

THE MORPHEUS PROJECT

RYAN ELLER

“Dream or awake, we perceive only events that have meaning to us.”

- Jane Roberts

“Dreams are true while they last, and do we not live in dreams?”

- Alfred Lord Tennyson

“There are some people who live in a dream world and some who face reality;
and then there are those who turn one into the other.”

- Douglas Everett

To those moments when our reality is more terrifying than our nightmare

1 – Luke

Darkness and the smell of disinfectant surrounded Lucas Shepard as he wandered aimlessly through what appeared to be an abandoned hospital. The cold tile floor stung his feet as he quickly rounded a corner to find several beams of light meticulously scanning the hallway looking for any signs of movement.

Jesus, why don't they ever stop?

Fighting against his numb feet, Luke backtracked until he arrived at a vacant nurse's station.

Quickly, he sat down and pressed the power button attached to the wall unit adjacent to the 50' screens that were mounted against the white wall. Instantly the screens jumped to life displaying every room, hallway, and janitor closet in the wing.

What am I even looking for? A file, a history...?

Luke had always preferred to do things the old-fashioned way. Whenever he had to perform his experiments in the lab he would always keep his notes in a good old-fashioned notebook.

"You just can't beat a hard copy of data," Luke would remark to his colleagues whenever they would complain about losing their data due to computer crashes. In their defense, he probably lost his notebook more times than their computers crashed. But still, to him, it was easier looking through drawers for his notebook than searching through endless electronic folders for the recovery logs on a holographic hard drive the size of a sugar cube.

Ever since Google started the Quantum Artificial Intelligence (QAI) Lab with NASA in 2013, computers were becoming absurdly advanced. Nowadays, personal computers could store all the information in the Library of Congress on one partition thanks to the advanced compression algorithm designed by a group of MIT students. Even though technology had its pitfalls, Luke liked being able to store the complete 6 seasons of LOST in a folder that took up only several megabytes.

You just can't beat the classics.

Plus, due to breakthroughs in QAI, computers were now able to map the far reaches of the universe and create "ultra-real-life simulations" used for

training soldiers and pilots. Needless to say, the computer business was now a multi-trillion dollar industry.

You know Luke, you probably have a few more minutes before they notice that someone is using the nurse's station.

After scanning the monitors for any sign of the men, Luke focused his attention to the broad crescent-shaped counter that enveloped a viewer's chair. Luke eased gingerly into the chair and at the flip of a switch, numerous holographic file folders rose from the slate black countertop that read: *INVENTORY, STAFF, EMERGENCY PROTOCOLS, PATIENTS...*

Luke stopped and stared at the folder. Something deep within the recesses of his mind told him that he was looking in the right place.

Why can't I remember anything? How did I get here?

Luke glanced down and for the first time noticed that he was in a hospital gown. As he looked at his reflection in the black countertop, he didn't notice anything particularly unusual. Staring back at him was an athletic 35 year old male with short brown hair and inquisitive green eyes. The only difference was a faded purple bruise above his left cheekbone about the size of a baseball.

Was I in an accident? Retrograde amnesia would be a logical explanation if I'm having trouble recalling the last several weeks.

Looking back to the shimmering folder, he touched the peach colored object lightly and it began to multiply into 26 smaller folders emblazoned with a single bold letter.

I guess looking up my file is the best place to start.

Scanning through until he reached **S**, Luke opened the folder and gawked as an endless list of names rolled across multiple, floating displays filling his field of vision. At the bottom corner of the floating dialog boxes was an indicator that read "1/4053."

My God, how big is this hospital?

Typing in his last name Luke had just enough time to see the results before he felt the hand come around the front of his neck performing a perfectly executed chokehold. As he struggled against his attacker he felt the slight pinch of a hypodermic needle that he guessed was filled with Midazolam, a benzodiazepine used primarily for sedation. Before his vision went black, he made out the following information:

Name:	Admitted:	Room:	Wing:
Lucas Shepard	9/17/2230	B832	D

****Notes: Admitted along with a Cassadee Knight (Wing M; Floor 1; Room 12)**

Cassadee Knight’s eyes opened to the bright Colorado sun streaming in through the floor to ceiling windows that comprised the east wall of the bedroom. She stretched tenderly, trying to shake off the last traces of fatigue that clung to her tired, but well-toned muscles.

This is my punishment for not stretching after my sprint routine.

As she got up and walked over to the window, she couldn’t help but marvel at the stunning view in front of her. In the distance loomed the crisp, snowcapped peaks of the continental divide reflecting tender hues of orange, red, and purple created by the early morning sun. A faint cry broke the serenity of the morning as a hawk flew over the glass and steel framed cottage. Knowing the Red-tailed Hawk’s call all too well, Cassadee strained to make out the red colorations that should be visible on the tail feathers. The hawk banked right and continued to glide smoothly on the thin air currents that characterized the Rocky Mountain air. Suddenly, the hawk folded its wings as it dipped downward into an accelerated, but controlled nosedive. When it was several feet from the ground, the bird beat its wings brandishing its impressive pectoral muscles, allowing it to hover above the ground for the fraction of a second it needed to grab its prey. Propelling itself back to cruising altitude, Cassadee could see the faint resemblance of a small rodent clutched in the raptor’s massive talons.

Regardless of what anyone says, the view out here never gets old.

Basking for a moment in the warm early morning sunlight, Cassadee ran her fingers through her long amber hair trying to remember the last time she could hear herself think. Living in Chicago had a few advantages, mostly relating to her research, but clean and solitary living were not one of them. Granted, advances in technology and medicine had improved the lives of many. However, as surmised by Sir Issac Newton, “every reaction has an equal and opposite reaction.”

The leaps and bounds made by the healthcare industry worked so well, that people were able to live until the telomeres on their genes finally gave out at roughly 150 years. Essentially, human life was limited only by the built-in biological fuses attached to the end of genes.

Replications to the DNA strand throughout life would shorten the telomere until, after copious replications, the telomere would cease to exist

and replication would stop. Granted, scientists had already found a way to extend telomers indefinitely, but the current overpopulation crisis made the enactment of this breakthrough unthinkable.

Their once beautiful cities were retrofitted to accommodate millions of people more than their capacities would allow. Transportation had to be rationed and their food was plentiful, albeit tasteless, due to the scientifically created Vitopak. This breakthrough was due to the scientists at Boston's Children Hospital who found a way to infuse oxygen directly into the blood so patients could retain oxygenated blood for the duration of a complicated surgery.

Now they are allowing us to inject pure calories, vitamins, and other nutrients in order to avoid a food shortage. The idea is imaginative, but it's also extremely demoralizing not being able to experience a human desire so basic and natural.

