ELIXIR

 Since the moment mankind first realized that all human beings must age and die, people have searched for a magical elixir that could halt or reverse the natural aging process.

 Many pharaohs, kings, queens, emperors, sultans, czars, assorted dictators, and multi-millionaires may have even fantasized this wish a step further: to somehow actually become immortal. But for most of us, simply returning to the golden era of one's vigorous youth would be more than sufficient.

 History is filled with accounts of such a desire across virtually every culture: How can we stop getting older, wrinkled, feeble, or senile? How can we arrest getting bald, losing our teeth, having our vision and hearing weaken, and thwart pain and a host of miserable, debilitating diseases?

 The word 'elixir' comes from the Arabic, *al-iksir,* meaning 'miracle substance.' The ancient Greeks searched for a special age preventative called *kimia.* The rulers of classical China ingested ground-up jade or cinnabar, and even ate flakes of gold or drank (toxic) liquid mercury -- the latter with fatal results. The Persians looked for the magical *aab-i-hayat,* the 'water of life.' The Japanese tried to find *manyoshu,* the 'waters of rejuvenation.' In India, the quest centered upon finding *amrita,* the pure 'elixir of life.'

 In the European Middle Ages, alchemists experimented with various formulas and substances in trying to break nature's cycle of aging and death. The search for the coveted but elusive 'Philosopher's Stone' would not only promise, when found, to turn base metals (such as lead) into gold, but it was also purported to arrest aging and offer its owner immortality. But obviously, it was never found.

 In 1513, Juan Ponce de Leon of Spain arrived in Florida, following up on a native Caribbean legend of a magical 'Fountain of Youth" whose waters -- when consumed and bathed in -- would make one eternally youthful. His search was also unsuccessful.

 In more modern times, blood-replacement transfusions using specific blood platelets from teenagers was attempted. And -- in perhaps the most unusual experiments done in America in the 1920's -- goat testicles were surgically grafted onto the scrotums of older adult males by a 'Dr.' John R. Brinkley, with the promise of having them regain their virility and turn back the clock. The procedure cost $750. Despite making the 'doctor' millions of dollars in several clinics across America, the process -- which was done on fifty new patients a week -- failed. (Brinkley even ran for governor of Arkansas in 1930 and garnered 30% of the vote.) But he was exposed as a fraud after forty-two of his patients died from their transplants, and it was soon revealed that Brinkley had never legitimately graduated from any medical school. He was sued multiple times and died a penniless, broken man.

 Despite lack of success across the centuries, however, the dream of discovering an anti-aging elixir remained. That was when it was announced to the world media that a new, exciting breakthrough in medical science had occurred.

 The establishment was called EVER, and it was headquartered in Zurich, Switzerland. Its corporate assets were estimated at over 90 billion Euros. EVER reported that after fifteen years of exhaustive clinical trials, a secret formula added to one's blood -- in a quick, painless, and totally safe transfusion -- would not only arrest the aging process, but would also cure and eliminate any diseases that the patient suffered from. The person would remain healthy and stop aging until around their 120th birthday, when they would die naturally and in peace.

 An ultra-modern EVER clinic had been built, sparing no expense, near Dubai, in the United Arab Emirates, a wealthy desert country off the Persian Gulf. Dubai today is the world's most advanced city -- an amazing place resembling something out of a futuristic vision of what the 22nd Century might look like. The initial cost for the EVER medical procedure was the equivalent of $50,000 U.S., though the price was expected to slowly decrease over time. The caveat, however, was that any prospective patient had to be from the world's professional class -- thus involved in the fields of medicine, government, education, science, business, the military, or religion -- and that such a person had to be between fifty and sixty years old.

 But the Food and Drug Administration in the United States was skeptical and wary of EVER's lofty claims. It forbade any American citizen from attempting the procedure until it was further deemed completely safe. The USFDA, therefore, sent its top scientific investigator, Benjamin Laramie, to the EVER clinic in Dubai to find out more. In addition to having a Ph.D. in biochemistry from M.I.T., Laramie was also versed in the clandestine art of industrial espionage. He knew how to look behind facades and hype and find out the truth.

 Laramie flew overnight on a small government jet from Washington, D.C. to EVER's private airstrip outside its large facility, located in the desert wastes far east of Dubai. He was met by a smartly dressed representative in an EVER company Tesla, who checked Ben's identification documents and scanned his passport via a portable satellite uplink to the proper UAE authorities. Driving to the clinic complex, Ben was reminded of Area 51 in Nevada, because they had to drive through many checkpoints and security stops once they passed the electrified, barb-wired perimeter, with its serious warning signs posted in several languages.

