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III AJ TUK +BIL The dream of a catharsis, Vladimír Dvorový

‘Please, welcome the CEO of Atex and the man behind today’s gala evening, Micheal Foreman!’ The crowd erupts with applause as I enter the stage. They’re mostly investors and members of the administration of my company or some other rich, influential people. I arrive to the podium with a warm smile and begin, ‘Thank you all for accepting my invitation.’ The applause slowly fades, and I continue, ‘I am very glad that you’ve come to celebrate the passing of the first decade since the foundation of Atex. You know, this company is more than just some business. I won’t lie, many of us here today did get pretty rich thanks to it,’ laugh spreads through the crowd, ‘But most importantly, we have saved millions of lives with our medications, vaccines and other medical equipment across all seven continents. And that is something worth a celebration.’ The crowd is again filled with applause. All the smiling faces are paying their full attention to me, which tells me that I am doing a good job delivering this speech. My speech writer had a hard time with it. I made him rewrite it at least five times but at the end of the day it comes down to the delivery. I wait until the applause quiets down and I continue in a more serious tone, ‘But not every day is like this one. We all know how many dark periods we had to go through, how many difficult decisions we had to make. And still, a lot of critique has been addressed to us throughout the years,’ I receive many sympathetic faces and heads shaking in agreement, ‘They say that our prices are too high, that we make the treatments of our competitors hard to access, they accuse us of dealing with human lives! But the truth is that nobody on this planet is responsible for more saved lives than we are. Therefore, we must let nobody tell us that we don’t deserve our wealth. Our job is far from finished. We have many more lives to save and many more dollars to earn.’ Once again, the applause erupts, and I wait for silence. ‘As you all know, a disease called tymonia has been troubling people across the world for centuries. After many years of research and billions in investments we didn’t get any closer to treating it. Until recently,’ I smile a little at the crowd which is hardly breathing because of the anticipation, ‘On this special day I have decided to give the world one more thing to celebrate.’ I take out of my pocket a small bottle and open it. There is only one small pill inside. I take it out and put it in front of a camera so that everyone can see it on a screen behind me. ‘This is the first ever effective way of treating tymonia.’ The applause and cheers are far louder this time, and I have to signal to the crowd to quiet down.

‘There are still a few trials and tests we must do because of the law, but we expect it to hit the shelves in less than two months. If you’re wondering about the composition our chemists will explain it at various conferences in the coming weeks. So please raise your glasses and enjoy the rest of the evening!’ I walk into the backstage accompanied by a standing ovation.

‘Prepare the car,’ I say to one of my security guards waiting for me in the backstage. I know I should go and shake hands and give out smiles to all the important people waiting for me, but I’ve had enough for today. ‘Dad!’ my mood immediately lightens up upon hearing the sweet voice of my son Harry. He runs to me, his babysitter barely keeping up behind him. His bright blue eyes glow with happiness and his long blond hair bounces as he runs to me. He hugs me, but his head only reaches my stomach as he’s a little short for his age. ‘Hey! Are you enjoying the evening?’ I ask him in softened voice. ‘It’s ok, but I’m tired from all the people talking to me,’ he says. ‘Yeah, me too,’ I laugh, ‘Let’s go home.’ I take him into my arms and carry him. We’re almost by the car when some reporter surprises us. ‘Mr. Foreman, what is your response to the numerous accusations of your medical equipment being faulty?’ she blurts out, trying to get past my security. ‘How did she get into the backstage?’ I ask my security which knows that they have messed up. ‘Let’s leave that to the judicial system to decide,’ I respond to her knowing that there is no evidence usable in the courtroom against me. ‘Sure, is the price of the new drug also going to be ten times higher than the manufacturing price?’ she shoots back almost immediately. I just smile to myself this time and don’t respond. We enter the car, and I help Harry put his seatbelt on. ‘Home,’ I tell the driver. I’m looking out the window and I think how much trouble and bribing I had to go through to get all the licenses for the equipment despite the very rare malfunctions. So what that it fails once in a while? You save millions of people, and those insane activists go crazy because a couple hundreds die. Anyway, I don’t have to worry. Those government officials and judges receive a salary too measly to reject my offers. I can’t bribe everyone but there is always someone important enough to bribe. Or in rare cases when the judges or officials think that they are morally superior, when they choose to live pathetic lives because of some imaginary moral principles and think that it is an act of charity. In those cases, I need to use other methods. I look at my son with the understanding that there is nothing wrong with putting myself and those close to me first. That is the world. We live in a jungle where if you want something you have to take it. There is a reason why the king of the jungle, the mighty lion, doesn’t eat berries in order not to hurt some hares. ‘Dad, I’m hot,’ Harry interrupts my thoughts. ‘Do you want to take off the jacket?’ I ask. ‘Yeah,’ he says and yawns since he’s usually asleep by this time. I remove