It seemed as if their only hope of escaping this failing world was to abandon it – or at least some of it. Once underfunded in the Bush administration, NASA and the other aeronautic programs around the globe had become their last beacon of hope. Upon the discovery of large deposits of water on several of the Galilean and Saturnian moons, the Exodus Program was immediately given the full backing of both the government and private sectors. That is where her research came into the picture. Since the development of the Gateway, a space elevator that anchored London to a multiplatform launch station positioned in a geostationary orbit, armies of mathematicians, physicists, and engineers were needed to calculate the equations needed to launch a shuttle every hour to the distant, terraformed moons. Cassadee was tasked with developing the necessary differential equations needed to keep the shuttles traveling to Europa stable during launch and descent. After 7 years of research, she believed that the answer to the problem lay in clearing her head and taking a step back.

Turning away from the mountains, Cassadee walked over to her dresser and began to put on a pair of green cargo pants when she heard a noise emanate from the bed behind her. She turned to find Luke turning violently with his hand clasped around his throat. She crossed the room with the agility of a trained sprinter and held him steady in her embrace until he woke, gasping for breath, his faced soaked with sweat.

For a brilliant bio-psychologist, I wish he could do something about these recurring nightmares. He's helped so many people and yet he cannot seem to help himself.

"Hey...hey, it's alright I'm here. You're safe," Cassadee cooed in his ear.

After Luke regained his senses, he laid back onto the soft white pillows and stared silently up at the cream colored ceiling.

"And I thought we came out here to clear our minds" "We did, you're just having a hard time adjusting."

Luke rolled over toward Cassadee feeling the kindness that radiated from her warm hazel eyes.

"Yeah, well if I was any good at my profession I would be able to understand why I'm having reoccurring nightmares about wandering around a dark, depressing hospital." "Did you find anything new while you were evading the guards?"

"Yeah, I found an admittance log with my name on it. I found your name too." "Now is that so? Why did we come in?"

"I don't know. The guard sedated me before I was able to find more details about our accident."

"What makes you think there was an accident?"

Luke looked at the continental divide in the background. The sun's intense radiance had already burned off the soft warm colors, leaving the mountains fully exposed, revealing every crevice, canyon, and high-mountain lake.

"I don't know, except I did find a bruise on my cheek" "Well, you look fine to me"

Cassadee pulled away from Luke and stood up beside the nightstand.

"So are you ready for our backpacking trip to Gray's Peak?" Cassadee asked as she put on her Timex triathlon watch.

"Of course, it's one of the reasons why we came out here. I still think you are being slightly optimistic. Nothing against sprinters, but are you sure you can handle a 7-mile hike with a 3600 foot elevation gain? It is called a mountain for a reason."

"Oh, you and your condescending attitude toward sprinters!" retorted Cassadee in a mock-serious tone. "You know, we may not be long distance

marathon runners like you, but we can still hold up under the tough conditions of mountain climbing. You have your niche in the running community to fill, and I have mine. That being said, I particularly enjoy watching your attempts at running the 400 meter. Your sprinting attempts remind me of a limping giraffe.”

Actually, I may be sugar-coating it. In reality, it looks much worse.

“It may be fun for you, but it is utter agony to me. My legs were never meant to turn over that fast. Anyway, you can start packing and I’ll make us a traditional breakfast of omelets and orange juice. Let’s be ready to go at 0900 hours.”

“Luke, come on, speak English time and not that government mumbo-jumbo. Don’t you get tired of the government lingo since you work for them every day?”

“It starts to grow on you after a year or two. You didn’t happen to see my research journal did you?”

“No, I haven’t seen it today. You were working pretty late on it last night in the kitchen. I’d start looking there. You never did tell me what exactly you are working on.”

“Come on Cassadee I’d tell you if I could. Everything I’m working on is classified.”

“One of these days you’re going to tell me, regardless of whether it’s classified. You know that I can help you work through problems, and the sooner you realize that the sooner you’ll let me help you.”

With a curt nod Luke got dressed and went downstairs to make breakfast and look for his journal.

3 – Project Morpheus [Classified R&D Notes]

9/10/2230

Experimenter Notes:

0800 hours

This morning patients #521-525 appear to be behaving better than patients #518-520 after undergoing last night's treatment. The increase of lysergic acid diethylamide by 10% in addition to the modification of electrical impulses (see attached Figure 68 for EEG readouts and the condition settings) appear to cause a rapid and complete immersion into the N1 sleep stage. Alpha brain waves (12.05 ± 1.62 Hz) transition to theta waves (5.10 ± 1.16 Hz) at the 25 minute mark. Transitions from the N2 to the N3 sleep stage are also improving at a faster rate. Subjects are now declining into these deeper stages of sleep in as little as 30 minutes. Yet, transitioning into REM sleep is still problematic and sporadic since subjects do not spend more than 20-23% in this desired state. Altering the mixture of hormones may allow REM sleep percentages to increase.

Next, patients will need a new infusion of trace levels of hormones added to the electrotherapy and mild psychedelic treatment. Paul will administer tonight's treatment and inform me of any progress tomorrow. This is, of course, assuming that he doesn't traumatize the patients with his horrendous bedside manner.

4 – Personals

Personal Notes: 9/10/2230

There are only seven more days until I take Cassadee out to Colorado. I have the perfect hike picked out for her (if she can manage it). We should even be able to get there while the aspens are changing color. There's absolutely nothing like it – the colors, the elk rutting, and the first traces of the brisk air that will usher in the Rocky Mountain winter. I'd take the cold any day compared to what we have here. The city is starting to get to me again – the dirt, the smog, and the conglomeration of humanity that engulf everything below the Company's high-rise. I have nearly everything figured out in the lab in order to send the results upstairs for analysis, review, and implementation. I am disappointed that no one will ever know my team was the group that helped resolve the population crisis. Yet, I wish we could exclude Paul from the report. I hate his smug and sadistic personality, which seems to hinder the project more than advance it. Why anyone chose him to be the assistant director of this project is beyond me.

To Do List:

1. Go to the store
 - a. Buy hiking supplies and packaged food items
(ideally not Vitopak)
 - b. Arrange for transportation and clearance out of the city
2. Pick up engagement ring (and try not to lose it)

The drive out to the Gray’s Peak was a typical drive through the thick spruce and fir forests that comprise the majority of Colorado’s wilderness. The pockets of wild aspen that dotted the drive through Arapaho National Forest reminded Cassadee of ornaments decorating a Christmas tree. Some aspen groves were crimson red, others were golden yellow, and a few had an orange color that would make even the most majestic sunset jealous.

Beautiful, simply beautiful.

After driving for several hours down I-70, Luke turned the Jeep Wrangler down Forest Service Road 189 where they bumped, bobbed, and weaved down the unimproved path until they reached the isolated trailhead. The couple quickly, but carefully donned their backpacking gear and headed down the trail toward Gray’s Peak that towered overhead at 14,200 feet.

Despite the early morning frost and last night’s torrential downpour, the hiking was fairly easygoing as they hiked up Steven’s Gulch. The sweeping panoramic views of craggy Mt. Edwards, Torrey’s Peak, and Kelso Mountain were absolutely breathtaking causing Luke to stop every couple of minutes in order to capture their grandeur in a photo.

