



# RONIL CAINE

# IMMUTATION

A NOVELETTE

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**By  
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**Im”mu\*ta”tion** (?), noun [Latin immutatio, from immutare, immutatum, to change. See Immute.] Change; alteration; mutation. [R.] Dr. H. More. (in Webster’s Revised Unabridged Dictionary, Springfield, Mass.: G. & C. Merriam, 1913)

(<https://www.websters1913.com/words/Immutation>)

PART I

**WHITE HEART**

## CHAPTER 1

Marren was playing a game on his phone, trying to distract himself from the heart problems that had brought him to his doctor.

“Gerald Marren,” came a pleasant female voice from the speaker.

At the same time, an alert popped up on his phone, covering his game of Tetris—his turn had come, and he was being called into the examination room.

He stood up, put his phone away, and walked through the white door. His doctor, Dr. Jenet Wang, sat behind her desk in a lab coat, her legs crossed, tapping a digital pen against a notepad. Her black hair was tied back in a ponytail. She was a small woman, always decisive, and—according to many—the best doctor in the city.

“Good afternoon, Doctor,” Marren greeted.

“And to you, Mr. Marren,” Dr. Wang replied, gesturing gracefully to the padded chair opposite her. Marren took off his coat and sat down. “How are you? What can I do for you?”

“Well... something’s not right with my heart, and I’d like to request a full check-up. My partner is worried, and I want to put her mind at ease. That’s why I’m here.”

Marren’s mind replayed the past few months—the key moments that had ultimately led him to Wang’s office. Nora, the woman he lived with, had practically nagged him to death to see a doctor, though Marren was certain it was nothing serious. He lived a healthy lifestyle, and his family history had no major red flags. His parents had died in a mass accident, so he had no clue about potential age-related conditions. He was an only child, and distant relatives never mattered much to him. He vaguely remembered visiting them during Christmas when he was young, but those trips thankfully stopped. Marren wasn’t

the family type, but he didn't like being entirely alone either.

A few years ago, he met Nora, who had been looking for someone like him since she was living in the country illegally. What started as a superficial romance evolved into a relatively normal relationship, though in recent times, both of them had found more and more to be irritated about. Their pleasant memories were now strung together by gray days and evenings spent with their backs to each other. Marren mostly played games or binge-watched series while Nora studied, read, and looked for ways to move up in life.

Marren considered himself a businessman, though in reality, he just dabbled in whatever goods came his way. Sometimes it worked out, and when it did, he spent freely, convinced things were finally taking off. But then a downturn would hit, and he'd live off loans and savings until he zeroed out his accounts and had to start over.

A year in, Nora realized Marren wasn't

cut out for business. His promises and talk of big profits had no real foundation. The idea of a prosperous life together in their own home was a fantasy, no matter how long she stuck around.

Yet, she couldn't bring herself to leave. She wasn't in a position to sign a lease for her own place, and besides, she was worried about Marren's health. He was getting exhausted far too quickly, complaining about numb limbs and sleepless nights due to erratic heartbeats. Though these were symptoms that could happen to anyone, Marren's were worsening, until one morning, he collapsed in the bathroom. Nora barely managed to drag him to the couch, but by the time the paramedics arrived, Marren was fine again. Still, it was a wake-up call—something was wrong with him.

“What are your symptoms?” Dr. Wang asked.

“Sorry?” Marren seemed to snap out of a daydream, his eyes unfocused as he looked at her.

“Your symptoms, Mr. Marren. Can you tell me what they are?”

Marren sighed and began to recount everything—the first signs, how they had worsened, and when they started to become frightening. As he spoke, the computer transcribed his words into text and saved them into his file.

Dr. Wang performed a series of tests, which were analyzed by a central algorithm. Finally, she gave her diagnosis: Marren had a 98% chance of having Boninger Syndrome.

“That sounds... rare,” Marren said, frowning.

“It is,” Dr. Wang replied. “It’s a genetic heart condition that causes premature aging of the heart. Also called White-heart syndrome. Your heart has simply worn out, Mr. Marren, which is why it’s no longer functioning properly.”

“What are my chances?” he asked, his voice subdued.

“The medical algorithm outlines several

possibilities, depending on the treatment options we choose.”

“And the worst-case scenario?”

“If we do nothing, your heart will almost certainly fail within a year.”

Marren sighed again. A heavy, sticky sadness pressed down on him like a weight on his back. The colors drained from the world around him, and his mind was filled with thoughts like, “*I knew it,*” “*Why me?*” and “*Oh, for fuck’s sake.*”

“One option,” Dr. Wang continued, “is to implant a pacemaker. With this, medical science can extend your life by several years—three, maybe even five.”

*I’ll be forty-six then,* Marren thought.

“The procedure is costly, but insurance covers most of it. You can apply for a payment plan for the rest. It’s a routine surgery, completely safe. In the best-case scenario, you might even be eligible for a heart transplant, but based on your blood type and other factors, the wait time could be up to two years, and the risks are higher.”

But Marren wasn't listening anymore. He stood up and walked toward the door.

"If you'd like—" Dr. Wang began, but Marren cut her off.

"Thanks, Doctor. I'll be in touch."

"Please call if you need assistance. There are excellent..."

Marren left. He didn't go home but decided to take a walk. The cool, crisp autumn air helped clear his head, and he began to think about his options.

If he died, no one would miss him—that much, he concluded right away. His relatives wouldn't recognize him on the street, and Nora would probably be relieved, sparing her the need to break up with him. For a while now, he'd sensed that she was only staying with him out of obligation.

"Best case, ten years," he heard Dr. Wang's voice in his head. What's ten years good for? He wasn't going to get rich, not if he hadn't managed it so far. Sure, he could make some money, but a world tour wasn't in the cards. And yet, he didn't feel like he

was missing out on anything. For Marren, life just... was. It didn't go from point A to point B; it simply passed, one day after another. Sometimes things were good, sometimes they weren't.

The yellow and brown leaves fell from the trees in the park like rain onto the grass. In a year, when autumn came again, he too would lie down to rest, just like the trees.

There was nothing to leave behind, but no one to leave it to either. So why delay the inevitable? He'd go home, lie down, and simply wait for the year to pass, for his heart to finally give up the struggle.

Through his coat, he patted his chest. Yet, there was still a spark inside him that wouldn't let him do that. The will to live hadn't deserted him so quickly. He didn't know what his purpose in life was, but he knew one thing—he wasn't ready to die yet.

## CHAPTER 2

Three days later, there was a knock at Dr. Wang's door. Office hours hadn't started yet, and she was busy with administrative tasks. She felt annoyed that she had to get up to answer the door since her assistant hadn't arrived yet.

"The office hours don't start until—"

"I'm not here for that, if you don't mind..." said the man standing in the doorway. He was tall and thin, with a gray beard and thinning black hair. He wore an elegant brown coat and had a neatly tied checkered gray scarf. "I apologize for barging in like this. My name is Dr. Erbert Sauer, perhaps you've heard of me."

Dr. Wang shook her head.

"No, I'm afraid not. How can I help you?"

"I'm here to inquire about one of your patients. His name is Gerald Marren. Do

you recall him?”

“I’m sorry, doctor, but you know I can’t provide information about my patients, even if—”

“Yes, yes, of course,” Sauer interrupted. His voice was calm, deliberate, and carried an air of confidence. A mischievous smile played at the corner of his mouth, as if he already knew the outcome but wasn’t in a hurry for Wang to come to the same realization. “I’m not asking you to disclose anything.”

“Then what do you want?”

“So, he is your patient?” Sauer raised a long finger, like someone making an important deduction.

“Yes, but you seemed to know that already. Please, get to the point. I’ve got a lot to do before appointments begin.”

“My apologies, I won’t take up any more of your valuable time. I’m a doctor myself, so I fully understand how busy we can be. Our profession is our life, isn’t that right?”

Wang didn't respond. She didn't feel threatened by him, but she definitely wanted him gone.

"I understand Marren's heart is affected by Boninger Syndrome, correct?" Sauer asked.

"How do you know...?"

"I'd like to examine him, that's all. I specialize in researching rare heart conditions, and Marren is the youngest Boninger Syndrome patient I've encountered."

Wang was puzzled by how this man knew so much, considering she had only entered Marren's data three days ago. She hadn't shared it with any external network.

"I'm asking if you'd refer Mr. Marren to me," Sauer continued, his previously friendly tone turning cooler as he got to the point, making it clear he was serious. "And since my research is well-funded, I'm willing to pay you fifty thousand euros for this favor."

A wave of anger surged through Wang at the thought of being bribed in her own

office. But then, she reconsidered. This wasn't really a bribe, was it? Marren was a dying patient, and a simple examination might contribute to a better understanding of the disease. She'd refer him anyway, and if this man wanted to pay her for it, why not? It was free money.

Wang pulled out her phone, tapped a few buttons, and held it up for Sauer to see.

“Transfer the money to this account. You have one minute.”

Sauer didn't seem surprised, as though he had anticipated this. He, too, took out his phone, and Wang noticed that his left hand was partially paralyzed. Clumsily but with practiced precision, he used a few fingers to hold the phone. Sauer made the transfer. Wang's phone gave a soft marimba tone, indicating the money had arrived. Sauer handed her his business card, which displayed the address of his clinic.

“Please send Mr. Marren to this address.”

“All right.”

“Thank you for your time, Doctor. Have a great day!”

With that, Sauer left, closing the door behind him.

## CHAPTER 3

Nora stayed longer than usual at the diner where she worked. By the end of the day, her hair was sticky with oil, as it always was. She washed the dishes, packed up two last orders for the owner to take home, and being the one on duty, she had to close up. She quickly mopped the dining area, wiped down the tables, locked all the doors, and hurried to the bus stop. The ride to the apartment building where she lived with Marren took thirty minutes. Along the way, she watched as the beautiful city center slowly gave way to grayer, cheaper neighborhoods.

Every time she looked at the building, it saddened her. She had heard Marren say a hundred, if not a thousand times, that soon they'd move into their own house, with a green lawn in front and a big TV

for watching basketball games, which they both loved.

But Marren's big deal had never come through—the one that would bring in steady and reliable income. There had been moments of success. Once, he had come home in a huge SUV, piling gifts under the Christmas tree. That had been their best year, and Nora believed things were finally going to change. But then the money stopped coming, and slowly, they had to sell everything. Up and down, up and down—that was Marren's business life, but never forward.

Nora had always felt destined for greater things. That was why she left her hometown, aiming to achieve more than anyone ever had in that small village. Deep down, she loved Marren despite all his misfortune, but Nora knew she would eventually surpass him—in her career, knowledge, and financially. She deserved better than the diner, this apartment, and Marren, and she was determined to make it happen. The day would come when Marren wouldn't be

her partner anymore. Instead, she'd be with a real man, one who had a real income, and she wouldn't be slaving away in a diner but giving orders in a sleek business suit, handling important tasks for major corporations in glass-walled skyscrapers. All she had to do was stay focused, unafraid, and not let anyone undermine her or make her doubt herself.

Every evening, she recited her favorite quote from Dante as a prayer:

“Fear not: no one can take from us our passage; by such a One, it has been given to us. But you, why do you linger? Why retreat? God, in His grace, has willed me to be here, immune to these torments, these flames hold no power; no thing of yours can reach or touch me.” (Dante Alighieri, *Inferno*, translation by Allen Mandelbaum)

When Nora finally arrived home, the apartment was dark, with only the small kitchen lamp casting a faint glow. She took off her shoes and coat, set down her keys and bag, and headed for the kitchen. Mar-

ren sat there alone, a glass of wine in front of him, looking deeply troubled. Nora had seen him like this before, usually after a “big deal” had fallen through or his investments had tanked. He always blamed someone else, but no one could be this unlucky so often.

They hadn’t talked much over the past week. Nora could tell Marren was avoiding her, retreating into himself. This had happened before, and sometimes she was glad to have her evenings to herself. But now, seeing Marren’s face, she could tell things had gotten worse.

“What’s wrong?” Nora asked, her voice gentle and dutiful.

“I went to the doctor four days ago,” Marren said, not looking up, just spinning his wine glass, making sure the base stayed aligned with one of the circular patterns on the tablecloth.

“What did they say?” Nora sat across from him and reached out to hold his hand.

“There are two things. First, the doctor

said my heart has about a year left if we do nothing.”

Nora’s hand flew to her mouth, and tears welled up in her eyes as if they’d been waiting for the right moment. People who leave their homeland always have tears ready in their eyes.

“Why didn’t you tell me?” she asked.

“I couldn’t,” Marren said, his voice strained. “I couldn’t even admit it to myself.”

He was fighting back tears but managed to hold them in, though his face turned red.

“There has to be something we can do,” Nora said. “Medical science—”

“Wait, let me finish,” Marren interrupted, looking up for the first time. When Nora calmed down a bit, he took a sip of his wine and continued. “Dr. Wang said, at best, we could stretch it out to three to five years with one of those devices implanted in my heart,” he patted his chest, “to regulate the heartbeat. There are also medications, but that’s it.”

“Sweetheart...”

“Wait. Today, Wang called me and said there’s a specialist who focuses on rare heart diseases, and he suggested I go see him. So I did. And this doctor said he can cure me completely.”

Nora’s face lit up, and the tears of sadness were joined by tears of joy, rolling down her round cheeks until she wiped them away with the back of her hand.

“That’s amazing news!” Nora exclaimed.

“Yeah, but doesn’t it seem strange to you? How can a doctor as knowledgeable as Wang not know about a treatment that could save a patient’s life? One day, I have a year to live, and the next, I could have thirty or forty more?”

“You said it’s a rare disease, right? Wang can’t know everything—she’s a general practitioner.”

“Maybe, but it’s also possible I’m just a lab rat, and I won’t even last that one year.”

“Sweetheart, if this is a chance, you have to take it!”

Marren didn't appreciate Nora's excessive optimism. He knew she wanted to be supportive, but her concern didn't feel entirely genuine.

"Of course, I'll take the treatment—I have no other choice—but I'm scared."

"If it's an experimental treatment, they might even pay you for it."

"No, unfortunately not. But what does that matter right now..."

"I was just trying to be helpful. I don't care about the money. If I did, I'd have run off with a rich broker by now. What's important is that you get better."

"Yeah."

"I'll be with you through it all," Nora said, squeezing Marren's hand. He felt the cool dampness of her tear-stained fingers. "We'll get through this together."

Marren nodded, finished his wine, and poured himself another glass.

## CHAPTER 4

“Good afternoon!” Marren greeted.

“Good afternoon to you as well. How can I help?” asked the man in the white coat who opened the door.

“I’m Gerald Marren. Dr. Wang sent me to—”

“Ah, yes, Mr. Marren! Please, come in!” The man gestured warmly. “My name is Dr. Erbert Sauer. Come in, have a seat!”

Marren felt a little let down when he entered the space. Instead of a typical doctor’s office, he found himself in what looked like a mini-lab merged with a study. One half of the room housed serious-looking machines, microscopes, and scientific instruments, while the other half resembled a salon, complete with Baroque furniture. The walls were bare, and boxes stood in the corners, making it seem like Sauer had

only recently moved in.

Marren sat down in one of the armchairs, resting his hand on the armrest.

“Apologies for the mess, it’s not really like me,” Sauer said as he sat down across from Marren, crossing his legs. His hands rested in his lap, with his functioning hand on top, a habitual gesture. The edge of an elegant suit peeked out from under his white coat, along with a pair of expensive leather shoes. “You see, I travel a lot. Haven’t had time to unpack. I participate in research projects all over the world and give lectures, so my life is mostly confined to this mobile lab and hotel rooms. I got lucky to find this rental.”

“You don’t have a family?” Marren asked.

“My research is everything to me,” Sauer replied. “I can’t imagine any family tolerating my workaholic lifestyle.”

“What kind of research?”

“We’ll get to that, but let’s talk about the real reason you’re here. After all, time is precious—especially for you, right?”

Marren didn't respond, but it struck him how much he had already forgotten that four days of his remaining 365 had already slipped away. Time felt more valuable than ever.

"The algorithm," Sauer continued, "indicates you have Boninger Syndrome. It's a genetic disorder, and there's nothing anyone could have done, even if they had screened your DNA in the womb. The symptoms of Boninger Syndrome only appear when the heart enters its final stage of deterioration, in the last year of life. What makes it insidious is that the symptoms mimic ordinary things—a skipped heartbeat, fatigue, or numbness in the limbs. Hardly anyone rushes to a doctor for that. And even if they did, it wouldn't help."

"Yes, I've read up on it," Marren said.

"Good," Sauer nodded. "Now, my colleagues and I have made some advancements in treatment that go beyond what general practitioners know. We work in cutting-edge labs, using AI to develop new

therapies. Interestingly, we weren't specifically researching Boninger Syndrome when we made this breakthrough. I wouldn't call it a 'happy accident,' but even I can't fully explain how we got here. We've retraced the process in hindsight, and it's... remarkable!"

For a moment, Sauer seemed lost in thought, as if accepting an award in his mind. He stroked his short, silver beard before refocusing on Marren.

"We have a new method," Sauer said. "It hasn't been officially approved yet, but we've already used it to treat patients with various conditions. The beauty of this treatment is that it can work in almost every case, regardless of the disease. The trials are ongoing, but we're close to securing a global patent and the necessary medical approvals. Until then, we're testing it on volunteers. So far, we've treated nine people—and all of them fully recovered."

"Dr. Sauber, this—"

"Sauer."

“Apologies, Dr. Sauer. But this sounds—”

“Too good to be true? Don’t tell me that’s what you were about to say!” Sauer chuckled. “Yesterday, you were given one year to live. Today, you find out your illness is potentially curable. It must feel like a rollercoaster—one moment, you’re facing death, the next, you’re being offered a miracle. I get it, and I’ll be honest with you. The treatment isn’t perfect. Our results are promising, and we have strong backing, but there are always risks. That said, this has been decades in the making, led by brilliant professors whose passion is medicine. No one here means you harm.”

“How much does it cost, and how long will it take?” Marren asked, trying to stay practical.

“Now that’s what I like—straightforward questions.” Sauer smiled. “The treatment isn’t cheap, but since we’re still in the testing phase, the sponsors cover all the costs, including a compensation fee for you if you participate.”

“I’d get paid for this?”

“Of course,” Sauer said, spreading his hands. “It’s still an experiment, after all, even if we’ve greatly minimized the risks.”

