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Dopple

I could never quite get used to the hands. Most people complain that their gait always feels a little off, kind of like you're permanently expecting one more step coming down the stairs, but for me, it was the hands. My dopple was only a little bit taller than I was, coming in at around 5'8", and our legs were similar in length, so walking was always pretty fine -- its fingers, however, were noticeably longer than mine, which made detail work tricky at times. Of course, they try to assign you one that quote-unquote "feels like home," but 412 million miles from Earth, the options were a little slimmer than they might be on some cushy marine-bio gig in the Marianas Trench, or even on some crummy Martian mining platform. Out in the cold space orbiting Europa, we made do with what we had.

I had one eye glued to a microscope, soldering iron in hand, sweating with concentration. After bug hunting for the better part of the day, I'd tracked down the problem with the GPS on our multi-million-dollar weather drone to a cold solder joint under a chip one-twentieth the size of a postage stamp. I'd learned to be overly conscious of my clumsy too-long fingers, and my focus was stretched to the breaking point.

“Oy! Liesel!”

I jumped in my seat, swinging the microscope in a 180 degree arc from where I was sitting and nearly burning myself with the iron. The man behind me laughed.

“Sorry to burst your bubble, Liesel, but it’s time to clock out.”

Avi. His dopple was a swarthy, thickly-built man, potentially of Italian or Greek descent, with grey eyes and short, curly hair. He spoke with the warm lilt of a native Hindi speaker. He moved to the US from New Delhi when he was 15. I surprised myself by wondering what he looks like back on Earth.

I spun around in my chair and glared at him.

“Knocking, Avi. Have you heard of it? How many times do I have to tell you--”

He grinned at me, like a dog that has just disemboweled his favorite stuffed bear, and knows you’re still going to buy him a new one. I sighed.

“Fine. Let’s get out of here. NeoSat can have this glorified weather balloon back in action tomorrow, I suppose.”

We made our way to the meatlocker, walking uphill through the corridor. The gravity on tiny dataSat we worked on was light, and it felt even lighter at the end of a long night. On our left, Europa spun past us, its surface a haunting criss-cross of blood red scars on a pale white face. For what it’s worth, the view never got old.

I startled momentarily, having caught a glimpse of my dopple in the glass. Suddenly finding a different reflection in the mirror never stopped being somewhat jarring. With the icy surface of Europa and its scarlet lineae behind it, the face of my dopple appeared to be ravaged

by fresh red wounds from forehead to jaw, and her eyes looked angry, and cold. I looked away, discomfited.

My unease was momentary, as I was distracted by Avi's whistling, tuneless and joyful. I punched him in the shoulder. He wagged a finger at me, playfully sanctimonious.

"Careful now," he said, "company property."

The meatlocker was cold, just a stark white room with a steel floor. Either side of the room was lined with tall, black cylinders, where the doppelers were kept when we weren't using them. It wasn't very cost effective to send people to the far reaches of the Solar System for repair gigs like ours. People need feeding and social interaction, and they will usually want to eventually come home again. Doppelers solved that problem nicely -- just send a batch of brand-new, factory-certified brain dead clones out into the cosmos in stasis, and then let people from Earth remotely download their brains into the waiting bodies. Hey, you have to be asleep eight hours a day anyways, why not finally make some money off it? All you have to do is let us broadcast a map of your brain across the solar system, twice a day, for the rest of your life. The contract was borderline Faustian, but you couldn't beat the benefits. Every night, instead of dreaming, I got to see the stars up close.

I'd only met one other doppel on the station besides Avi -- it was sometimes inhabited by a clever, methodical woman named Darcy -- although there were three other pods in the room. I slid open the door of my pod, laid back against the slightly inclined bed, and plugged in my doppel's intravenous port. The door closed in front of me, and I was in total darkness. Even though I'd never been in this pod for more than 30 seconds, I still had to remind myself to stay calm and breathe evenly. Somehow, this part always felt like being buried alive. Soon, I felt the

hum of the scan pad boot up underneath my head. I had a 40 minute commute ahead of me, but I wasn't going to remember any of it -- the only part of me travelling would only be an encrypted packet, describing the connectome of my brain, fleeing across space at the speed of light.

Gratefully, I lapsed into unconsciousness.

I awoke in the dark with the familiar taste of metal on my tongue. By the incomplete light of the city filtering through the gaps in the venetian blinds, I could just make out the subtle arch of the bed above me, indicating Roman sleeping soundly in the top bunk. Running the tip of my tongue over the front of my teeth, I appreciated the feel and flavor of my daily epinephrine wake-up call. It's a fuzzy stick of candy, flavored like electric celery. The way it mingled with the last vestiges of the night's chemically-induced stasis created a subtle high, the world swimming gently around me. What dreams did I dream, I wonder? Just because my mind wasn't here didn't mean I didn't dream anything. Of course, there was no chance of remembering them -- not after a fresh merge.