“Luke! At this rate we will get to the summit when the snow melts in the spring!”

Cassadee was already several meters ahead and gaining as Luke fumbled with the settings on his Canon Horizon T8.

“Yeah, I’m coming!” yelled Luke as he picked up his gear and ran after her.

Several hours before dusk the two arrived at the top of the ridge where they picked a protected spot and began to set up camp. After two hours, Cassadee had successfully set up the fire pit, shelter, and their freeze-dried dinner, while Luke had collected enough fire fuel to last them through the night if need be.

As dusk began to set in the water colored sky, the two admired their well-coordinated handiwork with smug satisfaction.

Ha, look at that teamwork! Bear Grylls eat your heart out!

“Hey Cassadee, come with me for a minute, I have something to show you.”

Cassadee looked at him curiously, but with a reassuring smile from Luke, she followed him across the grass-strewn tundra.

Okay, you've got this Luke. Just keep it short. Don't do anything fancy and for God's sake breathe!

Luke led the way around the boulders scattered on the tundra as he and Cassadee walked up the steep slope of the ridge. As they reached the precipice, Cassadee's senses were utterly overwhelmed. Before her stretched the west slope of the rocky ridge as it descended into groves of yellow, red, and orange quaking aspens. Even from a distance she could hear the harmonic rustling as the wind danced among their leaves. On the slopes of the ridge a herd of nearly 60 elk were peacefully grazing on the tender alpine grasses. And yet, above it all loomed clouds that had erupted into hues of purple, red, and orange that cast gentle streaks across the horizon silhouetting Grizzly Peak in the distance.

"My God, it's beautiful." Cassadee whispered as she sat down on a particularly comfortable boulder.

"It is," replied Luke as he bent down on one knee. "And there is no one else I'd want to share it with than you. Two years ago I was a wreck. Working 70 hours a week on my research, I didn't have a life. My research was the only thing that gave my life meaning. And then, in one of my weaker moments, I decided to go to that track and do sprint intervals to help remedy my lackluster kick to the finish line. And for God knows why, you saw a hopeless case and tried to help me."

Actually, nothing she did really helped. I guess it was the thought that counted.

"During the course of those agonizing months, I got to find out everything about you – your, patience, persistent curiosity, and your compassion. I've seen how our story starts, but now I want to see how it plays out. Cassadee I would do anything for you since I love you in ways you couldn't fathom. I want to wake up every morning and share the sunrise with you. I want to come home and sit awestruck with you as the colors dance away behind the curtains of the horizon.

Cassadee...will...will you marry me?"

Well that went better than expected. It was a little mushy in spots, but it was heartfelt and that's what I was going for.

As Luke progressed through his speech Cassadee looked at him with amusement as a smile grew across her face. By the end she was fighting to hold back the tears long enough for him to finish. Unfortunately for Luke, between the onslaught of natural beauty emanating from the landscape and Luke's obviously rehearsed speech, it took a couple of seconds for Cassadee to register what just happened. While she only needed a moment to regain her voice, she realized that it must have felt like an eternity for Luke. After realizing that his complexion had turned several shades lighter, due to not breathing, she bent down and hugged him just as the levee burst.

“Yes, of course you knucklehead, it's about damn time you asked!”

He was back in the hospital. Except this time he was lying on the tile floor somewhere that appeared to look like a broom closet. As Luke pulled himself upright, he noticed a slight sting in his left arm. Looking down he saw the end of a needle that was once attached to an IV line.

Great, now I'm being drugged.

As he pulled out the remnants of the needle Luke looked around and quickly found an emergency exit hologram that illustrated the evacuation routes of the wing.

Wonderful, so I'm on floor B6 in Wing D. Now I just need to get to the ground floor and find Wing M. Maybe "dream Cassadee" will have some answers.

Luke was about to leave when he noticed a room on the map that read:

Laundry Pickup

After dodging a couple of doctors, Luke made his way to the room where he awkwardly changed into an orderly's uniform amid the haze of the drugs.

Is it just me or is this room warping? What kind of drugs did they put into me?

After mustering all the coordination he could achieve in his state, Luke walked out of

the laundry room and headed toward the elevator. He walked in and tapped the button for the first floor. Just before the elevator closed shut a glass clipboard appeared between the doors causing the elevator to jolt as the doors jerked back open. A short man donning a white lab coat entered with his clipboard and pressed the button for the B4th floor. Luke gave the man a courteous nod and then quickly looked away in case the doctor noticed his dilated pupils – an obvious sign of being drugged. The doctor replied with a nod of his own and then tapped a button on his clipboard which revealed a three dimensional image of the human brain. The doctor highlighted several lobes with his hand and then began to jot a few notes at the bottom of his digital clipboard. As the bell tolled and the elevator doors opened, the doctor stepped out and Luke peered down the hallway. This floor was similar to the 6th floor, except this section of the hospital had dozens of patients sedated in

glass viewing areas where dozens of doctors patrolled, observed the patients' vitals, and made the occasional adjustment to the plethora of devices attached to the individuals. Before the doors closed Luke made out the words that were at the top of the departing doctor's clipboard.

Project Morpheus – Pilot Studies

Luke's mind was spinning. Whether his confusion was created by the drugs or the sudden revelation that his research was an integral part of his dream was beyond his comprehension.

Deeper I go down this convoluted rabbit hole. Ugh...here we go, more spinning. Maybe my subconscious is trying to tell me something about my research. Is it immoral? No! It helps save lives – it helps save our sanity.

Luke had just reached the ground floor when the elevator bell set off a cascade of colors inside his head. As he stumbled out of the elevator, he felt as if his legs were about to buckle underneath him. Struggling to stay upright, he tried to keep the encroaching fog in his mind at bay for long enough to reach someplace secluded.

[Blue, crimson, purple] Focus! First door is a doctor's private office. [Yellow, jade, pink, magenta] Second door is a...women's restroom. [Brown, silver, emerald, amber, orange] Third door is a linen closet. Perfect! It even has a lock on the inside.

Moments before passing out, Luke dove for the closet where he was somehow able to fall inside and lock the door behind him before collapsing into a stack of bed sheets.

What is truth? It is whatever we want it to be. Then is it really truth, or is it simply our subjectively-based perceptions of the world? Are we naïve? Can we live a life that is a lie? Of course we can! It is only a lie if someone opens our eyes to the truth. Then what is truth?

8 – Project Morpheus [Classified R&D Notes]

9/15/2230

Experimenter Notes (General Observations):

0800 hrs

Paul reported that the subjects are behaving as predicted. The stronger drug cocktail allows them to descend deeper into the N3 and even REM sleep. Also, Pyridoxine shows potential for allowing individuals to store their dreams in the hippocampus for long-term storage. Yet the patients suffer from frequent arousals if something or someone injures them mid-dream. Stronger sedatives may help, but we must proceed with caution as an overdose could prove fatal.

Cassadee woke up beside the obviously distressed Luke who was tossing aggressively from side to side in his sleeping bag.

