictory, Anna thought, to be in this class when she could be outside doing something she was actually interested in. "Think of your long-term goals" her father had said. He was right. She had her heart set on being a vet, and to get there, this class had to be passed. So, despite her feelings, she sat there, listening to the give and take between the professor and students, regurgitating information and statistics that had been argued about an infinite amount of times before.

From the corner of her eye, she saw Helga resizing her computer and placing it back in her pocket as she started to get up.

"What are you doing?" hissed Anna.

Before Helga could respond, the professor boomed, "And where do you think you're going, young lady?"

Helga turned towards the bow-tied man and said, "I've got better things to do."

The entire auditorium turned to look at Helga.

"Ethics is a mandatory class for all students."

"You want to talk about ethics? Do you know what's unethical? Forcing us to take this class when we're the ones who pay tuition. How can you expect us to learn anything about ethics when the university is shoving it down our throats on our dime? And as far as Exo goes, it is what it is; there's no point discussing whether or not it's ethical. To answer your question, I'm going to go study something more productive."

With that, she turned around, walked up the steps, but before she got to the door, the professor boomed, "A man without ethics is a wild beast loosed upon this world," he said.

Helga stopped, turned around, and looking directly at the professor said, "You know what? Fuck Albert Camus, fuck ethics, and fuck Exo." The class was silent except for the sound of Helga's boots on the concrete steps and the slamming of the door behind her. No one said a word, and, in that silence, Anna couldn't help but smile.

The boat had stopped now, hovering over the waves below, and Anna was alone at sea. She stood up, her white clothes fluttering in the wind. Anna looked down at her titanium watch Aleksi had given her on her 50th birthday, only two minutes left of life.

Anna closed her eyes and thought back to when all of this started. She imagined the white room of the Exodus Clinic with the Exo technician saying "Here, just one small mark," placing his finger on the back of the girl's neck. "It will be over before you know it," he said with no real feeling.

"Will it hurt?" asked Anna.

"No sweetie, in and out, no pain." Katrina Saarinen squeezed her daughter's hand, reassuring the five-year-old it would be a painless procedure. The girl nervously looked up at the Exo tech.

"When's your birthday, Anna?" he asked.

"June 6th."

On the glass screen in front of him, he entered the date then glanced at her mother and nodded before pressing a button. The screen went blank and then revealed the white Exodus logo, with the last few letters of "Exodus" seeming to fade into the wind.

From the back of the chair where Anna sat, a mechanical tentacle appeared and positioned itself behind her neck. With her eyes fixated on her mother, the metal serpent plunged into the fleshy area in Anna's spine, implanting a chip the size of a

small button and then withdrew itself, retreating into the wall.

In 70 years, that same chip would send a single electrical pulse throughout her body that would painlessly, but thoroughly, end her life. Scientists from around the world had come together to work on the Exodus project, working tirelessly to design a chip that would integrate but not interfere with a person's nervous system until it was time. They called it "a beautiful obliteration – a nuclear bomb for the nervous system." Others simply referred to it as Exo.

Anna reached back to touch the nape of her neck and discovered no blood but felt a mild tingling sensation.

"That feeling will go away in a few hours. Nothing to worry about. We've done this before."

Still touching the back of her neck, Anna looked up at her mother and asked, "What is it?"

"It's a chip, like the kind computers have, except this one is for people," replied her mother, "It's helped make our planet livable again."

"Not to mention it's the law," the Exo technician added.

Anna turned around to look at the hole in the wall from which the metal serpent had come. She didn't like something stabbing her, much less putting something permanent into her body.

The feeling in the back of her neck seemed to pulsate, letting her know something was inside her. A constant reminder of what society had now become and perhaps had needed. She squeezed her mother's hand and looked up.

"Is it safe?"

"Of course! Honey, everyone in the world does this, and they're just fine. I got mine a long time ago and have had no problems; sometimes I forget it's even there." Her mother had reassured her several times before the appointment, but Anna wasn't convinced. As a child, she'd thought about the chip now and then, but never fully grasped its importance, or understood what its purpose was. Now, with just moments of life left, she finally appreciated the importance of that fateful day 70 years ago.

Looking down at the watch, there were only 30 seconds left. She moved towards the side of the boat, took a breath, and dived into the water. Anna was alone, with nothing but the moon above shining down upon her. She felt the chill of the water throughout her body as she continued to sink, weighted by her clothes. Thoughts of her family played through her mind, and she looked up towards the night sky deep below the sea, the glow of the moon distant above the water. She closed her eyes, thinking that life was beautiful, but at this moment, so too was death. Just as she was beginning to feel the need for air, the chip in the back of her neck flashed blue, sending an electrical shock through her body, shutting down her nervous system, stopping her heart. She felt no pain and, in that instant, Anna Saarinen was gone.

ALEKSI

Aleksi Saarinen was just 20 years old when he graduated top of his class from Finland's most prestigious engineering school and found a job as a robotics designer with LEON, Europe's leading producer of military and industrial-use robots. After winning Europe's designer of the year award twice, he set off to form his own company, Trion, at 30.