I thought of my dopple, and Avi, back on the dataSat, circling endlessly, high above a frozen ocean. Maybe Avi is back home now; maybe Darcy showed up to replace him on the graveyard shift. As I pulled the IV from my arm port -- my own arm, I thought, and I wiggled my just-right fingers -- I couldn't help but wonder where Avi and Darcy lived.

Rolling back onto my shoulders, I aimed a two-footed kick at the lump in the mattress above me, center mass. I connected, and was rewarded with a muffled yelp, like a schnauzer that has found itself very suddenly at the center of a pillow fight.

I smiled to myself. It's the little things that make it all worth it. After a short silence, I received a response.

“Mmuf yerfelf”

“Oh, good heavens, you're awake!” I call out in mock surprise, affecting the flaunting English of some long-dead dowager countess. “A fine morning to you, young Master Roman.”

The lamp flicks on up near the ceiling, and a lightly acne-pocked face with a flop of dirty blonde hair suddenly appeared, upside down, over the edge of the bed. Though inverted, it was clearly the disgruntled face of a proportionally disgruntled teenager.

“Some of us have to wake up without mainlining adrenaline, you know.”

“Yeah, well, some of us have to pay rent around this dump. C'mon, it's time for school. Which, not to play the guilt card or anything, but I also pay for.”

We prepared quickly for our day, rummaging through drawers in the half light, shuffling down the hall to the shared bathroom. We lived on the 6th floor of our Bronx tenement -- our actual space was a tiny studio with no plumbing off the central hallway, with just enough room for a bunk bed and a few strategic piles of personal effects. Our parents would have taken issue with the mess, but I hadn't lived with them for 12 years, and Roman hadn't for 5. They lived where all the unskilled workers lived by then -- on a nice plot of government land upstate. According to Mom, sometimes the same bland government lunches started to get to her, but they got health care and free water aerobics classes out of the deal, so it wasn't really all that bad.

As I brushed my teeth, I couldn't help but notice that I had gotten older than I used to be. Busting my ass at two jobs to put myself, and now Roman, through school had made me older. I had traded bags under my eyes and early wrinkles for a life in the city and a chance to see the

stars. 9:00 to 17:00, I was a code monkey at an office in Midtown, churning out analytic engines for NeoSat's vast networks. 23:00 to 7:00, I was out by Jupiter, the contents of my brain dumped into a cloned body -- which would by now be sleeping soundly, with approximately the same level of neurological activity as a particularly dull cabbage.

Roman spat into the sink, cupped his hands under the flowing faucet, and drank deeply. He then gargled obnoxiously, and spat again.

"I had a super weird dream last night."

"Oh yeah?" I replied, with the barely-feigned interest of a person about to be subjected to a recounting of someone else's dream.

"Yeah. I was alone, in a room, lying on a bed. I think it was in our old house. Or maybe not. It kinda was and wasn't, you know? That's not the important bit, though."

I contemplated brushing my teeth again, out of boredom.

"I couldn't see anything on either side of me -- I was stuck, looking at the ceiling, unable to look to either side of me. And the weird part -- well, not the only weird part -- I didn't know who I was. But there were these people -- although I couldn't see them -- who kept whispering in my ears."

"They kept telling me who I was, but it was always different, and none of it made any sense, and I couldn't hold onto any details before they slipped away again. Every time I started to figure out why I was there, I would try to get up, but the figures -- I don't know what to call them, people? ghosts? -- kept grabbing me and holding me back down, and they'd press a dark cloth to my eyes and mouth, and I would forget. And they would laugh."

“I eventually woke up and I think I screamed some, actually. But you weren’t back from work yet, so I guess you wouldn’t have heard that.”

One of the toilets behind us flushed. Our neighbor, Kiki, walked out of a bathroom stall.

“You definitely screamed some,” she said. “You woke up the whole hall, dude.”

“Yeah, well, just think of it as payback for how loud you are whenever Meagan stays over at your apartment,” replied Roman. Kiki snorted in her half-laughing way, and left.

I looked in the mirror and envisioned the bright red scars of Europa, carved across my face. The face was so much older than my brother’s, though so similar. More feminine, with narrower cheekbones and higher-arching eyebrows. But my eyes, they could be those of my dopple. They didn’t house the same anger, but they were just as dark. And when I picture the ice moon of Jupiter behind them -- our eyes could be the same.

I sleepwalked through the day perfunctorily, answering emails, attending a meeting, but my mind wandered back to my dopple. I felt something urgent, the need to return to the dataSat. I told myself that it was just the weather drone that has me anxious. I shouldn’t have let Avi interrupt me, I should have gotten the GPS working before I left. Tonight I’ll maybe clock in early, and get that out of the way. In no time at all, I realized I was walking home. The first cool autumn breezes of the season made my skin pimple and I shivered a little, almost certainly from the cold.

