

### RUNNING LOW

A decorated veteran turns to a cloning agency in a last ditch effort to save his spiraling life, but he's having trouble finding a willing adopter.

FADE IN:

INT. DOCTOR AXEL'S APT - DAY

A man (HENRY AXEL, 40s, tall and generally well-kempt, with an unexpectedly gaunt face) mills about a barren apartment. Stark white walls exacerbate stretches of open, furniture-less space. Dust hangs and settles in particular corners of the rooms and walls Henry passes through, suggesting fixtures recently removed.

A woman's voice (AGENT DALLIS) follows Henry through the apartment, but its source is unclear. It plays in surround sound, moving and matching with the orientation of Henry's head.

AGENT DALLIS (V.O.)  
...excited to meet you. I really think he's the one. I know we've had some late drops on your case, but please don't be discouraged. All it takes is one, right?

Henry walks to the kitchen fridge. He opens it and grabs a protein shake from the door. His hand tremors as he takes a sip. His neck twitches, uncomfortably, the same involuntary motion repeating a few more times.

AGENT DALLIS (V.O.)  
Anyways, quick refresher on the first interview. It's just a simple get-to-know-you, so remember to ask questions yourself. Typically only a few minutes, by design, so as not to waste anyone's time.

Henry moves to open a nearby cabinet. Inside is a mostly-empty rack with a few thin plastic tubes adorned with prescription markings on the side. Henry rolls up his sleeve and lifts one of the tubes from the rack.

AGENT DALLIS (V.O.)  
You'll both be under serum per Finn-Dopt policy, of course, nothing new there. Helps put everyone at ease, prospectives included.

Henry lines the tube up to his upper arm and pushes a button at the top of the tube with his thumb. It discharges a shot of compressed air into his arm. Henry grimaces slightly and takes another sip from his shake. His hand no longer tremors.

AGENT DALLIS (V.O.)  
Sorry, Doctor. I know you've heard  
this all before. Just have to cover  
my bases, refresh basics, blah blah  
blah.

Henry moves past the kitchen and into a short hallway, approaching a door at the end of it. He stops for a moment, lingering on a cabinet in the hallway, a rare sighting of furniture. He looks at an impressive display of medals and certificates lining the shelves inside, complete with framed pictures of congratulatory handshakes.

AGENT DALLIS (V.O.)  
Okay, recap time. Our offices, 10am  
tomorrow. Nothing crazy. Hold on, I  
had a few suggested questions for  
you, give me a moment—

Agent Dallis's voice is replaced by the rustling of pages. Henry continues to the door at the end of the hallway and opens it. It reveals a garage, with a personal flying vehicle parked in the center of it. Henry steps into the garage.

INT. DOCTOR AXEL'S FLYING VEHICLE - MOMENTS LATER

The rustling of pages continues as Henry closes the butterfly door of his flying vehicle. Henry reaches up to his temple and pinches off a small, skin-colored chip connecting just beneath his hairline. The page rustling immediately cuts off.

Henry sets the chip down in his center console. He powers on the vehicle and taps the fuel gauge. The gauge wavers as the engine roars before finally settling at about a half-tank. Henry pushes a button near the vehicle's ceiling, and the roof of the garage folds away, revealing a blue sky.

CUT TO:

INT. FINN-DOPT OFFICES, HALLWAY - DAY

Agent Dallis (30s, formal but likeable, corporate golden child) fidgets with a tablet outside a conference room door. She puts the tablet down on a side table, setting it beside a one page waiver and a shot glass filled with a thick green liquid. She begins to tap her foot, unconsciously.

Henry appears from around the corner of the hallway.

AGENT DALLIS  
Dr. Axel, good morning! Happy to  
see you received my message.

HENRY  
Every word of it.

AGENT DALLIS  
Great. Just in case, I've gathered  
all the relevant materials for you  
here, including those suggested  
questions.

Agent Dallis hands Henry the tablet from the table.