 Laramie was met by Dr. Marc Kendall, clinic director, who was wearing a white lab coat over his shirt and tie. The oppressive heat of June -- even at 10 a.m. -- was instantly dispelled the moment Ben entered the impressive building, the crisp air-conditioning inside cool and comfortable. The large, four-story complex was state-of-the-art: the vast lobby was polished stainless steel and chrome, rich marble and glass, with tasteful abstract artworks and a few modern sculptures, along with abundantly arranged potted plants. The air was scented with a pleasant mixture of subtle floral accents. Men and women from various nationalities and races, most clutching clipboards or file folders, were busily moving to and fro. Laramie also noticed several beefy, observant security men.

 Kendall offered Laramie some refreshing mint tea and traditional light snacks once they were inside his private office.

 "As you might expect, we here at EVER are anxious to get your swift FDA approval so as to permit specially-screened Americans to undergo our amazing treatment. So far, we have performed 4887 transfusions without a single problem. We have five surgical stations, each doing five, two-hour procedures, for a total of twenty-five patients served each day. Our waiting list now has over 60,000 applicants from all over the world, both men and women," the director explained.

 "Such approval is also the sincere wish of my governmental agency," Ben replied. "But we would need a sample of your special additive to ascertain its viability and safety. Of course, we would examine your elixir here within your guarded facility, under your watchful eye, so as not to compromise your formula's value to any unscrupulous, thieving competitors. Naturally, we would never risk having anyone interfere with the lucrative financial considerations of your incredible discovery," he further explained.

 Dr. Marc paused a moment. "I expected such a request, Mr. Laramie. However, testing our secret formula is strictly out of the question. There are reams of publicly- available data confirming the strict safety of our procedure. That has been sufficient for the vast majority of scientists and medical professionals from around the world to approve of our work here. However, I am willing to give you a thorough, rare and special tour of our fine facility, where you can see for yourself what we are accomplishing here with halting the aging process. You can also freely question any of our personnel as we walk. Perhaps our experience together will allay your concerns and that of your government." He smiled warmly.

 Ben agreed. He was already covertly prepared by wearing a specially modified pair of eyeglasses which carried a micro-camera. Everything he saw and heard would be recorded, then relayed and stored on a tiny electronic device -- cleverly disguised as a pack of ordinary chewing gum -- which rested securely in his pants pocket. He touched his glasses and activated them. "Sure, doctor...let's take a look," Laramie said.

 Kendall got a security pass for his guest, then took Ben via elevator to the upper floor offices, introducing him to other pertinent employees as they walked. "We have 156 employees comfortably housed here behind the main clinic facility, plus there are 78 additional employees at our corporate headquarters in Zurich," Marc explained. Laramie casually asked the usual necessary questions of several random employees, and was politely answered. The fourth floor of the complex was the Recovery Ward -- bright, cheerful, and modern. Ben witnessed two dozen or so post-procedure men and women patients relaxing, eating, watching television, reading, talking quietly on their cell phones, or napping.

 But what Ben most wanted to see was the procedure area in the basement, where the elixir was manufactured, stored and injected through blood transfusion into eager and expectant human beings. Could man's dream of finally arresting the aging process and eliminating all chronic diseases at last be realized?

 Taking a special, secure elevator to the lowest building level, Laramie looked through plexiglass screens onto a vast laboratory and sterile surgical area. Technicians in white coats, as well as physicians and nurses, were all busily at work. Dr. Marc furnished the details.

 "After the patient is prepped, he or she is given a transfusion of precisely .50 liter of our special formula elixir. That's it there, in those purple glass containers," he pointed. "Recovery time is twenty-four hours, resting upstairs, as you saw. Then they are ready to go home, feeling completely rejuvenated."

 While secretly filming all of this with his spy eyeglasses, Ben noted one of the employees having a prolonged coughing fit behind his sterile face mask, which covered his nose and mouth down to his chin. He was behind the bank of clear plexiglass panels, standing about twenty feet away.

 Suddenly -- for certainly no more than three disturbing seconds -- the coughing man changed into sometime shocking.

 The cougher's head looked briefly like that of a large reptile -- grayish-green like a chameleon, but with slimy skin, much like salamander.

 Laramie watched in disbelieve as another employee quickly rush up with a hypodermic needle and injected the cougher with something into his wrist. The coughing stopped, and everyone went back to work. Strangely, none of the other employees nearby seemed surprised at this extraordinary event. Ben immediately thought that he had been momentarily hallucinating. But his spy camera had caught it all, hopefully. Once back in Washington, the footage would be processed, and then analyzed in slow-motion. It was so very, very bizarre...

