

DREAMING BIG

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Dreaming Big

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v1.0.0

Published by konsensus.net 

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ABOUT THIS PIECE

Lindsay Burns · Mar 22, 2025

An article published by [konsensus.net](https://consensus.net).

CHAPTER ONE

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‘Welcome to the Hammock Room,’ said the Factotum, pushing the door open. It was gloomy inside, like the Sleeping Bag room had been, only the walls were white instead of grey and there was more space between each occupant.

The Factotum handed her a duffle bag. ‘These are your new clothes,’ he said. ‘Throw your old ones into the incinerator.’

‘Ok, thanks. I will,’ whispered Jocelyn. Many people were sleeping in the hammocks, while others were sitting up in theirs, doing puzzles or knitting.

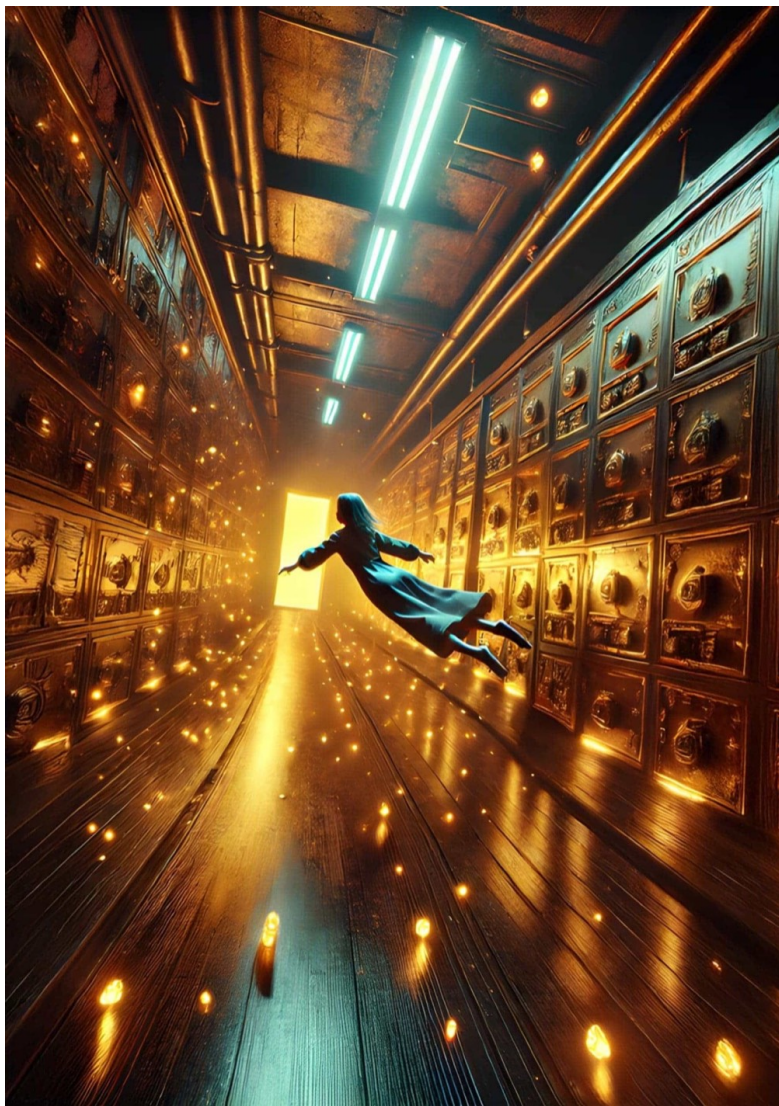
After going to the bathrooms and changing into her new red tracksuit, Jocelyn made her way to her designated hammock. Number 34. This would be her address for the foreseeable future. The hammock rocked violently as she sat on it and swung her legs up. She laughed to herself.

‘You’ll get the hang of it,’ came a voice from the hammock next to hers.

‘Oh sorry, did I wake you?’ she said.

The man shook his head and then held out his hand. ‘I’m John. Welcome to Hammock Room 220.’ His watery blue eyes looked into hers. They twinkled.

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‘Who have I replaced?’ Jocelyn asked. ‘An upper or a downer?’ It was a question she knew she shouldn’t ask.

‘A downer,’ said John, unfazed. ‘His credits nosedived from the first day he was in here. Lacked a bit of self-belief and then started with insomnia, so they sent him back to the Bags.’

Jocelyn glanced at the small screen above John’s hammock, with the familiar tangle of electrodes dangling from it. The digital display showed high credits. She’d have to work hard to compete with that, but she’d give it her best shot.