“So, what exactly does the treatment involve?”

Sauer raised a finger. “First, to answer your earlier question about time. If all goes well, it takes just a few weeks. Full recovery in about a month. And yes, I know it sounds like magic, but it’s pure science. The treatment involves injecting artificial cells into your heart. These cells locate the damaged—or in your case, aged—cells and replace them. These smart cells are tailored to your DNA and can perfectly mimic the function and size of any cell they replace. In your heart, we’ll need to replace quite a few cells, but that should only take two to three weeks. Once done, your heart will function normally for life. The artificial cells don’t age, and they don’t make mistakes. Think of them as nanobots—intelligent little workers.”

“And you’ve already cured nine patients with this?”

“That’s right. Most recently, a young girl with leukemia in Singapore. She’s been under observation for six months, and all her results have been perfect.”

“Have you treated Boninger Syndrome?”

“No, not yet. But as I said, the method is universal. It can work for any disease where cell replacement is a solution.”

“When do I have to decide?”

“I’ll be in town for another month. After that, I’m heading to Singapore for a longer period. You can decide anytime, but it would be easier to proceed while I’m here. Afterward, you might have to come to me.”

“How much would I get paid?”

“I can transfer fifty thousand euros to you once you sign the consent form and complete the treatment.”

“What happened to your hand?” Marren asked. He knew it was a personal question but didn’t feel awkward asking it.

Sauer raised his left hand, showing that

only two fingers moved, and even those were slow. He stroked the hand with his other, then rested it back in his lap.

“Birth defect.”

“Why not use your own treatment to fix it?”

“Good question,” Sauer said. “But as I mentioned, the treatment works by replacing damaged cells. In my case, the cells are missing entirely.”

Marren nodded.

“Well, Mr. Marren, what do you say?”

“I need to sleep on it,” Marren replied.

“Of course.”

On his way home, Marren bought a bottle of cheap wine, thinking about how he would explain all this to Nora. He hadn’t even told her about the diagnosis yet, unable to bring himself to do it. But now, he couldn’t delay any longer, especially if he accepted Sauer’s offer. As crazy as it sounded, Marren had to admit—it made sense. Maybe medicine really was this advanced now.

## CHAPTER 5

Two days later, Marren sat in the ergonomic chair of the small lab, which he hadn't noticed on his first visit since it had been folded up behind the counters. Several lamps shone down on him, making him feel pale. While that wouldn't be unusual toward the end of autumn, he knew he looked just as washed-out in the middle of summer.

He hadn't slept much the past few nights, his mind racing over whether he'd made the right decision by agreeing to the treatment, imagining all the horrific ways things could go wrong. But what other choice did he have? Wang had referred him to Sauer, and he trusted Wang, having been his patient since he was twenty. And if he said no to this? What then? He had a year left on Earth, and then it would be over. Marren was convinced this was his only op-

tion. While he had started to make peace with the idea of dying, the glimmer of hope flickered like a distant lighthouse on the horizon.

Dr. Sauer stood at one of the counters, prepping the artificial cells on his laptop. With his height, he had to lean forward to reach the keys. Marren noticed how passionate Sauer seemed—he wasn't lying when he said his life was devoted to healing.

“I'm uploading the data from your DNA sample to the artificial cells now,” Sauer explained. “We developed them at an MIT lab, where I collaborated with a few colleagues. Each of our test subjects has a unique sample for the procedure.”

Once finished, Sauer put on thick rubber gloves and transferred the cells from storage into a syringe. The few milliliters of dense, but clear white liquid looked almost like milk.

“Are you ready, Mr. Marren?”

Marren swallowed hard. “It would help

if I knew what exactly I was supposed to be ready for.”

Sauer smiled kindly. “Look around. It used to take multiple hospital visits to get an extra ten years of life—sterile environments, surgical masks, disinfectants, operations, long rehabilitation, and lifestyle changes. Now, in this tiny lab, with just a laptop and a syringe, any disease can be cured. Isn’t that remarkable?”

Marren agreed, though if he had spoken aloud, he would’ve added, *‘If it’s true’*. He didn’t want to seem disrespectful again. His eyes drifted to Sauer’s desk, where the consent form he had signed was probably tucked away. It laid out the terms, that he agreed to have artificial cells injected for therapeutic purposes, that he would perform regular self-checks, and attend periodic follow-up exams. It didn’t seem like much to sacrifice for the chance to live out the rest of his life.

“Just relax, please,” Sauer said, placing his paralyzed hand on Marren’s upper arm

before skillfully inserting the needle with his good hand.

The injection hurt more than a regular blood draw, but it was bearable. Marren clenched his teeth until the doctor withdrew the needle.

“That’s it,” Sauer said, placing a gauze pad over the puncture wound. “Hold this in place for a few minutes.”

“Thank you.”

“Don’t thank me yet,” Sauer replied while tidying up his equipment, packing everything neatly into a custom-made, metal-coated, soft-lined case. “Come back in two weeks. We’ll see if we’ve made any progress on your heart by then.”

Marren’s smile faded, but Sauer didn’t look up, so he didn’t notice. “*So he’s not sure this will work*”—Marren thought. “*My chances haven’t really improved after all?*”

But he didn’t say it aloud. He stood and reached for his coat.

“Alright,” Marren said. “Two weeks from now then.”

“If you notice any unusual symptoms, call me immediately. A tingling or numbness in your chest is normal.”

“I understand.”

“Good! Rest as much as you can. Don’t put any strain on your heart.”

“I won’t. Thanks again.”

“Take care of yourself.”

## CHAPTER 6

Thirteen days later, Marren arrived at Dr. Sauer's small lab at the agreed time.

“Good to see you, Mr. Marren! How are you feeling?”

“Good afternoon. I think I'm doing well, thanks.”

“Excellent. How were the last two weeks? Any symptoms?”

“Nothing major. Like you said, I felt a slight tingling in my chest. Some of the usual symptoms too, irregular heartbeat and so on.”

“That's a good sign. Let's take a look, shall we? Please, step over to the wall.”

Marren took off his coat and walked to the wall. Sauer pulled out a tablet-like device and placed it against Marren's chest, over his sweater. He held it there for about thirty seconds, repeating the process on his

side and back.

“What is this?” Marren asked. “Some kind of portable X-ray?”

Sauer chuckled. “No, it’s a specialized scanner. It communicates directly with the synthetic cells we’ve introduced into your body and maps out their locations. It gives us a rough 3D model of where they are and how many are functioning. If everything’s going as planned, the most critical parts of your heart should have already been replaced. Let’s see.”

Sauer moved over to his laptop, which was now displaying the data. He turned the screen toward Marren, revealing a black background dotted with clusters of white specks, forming a concentrated cloud. As Sauer rotated the model using the keyboard, the specks began to swirl around the cloud’s center, gradually revealing the unmistakable shape of a heart. Or, as Sauer had said—about half of one.

Marren was stunned. “Is that... my heart?”

“Yes, Mr. Marren. Half of your heart is now composed of synthetic cells, and from the looks of it, they’re functioning perfectly. Not only are you still alive, but you’ve had very minimal symptoms.”

“This is unbelievable.”

“Please, take a seat. I need to run a few more checks.”

Marren sat in silence as the doctor carried out more tests, but he could feel an overwhelming sense of relief flooding through him. He had faced something dire—looked death straight in the eye—but he was going to make it. He might actually survive this. Not just for another year, but—if Sauer was right—for however long his new, stronger heart could carry him. He had once had the weakest heart, and now, it would become the strongest.

“All done,” Sauer said. “The results are excellent. In another two weeks, your entire heart will be fully replaced. Every deteriorating cell will have been renewed, and you’ll be past this.”

“How do these synthetic cells know the exact boundaries of my heart?” Marren asked. “I mean, how do they work on a cellular level?”

“It functions similarly to stem cell therapy. I assume you’ve heard of that?”

“Yes.”

“The same principle applies, but with synthetic cells. They know what they need to become, and they do just that—they turn into your heart cells. It’s that simple. They don’t think; they just find your heart’s cells, replicate their parameters, and replace them.”

“I have to admit, it sounds a little scary.”

“Experimenting with the human body is always a bit frightening,” Sauer said, nodding. “Even today, there’s so much we don’t fully understand. But rest assured, in the end, science always prevails over nature.”

Marren stood up, slipped on his coat, and wrapped his scarf around his neck. Outside, the wind had picked up during the examination—a cold northern gust, evident

in the erratic dance of the branches of the sycamore tree just beyond the windows.

“Alright then. We’ll continue in two weeks,” Sauer said.

## CHAPTER 7

Day by day, Marren felt increasingly better. All the unpleasant symptoms related to his heart and circulation had completely vanished. He was sleeping more soundly, waking up more easily, and he felt, for the first time in a long while, completely healthy.

Sometimes he caught himself thinking about his new artificial heart. The fact that the organ inside him was no longer *his*, but a foreign material. Yet, the thought reassured him—he'd gained years of life back, and it was far simpler than undergoing a heart transplant or getting a pacemaker. What's more, Sauer hadn't even mentioned any medication. No talk of rejection, no need for lifestyle changes. In fact, it was possible he'd be capable of far more than before. For the first time in his life, he could

plan something big.

He did, however, notice something unusual—his bodily fluids had taken on a faint reddish tint. Dr. Sauer, over the phone, assured him that this was normal, explaining that it was simply the old, dead cells being flushed out. What he was seeing wasn't blood, and it certainly wasn't a sign of internal injury.

One evening, Marren found himself wondering about Sauer. If this treatment was truly as successful as it seemed, and if they'd already conducted multiple trials, why wasn't Sauer a world-famous, celebrated scientist? This achievement was groundbreaking. While others were still experimenting with printing and assembling synthetic cells, Sauer was already *healing* people with them—and doing it so quickly and efficiently that it was almost beyond comprehension. *What if something's off about all this?* Marren asked himself, but his relief and newfound vitality quickly overpowered his doubts.

Even Nora noticed the change in him. He was more confident, and stronger. His muscles were holding up better, now that his circulation was almost perfect. His new heart was setting a new pace, and his organs and cells were thriving after the long period of scarcity they had endured.

At his next checkup, Marren saw his entire heart on the monitor—an intricate structure built from billions of tiny dots. The process was nearing completion, and his old, diseased heart was disappearing forever. In its place, a new, artificial heart was taking over—one that would never tire, one that would always beat precisely as it should. No irregularities, no slowdowns, no overstepping its limits.

With his newfound energy, Marren threw himself into life. He started working out, took on new jobs, and began making grand plans. At first, Nora was thrilled—her partner radiated vitality. Even in bed, he was performing better than ever, bringing them both pleasures they'd never ex-

perienced before. But Nora, perhaps more attuned to subtle changes, couldn't shake a growing unease. Amidst the rush of excitement, she sensed something off-key in the melody of his transformation. *Where is all this headed?* she wondered. *What will he become in the end?*

One morning, Marren stood in front of the bathroom mirror. He pulled off the shirt he'd slept in to avoid getting it wet while he washed up. He took a long look at his body, which was starting to show signs of definition. He'd always been soft, but now he was finally getting into shape.

He flexed his biceps and then awkwardly turned to the side, mimicking a bodybuilder's side-triceps pose. His modest muscles barely bulged, but the progress was clearly visible compared to his previous self.

Satisfied, he turned back to the mirror, but something caught his eye—a faint spot on his chest. It was barely noticeable, a pale patch of skin on the inner part of his right pectoral. About the size of a thumbprint,

it looked as though his skin had lightened, similar to how people get sun fungus. Marren ran his hand over it, but felt nothing out of the ordinary—the skin wasn't any different in texture. He pressed on it, but it didn't hurt.

He decided not to think much of it for the time being, but since it was something new, he made a mental note to show it to Dr. Sauer at his next checkup.

## CHAPTER 8

Marren was growing more impatient by the minute. He couldn't shake the unease that Dr. Sauer might have left for Singapore without saying a word, abandoning him in the middle of an experiment. When he couldn't reach Sauer, Marren decided to head straight to his lab. To his surprise, he found the doctor there, and without any resistance, Sauer let him in.

Marren stormed into the office, knocking over a coat rack in his anger. He didn't bother picking it up, heading straight for Sauer. He yanked up his thin sweater and undershirt all the way to his neck, revealing his chest covered in sparse hair.

“What the hell is this, doctor?” Marren demanded. Sauer's face froze in genuine shock, as if he had never seen anything like it before.

“What the actual *hell* is this?” Marren was shouting now, eyes searching for any sign of recognition on Sauer’s face.

In the mirror across the room, Marren could see his own reflection: his pale chest had turned an almost ghostly white across a hand-sized area, a patchwork of splotches with no color at all. It looked like a bizarre, asymmetrical Rorschach blot.

Sauer raised his hands defensively, trying to calm Marren down.

“Please, Mr. Marren, let’s not jump to conclusions. It’s not necessarily—”

“Don’t tell me you haven’t seen this before! What is it?”

“I don’t... I don’t know,” Sauer muttered, shaking his head. “Let me take a closer look. Please, calm down. Take off your clothes, sit down, and I’ll examine it.”

“Has this happened to anyone else?” Marren asked as he threw off his jacket, sweater, and shirt in a frustrated heap on the floor. He slumped into the familiar examination chair, still fuming.

“I’ve never seen anything like this,” Sauer admitted, leaning in to examine Marren’s chest with a digital magnifier, zooming in on the pale area a thousand times over.

“Incredible,” Sauer muttered under his breath, though it was quiet enough that Marren knew it wasn’t meant for him.

“What caused this? Did the treatment go wrong?” Marren pressed.

“I don’t think so,” Sauer said cautiously. “This seems to be some kind of response we haven’t encountered before. But don’t worry, I don’t believe it’s serious.”

“You *don’t believe*? You have no idea what this is, and you’re telling me it’s not serious? How can you say that?”

“Please, Mr. Marren! It’s crucial that we stay calm. We can only solve this together if we remain level-headed. Let me check your heart as well.”

Sauer pulled out the scanner device and scanned Marren’s chest, the data transferring to his laptop. But when Sauer glanced

at the screen, he visibly recoiled—his expression one of pure shock, unable to hide it despite his professional demeanor.

Marren's eyes filled with dread just from Sauer's reaction. The doctor's face said it all—something was seriously wrong. His heart. Something was *very* wrong with his heart.

“What is it?” Marren's voice was barely a whisper now. Sauer turned the monitor toward him and started an animation.

On the 3D model of Marren's heart, thousands of white dots covered the entire organ, spreading out so much that his heart was almost invisible. The whiteness extended outwards, reaching into his chest. The pale patch on his chest was merely an extension of what was happening to his heart.

“The cells... for some reason,” Sauer began, his voice tinged with despair, “they've spread beyond the heart.”

“What do you mean? You said this was a stem cell treatment! Stem cells don't just

spread like this.”

“These are artificial cells. They’re similar to stem cells but not entirely the same.” Sauer shook his head, frustrated. “This wasn’t supposed to happen.”

Marren grabbed a tissue and wiped his nose, sniffing, then held it up for Sauer to see.

“Look at this,” Marren said, showing the doctor the tissue stained with a reddish-brown smear. “Old cells are coming out of me through every opening in my body.”

Sauer stared, his face straining to remain calm and composed in front of Marren.

“This has happened to others, hasn’t it?” Marren asked, eyes locked on the doctor. “What happened to them? Did they die? Is that what’s going to happen to me?”

“No, no! You won’t die,” Sauer insisted.

“Stop lying to me!” Marren shouted, slamming his fist on the desk, making Sauer flinch. “You have no idea what’s happening to me.”

Marren stood up, pacing the cramped room, too anxious to sit still.

“There was a risk, yes,” Sauer admitted, “but this wasn’t supposed to happen. I triple-checked everything. The cells aren’t supposed to cross the programmed boundaries. They shouldn’t be able to. Their programming is specific to the heart. They only recognize and replace those cells.”

“Then stop them!” Marren demanded. Sauer spread his hands helplessly, pointing to the laptop screen.

“I don’t know how to stop them. Look...”

“And what happens next? They’ll replace every cell in my body?”

“I... I don’t know.”

“Say something useful!” Marren yelled.

“Well... it’s possible...”

Marren’s realization hit him like a truck—Sauer had been experimenting on him blindly. That explained why this treatment wasn’t public, why it had no approval, and why Sauer wasn’t famous. Sauer was a fraud, an unethical scientist who had tricked him and was now playing with his life.

“What about your other patients? Did this happen to them too?”

Sauer was silent for a long moment before he collapsed into his chair.

“You were the first.”

Marren clenched his jaw, certain for a moment that he was going to beat Sauer to death right then and there. But the thought slipped away as his instinct for survival kicked in. Time was against him. He could be losing millions of cells every second. At this rate, he'd be gone in a month. And what would happen then? Death seemed the most likely outcome—nothing could replicate life itself—or maybe he'd turn into some uncontrollable mass of cells. Best-case scenario, the process would stop when the cells reached his brain. That would be the end of the line.

“Call your team!” Marren barked. Sauer looked up at him, lost. He sat there like a man preparing for ritual suicide to preserve his honor, gripping the arms of his chair as if to hold on to the last shred of

stability in his world.

“Do it!” Marren shouted. Sauer jumped in his seat.

“I have no team,” Sauer said softly. “I did this alone. Well, I stole a few things from others, but the cells inside you are entirely unique. No one else even knows this technology exists.”

“Oh my god,” Marren muttered, running his hands through his hair, and turning away from Sauer. “You’re insane! What have you done to me?”

“I was trying to help,” Sauer whispered. “If only your heart had been replaced, we would’ve both become famous. We could’ve changed the course of medical history.”

“I’m not your guinea pig!” Marren yelled, pointing accusingly at Sauer.

“But you are. Remember? You signed the papers. I even transferred the payment.”

“The backers—are they even real?” Marren demanded. Sauer nodded.

“I have backers. A group of wealthy, elderly individuals who are eager for this

treatment. They're willing to pay anything to solve aging."

"Did Dr. Wang know about this? Is he involved?"

"No, but he was willing to refer you to me for the right price. You were an ideal candidate. I couldn't experiment on a cancer patient; the artificial cells might replicate the cancer, since they don't distinguish between healthy and diseased cells. But you, you had a failing heart with otherwise healthy cells. That's exactly what I needed."