AGENT DALLIS (CONT'D)  
Oh, and the serum.

She follows up with the shot glass. Henry looks at it  
uneasily.

AGENT DALLIS (CONT'D)  
Something wrong?

HENRY  
It's green.

AGENT DALLIS  
Flavor change. Finn-Dopt's going  
"green apple" now.

Henry shrugs, downs the serum and signs the waiver on the  
table.

HENRY  
I preferred blueberry.

CUT TO:

INT. FINN-DOPT OFFICES, CONFERENCE ROOM - MOMENTS LATER

Henry closes the conference room door behind him. A man (JIM  
DORSETT, 40s, short and stocky with a dark gruff beard) waits  
for him at a small table in the center of the room. Jim sizes  
Henry up, not so subtly, looking from head to toe.

Henry settles in to the seat across from him, extending a  
hand. The two shake.

HENRY  
Henry Axel. Sorry to keep you  
waiting.

JIM  
No worries. Jim Dorsett, nice to  
meet you.

HENRY  
So, looking to adopt?

JIM  
Yeah, yeah.

Jim taps awake a tablet in front of him.

HENRY  
I'm sure Agent Dallis set you up  
with all the details.

JIM  
She did, very thorough. Didn't  
quite know what to expect, though  
you seem shorter than I—

Jim flushes a bit.

JIM (CONT'D)  
Sorry, this is my first time on  
this stuff.

HENRY  
Don't worry about it. Just makes  
you a little more forthcoming. Less  
of a "truth" thing and more about  
open communication.

JIM  
Makes sense.

HENRY  
Anything more you want to know?

Beads of sweat begin clinging to Henry's neck.

JIM  
Let's see. I don't know. It all  
sounds great.  
(reading from tablet)  
PhD in astrophysics, top marks,  
multiple publications, veteran,  
college athlete, no flags on  
genetic predispositions. What's the  
catch?

Henry strains for a half-second before covering it with an  
easy laugh.

HENRY  
Well, I was a punter. Not sure that  
counts.

JIM

Ha, alright, noted. I don't know.  
What do people usually ask?

HENRY

Here, I'll go. What do you do for a  
living, Jim?

JIM

I'm a forest ranger.

HENRY

They still have those?

JIM

(chuckles)

Still have those. Even though the  
funding's mostly gone to the sky,  
literally. Still forests down here.

HENRY

Why are you interested in adopting?

JIM

I guess I'm a bit of a "lifer."  
Been living mostly by myself in a  
secluded forest for 20 years. Not  
many dating prospects out  
there...always thought I'd be a  
dad, one day. It'd be nice to have  
some company too, when he's grown.

HENRY

I understand, I hope I didn't  
offend you.

JIM

No, not at all. So...why would a  
decorated astrophysicist put his  
clone up for adoption?

Henry attempts to wick away the sweat forming on his neck  
with a nonchalant wipe of his hand. His neck twitches. He  
tries to play it off as a stretch.

HENRY

Well, Jim, money. To be honest.

JIM

I see. For anything in particular?

A slight whine of static begins to build in Henry's ears. It  
is not heard by Jim.

HENRY

Just to survive, you know. Like everyone else.

JIM

Fair enough.

CUT TO:

INT. DOCTOR AXEL'S APT - DAY

Henry stumbles through the garage door as the static-like white noise continues around him, noticeably louder. He rushes over to the kitchen cabinet, sweat pooling around his shirt collar.

He begins rolling up his sleeve, but opts to take off his shirt altogether, revealing an emaciated frame. He grabs a plastic tube from his dwindling supply, triggering the air-based injection into his upper arm. The white noise lessens, but persists.

Henry strips down to his underwear as he walks to his bedroom, neck twitching. He collapses onto the bed before curling his knees into his chest, assuming the fetal position, foregoing any blankets.

CUT TO:

INT. DOCTOR AXEL'S FLYING VEHICLE - DAY

Henry shuts the lid of a collector's briefcase in the passenger seat of his vehicle, latching the two front clips. He's looking a little livelier, and the white noise is gone.

