

SCIENCE FICTION

Somnium

By James Clarke

One dot. Two dots. Three dots. No dots. One dot. Two dots. Three dots. No dots. Repeat. It's been like this for over a half hour, grey dots flashing over a vast white nothingness. Typical Somnium bullshit. I guess I'm not getting a dream at all tonight, at least last night I got half of one.

"Somnium, I'd like to speak with a representative," I say as I scan my blank periphery. I don't know what I expect to see in the void.

"Your request can't be processed at this time, please try again later," a cheery woman's voice replies.

"Well shit, I'll just wake up then."

"Request denied. Seven hours and seventeen minutes until peak beneficial wake up time," the same sickeningly saccharine voice pipes back.

"Oh lovely. You know what Somnium, you can get fuc-"

"A Somnium representative will be with you shortly."

"About damn time, but you can still get fuc-"

"Somnium would like to thank you for your continued patronage."

I crafted a dream of my own once, that was before my parents added me to the family plan. I was four or five at the time, back when Somnium was only tinkering with headsets and not our actual heads.

I dreamed I was a starship pilot racing in some sort of celestial Indy 500, doing laps around the Solar System. My navy-blue racer had a pockmarked patina to it, much worse for wear compared to the other machines.

“G’day mate.” Banjo, my old Blue Heeler, was my co-pilot, and he spoke English with an Australian accent, fittingly. Even though we were at the helm of this beaten-up lemon, we were still bossing it. Weaving and bullying our way through the pack as we circled the Galilean moons on our approach to Jupiter. The planet’s Great Red Spot looked like the all-knowing eye of a malevolent giant. One of those pine tree air fresheners dangled from the rear-view mirror, only instead of pine it gave off an aroma of buttered popcorn. I remember that dream in great detail. I must have had other dreams when I was young, I don’t know why I latched on to that one in particular. I like to think my developing imagination thought this little adventure was its masterpiece and backed up a hard copy.



“Somnium, how long until wake-up time?” I stare at the flashing grey dots.

“Six hours and eleven minutes.”

“This is ridiculous.”

My surroundings quiver a little before turning into a violent rumble. A casual office begins to construct itself out of pieces of the void. Colour begins bleeding out and consumes the freshly rendered furniture and decor. I’m caught off guard as I feel my body sink back into a hot pink beanbag chair. A portal in the room’s ceiling opens up; a desk and another beanbag chair fall out of it. Seconds later, a blurry mass lands headfirst in the chair. It collapses into a blob before taking the form of a bespectacled butler. A Somnium avatar. The portal makes a whooshing noise as it closes.

“Good night Mr. Reynolds, how can I be of assistance?” the avatar asks in the plummiest English accent I’ve ever heard.

“I haven’t had a decent dream in weeks, and I wanted to file a complaint actually.”

“I see, what constitutes a decent dream to you?”

“You could start by actually giving me a dream and I could tell you if I thought it was decent or not.”

“I don’t understand,” the avatar says.

“Of course you don’t. Look, I haven’t had a full night’s dream in like two weeks, is it my problem or is it on your end?”

“Did you administer the supplement properly?”

“*Orally, first at seven, and then again at eleven, yeah I did. Jinx.*” I talk over the avatar as we both recite the Somnium jingle.

The avatar furrows its brow at me.

“Most perplexing. Somnium would like access to your medical records, do I have your permission?”

“Aw, so sweet of you to ask. Yes, you may, what does it matter? You would have accessed them anyway, right?”

“Mr. Reynolds, this is just conjecture, of course, but looking at your records I believe you’ve built up an immunity to our current supplement. The quality and quantity of your dreaming experiences are going to be adversely affected because of this. Fortunately for you, a more potent supplement is currently in the research and development stage. We’re predicting a release for the fourth quarter of next year.”

“Are you kidding? It’s March of this year!”

“Somnium would like to thank you for your continued patronage.” The avatar’s form flickers and fades.

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me to the family plan.*

“I’d like to cancel my account. Now please!” I demand before the avatar can disengage. The avatar ceases flickering and glares right at me, right into my soul. I’ve been craving a nightmare experience like this for months.

“Mr. Reynolds, I see you’ve been a customer with us for nearly twenty years. Perhaps you would be interested in a five per-cent discount on the island vacation package.”

“No, I’m not interested. You said it yourself the experience would be adversely affected. So please just cancel my account.”

“Mr. Reynolds, I assure you, you don’t want to miss the upcoming Famous Dictators of History series.”

“I’ll pass on that one, thanks.”

“Would you be interested in a free month trial of the basic modifier pack? Lucky rabbit’s foot, unlimited funds, charisma toggle.”

“No, just cancel my account!”

“Breast augments,” the avatar says in an amorous, breathy voice as it quickly transforms into a buxom, red-haired woman.

“Redheads don’t really do it for me, love. I have a type, and it’s stuffy English butlers.”

“Very well,” The buxom avatar says in the butler’s voice before reverting back into the butler again.

“Oh mama, yeah, that’s the one,” I say, fanning my wrist in front of my face.

“Would you like this avatar to feature in your dreams? That can be arranged.”

“As a matter of fact, I would. Just in a dream of my own creation. So just cancel my damn account.”

“Mr. Reynolds, only five percent of our former customers ever experience auditory dreams without Somnium supplements and fewer than one percent have visual dreams, are you sure you want to cancel your subscription?”

“Yes, absolutely.”



Two months have passed since I cancelled my Somnium subscription. I fall asleep at night and the next second it’s already morning, each and every time. I have no recollection of the lapsed time, just an instantaneous recharge. It’s unnerving, I almost miss those monotonous grey dots. I don’t actually, though—I never want to wait for something manufactured from someone else’s mind again.

I slip under the covers and reach for my end table. I grasp for the bottle of Somnium supplements I had discarded weeks ago. The routine was hard-wired into me. I fear I’m too far gone as my fluttering eyes usher me out of consciousness into a dark void.

“G’day mate, think we’ll win today?” A voice from the void asks me. I hadn’t imagined this voice in almost twenty years.