

BROKEN

By Ashwini Suriyaprakash

The vial slipped from his hands and shattered on the floor. The glass shards flew in all directions. He staggered back as they clattered on the ground. The bitter taste of the red serum lingered in his mouth. Adrian had said that it would take a few minutes to act. He waited. Nothing. He was still drawn to her. Strangely, he felt relieved and even happy. He had to see her. Slipping into his black coat, he thrust open the door. The sun was beginning to set. The dark clouds, shielding the cheerful rays of the sun, were casting a pall of gloom. The chill air enveloped him as he entered the first pod that stopped near him. He quickly punched in her coordinates and sat down.

“Will she see me the same way?” he fretted. He reassured himself, “If it hasn’t worked on me, it mustn’t have worked on her either.” His thoughts swirled as the whirring of the pod hummed in his ears. Alas, how on earth did it come to this? As the pod raced through the night, so did his mind to the day it all began.

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“59 cents for a pound!” a boy with an apple basket yelled as he zoomed in his flypod. The marketplace was crowded. Man and man. Woman and woman. Laughing, hand in hand, happy as any normal couple. As he passed by the shops, he could sense the lingering, cold glances at him. Suddenly, he was shoved. Losing his balance, he fell on the tracks. The siren of an approaching pod grew louder and louder. He struggled but couldn’t pull himself. Someone grabbed him by the collar and moved him out of the tracks just in time.

“Daniel, are you okay?” he heard a familiar voice as he looked up. Adrian helped him up and patted his shirt.

“Ah, thank the gods! I would have been chicken soup if not for you!” Daniel exclaimed.

Adrian offered, “Let’s go to my house. We can talk there.” They began to walk together.

“So, how’s Darryl?” Daniel asked curiously.

Adrian responded, “My husband’s fine. We’re gonna have a baby! It’s become faster nowadays! Just a couple of years ago, Pete got his son in six months. Now, the labs have advanced tubes – fast and no mistakes! We’re expecting our daughter Sarah from the Capitol in just two weeks!”

“That’s great, Adrian. I’m very happy for you and Darryl!” Daniel said earnestly.

As they strolled through a narrow passageway, a passing man stared and pointed his finger at Daniel.

“I’m watching you. I know about you disgraceful types. We’ll get you soon...and her too.” He snickered as he walked away.

Daniel quickly pushed through the crowds and crossed the street. Adrian hurried behind him. A few minutes later, they arrived at Adrian’s house.

“Darryl’s not home yet. He said he was going to go shopping for the baby,” Adrian announced while taking off his coat. “How’s Cara?”

Daniel was preoccupied. “Things have been getting worse lately,” he sighed.

Adrian stuttered, “This was bound to happen. People are nosy. Your being different makes them uncomfortable and suspicious. Give it some time. It’ll pass.”

Daniel stared blankly at the ceiling. The color from his face had drained. He mumbled, “We won’t be able survive this.” His lips quivered.

“What can we do?” he groaned, clinging onto Adrian’s shoulder.

Adrian comforted, “Now, now, Daniel, this is not like you. Life may be a bit harder, but you’ve gotta go on. Think about her.”

“Don’t you understand? It’s going to be miserable for us. I can take it, but I don’t want her to!” Daniel’s voice quavered. “They will make her suffer for who she is. Remember what happened to the ones before us!” He was shaking.

“There’s nothing you can really do.” Adrian paused for a moment. “But…”

“But what?” Daniel enquired. His eyes grew wider.

Adrian hurriedly dismissed it, “It’s nothing. Nothing at all.”

“Please! If there’s anything at all that can help,” implored Daniel.

“It won’t do you any good,” Adrian paused before adding, “but there is something. A serum that can make you normal … I mean, like the rest of us.”

“Really?” Daniel was intrigued. “Is that even possible, Adrian? Does it work?”

Adrian replied, “We’ve only tested it in the labs a few times. It’s too early to say for sure. But, it looks promising.”

“What if I don’t like what I become? Can I go back? Is it reversible?” Daniel asked.

“What are you saying, Daniel? Are you even considering it?” Adrian chided Daniel and warned, “We don’t yet have a reversing serum. It’s too risky. You may never love Cara again!”

Daniel looked distraught. “I’m only thinking about this because I love her. Maybe I love her too much.”

“Why don’t you talk to her first?” suggested Adrian. Daniel nodded and picked up his hat ready to leave.

Adrian offered, "Would you like some coffee before you go?" Daniel shook his head. He reached for the door. As he stepped outside, he turned back, "Adrian, of all the people, why did the tubes choose to make their mistakes on us?" The door slammed shut behind him.

Daniel trudged through the night. The leaves rustled as he pushed his way through the branches and foliage. Soon, he came to an empty clearing. There, she was, waiting for him, always early. He flung his arms and embraced her. He ran his fingers through her soft brown hair. Her presence comforted him.

"Ah...Danny!" Cara exclaimed, "It feels so good to see you again." She kissed him on his cheek. Daniel stared at the ground in deep thought and turned his face away.

"What's the matter?" Cara asked earnestly.

Daniel stuttered, "It's...It's... nothing."

He could see the pain in her eyes.

She gently stroked his arm, "Danny, what happened?"

"Cara, someone pushed me onto the pod tracks! I would have been run over if not for Adrian!" Daniel muttered plaintively.