"Youbastard!" Marren spat as he dressed, turning toward the door. "I'll be back in a week. You'd better have a solution by then—or I'll make *you* my experiment."

Marren slammed the door behind him with such force that the frame groaned, sending a few flakes of white plaster drifting down onto the dark floor.

## CHAPTER 9

Sauer had disappeared. He'd packed up his lab and vanished, ignoring Marren's increasingly desperate calls. Meanwhile, the white patch had started spreading across Marren's back. His chest, from neck to navel, was now entirely white—like fresh snow.

Frustrated, Marren finally took the time to dig deeper into who Dr. Sauer really was. He wasn't surprised to find very little information. What he did uncover labeled Sauer as a fraud, a joke of a scientist. "How he ever earned a biology degree is beyond comprehension," one article said. His research was described as "dangerous, ungrounded flights of fancy," and his theories "harmful to the scientific community." Rage churned inside Marren's new heart. Dr. Sauer was now firmly at the top of his hit list—for lying to him, using him, ruin-

ing him, and then abandoning him.

Nora had grown distant, pulling away from him more each day. She worried constantly, though Marren's attention was singularly focused on finding a way to stop the spread of the artificial cells. Every avenue he explored led nowhere. This field was so new that even the most brilliant scientists barely touched on it. Marren visited doctors, hoping for answers, but none dared intervene. They were horrified by the aggressive, unnatural whiteness overtaking his body.

A side effect began to emerge: Marren noticed he was growing stronger. His chest muscles never seemed to tire, no matter how much strain he put on them. He experimented with different exercises, but no amount of effort could fatigue the white muscles.

Eventually, Marren gave up the fight. He shut himself away, resigned to the belief that death would come quickly, painlessly—like the flick of a switch flipping him

out of existence, controlled by some invisible hand.

Nora couldn't take it anymore. She left. A coworker, a man named Moha with long curly hair that screamed of Caribbean roots, took her in for a month.

Nora felt the change, too, but not like Marren. For her, leaving was a long-overdue decision. She had no future with Marren. This wasn't the man she had envisioned spending her life with. Marren was kind, and his dry, sarcastic humor made him seem laid-back, but deep down, he was a loser—someone who never got ahead and always blamed others or the circumstances. Nora, on the other hand, had bigger dreams. She wanted to break free, start her own business, buy property, and maybe even climb the corporate ladder at a multinational company, looking back on her past with a sense of triumph over her once meager beginnings.

Marren started hiding from people—those who stared. The whiteness had spread

to his face, snaking up in smeared flame-like patterns, reaching his nose and cheekbones. His upper arms were next. The artificial cells were replacing everything in their path, seamlessly taking over each cell's function. Whether the new cells connected to other artificial ones or to the remaining natural ones, all the systems—chemical transfers, information exchange—continued without interruption. His legs were already transforming at the knees. There was no doubt it was happening internally, too. By now, every organ—his liver, kidneys, lungs, even his intestines—was white.

One day, Marren deliberately cut himself to see if his blood had turned white. What he saw was strange. His blood wasn't white but more of a pale pink, and the wound didn't gape open as expected. It closed instantly and stayed that way. Marren made a deeper cut this time, burying the blade halfway into his arm. Light pink blood welled up and dripped down, but the moment he pulled the knife out, the wound sealed it-

self shut, leaving no trace of the cut. No more bleeding. The artificial cells recognized each other instantly, latching together as if the injury had never occurred. They seemed to part just enough to let the blade through, then fused back seamlessly. Marren stared at his arm, running his fingers over it, trying to feel the scar that wasn't there. The changes were far more serious than he had first imagined.

Marren didn't care that Nora had left. His sexual drive had vanished anyway. Now, all that consumed him was his new body and testing its limits. What more could it do? Was he becoming some kind of superhero—invulnerable, with superhuman strength? He knew that soon, he would find out his fate, because in just a few days, the whiteness would reach his brain.

## CHAPTER 10

The State Investigative Bureau had a special unit under its biotechnology weapons and development division—an elite task force known only to the highest levels of government. This unit was linked to a hidden research facility where they investigated developments deemed a potential threat to humanity. Since its inception, this task force, along with its security team, had been led by Agent Maximillian Gadberry. Over his seven years of service, they had uncovered and dismantled numerous secret labs, underground research collectives, and illegal experiments involving cloning, biotechnology, and genetic mutations.

Officially, Gadberry was classified as an intelligence agent with the highest clearance. His interest in the science was purely professional—only as much as was neces-

sary to assess the danger posed by a given project. What truly captured his attention, however, were the pursuits of surveillance, hunting, and, if necessary, elimination. These weren't just his job; they were his life, his hobby, his creed.

Gadberry arrived at the apartment complex with six tactical operatives and two armored SUVs. As they ascended the stairs, they ordered everyone they encountered back into their apartments. When they reached apartment 29, two of the operatives used a battering ram to smash the door in. The impact split the door down the middle, ripping the lock and hinges from their frames. The armed team stormed in, sweeping through the space with military precision, and found the man they were looking for standing by the window, back to them. He wore jeans and a black hoodie. The operatives fanned out, forming a semi-circle around him, aiming six weapons on his back.

Gadberry stepped forward, emerging

from his team. He was dressed in a sharp, tailored suit, the scent of masculine cologne clinging to him. In his pocket, he carried an authorization that permitted him to use any means necessary to apprehend Gerald Marren. His eyes, honed by years of fieldwork, watched Marren with the cautious gaze of a predator sizing up its prey.

“Marren?” Gadberry’s voice filled the room, leaving no space for denial or argument. The authority in his tone was palpable, commanding.

The hooded figure slowly turned. Under the hood was a face that was entirely white—unnervingly white. Gadberry squinted, momentarily taken aback by the sight, the horror and shock twisting in his gut. Marren didn’t look menacing, but he no longer seemed entirely human either. Gadberry’s professional instincts kicked in, years of experience preventing him from losing his composure.

“Put this on,” Gadberry ordered, motioning to one of the operatives, who stepped

forward and placed a specialized containment suit between them. The suit was designed to prevent even a single cell of Marren's altered body from escaping into the outside world. It would also restrict his movements to some degree.

Marren's fate was sealed, and Gadberry would ensure that the mysterious transformation wouldn't threaten anyone else.

## CHAPTER 11

Sauer had been hiding out for weeks in a secluded apartment he rented under a false name. He was used to this routine—constantly moving from city to city, conducting new experiments on unwitting patients, most of whom didn't survive the year. *But things had gone horribly wrong with Marren. This had never happened before. Marren was still alive when he shouldn't be, and worse, he had transformed into a thriving mass of artificial cells.* Even Sauer, whose theories often bordered on the fantastical, wasn't prepared for this. The situation had spiraled far beyond anything he could control, and he feared the consequences: reporters, investigators, and maybe even Marren doing something reckless.

But none of that had happened.

Instead, one morning, while leafing

through his old studies, Sauer made a disturbing discovery.

He stood beside a cardboard box containing his books and old notes, holding a printed document in his left hand while flipping through the pages with his right. One page detailed theories on reversing the spread of artificial cells. Lost in his thoughts, he let the book slip from his hand. Instinctively, he snatched it from midair with his left hand, grabbing it by the spine in a fluid motion. Slowly, he lifted the book back up, staring at his hand in disbelief. He had never been able to move like that before. His hand—looked healthy for the first time in years, except that from the wrist down, it had turned white.

He hadn't noticed it earlier because he rarely used that hand. He had grown accustomed to it being weak and useless, always hanging at his side. But now, only patches of skin had whitened, and even those were barely noticeable beneath the hair on his arm.

“No!” he muttered, horrified, as he examined his revitalized limb. He dropped the document and moved to the window. Slowly, he rotated his hand in the light, inspecting it from every angle. Then he brought up his right hand, moving them in sync to compare. They were identical, except for the color—one was much whiter.

“This is impossible,” Sauer whispered, the realization crashing over him like being submerged underwater. If this could happen to him, it meant the cells could spread to anyone. A global outbreak of artificial cell proliferation, like a virus. *What if it could infect animals? What if death itself became obsolete? How would new children be born? Would everyone eventually become nothing but a white, shapeless mass?* His heart sank further as he grasped the gravity of the situation—he had started this, and now people would hunt him down for it.

At that exact moment, the front door exploded inward, and masked commandos

stormed the room. Sauer screamed, backing up against the wall, but his reaction was slow. By the time he realized what was happening, they had already surrounded him, guns trained on him from every angle.

Gadberry, in a sharp suit wearing black rubber gloves, stepped forward from among them.

“Weapons down,” he ordered. The operatives lowered their rifles to the floor.

“Who are you?” Sauer demanded, his voice shaking.

“You don’t ask questions,” Gadberry said.

One of the commandos handed Gadberry Sauer’s ID card and phone.

“Dr. Erbert Sauer,” Gadberry said, tapping the card against the phone a few times. “We’ve been looking for you for a long time. Others have been, too. Consider yourself lucky we got to you first. Now, get dressed. You’re coming with us.”

They handed Sauer the same containment suit they had given Marren. Sauer

glanced at the suited man and immediately knew resistance was futile. He could struggle and try to escape, but it wouldn't matter. In the end, they were taking him. His only worry now was where they'd take him.

## CHAPTER 12

They had driven for days before the large SUV finally came to a stop. Marren had managed to sleep during the journey, receiving regular food and water, but he spoke to no one, and no one spoke to him. The guards accompanying him left him alone, though someone always kept an eye on him, even when they switched shifts or disappeared briefly.

When they finally got out of the vehicle, two men flanked him and escorted him into a building carved into a mountainside. The sun had already set, but the sky wasn't fully dark yet. The weather had turned wintry, though the first snowfall had yet to arrive. Marren glanced around but saw only jagged cliffs, mountain peaks, and dense forests stretching in every direction.

Inside, they descended into the base-

ment, going three levels underground. The hallway they stepped into from the elevator looked pristine, as if freshly prepared for some grand opening ceremony. Everything was spotless. The lights were all on, and the walls were seamless, without a single imperfection. The modern design and colors gave the place a welcoming appearance, but Marren's first thought was that he would not leave this place alive.

On one side of the hallway, spacious rooms opened up with glass doors, while the other side was lined with labeled doors. Marren focused on what he instinctively labeled as "cells" and peered inside as much as he could through the windows.

He had no doubt these were some kind of prison cells, although the furnishings made them look more like hotel suites. The first room was empty, but in the second, he saw a familiar face. Dr. Sauer stood in the middle of the room and lifted his head at the sound of their footsteps. He looked pale and exhausted.

The next room was vacant, but in the third, an unfamiliar man sat on a sofa, reading. Marren couldn't make out his face clearly, as the book obscured it partially.

In the following room, the occupant was standing by the door, watching through the window as Marren was brought in. Marren realized from this that the doors couldn't be opened from the inside—otherwise, the prisoner would surely have opened it to get a better view. Marren hesitated, but the guards pushed him forward again.

Nora was standing at the door of the cell. Her face was a mixture of despair and fear as she looked at him. Her skin was pale—not the sickly pallor of the unwell, but the same unnatural whiteness that marked Marren's own face. He could read her lips as she silently mouthed his name.

They passed another room before arriving at Marren's. He entered willingly.

“You can take off the suit now. There's food in there as well,” one of the guards said. “Get some rest. You'll need your strength.”

No key turned, no lock clicked, yet Marren knew there was no way out.

The entire wall opposite him was a massive window, offering a view of the surrounding forest. From the treetops, it was clear that the building was perched on the side of a cliff, and there had to be at least a ten-meter drop below.

The room itself seemed fully equipped for a long stay: a wardrobe, a shower, a bed, a fridge, a sofa, a TV, books, and even some exercise equipment. Marren had to admit, this was nicer than any place he had ever lived in his entire life.

In the corner, on a plastic table, a lavish dinner awaited him—fried chicken, bread, roasted potatoes, and salad. Marren sat down to eat, all the while trying to piece together what had happened to him and how he had ended up here.

*Sauer is a lying pig*, that much was clear. But Sauer didn't seem to have much control over things if he was locked up too. *Who's the stranger in the cell?* Marren wondered.

*Probably another one of Sauer's patients. And then there was Nora. How did she end up here? And why is she so white? Did they do something to her? Or... did she catch these cells from me? Is she...? No, that was nonsense.*

But it was intriguing that out of the three prisoners, two were directly connected to him. Maybe the third was too, and he just didn't know it yet.

*"What is this place? A research lab?"* Marren pondered. *"Do they want to save me, or just drain my cells for some scientific experiment or, worse, to create a biological weapon?"*

Marren wasn't deluding himself—whatever they had planned, it wasn't going to end well.

PART II

**REGENERATION**

## CHAPTER 13

Dr. Sauer sat perched on the back of the couch, staring out the window at the vast valley below. At first, he wondered at which point he had made the wrong decision in the chain of events that led him here, and what fate awaited him in this place. Then his focus shifted, scrutinizing the flawless projection of the landscape outside, convinced that it was all an illusion, that behind the window was nothing but solid rock. To him, this place was not a research facility but a secret experimental prison. And Gadberry? A modern-day camp commandant.

The door slid open with a quiet hiss, and Gadberry entered, as if waiting just outside for the moment Sauer thought of him. Two armed guards followed, and behind them, a man and a woman, both holding tablets. All five wore protective suits, as if guard-

ing against some chemical contamination. Sauer noticed through the closing door that at least two more armed men stood in the corridor.

“Dr. Sauer,” Gadberry said as he pulled up a chair and sat on it backward, resting his arms on the backrest. Sauer didn’t move, his mind turning over whether Gadberry and his team were simply overcautious or if they genuinely feared him enough to require automatic weapons.

“Where am I?” Sauer asked.

“This is a research facility,” Gadberry said, “where we study special individuals, like yourself.”

Sauer glanced at his hand, now alarmingly white, the pale color spreading upward, already reaching his collarbone.

“You’ve achieved something extraordinary,” Gadberry continued, “something we must keep hidden from the world for now. You agree, don’t you, that ordinary people aren’t ready to know about this?”

Sauer held Gadberry’s gaze for a few mo-

ments before nodding. *Sure, let him play along for now.*

“Thank you for your cooperation so far,” Gadberry said. “Continue to be helpful, and we’ll get through this quickly. We’re trying to assist you, but it will require extensive testing and, of course, your help. Tell me, what exactly happened to you? Why have you become so...” Gadberry gestured broadly at Sauer’s pale form, “...white?”

Sauer studied the group. Gadberry watched him intently, alert to even the smallest twitch. The woman and man—scientists, Sauer assumed—were poised with their tablets, just as focused on him as Gadberry was. The two guards, while not staring directly at him, stood at rest but with the precision and readiness of highly trained soldiers. If Sauer made a move toward Gadberry, he wouldn’t get far before taking thirty or forty bullets—unless, of course, his new cells had made him faster, stronger, more resistant.

He returned his gaze to Gadberry.

“I was researching the potential of synthetic cells with a few colleagues. We combined nanotechnology, 3D organ printing, and gene editing, and eventually succeeded in printing viable cells and molecules. Simultaneously, we developed an artificial intelligence—a learning program—to help us find the right path, modeling new combinations for us. Its task was to figure out how to create a higher form of humanity using available technology.”

Sauer hesitated for a moment, realizing how grandiose it sounded when spoken aloud. Gadberry seemed to pick up on Sauer’s underlying pride, interpreting it as anything but a failure that had landed him here.

“At first,” Sauer continued, “we all thought we were working toward a Nobel Prize. But over time, my colleagues started seeing only the risks. One by one, they dropped out, raising alarms. Eventually, we announced the project’s end and dissolved the team. But I couldn’t let it go. The idea

that we could replace our cells with synthetic, immortal ones—it consumed me. I found some wealthy backers and continued the work on my own. The process wasn't entirely ready, but I wanted to try it. I didn't dare test it on myself, so I found someone else. It took years to locate Marren. The challenge was finding someone with healthy cells, because the replacement requires functional tissue as I thought back then—so I needed someone healthy but willing to undergo the treatment. Though, in hindsight, a terminal cancer patient might have worked too, since the cells would repair any damage based on the DNA, and by the time the replacement finished, they'd be cured."

"And what did you expect to happen to Marren?" Gadberry asked, gesturing in the direction of Marren's room with his thumb.

"This," Sauer said plainly. "I knew this would happen. What I didn't anticipate was that the cells would be transmissible. According to the program, the cells were supposed to follow Marren's DNA, but it

seems that once they entered my body, they adapted to my DNA.”

“Didn’t you write the program that controls them?” asked the female scientist. Sauer was surprised she was allowed to ask a question but saw no reaction from Gadberry.

“Answer her,” Gadberry said, gesturing toward her without breaking eye contact with Sauer.

“Partially,” Sauer replied. “But mostly, it was the AI. The logic is clear, though—the AI’s job was to design a superior human species, and it did. The easiest way to implement that was through cell replacement spread like an infection.”

“And where is this AI now?” Gadberry asked.

“On my laptop, in the lab...”

“We have it. Access code?”

“Facial recognition.”

“Pin?”

“Paris-dash-Brussels-dash-Vienna-29.”

“Mr. Campea,” Gadberry said to the scientist behind him, “notify Mr. Mosby to examine the AI.”

The scientist began typing on his tablet.

“What do you think happened to Marren, Dr. Sauer? What is he becoming? And what about yourself?”

Sauer thought carefully before responding.

“We stand at the next stage of human evolution. But what the limits are, I don’t know. I’m still halfway between my old cells and the new ones. The transformation is progressing more slowly in me than it did in Marren. In him, it spread exponentially from the center of his body, while mine started at my hand and is much slower—perhaps because I’m older, I’m not sure.”

“And the mind?” Gadberry pressed. “Why didn’t Marren become brain-dead? His neurons were replaced too, weren’t they?”

“Yes,” Sauer agreed. “I expected that once the cells reached the brain, it would

be over. But it wasn't. They replaced the cells one by one and transferred all the information."

"We'll be investigating that thoroughly. Though we have no information about Marren, we've been watching you for a long time. You mostly stayed under the radar, but we had a sense that eventually, something would go wrong."

"If you knew so much, why didn't you stop me?"

"It's not my job to stop new technologies. It's my job to collect them. My team here will understand, process, and put it to use for humanity without letting anyone gain an advantage over the rest. We can't allow a single individual to surpass the entire species. We're the guardians of the world's technological balance, if you will."

