Industrial Organization

The doctor is looking at me with a serious expression. His brow is furrowed, jaw slightly clenched, his shoulders tense. He *looks* serious enough, that's for sure, yet it just doesn't *feel* quite right. The hands clasped on the desk, the way he compresses his lips as if to purge them of any inappropriate color, it's all too practiced, too performed. In fact, despite the topic of our current conversation, I think the doctor is in a perfectly fine mood. I think he is a happy man who works hard, on my behalf, to put on this serious face and I guess that's something I should appreciate. And why wouldn't he be happy and in a fine mood? He's handsome, wealthy, successful, and rich, and tall and healthy, and respected and he has a secretary and a big office and he's not about to die, and he's rich. But I neither am nor have any of those things, and so he must suppress his joy and furrow his brow and fold his lips while saying things like: "*Unfortunately, the treatment hasn't delivered the results we hoped for*" and "*I'm afraid we're running out of options… within your range*." Again he tells me I need to rest more and again I explain I actually need extra shifts to afford even the current treatment. His eyes are narrower now, his whole face appears oddly stiff, almost frozen. I bite my lip as I realize I'm rubbing the bottom button of my coat again, already conspicuously polished compared to its upstairs neighbor. He steals a look at the clock above the door, lets out a soft sigh and sits back in his chair, the movement momentarily dislodging a single strand of gold from his perfectly sculpted hair. We sit in silence for a moment. Suddenly, his eyes snap back to me, he deftly threads the rebellious lock back into place, and a sliver of pink appears around the slightest of smiles.

– You know, at its core, your issue is one of scale.

– Of scale?

– Yes. Or scope, if you prefer. See, a body is an expensive commodity. It's difficult to run one all by yourself and, frankly, if things keep going the way they are, yours doesn't have long left.

– Well, that's why I'm here, isn't it?

– Yes, yes, of course. My point is that it's inefficient for us to sit here week after week, one-on-one, and for you to struggle and slave just to waste it all on low-tier medications and treatments which will never fix your fundamental issue of scale. Or scope, if you prefer.

– I'm not sure I understand, of course I'd prefer the higher-tier treatments. If I could get some support from the state or-

– No no no, you don't need *support* from a teat like some helpless newborn! We'd only be feeding your inefficiency, not treating it. No, what you need is a merger.

He pauses, looking at me expectantly.

– A merger? I'm sorry, I don't think I follow.

– Think about it, just today I have to face at least ten other patients in your position. I have to sit here and go through the same spiel and take what little money they have and tomorrow there's a hundred of you and the day after and the next until you are back again and the merry-go-round goes round and round and for what? What's the end-goal here? Shoveling water out of a leaky boat with no land in sight until you inevitably go under, it's wasteful. Wasteful, and unnecessary.

– What-What do you want? To get rid of me? To let me-let the poor just die?

– Christ, no! I'm a doctor! You may not believe me when I tell you, but I do care. I care deeply about your well-being – not just the health to pass you over to tomorrow, but your overall well-being. What I'm talking about here is looking past the symptoms to the root, the rot, the inefficiencies.

On his feet now, he begins pacing around the office with gleaming eyes and a hypnotic smile. It's as if he's cast off some heavy burden, shed the thick skin of pretense. Suddenly, from beneath his starched white shirt he draws a fine chain bearing a large brass key and turns to the imposing, ornate wooden chest in the corner I'd never dared ask about. It appears to hum and throb as he unlocks it and pulls out a formidable tome bound in cracked black leather. An imperative, reverent silence descends as he places it on his desk and begins tenderly turning the foxed pages. I realize my breath has caught and my terminally stammering heart is racing. When at last he speaks again, his usually soft voice is charged with urgency, a barely contained excitement.

– The operation can be simple, quick, and not too painful. And we're talking mergers here, not even acquisitions, so it's between two consenting adults. It would be unethical *not* to share the solution with you!

– Acquisitions?

– Not yet, but I'm glad you're finally keeping up. No, just a simple innocent merger. Here.

He turns the massive book and points, his delicate finger trembling slightly. Facing me is a convoluted illustration of a pair of human bodies covered in cryptic symbols, overlaid with diagrams, equations, and text in a language I don't recognize.

– Your current issue is your heart. But your body is so much more than just one lousy heart! Your lungs, your spleen, your hair – your other departments are doing some great work! For that all to go to waste due to a single faulty part? Ridiculous!

– Sure, I-I mean of course I agree, but you know I can't afford-

– Yes yes, you can't afford the traditional treatment for your heart. And why not? Because it needs too much – the costs are exorbitant! And it's not just you and your heart, no, there are far too many others just like you, unwilling to cut your losses, stubbornly stumbling on. The model is simply not sustainable. Sure, I could give you some xylioephilin and a pack of rado and your heart might improve. But if it's just to send you right back out into the dogfight? That would be a cruelty, not a kindness.

He pauses for a breath, composing himself. The serious expression is back; this time I believe it. My time is up, but this is the first time I feel his undivided attention, so I stay quiet and try to understand.

– Thankfully, it doesn't have to be this way. Take my next patient. She has some corruption in her stomach, terrible stuff. She used to have a good job, but she can't work anymore, she can't eat, she can't move properly, can't do anything. Still, day after day she comes to me and dumps resources into a black hole to keep her decaying husk going. But her heart is fine, just fine – and she's pretty too. You see what I'm saying? The money's right there on the ground, you just have to bend over and pick it up – before somebody else does!

– I should… take her heart?

– Again, great enthusiasm, but let's keep acquisitions as back-up. Just a clean, simple merger. Meet with her, discuss what you like and what you dislike in yourself – and each other – negotiate! Strong heart, healthy tummy, pretty face, good job, etc. etc. We all have something to offer, our comparative advantages. Keep the top-earners, trim the fat. We can go beyond the survival of the fittest *whole* to the survival of the fittest *parts* – this is just the natural next step. Half the cost, double the experience, triple the well-being!

– What are you…talking about? Her face? Oh my god, you've lost your mind!

– No! My mind is the one thing I've kept! Don't you see? The sum of the parts is greater than the whole – *you* can become something greater! Don't you want to escape the eternal downward spiral you're caught in? To become sustainable? Right now it's your heart, but even if you had the money to patch it up, how long can your kidneys maintain full performance? How long can your liver keep delivering these numbers? You won't get anywhere unless you restructure. I

told you, I have hundreds of people in here every week! You're fighting for crumbs like rats in a cage – but there *is* a way out! I stand before you as a mediator, a consultant, a humble servant, offering you the path to a lean, sustainable, highly productive joint enterprise through corporal transformation. A path away from the grotesque waste, the foolish misery, the walking dead, a path to redemption!

While he speaks I begin to understand. The thick, golden hair, the gleaming eyes and hypnotic smile, the tall and muscular frame, the intelligence, the health. How many are they?

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2025, Amsterdam