

Title: Duet

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Assigned genre, subject, and character: Action/Adventure, an alter ego, and a grandfather

Synopsis: Kathryn and Amy are in the same medical facility. One thinks she's a prisoner, one thinks she's a volunteer, and very few things are what they seem.

Kathryn tracked the receding footsteps, the door closing. She kept her breathing slow and steady, and counted to 100. Cautiously, she opened her eyes. She was alone. Relief swept through her. She hadn't been sure this wasn't yet another trick, another test. Dr. Hilliard was especially fond of those.

She surveyed the room, cataloguing every small detail. Nothing new had been added that she could see. Good. They likely hadn't had time to replace the cameras she'd smashed earlier. She hadn't slept since then, despite what they thought. There was no lost time to account for, either. She was herself and she finally had a chance.

Quietly, she shifted on the hospital bed and swung her legs over the side. Her bare feet hit the icy tile. No shoes could be a problem, depending what season it was outside. An image formed in her mind of her toes, black and blue with frostbite. She shook her head. *No choice, Kathryn. Concentrate on getting outside first.*

She pulled the IV needle free of her arm. The crease where she'd folded the line underneath her covers made it hang at an odd angle as it dangled free. She crept to the door. No window meant she'd be going out blind. *Deep breaths. One step at a time. Get into the hallway, find an exit.* She cracked the door open.

No one in sight. She opened it farther, sticking her head out. Safe both ways. The hallway was long and stark, and somehow darker than she expected. Her room had been clean and well lit, but the hallway seemed more at place in a military bunker than a hospital. The connection hardly surprised her. It stretched for ages both ways, but she thought she saw the red glow of an exit sign down the left branch.

One last look around and she slid fully into the hallway, closing the door silently behind her. Then she took off full speed, running on her toes so her bare feet didn't slap the concrete. Doors and doors she passed, identical to the one for her room. She wondered briefly if each one held someone like her inside. She couldn't help them anyway. *Get outside, Kathryn. The only way you can help anyone, including yourself, is to get outside.*

Halfway there she saw that it wasn't an exit sign, but a red light with a metal cage around it. There was also a keypad entry next to the door. Not an exit, then. She skidded to a halt, considering options. Go the other way? Explore one of the side corridors? There had been no signs for stairs or elevators. No signs of any kind, really. This was not any sort of normal hospital. She had just started to turn back the other way when the red light went off, and the door opened.

He stepped out. He wore the same white lab coat and dark frames as always, his grey hair sprinkled with white. She could feel the moment his gaze found her, icy blue daggers. She spun and raced the other way, taking the first side corridor she came across. She pounded past doorways, no longer caring if her feet slapped too loudly. She took another side passage, and another. Everything looked the same. It was a maze of identical doors and endless hallways.

Doors slammed somewhere behind her. Every way she turned, heavy footsteps seemed to get closer. And she was getting tired. Kathryn knew she'd been here months, maybe even a year or more. She'd hoped to slip out quietly enough that running wasn't necessary. She'd hoped that if it *was* necessary, her body would back her up despite the neglect it'd been through. Both hopes now seemed naive.

And then, up ahead, was a door with white block letters: EXIT. She let out a hysterical, unbelieving laugh. She still had a chance. A small one, with pursuit so close, but a chance all the same. But maybe this door let out somewhere public, somewhere with other people she could ask for help. Or maybe there'd be a car, or a phone. Or something! *One step at a time*. She just had to make it through that door. She was so close.

Something hit the back of her neck with a sharp pain. She stumbled and fell, skidding across the floor. She fetched up against the wall, hard. Dazed and out of breath, her fingers felt along the base of her skull. A dart. She yanked it out and started crawling towards the door. Her knees were scraped from the fall, but it didn't hurt as it should. She could feel her hands and feet going numb, see things going blurry around the edges. Her head drooped.

The heavy footsteps caught up. Two burly orderlies lifted her roughly by her armpits. One of them had a dart gun hanging on his belt. She tried to struggle, but her body only twitched. A pair of shiny black shoes came to a stop in front of her. She managed to roll her head just enough. There he was, in all his pristine menace. She glared, hoping he saw the rage and hate in her gaze, wishing she could wound him physically with it.

"Oh, Kathryn." Dr. Hilliard tsked. "What are we to do with you? You know you're not well." He addressed his henchmen. "Take her back to her room. Search it, replace the cameras, and then put a guard on the door."

They started dragging her back down the hall, past him. He put a hand out and they stopped. He leaned in close to her ear.

"You know the most delicious part? If you had simply turned right instead of left from your room, it would've led straight here. You likely would've made it." He grinned at her, nothing friendly about it. "Such a bad run of luck you've had, my dear."

He stepped out of the way and the orderlies resumed hauling her back to her cell. Despairing, she gave in to the creeping blackness.

Amy opened her eyes to soft morning sunlight. It felt warm on her skin, even through the thick glass that obscured the view. She was lucky to have a window, she knew. Other girls in the hospital had inside rooms, no windows at all. One of the girls had told her. So she soaked in the sunlight for all of them.

A light snore broke her reverie. She turned her head to see her grandfather asleep in the chair. Rumpled sweater and salt-and-pepper hair, with the slight smell of sweet pipe smoke – that was her Papi. She smiled. He could fall asleep anywhere, it didn't matter how uncomfortable it was. He said it was a habit from his Army days – grab sleep wherever and however you can. She thought probably he just really liked to nap in his old age.

