The Life-Changing Serum

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I woke up when it was still dark, unsure what the time was. Water poured through the crevice in my roof, and the tin bucket underneath was now overflowing. I placed the bucket of water next to my bed and brought another to catch the rainwater. I then used the water to wash my face.

I looked at myself in the mirror shard on my table. Scars outlined the sides of my face, delineating my features. I padded them lightly with a washcloth, which became tinged slightly pink. After changing into a relatively clean pair of clothes, I put my hair into a bun and went into the main room. My parents weren't awake yet. I checked the time on the rusted clock in the kitchen. It was only 5. My usual shift started at 7. I decided to go to work early. I put on my jacket and walked into the rain. My jacket didn't shield me from the rain whatsoever, but I didn't mind the water splashing on my face and arms. The sky was pitch black, and the streets were empty.

I reached the synthesizer within 5 minutes. There were a few dozen other people there working, probably finishing up their night shifts. I checked in with the lady at the front.

"Name?" she asked.
"Scarlett Kensington," I replied.
"Your shift normally starts at 7. Coming in early today?"
"Yes," I said.
"Ok. Marked you in. Go set up."
"Thanks."

I made my way to my station. My job was to fix whatever products had defects, see which ones could and could not be salvaged. A cheap job for the company to save money.

As my hands moved robotically, my mind wandered. *If I were in school right now, imagine what I could be doing…* I shrugged off the thought, knowing it was futile to entertain such ideas.

Looking out of the small window in front of my station, I saw kids lining up in front of a building. The village school. I sighed. How badly I wished I was young still, able to go to school and learn. To be able to immerse myself in the world of the classroom and not have to think about where my next meal would come from.

My job, unlike most of the others, had some variation to it – not every single movement was the same because not every single defect was the same. There was a little more thought needed, some troubleshooting. Could this piece be exchanged for another? Was the motor faulty? Did the surface need to be sanded? Could the outside metal be replaced? Could the small scratch be covered up just enough with paint so that it became almost invisible? But beyond a certain point, I had seen all types of defects and began to mechanically handle the ones that came my way. I was stuck in an inescapable time loop, fixing things deemed not quite good enough for sale but not quite bad enough to throw away.

9 pm. The manager announced, " The shift has ended. You may now leave. Have a nice night." This was the sound I'd been waiting for. Permission to leave hell only to return the next day. I grabbed my bag, checked out with the lady at the front, and left. The cool air was a nice break from the stuffiness inside the synthesizer. The rain had ceased, and the sky was dark black, just as it had been in the morning.

Only a few feet down from the gate, I could make out something – rather, someone. Someone coming towards *me*. In his hand was something that emitted light, revealing his pale, thin face. His chocolate-brown hair folded back into neat, tight curls. His polished hazelnut leather shoes shined even in the darkness, a stark contrast to my worn-out tennis shoes that I shared with my sister. *Where could this person have come from?* I was lost trying to decipher his origins. The man halted a few steps in front of me and smiled.

“Hello. Your name’s Scarlett, right? Scarlett Kensington?”

I panicked as beads of sweat began to form on my forehead. *Am I in trouble? What is going on?*

“Yes… but how do you know me?”

“This isn’t the first time I’ve seen you.”

I could feel my heartbeat in my throat. Who was this crazy man who somehow knew me? “Have you been stalking me?” I barely managed to get out the words.

The man chuckled. “Funnily enough, I have. You’re a very interesting person.”

I let out a dry laugh. Or a cough. Mucus welled up in my throat.

“Tell me what you want.”

The man smiled sympathetically. “No, this is about what *you* want. Your job here in the synthesizer is such an unfortunate waste of your potential. I’ve seen your school grades. Much higher than the benchmark here. Normalized, it is on par with much more privileged students. It’s a shame you had to drop out of school for your family. Wouldn’t you say they’re holding you back?”

Why does this man even care? Too annoyed and hungry to offer a thoughtful response, I gave a brusque reply. “Life is life. You deal with it. I have to go home and see what’s there to eat.” I started walking when the man suddenly placed his arm in front of me, bringing me to a halt. He drew his face close to my ear and whispered.

“What if I could tell you that you could leave this place and do whatever you wanted?”

I turned to face him and saw his lips curl into a smile.

Now I was convinced this was a trap. Salespeople trying to fool the poor. A classic. *He's testing me. I can't fall prey to his tricks.*

"Shut up. You're wasting my time. I'm leaving." I shoved the man aside when he suddenly raised his voice.