Now, at 46, he couldn't help wonder what there was left to accomplish. Most people expected, and at times pushed him to start a family, but there was something about the idea that never clicked with him. For Aleksi, there were two worlds, Pre-Exo, and Post-Exo. In both worlds, people still questioned the purpose of life and asked the ultimate question, "Why are we here?" but now, Post-Exo, things were more linear compared with what he'd read about the old world. Life, assuming one didn't die from an accident or disease, which was rare these days, seemed so planned. The news the other day had said 98% of the population died from Exo on their 75th birthday, while 2% resulted from suicide and accidental deaths. He'd entertained the idea that it might be fun to be part of the 2%, but at the rate he was going, he'd be part of the majority in just 29 more years.

Aleksi looked out across the park as the warm wind played with his light brown hair. He thought of a question his sister Anna had asked him a few years ago, 'would there ever come a time when people would be able to go to sleep at night without catching the faint flash of red light coming from their Exo?' The Exodus Project had drastically reduced the population, and taken a strain off many of the world's economies as elderly care was no longer necessary. But he always asked himself, 'at what cost?' Aleksi was vehemently against Exo, a firm believer in free will and the right to life. But like many others, he was in no place to do anything about it.

He turned to look left and caught sight of a large holographic sign that read, "Your chip, our future," alongside a beautiful girl smiling. This was part of the government's marketing campaign that helped ease the worries and fears of the Exodus Project. Even though it was mandatory for every person in the world, advertisements like this assured people it was safe and necessary for the world to once again be prosperous and healthy.

A small vibration on his wrist seemed to break the stillness of the moment, signaling a phone call. He tilted his wrist and said, "Well hey there sis."

"Aleksi, tell me you haven't forgotten dinner tonight."

"Wouldn't miss it for the world, especially since it's at my place. 19:00 still ok?"

"We'll see you then!"

"Oh, and Anna..."

"Yes?"

"Happy birthday." He waved his wrist again, and the call disconnected. His older sister was turning 50, which in his mind meant that two-thirds of her life were gone. 25 more years. The number mulled over inside his mind, imagining the possibilities of what one could accomplish in that amount of time. Life may be finite, he thought, but the possibilities of what one could do with it weren't.

* * *

Walking up the illuminated path, Anna and Matias stared up at the building in front of them. The cool white stone with its clean lines and inlays of large glass windows reminded her of a modern-day igloo. Aleksi refused to call this his 'home,' instead referring to it as a residence. Home, he had said, was where he grew up. A home was for a family, and since he didn't have one, he didn't live in one.

As they approached the door, a beam of light scanned their faces and opened the entrance, prompting them to step onto a white marble floor and take in the grand open area. A spiral staircase made of glass steps circled down towards Aleksi's workshop while floating lights hovered close to the ceiling.

"You made it!" boomed Aleksi as he rounded a corner in a black V-neck sweater and light blue jeans that accented his gray hair and black-framed glasses. He was taller than both Matias and his sister, with a thin, athletic frame. He kissed his sister on the cheek and shook hands with Matias before inviting them into the living room.

"Dinner is almost done, shall we have a drink? Vodka for you, Anna, and Matias, a whiskey?" Without waiting for them to confirm, he gestured over to the bar where a robot poured the drinks.

Anna had been over to her brother's place a few times before, but she was always in awe of the life Aleksi had created for himself.

"Remind me again how many robots you've got here," inquired Matias.

"With a loose definition of the word 'robot,' about 140, give or take." The black robot hovered over to the trio sitting on the two couches and handed each guest their drink before slipping back to the bar where it once again continued to polish glasses.

"Here's to two-thirds!" said Aleksi, raising his glass.

"I hate when you put it like that," said Anna.

"Two-thirds of a life is no small feat. 50 years on Earth. And you've got 25 to go; 25 beautiful more years. Here's to hoping they're everything you want them to be."

"I'll cheers to that," said Matias, smiling at Anna as he raised his glass.

A voice echoed throughout the house stating, "Dinner is served."

"Do you ever do anything around here yourself?" asked Anna.

"Only when the bots mess up. And they never do," he said winking. They headed into the immense dining room which featured a handmade wooden table, the one Aleksi had sat at as a child. It was the only thing he'd wanted from his childhood home after his parents had passed. Around them, slim black robots were placing plates of food on the table as each person took a seat on one side of the square table.

"I can't believe you still have this," said Anna, touching the grain with her hand, remembering fondly the many meals she'd had with her parents.

"There are some things that technology can never replace," said Aleksi quietly.

As dinner wore on and laughter filled the air as the three of them shared stories from their childhood, Matias asked a question that both he and Anna had never gotten around to asking.

"Aleksi, why is it you never had any children?"

He calmly responded, "I think it's because I didn't want to bring a child into this world, so full of control and order and routine. I couldn't bear taking my child to an Exo center and having them inject my kid with that chip. I couldn't do it. Besides, I threw myself into my work, and despite the flings I've had over the years, I didn't find anyone that captivated something in me the same way that, and don't laugh, the same way that robots did. Do I sometimes wish I had kids? Sure. Looking at Olivia, I always think about what my kids would have been like. Do I regret not having them? No."