"I must be a huge threat to society," Sauer said, his voice heavy with sarcasm.

"You don't even know what these cells are capable of. But we're going to find out."

## CHAPTER 14

Moha lived in constant panic as his body slowly turned white, and his old cells oozed out as a purulent discharge from every possible exit. He had no idea why he was here or what they had done to him, and he was terrified of death. He was a simple man, and he knew that about himself. All he ever wanted from life was to make a little money, maybe smoke some, and that was it.

He liked Nora. They talked a lot during the slow hours at the diner where they worked, when there were fewer orders before lunch and in the afternoon. Moha knew Nora was afraid of Marren, because of how he had “changed”—whatever that meant—and was looking for some kind of escape. So, when the opportunity arose, he invited her to his place as a temporary solution.

Nora shared a lot about Marren and her

life, like she hadn't had anyone to talk to in years. Moha was a good listener and didn't mind refilling their wine glasses while she spoke. Eventually, Nora let herself be kissed, and caught up in the moment, they ended up sleeping together. She hadn't planned on it, but after Marren's awkwardness and increasingly frightening appearance, it felt good to be close to a normal, uncomplicated man, someone who was exactly what he seemed to be.

Moha figured there wouldn't be a relationship with Nora, but he didn't care much—he lived for the present, with no real plans. Nora, on the other hand, seemed to be headed somewhere, although Moha hadn't really paid attention when she talked about it that night.

Now, all that felt like it was decades ago. His world had flipped upside down, like he was stuck in a dream he couldn't wake from. It was the kind of feeling a hamster might have if a cruel child turned its cage upside down.

His days became a blur, the passage of time marked only by the changing light outside his window. Occasionally, they'd come in, run a few tests, take some samples, measure his reflexes, balance, and vision, and then leave him alone again. Meanwhile, the whiteness spread further across his body.

One day, they came for him. A whole army entered his room—his cell—dressed in hazmat suits. Armed guards, doctors, and Gadberry himself, his gaze stern as ever. Gadberry never carried anything in his hands, always liking to gesture freely. Moha felt it then—change was coming. Maybe this was the path to freedom. His instincts sensed danger, but hope—the cursed hope—beat loudly in his synthetic heart.

Moha followed obediently, flanked by Gadberry's intimidating escort, with the doctors trailing behind, tapping away at their tablets.

They took him down a few floors to a large, empty room. In the center was a single

medical chair, with two cameras pointed at it. More doctors approached and strapped him into the chair—not with ordinary leather straps, but carbon-fiber-reinforced restraints. *Why?* Moha wondered. *Are they scared of me? He had never hurt anyone, they knew that for sure. What were they planning? What was all this for?*

“Mr. Borg,” said one of the doctors, the apparent leader, clasping his hands behind his back as he stepped forward. Moha couldn’t remember the last time anyone had called him by his last name. Maybe last year at the airport when he flew back to visit his parents in Haiti. “I’m Dr. Emerson. Head of experimental division. It’s my responsibility to understand what has happened to you.”

“Remarkable,” whispered the doctors in the background. “Unbelievable.”

Moha looked around, feeling like a rare animal on display at the zoo. Then he looked at himself—his white arm was far from normal. He really did look like an alien.

“Why am I strapped down?” Moha asked.

“Well,” Emerson replied, “we’re not entirely sure what we’re dealing with here, or how you’ll respond to certain treatments. Synthetic cells are hundreds of times more resilient than biological ones, which means your strength is likely beyond human. The restraints are just a precaution, to make sure you don’t unintentionally hurt someone—or yourself.”

“Synthetic cells? What are you talking about?”

“You got it from Nora Darya. And she got it from Gerald Marren. It spreads like a virus, and when someone’s infected,” Emerson gestured toward Moha’s arm, “they turn white.”

Moha’s face twisted in shock.

“Yes,” Emerson nodded, “it’s hard to believe, I know. What happened is that Marren received synthetic cells to save his heart, but the cells didn’t just save him—they took over his entire body, replacing all his natural cells. Essentially, his whole

body became synthetic. Think of it like something out of a grey-goo sci-fi movie.” Emerson glanced at Moha, realizing that Moha had only grasped the sci-fi part. “The point is, the process can’t be reversed, but your body holds valuable secrets about these cells and how they cooperate. Based on our earlier examinations, we’re confident that this won’t cause you any harm.”

“What won’t?”

Emerson pulled a laser scalpel from behind his back, held it above Moha’s forearm, and turned it on. In one swift motion, the invisible beam severed Moha’s arm before he even realized what had happened. Then came the pain, followed by the scream. He thrashed, but his left arm wouldn’t move beyond the elbow. White blood trickled from the wound, and when Moha moved, it gushed onto the chair and floor. His panicked cries filled the room.

Emerson calmly unbuckled the strap around Moha’s wrist and held up the severed limb to inspect the cut. Aside from the

white color of the flesh, blood, and muscles, everything seemed normal—human. Gently, he placed the arm back onto the stump.

“Hold still, Mr. Borg! Stay calm!”

But Moha kept screaming and struggling, spitting in his panic, his eyes bulging as blood rushed into them. He only stopped when he noticed his left hand starting to twitch. Childlike wonder replaced the panic as he watched his hand move again, like a baby discovering its limbs for the first time.

“Synthetic cells,” Emerson explained to the crowd and the cameras, “unlike normal human cells, retain all their connections and can restore them. You can sever a limb, but if you put it back, the cells find their way to each other and reconnect everything—in a matter of seconds.”

He raised Moha’s now-reattached arm like a victorious boxer, then strapped it back to the chair.

“Sorry for the inconvenience, Mr. Borg,” Emerson said, turning to the audience.

“But I had to demonstrate to all of you what we’re dealing with.” Then, addressing the group, he continued, “These cells replicate themselves, can infect any living cell, and take over its place and function within the body. If this spreads outside, it could sweep across the world like a plague that we might never be able to stop. Our job now is to work with these three subjects to figure out how to stop, deactivate, or destroy these cells.”

Emerson looked to Gadberry, who nodded back.

Moha tensed and tried to break free from the restraints, thrashing in his seat, but it was no use. Gadberry gestured to his four guards.

“As agreed,” Emerson said, “in the next phase of the experiment, we’ll determine the threshold at which the cells can no longer repair and regenerate the body.”

The four masked guards stepped forward, wielding heavy steel sledgehammers. They surrounded Moha and began striking

without a word. The massive blows shattered his shoulder, twisting it at an unnatural angle.

Some part of Moha felt relief that this nightmare would finally end, but he still wept for the senseless way his life was ending—in a lab, on the edge of the world.

A blow to the head caved in his skull, and Moha lost consciousness. They kept hitting him until there wasn't a single unbroken bone in his body, his muscles pulverized into a mushy mass. He lay in the chair like a discarded, crumpled human costume. White flesh and white innards spilled out everywhere, all drenched in his snow-white blood.

“That’s enough,” Emerson said. “We don’t want him dead.” He couldn’t help but chuckle at the absurdity of his words. The guards stepped back, and Emerson moved in with his instruments to examine what was left of Moha’s body.

“Still alive,” he murmured, unsurprised. But Moha didn’t move. What was left of his

blood slowly pooled around the chair.

“Did we go too far?” Gadberry asked.

“Let’s give it a moment,” Emerson replied, his eyes never leaving Moha’s shattered form, though even he couldn’t imagine how it could possibly recover from this. No living organism could survive such damage, even if made of synthetic cells.

Then the mangled heap of flesh began to twitch. Limbs twisted in unnatural spasms, and the head bobbed forward. One arm, bent in five places, lifted itself as if trying to regain its former shape.

The dent in his skull seemed to shrink, and his hanging face started to round out again. The body writhed and convulsed, and one arm even slipped free of its restraint, thanks to its shattered wrist.

The guards stood stunned, watching in horror as the half-dead human wreckage spasmed, its white blood seemingly trying to crawl back into its body.

“Don’t touch him!” Gadberry ordered his men. “Everyone stay where you are!”

Moha's cells were relentlessly searching for their previous place in his body. But something else was happening too, something that caught Emerson's attention.

"Look!" he said, pointing to Moha's leg, where a swelling had formed as the cells clustered together. His knee had swollen to twice its original size, but soon the lump began to shrink rapidly. "The cells—they're taking over each other's functions. They're swapping places in the body."

Gadberry couldn't believe his eyes. It was already absurd enough to witness a man, beaten to death, twitch and slowly regain his former shape. He said nothing, merely watching Moha as he struggled through the transformation.

Moha groaned, coughed, sneezed, and occasionally let out a distorted scream, the sound warped by his broken jaw. It took about fifteen minutes for him to return to his undamaged form. Then, as if suddenly waking from a dream, he looked up, bewildered, eyes darting in terror between

those in the room. Gadberry gestured to his men to lower their weapons. Slowly, the rifles and pistols aimed at Moha tilted downward.

“Mr. Borg,” Emerson said. “Do you know what happened to you?”

Moha looked at him, but no matter how hard he tried, he couldn’t speak—his mouth felt bone-dry.

“Water,” he finally croaked, his voice weak and rasping. His legs tingled, as if blood was rushing back after prolonged numbness. He straightened up in his chair, his head finally clearing. That’s when it hit him—he somehow had gained superhuman abilities, something like Spider-Man. No wonder they were afraid of him. They needed armed guards and restraints. He was far stronger than them, and he could regenerate. Maybe they couldn’t even kill him.

Moha locked eyes with Gadberry. The commander stared back, unflinching. In that look, Moha sent a message: *I will kill*

*every one of you for what you've done to me.* But it seemed he failed to frighten Gadberry.

Gadberry and Emerson exchanged glances. First, Emerson nodded, and then Gadberry followed suit.

“Alright,” Emerson said. “Let’s move on to the next phase.”

Moha sat in the chair like a man in a drugged haze. The trauma from earlier clearly took its toll. He peered out from behind his disheveled hair, his expression dazed. His free arm fidgeted awkwardly, first resting on his lap, then on the armrest, as if it didn’t know where to go.

Emerson approached the chair and pressed a button on its side. The chair rotated and began to rise. As it did, the seat, backrest, and footrest straightened out, transforming into a flat table. The armrests smoothly retracted, and Moha remained strapped in, his head turning anxiously, searching for answers as to what was happening.

One of the assistants came over to Emerson, holding a laser scalpel. Moha began to tremble, then violently jerked against the straps, trying to tip the entire bed over, but it was useless. He accomplished nothing.

Guards stepped in, pulling out additional straps from underneath the bed. Despite Moha's frantic twitching, they secured him even more tightly, fastening him at additional points.

"Nooo!" he screamed, thrashing his head, the only part he could still move. "Leave me alone, you bastards! Let me go!"

"Please, Mr. Borg, calm down," Emerson said. "It's just an experiment. We'll be done quickly."

"No! No! No! Stop! Let me go!"

"Proceed," Emerson ordered, stepping back.

As discussed, the assistant made a swift cut through Moha's leg below the knee with the laser. It effortlessly sliced through the tissue of artificial cells and bone. Moha

didn't feel pain, but he was fully aware of what was happening. His nervous system sent signals to his brain, informing him that his leg had been severed. It wasn't experienced as pain—he simply knew it, as if he had seen it himself.

Even so, the helplessness drove him to scream and struggle harder. One of the guards removed the leg to prevent it from reattaching. Next came the other leg, and then both arms.

## CHAPTER 15

Marren sat in his cell, his face buried in his hands, struggling to make sense of the strange new sensations coursing through him. He had no idea who the mysterious man was, nor that he had been taken away for experimentation. Yet, somehow, Marren could feel his presence. A person with cells like his own was in trouble—that tingled in his nerves. Even if he wanted to help, there was nothing he could do. Still, it fascinated him that he could sense all this, as if he were connected to the man on some deeper level. And not just that—there was more.

In his mind, Marren could recall Moha's experiences, as though distant memories from another life. He could feel the cells regenerating, and he understood that perhaps even a severed limb could reattach it-

self. It wasn't exact knowledge, more like a vague vision, but it was certainly more than he had known an hour ago.

Marren considered himself Patient Zero. Nora and Sauer were the first infected, and this unknown man must be a second-generation host—someone who had contracted the cells from Nora or Sauer, only to have them rapidly multiply within his own body.

But what intrigued Marren most was how the cells—or perhaps more accurately, the brain constructed from those cells—seemed capable of sending information back to him telepathically, as if the connection remained between them and their source. The implications sparked an exciting chain of thoughts in Marren's mind. If there were hundreds like him, and they weren't locked away like this, they could potentially form a collective consciousness. He wasn't just becoming physically superior; mentally, he was evolving too. And on that front, he hadn't even begun to spread his wings.

## CHAPTER 16

The scientists circled around, quietly marveling at the extraordinary scene unfolding before them. They were watching a man being dissected right before their eyes—without anesthesia—and not only was the subject not in pain, but he was fully conscious. For them, this experiment was a once-in-a-lifetime professional opportunity, a research foundation with limitless potential. Whatever was happening here, if they could understand it, if they could control it, the possibilities for medical advancement would be endless.

Emerson inspected Moha closely. The cuts were pale, but only a faint trickle of white fluid—almost like blood—oozed from the wounds, as though the body understood what was happening and worked to contain

it. Had it somehow halted the circulation? Emerson mused.

“Please, stop...” Moha begged, his voice weak, but Emerson ignored him. He traced a line across Moha’s abdomen with his finger, glancing at the assistant.

The assistant stepped forward and, following the imaginary line, sliced Moha clean in half at the waist. This time, slightly more of the blood dripped onto the floor like white paint, but still far less than one would expect. Emerson waited a moment. Moha fell silent, staring blankly at the ceiling, his chest rising and falling in slow, measured breaths. Emerson suspected this was all part of a defense mechanism—the body had shifted into a kind of energy-saving mode.

The assistant looked to Emerson for a signal. Emerson nodded. The assistant drew the scalpel across Moha’s neck. His head lolled to one side, and he lay still. His eyes remained shut, and his chest stopped moving.

“My theory,” Emerson addressed the gathered onlookers, “is that these cells can enter a kind of standby mode, surviving until the body can restore itself. I’m certain Mr. Borg is not dead, despite appearances. Medical science tells us that decapitation or being cut in half would terminate all vital functions, but here we see something entirely different. Mr. Borg isn’t even bleeding the way we’d expect.”

Emerson looked with satisfaction at the dismembered body, its parts now separated by a few inches—a distance that was insurmountable for the cells to cross on their own.

“Alright. Let’s start putting him back together,” he said, grabbing Moha’s head and pressing it back onto his neck. Less than a minute later, Moha’s chest rose, and his eyes flicked open.

“So now we know,” Emerson said, “that the body can survive at least five minutes with parts separated, even the head.”

Moha looked around, confused, strug-

gling to tilt his head down far enough to see his own body. His efforts were in vain, as the straps held him firmly in place. They reattached his torso and arms but left his legs untouched. Each connection fused seamlessly, the body reuniting itself as the cells instinctively returned to their places.

The severed ends of his legs, however, took longer. An hour later, the cuts had begun to harden, the wet, white sheen finally fading from the stumps.

“One hour,” Emerson noted. “The body parts seem to last about an hour before initiating self-repair. Look at that.”

“Astonishing,” several of the scientists murmured as they stepped closer to examine Moha.

“I don’t think it’s unreasonable to assume,” Emerson added, “that eventually, Mr. Borg will grow new legs. Don’t you agree?”

## CHAPTER 17

Marren couldn't sleep, even though it was supposed to be late at night—though he couldn't be certain. He lay in bed, thinking about how, once he got out of here, he would finally set his life in order. When he compared his current self to who he had been a few months ago, he saw a much weaker, more indecisive version of himself. Now, he fully understood why Nora hadn't truly clung to him back then.

But now, every cell in his body had been renewed. He was stronger, and his thinking had somehow become more rational.

He was certain, however, that he wasn't a superhero. Not immortal, but harder to injure and faster to heal. Still, that wouldn't be enough to fight his way through a dozen armed guards in this facility. Besides, he'd never trained in firearms or combat sports,

so his strength would probably be his own worst enemy in a close fight.

After a few hours of restless sleep, Gadberry appeared with a larger-than-usual entourage—armed guards and people who looked like doctors or scientists, holding tablets. Everyone was in hazmat suits. The gear looked high-quality, and Marren knew he couldn't damage it with his bare hands, even if he wanted to attack Gadberry.

Instead, he obediently followed them down long hallways, into a massive freight elevator, and through more corridors, eventually arriving in a spacious room with a single chair. The place was rigged with cameras, and behind a wide glass wall, others were watching what would happen inside. Marren had no doubt the glass was unbreakable. He couldn't see through it, but he guessed the room was packed. *I am the main attraction today.*

They strapped him into the chair, and for a moment, he felt that if he let them do it, he would lose his last chance to escape.

But with at least six guns trained on him, any struggle would be a hopeless, desperate fight.

“Mr. Marren,” Emerson greeted him. This time, he didn’t bother with introductions; the audience already knew who he was. “We’re here to figure out what’s happened to you and how we can learn to control and direct these new cells.”

Meanwhile, two hazmat-suited people placed a device on Marren’s head. It reminded him of those caps from movies used to scan brainwaves, but this one had many more components and looked far more complex, more advanced than anything he’d ever seen.

“For this, we’re using Dr. Sauer’s artificial intelligence program,” Emerson continued. “According to Dr. Sauer, this software not only knows a great deal about your cells, but it was also largely responsible for designing them. We expect that once the AI analyzes your cells, we’ll have all our questions answered from its log files.”

Marren said nothing. He didn't really understand what Emerson was saying, nor did he care. His mind was fixated on escape, but it seemed like the opportunity would never come. They were prepared, and they guarded him well—probably the entire complex, too. Who knew how big it was, or how many more armed guards were outside? He cursed himself for letting them strap him down. Emerson didn't care about his life. He would push him to the limit to get the information, then toss him into a crematorium like a used-up lab rat.

“Are we ready?” Emerson asked his assistants. Muffled affirmations came from inside their helmets. “Good, let's begin.”

Somewhere, probably behind the glass wall, someone activated something. No one touched the cap on his head, but it started to hum, like an electromagnetic field. Marren felt the hairs on his back stand up, and his scalp tingled as though someone was twisting each strand of hair individually.