his seatbelt to help him with the jacket. Suddenly the driver yells and jerks the steering wheel to avoid something in the road. The car is thrown off the road and I am completely disoriented. I can't tell which way is up. I am completely pinned and can't move. There is blood everywhere, but I can't feel any pain because of the adrenaline. The only thing on my mind is my son, who I can't see. My consciousness is slipping. I try to fight it, but to no avail. I slowly fade into darkness.

When I wake up, I am lying in an ambulance. I immediately start to panic: 'Where is my son!?' 'Calm down sir he is being transported to the hospital in another ambulance. You have probably suffered a concussion, and you have a few broken ribs, but you'll be fine. We'll be arriving at the hospital shortly,' The paramedic tells me trying to calm me down. My head feels like it's about to explode and I see some bandages on my body, but other than that I am fine. We arrive at the hospital, and I instantly try to get up from the gurney, but the doctors don't let me. 'Where's my son! I need to see my son!' I shout. 'Sir, he suffered very serious injuries and was taken right into surgery. We'll talk about it later, but we first must make sure that you are alright,' the doctor tells me trying to sound as calming as possible. I am in complete shock, so I don't even react. I just silently let them do their tests. When they finish the doctor comes to my room and tells me that Harry is out of surgery. I run to his room just to be stopped in front of the door by his doctor: 'Sir, I'm sorry you can't go there yet. Your son has suffered very serious injuries as he was thrown into the windshield. The surgery went well, but he is still in a very serious state.' I try very hard not to break down in front of the staff, but my voice still shakes as I say: 'You need to save him ok. You know who I am. If you don't save him, I will... I will..., ' The doctor cuts me off: 'Listen to me sir. We're doing everything we can. The accident among other things caused a tear in his heart muscle. He was extremely lucky to even make it to the hospital, as others with cardiac rupture usually don't. However, he is going to need a heart transplant soon, as the previous surgery will keep the heart going only temporarily. We're going to need a miracle to get a heart this quick.' I am thrown into even bigger shock, but I quickly calm down because I know that my son needs me now more than ever.

I order my security to bring me a change of clothes and I head straight to the office of the hospital director, John, who I happen to know. I walk into his office, and he gets a little startled. 'Michael, how are you doing? Shouldn't you still be resting?' he asks while getting up from his chair to shake my hand. 'I have something very important to discuss,' I start off