"But even before Exo, would you have had a kid?"

"Probably, hard to say, but without Exo, sure, it would be a viable option."

"Do you think I'm a bad person for having a kid?" asked Anna, looking directly at her younger brother.

His green eyes looked back at her, "Of course not, Anna. I love Olivia, and you're a great mother. I'm just saying that for me, and for the way I see this crazy world, having a kid just wasn't on my ticket." Life was too controlled, routine, and complicated, he thought. It was as if deep down, he didn't want to bear the guilt of raising a child in a world where morality had seemed to be tossed aside.

The conversation soon turned to Exo and Anna was talking about her rebelliousness towards Exo when she was 16, commenting that Aleksi had always seemed so accepting of it.

Aleksis laughed, "I know most people go through a phase where they are angry about Exo, and maybe I was as well, but I never lashed out about it. I never argued or yelled, or said much about it. I realized that this was just part of life. For me, it was like being mad that I had a heart. I couldn't very well remove it, so I just accepted it."

Aleksis thought for a moment about his life as a kid, and how angry his sister had felt towards the new policy, with her constant comments about the violation of having something put into her that controlled her fate. For her, the anger never really subsided, but she had learned to accept it. His feelings about the policy were the same, but he had quickly realized that being angry about something he couldn't control was a waste of energy.

"I sympathize with them," said Anna. "I remember feeling so, just so angry about Exo. And disgusted, as if there were some foreign entity inside me. No matter what I did, or how hard I tried to change my mind, I couldn't get over feeling so repulsed having this thing inside me."

"But did you ever do anything about it?" asked Matias.

"No, just a lot of hot air. I yelled and protested, but never once thought about trying to take it out of me. I just felt like I had lost my sense of control, I just..." she shook her head, "I didn't like the idea that my life had an expiration date."

"Do you think Exo killed the idea of fate? Or was it fate for Exo to come along in the first place?" asked Aleksi.

"The philosophical chicken or the egg – going to need a second to think about that one," said Matias while finishing off his whiskey.

"I don't believe in fate," said Aleksi. "We live our lives, make our choices, but thinking that every little detail was pre-planned and no matter what I do, I was supposed to end up exactly where I am? No way."

"Are we better off because of Exo?" asked Anna.

"Depends on who you ask," said Aleksi. "Earth isn't the same place it used to be a decade ago, or even five decades ago. Our world is continually changing, and in the long run, we're only here for a brief amount of time; we're but a blink of the eye in the history of life."

"Well, regardless of what happens, I suppose all we can do now is be thankful for what we have and who we are," said Matias.

As dinner finished, the slim black robots returned to clear the dishes and brought out coffee and Rönttönen, an open-faced pie made of rye dough and filled with sweetened mashed potatoes and lingonberry.

Anna smiled, "This looks exactly like..."

"Mom's," finished her brother. "It's her recipe that I programmed into the bots."

"Remarkable," said Matias through a mouthful of the sweet dessert.

As they talked and reminisced, Anna said, "It feels forever ago that we were at Grandma Tuula's Deathday."

Alexi remembered it like it was yesterday. His whole family had stood on the cliff overlooking the blue sea that crashed against the rocks below them. The brisk wind had whipped against their faces.

Anna's uncle stood before the group of people dressed in all white.

"Today, we remember and celebrate the life of Tuula Saarinen. As a wildlife photojournalist, her memory will live on through her photos. She traveled the world, interacted with unique cultures, and brought to life the intimacy of animals in their

natural habitats. Physically she is no longer with us, but she'll live on through our memories of her."

From the ground, Anna's uncle picked up a silver jar, opened it, and held it over the edge of the cliff, releasing Tuula's white ashes into the wind, drifting on the current and flying out across the blue sea. Tuula had been around the world, and now so too would her ashes, spreading from one end of the Earth to the other.

It was at that moment that Aleksi had thought about his Deathday. He wondered who would attend, and what they would say about the life he had lived. Tuula had always been there for him, during birthdays, graduations, walking in the garden, and now, she was gone. The waves crashed on the cliffs below, their roar echoing up over the rocks. The wind blew, and Aleksi smiled, knowing no matter where he went in life, his grandmother would always be looking over him.

"One hell of a lady," said Aleksi.

When the robots returned to clear the coffee cups and dessert trays, Matias excused himself to call and check in with work.

"Want to see the workshop?" he asked Anna.

"I thought you'd never ask!" The two made their way down the glass staircase, and Aleksi placed his hand against a glass door that opened after it recognized his DNA and fingerprints. The room was full of odd-shaped pieces of glass, fiber optic cables, and strange pieces of machinery that Anna had never seen before. Algorithms and indecipherable math problems were hastily written on glass boards and odd bits of metal and electronic components were strewn across the many tables that occupied the space.

As Aleksi watched his sister stare in awe at his workshop, he asked, "Do you remember when I was 6, you asked me what I thought the chip did?"