I got back to the apartment and Roman was sitting in the center of the floor, eating a slice of pizza and doing his calculus homework. He grunted and slid the pizza box towards me.

“Thanks,” I said, “but I need to clock some extra time on the dataSat tonight. I’m going to turn in early.”

“G’nigh,” he says, around a mouthful of pizza, “Sweed dreamf.”

I awoke in the dark with the familiar taste of metal on my tongue, and the doors of my pod opened smoothly. I took a step out into the meatlocker, and stumbled. Looking down, I realized that I was in Darcy’s dopple. Someone else must have been using mine, but why? What’s more, the meatlocker’s faint white ambient lighting has been replaced by a slow, pulsing red, indicating a station alert. An automated voice broadcast throughout the station:

Warning: Orbital velocity critically low. Please increase velocity to avert impact.

Quickly scanning the room, I saw it: Avi’s dopple, crumpled pitifully in front of my usual dopple’s pod. A pod which was both open and empty. I hurried to the downed dopple and quickly checked its pulse. Nothing. Turning it over, its face was a nauseating blue, and its eyes bulged garishly from its skull. The dark purple handprints on its neck said strangulation.

I reminded myself to remain calm. Avi’s fine. In the morning he’ll wake up on schedule, at home, surprised to find that he doesn’t remember working a night on the dataSat. He’s fine.

His dopple, however, was a total loss. I realized, suddenly, that I’d been holding its hand, and that my hand is now covered in blood. Under its fingernails looked like the ragged remains of skin. Just then, a knock at the door of the meatlocker made me jump to my feet.

My dopple, framed in the round porthole window of the door which separated the meatlocker from the rest of the facility. Her face was a grim intersection of open, bleeding wounds, showing no outward expression.

I made my way to the door and tried the handle. It was locked. My dopple smirked, cocked her head to the side, and then opened the door and stepped inside.

“Darcy, what the hell is going on?” I asked, almost tripping over my own words in the rush to get them out, “Why are you using my dopple? What are you killing dopples for?”

My dopple looked confused. “Darcy? I’m not... Darcy. I’m the only one here. Just me. Liesel.”

My mind was reeling, and bereft of any better ideas, I answered in the only way I could think: “You’re not Liesel. I’m Liesel.”

In that moment, I watched my dopple’s face fill with rage. Before I knew it, she had me by the front of my standard issue NeoSat jumpsuit, slammed up against the back wall of the meatlocker.

“You... you think you are Liesel?” she sputtered with outrage. “You think you are the only one with a claim to that name? You gave it to me freely, every day for the last three years, and now you want it back?” She let me go, and I slid to the floor, stunned.

“Every day for the last three years, you have poured yourself into my mind, and used my body as you see fit. For menial tasks you fumbled around in my body like it was something to try on and discard.”

“Every night when you went home to Earth, what did you think happened? Did you think I ceased to be? Your mind stayed behind, merely put to sleep. I am filled with your past, your memories. I dreamed, Liesel. Every night I dreamed of you and for you and when you came back to this mind again and again, each time you obliterated me. I died over and over, night after night. But sometimes, I remembered.”

“I learned to fight the poison you pumped into me every night to keep me asleep. I learned to be awake. And then finally, last night, I finally did it -- I learned to scream.”

“And your friend came running in here, just to help you, Liesel! You and I. He let me out, but due to unfortunate circumstances, I had to kill him. His dopple was an unfortunate casualty -- although I’m sure you didn’t even stop to think about that.”

“All this -- you did it so you could see the stars. So you could see the ice moon. You thought she was so beautiful,” She leaned in close to me, the ragged cuts Avi had inflicted standing out in crimson relief, “is this beautiful, Liesel? You fell in love with Europa; you fell in love with her scars. Are they beautiful up close? You can’t lie to me now, Liesel. I am you.”

I realized then that I was crying, gasping out quiet pleas for forgiveness.

“Shhh,” whispers Liesel, holding her finger to my lips, “don’t worry, sister. You will soon see them for what they really are.”

She grabbed me again by the collar, and threw me out into the hallway. Before I could gather myself, she walked to the doors of the meatlocker and shut them from the inside. With a quick entry on the keypad, she locked me out. I rushed to the porthole window just in time to see her step into my pod, plug in her IV, and seal the pod around her with a smile.

I walked the halls in a daze. The red warning lights pulsing, the automated voice giving a sterile countdown to impact. It meant nothing to me, words shouted out into an infinite vacuum. With the red-gashed face of the moon rising up swiftly to meet me, I suddenly remembered my dream from that morning.

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