She sobbed, "What have we ever done to make them treat us with such hate? What are we going to do?"

In a hushed voice, he hesitated, "I talked to Adrian today. He mentioned something about a serum."

"What serum?" Cara inquired, suddenly curious.

Daniel's eyes were sunken as if he hadn't slept the past two days. "It will make us like the rest...normal."

Cara shuddered in horror, and her lips quivered in the chill air. “Danny, I don’t know what’s normal, but I know that’s not us,” she trembled.

Daniel sighed, “I know. But we may not suffer like this. Maybe we’ll find peace.”

“We can be happy! Daniel, why have you gone weak! Where is the strength that you gave me?” Cara turned away and stormed off into the night. Daniel tried calling for her, but no words came out.

A few days later...

“Danny, what happened to you?” Cara wailed.

As he stepped into the moonlight, she saw the face she loved - bruised and battered. He shrugged wearily, “Nothing new, Cara. This morning, four thugs – just because I’m different.” She passed her hands over the cuts.

He observed her. Her feet were swollen with red welts. “What had she gone through?” he wondered.

As he caressed her feet, she wept, “Remember the bitter widow who had lost her wife... she shoved me.”

Daniel exclaimed, “We can’t live like this. With these people. It’s getting worse everyday!”

“Danny, what can we do? Run away?” Cara cried in despair.

Daniel shook his head, “No, they will come after us – track us down.” He paused for a moment. “There’s only one way to end this.”

Cara sniveled, “Why does it have to come to this?”

“It’s the only way. I’ll talk to Adrian,” replied Daniel.

“Please don’t! We can make something work,” Cara refused.

“If we take the serum, you might have a chance at a normal life.”

“Aren’t we happy now? In spite of everything,” Cara resisted.

Daniel sighed, “I don’t want you to get hurt, Cara. I don’t want that for you.”

She sniffled, “I don’t want that for you either.”

“I will tell Adrian to get it ready tonight,” Daniel responded.

“So, I guess this is it then,” Cara wept softly in resignation as she embraced him in silence. She let go of him and gazed into his eyes one last time.

“Before we part, I want you to have this,” Daniel said as he took out a ring from his pocket and slipped it onto her finger, “I have a matching one on my finger.”

“I don’t think any serum can erase you from my mind, Danny.” They shared one last kiss before she disappeared in the darkness.

At Adrian’s house...

“I shouldn’t have told you. You can’t do this to yourself!” Adrian pleaded.

Daniel whimpered, “Please Adrian, please for the both of us. We need it.”

“I never thought she would agree,” Adrian muttered under his breath.

In the doorway stood a tall, slender man watching them. He seemed to be puzzled by the ruckus. Adrian gestured towards him. “Darryl, what do you think?”

Darryl sauntered into the room.

“Daniel, Adrian talked to me about your situation. I, for one, disagree with Adrian. I think it would be best for you to take it – you’ll be cured of your disease,” he said nonchalantly.

Adrian interrupted, “Darryl, let’s not be rude! Daniel, don’t mind his talk! I’ll make you the serum if you wish. I’ll send it to you and Cara by dusk tomorrow.” He turned to Darryl, “Won’t you help me make it?”

“I’d be delighted,” replied Darryl with a smile.

Daniel hugged Adrian. “Thank you so much. What would I ever do without you!”

The next night, Daniel got his serum - a vial full of red liquid. He popped open the lid and emptied its contents in his mouth. The surprisingly bitter taste stung his mouth as he staggered and let go of the vial.

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Bang! Daniel’s head hit the metal bar in front as the pod jerked to a stop and brought him back to the present. He clutched his forehead in pain as he stepped out in front of her house.

“Hello, Daniel,” an intimately familiar, but strangely cold, voice beckoned him. He swerved around to find her holding a basket of flowers. Cara’s face had changed since he saw her last. Her expression seemed friendly, but there was something missing. She looked unusually pale – almost dead. He moved towards her and opened his arms to embrace her. Shocked, she quickly stepped back. He stopped. His eyes drifted to her fingers, anxiously inspecting each one. There was no ring. She watched him curiously.

He asked, “How are you, Cara?”

“I’m fine, Daniel. How are you?” she enquired politely.

“I just dashed over to see you. Did you take it?” he sounded desperate.

“Yes, Daniel. It was nice of you to have arranged it. I have to go now. Bye.” She turned around and walked away.

He watched her move away. The sight was tearing him apart – wrenching his insides out.

“The serum has changed her... but not me!” voices screamed in Daniel’s mind. He gripped the wooden fence and gasped for air. Tears trickled down his cheeks.

“Why would Adrian do that?” Daniel shrieked, “Why would he betray me like this!” He began to run. He went where his legs carried him. He still loved her. But she would never return... never to him. He couldn’t bear the thought – they were *broken* forever. “Why did I suggest the serum? Why did I convince her to say yes? We shouldn’t have taken this path. We could’ve been together – Alone in this world, but happy together,” the inconsolable voices in his mind would not stop. Tears from his face stained the ground like raindrops. He stopped at the precipice of a cliff and stared at the abyss.

At Adrian’s house...

“I hope both of them are at peace now. Good night, love,” said Adrian as he switched off the light.

“Good night, Adrian,” said Darryl as a derisive smile crept onto his lips. He muttered to himself, “I’m sure one of them is.”