

The Crystalline Mythos:

# Ephemera

(A Short Story)

By Teej

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NOT FOR RESALE

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***Note:** This short story takes place after the novel, *The Crystalline Mythos: Lucid in Machina*, and before the second novel, *The Crystalline Mythos: Nightmare in Machina*. It is set in 195 D.C., a little over a year after the end of the first novel. Still, as a short story, it may be read and enjoyed on its own merit.*

**195 D.C.**

*Dust. Dust. Everywhere...*

The tent was rattling from the sand storms. Penelope could not sleep. She had been huddled over an oil lamp for some time, reading. She had just finished the book, *Stairs of Steel and Glass*, by Ronald Artaro, and now opened a new text, *The Four River Scrolls* by Kat Tanaka. Her eyes and mind were growing tired.

Penelope closed her book, and dimmed her lamp. She placed a brown cloak over her shoulders, and threw the hood up in preparation for the wind. She strapped on a pair of fingerless, leather gloves, and checked an old compass, which appeared to be in working order.

Peeking outside, she checked to make sure that no one had stolen her rusty dirt bike. Luckily, it still stood propped up on its kickstand. It used to be a beam cycle, a product of the Artaro Corporation, built to buzz around a city of steel and glass. Now, it was a piece of junk, but still fit to run, and for that, it was valuable.

She had purchased the bike from a scrap trader with metal hands and a jagged smile under a welding hood. He was not a nice fellow, but he was rational, and he liked money. Penelope had money. She had a great deal of money—at least in relation to the meager merchant traders and desert people of the Rust Lands. It was hard coin, Stanley-bucks, she had received as a tool for survival from Dr. Webweaver, her former colleague and mentor at the Artaro Corporation, before she was sent to the desert to waste away a year of her life in exile.

It was now the month of Mantis, which meant that it had been over a year since Penelope had been forced to leave her career as a Dream Operator for Artaro. She had earned her fortune in this line of work by crafting sophisticated and very persuasive advertisement campaigns, which were transmitted directly into the minds of the sleeping masses in the midst of R.E.M. sleep. This career had been cut short by a dramatic hostile takeover of the Dream Operations Program perpetrated by the radical Iconoclast faction. As a result, Penelope had to evade the Iconoclasts in order to avoid being required to create nightmares used for technocratic social control purposes.

Since the beginning of her exile, Penelope had proven herself quite resourceful. She immediately bleached her magenta hair white-blonde. This was because the TKB network's news programs had been blasting propaganda, which vilified her illegal creation of a non-commercial dream. Furthermore, she was now considered, by some segments of Machina's government, to be the murderer behind the violent death of another top dream operator.

She purchased a proficient android to assist her with surviving in the Rust Lands. It was an old modified Nurse Sally 600 Android thrown out from Machina's Apathia District Hospital. Penelope had seen many Nurse Sallys over the years, but had never expected to own one. This model was older than the ones active in the city. Perhaps that's why it had been thrown out. While the android appeared very human in some respects, its nurse's uniform was built-in—the whole of the android crafted from advanced polymers. This Sally was somewhat worn by the dust and the wind. Her translucent skin was chipped. Her formerly blonde hair had lost its luster. To protect herself from the elements, the android wore a long gray woven cloak, and laced leather boots over non-removable, plastic white sneakers.

Together, they built a dwelling from aluminum poles, sheet metal, and tarps from local trading posts, scrap yards, and collected goods from merchants. The home was makeshift, but cozy, with wood panel flooring covered in a handmade Adularian rug. They had a small furnace and a pot for making stews. The android could taste food and was a skilled cook, as she was designed to meet the needs of those she cared for. Penelope and Sally 600 would feed stray dogs, and lived amongst people with dusty faces. And, since then, they had lived just like this.

There was a noise.

It was the sound of crying—the crying of a baby. Penelope turned to look at the small handmade bassinet against the fabric walls of her living structure. She walked to the small child and picked her up. This was Penelope’s newborn daughter, Sunny. She had named Sunny after the blue sun, hoping the name might signify a happy, optimistic view of life. Looking to Sunny’s face, her big eyes opened, bright. The irises of the eyes were a light opaque blue, and it was becoming increasingly evident that the child’s eyesight was quite poor. Her face was very pale, as well, but this at least was normal for one with Ravell blood.

Had Penelope still lived in the district of Chrome Crow, she would have simply opted to get Sunny a set of ocular implants, and the problem would have been resolved. While Penelope was determined to fix this issue, it was upsetting to live without the luxuries and technological conveniences that a career at the Artaro Corporation had once offered.

It was Sally 600 who had delivered the child into the world.

“She has a unique, fierce look,” Sally said. “Her eyes look so serious.”