"Hmm, no, I don't recall."

"We were sitting at the table, while dad was cooking, and I told you that a friend of mine had told me that Exo could control our minds."

Anna laughed, "Yes, I remember!"

"And do you remember what you told me?" Anna was laughing uncontrollably.

Aleksi continued, "You told me that Exo would slowly grow, and in six months, a baby robot would be inside of me."

"I'm so sorry," Anna said between fits of laughter.

"I had nightmares for weeks!" said Aleksi. The two of them laughed together.

As the laughter subsided, and the two were once again silently looking around the cluttered workshop, Anna asked, "Do you think mom would be proud of us?"

"You know she was!" replied Aleksi immediately. "What makes you think she wasn't?"

"I just, I just hope she would be."

"I run one of the most successful robotics companies in the world, and you heal hurt animals. In a world where everyone is concerned about searching for meaning, we give back. We positively contribute to society, what more could Mom have wanted?"

"You're right. It's just hard not to think back and wonder if there was more we should have done or something I could have done, but didn't."

"You can't think like that. It will get you nowhere. But if at this age you are still searching for meaning, maybe take a trip. Go find yourself."

"I've been on plenty of trips recently," said Anna, thinking back fondly of the many adventures she and Matias had had after Olivia had left for school.

"Spend more time with your family," he joked, squeezing her arm.

"Maybe that's the problem," joked Anna. "Speaking of mom, do you remember the first time she told you about what Exo was?"

Aleksi closed his eyes. It was a day he'd never forget. He was seven years old, the same age Anna was when their mother had told her about Exo. Sitting in his bedroom, his mother sat facing him with a look that suggested this wasn't easy for her.

With a heavy sigh, she had explained that one of the most significant problems in society were the elderly.

"Like grandma" he had stated, a little more astutely than Katrina had expected.

"Yes," she said slowly, "like grandma."

"What does Exo do?" he asked, the same question he'd been asking since he left the Exo clinic two years ago.

"Well, it..." she had started, knowing there was no easy way to say it. "When a person turns 75 years old, the chip ends their life."

Aleksi's face showed no signs of emotion as the gears inside his head started to turn, processing what he'd just heard. He'd heard rumors about Exo at school but brushed them off as nothing more than stories that older boys liked to tell during lunch.

"Is it painful?"

"The Exo tech said it would be painless."

"Why?"

"Why is it painless?"

"No, why do we need Exo?"

"There just isn't enough, sweetheart. Not enough food, space, clean water, medicine, you name it. Older people have lived their lives. They've worked, loved, had families, traveled, and experienced life. But when they get older, they don't contribute to society anymore, and are holding us back."

"From what?"

"From progress. We spend billions of dollars a year on caring for the elderly, spend a huge amount of time focused on their well-being. If we took all that time and money and invested that in research, or education, or technology, our world, as you've seen now, can flourish."

"Flourish?" he asked.

"It means to grow, to be great."

"But it's not right," Aleksi stated, staring up at his mother.

Katrina hadn't expected her son to take such a firm stance on Exo so immediately. "I agree with you. But it's the law, and we can't change it. Sometimes, even if we disagree with something, that's just the way it is."

"75," whispered Aleksi, no longer looking at his mother. The number seemed to dance in his mind as if that number now represented life itself. As he continued to think, he understood the logic behind Exo and its necessity, but it was still hard to accept that fate now had a number, and it was 75.

Katrina watched her son absorb the information and process it like he usually did. At times, she didn't think Aleksi was human with the way he saw life, so pragmatic and logical.

"Whatever you're thinking," she began, "just know I love you and that no matter what path you choose in life, always do what makes you happy."

"I will," he said, with the number 75 still consuming most of his thoughts.

"At the time, I wasn't sure what to say," he said to Anna. "I had always suspected something 'sinister' about Exo, but when mom told me it would kill me, I thought about all the different things I could do in 75 years. I never viewed it as limiting, but thought about it more as a challenge, like what I could do with my 75 years that could positively impact humanity the most. Maybe I was just a weird kid, but that's how I saw it." Anna listened intently to her brother, ever the realist she thought.

"Anyway, since it's your birthday, it's only fair that I give you this." From one of the tables, he picked up a shiny black box and handed it to Anna. She opened it and inside was a glass watch with titanium bands. The glass hands ticked silently as the gear slowly moved ever so slightly.

"I know mechanical watches are considered an antique, but I've been working on restoring this one for a while now. You'd be surprised how hard it is to find watch parts these days."

"It's beautiful," Anna whispered as she fastened it to her wrist.

Anna looked into Aleksi's green eyes and asked, "Did you ever think we'd be where we are now?"

"I knew you would," said Aleksi. "I always knew you'd get married. You're one of the best people I know, and I knew that some lucky guy would get your attention and you two would eventually get married."

"And you?"

"You know how I feel about marriage. Life is an adventure, and I want to go out and explore as much as I can. Getting married, no offense, would hold me down. I'm like a bird, I need –"

"To fly?"