At first, he thought of Nora, and suddenly the feeling of love flooded him, just like it had at the beginning of their relationship. He hadn't felt that in a long time. His heart tingled just like his scalp. He had to get out of here, but he would free Nora too. They would become the outcasts, pale survivors, hiding and defending themselves, but always staying together from now on.

Then, something strange happened. A voice appeared in Marren's head—not speaking, but as if it were another personality, giving him knowledge. It was the AI, connecting with his neurons. The AI knew how the cells worked, and now Marren understood, too. But there was more. The cells were capable of far more than they had shown so far. The AI had also embedded numerous hidden functions within the cells, encoded deeply, waiting for the right impulse to activate them. And now Marren knew how to send that signal. From his mind to every cell in his body. He did it, and his body jerked violently in the chair,

so suddenly that the nearest scientist and even Emerson took a step back.

Marren couldn't communicate with the AI, and the AI couldn't upload itself into Marren's brain cells to become one with him. But it could transfer the knowledge Marren needed, allowing his cells to reach a new level of evolution. This had been Sauer's plan, and the AI had completed it. Though they had to reach this point, where the two were connected. Sooner or later, it would have happened—the AI had calculated as much. And they both had time. After all, one of them had cells that didn't age, and the other was a software.

After the AI finished scanning Marren's brain and uploaded the missing data from the cell program into his consciousness, it shut down. The operator at the computer cursed as the data feed stopped, and the software crashed. Every time he tried to reboot it, the program exited on its own.

“What happened?” Emerson asked over the internal comms.

“We don’t know,” the operator replied.

“Professor, look!” one of the scientists exclaimed. Emerson looked at Marren, who was trembling violently in the chair, foaming at the mouth, tears streaming down his face. He looked like a ragdoll spinning in a centrifuge. Thick white foam dripped from his mouth, and his eyes rolled back, turning completely white. Emerson recognized the telltale sign of a hemorrhage.

“Damn it! Get it off him! Get it off!” Emerson yelled, pointing at the cap. “The straps!”

“Dr. Emerson, I don’t recommend releasing him,” Gadberry said, having watched the experiment from the corner.

“Fine,” Emerson said, raising his hands in surrender. “He’s yours.”

Gadberry signaled to his men.

“Take him back to his room!”

“Wait,” one of the assistants, a woman by the sound of her voice, said. She held a large syringe. “This will knock him out.”

Emerson nodded his approval.

The assistant cautiously approached the convulsing Marren and injected him. The trembling stopped, and he slumped, completely limp. The milky liquid still trickled from his mouth. His eyes rolled back, and he passed out.

“Alright, take him away,” Emerson ordered.

The guards lifted Marren onto a stretcher and wheeled him out of the room. Gadberry followed, but paused, turning back to Emerson.

“Is it over for him?” Gadberry asked.

“I don’t know what happened, but one thing’s for sure—Marren will never be the same. I’ll examine him later, and tomorrow, we’ll bring in the woman.”

Gadberry nodded and left. The assistants began packing up.

## CHAPTER 18

Marren lay motionless on the stretcher, limp like a corpse. Gadberry stopped the two guards and checked Marren's pulse on his smartwatch. It was weak, but he had it.

"Move on," Gadberry said. He wasn't concerned with the prisoner. If the doctors weren't worried, neither would he be.

When they reached the door to the room, Gadberry identified himself, and the door slid open. As he turned back, Marren was already on his feet. One guard was mid-air, flying toward the wall, while the other had Marren's hand clamped around his throat. In a flash, Marren grabbed the guard by the thigh, lifted him up, and slammed him head-first into the floor. The helmet and skull cracked simultaneously with a sickening thud that sent a chill through Gadberry. The other guard crashed into the wall

like an insect, crumpling to the ground in his bulky hazmat suit, looking like a pile of discarded laundry.

Gadberry reached for his weapon, but Marren was there in an instant, ripping the gun from his hand as effortlessly as a mother taking a knife away from a child. Marren grabbed Gadberry by the collar and shoved him hard into the room, slamming the door shut behind him. Gadberry sprawled on the floor, his keycard clattering to the hallway as it slipped from his grip during the impact.

With the gun in one hand and the keycard in the other, Marren strode toward the next occupied room, his mind racing to understand why and how all of this was happening. Until now, everything had been uncertain, but now he knew exactly what he wanted to do and how to achieve it. He had never fought before, yet he had just taken down his escorts with precision and purpose.

*“It’s the AI”,* Marren thought. *“My think-*

*ing has changed. I'm more logical and more efficient. I don't know how to fight, but I can instantly figure out the best way to neutralize someone—and I have the strength to do it. And in that experiment room? The AI helped me fake that collapse. It triggered empathy in the others, making them bring me back here with a smaller escort. That was the first step to escape.”*

Marren didn't hear a voice in his head; these thoughts were his own. And that was the truth. Sauer's AI wasn't living inside him like a separate mind or program—it had become a part of him, integrated as knowledge into Marren's psyche. It was as if Marren had taken a crash course in a new way of thinking, gifted with logic and a pragmatic approach.

Marren used the keycard to unlock the door and stepped inside. Nora rushed to him and embraced him tightly. Their pale skin touched, and it buzzed with an energy that felt like communication.

Nora knew this wasn't the same Gerald

Marren she had once known. It was clear in his eyes, his posture, his very aura—he had changed, not just at a cellular level, but in his entire being. And Nora felt something deep inside her stir—this was the man she had always longed for. Her entire being tingled with that rare, electric thrill that only comes a few times in a lifetime.

Marren knew the entire complex was covered in cameras, brimming with sensors. Algorithms tracked his every heartbeat; digital sentinels followed his every move. Time was not on his side, and his odds were still slim, but there was no turning back now—only forward, toward freedom.

“Let’s go,” he said, grabbing Nora’s hand as they moved down the hallway in the direction they’d been brought from. But at the next cell, Nora hesitated and released his hand. She couldn’t help but check on Moha.

Nora knew that lingering too long might arouse suspicion in Marren. She peered

through the small window and recoiled. Moha sat in a wheelchair, wearing dark shorts. His legs ended abruptly below the knees, tapering off to thin, frail stumps, like something unfinished. His skin was bone-white, like the rest of his body. He didn't look up, just stared blankly ahead, his face hidden behind his hair. His hands lay limp on the armrests.

“Who is that?” Marren asked.

“My colleague,” Nora replied.

“Should I get him out?”

“We can't save him.”

“Then let's go.”

They continued, but two cells down, it was Marren's turn to stop.

“Give me a second,” Marren said, unlocking the door. Sauer flinched, sitting on the couch. The right side of his head was completely white, though patches of his original cells remained in some places.

“Marren!” Sauer exclaimed, relief flooding his face. “Thank God!”

Marren pointed the gun at him and

stepped closer.

“Dr. Sauer,” Marren said coldly, “I might actually be grateful for what you’ve done to me. I’ll admit, there are some advantages to it, and the AI has taught me a lot.”

Sauer lowered his head in shame, then looked back up at Marren.

“Forget him!” Nora shouted from the doorway.

“I’m sorry I lied,” Sauer said. “But if I had told you the truth, you never would’ve agreed. You would’ve chosen death instead. Believe me, I know.”

“You’re a twisted man, Sauer. You don’t deserve to live.”

“Wait—”

Marren fired. Sauer’s head snapped back, his body slumping into the couch, staring blankly at the ceiling. Behind him, blood and brain matter splattered onto the armrest, pooling where he sat as if it were seeping from the fabric itself.

Marren knew what these experimental cells were capable of, so he stepped clos-

er and fired two more shots into Sauer's body.

"Damn it!" Nora yelled. "Let's go already!"

Marren and Nora sprinted down the hallway toward the stairs. They chose the stairwell over the elevator. It was empty, and they raced up two floors, Marren checking the hallway before stepping out. There was no one in sight, and he began to wonder if their escape had gone unnoticed. Maybe no one was watching the cameras, or the sensors hadn't triggered—or maybe there weren't any sensors at all. Could they just walk out of here?

They were now outcasts, renegades, trusting only each other. Everyone else would be against them, wanting their abilities, their differences, their very blood. Marren gripped Nora's hand tightly, ashamed of the lies he had told her before—about the money, his feelings, and how he hadn't always loved her the way she deserved.

They stepped into the hallway, and Marren spotted a guard standing barely four meters away, staring at him in shock. The guard had a gun in his hand, but it was pointed at the floor. Marren's own gun hung at his side, both men frozen for a moment, knowing they only had time for one shot, like an old Western standoff. Their eyes locked, both realizing this.

Both raised their guns, but Marren had already calculated the most effective shot. In a fraction of a second, he knew that if he aimed for the gut, his bullet would hit before the guard's gun could reach him. The guard was aiming higher, giving Marren the advantage.

He fired. The guard doubled over, managing to get off a shot that buried itself in the floor. Marren stepped forward and finished him with a shot to the head. It didn't matter whether it was moral—he had been held captive here, experimented on, lied to, and they would likely have killed him. Moha's silent fury fueled his own, buzzing

through his mind like a distant, dreamlike stimulant.

Nora stepped out into the hallway and saw the dead guard. She was shocked for only a moment, having never seen a bleeding corpse before, but quickly looked away. She wanted to escape, no matter the cost. She could see in Marren that he was ready to take down anyone who stood in their way. He had finally become the man she had always wanted him to be. It was a shame all this hell had been necessary to get him there.

They moved cautiously down the hall, which Marren believed led to the ground floor.

Gadberry slowly stood, then sat on the couch, listening to his own ragged breathing inside the hazmat suit. His ribs were badly bruised, his head was bleeding from two spots, his tongue had been bitten, and his gun was lost. When the door opened, he stood tall and stepped into the hallway. A dead guard lay there. Another guard, who

had dragged himself over to open the door, clutched his broken, twisted leg, looking pleadingly through his visor at Gadberry. But Gadberry walked past him without a glance.

“I’ll send help,” he said.

He could’ve taken the guard’s gun, but he had other plans. He headed straight for the control room at the far end of the level. He knocked on the glass door, and the officer on duty let him in. Both on-duty guards snapped to attention.

“They’re on minus one,” one of them said.

“You stay here and report their location over the radio,” Gadberry ordered, taking a keycard and walking over to the weapons locker. He opened it and pulled out a rifle capable of firing explosive rounds. He looked briefly at the other guard. “You, grab something bigger and come with me.”

The guard, not bothering with a hazmat suit, grabbed a Mossberg 590 shotgun and loaded it with eight rounds before follow-

ing Gadberry.

Marren and Nora had realized they were on the wrong level; they should have reached the main entrance by now. Instead, they ran into two more guards, who opened fire immediately. Nora reached the elevator and hit the button, then dove for cover behind a column that segmented the hallway. Marren took cover on the opposite side of the hall, behind another column.

The guards stopped shooting. Marren peeked out and fired back, missing them. The elevator arrived, and Nora slipped inside easily, but Marren would have to cross the hallway. He fired a few covering shots before sprinting across, but as he did, the guards fired again, and three bullets hit him. He collapsed into the elevator, and the doors slid shut as they ascended.

White blood splattered across the elevator like careless painters had flung it onto the polished metal walls.

Marren sat up, leaning against the wall. He'd been shot three times, but he was al-

ready healing. There was no pain, but the impacts had been jarring, and his body wasn't moving as smoothly as before. By the time they reached the top, some of his strength had returned, and he managed to stand, though still slow.

As the elevator doors opened, Marren braced himself for a hail of bullets from waiting guards. They'd been alerted, warned about their arrival. He imagined a semi-circle of guards, guns trembling in their hands, ready to fire the moment the doors parted.

But when the doors opened, the hallway was empty. Footsteps echoed from all directions. Marren peered out. He had left his empty gun in the elevator. Holding Nora's hand, he searched for a way out. They realized they had taken a back elevator and still had to make their way forward to the main exit.

They hugged the wall, creeping along, when suddenly the stairwell door burst open, and there stood Gadberry, holding

a weapon with a thick, menacing barrel. As soon as he saw them, he fired. Marren watched in horror as a thumb-sized explosive round slowly spiraled toward them. He shoved Nora to the ground and dove aside. The projectile hit the wall between them and exploded, sending shards of metal, concrete, and debris flying with brutal force. Marren was scraped by the shrapnel, but Nora was too close. The blast tore off half her shoulder and lower jaw. She spun through the air and crashed onto the floor.

Marren got to his feet and sprinted toward Gadberry, who was loading another round. He reached him just as an unarmored guard stepped out from behind Gadberry, shotgun raised. The blast tore Marren's right arm clean off. But he didn't stop. With his left hand, Marren struck Gadberry with a force that knocked the breath out of him and slammed him into the wall. Gadberry dropped the half-loaded round, which rolled away with a hollow clink. The guard, meanwhile, chambered

the next round, but Marren reached him with inhuman speed and tore the shotgun from his grip, despite the man's desperate attempts to hold onto it. In one fluid motion, Marren spun the gun, pointed it at the guard's chest, and pulled the trigger. The blast ripped through him, sending a cloud of red mist spraying from his back. The guard collapsed against the wall and then slid lifelessly to the floor.

Marren couldn't reload the shotgun with one arm, so he swung it like a club, smashing it against Gadberry as he struggled to stand. The impact cut a deep gash into Gadberry's scalp, and he crumpled to the floor, his face thudding against the ground.

Marren threw the shotgun against the wall with such force that it shattered. He then picked up his severed arm, reattached it to his shoulder, and held it there for a moment as though waiting for glue to set. He looked over at Nora, who was on all fours, waiting for her wounds to heal. Her face was slowly beginning to reform, though a

large dent remained, and part of her teeth were still visible through her torn cheek. Her shoulder was still missing a chunk, framed by her burnt, shredded clothing. But even so, it was clear that her cells were rapidly rebuilding the lost flesh and bone.

Marren flexed his fingers, then rotated his arm, now fully functional again. He helped Nora to her feet, and they moved on. They rounded the next corner and could finally see the main entrance. Four guards were stationed there, waiting for them. Marren shoved Nora back into cover and bolted forward. He moved impossibly fast, making himself a difficult target as he zig-zagged toward the guards. They fired, missing him with each shot. One of them turned and fled, realizing too late how doomed they were. The other three stood their ground, watching in terror as the pale-skinned, bloodied figure charged at them.

Marren ripped a gun from the nearest guard's hands and kicked the one beside him so hard that he was flung a meter into

the air, slamming into the wall before collapsing onto the floor with a painful thud. Marren spun the gun in his hand and shot the first guard in the chest. He was still falling backward, suspended in the air, when Marren pounced on the third, knocking him out with a brutal left hook. The man's head twisted grotesquely, his neck snapping like a thread. Marren turned to the fourth guard, who had gained a hundred meters of distance, but Marren caught up in mere seconds. He lifted the man like a sack of feathers and slammed him into the ground with such force that the entire building seemed to shudder. The guard died instantly, as if he had fallen from a ten-story window.

Nora had reached the entrance by then, and Marren rushed back to her.

“How are you doing this?” Nora asked, horrified as she looked at the bodies. Marren glanced at his hands. She could see he was reveling in his newfound, superhuman strength.

“I don’t know,” Marren said. “The AI taught my cells a few tricks.” He quickly searched the guards’ pockets and found a car key in one of them.

“What kind of AI?” she asked.

“Sauer’s,” Marren replied, “from when I was in his treatment program. His software designed this... person.” He gestured to himself. “What I’ve become... what we’ve become.”

Nora was amazed by both of them but felt a familiar emotion stirring within her again—an insidious sense that she was meant for more. She should have been the one to gain these abilities. She deserved them more. She could put them to better use. This was what she had been waiting for her whole life—a chance to transcend herself, to become something greater. She felt it in every cell of her body, in her core, in the very spark of her being. And something deep within whispered that it was possible. Marren didn’t deserve this knowledge. She didn’t know how she would do it, but she knew she could.

## CHAPTER 19

As Marren reached for the door handle, he thought it must be locked by a magnetic seal triggered by the alarm. But to his surprise, the main entrance was open. He motioned for Nora to go ahead, then glanced back down the hallway to check if anyone was following them. Gadberry stood just ten meters away, aiming a rifle at him. His helmet was gone, and his torn hazmat suit hung loosely like an old work uniform. It wasn't the determination in Gadberry's eyes that was most frightening—it was the rage. He was furious, no doubt enraged by the fact that he was fighting from a disadvantage, having grown used to always being the one with the upper hand. But Marren didn't care—he had no time to step outside.

Gadberry fired, but the explosive round arced too short, hitting the floor in front of

Marren. The blast knocked him backward, shattering the floor, and spraying the entire entryway with debris. The front door was blown off, its glass shattered along with the windows beside it. Nora had already thrown herself to the ground outside. The doorframe and Marren's shirt caught fire.

Shards of glass had pierced Gadberry, but he didn't stop. His ears rang from the explosion, but he was unfazed. He switched the rifle to full-auto mode.

Marren struggled to get up, slapping at the flames on his shirt, but Gadberry took aim and unleashed a burst of gunfire. Four bullets hit Marren, and he collapsed. His torn, smoldering clothes and battered body made him look dead, but Gadberry wasn't taking any chances.

Blood still dripped from Gadberry's head, and the right side of his face was stained red and black with dried blood. His hair hung messily over his forehead, but his eyes burned with a fierce, unrelenting fire. He stepped up to Marren.

Marren had no doubt that Gadberry intended to kill them both before they could escape to the outside world, where their powers and regenerative abilities could infect or be exploited by anyone. And exploited they certainly would be.

Gadberry looked down at Marren, raising the rifle to finish him off. Marren saw that Nora was watching from outside, but she had no time to intervene. Yet, in a way that Gadberry couldn't comprehend, Marren suddenly sat up, grabbed Gadberry's wrist and, with a slight twist, snapped it and wrenched the rifle from his grip. In the next moment, Marren was on his feet. Gadberry's head swam from the pain, but even in his daze, he realized no human could have stood up like that—like Marren just did.

Marren kicked Gadberry's knee, shattering it, and Gadberry crumpled to the floor. Then Marren kicked him again, this time breaking several ribs on his left side. Gadberry slid across the floor, unconscious, until he hit the steel-gray elevator doors

with a dull thud. Marren stood over him for a moment, watching, but Gadberry didn't move. Without medical help, he wouldn't last an hour.