“She gets that from her father. Grim always has that expression on his face. Even when he laughs.”

“It’s a shame that you haven’t been able to talk with Grim about this matter.”

“...Not with the Iconoclasts out there. Sunny is a psychic. I can sense it. No one can know about her. Not even her dad... Obviously, this is not an ideal situation.”

In fact, Penelope was quite upset about her plight in many ways. Thinking about it kept her up at night. Part of her was angry. She could blame Webweaver, but that wouldn’t make sense. In the end, it was the Iconoclasts who were responsible—the radical faction had undermined Artaro, and in the process had upended Penelope’s career as the star Dream Operator. The Iconoclasts had seen to it that the Artaro Labs Dream Machine was destroyed and replaced by a new operation and Dream Machine far away in a place called Wardencllyffe.

Penelope moved her attention to an old analog radio, which she had been using in recent days to communicate with old friends—Dissidents and other such anarchists from Fort Tekk in the Machina Landfill. Slowly, she adjusted the signal, filtering through gurgling, oscillating radio frequencies, and white noise. She wasn’t having any luck. Fort Tekk, which she hoped to communicate with, was some distance to the east and north.

They had planned a very important trip some weeks ago, and she needed to check in with them before she left. Now the time to go was fast approaching, but, nothing was coming in over the radio transmitter. Nevertheless, she would have to leave soon.

It would be a long ride over on the dirt bike. Penelope would head out at midnight. She would have to leave Sunny with Sally 600, who was programmed for childcare tasks, and to watch over things for the two days the trip would take. It was safer that way—safer than taking an infant on the road east where junk traders crossed and Patrol Robots guarded the scrap yards.

Among the Dissidents was Sneak Lennox, a young Rodashi man who trained rats, and was said to be able to communicate with them. As an owner of a junked beam cycle, he was supposed to have come to the trading post where Penelope lived to meet her before she drove east. But, he had not arrived yet. Perhaps, he had drunk too much wine, or become distracted with difficulties at Fort Tekk. Or, perhaps, he had been attacked by a Patrol Robot, or one of the many desert gangs which lived around the Rust Lands. It wasn't outside the realm of possibility that he could have been accosted by one of the giant mutant rats, which roamed the Machina Landfill. It was hard to say, as there were many, many dangers in these parts.

The time to leave was nearing. She picked up Sunny in her arms, and held her for a moment. Then, she passed her to Sally who cradled and rocked her carefully. Penelope was apprehensive about leaving, but at least Sunny was in good hands.

Penelope grabbed her backpack full of necessary supplies, and stepped out into the dust and wind. There was only one thing left to do. She would need to get diesel fuel.

She could hear the rattling of cans from the old Scythipoda Merchant's shop up the way. He was called Eckis, pronounced Eck-Hiss by creatures of his like. He was a curious old bug, a craftsman, or a craftsbug, one might say. If he had ever stood up straight he would clock in at about eight feet, but he was always hunched over, working on one of his bizarre metal works. He crafted windmills, and strange, twisted statues, and fired his own pottery in a brick kiln. He was very skilled at making vases with his many segmented arms. His strange crustacean eyes were always concentrated on his work.

Like any terrestrial Scythipod, he was not easy to communicate with. But, he was friendly enough, and had often done favors for Penelope such as supplying food or goods to help her build and maintain her small home.

Walking the bike to the shop, she could see he was out in the yard. As was common place, he was sorting trade goods outside the storefront. He was wearing a straw hat with holes punched out for his antennae. It was getting pretty late, and there were certainly no customers to be seen. Nevertheless, he looked to be keeping himself busy.

As Penelope came up the dirt path to the post, Eckis welcomed her with a waving of many arms and a greeting of indecipherable clickety-clack. Though Penelope could not understand his speech, the creature understood the New Worlder speak of Machina quite well. So, when Penelope requested the diesel fuel, he retrieved a large canister in prompt fashion. He went so far as to fill up the tank himself, and to give the engine a quick once over for good measure. When all was done, Penelope thanked him for his help, and paid him with a twenty Stanley silver dollar.

She pulled a black half helmet out of her bag, and grabbed the goggles that Webweaver had gifted her when she first came to the Rust Lands. There was a spotlight strapped to the front of the helmet, which Penelope flipped on. She climbed on the bike, and used a knife as a key to fire the broken ignition. As the shattered moon rose in the sky, the old dirt bike flew into the night.

Penelope drove along the long dirt road, which led east. After a while, there was a buildup of junk which formed cliffs of smashed Artaro Cars and old appliances on the sides of the road.