"Exactly. I want to get out there, meet people, travel, try new things, push the boundaries, challenge the norm, and go crazy. And I don't see myself being able to do that with a wife. Besides, if I got married, I'd have no time to spend with my robots. But again, that's no comment on you and your marriage."

Anna looked at her brother and put her arm on his shoulder.

"Look around this room," said Aleksi. "This is my life's work. Ever since I was young, I knew I was meant to help other people, and through technology and my ideas, I'm making that a reality. But you help keep me grounded. No matter how much money I make, or things I achieve professionally, it's you who reminds me that family matters and in the end, it's the relationships you have that will matter the most. I guess what I'm trying to say is that I'm proud to call you my big sister."

Anna smiled and hugged her brother tight, wrapping her arms around him and whispering "I'm proud of you too, Aleksi."

OLIVIA

The sun was rising, and a flood of orange and yellow fell over Helsinki and the buildings as if a wave of paint had crashed into the city.

"Olivia, get your shoes on, we're almost ready to go!" yelled Anna from the kitchen. She had just finished packing her daughter's lunch and was determined not to be late for Olivia's first day of school.

"Olivia!" she yelled again, rounding the corner of the kitchen and entering the living room. There, she found her five-year-old daughter and husband watching the news on the glass panel on the wall.

"Exodus, offering not only a solution for the world but a solution for you. We believe life is meant to be lived, enjoyed, and shared. There's a lot you can do with 75 years, and we hope you do something great." The video of a family walking along the beach faded and tiny white script appeared on the screen.

Olivia Saarinen, you are required to receive your chip from Exodus today. Failure to comply will result in legal ramifications. State you understand.

The little girl looked over to her father who nodded and then turning back to the screen, Olivia said, "I understand."

Confirmation received.

The message faded, and the TV show resumed. Anna hated how intrusive technology had gotten these days. Everything about a person was documented and stored, and Exodus had access to a vast majority of it, which was collected the moment a person was born. The government had deregulated privacy laws at least two decades ago, which had garnered a lot of protests, but there had been some benefits. AI systems could now access billions of people's medical records and worked to find patterns and variables of certain diseases, which led to improved medicine and raised the lifespan of every country on Earth to 75.

Anna had laughed when she first heard the news, commenting, "Great, now everyone can live long enough for Exodus to kill them."

"What do I have to do?" asked Olivia, looking first at her father and then up at her mother.

"I'll explain after school, sweetheart, but right now, we have to go!"

* * *

"It's today, isn't it?" asked Katrina after opening the door.

Anna hugged her mother and entered the house, unwrapping her scarf and placing it on the table before opening the fridge.

"How'd you know?"

"Mother's intuition," she said, winking. "And that I know my granddaughter's birthday."

Anna aimlessly scanned around the fridge before closing it and then made her way to the floating cake pan that was hovering over the counter. She took off the lid revealing five pieces of cheesecake.

She swiped her hand underneath them and said, "I'll never not be amazed at what we've been able to come up with."

Anna cravingly looked down at the cake.

"Live a little," her mother said while laughing.

"I don't think I can do it," she said, grabbing a floating piece of cake and placing it on a plate. "I understand the necessity for it, but it's just so..."

"Feels cruel, right?" her mother interrupted.

"Yes, exactly!" said Anna, pointing the fork at her mother just before she took a bite of the creamy cheesecake.

"What's the alternative? You know just as well as I do, and everyone else on this planet that Exo is mandatory. It has to be done."

"How did you get through it? I mean, like how did you deal with it?"

Katrina sighed and stared at her daughter, "It was hard, but that's how things are. I didn't think of it as putting a time frame on your life; I realized that this is part of the world we live in."

"That doesn't make it any easier," said Anna through a mouthful of cake.

"What's Matias's take on all this?"

"He doesn't like it any more than I do, but we both understand it has to be done."

"I thought it would've eventually been phased out. I didn't think Exo would have lasted as long as it did."

"Why fix it if it isn't broken," replied Anna, quoting something her father used to say.

"We have anti-gravity countertops but have yet to figure out a humane way to deal with overpopulation. We're still barbarians murdering people, but because it's done with a microchip, we're somehow a more 'evolved' society."

"While I agree with your sentiments, you know there's no other choice. I'd offer to come, but speaking from experience, this is something you need to do by yourself," said Katrina.

Anna flipped her wrist over and saw her digitally implanted watch flash the time. She placed the plate in the sink, wrapped her green scarf around her neck and then walked towards the large glass door.

The 50-year-old woman stood on the doorstep, watching as Anna sped down the street, knowing today would not be easy for her. She thought back to when Anna was growing up and knew she had done the best she could, believing Anna would do the same for Olivia.

* * *

"Will it hurt?" she asked, staring up at her mother. Anna smiled, her eyes wet from the tears forming, and softly replied, "No, sweetie, of course not," repeating the words her mother had said to her 35 years ago.

Olivia was sitting on an all-white chair while her mother put her hair up into a bun, leaving her neck exposed. Within her, she still felt the rage against Exodus for what they had done to society but was now smart enough to bite her tongue, especially in front of her daughter.

