

Chapter 20

“Mrs. Michaud.”

“Dr. Abigail Michaud,” she held out her hand. “History Department at White Mountain State University. You’re Nate Santorum, correct?”

“Yes.”

Abigail’s face contorted in rage. “What the hell was in that suit my husband was testing for you!?”

Nate held-up his hands in defense as if she had physically assaulted him rather than just verbally. “Dr. Michaud, I understand you’re upset. My company will cover all of the medical expenses...”

“That doesn’t answer my question, Mr. Santorum!” Abigail snapped back. She paused a moment to pull herself together. “I’m sorry. I shouldn’t snap at you. It’s been very stressful here. Have you seen the medical reports?”

Nate looked puzzled. “No, I haven’t. It’s not like I would have access to them under HIPAA (Health Insurance Portability and Accountability Act) as I’m not immediate family, Dr. Michaud.” Nate paused a moment. “I only know what my employee reported back to me immediately after the accident. Your husband was electrocuted and severely burned. What has happened since?”

“I and the medical staff were hoping you could tell us. He had second and third degree burns over seventy-five percent of his body.”

Nate’s face turned ashen. “I was aware he was burned pretty badly. I didn’t realize how badly. I’m so sorry. Why is he still here? Why hasn’t he been transferred to the burn facility at Boston General?”

“No, you don’t understand, Mr. Santorum. He ***HAD*** burns. Most of the burns have healed and not with scar tissue but with healthy skin.”

Nate’s jaw dropped briefly. “What? It’s only been roughly a day-and-a-half since the accident. How is that even possible?”

“Again, the medical staff were hoping you’d be able to explain. Come see for yourself. You’ll have to put on some protective clothing. They’ve got him isolated.”

“Why?”

“It’ll be easier to let the medical staff explain what’s happening. Then maybe you can explain why.”

She led him from the waiting room down a hallway. They stopped in front of a door marked with several warning signs:

QUARANTINE PROTOCOLS ARE IN EFFECT
WARNING: UNIVERSAL PRECAUTIONS MUST BE OBSERVED
CONTAMINATION CONTROL AREA: AUTHORIZED PERSONNEL ONLY
NOTICE ISOLATION AREA

She pulled out a disposable yellow body suit from a stack on a shelf near the door and handed it to Nate. She then started to put one on herself. She handed him a mask, face shield, and a pair of nitrile gloves. Once they were fully suited, gloved, and masked with face shield in place, she led him through three sets of doors, the first of which was air locked, and into what looked like a standard hospital room except there was no window. Rick lay on a bed within. He was surrounded by monitors. Strangely, he was curled on his left side instead of lying on his back. An oxygen tube was inserted in his nose. He breathed normally with his eyes closed. An IV drip trickled into his arm. He suddenly twitched briefly. One other person, also fully suited like them, was monitoring him. She looked at the newcomers.

“Dr. Michaud, your husband’s condition remains the same.”

“Dr. Zebronski, this is Mr. Nate Santorum.”

“Of Second Limb Prosthetics?” She turned to Nate. “Your company does such good work with our troops. Is this something new from your company?” she gestured at the patient. “If so, you’ve got some explaining to do to FDA regulators.”

“What do you mean?” Nate replied with puzzlement.

“Please fill him in on everything you can, Dr. Zebronski,” Abigail stated.

Dr. Zebronski gestured Nate over to Rick’s unconscious form. “When the patient arrived, he was severely burned. The costume he had been wearing had burned and melted, with portions of it fusing to his body. We almost had him airlifted to Boston. But one of the nurses noticed something unusual. The outer edges of the burns were quickly vanishing and replaced with healthy skin. He has continued to heal rapidly and without scar tissue. Where the costume had fused, it has peeled off or is in the process of peeling off revealing health skin in its place. But as you can see there are some serious side effects to this,” she lifted the bed sheet to reveal that there was a layer of fuzz on the healed skin across Rick’s back. Nate spied what look like a small tail protruding at the base of Rick’s spine just above his buttocks before the doctor laid the sheet back in place. “We’ve run blood tests. He’s got nanites in him,” Dr. Zabronski paused a moment shaking her head and then added, “A lot of them.”

“Nanites? Microrobots like in science fiction?”

“You could say so as these are well ahead of any research I know of. Best we can tell, they’re responsible for healing his injuries. But he’s also growing a tail, fur, and losing weight.

Second Fur by Aldin Busheytail

Somehow, they're altering him at the DNA level. We don't want to risk them getting into anyone else and possibly alter them, too. That's the reason for the quarantine."

"What!?"

"So, you know nothing about this?"

"No, but I will immediately launch an investigation within my company to determine what happened. I promise our full cooperation. What do you think he's being altered into?"

"Isn't it obvious!?" Abigail blurted. "He's curled on his side because every time the staff here have tried to roll him onto his back, he rolls back onto his side slightly curled as you see him now, a more natural position for the form he's changing into." She pulled the sheet up again. "Take another close look at the fur growing in as his burns heal. Peppery gray on his back and white on his abdomen. Most likely his tail will also be peppery gray once it's fully grown. Look at his face. It's already starting to elongate into a muzzle."

Nate stared in shock for a moment as the realization of what he was seeing sank in.

Abigail dropped the sheet and glared at Nate with tears in her eyes. "My husband is changing into the squirrel your suit allowed him to pretend to be! But what I don't understand is, if this is a result of the suit, why doesn't the fur color match the suit instead of peppery gray? As crazy as all of this is, wouldn't that make more sense?" There was a pleading tone to her voice as she asked.

Nate turned again to Dr. Zebronski. "And you can't stop these nanites?"

"It's believed we could possibly stop them by putting him through a full body MRI and let the powerful magnetism scramble them. But it might do more harm than good at this point."

"What do you mean?"

"He'd be stuck in mid-change between human and squirrel or whatever he's becoming. There's also the possibility that the MRI could just rip them out of his body, possibly killing him in the process. We were hoping you knew about these and had a way to control them. Maybe reverse what's happening before it goes much further."

"As I've promised, I'll investigate as soon as I can pull my phone out of my pocket once I leave this quarantine area."

"You have thirty-six, maybe forty-eight hours. That's how long we estimate before he loses too much mass."

"At which point, what?"

Second Fur by Aldin Busheytail

“Well, if you reverse it after that, he’ll be a midget at best by our best guess. As it is, even if we could reverse it at this moment, he’d be several inches shorter and at least thirty pounds (thirteen-and-a-half kg) lighter than he was before.”