 The tour of the clinic was concluded about thirty minutes later. If Marc Kendall noticed anything out of the ordinary, he never let on. Ben Laramie was treated to a lavish lunch, and given further briefing documents, before being returned to his government jet. He thanked his host, and promised to let Kendall know as soon as possible if or when FDA approval would be granted.

 Back at his agency's central headquarters, Ben was fully debriefed. When the secret spy footage was reviewed by his select supervisors, however, there was a serious alarm raised at the USFDA.

 "Jesus H. Christ! This looks way beyond suspicious...what the hell was that 'thing?'" Security Director Jaycee Cameron, age 44, announced, referring to the momentary appearance of the reptile-headed creature. "Something is definitely wrong here. This could be a dangerous matter of national -- or even international -- security. We might need to move with our allies and shut down EVER until a full explanation is given." The other members of the supervisory panel murmured their agreement. "But let's send Ben back to the clinic, only this time with our top immunologist and surgeon, Dr. Jenn Tsao. If she can personally witness what Ben saw, then we'll have even more definitive proof to go on."

 Ben and Jenn had previously worked together on various projects. Both were in their early thirties, married, with young children. They lived with their families just a few miles apart in quiet residential neighborhoods in Bethesda, Maryland. Their commute to work was about the same too -- thirty minutes, if the traffic was good.

 Director Jaycee next outlined the plan.

 "We'll contact EVER clinic again in Dubai. We'll tell them that Ben and Jenn have a tentative agreement for the company to sign, granting our FDA approval for the elixir, provided Jenn can scrub up and witness one of the special blood transfusion processes. She'll want to talk with the selected patient before and after the procedure as well. All the time during their visit, however, both of our agents will be looking for any 'coughing' employees who briefly turn reptilian and need an emergency hypodermic injection. Neither of you will need to use our spy glasses this time. Wearing the identical eyeglass brand might raise suspicions. Your word, Jenn and Ben, will suffice as to what you witness. Any questions so far?"

 "No? Alright, then. One other extremely important thing...Our friends at the CIA have been briefed on our mission and its possible danger to national security. They have given us two specially-adapted but ordinary-looking Casio wristwatches. Each of you will wear one. The watches have four, unmarked, standard side 'mode' buttons. You must press and hold down any button for a five full seconds to activate its secret feature.

 Now listen carefully: the lower left will be called your 'green' button. If you press that one, it transmits via satellite and tells us that everything is safe. The upper left on the watch is the 'yellow' button. Press it, and it tells us that there is a problem to be concerned about, but that it is not dangerous. The upper right on the watch is the 'red' button. This is a major alert that tells U.S. military helicopters with armed special forces nearby to invade and seize both the EVER clinic where you are, as well as the EVER headquarters in Zurich. Finally, the lower 'black' button is the most serious. Never press this one unless one of you -- if you get separated -- or both are absolutely convinced that the entire clinic must be immediately destroyed, with everyone in it. Of course, that means...both of you as well..." Cameron paused to let that dire fact sink in.

 Drs. Laramie and Tsao looked at each other, surprised and disturbed. Was all this actually happening?

 The FDA security director continued.

 "Steaming in the Gulf right now is our country's finest -- and the world's largest -- nuclear-powered aircraft carrier, the USS Gerald R. Ford. It is equipped with advanced RIM-162 Evolved SeaSparrow missiles. It also carries Sikorsky SH-60 Seahawk helicopters if we need them. Now, if you press the 'black' option button, a battery of missiles will be launched, hitting the EVER clinic within three minutes, and reducing it to dust. We'll launch these weapons to fly under radar detection, then let the friendly Emirates know what and why we did what had to be done. U.S. President Angela Starke has already been fully briefed by our contacts at the NSC, and has given her official pre-op approval. Because the EVER facility is in a remote eastern desert area, the pinpoint accuracy of the SeaSparrows should cause no collateral damage to any innocent civilians who happen to be near the impact zone.

 That's it. The only question remaining is: are you in or out? Either or both of you can refuse this mission, with no negative effect on your careers. We could recruit two other volunteers to do this critical job, if absolutely necessary, yet it would take some time," Jaycee explained. "But I believe that you two are our best team for this special assignment. As a bonus, your current FDA salary and eventual pension will be doubled, given the unusual risks you might be subjected to in taking this mission. Take time to discuss all this with your families, and let me know by midnight tonight."