“Luke! Wake up! LUKE!”

Cassadee pinned his arms and head so he wouldn’t hurt himself. Eventually, Luke’s eyes, full of fear and confusion, shot open and glanced around wildly. Yet, when he found Cassadee’s gaze his posture relaxed and his rapid breathing slowed.

“You know I have a bottle of sleeping pills in my bag that you can use.”

“NO! No drugs! I mean, thanks, but I’d prefer not to take any drugs. Last night’s dream featured a particularly ‘trippy’ LSD excursion.”

“Now wait a minute, how would your subconscious know what being on LSD feels like?” “Well, I study it in my research, and I am a psychologist. I suppose my mind was able to fill in the blanks.”

“Maybe I should put in a couple of requests for my nighttime dreams. I’ve read enough about Callisto and Europa; maybe my mind can put me there in a dream so I can walk around on it.” “You would be surprised at the amount of information your subconscious holds and its ability to construct a scene.”

“With the way you were turning last night and this morning, I have no doubt that your mind is doing a fantastic job,” commented Cassadee sarcastically.

As the couple ate breakfast and broke camp, Luke’s mind wandered back to his dream and the implications it made about his research. He looked nervously down at his pack which contained his research journal.

There’s something he’s not telling me. If only he would let go and let me in. What has he been working on during the last 10 years that involves LSD? What is the government trying to do?

The second half of the hike was more strenuous compared to the first leg. Besides being higher in elevation, the trail climbed steeply through vast meadows of alpine tundra filled with sharp talus rock, boulders, and the endless expanse of tundra grass that rose up to meet the Colorado blue sky. Onward they hiked toward the ominous peak standing resolute in the distance.

“Boulder field ahead!” called Cassadee as the bend in the trail revealed a section of path that meandered through countless human-sized talus deposits that littered the hill above the swiftly moving Quayle Creek.

“Well, they’re not exactly boulders, but I guess they’re close enough,” corrected Luke playfully.

Cassadee looked back at him unfazed.

“You don’t always have to be so technical you know,” Cassadee said rolling her eyes. “Just let loose of the technicalities once in a while. Take me, I always try to live life foot loose and fancy...”

Cassadee’s last words were stifled in her throat as the ground beneath her gave way.

Talking back to Luke had distracted her from the flat piece of talus that was balanced precariously on the edge of the trail. Walking on the rock had shifted the gravel that was holding the sheet in place, causing the rock and Cassadee to cascade down the incline. Like a snowboarder riding down a double black diamond, Cassadee gripped onto the large, flat rock as she careened down the hill.

With a look of horror on his face, Luke watched helplessly as the distance between them increased. Immediately, Luke collected a few essentials from his pack and raced down the slope covered with the dangerously sharp pieces of weathered rock.

He’ll never get here in time. I can either jump off and fillet myself on the rocks or I can take my chances with the river. I pick the river.

Luke barreled down the hill trying to ignore the pain in his legs as the talus quickly shredded his olive-colored cargo pants.

“I will not lose her,” he muttered under his breath. “I can get to her.”

As Cassadee reached the bottom of the hill, the rock beneath her snagged on the remnants of a gnarled tree root and threw her violently into the river fed by glacier runoff. The collision with the surface of the river knocked the wind out of her, but worse, the icy current prevented her from regaining it. Even though she was a seasoned swimmer, she was unprepared for the challenges the near-freezing, fast-moving water presented. Several powerful strokes brought her closer toward shore, but at the expense of her body temperature. She calculated that she only had a couple of minutes before she would enter shock. As she looked ahead, she saw a bend in the creek.

*If I time my strokes until I'm halfway through the bend, I may be able to use the stream's momentum to get to shore. Now here comes the bend.
Three...two...ONE!*

At the apex of the bend Cassadee used the last of her strength to execute several powerful overhand-strokes tangential to the current. Her strokes, added to her already large momentum, proved to be enough to get her out of the fast moving center of the creek and into the slower moving shallows. Crawling out of the river up the pebble-riddled beach, Cassadee noticed that the only thing worse than the icy river was the merciless wind that tore through her soaked clothes.

I'm numb; literally every part of me is numb.

After what seemed like forever, Luke arrived beside Cassadee who was now turning a light shade of blue. He quickly removed his outer two layers and the reflective heat blanket he had collected from his pack. After removing her wet layers, he wrapped himself and every dry piece of fabric around Cassadee.

"I've got you. I've got you." Luke repeated as Cassadee closed her eyes trying to block out the pain that was now erupting from her warming extremities.

10 – Personals

Personal Notes: 9/16/2230

I can't believe there are only two more days until I take Cassadee to Colorado. So far I don't think that she has any idea of my intentions to propose to her. I've got it all planned out, but I know what happens to the best made plans. That's why I have eighteen contingencies! They say that chance favors the prepared mind. I was able to rent us a Jeep Wrangler and a pass out of the city at daybreak before the city reaches its deadlock state. It'll be nice to drive down Lakeshore Drive when the sun comes up over the lake. I know how much Cassadee loves the sunrise – it'll be the perfect start to our little getaway.

To Do List:

1. Pick up the jeep and make sure we have enough fuel cells to reach Iowa.

“Well, I can’t say that you don’t put excitement in my life,” commented Luke as Cassadee sat up in a sleeping bag next to a blazing fire.

“Yeah, if it weren’t for me your life would be boring,” Cassadee said weakly.

“Here, try some of these energy bars and green tea. They should warm you up and give you some of your strength back.”

“Thanks. What you did back there, that crazy stunt on the talus slope, you know you are an idiot right?”

Wow gratitude is not exactly her strong suite.

“Yeah, I’m the idiot that saved you.”

“Yes...but you shouldn’t have risked your life for me. There is no need for both of us to die on this mountain.”

“Well I guess I’m more like you than I thought. I try and save the hopeless cases too.”

Cassadee giggled as she sipped her tea. Night had fallen hours ago, plunging the landscape into an abyss-like darkness. Luke admired the amorphous flames of their campfire that danced in the lonely and chilled night, reciprocated by the twinkling starlight of a trillion Milky Way stars. Far away a pack of wolves howled in the darkness, breaking the eerie silence that had settled over the pine forest.

“Thank you. You know, for not giving up on me,” said Cassadee looking up from the simmering surface of her green tea.

“You are going to have to do a lot better than jumping into a freezing river to get away from me,” replied Luke shifting his gaze away from the heavens.

“I know it’s morbid, but what would you have done...if you couldn’t have gotten to me in time?”

“I don’t know. I guess I would feel guilty. I would replay it over and over trying to see if there was something I could have done differently.”

“There is always something that we could have done differently. I could have done this, you could have done that. You can’t relive a situation in your head trying to change things; otherwise you’ll spend your life in the past.”

“It’s not that simple. You are telling me that if something happened to me, you wouldn’t try to figure out whether there was something you could have done?”

