

Dreaming the Perpetual Dream

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Chapter 1

Magazines lined the tabletop, the covers speaking their contents in airbrushed photos and catchy headlines. Worn corners and ruffled pages were a strong deterrent against any curiosity the images might evoke, considering their location. All of the seats were fabric, which made it as uncomfortable to sit in them as it would have been to leaf through a gossip or garden periodical.

Link almost chuckled under his breath at the thought of standing in a corner and avoiding physical contact with everyone in the room like he was already avoiding eye contact with them. It only made sense, in a room made to cycle sick people through it; but only Link seemed to be conscious of it. Without looking, he watched half the waiting patients leaf through magazines while he watched the other half touch themselves and then their seats.

All he could do was his very best to lose himself in his phone. No messages awaited to grab his attention, and no game existed that was compelling enough to evaporate his time. It seemed unfair to him, to have such a myriad of ways to communicate and yet feel more awkward than ever all at the same time. With different ways to text and email and post on every forum, the only real assurance he had was that none of what he did worked to get him what he wanted.

Lost as he was in his thoughts, it took a couple of repetitions of his name before Link heard it. Someone had stood in the doorway so many times since he had sat down, and called out some name other than his, that the first reaction he had was to ignore it.

“Nash,” the voice came, for the third or fourth time, “Lincoln Nash.”

Link sat up, blacked out the screen on his phone without shutting down the window. He waved his hand, even as he felt a flush creeping up the back of his neck.

“Oh, hey,” he said, rising and teetering at the same time. “That’s me.”

She had already turned away, giving him a scant second to catch the door before it swung shut on its own behind her. Link shouldered his way through, and followed her to a small empty room.

“Have a seat, Mister Nash,” she said, halfway in another doorway.

She hesitated, and smiled, so he smiled back.

“My friends call me Link,” he volunteered.

Her smile fell.

“Of course, Mister Nash,” she said politely. “The doctor will see you soon.”

She closed the door, rather abruptly.

There were no new messages on his phone, no matter how many windows he opened. Link had time to check them all several times before the door opened again, time to consider and reconsider washing his hands in the stainless sink, and a few more minutes to sit and be alone.

“Lincoln,” floated in front of the doctor, as the door opened. It was followed by a clipboard, then a stethoscope; a body came behind it all.

Link nodded, and smiled.

Close enough.

“Hi,” he said, to reply somehow.

“It’s been awhile.”

The clipboard came down, and Link was nodding.

“I know,” he shrugged. “I’ve been fine.”

“Was I the doctor here, last time you visited?”

Trying to smile, he shook his head.

“No,” he said. “I wasn’t going to say anything because I honestly don’t remember his name. I do remember that he was older than you, and definitely not female.”

Her smile was automatic, and looked a little forced.

“Does that bother you?” she asked.

Link shrugged.

“My insurance picks my doctor,” he replied. “If I got to pick, I would probably choose a female if I chose based on gender. Women tend to be more detail-oriented and capable of multi-tasking, as well as being smarter on average. Honestly, I’m happy to see the change.”

For a long moment it looked as though she was looking for something to find offensive in what he had said. Link found his own mind going back over it, after marveling that he had been able to successfully string a sentence together in front of a total stranger.

Following a considered pause, she nodded. She glanced at her clipboard, and spoke while looking at it.

“So, Mister Nash,” she said. “What seems to be the problem?”

Her decision to avoid eye contact with him left Link feeling a lot more alone with his thoughts. Grateful for her decision, he collected them.

“I guess…” he began, only to finish lamely.

“Sleep?” he shrugged.

Her eyes left the clipboard, to find his wandering the room.

“You can’t sleep?” she said. “I hope you aren’t looking for a prescription to knock you out at night. I will write prescriptions, but only when I feel it is absolutely necessary. I’m not that kind of doctor.”

His eyebrow arched higher the more impassioned her speech became, and he nodded when it seemed like she was done.

“Okay,” he said. “I’m not looking for a prescription, though; and I’m not trying to sleep more. I’m trying to sleep less.”

Link could tell that she was trying not to laugh at him, and she bit her lower lip to keep it from spilling out.

“How much do you sleep, on average?” she asked.

He took a moment to think about it, as if he hadn’t been thinking of nothing else for so long that it actually drove him to schedule an appointment with a doctor.

“Seven or eight hours a night,” he said. “I know, it’s normal; but I want to sleep more.”

Their eyes met then, and Link wondered if she had taken that wrong.