 Both Laramie and Tsao somehow convinced their anxious spouses that the mission was unlikely to cost any lives -- although inside their own minds, each was concerned, as anyone might expect. Both texted the security director later that evening, after talking to each other on the telephone to see if each fully agreed to take on the risky job. They then kissed their spouses and children good night but diplomatically did not say goodbye. A FDA government jet had already been fueled and was ready to take them overnight back to Dubai when they both got to the airfield around 10 p.m. Sleeping was fitful on the long, thirteen-hour flight, but it would have to do.

 At the EVER facility, the pair was warmly met by Dr. Kendall. Ben introduced Dr. Tsao, after which Marc hosted a pleasant Middle Eastern-style buffet lunch for his guests.

 "Well, there is no problem allowing another esteemed surgeon to witness a sample of our amazing transfusion procedure," he mentioned, after the trio finished eating. "I am sure that we can sign the official USFDA approval documents immediately after Dr. Tsao is satisfied. Jenn next gowned up in a pro-offered surgical uniform and scrubbed, and was introduced to the three-person surgical team she would observe. Ben would watch the entire operation from behind the sterile, clear plexiglass barrier.

 Jenn was next introduced to the prepped patient in her operating station, a Mr. Amir Aziz -- corporate head of a technology company headquartered in Rabat, Morocco. She asked him about himself and his family, and why he decided to receive the special EVER blood transfusion.

 "I want to remain young, of course! I do this both for myself and for my family. I am fifty-four years old. I also hope to be cured of my diabetes and severe migraine headaches," he confessed. "The cost of this is no problem, given all the promised benefits. When you get older, you'll see that time is much more important than money, believe me..." The eager patient was then given a sedative, and the procedure was begun.

 The process was indeed fascinating. However, about forty-five minutes into the transfusion of the purple elixir, a female technician near and behind Ben began a coughing fit. Jenn noticed it to, but Ben instinctively turned and pointed to the woman having the spasm to make sure Jenn was watching. Sure enough, the brief reptilian transformation occurred, the head of the woman resembling for a few seconds a large, grayish-green chameleon with slimy skin like a salamander. As expected, another lab-coated employee rushed to administer a hypodermic injection into the woman's wrist. The situation quickly returned to normal.

 But Marc Kendall saw it all. He realized that both Laramie and Tsao saw what they were never supposed to see. He spoke an order in a low voice into a kind of wrist communicator, and seconds later, four armed security men arrived. Two grabbed Ben, and two rushed into the surgery and snatched Dr. Tsao. Before they knew it, the two startled USFDA agents were hustled off to a windowless detention room. A pair of hard metal chairs were brought in.

 "What's the meaning of this? What the hell is going on?" Ben demanded. Jenn likewise looked helplessly at Ben. The multi-ethnic security squad was silent and grim-faced.

 Dr. Kendall came in next, dismissing the guards. The door was bolted from the outside. Click.

 "It seems you have stumbled upon our little secret, Dr. Laramie. All that remains is deciding exactly how to kill you and your esteemed companion."

 "Are you insane? Please explain yourself, " Ben nervously demanded.

 "Very well. I have a very interesting story to tell you. Do sit down, both of you...Relax...and I'll begin," the EVER clinic director offered.

 "About 4.6 billion of your Earth years ago, my planet -- ZYREX -- existed between Jupiter and Mars. But an enormous asteroid was detected, bearing down on us on an absolute collision course. Fortunately, we had enough time to evacuate our home and subsequently moved to Mars -- using inter-dimensional space travel -- before ZYREX was obliterated. As you know, that area in the solar system hence became the asteroid belt, filled with orbiting, rocky space debris today. On Mars, we rebuilt our civilization underground, given that the thinner Martian atmosphere provided more harmful solar radiation than we were used to on ZYREX. Meanwhile, your alluring and promising Earth -- floating in not-too-distant space -- beckoned.

 We briefly visited your planet during your Age of the Dinosaurs, assuming we could settle there. But fate would have another asteroid collision hit you near the Yucatan Peninsula, pulverizing part of the Earth and sending up black clouds that blocked all sunlight, lasting for years, soon killing the dinosaurs off as you know. For a second time, then, we saw disaster coming, and left before the catastrophe hit, and returned once more to Mars.

 We monitored your planet's various evolutions, however, for millions of years, up until the modern age. We noted your infant space program, and your development of atomic weapons and nuclear energy. The time was deemed finally right for us. In your year 2000, the surviving few hundreds of our race -- our average life span, if you are curious, is about 650-700 of your Earth years -- returned to Earth, again using inter-dimensional space travel.