“Of course I would. But, I would try and not blame myself for being unable to stop it. Some things are just unseeable, unavoidable, and ultimately out of our control. Sooner or later you’ll have to put it in God’s hands; otherwise you will drive yourself insane trying to control things that were never meant to be controlled. Luke I love you, but sometimes my little control freak, you have to learn to let go.”

“Yeah, that’s easy for you to say.”

“You’re right; I can’t imagine how you must have felt. All I can do is have faith that everything happens for a reason, and that He’ll take care of us.”

“So what exactly would be the reason for you dying? How would you drowning in a river improve anything?”

“I don’t know. I’d like to think that every difficult situation I face has a purpose. As soon as I start believing that challenges have no purpose, that suffering has no purpose, then that is when my life starts to lose its purpose. ‘I am not skilled to understand, what God has willed what God has planned.’ That is a line from one of my favorite gospel songs. It reminds me that despite having misfortune dumped on me, there must be a reason even if I am not able to see it.”

“Yeah, I remember my mother telling me something similar to that once. ‘God grant me the serenity to accept the things I cannot change, the courage to change the things I can, and the wisdom to know the difference.’ It’s too bad it’s easier said than done.” “All the important things in life usually are.”

Luke opened his eyes staring up at the bleach-white ceiling.

Here we go again. You know Luke the fact that you are aware that you're dreaming should give you an advantage. How many patients did you treat with trauma and reoccurring nightmares before you joined the government? Every time they entered a dream aware that they were dreaming, they were able to control their surroundings. It is one of the hallmarks of lucid dreaming we learn in Psychology 101. Maybe if I try and imagine I'm with Cassadee... ouch! Apparently that's not going to work.

Luke grabbed his head, aware of the throbbing pain spreading radially from his frontal lobe.

I guess teleportation is out of the question then. I'll just have to find Cassadee the old-fashioned way.

Luke got up, still dressed as an orderly and exited the cramped linen closet. He walked for what seemed like an hour through floors that contained patients with dozens of psychiatric conditions monitored continuously by doctors. Every one of them was attached to dozens of cords that emanated out from an endless row of medical equipment. Medical equipment ranging from re-atomizers to AI's that regulated their body functions were used in order to "normalize" the patients' abnormal thinking.

What is abnormal but a deviation from what is typical? Is change really something that we need to correct?

At one point, Luke stopped and stared at a nurse who was wheeling the newly patented STIP (Stimulus Treatment for Immobilized Patients) machine down the hallway. The machines were a miracle for coma patients, whose muscles atrophied due to their prolonged immobilized state. What's more, the machines provide enough neuronal stimulation to allow patients to keep control of their peripheral nervous system since especially prolonged comas cause patients to "forget" how to work their limbs. Yet, despite decades of research, the machine was still not able to stimulate the brain to a high enough level to prevent irreversible brain loss. Their bodies work, but their minds fail them.

Luke reminded himself that his current objective was finding Cassadee, not gawking at a piece of equipment. He hurried down a corridor until he reached a set of large stainless steel doors that must have been at least

a half-foot thick. From the one side the doors were protected by several keypads. One of them looked like a retinal scanner while the other required a nine-digit PIN number. Above the door hung two security cameras that monitored each side of a long hallway that ended with another set of double doors. Luckily for Luke, there was relatively no security for those leaving this area. Curiously, Luke pushed in on the push bar expecting to heave the doors open. Surprisingly, the well-balanced doors open with a slight touch and Luke exited the heavily secured area. As he stepped out Luke looked back and read the sign positioned over the door.

Restricted Access – Secret Clearance Required

Luke only had a moment to realize that the second security camera had turned toward him. During the early 21st century, facial recognition programs had relied on a series of facial markers that allowed a computer program to identify a human face with mediocre results at best. Now, however, with the advent of advanced 3-D imaging, holographic facial scans used for the state-mandated identification cards, and AI supercomputers, facial recognition had become an art. It now allowed for a near perfect match of an individual within seconds. Deciding that the computer would positively identify him anyway, Luke turned and attempted a sprint down the hallway toward the second set of double doors. Within seconds, the white fluorescent light were cut and replaced by malicious red security lights as a well-built security guard entered the hallway from an adjacent door.

“STOP!” the trim officer cried as he closed in on Luke. “Seal the doors. I repeat, SEAL THE DOORS!”

Only feet from the second set of double doors, Luke threw himself the last couple of feet and crashed into the push bar half-expecting to break his ribs on the wall of reinforced steel that he presumed was now locked.

13 – Personal

Personal Notes: 9/17/2230

I have my bag packed and Cassadee and I have loaded everything into the Wrangler. We have about another hour or so before the sun rises and our departure time arrives. We are leaving. I can't get it through my mind that we are leaving this God-forsaken city. What I would give if we could spend the rest of our lives out under the clear, blue skies in the mountains. It's true that it would be selfish since our research could save thousands of lives, but still, there comes a point when you begin to question why we are invested in our work. Why should we release the plague that has destroyed countless peoples, cultures, and ecosystems? Who are we to unleash this devastating force onto another world? In some ways it is sad that we are forced to throw our lot in with a species that is so narcissistic and selfish. Perhaps my negativity stems from this disgusting environment, yet I feel as though humans do too little too late. Who's to say that if we are given another world, we won't just ruin it as well? Do we even deserve a second chance?

Outside a remarkably dense set of double doors, a young child sat on a bench playing with a small, life-like Brachiosaurus as his father relieved himself in the men’s restroom. The Brachiosaurus was leaning down to take a bite of virtual grass when a man dressed in a white uniform seemingly flew through the doors and skidded to a halt a few feet away on the smooth tile. The little boy thought he could hear the sound of a faint click emanate from the heavy doors behind him. The stranger looked up at the little hazel-eyed boy, smiled, and then headed down the hallway that led to the general admission area.

“Nice dinosaur kid,” the man said as he rounded the corner.

The father reemerged from the restroom and noticed his son’s apparent confusion. “What is it?” the father asked.

“It was a man who flew through those double doors. He liked my Brachiosaurus!” squeaked the child.

“Okay Ryan, whatever you say.” “NO REALLY, he was here!”

“Okay, I believe you. Now let’s go find your mother and get to Oncology. We don’t want to miss your re-atomization therapy.”

“Sure Dad,” the little boy chimed. As he walked away from the strange section of the hospital that he and his directionally-challenged father had wandered into, he almost thought he could hear the faint sounds of banging coming from within the windowless, stainless steel doors.

Luke approached the receptionist desk in what appeared to be the largest waiting room he had ever seen. Despite its size, nurses were admitting several patients at a time, which effectively kept up with the steady stream of sick individuals who trickled in off the dusty street.

“Excuse me miss. I appear to be a little lost on my first day. I’m looking for M Wing.”

The blond-haired receptionist looked up from her holographic screens and looked at what appeared to be an orderly who was having a particularly difficult day.

“Sure thing, just go through these doors, turn left, and it’ll be on your right. Let me buzz you in.”