“I mean, I don’t want to,” he clarified. “I feel like I want to. There’s no desire to get out of bed, but there is a lot of desire to just go back to sleep.”

Giving herself time to think, the doctor turned slowly to set the clipboard down. When she turned back to him, she seemed to be wearing a practiced look of genuine concern. Link wondered if it was genuine, or practiced, or both.

“Have you tried giving in?” The look was still there, even as she spoke in a mildly condescending tone. “Maybe if you sleep a little more for a couple days, you’ll get caught up. That could be all you need.”

The list of things he had tried were likely to be pretty close to her list of suggestions, but he knew she had to go through them.

“Yeah,” Link said. “I slept eighteen hours a day, two weekends in a row. I didn’t feel any more or less tired after, just like I wanted to sleep even more.”

She was nodding as he spoke, ready to hit the next item on the list.

“Has anything happened lately?” she went on. “A death in the family, a breakup, a job loss?”

The temptation to explode was not a strong one, but it was there. Link wanted to shout that he had exhausted all of the common things, and that the internet had provided the same list for him to check off. That’s why he was here, for some secret knowledge that might be worth seeking. It was also why he hadn’t been to see a doctor for so long; the easy stuff was easy.

Link forced a laugh.

“I’m no more depressed than anyone else,” he said. “I have a good job and all that, and no one close to me has died or walked away lately. I just find sleep more interesting than being awake.”

The words hit his ears at the same time as they did hers, and he added a touch more commentary.

“Lame, right?”

She was looking away again, perhaps regretting her decision to shed the shielded safety of the clipboard.

“Of course not,” she said. “You are depressed, then? Are you taking something for that? You may not know this, but SSRIs are pretty notorious for causing disturbances in the sleep cycle.”

“I’m not taking anything,” Link shrugged. “You’re not that kind of doctor, I’m not that kind of patient. I believe that most depression is there to be examined, not ignored or medicated. A good dose of unhappiness is often required to propel us towards greater happiness. I know that. I know that some foods cause sleep disturbances, and that lots of medications cause nightmares. I don’t take any drugs, and I’ve tried altering my diet in every way I could think of.”

The doctor was looking at him again, pregnant with some comment that was obviously bursting to be given voice. Her eyes had been glazed with the look for more than half of what he said, and Link was afraid she was about to suggest that he alter his diet.

“Do you dream?” she asked, instead.

Several seconds passed while he filtered his words through his thinking process, and Link realized that none had made it through at all. He studied a poster behind her, a drawing of a man and woman facing each other; they were missing both clothing and the half of their bodies that had been sliced off to make the diagram. Still, they were both slightly smiling.

“Sure,” Link said. “Everyone dreams, right?”

“Nightmares?”

“Nah.” Link waved his hand, dismissively. “Just dreams.”

Either she was picking up on his discomfort or she had an idea she needed to chase down; whichever it was, she pressed him further.

“Nothing special about your dreams?” she said. “At all?”

The two half people were of no help, spilling their guts with smiles on their faces. Link shrugged again.

“I guess,” he said. “I kind of have lucid dreams, I suppose. I’ve had them since I was a kid, and didn’t know they were unusual until I started looking into sleep disorders. I say ‘kind of’ because I’m not always in control. I do always know I’m dreaming, even when I get the sense that what is happening is...”

Link trailed off, pretended to be particularly interested in the bloodless gory print on the wall.

“Lucid dreams,” she echoed. “You know that you’re dreaming, but you still somehow feel that the dream is real?”

They practiced for awhile not looking at each other, and she picked up the clipboard while he let his eyes roam the environment. He mused that it was a room made to give the impression of sterility, and also the most likely place that a person might get sick.

She was writing something.

“Sometimes people come to me for a prescription,” she said, “usually for some kind of anti-depressant. Generally I tell them to start working out, or eating better. Every once in a while, I do this.”

In one smooth and apparently practiced motion, she ripped a sheet from her clipboard and handed it to him.

“Take one of these when you first wake up,” she said. “Come back and see me in four to six weeks, and let me know how it’s working.”

Link eyed the paper, not surprised that he could not read a word of what she had written.

“What is it?”

She smiled, relieved that she had found a solution.

“It’s a generic version of a popular narcolepsy treatment,” she said, still smiling. “It has been shown to have benefits for all kinds of sleep conditions, and I’m pretty confident it will help with yours as well.”

Link took the slip from her, folded it and put it in his pocket.