She watched as the metal snake appeared out of the wall and made its way to Olivia's neck where it paused before inserting the chip.

"Olivia Saarinen has officially received her Exo implant which will expire exactly 70 years from now," the Exo technician said. "We need your daughter's confirmation before you go."

Olivia looked up at her mother as the Exo technician placed a glass tablet in front of her. Anna nodded, and Olivia put her hand on the screen which glowed light green, having accepted her handprint as confirmation she had received her Exo chip.

"Have a lovely 70 years," the Exo technician said, smiling down at the young girl.

* * *

When Anna and Olivia entered Katrina's house, Anna's mother could sense that the procedure was more painful for Anna than it was for Olivia.

"Want to get ice cream?" asked Katrina, trying to soothe the stress of the day. The young girl probably didn't realize it was one of the most important days of her life. Olivia smiled and whispered, "But we never get ice cream."

"Well hey, you only live once, right?"

Olivia mulled that statement over in her mind before saying, "Yes! Let's get ice cream!"

Katrina winked at Anna as they headed out the door, jumped in the car, and sped off in pursuit of the creamy frozen treat, lost in the moment of something they both enjoyed.

Olivia with her mint chocolate chip and Katrina with her rocky road, the two sat outside on a bench in the warm evening air, enjoying the ice cream.

Olivia brushed a bit of brown hair out of her face and then asked, "Do you feel it too?"

Katrina understood the question and smiled, placing her hand on the back of her neck, "Yes, sometimes. But now, it's more of an idea rather than a physical feeling."

Olivia had felt the faint vibrations of the throbbing chip since she left the clinic a few days ago. The feeling had subsided a few hours after the procedure, but now and then it came back, reminding Olivia that something was a part of her.

"Will it ever go away?"

"I don't think so," smiled Katrina, her hair much grayer than it had been a few years ago. She looked down at Olivia and smiled, thinking how similar she had looked when she was that age.

"But ice cream is a good cure," she said, winking.

Olivia looked up at Katrina with green ice cream around the corners of her mouth. She loved her grandmother and always felt like she understood her. Katrina appreciated moments like this. For her, at her age, it wasn't so much about what she did, but more about who she did it with.

After a moment of silence, Olivia asked, "Why do we get it?"

Her mind had been whirring, searching for an answer. Maybe it could track her, she thought, just like a phone could. Or perhaps someone could control her. She shuddered at the thought but soon dismissed that idea as she had never seen her parents, who also had the chip, do anything that would lead her to believe they were being controlled. She scrunched up her face, as she watched the sleek, shiny cars fly by in the distance.

Katrina took a breath before responding, "The chip is something that everyone in the world has to make Earth a better place."

The little girl scrunched her nose again and tilted her head to one side, not understanding.

"Would you stop eating ice cream if it meant that everyone in the world was never hungry?"

She paused before declaring, "Yes, I would."

"Ok. If you had been sitting on a train for a long time, and someone else had been standing the whole time, would you give up your seat for them?"

Olivia again took a second and then said, "Yes. It's not fair that I get to sit and they have to stand."

"I agree, and that's what Exo does for us. It helps make things better for everyone," she said, placing her hand on the little girl's shoulder.

"So, it's a good thing?"

She wanted to look into the girl's bright blue eyes and tell her that she thought Exo was a necessary evil but instead looked at the innocent girl before her and said, "Yes."

Katrina knew the feelings children went through after getting their implant. Confusion, apprehension, stress, curiosity, and it wasn't her responsibility to convey to her granddaughter that the small piece of electrical equipment now fused to their spine would ultimately take both their lives. Olivia quietly ate her ice cream and watched the setting sun shine through the glass buildings that seemed to tower over the people. As a 5-year-old, Olivia was beginning to understand the world in which she lived, and Exo was just her introduction.

* * *

Helsinki was covered in snow as if a cold, white blanket had wrapped itself around the city and everything in it. Olivia glanced out the window of her bathroom and paused for a moment to watch the snowflakes flutter past. She turned back to the mirror, looked at herself, and took a deep breath. With her father's straight razor in hand, and trying to locate the spot of the chip with her left, she bent her head forward and moved the razor to the nape of her neck. Once she had located the spot, or so she thought, she dug the cold steel of the razor into her neck and winced at the pain. Bent over the white porcelain sink, she watched as drops of crimson blood seemed to catapult themselves into the pristine sink, exploding on impact as if in slow motion. Pain surged through her body, but she pressed on. She moved the razor along the perimeter of the chip and again, paused to take a deep breath.

For a moment, she looked up into the mirror, seeing her blue eyes stare back at her. She was determined to get the chip out of her. Olivia had argued time and time again with her mother about Exo, ultimately deciding that if anything were to be done about it, she had to take matters into her own hands.

She thought about the conversation she had had with her friends a few days ago.

"I mean, we're all going to die one day, right? Exo is just a better solution to death" said a boy sitting on the picnic bench across from Olivia.