Some time into her drive, she was surprised to come across Sneak on the side of the road. He had been on his way to meet her, after all. He had run out of fuel, and was now walking his bike. He had a hose, which he planned to use to siphon diesel gas from a truck, but most of the available vehicles appeared to be electric.

“I’ve got something for you,” Sneak said. “It’s not me, actually. It was delivered to Fort Tekk by a small custom Artaro drone. The return address says it came from the Ithica Hotel.”

Penelope was aware of the Ithica Hotel. It was an old building located in downtown Optera, next to the Artaro HQ Tower on Polygon Avenue.

“Do you know who sent it?” Penelope asked.

“No. I thought you might. It's for you.”

Penelope opened the package. Inside, there was a pair of goggles similar to the ones that she owned, but smaller. An attached note read: “For the little one. To see the world is Sunny. –W.”

“...Webweaver.”

Holding up the goggles, Penelope pressed a button. They lit up as many machinations turned, creating a sense of complexity and order. She put them in her bag, excited to eventually bring them back home with her.

As for Sneak, he was quite glad he had found Penelope on the road. He was probably hoping to get back to Fort Tekk sooner rather than later. Sneak appeared as streetwise as ever. He had found a new pair of glasses, this time with no cracks or visible damage. He was wearing a fuzzy brown peacoat, with a Finnegan blaster in a holster at his belt. His beam cycle appeared to have been spruced up. The paint job wasn't so great, but the lights worked, and it had an added cart on the back for carrying goods. It was certainly in better shape than the dirt bike Penelope rode in on.

After siphoning some diesel fuel from a big, trashed cargo truck, he was back on his bike. Light trailed as his beam cycle blazed on into the night. Penelope flipped her engine back on, and tried to keep up. She could see the meager folk of the Rust Lands in the distance, warming their hands around barrel

fires. They passed swiftly through the landscape to a continuation in the road where tires were stacked like tall walls on both sides. There were rats here, and worse—the Patrols. But, Penelope and Sneak made sure not to disturb the premises, and passed quickly without incident.

They came to a place where the road led up to a large stone where you could overlook the way to the Machina Landfill. Here, they came to a stop. From this vantage point, it was easy to survey the land for potential threats and to get a sense of direction. It was halfway between the trading post, where Penelope lived, and Fort Tekk, where she was going. In a couple of hours, they would be there. The problem was not the distance. The roads ahead were complicated and maze-like. In the labyrinth of the massive Machina Landfill, one could easily get lost or attacked by the dangers which lurked within.

Sneak grabbed a bottle of wine from his bag and uncorked it. He took a swig.

The view was both unsettling and beautiful. Pointy spikes of crushed steel zigzagged in jagged walls under a starry night sky. There was a full moon, shattered as it was. Just to think, Artaro had a moon base and even a theme park up there—and beyond that, there were spaceports to the outer solar system, to the Martian colonies, and the Paradise Archipelago on Jupiter’s moons.

Across the mazes of trash and twisted aluminum, there was one particular spikey cliff of smashed cars that was pronounced and silhouetted against the bright moonlight. It was tall and thin, and hanging in an oddly elegant form.

“Look,” Sneak said. “At that cliff. There’s someone there.”

Penelope could see a figure, cloaked in shadow, against the pale stars. The figure stood, stoic with flowing robes, only to pass into darkness.

“Who do you think that was?” Penelope asked, curious and guarded.

“Could be another dissident, or a scraper, or droid, I suppose. But, I don’t think so. I could see her. My eyes are pretty sharp at night. I think it was a woman—an Adularian, if I had to take a guess. That’s a bit odd. We don’t see much of them around here. They stick to the Forest, or Termite Hill, or maybe the Scrap Belt. But, they don’t usually come anywhere near the landfill.”

Sneak took a breath of the cold air, and kicked his gas pedal again, driving into the night. And, Penelope followed.

For the time, the drive became actually rather quiet. They continued down roads, which now began to weave and bend in unexpected directions. But, this did not slow Sneak down very much. He was familiar with this terrain, as the Machina Landfill was his home. As they moved further into the landfill, which spread for many terrans, a strange feeling seemed to creep over him. He slowed his bike, and attempted to keep the engine from getting too noisy.

“What’s the matter?” Penelope asked.

“Don’t look up. But, there are drones.”

“Artaro?”

“I don’t know. Maybe. Probably. Whatever the case, I think they saw us.”