"What if you could take a serum that would erase all of your bad memories so that you could start life afresh? Feelings of guilt and sadness would cease to exist. Your life would transform. You could go back to school, make something of yourself, not have to worry about supporting your family. Wouldn't that be nice?"

Curiosity tempered my anger just slightly. *What was this guy on?* I stopped walking for a second. Still, I didn't trust him.

"Who are you?" I inquired, trying to pierce through his seemingly empathetic eyes and extract his real intentions.

The man grinned. "You finally decided to ask. I'm Everette Elrod, head of the "Global Solutions" organization's youth outreach program, dedicated to helping young individuals with potential escape poverty and pursue their dreams. I've seen that the nation's best talent lies in these slums and villages. These individuals' lives are full of misery and disappointments. They don't know that a whole world of opportunity waits for them. They don't realize that they can, in fact, escape the vicious cycle of poverty. When I tell them that they can forget all of their misery and live a new life, they think I'm playing tricks with them. But when they finally realize that I'm serious, they wisely grab the opportunity. And now, they live luxurious lives in some of the most expensive places in the world."

My eyes lit up, almost inadvertently, with excitement, and my heart started beating fast. I tried to caution my body to not react before my mind. I still needed to learn more about this too-good-to-be-true opportunity.

“How do I know you’re not tricking me? Where’s the proof that this works?”

The man grinned. “I knew you wouldn’t believe me with mere words. Classic sign of intelligence. Take a look here.” He held his hand-held device in front of my face and showed me a photo of a man who looked oddly familiar. Suddenly, it struck me.

“Wait, that guy used to go to my school! Caleb, right? Didn’t he die in the coal mine?”

“Yes, Caleb. No, no, no. He didn’t die at all. In fact, he’s living a very pleasant life right now.”

I was shocked. Caleb looked… happy. He was healthy. No longer bony and thin. He was wearing a suit and a tie, and behind him, there was a giant glass staircase. My heart skipped a beat.

“What does he do now?”

“Caleb works at a large biotech company. He earns around $230,000 per year,” Everette replied.

Clearly, there was proof this thing worked. Still, it sounded just too good to be true. “What happens if the serum doesn’t work?” I asked.

“In the 10,000+ people we have tried this on, it has always worked. The chances of it not working are infinitesimal. Our company would lose its reputation if it didn’t work. I think it is in the company’s best interest to make sure it works, don’t you think?” he grinned. “I’d say you’d be well served taking the shot knowing that there is almost a 100% chance that it will work perfectly as intended,” Everette replied.

I had to re-ground myself in reality. “How much does it cost? And what will you tell my family?”

“The procedure is completely free of charge. And don’t worry about your family at all. We will tell them you died in an unfortunate accident, just as we told Caleb’s family. They will not know where you have gone. You will pass to them, like the winter. Consider it a fresh start in life. A chance to forget everything and move on.”

What could I possibly lose? Nothing. I possessed nothing valuable enough to lose. “Alright. When can I take it?”

“We can arrange for it to be administered tomorrow morning. I understand that you like to come early to work. You can come here before your parents wake up so that they don’t suspect anything. We’ll take care of you from there.” Everett smiled.

I quieted my defensive tendencies, finally convinced that Everette could be trusted. Happy, confused, and slightly nervous, I thanked him.

“Of course! This is our job. You deserve it.” He winked at me and vanished into the darkness once again.

By this point, my hunger became satiated with hope. From tomorrow onwards, I would never go a minute hungry. I would finally exit the time loop that was my life and move into something new. I walked back home on the rough, cobblestone paths, no longer bothered by the rocks piercing through the thin soles of my shoes, my spirit newly revitalized.

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I settled into my bed, unable to sleep. I started to feel guilty – guilty that I was choosing myself over my family. My family had waited for me to come home before having dinner. As we ate, Anna told us about her school day, and she asked me for help with some of her homework. Instinctively, I told her I’d help her tomorrow. After saying this, I realized that I wouldn’t be here tomorrow. Tomorrow, they would be under the illusion that I had died, when I would have actually gone somewhere far,

far away. *Would they miss me?* After all, they were my family. It wasn't their fault we were stuck in this situation. But it wasn't mine either. I should be allowed a new chance at life. *"You will pass to them, like the winter."* Caleb's words echoed in my mind.

Maybe this would be good for the family. One burden removed. One less person to feed. Maybe they would be thankful. Maybe I'm actually helping them. I *am* helping them.