"But that doesn't mean we need to have parameters on it," retorted another boy. "What if I were destined to live to 100, but that was cut short by 25 years because of Exo?"

"What were you destined to do? Annoy people for 85 more years?" The teenagers at the table laughed.

"I think it's horrible," added Olivia. "The government is killing people, and they have no right to do that. What if I killed the president because I decided we didn't need him anymore? How is that any different from what the government is doing to us?" The group around the table agreed with her.

No one was in favor of the chip except Tom, who added, "And why do you think they came up with the Exodus Project in the first place?" The table was quiet.

Before anyone could answer, Tom, a tall, lanky boy who had dark hair that was just long enough to fall over his piercing blue eyes, continued, "It's because the world can no longer support everyone. We overeat, consume too much water, and require heat in the winter and cold in the summer; multiplied by billions of people, it's had an enormous effect on the world. Basically, we're the problem."

"You're only saying that because your dad works for Exodus."

"You think I'm biased because my dad works for Exodus? Don't forget that I too have a chip in my head – just like you; I'll also die at 75. Instead of complaining about it or fighting it, I accept it and believe I'm doing my part for humanity."

"Your part?" laughed a girl, "By dying, you're doing your part?"

"You guys just don't get it," said Tom, getting up from the table and walking back towards the school. Anna watched him go in silence. What he said made sense, but she didn't agree with it.

"The government can't just kill us, what gives them the right?" she said to the group.

"For sure," said another student, "Just because I don't like something doesn't mean I can get rid of it. If that were the case, Mrs. Jones would have been gone a long time ago!"

Everyone laughed. For a second, Olivia caught herself staring up at the big blue sky, feeling the warmth of the sun on her face as the wind gently blew by. The noise of the group seemed so far away as if for her, time had stood still. She smiled as she looked up at the wispy white clouds above, contrasting but also blending in with the sky. She thought for a moment about how happy she was. She had her friends, a nice

life, and she was young, plenty of time to live the life she wanted, but she wanted to live it on her terms. The noise of the group rang in her ears, and she caught a girl saying, "Olivia, Earth to Olivia!"

"Sorry, I was just..."

"Spacing out?" laughed a boy.

"Yeah," she chuckled. She had been caught up in her thoughts, just as she was now, watching the blood slowly drip into the sink.

Suddenly, the wooden door of the bathroom opened and her mother stood at the entrance, locking eyes with her daughter and within just a few seconds, comprehended what was happening. Olivia's blood-covered hands were frozen above the back of her neck as she stared at her mother, both frozen in a moment of shock.

"Olivia, don't move!" She lurched at her daughter and swiftly removed the straight razor from her daughter's hand and grabbed a towel from the rack, firmly placing it over Olivia's bleeding wound.

"But you don't understand, mom!" shouted the young girl as her mother moved her towards the kitchen with the towel absorbing the flowing blood.

"Not a word," commanded Anna as she removed the towel to take in the damage her daughter had caused. The cuts were deep, but luckily, she had avoided touching the chip. Any external contact with Exo's membrane would cause it to activate, killing the person instantly. Attempting to tamper, deactivate, or remove the chip was an offense punishable by death. The skin around the chip was roughly cut as Olivia had attempted to cut blindly using only her fingers to guide her.

"You could have died!" said Anna pressing the wet towel against the open wound.

"Well Exo will make sure of that anyway!" she retorted.

"Is that what you want? Do you want to die right now? You have your whole life ahead of you, and you want to risk cutting out your chip for what? An extra decade of life?"

"I don't want to not have that possibility," said Olivia, quieter than before.

Her mother took her face in her hands and looked into her daughter's bright blue eyes, "I was just like you once."

"In time, you'll learn to accept your reality, but in the meantime, this is not the solution."

With Olivia now holding the towel against the back of her neck, Anna walked over to a cupboard and found a white cylindrical object about the size of a jump rope handle. She grabbed it and walked back over to Olivia, motioning for her to turn around. With her hands on the counter and her hair pulled into a bun, Anna removed the towel and aimed the white device directly at the wound. She pressed a button, and blue light shone on the cut skin, slowly healing the wound as if a slow-motion video of a shirt ripping was played in reverse. Olivia winced at the pain, but she grit her teeth, knowing the pain she felt now was nowhere near the pain she would feel when she saw the look on her father's face upon hearing the news. With the wound healed, but still tender, Anna placed a large white Band-Aid over the area and instructed her daughter to leave it on for 24 hours, and with luck, no scarring would be visible.

"I know you feel powerless, and at times, I feel the same way," said Anna. "Feeling that way is perfectly normal. You think I'm happy about having a chip?"

Olivia nodded, understanding that her mother, and everyone else in the world, was in the same boat as her, but still angry at the fact she too was part of this system.

"But if you ever, and I mean ever, try to mess with your chip again, you'll wish you were dead." Olivia looked down at the floor, trying to balance her current feelings of disappointment and anger.

"And you know I have to tell your father."

"But..."