There was a crash, and then orange mist. It was difficult to see. But, they could hear. The sound was loud—turbines spinning in the sky. Penelope looked up to see the faint shape of corporate hovercrafts. But, these were no Artaro hovercrafts. Their corporate seals were that of *Sociallite Sunshine, Inc.* and the Television Metropolitan Party, all stamped and approved by the Monolithic Government. They were private police forces, not of the Artaro Capitalists, but of the Metropolitans, with their own motives and interests. The Metropolitans represented culture and business for the new generation—they were *Cooler, Kinder, Better.*

*What are they doing out here?* Penelope thought. *Isn’t the landfill run by the Artaro Corporation?*

Ropes lowered from the hovercrafts, as Metropolitan controlled private police forces slid to the ground. They were armored, hidden under visors, and equipped with heavy blaster weapons.

A loudspeaker voiced from a commander with night vision gear masking his face.

“Outlanders! You are now trespassing in the district zone now under the dominion of Sociallite Sunshine, Incorporated, and the TKB Entertainment Network under the umbrella of the Moonstone Company. The Machina Landfill is expanding westward! All locals must vacate the premises! Do so immediately. This is your *only* warning! We will be releasing Moonstone Patrols, which will protect all Moonstone assets west of the Artaro controlled district, and east of the tire cliff fork. Vacate *IMMEDIATELY!*”

“Okay!” Sneak shouted. “Thanks for the information. We’re leaving! We won’t bother you again!”

A light shined in Sneak’s face as he spoke, but soon enough it went dim again. It looked as though they were free to go. Then, unexpectedly, a second light blared up—this time at Penelope. She hoped they would not recognize her from her career at the Artaro Corporation. Surely, she appeared quite different, with her bleached hair, hooded cloak, and thick scarf over her face.

“Okay. You’re free to go,” the commander said.

“Thank you,” Penelope responded.

It was precisely at this moment that there was whirring sound in the commander's helmet. A module voiced itself from within his visor.

*Vocal speech pattern identified. Penelope Curtis. Artaro Corporation—former Dream Operator under Artaro Engineer, Dr. Ariton Webweaver. Status: DISSIDENT. Did not yield to protocol after operation yielded to Iconoclast management. Bounty—status: A. Subject is to remain alive—turned over to Monolithic Government. Subject is psychic—potentially dangerous. Proceed with caution.*

Penelope could hear all of this as it was being said. She stood frozen for a second, but adrenaline kicked in, and she hit the gas. Sneak followed swiftly behind. Their speeding bikes kicked up large dust clouds as they weaved through the mazes in the wreckage.

The propulsion craft landed, and beam cycles released. Several Moonstone police now followed. Penelope cranked the gas to full speed. Her bike was fast, but not as fast as Sneak's. Nor was it as fast as the beam cycles that followed. Soon, the private police forces were hot on their tail. Sneak pulled his blaster and exchanged fire, but with no success. The propulsion craft rose overhead, and its headlights blared.

An officer rode up on Penelope and pulled a Finnegan blaster. Her pupils pinpointed as her instincts hit, and her telekinetic abilities took hold. His bike flipped, and crashed. She turned back to see the disaster as she continued to speed forward.

Still, the pursuit continued. Sneak and Penelope wound along twisting paths, using the darkness to evade the beam cycles. Yet, the lights searched on, and the cops remained in pursuit.

The maze became ever more complicated as they rode, until finally, it appeared they had reached a dead end. They had no choice but to stop their vehicles.

“What do we do now?” Penelope questioned.

“I don't know!” Sneak replied, his blood running hot.

Looking up, on a stack of twisted metal, there was a shadow. It was the woman from the ridge, with the flowing robes. This time they could see her. Her skin was golden—hidden under a purple, hooded cloak. She was wearing woodlander garb with a tunic and boots, but in her hands was a blaster. She was not alone. Behind her, a tall green-skinned man with long dark hair and a short beard stood with a spear in his hands. He, too, was armed with a blaster. His eyes were piercing, and his face was tattooed with subtle traditional designs.

“Adularians,” Sneak said quietly to Penelope.

The two woodlanders leapt to ground before Sneak and Penelope.



The woman removed her hood. Her hair was a long, silvery white, which reflected the light of the broken moon. Her eyes were a glowing golden yellow, more powerful than the sheen of her golden face.

From under her cloak, she pulled a wand, and held it in the air. The wand had a star shaped crown and a bright crystal of great intensity in the center of the star. The golden Adularian held the wand high, and cast from it a portal into the space before her. The portal appeared luminescent in an array of many colors as it swirled about in geometric forms. It was strange and mesmerizing to look upon.

“Come with us,” the golden woman spoke.

Penelope turned to see the Moonstone forces speeding down the bend of the road. Just as the lights of the vehicles approached, she leapt into the portal, and Sneak with her, and the two Adularians, as well. Gunfire could be heard just as the portal closed. The four of them reemerged from the portal several terrans to the east, still in the landfill, high on a ridge overlooking Fort Tekk.