EXT. FUELING STATION - CONTINUOUS

Henry steps out of his car, briefcase in hand, as another flying vehicle parks across from his at the fueling station. A well-dressed BUYER (50s) steps out from the vehicle.

BUYER

Are you haxel\_215?

HENRY

In the flesh. Here you go. Take a look.

Henry hands over the briefcase. The Buyer sets it down, unlatching it. He reveals a neatly organized set of medals, the same seen earlier in Henry's apartment.

BUYER

Wow. These are in amazing condition. Are you sure you want to sell?

HENRY

Are you trying to talk me out of it?

The Buyer laughs.

BUYER

Alright, deal.

The Buyer taps his finger just below his graying hairline, on the left side of his temple. Henry's own voice is heard in surround sound, but it is slightly roboticized.

HENRY (V.O.)

(robotic)

Payment received. 400,000 units.

Henry cuts off the voice with a press of his temple.

HENRY

Got it, we're all good.

BUYER

Thanks again!

CUT TO:

INT. DOCTOR AXEL'S FLYING VEHICLE - MOMENTS LATER

Henry settles back into his vehicle, powering it on. He taps the fuel gauge, which wavers a bit before showing a little less than a quarter tank. A melodic chiming is heard, again in surround sound.

HENRY (V.O.)

(robotic)

Incoming call - Agent Dallis.

Henry presses his temple, and the chiming ends. Henry speaks into the air.

HENRY

Good news I hope?

Agent Dallis responds in surround sound.

AGENT DALLIS (V.O.)

Hi Doctor Axel. Actually, yes!

HENRY  
(surprised)  
Oh, really?

AGENT DALLIS (V.O.)  
Mr. Dorsett wants to move forward  
with a home interview, but it might  
be a tight window. I just sent over  
the address — any way you could  
make it within the hour?

The dash of the vehicle lights up, and a location pops up on  
a virtual map. The estimated time is just within the hour.  
Henry looks at the fuel gauge and hesitates.

HENRY  
I can be there.

AGENT DALLIS (V.O.)  
Great, I've already sent the  
materials to his house, including  
the serum and the paperwork, if  
it's a go. You've got this!

HENRY  
And would the second payment wire  
through immediately if we do sign?

AGENT DALLIS (V.O.)  
As soon as his name's on the dotted  
line, we'll release the payment.  
It's a Finn-Dopt guarantee.

CUT TO:

EXT. JIM'S CABIN, BALCONY - DAY

Jim and Henry sit laughing at a small outdoor table on the  
balcony of a cabin nestled in the treetops of a dense forest.  
Two shot glasses with green serum residue as well as roughly  
matching halos of empty beer cans are scattered on the table  
in front of them. A box of paperwork sits to the side,  
presently untouched.

JIM  
It's true! I swear those were not  
bear tracks, there's something  
bigger out there, man. Ask any  
ranger.

HENRY

Alright, I'll be sure to round up  
all the ones I know and take a  
poll.

JIM

We actually did, like, three years  
ago, I think?

HENRY

And?

JIM

60 - 40, Bigfoot's real.

The two share another laugh.

JIM (CONT'D)

Hey, listen. I know this might be a  
little weird, but I understand the  
clone will grow up from a kid,  
right?

HENRY

Yeah, I think he'll progress a  
little faster than we did, but he's  
currently in stasis as a newborn  
until he's adopted.

JIM

Right. Would you mind showing me  
some of your childhood pictures,  
just so I'd know?

HENRY

Oh yeah, of course.

Henry pulls out a tablet and starts navigating on it.

HENRY (CONT'D)

Agent Dallis had me prepare a  
collection, actually.

JIM

Not surprised.

Henry hands over the tablet to Jim, who starts scrolling  
through the pictures.

HENRY

Out of curiosity, why Finn-Dopt?

Jim continues scrolling.

