

The dream started like they all do: I was in the dropship, ready to go. Just waiting for the order to hop into my RLOI pod and drop down into an unknown battlefield. Of course in real life this would never happen - on the dropship alone there was enough surveillance equipment to make any mystery about the insertion point resolved with a quick query to the real-time data analysis stream. But in the dream there was no such information. Maybe the dropship's sensors were damaged. Maybe the enemy was underground, out of our intel. In any case, all the data streams were silent.

Then Menendez turned off his mic and put his faceplate against mine, and said something. I can never remember just what he says, and it's never the same thing. In real life he had said "We're gonna make it through this bud." Then the alarm sounded, and we triple-timed it into our pods. No time for chit-chat at that hour.

The dream skips a little time there. The drop itself is always peaceful, and with the anti-missile defenses on them there's virtually no chance of being hit. It probably doesn't make it into the dream for that reason.

Then I'm on the ground, right in the thick of the fight. Artillery and bullets flying everywhere. There seems to be no definite battle line: enemies come up behind you and pop up in front of you. I find a good position and start firing on whatever enemies I see. The dream skips a little more time there; in a battle my brain is stripped almost to the bone, to the reptile brain, to get that quarter-second faster reaction and that single-minded intensity. My conscious self is just along for the ride, feeling very little.

The next thing I know I'm looking at Menendez's body. I can remember this clear as day... His eyeballs rolling around in his sockets, his chest with a gaping hole through it. And my reptile brain barely notices. It keeps fighting, not even giving the rest of me the time to get a good look. Then a bullet rips through my thigh and I fall with a scream.

I wake up in a cold sweat. The alarm clock says 4:14. Addie is already up, getting some food and coffee into her before she syncs into her job. She's a time-sharer, leasing out her brain's processing power to big cloud computing companies. As it turns out, the hourly wage of a human is significantly less than the hourly cost of a big supercomputer, and with the proper mods and B2B methods it can also be more effective. AI's might surpass single humans, but network 10 together just so and they can defeat even the biggest distributed AI's in adaptability and analytical power.

Me, I still have 4 hours before I have to work. I attempt to fall back asleep, both to avoid having to talk to Addie after the dream and for getting more sleep. I'm unsuccessful, and eventually I give up and get out of bed,

Addie's still drinking her coffee, reading the news at the table. I pretend not to notice the concerned look on her face, and start to make toast and pour

myself coffee. As I slide into my seat across from her, she diverts her attention back to her news feed and says, "You were having nightmares again last night."

I don't have anything to say to that, so I say "Yep." She looks back up at me, again with that concerned face. Even now, in the early pre-coffee hour, I can't help but notice how beautiful she is. Her eyes are big and expressive, like lakes of emotion.

She looks away, taking her eyes away from me. Instantly I notice how tense she is, all the little imperfections. Her frazzled morning hair, the bags under her eyes, her too-pronounced jawline. She says quietly, "If you don't tell me what's going on with you we can't get through it. It's like a barrier between us." She brings her eyes back up to look at me, pleadingly. This time I can't bear to look into them. She sighs and finishes off her coffee, and says "I'll wait until you're ready. I have to work." She gets up and disappears to her little cubby.

I can't tell her about it. Not yet, at least.

I start reading the news and munching on my toast. Another weak nation bought off by a corporation - Sri Lanka, this time. FizerPharm, the corp in question, stated their plan was to modernize the nation and employ the entire populace in high-tech jobs. They were greeted enthusiastically by the locals, but the international community groaned... not another corp with nation status. The UN was halfway owned by them already. In other news, Russia formally declares war on China, to the surprise of nobody.

I dither around on the internet for a few hours, soaking up tons of useless information. Finally it's time for work.

I work a fairly thankless job as a machinist. Most of my job is redundant these days: I just sit there and watch the 3d printer do the real work, just like so many millions of people. Oh well, at least it gives us something to do. I slip into my "work clothes" and pick up my MassTran pass, hoping the wait isn't long today. Thankfully, it isn't. I get into an autonomous car and tell it to go to the fab.