“I’m assuming you were heading here,” the woman said.

“Yeah, thank you,” Penelope said, confused and amazed. “So, you can teleport with that wand? I’ve heard of the Artaros having such an artifact in their private collection, but I’ve never seen it used.”

“The wand of the Artaro family is a forgery—a replica designed to appear as this wand does. But, any portal created by science re-atomizes anyone who passes through it, so that on the other side of the portal, they emerge as a copy of their former self. This is not so with the Wand of Ephemera. With it, you may pass through the Ephemeral Realm of Adularia and emerge once again. But, you’ve seen the Ephemeral Realm before. I can see it in your eyes.”

“Yes,” Penelope answered. “I was a Dream Operator for the Artaro Corporation. Once, when creating a dream in the Artaro Labs Dream Machine, I came across a crack. Light poured in from another dimension. I realized in that moment that the properties of the world, and of my mind, were different than I had previously comprehended.”

“The world is very strange—much stranger than you could possibly imagine,” the woman replied.

“Who are you?” Sneak asked. “Why have you come to the Machina Landfill?”

“I am Kat Tanaka, the Crystalline Priestess of the Quartz Temple, and the Queen of the Secret City, Lithulumi. I dwell beyond the Mouth of the Forest, in the Crystalline Forest System.” She gestured to the green man who stood at her side. “This is Karu Maru, the Chieftain of Glowheart—a village in the southern forest, in the Copper Domain.”

Karu Maru nodded in greeting, with a stern look on his face.

Tanaka continued, “We have come to Fort Tekk to speak with your Dream Director, Myra Jax. And, to speak with you, Sneak Lennox. And, to speak with you, Penelope Curtis. And among the dissidents, I sense some of them wish to drink of the rivers and to become green, as the Adularians are. But, I fear others will choose a different path—a path of nihilism and nightmare.”

“You’re speaking of the Iconoclasts?” Penelope asked. “Their Nightmare Machine...”

“I am speaking of the dilemma which will face all of us, Penelope.”

“How do you know this?” Penelope asked.

“I know, because I know. I am four centuries old, and am aware of many things. I have seen the world before Artaro, and even before the void.”

Tanaka fell silent. She then slowly turned her attention to the scene which stood before her.

Fort Tekk did not look like much from the outside. It was composed of concrete walls around a mass of junked cars and steel barrels set around a large iron manhole with a heavy hatch. For as long as Fort Tekk had existed, the Artaro Corporation, nor anyone else, had ever discovered its precise location. But, the Adularians seemed to know exactly where they were.

Sneak was surprised to realize this state of affairs, as he was usually very cautious about bringing outsiders to this underground home of the Dissidents. Nevertheless, he led them down the path from the ridge, and approached the iron hatch. He pulled hard, and with a loud twang, the hatch came open. Fluorescent light flowed out from the interior. They would have to climb many meters down a long ladder composed of pipes. A rat saw them, and scurried into the depths of the structure.

The climb down led to a room with an arched ceiling, dimly lit by fixtures built into cracked concrete walls. A large red flag hung on the wall, which depicted a deer’s head, covered with a gas mask, surrounded by seven stars. This was the Seven Faction Flag of the Dissidents.

There was a steel door in the room with a shutter at eye level. It was closed. Sneak approached the door, and knocked three sturdy knocks. For a moment, no one answered.

“Be patient,” Sneak said. “They’ll come. It just takes a minute, sometimes.”

The slit at eye level slid open, and a pair of glowing optics peeked in. They looked at Sneak for only a brief second, and studied Penelope for a few moments longer. Then, they looked at Kat Tanaka and Karu Maru, analyzing them silently.

“Okay,” a low, strange modulating voice said from behind the steel door.

The heavy door opened. At the door, stood a singular robot, heavily repurposed. It was beat up and rusted, but with fresh plastic wires of all colors connecting its modified limbs. They followed the robot down a corridor, until they reached a large cylindrical room with several stories of balconies, which extended into rooms and passages unseen. There were people here, talking, working, eating food, and socializing. It was like a little underground town—hundreds of people living unseen by the outside world.

A tall Rodashi woman with long purple hair came from out of the crowd and greeted them. Penelope recognized the woman as Liliana Sioki, whom she had met before, but whom she did not know particularly well. She was surprised to see Liliana give Sneak a kiss on the lips when she came near. Penelope was somewhat shocked to learn Sneak could get such a catch. After all, Liliana was quite a bit taller than Sneak was—and certainly a lot cleaner.

She had a thermos of tea, which she handed to Sneak. He accepted it, but then said, “Oh, thanks, Liliana, but I’m already warm. I drank a bunch of wine, and then got chased by corporate rent-a-cops. If that doesn’t heat a person up, I don’t know what does.”