‘How long have you been in the hammocks?’, she asked.

‘Four hundred cycles. I’m hoping that after five hundred cycles I’ll get promoted to a Bunk Room.’

‘Good luck with that,’ said Jocelyn. ‘I’m going to get some practice in, so I’ll say goodnight for now.’ She flicked on her screen and pressed the electrodes to her temples, then shuffled down in the hammock, fidgeting for a few seconds, unsure what to do with her arms. She’d always used them as a pillow when she’d been in her bag.

‘By your side is best,’ advised John. ‘They’ll go numb if you put them behind your head.’

She closed her eyes. It must have been something to do with the novelty of the sleeping arrangements and the relative privacy of the hammock because Jocelyn was soon in a deep sleep and dreaming.

And what a dream it was, in colour too, her weightless body gliding horizontally through a complex web of underground tunnels, brightly lit. Her eyes flitted all around, searching every crack and crevice. There were wooden doors here and there, most of them fake.

‘Don’t give up,’ she told herself. ‘Try them all.’ The last door she saw was bigger than the rest, and she fought to get a grip on its slippery handle. It opened so slowly she was afraid she’d wake up before seeing what was behind it. But then it relented, and her eyes widened. A gold bar, right there on the dirt floor. She’d never found gold before. Her promotion from the bags to the hammocks had been achieved through amassing thousands of tiny silver coins. She rolled the gold bar around in her hands, guessing it must weigh a kilogram, then she shoved it into her rucksack before waking up with a start.

‘Not bad for your first day,’ said John, nodding towards her screen as she disconnected the electrodes. ‘With credits like that after one sleep, you’ll catch me up in no time!’

There wasn’t a hint of bitterness in his voice. Jocelyn decided she liked him.

After cycle upon cycle of almost constant sleeping, Jocelyn had amassed enough credit to go into a Bunk Room. Even she was astonished at the amount of treasure she had found in her dreams. Gold, precious stones, wads of cash... all gathered for the Common Cause. It made her feel proud inside, and desperate to do better. John had done well too, in his steady way. They were due to transition on the same day.

‘You’ve got a competitive streak, Josie,’ he ribbed.

Perhaps she did. Or had. She couldn’t remember. Her life before was like a series of blurry snapshots. A pair of shiny black shoes. A forest full of white flowers. Bubbles and the sound of giggling. But there were also black clouds. Fire. Shouting. Pain.

‘I’m glad you’re coming with me,’ she said, and blushed. ‘Who else can I share my awful meals with?’

John smiled at her then reached across to her hammock and patted her hand.

The Bunk Room was a step up in comfort. Melamine beds were neatly arranged in rows, made up with quilts instead of scratchy blankets. Her bed, number 46, was a bottom bunk next to John. The Factotum handed her a bag of new belongings and her old ones were jettisoned into the incinerator. She liked her new navy lounging suit. It had a shape to it and gave her some definition.

‘Wow, John. A feather pillow,’ she said, poking it with her index finger. ‘And cotton pyjamas! And what’s the little cup for?’

The Factotum pointed to an urn in the corner.

‘Sleeping juice,’ he said. ‘Help yourself, one cup a day to be used as you see fit.’

‘I’m not having any of that,’ said John through pursed lips. ‘I sleep perfectly well, thank you.’

The Factotum turned back to Jocelyn. ‘More sleep, more dreams, more treasure. For the Common Cause. The way your credits have been going you should be in a private suite within a thousand cycles. So the Bosses reckon.’

He tapped the plastic cup that Jocelyn was clutching in her palm, and she watched him exit the room, her face glowing.

And so the cycles began. It was so calm in the Bunk Room where everyone was almost always asleep, a complete contrast from the confused chaos of the Sleeping Bag room. The food was slightly better too. Sometimes she and John exchanged a few words, but their conversations were limited as they slept more and did less. In the Hammock Room they had chatted about this and that as they spent a bit of time working on their puzzles and crafts, but Jocelyn had lost interest in those things now.

‘Do you ever think about the people that are still in the Sleeping Bag Room?’, he asked her one day as they were shovelling down their dinner between naps.

‘No,’ said Jocelyn. ‘I thought I would, but I don’t.’ It sounded harsh even to her own ears, but it was the truth. She only really looked forward. Whilst the distant past was an unfathomable mess, the recent past only seemed relevant in terms of how it would affect her future.

John took a pause between mouthfuls.

‘You’ve been taking the juice, haven’t you?’, he said.

Jocelyn twiddled with her fork. ‘Sometimes,’ she said, looking down. That was a lie. She took it all the time, the maximum she was allowed.

