

Chapter 1

‘We’re located in Nashua. Directions are enclosed. Please ask for Nate.’

Rick read through the message one more time on his phone as he stood in front of the address listed. The sign out front of the 3-story brick building read, “Second Limb Prosthetics.” This couldn’t be right he briefly thought to himself. He shrugged and walked in, hoping this wasn’t some hoaxer’s elaborate gag.

“May I help you?” Asked a clerk. He had a military tattoo on his right forearm peeking out from under his short-sleeve shirt indicating his service unit. ‘Steve’ was on his name tag.

“Well, I’m not sure if I’m in the right place,” Rick responded glancing at his name tag. “Steve. But the directions I was given brought me here. Is Nate around?”

“You’re Richard Michaud, right?” He pronounced it ‘Mich-owd.’

Rick nodded back despite the butchering of his French heritage last name, ‘Me-shoe,’ though ‘Mish-O’ was also acceptable.

“Yes, Nate is in. Head on through the back door,” Steve pointed. “Nate’s office is the third door on the left. I’ll alert him that you’re here.” Rick proceeded through the doorway as Steve tapped an icon on his phone. “Nate, Richard Mich-owd is here. He’s on his way back.”

Before Rick reached the office door, Nate stepped out to greet him, offering his hand. “Nate Santorum”

Rick took the hand in a firm shake. “Richard, ‘Rick’ Michaud” He pronounced it properly, ‘Me-shoe.’

“Welcome, please come in.” Nate ushered him into the office and indicated where to sit. He offered his guest a bottle of water. “I see you had no problems finding us.”

“Well, you didn’t indicate you were in the back of a prosthetics lab, but no, I had no problems.”

“Yeah, I knew I forgot to include something. My apologies. Sadly, the prosthetics is our main line of business at the moment. We’re hoping to branch out, which is where your assistance comes in.”

“I should be thanking you, Mr. Santorum.”

“I’m fine with Nate if you don’t mind Rick in return.”

“That’s fine,” Rick responded. “I was a little surprised when I arrived out front. Then again, I didn’t expect I’d find a sign marked ‘Second Fur Mascot Costumes’ either.”

Nate nodded in return. "I've got some great people on staff here and they're doing some incredible work for our armed forces service members. Of course, a lot of them are veterans themselves." He paused a moment and then continued, "But to be honest, we don't make a lot of profit on it. We aim to serve those who have served without gouging them. Thus, why we're trying to branch off into other markets."

Rick nodded. "So, why fursuits?"

Nate chuckled. "We've got a few members on staff who are in the furry community. It took me a little while to warm up to it. However, their proposal made sense once I did a bit of research and saw all the positives of that fandom, such as all the funds they raise for various charities. It needs better PR, that's for sure." Nate shrugged. "Anyway, it's thanks to that staff that we're creating a new division called "Second Fur Mascot Costumes" or simply 'Second Fur' for short." Nate shook his head. "Our creations will be on the high end of the market. We'll be putting the same robotics technology into the mascot costumes or as the furry community calls them, fursuits, that we use in our advance prosthetics. But rather than talk, let's go upstairs into the actual lab and I'll show you what I mean."

Nate led him upstairs. He paused outside a door and handed Rick a plastic coverall. Nate put one on also. They also put on disposable gloves and hairnets before proceeding into a large open room. Rick was introduced to team members who were working on various prosthetic limbs, some testing, others working on the cosmetic appearance. Nate explained how these prosthetics were intended to blend in and look like and work similar to a natural limb, thus the company's name. He led him into a second room, nearly as large as the first.

"This is our new fursuit development area." He pointed out individuals and introduced them to Rick. Rick didn't catch most of the names as his attention was on a manikin head on a workbench. The manikin was wearing a set of thin VR goggles with some wire framing.

One of the techs pointed to it. "We want to make sure this will fit you properly, Mr. Michaud." He pronounced it 'Mich-euh,' which was closer than Steve's attempt downstairs.

"Rick, please...I'm sorry, I'm terrible with names...Jim, right?"

"Yes, Rick. As I was saying, I wanted to see how this fits on you, and how you react before we build the suit head around it. According to the furries on our staff, one of the top complaints you hear about many fursuit costumes is poor vision. That won't be an issue with this." He paused a moment, "but I wasn't aware you wore glasses. Near or far-sighted?"

"Near-sighted with a slight astigmatism."

Jim nodded with a look of relief. "Good, I won't have to do any reprogramming." He pointed to the rig. "As you've probably guessed, these are VR goggles with an LCD screen. The display is split for each eye. They are hooked to these two digital cameras," he pointed to the tiny cameras on the wire framing. "The cameras will be in the eyes of the fursuit head once constructed."

Rick looked it over. “They look like they’re aimed kind of sideways.”

“Well, you did indicate in the initial online interview that you wanted a realistic feral squirrel suit. Squirrel eyes aren’t pointed in front like ours. The challenges your proposal created is one of the reasons we chose it. It’s also why we need to try this on at this stage. If it doesn’t work-out for you, we’ll have to go to a single camera and probably hide it in the nose.”

“I’m aware of the position of the eyes of a squirrel, but I didn’t expect you to incorporate that into the suit. I’m impressed and I’m game to give this a shot,” Rick responded, taking his hair net off, followed by removing his glasses and tucking them in his shirt pocket. “What do you need me to do?”