Luke had reached the double doors when the receptionist got a call on her headset listed as urgent. She had just buzzed him in when her eyes widened in panic as she tore her hand away from the red button. She looked back toward the door to try and get him to come back, but the door was already swinging shut behind him.

I’m almost there. I just need to make a left and then Cassadee and I can figure this out together.

As he turned the corner and walked through the first door on the right, his first thought was that this was a strange place to keep a patient. The lights were bright and the smell of disinfectant was extremely strong. However, the most prominent feature of this room was the cold. Yet despite the frigid temperature, Luke’s chill originated from within himself as he realized that he wasn’t in a section designed for patients at all – at least not for patients who were still living.

“No...” Luke whispered as his knees buckled underneath him. His hands hit the ground bringing him to all fours as he vomited into a bucket underneath a gurney. Laid before him were dozens of rooms arranged in a radial pattern spiraling outward from the central examination room. Each room contained a wall that contained hundreds of drawers in which Luke expected lay cadavers.

“You are a sly one doctor, I give you that,” said a hollow voice echoing off the numerous metallic instruments in the room.

Luke got up and faced the slim man who was making his way toward the center of the examination room. The man must have been in his late 60's, made apparent by his white hair and cane. Luke eyed the white lab coat and the digital clipboard that the man carried in his left hand.

"This is a dream. This isn't real!" Luke shouted at the man. The reverberations caused by his voice rattled the scissors, forceps, and dissection blades that were sitting on a nearby instrument tray.

"Now how did you come to that conclusion, Luke? Is this a dream because you want it to be, or is this in fact reality?"

"If this is reality, then it's not one that I want to be a part of."

"Now there, let's be a little less melodramatic shall we? What do you remember?" "What are you talking about? What kind of things should I remember?"

"Let me rephrase. What is the last thing you remember about you? Who are you and what do you do?"

"My name is Lucas Shepard and I'm a bio-psychologist who works for the CIA. My research is based on allowing patients to enter into a dream state that allows them to create ultra-real simulations."

Wait, was Colorado a simulation? Was Colorado my simulation on a program I helped to design?

"Now we are getting somewhere, Luke. Let us proceed."

"How do I know that this is not a simulation? How do I know that I didn't create all of this to help me work through the moral dilemmas of the Morpheus Project?" Luke was close to tears, trying to hang on to this last thread of hope. The frail man stepped closer causing Luke to step back behind the steel gurney.

"Easy Luke, I'm just reaching for a stool. My tired legs have almost had their limit of physical exertion today from chasing you up and down this damn hospital. As you might have guessed by now, this is not just a hospital."

"Yeah, tell me about it! When was the last time hospitals had wings with Secret Security clearances and next generation facial recognition?"

"You're right. This hospital has a special wing that conducts research for the CIA. In particular, that wing conducts your research, Project Morpheus. Do you remember yet?"

“Sure, I remember my own project! That still doesn’t explain why I’m here, if I’m really here, why I was drugged, and why I don’t remember anything else.”

“Luke, you are a psychologist use your head. You can’t remember anything because you were in an accident and you have retrograde amnesia. However, most of your confusion is caused by the numerous drugs you have in your system.” It was apparent that the older man was growing tired of arguing with the immovable younger doctor.

“I don’t think so,” Luke responded. “This is a reflection of my subconscious that is telling me what will happen if my project is a success. Thousands of people will be forced to live a lie. They will be put into a medically induced coma. They will exist in a made-up reality built by their subconscious and acted out in their dreams. They will live and die without ever living at all. I no longer care that it will help overpopulation, since what this is, isn’t real.”

“So you would rather let people lead miserable lives instead of letting them live in ignorant bliss? That’s not the same Lucas Shepard that I once knew.”

“I guess my ordeal has given me clarity then doctor.”

“Doctor? Ha, really? Come on now Luke, you don’t remember the person you’ve worked with for the last ten years?”

Wait he does look vaguely familiar. His name is...Paul.

“Your name is Paul, Paul Callowell. You were the assistant director of the project,” Luke stammered as he eyed the sinister dissection equipment lying next to him.

“Yes, I *am* the assistant director of this program, and you, Luke, are the director. But unlike me, you were unwilling to take steps with this project that I was willing to take. You saw something malicious and deceptive and you tried to turn it into something far more poetic.”

“What are you talking about?” Luke shouted as several guards appeared in the doorway. “Why am I here?”

“It is okay gentlemen – I will need no assistance with Dr. Shepard at this time. You may stand outside,” said Dr. Callowell casually waving off the guards who reluctantly stepped back into the shadows of the hallway. “Luke, tell me about the morning Cassadee and you left for Colorado.”

“I waited with her outside our apartment for our departure window. Then we packed our bags into the back of the Wrangler and we drove south on Lake Shore Drive. We wanted to catch the sunrise over the lake.”

“Yes, yes, keep going,” urged the doctor who was now leaning forward interested in the spectacle developing in front of him.

“We were driving west on I-290 about to cross I-90, but some driver missed his exit so he cut over two lanes trying to get to the exit ramp. His bumper clipped the side of our Jeep. We were spinning....”

Luke held his head in his hands as vivid flashes of that morning cut through the haze of his memory. He had broken out into a cold sweat, and he tried to regain his composure despite his rapidly beating heart that was now thundering in his ears. His entire body felt numb, but he continued.

“We were stopped by the kinetic barriers lining the guard rails, but several cars behind us crashed into us, forcing our jeep over the guard rail and onto the off ramp several feet below. We rolled, but for how long I can’t remember. All I can remember are her screams. The emergency crews appeared shortly after the hydrogen fuel cells started leaking. There must have been some spark from the electric engine since there was a small fire that had appeared from underneath the hood. They were able to get us out, since they drenched us in flame-retardant liquid. There was a firefighter there who dragged me away...”

It is hot and dry. The dusty air sweeps over me as I try to open my eyes. I’m upside down suspended in my seat restraints.

“Sir, I’m with the Chicago Fire department. I’m here to help you. We need to get you away from the crash site.

“No, please, save the girl!”

“Sir, we have someone attending to her. But, now we need to get you out while we still can.”

Flames, burning rubber, and sirens fill the air. People are screaming and running. Firefighters are spraying the mangled piece of metal that once served as a vehicle with F-foam. Its smell is putrid, but it crystallizes with the metal on contact incasing it in a crystalized, fireproof sheath. Cassadee is on the other side of the off ramp with another firefighter. He calls to someone back at the engine. Soon an ambulance is racing up the off ramp toward us. Two paramedics get out and run toward Cassadee who lies limp on the ground. They bend down to take her vitals as they pull out their equipment. One frowns as the

other shakes his head. The one who frowned begins performing CPR as the other charges the paddles of a defibrillator. Shock! Cassadee's body convulses once as the CPR compressions continue. Shock! It all happens in slow motion. I feel a trickle of blood roll down the side of my face where my forehead was cut by the broken glass lying scattered around the scene. Shock! I look back up the road where several people stop and attempt to help the other drivers in the crashed cars. Shock! The highway is now backed up and officers arrive to divert traffic. Shock! The firefighter looks at my face and attempts to close the lacerations with amorphic bandages, but I ignore him and look back toward Cassadee. Shock! The paramedic reaches down and sets the paddles back into their respective holders as the other waves his hand across her face. Then all is still inside my head. I hear no sirens, no screams, and I feel no pain. I hear only silence and feel nothing. That's not true, I feel alone – completely alone.

