

“There’s no telling if the side-effects will manifest worse in humans,” Phross returned. “You’re endangering lives...”

“What lives?” Krouse replied. “Those people lived on the street, most of them stewing in their own bodily fluids. Nobody cared about them. Nobody even noticed they were gone. At least here they had a purpose.”

“You’re not some savior,” Phross returned. “This isn’t science anymore, Merlin. And it’s not only dangerous, it’s completely unethical.”

“Every advancement in science comes with a need for calculated risks...”

“But you haven’t calculated anything!” Phross snapped back. “The product is still in beta testing. And the success we had during the initial trials was nothing compared to the amount of adjustments we needed to make to mitigate the side-effects we found after.”

Krouse stopped and placed both hands on the table. “Your research helped correct a number of the failings from the first tests. Don’t be so modest, Josh. The product is ready.”

Phross scoffed. “In theory, but without a substantial source of power to fuel the nano-components, the body will eventually cannibalize its own cells for energy until there is nothing left.”

“That’s not entirely true,” replied Dr. Krouse. He had a knowing look on his face. “It may not need a substantial power source, just a recurring one.”

“What are you talking about?”

Krouse flashed a confident smile like he knew something Dr. Phross didn’t. Phross had always felt a sense of competition whenever they went to their individual testing. Each one wanted their idea to be the breakthrough. But he could tell by the look Krouse was now giving him that the tiny man may have finally done it. Or at least thought he had.

“Look,” Phross struggled for a moment, but finally managed to put away his scientific curiosity. “Whatever it is you’ve found, I want no part of it or any human testing. I don’t care if you think nobody will notice when a homeless man goes missing. They’re still people for God’s sake!”

“But it’s working, Josh!” Krouse returned.

Dr. Phross stared intently. “Working how? The side effects were so volatile that I thought we still had years on the table...”

“The extreme side effects are mitigated with recurring injections or access to an alternative power source to keep the nano-components functioning,” Krouse replied. “As long as the

subject has the means to obtain either, the worst side-effect they'll experience is maybe a few headaches or mood swings.”

Phross scoffed and shook his head. “Means to obtain? Is that just your way of saying they need to be able to meet a price? Your price...”

“Don't be naive, Josh,” Krouse stepped away from the table prompting Phross to back away himself. The doctor waved his hand sarcastically in the air. “How do you think this was going to turn out? A product like this deserves the proper recognition.”

“I thought we were going to cure those that needed healing?” Phross said as he stepped back toward his office. “You're making us sound more like drug dealers.”

“What did you think the pharmaceutical industry was?” Krouse replied harshly. “It's an industry that makes money off people's suffering. Those who can afford it often get the best treatment.”

“And those with the biggest problems become easy to control,” Phross said. “Like that man I saw you with this morning...”

Merlin Krouse laughed incredulously and shook his head. “Of course you were here, of course...tell me, what exactly did you see?”

“I saw what I'd call more than just a man suffering from the occasional headache,” Phross replied.

“Well I can assure you,” Krouse began. “What you saw was more from his condition than any treatment.”

“For his sake, I hope his money doesn't run out.”

Krouse still wore a peculiar look. “He has no reason to fear the alternative.”

Phross shook his head. “I'd be surprised if he knew there was any. Do you tell them about the big one, you know...death?”

“I've been honest about my motives,” Krouse's reply seemed to dodge the question. “But what are yours? What is it that you planned to do by coming back here? You undoubtedly figured this out long before now. Why haven't you reported the lab to the police?”

“I wanted to give you a chance to come clean,” he replied.

“Or you didn't want to implicate yourself,” Krouse stepped closer. “Come on Josh, look around. There is no one here but you and me. You can say it.”

For the first time he noticed something bulky in the pocket of Krouse's lab coat as the doctor began to reach for it. “Are you planning on killing me?”