“Sit down and close your eyes and I’ll place the goggles over your head. Keep them closed until I instruct you otherwise.” Rick complied as Jim adjusted the goggles over Rick’s eyes. “That looks good.” Jim glanced at a tablet computer on the bench. “We’re just waiting for the rig to boot-up. There we go. Slowly open your eyes. You might be slightly disoriented when you do so.”

Rick opened his eyes and blinked a few times in disbelief. “Whoa,” he uttered. “I see what you mean. This is so weird.” He no longer had the normal 210 or so degrees of vision a human has, but closer to 300, maybe 320 degrees. He couldn’t see his nose, nor directly behind his head, but if he turned his head slightly one way or the other, he could see all the way around the room. He explained this to Jim.

“Excellent! That’s what I was aiming for with this. When you responded to Nate with your fursuit proposal, I was intrigued and wanted to push the tech as far as I could.” Jim held-up a mirror and Rick looked at himself.

“Wow,” was all Rick could utter. “I still can’t get over how much larger my field of vision is with this and it’s clear too. Distances are not fuzzy.”

Jim nodded. “Well, you’re staring at LCD screens about three-quarters of an inch (1.5cm) from your eye rather than directly at distant objects, which is why I was concerned when I saw you use glasses. If you had been farsighted, it would take a bit more programing to give you clear vision.”

“There is a blind spot in front, just as one would expect. I can’t see my nose.” Rick held up his right index finger towards the center of his expanded field of vision and slowly brought it back and stopped about 6 inches (15cm) from his face. “This is where I lose sight of my finger.

“Good. That makes it proportionally about the same as a real squirrel based on what research I could find online. Considering the orientation of the eyes, that makes sense. You’ll just have to be aware of your surroundings.”

“Just like every other suiter. Or better, have a spotter.” Rick then noticed the blinking cursor at the bottom of his vision to the right. “What’s the blinking cursor mean?”

“Look directly at it and tell me what you see.”

Rick did so, resulting in a drop-down menu, listing choice1, choice2, and choice3. “Whoa! A retina-activated menu system?”

“Correct. But it won’t do anything for you at the moment.”

“Are these for the suit?”

“Yes, hopefully. I’m not sure if we’ll be able to build in those features or not. We’ll see.”

“Alright, I understand. Is there anything else you want me to do? This rigging is a little heavy.”

“I’d like you to try walking around the room a little.” Nate suggested. “Jim will be right here next to you in case you get dizzy. Now’s the time to determine if you can handle movement with this field of vision or not.”

“Sure, I’m game. I agree its best that we figure this out now.” Rick made a circuit of the room, kind of unsteady at first. However, by the time he made it back to his starting point he had it down pretty well.

“I’m impressed with how quickly you adapted to this,” Jim stated.

“You and me both. So, do I close my eyes again before you power it down and remove it?”

“Yes.”

It only took a moment to power down and remove the goggles. Jim set them back on the manikin head. “Open your eyes.”

Rick opened his eyes and needed to blink a few times as a wave of dizziness hit him. “I think it was more disorienting to go back to normal vision.”

“Interesting,” was all Jim replied while he made some notes on his tablet.

Rick turned back to Nate. “This is very impressive. But I still don’t understand why you need me to test this. Why not one of your furry staff?”

“We need someone not directly involved with the development to give us, hopefully, impartial feedback as they test the suit,” Nate replied. “And, again, in return, you’ll get to keep the resulting suit.”

“Which, in turn, provides advertisement for your company.”

“Of course.”

“Now that we know the goggles will work,” Jim stated, “we’ll now need to take your measurements for the suit itself. Are you sure you still want to go with a feral design? How are you at squatting?”

Rick squatted in place. “I’ve done this a lot in life due to my camp counseling background. It’s a lot easier than sitting cross-legged when I need to talk face-to-face with a young camper. It’s less intimidating to a shy eleven-year-old if you’re eye-to-eye. And yes, I’ll stick to feral or as some say in furry circles, a quad-feral suit. My main fursuna, Pistachio, is a feral Eurasian red squirrel, though as you’re aware, I’m going with a different species for this suit. No offense, but if this doesn’t work out, I’d rather not have my main fursona remind me of the failure.”

Jim nodded. “None taken. So, how long can you squat like that?”

“How long do you need me to do so?” Rick chuckled.

“Well, however long you’ll be wearing the suit at a time. Say a few hours.”

“Sure. As I said, I’m use to this.”

“Alright, we’ll need to take measurements for the fursuit.”

“Really? Right here and now? If I had known we were going to move this quickly, I’d have come better prepared. I didn’t bring beater clothing for a duct tape dummy.”

“A what?”

“Most fursuit makers require a duct tape dummy. You put on some beater clothes and your friends duct tape you tightly in place. They then carefully cut the duct taped clothing off with reassembly marks and you then ship it off to the maker.”

Jim laughed. “Sounds very old fashion. I think you’ll find this a lot easier. I’ll take you to a room. You’ll strip down. Put on protective eyeglasses, and squat in the square marked on the floor in that room facing straight ahead with your arms held straight out to your sides,” Jim held his out the way he wanted Rick to do so. “And hold still for a couple minutes. We use a laser measurement system. After squatting, you’ll need to stand for additional measurements.”

Twenty minutes later, Rick was heading home. They would call him when they’d want to have him try something on. He didn’t mind as it was only a 90-minute drive back to Groton.