JIM

Not much of a choice, actually. I wouldn't have been able to afford any sort of adoption, clone or no clone, but I received a grant offered to federal employees. Just so happens the only agency eligible to receive the grant funds was Finn-Dopt. I'm guessing that's not a total coincidence, the way the government works these days.

HENRY

You're probably right.

JIM

You know, about what you said at the offices, is the job market that bad for astrophysicists?

HENRY

No, not really.

Henry strains a bit, sweat beading on his neck. Jim is half-listening while scrolling.

HENRY (CONT'D)

It's mostly my military background that's caused troubles.

JIM

That's surprising...

Jim takes a moment before Henry's words register.

JIM (CONT'D)

Wait, you weren't involved in the Orion assault were you?

HENRY

I was.

JIM

Oh. I see.

Jim puts the tablet down and sips an open beer in front of him. Sweat has started to pool again on Henry's collar.

JIM (CONT'D)

You know, my cousin served around the same time as you.

HENRY

Oh, really?

JIM

He probably ran in different circles than the brains like you guys. Got mixed up in glitterol, though, like a lot of the Orion foot soldiers. It sorta consumed him. I'm sure it didn't make its way up to the non-combats, though.

Jim fixates on Henry. Henry attempts to suppress a violent twitch of his neck, playing it off poorly, white noise rising around him.

HENRY

It did.

A beat as Henry's words sink in.

JIM

I'm sorry to hear that. It's awful stuff. I lost a good friend.

Henry's profusely sweating, and the white noise builds to a constant static, enveloping his space. He attempts to take a drink from the open can in front of him, but his hand shakes violently, and he's unable to grasp it. He can barely hear Jim over the static.

JIM (CONT'D)

Are you okay?

HENRY

(strained)

Is it okay if we pick this up again another time? Sorry, I don't drink often.

JIM

That's probably for the best. Are you sure you're okay?

Henry stands up, neck twitching again. He stumbles a bit.

HENRY

Sorry, before I go, are there any fueling stations nearby? I'm running low.

JIM

There's a lookout, not too far away, with a small self-serve. Not much but the view is great.

CUT TO:

INT./EXT. DOCTOR AXEL'S FLYING VEHICLE, FOREST LOOKOUT - DAY

Henry's flying vehicle idles on a small lookout platform above a sea of green treetops.

Henry's convulsing in the front seat as an overwhelming blanket of static noise fills the space around him. Within the otherwise indistinguishable static, we hear layers of explosions, screams, wailing, tearing, gnashing, moaning.

A constant beeping, somewhat more distinct, emanates from the vehicle's dashboard, accompanying a flashing "low fuel" light. Agent Dallis's voice is also heard, faintly, in surround sound.

AGENT DALLIS (V.O.)

...Mr. Dorsett's decision not to  
move forward. Not a problem at all,  
we have plenty of prospectives...

Henry rips off the skin-colored chip from his temple, cutting off Agent Dallis's voice, though the oppressive static cacophony continues. Henry screams, lashing against the inside of the driver-side door and the center console, rattling a few empty plastic tubes scattered around.

A panel falls from the driver-side door, revealing a small baggie with a white substance. Henry's face lights up as he cradles the baggie like a pearl sifted through thick sands. His face then shifts to a tortured look, his eyes closing. The "low fuel" beeping grows louder amidst the static.

Henry opens his eyes. He flicks a switch near the dash with baggie still in hand and pulls the flight controls back, raising the vehicle high above the treetops. He pushes the throttle forward, slowly at first, before locking it at full speed, the vehicle barreling forward.

Through tears, Henry opens the bag and snorts the white substance. All noise immediately ceases, melting to a complete silence. Henry's once gaunt face is now full, happy, almost unrecognizable. He looks out to a vibrant sea of multi-colored treetops glistening against a kaleidoscopic sky, the colors and shapes pulsating in harmony as he passes.

Henry appears weightless, floating, as the vehicle lurches forward, free-falling, the engine cutting soundlessly.

FADE OUT.