Satisfied, Marren tore off the remnants of his shirt and stepped out of the building. The winter cold didn't bother him at all. His body perfectly regulated the heat loss, and neither he nor Nora felt any chill.

It seemed no one was coming after them anymore. Those who hadn't already tried to stop them had realized by now that attacking them was suicide. Reinforcements were surely on their way, but they hadn't heard them yet. By the time they arrived, Marren and Nora would be long gone.

Marren walked over to Nora, who beckoned him for an embrace. He felt, for the first time, like his life was complete. He loved her, and now they could finally start the happy, carefree life they had dreamed of on their first date. Only now, it would be even better—superhuman.

As he stepped closer, Nora grabbed his

arm and squeezed. Marren was surprised but didn't resist. Her chest, then her stomach, pressed against his. Through the torn fabric of their clothes, their skin touched. Nora's body clung to his. By the time Marren realized what was happening, it was too late. Nora's cells were extending into his, consuming them, reprogramming them. Despite the AI-enhanced DNA and knowledge, Nora's personality, her very essence, was more cunning and stronger. One by one, Marren's cells switched allegiance and obediently merged into Nora's body, while Marren slowly faded away. He felt no pain, only a growing weakness, as he sensed himself disappearing, cell by cell, from existence.

Nora leaned in closer, their faces touching.

"Thank you," she whispered into Marren's ear, then melded into him, greedily absorbing the cells from his head as well. Marren's eyes and mouth melted away as if made of wax left too close to a flame. His

body thinned, as though he were wasting away, while the skin that connected them broke off and crumbled to the ground like dry, brittle paper.

Finally, Nora released him. Her new body was satiated. At first, her belly, chest, and face swelled unnaturally, but soon the excess mass redistributed itself, her form becoming dense, not larger.

Marren—what little was left of him—collapsed onto his back, like a half-finished mannequin. His abdomen, chest, and head were just holes, his skin and flesh ashen, his ribs poking out like the charred beams of a burned-down building.

Nora stood tall. She had learned much from Marren in those last few moments. Everything the AI had taught him, and even more—because her own knowledge had fused with his, creating new connections, new, extraordinary insights. Nora now knew how to alter the color of her skin cells. She knew how to heal herself, how to control the infection, and prevent her cells

from consuming others at will. And beyond that, she felt there was so much more she would be capable of in time.

She gazed off into the jagged horizon of mountain peaks and rocky cliffs, where the dawn was breaking in soft pink hues. “*God, in His grace, has willed me to be here, immune to these torments, these flames hold no power; nothing of yours can reach or touch me.*” She whispered to herself, a white smile curling on her lips.

She looked down at Marren’s remains, then plucked the car keys from his lifeless hand. She pressed the button, and the headlights of one of the SUVs flicked on.

Nora climbed into the car, turned it around, and drove off, heading for the unimaginable distances that lay ahead of her. By the time she pulled onto the road, her skin had darkened a few shades—she looked almost human now.

## CHAPTER 20

A hand slammed down into the shards of glass scattered in front of the main entrance. Moments later, a bloodied head appeared, dragging itself determinedly out of the building. Gadberry was crawling, gritting his teeth against the searing pain. He knew he wouldn't catch up with Nora anytime soon, but he needed to see Marren. He didn't know exactly what had happened, but one thing was clear—the woman had left alone.

Every inch was an agonizing battle for Gadberry. Several of his ribs were broken, and at least two had punctured his lungs. He was only still alive because the ribs hadn't shifted, but even so, each breath became harder and harder, the taste of blood constant in his mouth. He dragged his twisted, broken leg behind him, his

swollen wrist hanging limp by his side. With his one good hand, he clawed at the gravel, pulling himself forward, inch by torturous inch.

He had to stop often, panting, and biting his lip to avoid passing out. His head spun so badly at times that he wasn't even sure he was heading in the right direction. Then clarity would return for a brief moment, and he would crawl again. After what felt like hours, he finally reached Marren and, with the last of his strength, sat up beside the lifeless body.

For a while, he just stared at what was left of Marren—the hollow shell of a man with no organs left inside, a void where his face had been. The cells had stopped their struggle and now pooled in a grey sludge at the bottom of the remains. Gadberry tried to comprehend what had happened, but thinking was becoming too difficult. He wasn't going to survive, and that realization filled him with a deep sadness. He had fought hard his entire life, shaping ev-

everything the way he wanted. And now here he was, next to a man who had been killed by a woman who had taken a part of him with her. It was his responsibility to stop them, but he had failed.

He still wanted to chase after her, hunt her down. Oh, how much he wanted it! His superiors and the scientists would want her alive, but if he could pursue her, accidents could happen. After this, he wouldn't show mercy. If he caught her, he would finish her. No one could stop him.

Then, Gadberry leaned forward, plunging his good hand into what remained of Marren. He smeared the cells into his wounds, then shoved a handful into his mouth. He gagged but didn't stop.

If whatever this was could spread, then maybe it wasn't too late—maybe it could regenerate him too. Then the fight would be fair. But his strength was gone. He collapsed onto the rocky ground, rolling onto his back, staring up at the dark grey, dawn-clouded sky. "*Please*", he thought.

*“Just give me one last chance to catch her...”*

At that moment, the snow began to fall—large, peaceful flakes, drifting down slowly.

PART III

**OVERDEVELOPEMENT**

## CHAPTER 21

The next afternoon, a black SUV and a maroon Corvette pulled into the gravel parking lot of the remote, snow-dusted research facility hidden in the mountains. Four men in suits exited the SUV, followed by a man in a long winter coat and sunglasses stepping out of the Corvette. At first glance, he looked like a sharp businessman, but when he removed his sunglasses and locked eyes with Emerson, who greeted them at the entrance, he looked more like a ruthless mobster.

“You’re Emerson, correct?” said the man from the Corvette, gripping the scientist’s hand in a quick, firm shake.

“I am.”

“Speranza Argenti.”

“Pleasure to meet you. Your superiors informed me of your arrival.” *“And they*

*mentioned it would be wise not to mess with you,”* Emerson thought.

The four men in black suits, who had arrived in the SUV, approached.

“These gentlemen are agents Ziegler, Rahman, Mayheaven, and Funar. I’m here to wrap this case up, now that poor Gadberry is out of the picture.” Argenti adjusted the collar of his coat, gesturing toward the building as if he were hosting the visit. “Dr. Emerson, please walk us through everything that’s happened so far.”

“Of course,” Emerson said, gesturing toward the door and using the brief moment of turning away from them to swallow hard. “This way, please.”

As they walked down to the room where the bodies were being stored, Emerson recounted how Gerald Marren, the zero patient, had been brought in along with the other infected subjects. He explained who Dr. Sauer was and how the escape had ended. He also described their research findings and how Nora Darya, the escaped sub-

ject, had evolved.

“Gadberry isn’t dead?” Argenti asked.

“No,” Emerson replied. “He was taken to the hospital in critical condition. From what I understand, they managed to revive him, but he’s currently in a coma in the intensive care unit at St. Lucas Hospital.”

“How unfortunate. I knew him. Good man, excellent agent.”

They arrived in the chamber where the dead bodies—guards, Sauer, Moha, and Marren—lay covered. The temperature was kept at a steady one degree Celsius to halt cellular activity. Argenti, his entourage, and Emerson observed from behind a glass wall as a suited colleague entered the room. The man approached Marren’s body first, pulling back the sheet to reveal him from the waist up. Emerson watched Argenti’s expression closely, certain that even someone like him had never seen anything like this. Argenti remained composed, though his eyes widened slightly when he saw the hollow space where Marren’s face had once

been, and the torso that was now nothing more than a gaping crater, bordered by grey, charred ribs.

“Is this Marren?” Argenti asked, pointing at the body.

“That’s all that’s left after... well, after he and Nora said their goodbyes,” Emerson replied, signaling for the assistant to cover Marren’s remains again.

“The woman did this to him?”

“Yes. There’s video footage of it—I’ll show you later. It’s beyond words. Not human...”

“Is he completely dead?” Argenti asked, a question that would have seemed odd in the case of a normal corpse but was quite fitting given Marren’s pale, hollowed-out form.

“Well, the artificial cells are inactive,” Emerson explained, “but we believe they could be reactivated if the conditions were right. In these cases, the cellular communication broke down at too many points, leading to system collapse. I don’t fully un-

derstand it myself, but I think the cells can't indefinitely take over each other's roles—or if they can, they do so very slowly. For regeneration, they need raw material—additional cells—and energy.”

“So, if we were to resuscitate Marren and give his cells the resources they need, he would come back and regenerate?”

“I believe so. In fact, it's possible he could still do it on his own, given enough time at room temperature.”

The suited man moved to the next table, reaching for the sheet.

“This is Charles Moha Borg,” Emerson said. “He was Nora's acquaintance, and we suspect he contracted the infection from her, likely through sexual contact. He was the one whose leg regrew after we amputated it, but when the chaos broke out, we decided it was best to eliminate him before he could escape too.”

“I'm not interested in the others, thank you,” Argenti said. “Do you have any idea where the woman might be, or how we

could track her?”

Emerson shook his head, while his colleague covered Moha's body.

“The artificial cells don't have any traits we can easily detect,” Emerson said. “Maybe with a highly sensitive electromagnetic scanner, like an MRI. We found such a device in Dr. Sauer's lab, but it only works at close range, and it's slow. I think it'll be easier to find her by looking for the signs—a superior human being will stand out. She's faster, stronger, and more pragmatic than anyone else. Her skin is entirely white. She regenerates instantly and can rearrange her cells, which take over each other's functions. Unless she hides herself away somewhere, she's bound to attract attention soon.”

“If she's smarter than any of us, that seems unlikely,” Argenti said, heading toward the exit. “Professor Emerson, the orders are clear: all artificial cells must be destroyed. Except for the zero patient—package him according to these instruc-

tions, as he'll be transported. Agent Funar will remain to assist. I'm going to see Gadberry, and then we'll capture Nora."

"Understood, Mr. Argenti," Emerson replied. "There won't be any problems."

"We're taking everything—the security footage, the evidence, all of Sauer's work. This technology is too dangerous. We need to prevent the spread of the infection. Please ensure everything is handled accordingly."

## CHAPTER 22

When Argenti arrived at Gadberry's hospital bed, Gadberry was already five hundred kilometers away, holed up in a secluded cabin deep in the forest. The cabin had been purchased under a friend's name, specifically for situations like this—when things mess up. And now this is exactly such a situation.

No one knew about the cabin. It stood empty, carefully locked up, far from other similar woodland retreats. Gadberry checked the passports, cash, and weapons he had stashed there. He dressed in a gray T-shirt, dark brown coat, and blue jeans—clothes that would help him blend in. Then he looked at himself in the mirror. His skin was still far too pale, but he could feel that he had the ability to change it. Concentrating, as if meditating, he imagined his skin

taking on a more human, darker shade. But nothing happened. He stood there, fingers pressed to his temples like a fraudulent medium trying to convince a TV audience that he was contacting one's dead grandmother.

Gadberry gave up, but he knew it was worth trying again later. His new cells were capable of much more—he just needed to learn how to control them. That would require a completely new way of thinking. His new self—his new logic—resting beneath the surface, like a bag of surprises waiting to be unpacked.

He heard footsteps outside. The snow-crusted leaves rustled, and branches cracked underfoot. Gadberry grabbed his pistol and moved to the window, peeking out. He saw a man, and though the figure was facing away, he recognized him by his posture, his oversized winter coat, and his hair. Gadberry opened the door, and the visitor turned to face him.

“Dr. Emerson!”

“Jesus!” Emerson gasped. “You’re...”

“Come in,” Gadberry said, holding the door open before heading inside and sitting at the dining table.

“You’ve completely recovered,” Emerson said, unable to hide his amazement as he stepped inside and closed the door.

“Did you bring what I asked for?” Gadberry asked.

Emerson placed a cloth bag and a metal-framed plastic case on the table. “Yes.”

“Thank you.”

Emerson sat down across from Gadberry.

“I recovered in less than half a day at the hospital,” Gadberry continued, “but after just a few hours, I was only pretending to sleep. These cells are incredible—I’ve never felt better.”

“They truly are remarkable.”

“I know you didn’t come here to help me because you care, and I know you don’t like me. But your scientific curiosity is stronger than your dislike. Especially after you had

to burn everything, right? Who did they send?”

“Speranza Argenti.”

“Dragonfly,” Gadberry said, as though the nickname evoked some distant memory. “They’re not leaving anything to chance.”

“What exactly do you want from me?”

“Do you know why they call him that? The dragonfly is the most efficient predator on Earth. It hunts with ninety-five percent accuracy. Argenti will catch the woman—and he’ll catch me, too.”

“Look, that’s no longer my concern...”

“I want a chance for myself. I need to be the one to catch Nora Darya. I have to. After that, I’ll disappear, and you’ll never hear from me again. I’ll send a message to Argenti letting him know there’s no need to worry about Nora anymore, and in return, he’ll have to give up pursuing me. He can’t win against me—I’m no longer human.”

Emerson listened closely to Gadberry, whose skin and hands were still chalk-white. But at the mention of “*I’m no lon-*

*ger human,*” a shiver ran down his spine. Perhaps coming here had been a mistake, Emerson thought. Gadberry was now in complete control of his own fate. If he gave Gadberry what he wanted, why would Gadberry let him live? Yet Emerson clung to one hope: if Gadberry was as driven by honor and duty as he seemed to be, obsessed with capturing the fugitive, then there would be no reason for him to harm innocent people. Killing Emerson wouldn’t change his situation—it would only worsen it, as Gadberry was already a wanted man. But then, a voice in Emerson’s mind reminded him: *you’re not exactly innocent.*

“Don’t worry,” Gadberry said, as though reading his thoughts. “I’m not going to kill you.”

“I came to the same conclusion.”

“There’s something very important I need to ask,” Gadberry said. “How can I defeat Nora? What’s the most effective weapon against someone like her—or someone like me? Don’t tell me you haven’t thought

about it.”

“I’ve considered a modified DEW—directed energy weapon,” Emerson said. “I’d use it to try and disrupt the cellular bonds.”

“Thanks for the tip,” Gadberry replied, tapping his chest with both hands. “Now, let’s get started.”

Emerson nodded, then began unpacking the equipment he had smuggled out of the lab. He connected the units, linked them to his laptop, and placed the electrodes on Gadberry’s head, arm, and chest.

“You should know,” Emerson said, “I’m not exactly sure what we’re doing here.”

“I’m aware,” Gadberry said. “But you know this system better than anyone else, and I trust that your theories about how these artificial cells work are well-developed. I don’t think you can harm me. As I said, I trust you.”

“Alright then,” Emerson said, pressing a few buttons on the screen. “I’m going to try amplifying the communication between your cells, to activate or accelerate

the newer ones. If everything goes right, it should speed up data transfer, enhance regeneration, and possibly bring out more of the abilities encoded in your cells—the ones the AI triggered in Marren.”

“Go for it,” Gadberry said, sounding confident. But what he had to endure—physically and mentally—would break even him.

## CHAPTER 23

Diana Solomon stepped gracefully into the luxurious hotel perched on the edge of a breathtaking mountain ridge. Wearing an elegant pantsuit, she approached the reception desk, rented a room, and made her way upstairs, pulling a medium-sized travel bag behind her. Once inside her room, she stepped out onto the terrace, taking in the stunning view of the valley below, dotted with dense, snow-covered pine forests and meadows. The crisp winter sunlight made the landscape sparkle, the deep blue sky overhead as vibrant as something out of a hyper-stylized movie.

The clothes and bag were stolen, and she had no money, but she had a plan to settle the bill when she left.

Once inside the room, certain that no one could see her, she allowed her cells to

return to their original arrangement. Her face and body shifted back to their true form—Nora Darya. She hadn't changed her shape exactly—she wasn't capable of freely rearranging her cells at will—but she could make small modifications within certain limits. That's how she had become Diana, someone who looked like she could have been Nora's sister. The resemblance was there, but her skin was slightly darker, her hair lighter, her cheekbones broader, and her lips fuller. Just different enough for people to pass her by if they were searching for Nora, and effective enough to fool facial recognition systems when she rented a car.

She wasn't sure what kind of forces were hunting her, but she suspected there wasn't an international warrant out for her—yet. The institute she'd escaped from was secretive, and while they might claim to protect world peace, they weren't keen on attracting attention. Most likely, they'd try to catch her quietly, using agents or bounty

hunters.

Nora stepped into the bathroom and began practicing. She had gained considerable control over her body—or more accurately, over her cells. Most of her abilities came instinctively, the same way a person knows how to wiggle their toes. It might not happen on the first try, but with enough practice, the neural pathways become familiar. That's how it was for Nora, except she could address each of her cells individually, or command them in groups. Sometimes it felt like she was trying to comprehend the entire universe, while other times, her commands triggered involuntary chain reactions, leading to strange and unpredictable results.

Nora stared at herself in the mirror, trying to reshape her face. The cells responded sluggishly. Over the past few months, she had practiced several female faces, but she hadn't yet managed to create a male one, which would be her safest disguise. Her skin tone was easier to adjust, shifting

across a broad spectrum like an octopus—much faster than a chameleon, whose color change is slower and not meant for disguise.

She had also mastered changing her hair color and could alter her physique to some degree—wider hips, thicker arms, more muscular shoulders, or even slimming herself down for days at a time.

Nora knew she had become an extraordinary being. In fact, she now stood at the pinnacle of the human species, the most evolved individual on the planet. No one was stronger than her. And with her ability to infect others, she believed she could control them, too.

She planned to experiment on a few people to see how far her influence over their cells could extend. If successful, she could gather an army, and if the network functioned properly, she could potentially infect all of humanity. If she could control thirty-five trillion cells, nine billion humans would be no problem.

That evening, she headed down to the hotel restaurant for dinner, taking on Diana's appearance again, wearing a moderately attractive dress to draw as little attention as possible. The intense use of her cells required a massive amount of energy, and she needed to eat a lot. Luckily, the menu offered calorie-dense appetizers and main courses, and she ordered several, along with a few sodas and a double coffee. She was halfway through a dessert called the Alpine Schokoladenbombe when a man approached her table. Nora immediately assumed she'd been spotted, and that her inevitable battle for survival was about to begin.

"Excuse me," the man said in a British accent, "I couldn't help but notice you're dining alone. I was wondering if, perhaps after dinner, you'd like to join me for a drink at the bar?"