“So Luke, do you remember now?” asked Dr. Callowell in a hollow tone.

“I do,” responded Luke as his knees crumpled, pulling him to the cold tile where the darkness again enveloped him.

The sun shone brightly on the banks of the Quayle Creek causing Cassadee to squint as she looked upstream. The chill that had plagued her all night had subsided thanks to Luke’s handiwork with the fire, blankets, and endless cups of hot tea. She was thankful that she could have a fiancé who was both caring and resourceful. Yet when Luke woke up she could see that his eyes were empty, as if a giant hole had been cut into his soul.

“Hey, what is it?” Cassadee asked nervously.

Luke glanced back at her. His gaze was hollow – his voice was weak and shaky. “You died.”

“What are you talking about? You pulled me out of the river – I’m right in front of you.” “NO YOU’RE NOT! You are just an elaborate dream created by my project at the CIA.” “Luke, calm down, you’re starting to scare me. Wait, you think this is a dream? Why would you dream about almost killing me?”

“Correction, why would I dream about saving you? I don’t know, maybe because I felt helpless on that exit ramp where I couldn’t do anything to save you – how I couldn’t evade that car on I-290 and prevent that accident. How your death was completely my fault!”

Luke gasped on the thin air trying to fathom the gravity of the situation.

“Wait, are you talking about that car that almost hit us the day we left for Colorado? Luke, you swerved and missed that car – it never hit us.”

“What are talking about? It hit our bumper causing us to hit the kinetic barrier. We spun over the guardrail and they pronounced you dead at the scene!”

“Luke, listen to me, I didn’t die. It was a close call, but we dodged that bullet and made it out here. This is real, not the dream you’ve been having for the past couple of weeks. Come on you’ve been having those dreams since we came out here. You are probably still shaken from that close call, and your mind is playing out the possibility of what *could* have happened. Like it or not, you are going to be stuck with me for a very long time.” Cassadee smiled, but Luke’s expression stood resolute.

“Then explain to me how I had memories inside my dream Cassadee. How is that even possible?”

“You already answered that. Remember when you told me that the brain is a remarkable piece of engineering that can create situations from small pieces of data? You told me that the brain can place us on planets that we have only seen through telescopes, or how it can give us a LSD hallucination despite never using the drug. Please Luke I’m begging you to believe me.”

“I just...can’t. I want to believe that this is real more than anything, since I can’t imagine living without you. But, now I’ll forever question whether this real. That is...unless I can figure out what is really going on. I need to fall back asleep one last time. Do you still have those sleeping pills?”

There’s nothing I can do or say that will convince him that this is real. I have no choice but to let him go back into that accursed dream.

“Of course Luke, I still have a few of them in my bag. They are a little damp, but they should still work. Just know that I’m going to be right here beside you the entire time. You’re not alone in this. I love you Luke – don’t forget that.”

With that Luke kissed his fiancé, downed two of the pills, and awaited Dr. Callowell who he knew would be waiting for him on the other side.

“Round and round we go Luke. What is real, what is an illusion, and is there any difference that separates the two?” croaked Dr. Callowell as he sat on a black leather chair underneath harsh fluorescent lights.

Luke looked up in order to take stock of his surroundings. Apparently he had been moved from the morgue to Dr. Callowell’s office while he slept. Or perhaps he was awake – at this point he wasn’t sure what was real anymore. Wherever he was, he appeared to be sitting on a brown couch in the corner of a large office that looked out at the hospital’s courtyard. Plants of all shapes and colors inhabited the penned in area at the center of the compound. The green courtyard contrasted sharply with the dusty brown habitat that surrounded the hospital grounds.

“Nice office doctor. You could add some color to it though.”

“I don’t see many patients here anyway, and the colors suit me,” shrugged Dr. Callowell. “Was your deceased counterpart able to talk you into believing that this is a dream?”

“All I want is the truth doctor.”

“Ha, all you want is the truth,” mocked Dr. Callowell harshly as he folded his hands on his mahogany desk. “Luke, sometimes the truth can be more twisted than the fantasy. Are you sure you want to go down this road?”

“I have to see this through to the end, regardless of what I may find,” stated Luke in a solemn tone. His disdain for the vile man in front of him was great, but he believed that the doctor held one last piece of this convoluted puzzle.

“Very well Luke. Three weeks after your accident you came to me with a proposition. You asked me whether it would be possible to modify the project to allow for brain stimulation. In essence, you wanted to run tests that would test the rate of brain growth and decay while undergoing the ‘dream therapy.’

You had this crazy notion that you could help finish the Exodus program in honor of your girlfriend. The scientists were able to figure out everything to get to the terraformed moons. They had the flight vectors, the stabilization models completed by Cassadee, and they even had the funding. But, the prolonged travel time posed a problem. If we put the astronauts into a

medically induced coma, then this would allow them to reach the moons while they were still young. The problem is comas have a nasty tendency to atrophy parts of the body that we do not use for sustained periods of time. We were able to stimulate the muscles and nerves to retard the degradation caused by the hibernation-like state with the STIP, but the brain was too complex to stimulate without causing irreversible brain damage. That is when you thought you could hijack this program, *our program*, to suit the needs of a failed project. You spent every night in the lab working through the models in order to make it work. You just couldn't *let...her...go*. You had to figure out this puzzle just so she wouldn't die in vain. You kept saying everything must happen for a reason."

Dr. Callowell got up from his chair and began to walk around his desk looking out the window at the green plants with a profound sense of sadness.

"You see Luke, all of your objective thinking was lost after you became emotionally involved with this girl. You lost sight of the *true* goal of our project, and instead tried to pervert it to aid those who believe that the future of society is beyond this world. Well I'll tell you this, the future isn't on Europa, Callisto, or Ganymede. The future is here and now within our own minds! We have the ability to shape our reality despite inheriting a dying world. The solution shouldn't be to abandon our home for a new one – it should be to fix what we already have. This is perhaps one of God's greatest gifts to us and what did we do with it? WE DESTROYED IT! All in the name of PROFIT!" spat Dr. Callowell in disgust as the echoes of his last statement hung momentarily on the filtered, sterile air.