‘You know, John,’ she said, looking him in the eyes now, ‘you wouldn’t believe the things I can collect when I’m asleep now. Such beautiful things. Invaluable.’ She looked at her screen, her credits blazing in red lights. Then she looked at her watch. It was almost time for another nap.

‘Don’t Josie, not yet,’ John pleaded. ‘I want to talk to you.’

‘What about?’ she said.

‘Well, what if this is all a trick?’

‘What do you mean?’ she said, frowning.

‘It’s just...’ he said, lowering his voice, ‘don’t you ever wonder what the Common Cause is?’

Jocelyn shrugged. ‘What we contribute to. And when we’ve contributed enough, we’ll go somewhere better.’

John sighed, and Jocelyn thought how tired he looked all of a sudden. ‘Perhaps there is no ‘better’. Not for any of us. What if the

whole point is to keep us asleep? What if the more lucid our dreams are, the more intelligent they think we are, and the more they have to keep us quiet? This sleeping game, these credits we get... I don't think it's about making money for the Common Cause. It's about occupying us, keeping us busy.'

'I'm really lost now, John. Why do we need to be kept busy? What are they afraid of?'

He leaned in and whispered in her ear. 'That we might revolt. There are thousands, probably millions of us in here. Did you not see the endless corridors, and how many floors the lift went to? They have to keep us under control.'

Jocelyn covered her eyes, her thoughts turning over and over. It had been so long since her mind had worked like this in waking time that after a few minutes she had to lay down, her body exhausted by the cognitive effort.

'John,' she said at last, her expression vacant, 'I think you need some sleep. Your eyes, they've lost their twinkle. And your credits are well down.'

She pressed the electrodes to her temples, took a sip from her plastic cup, and fell immediately to sleep. When she woke, John was gone.

'Demoted,' said the Factotum, shrugging. 'Stopped dreaming.'

The cycles melded into one as Jocelyn threw herself into her work, her waking time spent blocking out the memories of John and what he had said to her. She missed him on some level. No one had ever called her Josie, apart from him and someone from a long time ago that she couldn't recall. So she drank maximum sleeping juice, slept more, and racked up her credits. Her dreams were

fun and challenging, complex and colourful, and she had more and more control over them as she mined the recesses of her dream-world for riches. It was while she was in this semi-unconscious state that Jocelyn felt most alive, in stark contrast to her waking life in the perpetual gloom of the purgatorial Bunk Room.

She eventually graduated with record credits, having gathered untold fortunes for the Common Cause. ‘Leave all your things,’ said the Factotum on the day she made the transition, ‘and follow me.’

It took a long time to traverse the maze of white corridors, sometimes using stairs and other times taking lifts. Jocelyn was breathing hard by the time she arrived at her private suite, her body unused to such physical activity.

‘Welcome,’ said the Factotum, pushing open a door which had a small plaque bearing her name. Jocelyn Peters. Was that what she was called? Maybe, she couldn’t remember.

Jocelyn gasped when she saw the room. It was almost the size of the entire Bunk Room, with a sumptuous bed against one of the beige walls. The bed covers were a floral pattern, a variation on a favourite of hers that appeared in most of her dreams. She ran over to touch them.

‘Silk,’ said the Factotum, ‘as are the pyjamas and slippers. There’s also an exercise bike which you must use for at least fifteen minutes between sleeps. On the fridge is a menu. And in the fridge is sleeping juice. It’s unlimited, so help yourself.’

It was the door in the corner that drew most of Jocelyn’s attention.

‘Is it a real door?’, she asked.

‘Yes,’ said the Factotum. ‘All you need to do is amass enough credits for the Common Cause, and in return, you will get a key.’

‘Really?’ she said, one eye already on the comfy pillows.

‘Have we ever lied to you?’, he asked.

She shook her head.

‘It is your choice, Jocelyn Peters,’ the Factotum said, placing his hands on her shoulders, ‘whether or not you take the room’.

Jocelyn fleetingly thought of John, back in a sleeping bag, and felt a twinge of sadness as well as frustration. He could have had all this if only he had been more focussed. Then she surveyed the room again, a room filled with all the trappings of her success. Finally, her thoughts turned to the door and what might be behind it, and how she was determined to get that key. Of course, it meant more work, but faced with a choice between a waking life on the brink of existence and living a dream, Jocelyn had no doubts.

‘So,’ said the Factotum, hovering on the threshold now. ‘What do you choose?’

Jocelyn picked up the silk pyjamas and pressed them against her warm skin.

‘I choose to dream big,’ she said.

SOURCE

Originally published at konsensus.net/article/21f-dreaming-big