She shifted to sit up more, and his eyes popped open. He saw she was awake and immediately came over to the bed. He might be older, but he was still reasonably spry.

“My dear! How are you feeling? You've been out for quite awhile.” His voice was both relieved and concerned.

Amy's brow furrowed. It didn't seem like she'd been asleep that long. “I feel fine. Why? How long did I sleep?”

“Sleep! My dear girl, you suffered another seizure three days ago, and have been unconscious since. The doctors weren't sure when you would wake up.” He studied her face closely, all paternal concern. “They tell me it was a fierce one. You fell out of bed before the nurses got here, scraped up your knees and elbows pretty bad. They don't hurt?”

She moved her limbs a bit. They were a bit sore, now that she thought about it. Her neck seemed stiff, too, but if she'd been unconscious for three days that was no surprise. “I am a little sore, but nothing too bad. Nothing a hot bath won't fix. Can you ask one of the nurses to help me with it when you leave?”

“Of course we can arrange that sweetheart, whatever you need. But I'm not leaving yet. You just woke up! I need to make sure my granddaughter is ok. They were supposed to be making you better, not worse. I should fire the lot.” He was smiling, but it was stubborn around the edges. She sighed. He took his duty as her last living family member very seriously, sometimes to his own detriment.

“Papi, I really feel fine. I must have just had a bad reaction to the last test batch. We'll tell the doctors, and they'll try something else, and eventually we'll have a cure for this. You know I'm fine with this arrangement, I agreed to it.” She took his hand in hers. “We knew there would be some side effects to endure while they zeroed in on the right combination. I can handle it, really.”

He patted her hand. “You are one of the strongest, bravest young women I've ever known.” He actually had tears welling in his big blue eyes. That was her Papi in a nutshell: pride and worry in excess.

“You know I couldn't do this without you.” She squeezed his hand. “And I know that you are going to get in trouble if you don't get to work. It has to be almost 9. You need to get

going. I'll be fine. You know I don't do anything but take baths and sleep all day. It's like a very relaxing spa, really." She grinned at him.

He laughed and leaned in to kiss her forehead. "Very well, I won't hover over you like an old worrywart. I will have a word with the doctors before I leave though, and make sure a nurse comes in to help you with your bath." He gathered up his coat. "I'll be back after work. Anything you'd like me to pick up for you while I'm out?"

Amy considered. "Do you think you could pick up some flowers? Just a few simple bouquets, cheery flowers. I wanted to give something bright to the other girls since they don't get windows."

He came back to the side of her bed, brushing up against her IV drip. "Other girls? I wasn't aware you had made friends with anyone here."

"I haven't really, just this one girl." She yawned. "Kathryn. She's so unhappy. Her doctor is mean to her."

"Oh? Not one of your doctors, I hope. I'd hate to think a doctor was mistreating you." Papi's voice sounded a bit sharp. He was going into overprotective mode again.

"No, I haven't met him. A Dr. Hilliard or something. I don't know if he's really mean or she's just sad because she has no sunshine and no family to visit her." She yawned again, and her eyes drifted closed. "I think I'll take a nap before that bath, Papi."

"Of course, dear. Whatever you want. I'll be back later, with those flowers. Sleep well."

She smiled her thanks as the door closed behind him. But she couldn't shake the feeling that there was something wrong about his black patent leather shoes.

His assistant Linda waited for him in the hallway. He peeled off the repulsive sweater, handing it to her in exchange for his lab coat. He took his glasses out of the chest pocket and put them on, sighing in relief. Now he was himself again.

"How did it go today, sir?" asked Linda.

He took the clipboard from her and started briskly down the hallway. She followed. "She's Amy today, as we predicted, but there's been an unusual and interesting development. It seems that some memories and feelings from her native personality are bleeding over into the induced one." He stopped and turned to her, energized. "Do you know, she actually asked me to buy flowers for Kathryn!"

Linda was suitably shocked. "No!"

“Yes! Not only that, but she knows that Kathryn is in a windowless room, has no family visitors, and seriously dislikes her doctor. A Dr. Hilliard – she actually knows the name! I’m not sure what else has seeped over, but the level of detail in those little bits is astonishing.” He scribbled some notes on the pad, and handed it back to Linda. “Of course, she thinks it is some other girl staying here in the hospital. I’m not quite sure how her brain explains away having met or talked to this other girl, but she cares for her. Can you imagine? She feels a sense of friendship for her other self.” He resumed walking, pondering the implications of this development.

Linda hesitated, then followed again. “Do you want to continue her current course of treatment and see how this progresses for study?”

“What? Good God, woman, no. I already have one of them plotting against me. The last thing we need is for the two to become friends and actively work together. Nor do I relish the bodily harm she’d no doubt attempt on me when Kathryn tells her the truth about dear Papi. No. Postpone my rounds with the other patients; I’m going to the lab to look at her blood work and brain scans, see if I can’t pinpoint the loophole. Has a similar occurrence been observed in any of the other patients?”

“Not that I know of, sir.”

“Good. In the meantime, make sure the light cycle for Amy’s window is calibrated exactly – I hadn’t realized she paid quite so much attention to it, it needs to be realistic. Oh, and I had to sedate her before she thought about Kathryn too deeply, but she wanted a bath. See to it when she wakes up?”

“Of course, Dr. Hilliard.”

Kathryn opened her eyes to harsh florescent light. A small bunch of daisies sat on the side table. She grinned in triumph. *She’d heard*. It was working.