He handed the thermos to Penelope. “You take this,” he said.

Then, he put his arm around Liliana, and walked off around the corner into another corridor.

Penelope was left standing in the main hall entrance overlooking the many floors and hangers of Fort Tekk with the two Adularians.

“This is an interesting place,” Karu Maru remarked. He looked over the edge of the hangar.

Penelope joined to see steam billowing up from power engines on the lowest floor. There were plants down there, as well, and quite a bit of hydroponic growing equipment. There were even some small livestock animals on the lower levels—goats and sheep and chickens. Everything was situated in very clever fashion so as to properly utilize limited space.

There was a deep humming sound, and the sound of gears turning. Penelope turned to see that mish-mash of robot parts return. This time the robot was not alone, but had someone with it. It was Dr. Myra Jax looking over them with her reflective metal eyes. Her hair was short and black, and her look was stern. She had oil all over her jumpsuit, and a tool belt over her shoulder like she had been repairing some kind of machinery.

Dr. Myra Jax was a major force in the world of the Dissident factions. With her expertise in engineering and computer systems, she was able to play a connecting role between the seven forts. This was important because the factions were often in disagreement, and organisation between them had always been difficult. For instance, Fort Flowerpot, the faction from which Liliana Sioki initially belonged to, was primarily concerned with the welfare of super cows and captive animals in Machina. Oppositely, Fort Darkboot was interested in obtaining Cogship in Machina in order to compete with various biker gangs for turf. Meanwhile, Fort Tekk was primarily interested in rewiring old robots, and

building community. Everyone had different interests. Jax would use her skills to help the various forts organize and work together. For this reason, she was one of the few people who was truly of benefit to all of them.

Once, long ago, she had worked for the Artaro Corporation under an old identity. For this reason, she knew many things about engineering, computer science, and dream mechanics, which were of great benefit to the Dissident factions. For years, she had struggled against the overreach of the Monolithic Government, building alliances with the seven Dissident syndicates to create loopholes in virtual interspace through a sophisticated backdoor system. Now, she was meeting with Penelope, whom she had requested to see. Penelope had not seen Myra since she came to live in the Rust Lands over a year earlier. She was very curious as to what Myra wanted from her.

Myra greeted Penelope warmly. They knew each other well from the days when Penelope had first been discovered by the Artaro Corporation. She could recall much about Penelope's story, and sympathize from the perspective of someone who was both a Dissident and former Dream Director at the company. But, they had not seen each other for a long while, and she felt worried about Penelope. She had seen the terrible media slander—the holographic billboards depicting Penelope as a dangerous, cold-blooded menace. If the Iconoclasts could not have Penelope to serve as their operator, then they would destroy her, just as they destroyed the Artaro Labs Dream Machine, and her career as Dream Operator.

Kat Tanaka came forth and spoke. "Hello, again, Myra."

Myra shook Tanaka's golden hand, and explained to Penelope, "Tanaka and I have met, recently, in fact. The Adularians have agreed to assist us by allowing us to build this Dream Machine in a hidden location within the Crystalline Forest System."

"Did you get the package from Dr. Webweaver?" Myra asked.

"Yes. The goggles, for Sunny," Penelope answered. "It's good to know he's still trying to help."

"Trying to help?" Myra responded. "Penelope, Dr. Webweaver has been working tirelessly to craft a plan to get you back into Machina—back into the good graces of the Artaro Corporation, if that's at all possible. He and I have been in communication. It's been good to reestablish communication with such a colleague as him. He's one of the very few minds in the world who truly understands the complex dynamics of dream mechanics, and its many philosophical implications. Furthermore, he's led me, again, to you. And, Webweaver is not the only one with plans in the works."

"What do you mean?" Penelope asked, genuinely curious. "So, you're saying, I might actually return to the company? I don't want to work in the midst of those Iconoclast assholes."

Myra chuckled at this remark, then invited Penelope and the two Adularians to follow her. She led them up a staircase into a room fashioned as a sort of command center. Two strong Dissident guards

stood at the door with blaster rifles over their shoulders. There was a broad table in the middle of the room, and there, Myra came to a halt.

“Webweaver and I have been talking,” Myra began, “and I’ve devised a plan to build a new Dream Machine, in secret, far outside of Machina. It’s very difficult to build a Dream Machine, especially, with the poor financial backing that we’re working with. It could take some considerable time to finish the product, but this is why I’ve called you. I’d like you to be involved in this process.”

“So, you are considering partnering with the Artaro Corporation to build this machine?” Penelope asked.