Nora looked up at him. She could feel a bit of chocolate cream at the corner of her mouth but hoped it wasn't visible. "I'm

alone as well,” he added. “And it would be nice to chat with someone in such a beautiful place.”

Nora swallowed her bite and wiped her lips with a quick, elegant motion. She paused, waiting for the man to grow uncomfortable.

“You’re not really alone, are you?” the man asked.

“We could have a drink,” Nora said, smiling slightly. “Why not?”

Everything seemed so easy for her now. Her entire life up to this point had felt like an uphill battle, wading through waist-deep mud. No matter how hard she pushed herself, it was as if the world was working against her. But now, ever since her cells had been transformed, the world had slowed down. She could split her attention between multiple things, and she became hyper-aware of the smallest movements around her. If she wanted, she could see every subtle twitch on a person’s face. She knew what the man was going to say next

from the way his lips moved, even before the words left his mouth. She understood context and intention. From a million tiny signals, she could predict what would happen next—and she was right almost every time. Her mind was racing at a speed that even surprised her. Calculations, reasoning, problem-solving, probability assessments—they all flowed effortlessly. Her intuition felt almost like a new superpower, a form of real, functional clairvoyance.

Nora played the part of the lonely widow on her first solo trip since her husband's death. The man—Ryan, as he introduced himself—was quite handsome and kept himself in good shape. He had a kind personality but was predictable. Nora didn't mind; he fit perfectly into her plan.

They drank a lot, enough for Ryan to get tipsy, though Nora remained unaffected. She could filter the alcohol from her brain but pretended that it was getting to her.

Eventually, she let Ryan escort her back to her room, where she invited him inside.

As they shared their first kiss, Nora transmitted millions of her white, artificial cells into him. Ryan recoiled, shoving her away, but ended up stumbling backward himself. He gagged and coughed, wiping at his mouth as though he had bitten into something rotten. Thick white foam dripped from his lips. Nora stood over him, concentrating. She called the cells she had passed to him, and they responded, doing exactly what she commanded. They infected Ryan, multiplying rapidly and taking control. He writhed on the carpet as if suffering from an intense migraine or muscle spasms, before going silent and finally losing consciousness.

Nora smiled.

## CHAPTER 24

At dawn, Emerson left the cabin, feeling as though he had been freed from a long imprisonment. The crisp, cold forest air was a stark contrast to the stale, used-up air of the sealed cabin, which carried the faint, plasticky scent of Gadberry's sweat. The fresh air smelled like freedom. Without looking back, Emerson got into his car and sped away, pushing the accelerator as hard as he could to put as much distance between himself and Gadberry as possible. Once, he had held a certain respect for Gadberry—the head of security and lead operative for his beloved institute. But now, Gadberry had become something else entirely: a superhuman entity, capable of unimaginable things and evolving into who knows what. Emerson no longer cared about the answers—his only concern now was his own

safety.

Even though he knew Gadberry was still asleep, he couldn't shake the feeling of being watched, as if Gadberry's eyes were on his back. Perhaps that sense would never leave him, the nagging thought that Gadberry was always aware of where he was.

As he reached the main road, Emerson spotted the van, parked at a safe distance of about five kilometers from the cabin where Gadberry was hiding. He pulled over and parked behind it. The side door of the van slid open, and Emerson stepped inside and then took a seat.

"Took your time, didn't you, Professor?" Argenti said with a smile—that polite, yet predatory grin of his. Emerson glanced around the poorly lit van. Four other men were inside. Two were working at computers, while the other two looked more like commandos, ready for action, though they weren't fully geared up yet. One of them, Emerson recognized from the institute—his name was Mayheaven.

“It took longer than expected,” Emerson replied. “I discovered some interesting things I couldn’t leave unfinished.”

“Gadberry isn’t of any interest to me—he’s just a tool. Did you do what we agreed on?” Argenti asked.

“Yes,” Emerson said. “I implanted the tracker in him. I also administered a dose of sedative. Surprisingly, the sedative worked—the artificial cells were able to recognize and utilize the foreign substance.”

“Spare me the details,” Argenti interrupted, raising a hand in a dismissive gesture. “Tell me about the woman, Nora. What is she capable of? What can I expect?”

Emerson rubbed his chin, the stubble rasping under his fingers. He could use a shower.

“Of course, I can’t be certain,” Emerson began, “since this is an entirely new technology. Or you might call it a virus, or even a form of synthetic organism. Nora contracted the cells from Marren and then was able to take more from him. What’s

fascinating is that it doesn't seem to matter who was infected first or what stage the mutation has reached. Rather, the individual's physiology and personality seem to determine how much control they can exert over the cells. Marren's cells, as you know, were enhanced with the help of artificial intelligence—effectively 'upgraded' without us fully realizing it. I'm certain those enhanced cells passed into Nora, and she's likely evolved even further since then. Human cells are normally fixed in place—they can't relocate or swap functions. But Nora's cells can. They take over each other's roles and can even shift locations—if not at the cellular level, certainly at the organ level."

"Get to the point," Argenti said.

"I'm confident that, to some extent, Nora can now alter her appearance and body structure," Emerson continued, counting off on his fingers. "She regenerates almost instantly from nearly any injury. She's stronger than any human, and her thinking is... mechanical, highly rational, purely

functional.”

“But she’s not immortal, right?”

“No, she’s not,” Emerson replied, shaking his head. “She’s still an organism, operating as a single system. Beyond a certain point, if too many of her cells are damaged or they can no longer communicate with each other, the system will collapse, and the cells will shut down. The same rules apply as with a normal human—just on a different scale.”

“Good,” Argenti said. “As agreed, you can keep your position as lead researcher at the institute.”

“Thank you, sir.”

“Any recommendations on what kind of weapon might work against her?”

Emerson had pondered this countless times since witnessing what Borg and Marren were capable of at the institute.

“Standard bullets will injure her, and slow her down. Fire will definitely damage the artificial cells. A directed-energy weapon might also be effective, but when I

return to the institute, we'll come up with something more reliable.”

“If you find anything useful, send it to us,” Argenti instructed.

“Understood. I will.”

“You can leave now. The rest is up to us.”

At the door, Emerson hesitated and turned back.

“It would be a good idea to catch Gadberry as well,” he said, continuing even though he knew Argenti could probably read his thoughts. “Because if you don’t, he’ll find me.”

Argenti nodded and flashed his deadly smile again.

“If that happens, I won’t be alive to care.”

## CHAPTER 25

Gadberry slept for a long time. His cells needed the rest after working through the night. When he first tried to sit up, his entire body tingled, a sensation reminiscent of the morning after his first day of military training, when even his earlobes felt sore.

He began exercising, and the discomfort quickly faded, replaced by a sense of vitality. He felt strong, healthy, and young.

“Amazing,” he muttered to himself. He dressed, devoured all the remaining food with a ravenous appetite, and then checked his gear—his clothing for the mission—all of which he packed into a duffel bag. He got into his car, ready to hunt down Nora.

His cells guided him. He felt an almost inexplicable pull, a connection between them. It was difficult to put into words, as though an invisible thread linked him to

her—a dimension beyond normal perception that allowed the artificial cells to communicate with one another. It felt like such a link existed between all people, but for those with artificial cells, it was a hundred, even a thousand times stronger. At times, Gadberry thought he could see it, a faint white thread leading him to Nora. Other times, it would vanish, and the sensation would fade, only to reappear later.

The truth was likely less mystical. It was possible that the artificial cells emitted signals, like electromagnetic waves, some of which escaped the body. These fragmented signals might traverse countless transistors, relays, transmitters, amplifiers, networks, and devices—signals Gadberry couldn't consciously perceive, but his cells could detect, like recognizing a familiar pattern amid a sea of noise. Sometimes stronger, sometimes weaker, coming from different directions, but overall, it gave him a vague sense of where to go.

As Gadberry drove, he wondered what

it would be like if there were a million of them. What kind of connection would exist between that many? A billion? Or if the entire world was made up of people like them? He could have entertained the notion of becoming their leader, the source who infected the world, but he pushed the thought aside. His mission was clear: to capture Nora. This was his life's purpose, the final hunt for an extraordinary prey. Everything else could wait until after.

However, tracking her wasn't a swift process. Every day, every hour, Gadberry could sense Nora's presence, but he had to wait until those impulses pointed in a single direction, leading him closer to a particular city. When the sensation grew stronger, he knew he was heading the right way. If it weakened, he waited again. It was like playing a global game of hot-and-cold.

He made a detour to meet with a colleague who had procured a handheld energy weapon for him. The device could generate vibrational waves at a frequency that

would likely disrupt the bonds between the cells in Nora's body.

Gadberry only slept a few hours every couple of days—he didn't need more. He tested his abilities during the downtime. His strength had multiplied, and he could shoot any firearm with perfect precision. His hands never trembled; holding a gun felt as stable as resting it on a tripod.

He was certain that Nora wasn't idle either. But he believed time was on his side. Day by day, he was getting closer to her.

## CHAPTER 26

Nora continued her journey south, all while carefully selecting the right people to join her growing team. Ryan followed her everywhere, loyal as a personal assistant, but in reality, he was an extension of Nora's mind, encased in a man's body filled with artificial cells. Nora could see and know everything Ryan did, and he acted like an extra limb, carrying out any task she thought of.

Soon, there were two, then three of them. It took time for Nora to adjust to this new state of being, where her consciousness was no longer confined to a single body but spread across multiple physical locations. Her perception of sight and sound altered, but her artificially enhanced brain adapted quickly, processing and organizing the overwhelming flow of information and im-

pulses with ease.

Nora freely used her minions' wealth, properties, and connections to select new targets. A fabulously wealthy bachelor, Pierre Allard had a sprawling beachfront mansion that became the perfect headquarters for her artificial team. Nora enjoyed the sunshine by the pool, sipping cocktails in expensive clothes, surrounded by handsome men who catered to her every thought—literally. They fetched whatever she desired, and she wanted a lot. Nora intended to live like a queen, fulfilling the dreams she had when she first left her childhood home.

She was fully aware that they were coming for her, so she prepared her men to defend her. They instinctively knew that they must protect her at all costs, even if it meant sacrificing their lives. Gadberry had to be captured or killed the moment he appeared.

The hardest part was acquiring weapons. While Nora herself was a weapon, and

her infected followers shared some of her abilities, she still wanted firearms—pistols, and rifles—to give her an edge against Gadberry. She needed to slow him down, incapacitate him, or at least surprise him.

One of her wealthy pawns knew someone who had connections to a man who had previously sold weapons to the mafia. Nora arranged a meeting, accompanied by Ryan and Kaia. Ryan and Kaia, both in sharp suits, followed Nora into an exclusive night bar where Georgij Nador, the arms dealer, held court. Nora wore a form-fitting red evening gown, her long black hair giving her the air of a femme fatale.

It wasn't hard to spot Georgij—a scarred man with a thick Bulgarian accent who seemed tougher than anyone Nora had met before. Four men sat around him on couches and armchairs, along with five women.

“Mr. Nador,” Nora said.

“Who are you?” Georgij asked.

“Debby Wolf,” Nora replied smoothly.

“Our mutual friend, Eddy Borgese, prob-

ably mentioned I'd be coming."

Georgij looked her up and down, then glanced at the two men standing by her side. He thought they looked insignificant, but something in Nora's gaze made his skin crawl.

"I do no business with women," Georgij said dismissively, waving her away with a flick of his wrist. "Now leave."

Nora didn't hide her displeasure at his response. Georgij gestured to one of his men to escort them out. A muscular man stood from one of the armchairs and placed a hand on Ryan's shoulder.

"Let's go," the man said.

In one fluid motion, Ryan grabbed the man's arm, twisted it, and broke it. Before the man could scream, Ryan had snapped his neck. In those same few moments, Kaia kicked another man, sending him tumbling across the room, while she grabbed a third by the hair and smashed her knee into his face. The women screamed and scattered, rushing for the exit.

Georgij's fourth man jumped up, reaching for his pistol, but Ryan was already there, knocking him out cold with a single blow, sending him crashing into the glass table. Georgij stayed where he was, managing to keep his composure. Three of his men were already dead or incapacitated, and Nora walked over to him, leaning in close until their noses were almost touching. As she did, her features began to shift. Her arms became thicker, her hair shortened, her face grew more angular, and stubble sprouted on her chin. Her voice deepened from the start of the next sentence to the end of it.

"Are you ready to do business with me now?" Nora asked, her male form looking out of place in the red gown, almost like a drag performer in the spotlight.

"What do you want?" Georgij asked, his previous cold demeanor now replaced by fear.

"Weapons," Nora said. "Lots of them."  
Georgij nodded. "Fine."

Nora straightened up and shifted back into her “Debby” form, her hair lengthening, her face softening back into its delicate, feminine appearance. Georgij’s eyes widened as he watched the transformation in stunned silence.

“Excellent,” Nora said, dropping a piece of paper into his lap. “Here’s the list. Take it to the parking garage—my car’s a black Escalade. Ryan will handle the payment.”

Georgij stood and left to arrange the delivery. It didn’t even cross his mind to retaliate, despite having the connections to call in serious firepower. The woman wasn’t human, and the two men with her weren’t normal either. His quickest, safest option was to simply give them what they wanted and get rid of them.

Satisfied, Nora returned to the villa and sent out a signal to Gadberry, wherever he was. It was time for them to meet.

## CHAPTER 27

After Emerson had departed, Argenti, along with his team of eight, kept a close watch on Gadberry. Argenti saw no other way to track down Nora, even though an international warrant had been issued for her. He didn't trust that a random patrol would stop her or that a security camera would catch her—Nora's intelligence and capabilities were far beyond such simple measures. Gadberry was the only one who could engage with her, and Argenti planned to strike when they were both preoccupied with each other. His goal was to eliminate them both, as any expert hunter would.

The van was driven by Tomson, with Argenti, Mayheaven, and Hill riding in the back. Two cars accompanied them—Ziegler and Rahman in one, Nguyen, DaSilva, and the muscle-bound Hendricksen in the oth-

er. In the trunks were weapons and tactical gear. Argenti wasn't taking any chances; he didn't want his team to risk getting what he called "the white infection," the virus-like spread of the artificial cells.

Time dragged on painfully slow. While Nora was guiding Gadberry through intuition, Argenti kept his team focused and maintained the support of his superiors. They had acquired a few special weapons that might slow Nora down or at least give them an edge. Emerson had even sent two custom rifles of his own design.

Most of their time was spent in the van, which functioned as a mobile operations center, but they occasionally took breaks at motels and inns.

"Boss," Rahman asked one quiet evening while they were staying at a hotel. In the background, Hill, who was monitoring Gadberry's location, never took his eyes off the screen. All nine of them were in the suite, either watching TV or chatting, but now everyone turned to Rahman.

“Is it true that one of those infected people had his leg cut off, and it grew back?”

“Where’d you hear that?” Argenti asked, gazing out the window at the city’s colorful lights and towering buildings.

“I know one of the guards at the institute. He told me about it,” Rahman said, glancing at the minibar, thinking how badly he wanted a beer. But Argenti didn’t allow alcohol on a mission under any circumstances. It was easy for Argenti—he never touched a drop—but Rahman was reaching his breaking point after weeks without a drink.

“Apparently, it’s true, yes” Argenti replied. “But all I know is what Emerson told me.”

“That’s crazy, right? That something like that even exists.”

“It shouldn’t exist until we can contain it.”

“Got it, boss.”

Over the next few days, they closed in on their target. And then, one evening Hill

showed Argenti the screen.

“Gadberry has stopped,” Hill said.

“What do you mean?” Argenti asked.

“He’s been in the same city for a few days now,” Hill explained, zooming in on the map to show the location. “He’s circled this property several times and hasn’t moved far beyond a well-defined area.”

“Maybe he’s found what he’s looking for.”

“Could be,” Hill replied. “What’s clear is that he’s very interested in this mansion.”

Argenti nodded thoughtfully. The house was in an isolated area, perched on a hillside—a perfect hideout for Nora. It was likely equipped with alarms and a surveillance system, but Gadberry wasn’t a novice. He was scouting the place, waiting for the right time to break in and capture her.

“Who owns the place?” Argenti asked.

“Let me check,” Hill said, quickly searching through databases. “Pierre Allard. Doesn’t seem to have any connections to our case.”

“Rahman, Ziegler,” Argenti called through the radio. “Go out to the house and watch it. Hill will send the coordinates. Report even the smallest movement.”

“Roger that, boss.”

Argenti returned to the map and pointed to a spot near the house, a location that was close but still at a safe distance.

“We’ll meet here with the rest of the team,” he told Hill, who nodded and sent the destination to DaSilva, then informed Tomson where to drive.

While the van headed toward the rendezvous point, Argenti and Mayheaven checked over the special weapons. Argenti didn’t sugarcoat things for his team—they all knew this operation wasn’t going to end neatly.

“I’ll take the plasma gun. It should disrupt the bond between her cells or, at the very least, interrupt the communication between them, which might paralyze her.”

Argenti gestured to two other guns that looked more like minimalist water guns

than lethal firearms.

“Emerson sent these. They’re loaded with Botox.”

“Sorry, boss, but I’m not walking into a fight with a toy gun,” Mayheaven said, hefting his M16 rifle. “I trust this. And this,” he added, patting the Desert Eagle strapped to his thigh.

“Emerson believes it could be effective.”

“Yeah, I bet. What’s it supposed to do, smooth out their wrinkles?” Mayheaven scoffed.

“Someone’s gotta use it.”

“Maybe, but not me.”

“We’ve also got a cryo-gun. That could be useful too.”

“And that one?” Mayheaven pointed.

“That one shoots a net,” Argenti explained. “The plan is to hit her with live rounds and plasma first, which should slow her down. Then we hit her with the net. Nothing on earth can tear that thing off once it’s wrapped around her. After that, we lock her up in a containment unit.”

“Piece of cake.”

“Let’s not underestimate her,” Argenti warned. “We can’t kill her, but we need to be ready for surprises. She’s probably expecting us.”

“Still, she’s either human or some kind of android. She’s organic, so she can be killed.”

“She’s currently the most intelligent and the strongest human on the planet.”

## CHAPTER 28

Gadberry had a feeling that his instincts were being influenced by Nora, or at the very least, that she knew he was approaching. Despite this, he trusted in his ability to strike quickly and forcefully when the time comes. A few seconds of advantage could be enough, even if she was expecting him.