"He has a right to know." The 15-year-old remained quiet. She knew there was nothing to say. She feared disappointing her father, a man she loved, respected, and revered. She knew he wouldn't be mad, but she dreaded the look of disappointment that would inevitably appear on his face. She had thought of that before placing the blade to her neck, but her desire to remove her Exo was greater than her father's feelings. She had made her choice, and now she had to deal with the consequences.

* * *

"At least I went for it," said Olivia, catching both her parents by surprise and breaking the silence.

Her father looked at her, puzzled, "Oh, and what do you mean?"

"I mean it's stupid, Exo is stupid, so at least I was brave enough to try to do something about it. I'm just so sick of it. Everywhere I look, I'm reminded of how fleeting life is. Slogans on shop windows read, 'Get it before you're gone!' 'Seize the moment, it won't last forever!' and 'Nike's forever, life's not.' Walking down the street, I see the small area in the back of people's necks, showing their Exo implant with the faint red light flashing every few seconds as if reminding me and everyone else that one day, we're all going to die."

Olivia hated the system despite the constant stream of benefits the news seemed to spit out about how great Exodus was. Traffic wasn't as congested, hospitals were more efficient, and society seemed to be more humane. She remembered teachers telling stories of Pre-Exo people living fast-paced lives full of rampant crime. Now, according to statistics, things had seemed to slow down as people were focused more on appreciating the moment rather than constantly working and living day to day. She had seen movies and read stories about what life was like before Exo had come into being. She recalled her history teacher once say, "It was chaos, pure chaos." Images of wars, rebellions, strikes, protests, and violence raced in her mind as she thought about the Exo campaign ads, and how "because of Exo we now live in a more peaceful and harmonious world."

Olivia felt conflicted. She was angry; she didn't have a say in her death and even more upset that everyone just seemed to accept it.

"But you could have died!" interjected her mother.

"Well, I will die anyway, right?" retorted Olivia.

"Your logic is sound," began Matias in a quieter tone than the other two. "However, you're risking 64 years of life for what, an extra 25 assuming you live to be a hundred? What was the plan exactly? You know if you had cut the membrane and the chip detected any interference, it would have automatically triggered itself to shut down your nervous system."

"There was so much blood, I couldn't believe it," said Anna softly. "Is it something we did? Are we bad parents?"

Tears flowed down Olivia's cheeks. "I don't want to die," she whispered.

"Honey, that's part of life," said Anna, "But the important thing is that we make the most of our life while we have it, right? When you're older, you'll understand, but for now, please, please don't mess with your chip again. Your father and I couldn't bear to lose you. Having you was the first time in my life where someone else's future became more important than my own and seeing you in that bathroom, it broke my heart."

Olivia's head was bowed, her eyes unable to look at anything except her knees.

"I'm not pleased about having my death regulated by the government either, but that's just how it is," said Matias. "Regardless, promise you won't try anything like that again."

Olivia dragged her elbow across her face, wiping away the tears, still unable to look her mother in her eyes and said, "I promise I won't mess with my chip again."

"We're not angry," said her father.

"Just scared," began Anna. "The thought of losing you, at this age, would kill me. I can't imagine a world without you in it, and I never want to see you hurt yourself again. You'll die one day, but not now, you're too young, and there's so much to do and see."

As tears rolled down Anna's face, Olivia quietly got up from the couch and rushed over to her mother, hugging her as tears flowed down her face.

"I'm sorry," said Olivia. "I'm so sorry." Anna stroked her brown hair, thankful her daughter was still alive. She struggled to imagine that her cute, innocent daughter had felt so much anger she was willing to harm herself.

She thought of when Olivia was seven, standing on a beach in the Philippines holding a coconut, her tiny feet buried in the white sand. She remembered the look of surprise and curiosity that had spread across Olivia's face when seeing the ocean for the first time.

"It's just so big!" she had cried out with pleasure.

That same bright and curious girl was still there, yet somehow different. Older and more stubborn. Olivia shifted her gaze from her mom to her dad, guilty for how her actions had made him feel. She felt conflicted. Her guilt seemed to mix with her an inexplicable hate for Exo, a chip that had more control over her life than she did. In that

moment, standing in front of her parents, she wondered if her anger would ever subside, or if it would always be in the back of her mind.

Her mother was talking, telling her that in the end, we must all accept our fate, but Olivia wasn't listening. She was lost in thought. Thoughts about the life she had, and the life she wanted to live. Her hopes, dreams, and desires swirled around her mind. Anna recognized the look on her daughter's face. She empathized with Olivia's feelings, knowing there was nothing she could say that would alleviate the anger and fear she felt deep down.

"I just need some time alone," said Olivia as she kissed her mother on the cheek and walked out of the room and out the front door. The sky was dark, but the city looked alive with lights and holograms reflecting off the tall glass buildings. Olivia's mind continued to race, wondering what life would be like without the constant reminder of Exo. Free, she thought. She glanced up at the night sky and saw the infinite number of stars, each burning bright until one day, they would burn no more. Olivia thought about what she would do with her remaining 60 years until, on her fateful 75th birthday, she would be gone forever.