“Yes, in some capacity. Despite the threat of the Iconoclasts, their infiltration into the Artaro Corporation, and their growing presence within the Monolithic Government—there is still hope. We have allies, potentially, within Artaro, as well.”

Kat Tanaka interjected, “As the Crystalline Priestess of the Adularian peoples, I have recently undertaken the action of establishing a line of communication with Artaro’s President Executive, Stanley Artaro. And, he, too, is concerned with the Iconoclast insurgents. Myra does not lie. We have allies, within Machina—powerful allies.”

To Penelope, it was all beginning to make sense. If Stanley Artaro was the financial backer of this operation, then maybe it was viable, after all.

“I have a related point, which I need to address,” Kat Tanaka said, poised and serious. “These waves of Iconoclasm, which have so affected Machina, and the Artaro Corporation, and which now even begin to come to my forests—they will create a great dilemma for the Dissidents.”

“What do you mean by dilemma?” Myra asked.

“I simply mean that the Dissidents will have to choose which way they will go when their world inevitably comes to its demise. Will they turn to us, the Adularians? Or, in their hatred of Artaro, will they turn to the Iconoclasts? The Adularians and the Iconoclasts are fundamentally opposed. When the academic papers of Scathe became known within Glowheart and Lithulumi, and within the other forest villages and townships across the many domains, the Adularians were caught and befuddled by the words which were said. The Adularians are a people composed of empathic personage—people of free and natural lifestyles. They are not caught in simulated realities or endless shopping malls like the Cogs of Machina, and they are not hard and cruel like the Ravell of the east. They do not live by the corporate policy boards of the Artaro Corporation or of Sociallite Sunshine, or of any other company empire. They do not live for the Monolithic Government, or for the Monolithic Mainframe Supercomputer. They live for creativity, and fun, and for nature. The Iconoclasts despise nature. They abhor it more than anything. In some respects, the Adularians and the Dissidents are similar. In some ways they are different. The Adularians have faith in my leadership, and the Iconoclasts are distrustful of those who have consumed the waters of the rivers, and of those who have practiced dream magic or consumed shamanic teas. The

Iconoclasts despise dreams. They envy those who can dream. Ravell cannot dream, and this has deeply pained Dr. Chaz Scathe. It has twisted him into a man who thinks like a tarantula. But, unlike the Adularians, the Dissident factions are susceptible. As the Iconoclasts grow, they will not tolerate uncontrolled anarchy. They will wish to turn the Dissidents to their cause. They will forge you into Iconoclasts.”

“I don’t think they’d be able to make me do anything,” Myra said.

“And, that is good. And for that reason, you are always welcome to take refuge in Glowheart, where I will make refuge for Dissidents who wish to escape this new force in Machina and elsewhere. Of your people, those who wish to join are welcome among the Adularians. But, those who side with the Iconoclasts are not welcome. Nor, will they ever be.”

“I will side with the Adularians,” Penelope said. “I’ve given it thought. I’ve seen the Ephemeral Realm when using the Dream Machine. I’ve seen the crack in reality. I think I can be of use to your people.”

“Yes,” Tanaka answered, “but, I don’t think it is your purpose to become one of us. You are not called to drink of the rivers or to live as we live. Your role is bigger. You, Penelope, are the link between worlds. A path is opening up before you, which may lead you back to the Artaro Corporation. I think you should follow this path to see where it may lead. There may come a day when Artaro and the Adularians will have to stand together.”

Penelope thought hard about this for a moment.

“I understand,” she said, and when she said those words, there was a subtle transformation that took place in her mind. It was a recognition of her responsibility, and a coinciding sense of certainty.

“There is one more thing, Penelope, which I need to tell you,” Tanaka said.

“Alright. What is it?”

“I suspect you have not told Grim Glitchfield, or anyone in Machina about the birth of Sunny. Am I correct in this assumption?”

“Yes. I haven’t told anyone at all. Though I suppose Dr. Webweaver found out somehow.”

“I told him,” Myra Jax said. “Don’t worry. Dr. Webweaver has your well being in mind.”

“Sunny must remain secret for her own safety,” Kat Tanaka explained. “And, I sense Grim has his own path, which will unfold as time moves forward. But, you will see him, again, eventually. This much is clear to me.”

Penelope pondered over this. But, she sensed that Tanaka knew things that others could not know, and that she was telling the truth.

As the night carried on, Penelope was taken to a small sleeping quarters with a mattress, while Tanaka and Karu Maru stayed in nearby accommodations. She couldn't sleep. It was hopeless.

Suddenly, there was a clamor, and Penelope arose. She walked out into the main floor. Many people were still sleeping in their quarters. But, she could see people heading for the door to the exit hatch, which led to the surface.

"What's going on?" she called to the modified guard robot.