"Let's not reduce our carbon emission so we can save money on energy, let's fish the oceans until the ecosystems collapse, and let's not enact any population regulations until we are too far gone TO DO ANYTHING ABOUT IT! Despite having the most advanced brain in the animal kingdom, we are perhaps the most idiotic species to roam the planet! So what if we have to trim the human population back to a sustainable level. Plus, with this project, we don't even have to kill anyone! We just put them to sleep to live out the rest of their lives in a fantasy of their choice. Who cares if it isn't real – it's real enough to them! Heck, we deserve far worse for our crimes against this magnificent planet. So yes, I'm bitter that you asked me to alter our project to help the Exodus program. That pitiful excuse for a solution is draining our resources faster by using millions of tons of raw material. We are stripping our planet in order to help the rich escape it. What, do you think that they will be able to accommodate all 90 billion of us? WAKE UP Luke, the only people

that the Exodus program will save are those with deep pockets! THE SAME PEOPLE THAT GOT US INTO THIS DAMN MESS! Why should they be the first off the boat that they poked holes in?"

The doctor looked away from the window and attempted to regain his composure. He returned to his desk where he touched the delicate snow-white petals of an orchid that was sitting in a pot on his desk.

"You know Luke this little fellow is called *Dendrophylax lindenii* or the American ghost orchid. It's a remarkable little plant whose flowers smell like fresh cut Honeycrisp apples.

Unfortunately, they can no longer be found in the wild because their only pollinator, the giant sphinx moth, is extinct. How easy was it for something so delicate and beautiful to be destroyed by something so ugly and selfish? So, I keep this plant to marvel at its beauty and to remind myself of the damage I must help remedy. Now, imagine my sadness when you came to me proposing that we use our project to help advance the Exodus program – the same program that helped destroy the habitat for this flower. I tried to convince you to stick with our original plan, but you were stubborn and persistent."

Dr. Callowell shifted his gaze from the orchid back to Luke.

"But then you asked me to test your new protocol on yourself. You thought you had solved it, and you knew that standard procedure would delay your research for months. So you thought you would try it out first to speed things along."

The doctor's face relaxed and a malicious smile tugged at the sides of his lips.

"So you know what I did? I told myself that I would be doing us both a favor. I would go along with your experiment in order to ease your conscious about killing your girlfriend, and I would get rid of the last obstacle standing between me and the true potential of our research. The ironic thing is that your idea actually worked. Under your revised protocols, your brain didn't decay despite being put under for a month. The only side effects were a little amnesia and confusion, which subsides after being off the 'dream drugs' for about ten hours."

The doctor walked around and sat on the front of his desk smiling broadly at Luke.

“Do you know what the best part is? You have been off of these drugs for about four hours.

Even though you’re regaining your memory, one of the drugs in the cocktail prevents you from being able to differentiate the real memories from the fake ones. I actually take full credit for that little development. We can’t have our patients realizing that their fantasies are fake right?

Otherwise, they would go to sleep and not enjoy themselves. So my question is, how badly do you want the truth? Is it worth losing Cassadee all over again? Does reality matter when one world is suffering and one is bliss?”

Luke looked into the eyes of the smug doctor.

How did I ever put up with this sociopathic lunatic for all these years?

“Well this has indeed been fun, but if you wouldn’t mind I would like to be taken to my office as quickly as possible.”

Dr. John McGreer had worked alongside Lucas Shepard for years. John had been involved with the Morpheus Project since its onset roughly 10 years ago. He had worked under Dr. Shepard administering doses, collecting data, and even helping the renowned doctor design the complex protocols. So, when John had heard that Dr. Shepard had taken a leave of absence, he was happy that his boss had finally decided to take a prolonged vacation with his girlfriend. While he was glad his trusted advisor was spending some alone time with his significant other, he was also rather upset when he learned that he was left under the supervision of Dr. Callowell. It certainly was one of the longest two months of his life.

Since then, John had organized the data, drawn up the necessary statistical analyses, and cleaned his boss's office. He did anything that would allow him to keep busy and retain his sanity.

Thus, it was a shock when Dr. Callowell burst in to the office followed by a rather ragged looking Dr. Shepard.

“Luke, welcome back. I trust that your vacation was time well spent?” Luke looked at the young man and tried to put a name with the face. “Uh...Dr. McGreer?” asked Luke.

“Why yes Luke, don't you remember me?”

“It has been a rather hectic couple of months. Look, I have a couple of things to ask of you before I leave.”

“Why, yes of course. Anything you need sir.”

“Wonderful, first of all you need to put in a request for a transfer. I believe that my research is about to conclude and I want you to get into a facility of your own where you can conduct your own research. I've already written a letter for you so you shouldn't have any problems. It's been a pleasure my friend, and I'm glad you've been here to help me,” commented Luke truthfully as he walked around to his computer.

“Uh, thank you Luke. Are you going somewhere?”

“Let's just say that I think I'm going to be able to retire after we send out the results from the last batch of data. Now here is what I need you to do.”

After several hours the sleeping pills appeared to wear off as Luke slowly began to regain consciousness.

“Hey sleepy head were you able to find your answers?” Cassadee asked as she sat Luke’s head down in her soft lap.

Luke looked up at her. He basked in the last ringing notes of her voice as the afternoon sun warmed his face.

“I was able to get enough,” was all he managed to say.

“So are we good? Can we move on without having to wonder whether this is a dream?” asked Cassadee as she gave him a smile that could have melted a heart of stone.

“Yeah, we’re good,” replied Luke as he got up and hugged her for what seemed like forever.

As they held each other tight, Luke could feel her heart reverberations as her hair brushed gently against his face. They may be insignificant details, but Luke cherished every bit of their connection together. It is the connection between them that made Luke feel truly alive.

“Hey, I think I finally realized the reason why we are out here.”

“Now is that so?” inquired Cassadee curiously. “What is the reason for me falling into an icy river in the middle of Colorado?”

“It’s a long story. Well...actually, it’s not that long, but it made me realize that you and I can help each other with our projects.”

Cassadee grinned and rolled her eyes.

Now he listens to me. Men, why don’t they ever listen the first time we bring up the obvious?

“Okay Luke, let’s hear what you have to say.”

20 Years Later

After a three year journey, a middle-aged man stepped off the shuttle transporting the 141st wave of settlers to the Galilean moon of Europa. The man walked down the gangplank and marveled at the beauty of the foliage that the lush planet had to offer.

This must have been what Earth looked like at one point. At least this time we have a second chance to get it right.

Beside him walked a dark-haired woman of roughly the same age holding a baby boy in her arms. The boy held a small toy Brachiosaurus, occasionally nibbling at one of its feet. The man looked back at the shuttle with its numerous Shepherd Pods that had carried them across the vast expanse of space. Above them loomed the massive red, tan, and orange bands of the immense gas giant that Galileo Galilei had once observed through his telescope over 365 million miles away. As the shuttle departed, the couple looked across the vast expanse of wilderness and continued toward what would be the beginning of their new home together.

ABOUT THE AUTHOR

Ryan Eller, Ph.D. is a lecturer at Indiana University Purdue University Indianapolis, IN. His research focuses primarily on utilizing increasingly powerful computational tools to extract and analyze genetic information from human DNA. Questions I'm currently studying range from the medical field to forensics to population genetics.