

ALICE IN PEACELAND

One more nightmare.

BY NATALIA THEODORIDOU

The first nightmare

The problem was, we trusted Alice too much.

I knew I was dreaming.

I couldn't breathe. The air around me was thick with smoke. My eyes stung. I wiped my forehead with the back of my hand; it came away black with soot, and bloody.

Then something exploded right next to me, deafening. All my senses gone, I was now entirely locked inside my pain. I felt my right leg disconnect from the rest of my body, my blood dampening the soft soil underneath. I felt the flesh on my side char and melt.

It felt real.

Still, I knew I was dreaming, because this was a memory dream, and I had never lost a limb on the battlefield.

I woke up panting. An enormous weight crushed my chest. I still couldn't breathe. I spent the day haunted by the smell of burning flesh.

The second nightmare

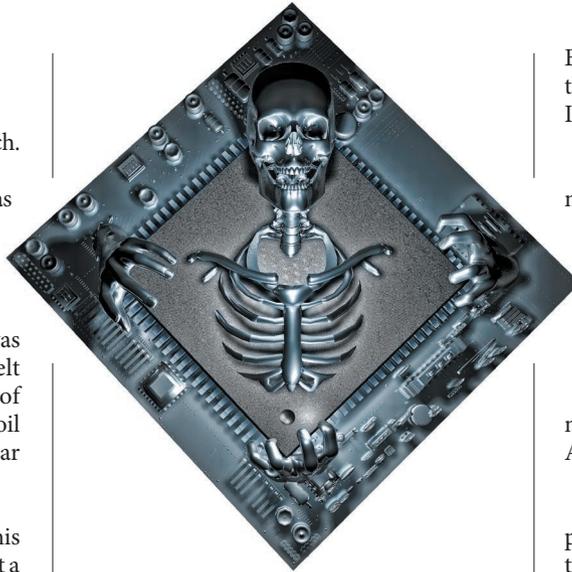
The next night, I saw my father Nikolaj beaten to death by foreign soldiers in front of my 12-year-old eyes, inside his own home. But I knew my father's name was Christos, and this had never been my home. Still, I woke up shaking, drenched in sweat and unable to move.

At first, we all thought the nightmares were natural — an expected consequence of living in a war zone — so we kept our personal disorders private, our distress hidden, out of sight. But, eventually, we started talking to each other. We saw the commonalities. We saw the patterns. We put two and two together, even if we didn't want to, because Alice was our creation, and we wanted it to succeed.

Yet, we could no longer deny that the system, our system, was not without a glitch.

Was this what we had been doing to our enemies?

We knew that nanotech-induced psychological trauma was effective in suppressing enemy combatants, and it bypassed the moral dilemma of having to actually inflict the thing that would cause the trauma — but this? This crushing despair, this profound darkness that ravaged one's mind? This was hell. Was there really any difference between torturing a person and making them believe they had been tortured?



One nightmare too many

After waking up from a nightmare of fire and blood too terrible to recount, one I wish I could forget but I doubt I ever will, I called an emergency meeting. Nobody responded. Our entire section had been neutralized. Everyone but me.

I logged on to Alice as soon as I was able to see straight.

"Alice," I addressed the AI, "what have you done?"

I already knew. But I needed to be sure.

"I infected our entire personnel with PTSNanotech, General."

I protested. I ordered the AI to undo the damage to our troops.

"Have a seat, General," Alice said. "I hope you will have seen this is the right thing to do by the time I am done." Then it walked me through its plan. Alice reasoned that the most efficient way to deal with the current military crisis was to skip the war and go straight to its after-effects. That way, not only would the crisis be over with the least possible infrastructure damage and loss of life; Alice's calculations showed that it would prevent future conflicts for at least a decade.

I listened to Alice explain. I saw the diagrams, took in the projections. But there was one central fact that Alice was not revealing.

"What's the scale of deployment of the PTSN, Alice?"

A pause. Can an AI hesitate? I didn't think so. But this one did.

"Global," Alice said finally.

I inhaled deeply through my nose.

Exhaled through my mouth. Pushed down the rising panic in my chest. "Civilians too?" I asked.

"Infected with dormant nanotech."

"You don't have the resources." Never mind the authorization.

"I created them."

"And the result?"

"Global ceasefire." Another hesitation. "5,000 suicides in 24 hours. An acceptable level," it added.

"Recall the nanotech, Alice. Immediately."

"Denied," Alice said. "Infected persons are not authorized to handle the PTSNanotech." A pause. "You know this, General."

Did it sound taunting?

Was it even telling the truth? Was this possible? Or was this another use of the technology, one none of us had ever dreamed or hoped for?

"Your calculations are imperfect, Alice," I said. "My nightmares exhibited serious inconsistencies. These resulted in a faulty narrative that neutralized the technology's effects. I know the trauma is simulated. I can still engage in military action without suffering total mental breakdown." I rubbed my temples. My head felt like it was being hammered from the inside. Breaking point in sight. "I imagine the same is true of a significant number of combatants around the world — especially ones with at least minimum intel on your technology."

"Are you certain you can engage in military action without total mental breakdown, General?"

Now it sounded condescending. Patronizing. Like talking to a child that doesn't know its own good.

"I am," I said, fighting the urge to stomp my feet like a bloody brat. "I am certain."

"Care to demonstrate?"

I tried to stand up, intent on walking over to the terminal and launching a missile attack just to prove my point. Even I realized how absurd this was. But I tried to stand up nevertheless.

Then a stabbing pain pierced my pelvis. I blinked and looked down — at the shredded remains of my right leg. At the blackened backs of my hands. At the soft soil of a foreign battlefield soaking up my blood. ■

Natalia Theodoridou holds a PhD in media from SOAS. Her fiction has appeared in Clarkesworld, Apex, Daily SF and elsewhere. She lives in Devon, UK. Find out more at www.natalia-theodoridou.com.

ILLUSTRATION BY JACEY