He donned his night camouflage suit, which didn't just blend into the darkness but also adapted to the shades and patterns of his surroundings. Over the past few days, he had scoped out the perimeter, identifying weak points in the security. The camera system was basic, without any facial or pattern recognition software. There were motion sensors along the fence, but they only monitored a zone close to the ground, about knee height, for three meters around the perimeter. Gadberry had retrieved these

details from the security company based on the logo at the entrance. When he visited their office, they initially refused to release sensitive information about their clients, but Gadberry swiftly persuaded them otherwise, ensuring the matter stayed discreet.

Besides the fixed security system, there were guards as well. Gadberry counted five, stationed carefully around the property, with four more men roaming inside and outside the villa. He suspected they were Nora's servants, judging by their pale, white skin and the mechanical, deliberate movements typical of the infected.

"Do I move like that?" Gadberry mused. He liked to think he was different, not one of them.

He found a spot along the fence that lay in the blind spots of two cameras, hidden by thick vegetation. Listening to the steady hum of crickets and cicadas, he waited for the guard to turn away, then sprinted forward. After covering ten meters, he reached

the motion sensor's range and leapt, soaring six meters forward and three meters up. He cleared the fence and landed softly on the grass, lying flat as he surveyed the surroundings. No alarms blared, and no lights switched on. The guard looked in his direction but saw nothing but the familiar garden, unaware that a dark shadow—Gadberry—was lying unseen in the blackness of the night.

Silently, he crept up behind the guard and, like a living shadow, wrapped himself around the man, slitting his throat. The guard struggled, but no sound escaped. His body possessed immense strength, but Gadberry's was greater. With quick precision, Gadberry decapitated the man, ensuring no chance of regeneration.

He had an idea where Nora might be based on his earlier surveillance, but he still moved cautiously, peeking into different parts of the villa. He avoided other guards and slipped through the garden, weaving between statues, shrubs, and smaller struc-

tures, unseen.

Crossing a shadowy section of the terrace, Gadberry suddenly felt Nora's presence stronger than ever before.

"Hello, Maximilian Gadberry," came her voice, startling him. He stood up straight as the pool lights turned on, illuminating a figure just twenty meters away. Then, one by one, the garden lights flared to life, followed by the villa's decorative lighting, bathing the terraces, walkways, and pool in a near-daylight glow. There stood Nora, apparently unarmed. Gadberry realized any hope of sneaking up on her had been a fantasy. He stepped out from the pillars.

"Nora, I think this has gone far enough," Gadberry said, pulling out his handheld directed-energy weapon and firing it at her. The waves reached Nora in a heartbeat, invisible and soundless, lifting her into the air as the energy struck. The frequency disrupted her artificial cells, momentarily causing them to lose cohesion. It seemed like Nora's body was coming apart

at the seams—her organs, skin, and muscles struggled to stay connected, spontaneously forming chains to hold themselves together. In certain places, Gadberry could even see through her disintegrating body before she crashed into the still surface of the pool.

Gadberry saw two guards approaching from different angles, but he rushed to the pool to see what had happened. Emerging from the water wasn't Nora, but a man, his body melting and reforming, trying to pull itself together. The cells in the water were in chaos, desperately attempting to reassemble, but the disruption had been too severe. The half-formed figure clawed at the pool's edge, but its hand, slick and boneless, couldn't find any purchase. The creature slumped forward, its distorted face crashing into the pavement with a horrid gurgle before collapsing, its remaining body solidifying in a twisted mass, no longer able to rise. What remained in the pool dissolved completely.

Gadberry realized then that the man had only been mimicking Nora's form—he hadn't shot the real Nora. Worse, he understood that his one shot had been his best chance. Now it was gone.

The two guards opened fire, bullets tearing through his body, shredding his white flesh, and destroying the DEW rifle in his hand. Gadberry charged at one of the men, pummeling him with brutal blows until his head was a ruin. He then pulled out his knife and plunged it into the man's chest several times. By the time he turned to the other guard, who was reloading, Gadberry had already taken ten bullets to his body. His white blood flowed from multiple wounds.

He lunged at the second guard with tremendous force, knocking him down and swiftly decapitating him with three quick slashes of his knife. The garden was empty. Gadberry could feel his wounds slowly healing, but he knew he was no match for Nora, not like this.

He entered the villa through the wide terrace doors, stepping into an opulent hall. The flooring and furniture looked incredibly expensive, illuminated in a soft blue and purple hue. From a side corridor, another man rushed toward him, shirtless but wielding a massive shotgun. Gadberry drew his sidearm and fired, but the man seemed to shrug off the bullets. As the man got close, he raised the shotgun and fired. Gadberry was thrown to the ground, a gaping wound in his abdomen. He scrambled to move, but the man shot him again, this time shattering his leg, and spraying his white blood across the floor.

Gadberry didn't scream; he could shut out the pain. Instead, he used his good leg and arm to lunge at the man, grabbing the shotgun's barrel and yanking him forward. With the man off balance, Gadberry pulled him down and embraced him. His hands melted into the man's back, consuming his cells. Their skin merged first, then the flesh underneath. The cells obeyed Gadberry's

will, flowing into him, healing him, and making him stronger. The man struggled, but his strength quickly faded as Gadberry devoured him.

As Gadberry drained the man's cells, their minds briefly connected. Nora's consciousness was there, and for a moment, they faced each other in a realm beyond physical sight. Nora was furious, but Gadberry was resolute. She tried to dominate his will, but Gadberry resisted, blocking her out. When it was over, he dropped the man's body beside him, his fingers peeling away from the skin as though stuck in honey, stretching before finally retracting. The man's back was flayed, with bones and even part of his spine exposed.

Gadberry stood tall, fully healed, and stronger than ever. With no more attackers in sight, he ascended the villa's grand staircase. The room above the hall had ornate doors, and Gadberry pushed them open. There, standing before a large window, was Nora again. But before he could determine

whether this was the real Nora, two men attacked him from both sides, hitting him with electric stun batons. Gadberry collapsed to the floor, convulsing. Every time he tried to stop shaking, they shocked him again. These weren't ordinary tasers—the volts were immense, causing many of his cells to explode from the heat, oozing from his skin as white pus.

A third man stepped forward, holding a flamethrower. Without a word, he opened fire, engulfing Gadberry in flames. Nora watched, her expression cold as Gadberry and the carpet beneath him caught fire. The two men with stun batons leapt back to avoid the blaze.

“Make sure no cell of his survives,” Nora commanded, her pale skin glowing orange in the firelight as she watched Gadberry burn, his agony reflecting in her eyes.

But Gadberry refused to die. As soon as the numbness left his body, he surged to his feet, still ablaze, and charged at Nora. He grabbed her, crashing through the win-

dow as it shattered into shards. Gadberry and Nora fell into the pool below, but Nora's head struck the edge of the pool, and it shattered.

## CHAPTER 29

Gadberry crawled out of the water, his body smoldering as smoke rose from his half-melted suit. The micro-displays and sensors were fried, and the once pitch-black material had turned a faded gray, like an overwashed jumpsuit. Nora, too, emerged from the pool, but her movements were less human—more insect-like. Her shattered head hung limply from her neck. Her right temple was caved in, her jaw broken in two and grotesquely twisted, while her eye was nothing more than a white, lifeless orb sunken into its misshapen socket.

At that moment, a group of heavily armed soldiers stormed in, their faces and bodies completely concealed by armored suits. Argenti's men. They opened fire with automatic rifles, and Gadberry's body was riddled with bullets, collapsing onto the

stone tiles next to the pool.

Nora attempted to escape, but her head was still in the process of healing, and her vision was blurred. She stumbled into a patio set, crashing through it before falling. More bullets struck her, further weakening her. One arm was nearly severed, and her leg was broken, but she still struggled to rise, mentally commanding her loyal servants to attack. Instantly, they obeyed, leaping from the upstairs windows down onto the commandos below.

One of Nora's men tackled Ziegler, one of Argenti's soldiers, smashing his helmet and shattering his face beneath it with a single blow. Within seconds, Nora transferred a few thousand of her white cells into Ziegler, and she took control of his mind.

Rahman fired an explosive round, hitting another of Nora's infected. The man exploded from the waist up, his body disintegrating in a blast that sent everyone nearby tumbling from the shockwave and shrapnel.

Ziegler stood up, his helmet shattered, blood dripping from his face, and charged at Argenti. Argenti caught him and tossed him over his shoulder. Hill quickly stepped in and unloaded a burst into the writhing, zombified form of their former comrade.

Meanwhile, Nora had risen, her leg fully healed, and her head now looking as if it had never been damaged. “Hill! Nguyen!” Argenti shouted. “Bring out the special rifles!”

Another one of Nora’s servants grabbed Tomson by the neck, but DaSilva intervened, blasting the arm to pieces. Though it was severed from the body, the arm refused to release its grip on Tomson’s throat; instead, it began to coil around his neck like a living snake. “What the hell is this?” Mayheaven muttered from behind Argenti, watching in horror as the disembodied limb tightened its grip.

“Tomson!” DaSilva shouted, slashing at the arm with a knife, eventually freeing his teammate. The severed arm writhed on the

ground like a decapitated serpent, twisting and curling, its sight nauseating enough to churn DaSilva's stomach. Just then, the man with the flamethrower emerged from a side room and unleashed a stream of fire that engulfed DaSilva. Screaming, he ran towards the pool, but before he could reach it, Pierre Allard, one of Nora's early infected, shot him dead. DaSilva collapsed in flames, his body burning as he lay motionless.

Ryan, Nora's first servant, fired from the other side, managing to shoot Tomson in the head just before he could take cover.

Argenti's team retreated beneath the arcades below the burning second floor, taking cover behind the Roman columns as they returned fire. In the ensuing firefight, they managed to take down several of Nora's infected, including the man with the flamethrower. A headshot proved effective—the infected didn't get back up. Argenti guessed that even if they could heal, reconstructing a destroyed head would take

time. Except for Nora, who was regenerating and evolving at an incomprehensible speed.

“Nora!” Argenti shouted. “This ends now!”

Nora kicked off her shoes and began walking toward Argenti’s team. As she moved, her feet absorbed the remains of her fallen servants scattered across the stone floor. She grew taller, towering over the men like an amazon from some ancient myth. Her clothes were shredded, and her wild hair framed her round face. Her white skin gleamed, free of dirt, glowing as if freshly polished. Her eyes, reflecting the flames of the burning villa, glowed with a demonic intensity as she stared down her attackers.

“God, in his grace, has willed me to be here,” she whispered, almost as if casting a curse, “these flames hold no power.”

Argenti’s team reloaded and fired at Nora. The bullets tore into her flesh, shredding her arms and face, and forcing her down to one knee. Argenti seized the mo-

ment and fired the plasma rifle.

Blue, egg-shaped plasma rounds shot down the terrace. The first missed, but the second hit Nora, blowing a hole in her body large enough to fit a fist through. Another round found its mark, though two more missed as she collapsed. The stray plasma rounds tore apart the bar and fireplace on the far end of the terrace.

“... nothing of yours can reach or touch me.” Nora groaned in a barely audible voice.

“The net!” Argenti ordered.

Rahman moved closer to Nora’s writhing form and fired the net launcher. The net unfolded in midair and draped over her body, tightening as it ensnared her. Nora struggled to free herself, but the net held her limbs close to her sides. Rahman, using a remote control, tightened the net even further, until its dense fibers started cutting into her skin.

“Got her!” Argenti shouted. “May heaven, get the crate!”

But then Nora’s body began to change,

softening as the net cut deeper into her flesh. Slowly, the fibers of the net passed through her. Argenti's face drained of hope, his expression morphing into sheer disbelief. His men reloaded as Nora's cells simply allowed the net to pass through them, reconnecting and reforming. She stood again, her eyes burning with a malevolent rage, her body completely intact. Argenti's mind raced—this was beyond anything he could comprehend. Every cell in Nora's body seemed to be capable of assuming any function—bone, flesh, or even something beyond human biology.

Argenti's weapon indicated it was ready to fire again, but before he could pull the trigger, one of Nora's infected leapt in front of him, absorbing the first plasma round. Nora herself dodged the rest, the errant shots destroying more of the garden's structures.

Moving faster than Argenti could track, Nora rushed Rahman. He barely had time to reach for his pistol before she was upon

him, ripping off one of his arms, then the other. Rahman screamed as Argenti's team scrambled back into the house.

Nora tore Rahman apart as if he were an insect, dismembering him with the ease of pulling off the wings of a fly. His blood soaked the ground as Nora casually tossed aside his head, now severed from his body.

Her white cells sloughed off the red human blood, leaving her skin pristine as she advanced toward Argenti. When she entered the house, Argenti and Mayheaven opened fire, but Nora darted to the side faster than they could aim. She grabbed Mayheaven and slammed him against the wall. His body crumpled like a ragdoll, as though every bone in his body had shattered.

Outside, in the garden, Hendricksen managed to track down Ryan and shot him. But just as he moved in for the kill, Ryan sprang up and struck him down. Though Hendricksen was exceptionally strong among humans, he was no match for the

infected. Still, his knife skills and survival instincts gave him an edge, fueled by adrenaline that Ryan lacked. Nora couldn't control Ryan in that moment, preoccupied with the fight inside. Ryan tried and failed to overpower Hendricksen, who slashed and stabbed his white flesh repeatedly until Ryan finally collapsed. Hendricksen got behind him and began sawing through Ryan's neck with his knife. Ryan fought back, gripping his own head to keep it in place, but Hendricksen kicked his hands away and resumed cutting, finally severing the head. Ryan's body convulsed briefly before falling still.

Inside, Hill and Nguyen arrived with the specialized rifles, but before they could aim, Gadberry stormed in, charging at Nora like a furious predator. He leaped into the air, nearly reaching the ceiling, and struck her with such force that his hand cleaved through her from shoulder to stomach. The burning roof partially collapsed, blocking the terrace as smoke filled the room, though

the protective suits kept Argenti and his men safe for now.

Nora twisted her arm backward, bent her elbow at an unnatural angle, and grabbed Gadberry, who flailed like a child in her grip. Her fingers dug into his flesh, holding him like claws. Nora's torn body opened, revealing hundreds of sharp teeth inside the gaping wound. She stuffed the struggling Gadberry into her body, consuming him. His legs kicked and flailed as the teeth tore into his flesh, quickly dissolving his body and absorbing his cells into hers.

Argenti watched in horror as the flames illuminated the monstrous scene before him—a towering, nearly eight-foot-tall woman with pale skin and a face twisted in madness, her body split open from shoulder to stomach, devouring an entire man like some horrific beast.

“Fire!” Argenti shouted. Nora slowed as she processed Gadberry, giving Hill and Nguyen the chance to move in and take their shot. They fired, unloading their en-

tire magazines into Nora.

Nora's body received two thousand nanograms of botox, paralyzing her completely. She collapsed and lay sprawled across the floor. Gadberry's legs still protruded from her shoulders, but the grotesque wound had sealed, leaving only a ragged scar that ran down Nora's torso—like a deranged surgeon had stitched Gadberry into her.

For Nora, based on her body mass, one hundred nanograms of botox would have been a lethal dose. She had received twenty times that amount. The toxin couldn't kill her, but it effectively disrupted the communication between her nerve cells. Argenti knew the paralysis was only temporary. Nora's artificial cells would soon figure out how to bypass the toxin or expel it from her system.

"The crate!" Argenti ordered, and his men moved quickly. Argenti followed Nguyen and Hill, bringing in the freezing unit.

He feared that by the time they returned, Nora would already be gone, having es-

caped once more. Without agency support or tracking devices, they'd be back to square one. But to his relief, Nora still lay on the floor. Her twisted, deformed limbs writhed like tentacles around her, while her face shifted through subtle waves of previous identities she had worn.

Argenti fired the freezing gun, encasing her amorphous, trembling body in ice. Frost flowers formed across her body, like eerie funeral decorations. Nora's pale skin turned rigid, frozen solid. Her eyes closed, and she remained motionless. The flames from the house had already begun to melt the ice, leaving them with only a short window to act.

Nguyen and Hill hesitated but eventually grabbed her and wrestled her into the crate. They had to sever Gadberry's legs, still partially embedded in Nora's body, to fit her inside. They sealed the crate, setting the internal temperature to zero degrees.

Hendricksen entered, having found a route from the garden into the main hall.

“What happened?” he asked.

“We got her,” Hill replied, almost adding, “It’s over,” but he didn’t dare say it out loud.

“Hendricksen,” Argenti called, “Grab the flamethrower. Burn every corpse, every single cell.”

“Yes, sir!” Hendricksen headed out and began torching the grounds, incinerating everything in his path. He started where Gadberry had entered, then moved to the poolside where most of their fallen comrades lay. He then proceeded further into the garden, where Ryan’s body was sprawled. Ryan’s head had already begun to regrow—an eerie, featureless, egg-shaped white mass with hollow eyes and a barely-formed mouth. He resembled a ghost. When he turned towards Hendricksen, opening his mouth, which tore more than it opened, Hendricksen set him ablaze.

On the other side of the pool, Hendricksen found Allard, who was no longer aggres-

sive without Nora's influence. He crouched over a corpse, gnawing at its internal organs.

"Jesus, Ziegler," muttered Hendricksen, before burning Allard and Ziegler's remains together.

An hour later, the villa's garden was a charred wasteland of cinders and ash. The upper floor and roof had also burned away, but the fire hadn't spread to the rest of the structure. The alarm system connected to the fire department had been deactivated by Nora, so no one had responded to the blaze. The nearest neighbors lived miles away.

Argenti's team loaded Nora's coffin-like crate into their van, securing it carefully, and drove to their base. There, in a heavily guarded underground facility, they placed Nora's container beside another—Marren's frozen body. Nora's form was twice the size of Marren's. Both floated motionless in a bluish suspension fluid. For now, they seemed harmless.

Argenti stood there for a moment, staring at the two superhuman beings, then left the room. He reflected on how unfortunate Gadberry had been in all of this. It could have easily been him in Gadberry's place. He waited for the final report confirming that no rogue artificial cells had survived outside the bodies of the zero-patient or the omega-patient, then headed home.

Before he left his office, he kissed two of his fingers and pressed them against the framed photo of a dragonfly hanging on his wall—a silent ritual of superstition.



# RONIL CAINE

# IMMUTATION

A NOVELETTE