serious wasting no time, 'As you must know, my son is in a critical condition...' 'Of course,' he cuts me off. I can see that he's nervous because of my visit. 'I am very sorry Michael. I can assure you that he's in the best hands and that we're doing absolutely everything in our power to save him.' I sit down in a chair and look at him very seriously. 'Actually, I need you to do more.' 'I'm sorry, I don't understand,' he says. 'John, I am going to ask a great favour of you. You know how valuable it is to be owed a favour from me. You know what things others would do to get into my sympathy.' 'Well of course, what do you need?' he replies. 'I need you to get my son a heart as soon as possible,' I tell him, and he looks away and sighs. 'Michael, you know that that's not my decision. There is the ethics committee, the transplant centres, the whole OPTN system...' I don't let him finish, 'John, listen to me, I know that you have friends and influence in the right places so stop acting dumb,' I raise my voice, 'I like you and I want to be on good terms with you. But know that I would do absolutely anything for my son. So, you have two options. Either you pick up your phone and start dialling and you rise significantly in the list of my friends, or you choose to play a hero and let my son die. But if you choose the second option, be aware that I will try to my best ability, I won't hesitate to use any resource, I will not sleep until I make sure that your life is over.' I get up and walk to the door. I look at his terrified face one more time and say, 'Your next decision will either make or destroy the rest of your life.' I walk out and go comfort Harry. I spend 30 minutes watching him sleep when doctors run in his room to prepare him for the transplantation. They roll him out of the room in a hurry and I follow them until they enter the operating room.

I am walking up and down the hallway. My fear is unbearable. It has been a few hours since they have taken him in the operating room, and I am unable to sit down. Whenever I look at the door that closed behind Harry the last time I saw him, I feel sick to my stomach. I have thrown up two maybe three times, I'm not sure. At last, the door opens and the doctor walks out. I run to him hoping to be relieved but even from afar I can read his expression. A cold unlike anything I have ever felt descends upon me. I stop in my tracks, and I have to lean on a wall not to fall down but I just slowly slide down until I'm on the ground. Tears start falling down my face. The despair quickly changes to anger. I get on my feet and shout at the doctor, 'You killed him!' 'Sir, calm down,' he speaks with sadness in his voice. 'You did it! It's your fault!' I keep yelling. 'No sir, I did not,' he looks at me and I can see that he is also devastated by Harry's death, 'We didn't manage to save your son's life because of a malfunction of one of our machines. We did nothing wrong.' I look at him with fury. I will burn this hospital to

the ground along with everyone responsible for Harry's death. My son is dead, not because of his injuries, but because of the ignorance and negligence of the staff responsible for the equipment. Rage unlike any other burns in me. But suddenly, words sharper than any blade sink into my heart, 'The machine is yours. We've been having troubles with it for a long time. Your company has supposedly fixed it five times now. The staff...' The doctor keeps on talking angrily and blaming me. I could destroy his career because of this but I won't. I won't because I know that the one person responsible for my son's death is me. I knew about the malfunctions, but I bribed away every lawsuit and every death. No amount of money will help me this time. I walk away from the doctor and wander aimlessly. Without taking notice my legs carry me to the roof. The moon is unusually bright today. I walk to the edge of the roof and stare at the thousands of lights in the streets which are even at this hour busy. I am surprisingly numb, unable to shed a tear but at the same time I feel grief incomparable to anything in my life so far. I think about leaping of the roof. It is the only way I could ever rid myself of this despair that I have brought upon myself. But I can't. At least not yet. I sit at the edge of the roof the whole night, drowning in thoughts. While watching the sunrise I call my assistant so that she sets up a press conference. When I get there, I immediately start talking without greeting any colleagues, 'Good morning, as you will find out in today's papers my son has passed away. The reason of his death is improper function of equipment produced by Atex. Corporate greed has taken far too many lives, and I've decided that the death of my son is the last one in which I had a part. I admit to lying in every lawsuit against Atex and I take full responsibility. Atex will pay all the damages.' I finish in less than a minute and leave without answering any questions. I walk through the hallways of my company filled with panicking colleagues and investors trying to stop me and get an explanation out of me, but I ignore them all. I enter my office and lock the door behind me. I look at Harry's photo on my desk and for the first time since yesterday I am able to cry. I know that as long as I live, I will not be able to get rid of my sorrow. But hopefully in this pain I will find retribution for my sins. Maybe I will come to find that catharsis is possible. For now, I will have to follow this single ray of light in the midst of my all-consuming darkness.