The rain started again. I placed a bucket under the hole in my roof. As I listened to the comforting sound of raindrops bouncing off our flimsy roof and dropping one by one into the bucket, I fell asleep.

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I woke up at 5 am. Today was a special day, the day I'd take the serum. I grabbed my jacket, put on my shoes, and carefully opened the front door so as not to disturb anyone. I set foot on the rough, cobblestone path and walked to the synthesizer, this time with a bounce in my step. Upon reaching the synthesizer, I saw Everette, who smiled at me.

"Good morning," he said.

"Good morning."

"Are you ready to take the serum?"

"Yes." Finally, I'd be able to escape this horrid life.

"Good. Now, follow me into the room where you'll have the injection administered. Everette took me to an old warehouse close to the synthesizer. Nurses were already there, preparing the injection. A nurse ushered me into a chair in the middle of the room. She cuffed my arms to the sides of the chair. "Just to make sure you don't

interfere with the serum administration," she explained with a smile. My chest tensed. I was trapped here. My leaving was contingent upon those in this room letting me go. I was almost ready to scream, but then I reminded myself how much I wanted this. How much I deserved this. I deserved to stop spending my life fixing broken items and finally fix myself.

A nurse approached and rolled up my sleeve. She rubbed an alcohol pad on my arm, so much so that it stung as it scratched my dry skin. She brought the needle close to my arm. It was the thickest needle I had ever seen. I closed my arms and pursed my lips… a sharp piercing through my skin and I felt like screaming…the pain got worse and it felt like my arm was being ripped off my shoulder… I strained my vocal cords but no sound came out… before I knew it my arm went numb, then my shoulder, then my chest, and then everything went numb and all I could see was darkness.

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Cool water splashed over my face. My fatigued eyes gradually opened, and I saw a stranger leaning over me. I sat up slowly in my chair.

"Who are you? Where am I?"

The man in front of me grinned. "Hello there. You are in the city of Emerald Springs, a great place for aspiring entrepreneurs and leaders. My name is Everette, and I'll be your guide in your journey."

My brain felt fuzzy. As my eyes adjusted to the brightness, I began to feel a pounding sensation in the back of my head. "How did I end up here?" I mustered through the pain.

The man – Everette – sighed. "You were one among many who were in grave danger, on the brink of death. My team and I rescued all of you and brought you here. You're safe now." He smiled.

“How come I don’t remember any of that?” I asked.

“We had to perform a procedure on you that unfortunately erased your memory. But, rest assured, you can trust us. We are telling the truth.” Everette patted my hand.

I tried to think hard. No memories came to my mind. I was searching for something that wasn’t there. Everything around me seemed so…strange. I was in a room with a glass staircase and large windows. Outside, cars filled the streets. I could feel every single new piece of information about the world around me enter my brain, carefully, taking in its own designated place, a jigsaw puzzle coming together. I couldn’t believe I was where I was but I couldn’t imagine a place any different.

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The alarm on my phone chimed at 6 am. Annoyed, I reached over and turned it off. I sat up in my bed and checked my phone for notifications. I had another “ad hoc meeting” today at 8 am. Slightly irritated, I threw my blanket to the side and got ready. I quickly brushed my teeth, changed, grabbed a granola bar, and headed off to work. As I sat in my car, classical music playing in the background, I mentally planned out my day. I had four back-to-back meetings in the morning, followed by a 15-minute lunch and 5 meetings in the afternoon.

Within 20 minutes, I reached the office building. “Global Solutions” was plastered onto the front of the building in silver font. The campus’s magnificent architecture never failed to mesmerize me. The central building was a heptagonal structure made entirely of glass. Curved skywalks connected the central office to the ones around it. Emerald pine trees were arranged in single file along the path leading up to the entrance.

I walked towards the automated glass doors and stepped inside the building. A fresh, lemon-tinged coolness washed over me, a sharp contrast to the scalding temperature outside. Almost instantly, my frustration and worries about the amount of work I

had were gone and were replaced with a cool calm. A peace. My hands, feet, and eyes became coordinated with a superhuman level of precision. I walked over to the elevator, scanned my ID card, and pressed the “up” button, ready to go up to the highest level of the building. As I stood alone in the elevator, I smiled instinctively. 30 seconds later, the elevator beeped. “Floor 51.” The doors swished open. Only a few meters in front of me was an opaque glass door leading into Everette’s office. I walked towards it and knocked. I was ready to work. Ready to deliver. Ready to serve.

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