 We assumed the appearance of ordinary human beings, studied your social and economic systems and natural resources, and eventually founded the EVER corporation and clinic. Our goal was to mix our blood -- now synthesized in adequate quantity for our projected needs right here in our laboratory -- with the best and brightest people of the Earth. What better enticement than to offer an 'elixir' that would arrest your aging process and cure your chronic human diseases? Those given the transfusion process completely change into beings of our race within six months -- mentally and physically."

 "What is your ultimate objective then?" Ben asked, already suspecting the worst.

 "To place my race into leadership positions in government, industry, finance, law, education, religion, the military, education, science, and medicine. Gradually, we would prepare your world to accept and welcome us, until we completely take over the Earth. The transfusion process will continually become cheaper, and be offered to younger and younger patients, until everyone is assimilated. Ultimately, anyone who refuses to join us will be eliminated, " he added coolly.

 "Why do your 'coughing' employees need an emergency injection?" Jenn then asked. "And is what we briefly witnessed back there near the surgery how your race actually appears physically?"

 "Good questions, Dr.Tsao. All of my race need to take a daily injection of a cobalt compound every morning to maintain our public human appearance throughout the day. But sometimes, the frailties of your inferior human physiology -- stress, body temperature fluctuations, and so on -- cause our injections to fade prematurely. Coughing is the main indicator, so booster shots are readily available. As to your second question, Dr. Tsao, yes. We believe our natural forms are much more beautiful and advanced than your rather odd and, frankly, rather hideous human forms."

 "You mentioned cobalt. That mineral is becoming scarcer and scarcer, seeing as it is a crucial main component in manufacturing batteries, especially to power the new, expected world influx of electric vehicles," Jenn pressed the fact.

 "True, Dr. Tsao. But we hope to no longer need cloak our real physical forms after a decade or two. We won't need cobalt injections anymore, as the people of Earth will learn to accept our actual appearance, especially when dictated from positions of power and authority. And remember: my race can reproduce and live individually for 650-700 of your Earth years...So we are in no real hurry."

 "What will become of us, then, now that we know the truth of your twisted plot to ultimately conquer the Earth?" Ben interrupted, in absolute seriousness.

 "Well, as I earlier promised, both of you will killed," Dr. Marc Kendall breezily answered. "A simple but painless lethal injection. However, seeing as I am in a generous mood today -- and that both of you are clever and highly capable professionals -- I would like to offer you a second option. You can join our race through a complimentary transfusion of our special elixir right now. I would personally welcome that. The age restriction is waived. We can become fully integrated! So...which will you choose, my friends?"

 Ben and Jenn stared at each other. Obviously, there was no other choice. This was it. They each thought about the families, and mentally sent their spouses and children their everlasting love. They joined hands after each pressing the black button on their watches for five seconds. They closed their eyes and began to pray aloud: "Our Father, who art in Heaven, hallowed be Thy Name..."

 "Wait...what are you doing?" Kendall asked, somewhat alarmed. He began coughing. "Guards, guards!" he yelled, as his face and head took on their terrible reptilian features. Security unlocked the door and armed men rushed in.

 "It's called 'code black,' and it means you failed, you fucking monster!"Ben growled. His blue eyes bored into Kendall's with pure hatred.

 Three minutes later, a blinding flash from the targeting American aircraft carrier missiles vaporized the entire area and everyone in it. Within the hour, in Zurich, the EVER corporate headquarters was surrounded and secured by a forty-man U.S. military SWAT platoon. All computer data and assets were seized, and all 78 of its secretly alien employees were arrested. World media was informed of the whole situation, but were sworn to a 72-hour news blackout. This would allow time to pick up the 5400 or so patients who were already infected with the alien blood elixir. Their contact countries and addresses were fortunately all included in EVER's seized tracking database. Medical experts were hopeful that by reversing the transfusion process -- by using 100% human blood again -- they could abort the patients' transformation into becoming the dreaded alien beings.

 The aborting experiment was successful, and thus it took about a month to cure all 5419 patients from around the world. But without their cobalt injections, the 78 alien captives reverted to their actual, repulsive reptilian form, so the people of Earth could see the shocking truth for themselves on their TVs and media devices. When the aliens were offered the chance of a human blood 'reversal transfusion,' every creature refused. The authorities, as a result, had no choice but to terminate them all by being incinerated en masse.

 Drs. Benjamin Laramie and Jenn Tsao of the USFDA were memorialized as international heroes. American President Angela Starke referred to their immense courage and dedication in a world-televised speech, calling them both "...the true saviors of both humanity and our planet."

 Yet, from that day on, human beings still continually worried...What if a few, scattered aliens from the extinct realm of ZYREX escaped that final destruction, and were still here, somewhere, lurking among us?

 Watching and waiting...

 THE END

 by Jack Karolewski

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