

ONE

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.

TWO

The fact that it was Saturday should not have any bearing on whether or not he took a pill. They had worked so well Thursday and Friday, and a month's prescription didn't take weekends off. Just because he had no plans and no desire to make any didn't mean he shouldn't get his brain in waking mode.

Waking mode...that's how he had come to lovingly refer to his time on the pills, in his mind. It was almost as if Link had lived his whole life with an extra set of eyelids, and didn't realize they were there. A few minutes after swallowing the first one, that first morning, those eyelids had peeled back suddenly. Without any effort or intention to do so, Link was staring at a new world by the time he splashed water on his face. He had felt the eyelids close, slowly, as the hours passed; they were flung open the next morning by another pill, and he was delightfully immersed in waking mode again.

Now there was nothing to do, and a pill assigned to help him do it. Link took one, with a sip of the bottled water on his nightstand, and lay back in bed again. He didn't have to wait long to feel its effects, but that didn't mean he couldn't continue to lie there awhile longer.

When sleep became a favorite hobby, Link had decided that some nicer sheets might be in order. His few romantic

entanglements had showed him a little more of himself and taught him something about the world at the same time. He remembered each coupling by the lesson, and by the way he'd felt slightly or completely different when their energies intertwined. Neither altogether good nor altogether bad, his most recent string of memories were of a woman he'd been both sad and relieved to see go. Link found it a little disappointing that one of the greatest lessons he had learned from her was that nice sheets actually mattered.

He had been even more disappointed when the nice sheets he bought somehow disappeared when she did; it wasn't until Link took up sleeping as a pastime that he purchased a new set. They might not get changed as often as before, but they were a sure step up from the thin scratchy coverings that he had spread across the sleeping surface in the interim.

Despite the pill kicking in, and those inner eyelids popping suddenly open, Link kept his actual eyes closed. A landscape swirled into perfect existence before him, and in the same moment his limbs became very heavy. Link had no doubt that he could lift his arms if he wanted to; but why would he want to? Dreams had always been a vivid and wakeful thing for him, but this was different.

Link was staring at a display screen, with characters stretched in digital overlay across a very realistic picture of space. It even seemed that he was moving, getting closer to some stars and further away from others. The lack of control in his body seemed to extend to the dream, and Link could not turn to look over his shoulder at whatever was behind him. For several minutes he stared at the lifelike image, stretching from wall to wall and floor to ceiling before him. It took up his entire visual field, the characters beautiful incomprehensibility while forever stretched out in starry spaciousness beyond them.

A sound came from behind him, a steady stream of what would have been words had he understood them. It was like no language he had ever heard, spoken in a smooth melodic tone. The desire to turn his back on the spacious image grew within him, and Link wondered again what was behind him. The voice continued speaking, and he kept staring through the illusion of glass to the eternal nothingness beyond.

It was strange to feel himself inside this dream, inside this experience. Even his body felt different, and Link felt his attention turning inward. As he watched space flowing forever past at what seemed a both interminably slow pace and somehow blindingly fast at the same time, he let his awareness move to his own breathing.

Except that it wasn't his own breathing.

Had he been in control of the process, Link surely would have paused his breath as he realized it. It went on instead, steady and smooth and with a depth to it that sent a spiraling thrill up his spine with each inhale. As a student of sleep, these last few months, he had also become a student of breath. All of the relaxing and invigorating exercises he had found were different than this. Link had seen results from playing around with various breathing techniques, but this was a whole new world for him.

For some reason, Link thought to follow the breath. It was all he could do, other than stare at the overwhelming view of what he could only describe as deep space. He would never tell anyone that his sleeping self often wondered if he was being taught something, either by his deeper consciousness or some other-worldly one; he had no one to tell, and it surely wouldn't make sense outside the confines of his own awareness within the dream state.

Following the breath was not nearly as simple as letting

his mind be blown by the vivid imagery of its own creation. It was all too easy to wonder how accurate his unconscious map of the stars might be, and where his drowsing brain might have placed him among them. Still he concentrated, and tried to sync his thought of breathing with the strange but somehow comfortable pattern.

Link had only meant to track it in his mind, to watch the pattern and try to imitate it later. When he felt a distant rising and falling, and felt that it was his own body breathing, Link suddenly felt his awareness volleying back and forth between the vivid scene and his own soft sheets. In mere moments, he had bounced back and forth a dozen times; Link reeled in the dizzying silent aftermath, and heard words reach his ears through the confusion.

“It would at least behoove you to acknowledge me,” the words said, in a strangely tinny masculine tone. “There was a time when our views were of equal importance, even in your eyes.”

In the same moment that Link realized he was still in the otherworldly setting, he realized that the body he was inhabiting was turning around. There was another fleeting sensation of his own body, lying somewhere far away, and the slippery sense that now would be a good time to open his eyes.

Link drifted in the dream, watching the view change as the eyes he was looking through turned to the voice he could suddenly understand. Another voice erupted, more masculine and less tinny; and Link heard it from within, like he was accustomed to hearing his own.

“That was before you betrayed me,” it said. “That was before you tried to take control of my fleet.”

“Admiral.” The tinny voice came again, as Link got a look at what was speaking. “You are not in charge or in possession of this fleet. There is—”

It looked almost completely human, other than the dull metallic covering that served as its skin. All one color, the metal appeared soft and pliable; only that and its eyes gave it away as something less than natural. Its eyes were shaped like a person's, but were illuminated by the soft blue glow of active electricity. The way it moved was smooth and deliberate, while its face was expressing emotion and depth as clearly as its voice had been. Link found himself marveling at the creature, even as he reminded himself that it was only a dream.

In a flash, the body he was inhabiting moved. One arm stayed at his side, while the other snatched a sidearm from his hip. A silent burst of purple lightning erupted from the barrel, too fast to see and too bright to miss; and the creature exploded into a dozen pieces. Shards of metal and glass littered the floor as it collapsed, and bare sparking wires danced in the burst remains. The lump smoked and sputtered for a moment after it fell, to finally lie silent and fully extinguished.

Link felt his eyes go wide in wonder, and he smiled.

"Wow," he said, aloud.

The body he was in took a step back, surprised at the exclamation. Link swirled in his own confused bewilderment; the sound that had escaped those lips had not been the word he had uttered, but he had understood it as if it had the same meaning. It was all too much for him; the next time he became aware of soft sheets, Link dove at that awareness with all he had.

The last glimpse he had was of a half-dozen tiny trundling machines, appearing from hidden panels to converge on the pieces of robot that lay on the floor.