"An alarm was tripped," the robot replied. "Scouts are going to watch the perimeter. There is a high likelihood that there are Patrols nearby. This is somewhat routine. I wouldn't suggest you panic just yet."

Penelope took the path to the ladder that led up to the surface. When she opened the exit hatch, she carefully peeked out to see. She could see several Dissidents up here, marshalling themselves to patrol the surrounding landfill. None of them appeared to know who or what tripped the alarm.

A hand extended to help her up. It was Sneak, and with him was fellow Dissident, Vincent Sinclair. The last time that Penelope had seen Vincent he was yelling at her for taking the job at Artaro. He was calling her a "sellout".

"Penelope," he said.

The look on Vincent's face conveyed no joy to see Penelope. The truth was, he had lost any and all respect for her. And, despite the fact that she had been driven out of Machina and away from Artaro, his opinion about her wouldn't likely change.

He was smoking a cigar, and had a large blaster rifle resting over his shoulder. He was wearing a leather coat, and a tough pair of trousers. But, instead of shoes, he was wearing slippers—just like always. Penelope remembered the last time she saw him. He was walking around Machina in a pair of goddamn pajama pants. He was too stubborn to dress any way he didn't want to dress, and, too stubborn to do anything he didn't want to do. Certainly, he was too hard-headed to understand Penelope's experiences working for Artaro and losing everything. To Vincent, once you were what he would call a stooge or a shill, then you were always going to be just that.

"Good to see you," Penelope said. "Nice slippers you got there."

"How's work?" he said, not having it. It was really all he had to say.

*What an asshole.* Penelope thought to herself.

“Got fired. Sort of,” she said. “Anyway, it’s none of your goddamn business.”

Vincent scoffed, laughed to himself, took a slow drag from his cigar, and walked off. His judgement was palpable.

Penelope looked to Sneak who informed her that they were going to climb up a ridge formed from crushed appliances. Ridges like this one formed natural barriers around Fort Tekk, and were part of the reason they were able to keep the place hidden. Their group was to post up there, while other groups covered different ground until whatever tripped the alarm was discovered.

From this elevated vantage point, one could really see how much crap covered these lands—all of this leftover bullshit consumer product mumbo-jumbo. There were many Dissidents watching the perimeter, including Dr. Myra Jax. But, the two Adularians were not to be seen, and there were no clear signs of Patrol Robots or corporate police anywhere.

There was the sound of yelling, and men running in the direction of the calamity. Penelope and Sneak followed. Running along the junk wall, they prepared themselves for a potential fight. But, when they got there, it was only a single Machina P.D. Officer who had been stranded while the others got away. On his arm, there was a Moonstone patch and an Artaro patch, both below the state seal of the Monolithic Government. He had been captured by the Dissidents, and yet, he was laughing to himself.

“We’ve found your compound!” he laughed. “It’s taken so long, but we’ve got you anarchists by the balls!”

Looking at the officer, Penelope noticed the adjusting aperture of a camera lense fixed on her.

The man turned his metal armored head, and looked her in the eye. “Ah, look. It’s the star Dream Operator, and alleged murderer—live and in the flesh. I saw your face on an advertising blimp just yesterday, you know. They’re saying you were the best, but that you went mad. They also say you’re a psychic. Tell me, can you read minds? What am I thinking?”

“No. I don’t read minds,” she answered. “But, my guess is you’re a dick.” She was trying not to let him see how terrifying his words were to her.

“I’m thinking about the army of private police who can see you right now—they are coming right now to end this place, and to capture you. It says in your file that they want you alive. Lucky you. What a shame.”

Sneak walked up and smacked the man in the head with the butt of his rifle. The officer fell flat on his face, was seized upon, and placed into a pair of laser cuffs. He was pulled up to his knees by Dissident guards. Nobody knew what to do with him. Sneak certainly wasn't the kind to take political prisoners, and he had never needed to. But, to him, it seemed like the right call.



“We could put him in a cell,” he suggested, “in order to keep them out of Fort Tekk while we figure out what's next.”

To Penelope, this made some straightforward, logical sense. And Myra, and Liliana, and the crowd of other Dissidents present seemed to agree with his assessment. But, Vincent did not agree.

“We can't take him into Fort Tekk,” Vincent said. “He's Machina P.D.—sealed and approved. Moonstone, Artaro, or otherwise—I don't give a damn. We ain't keepin' him. No way.”

“Fine,” Sneak answered. “Then, we should tie him to a poll, and leave him there. That's the only other option we've got.”

“Look, Sneak,” Vincent puffed at his cigar. “You and I both know there's another option on the table.” He pulled his firearm, and readied it for use.

“What are you, fucking crazy?” Sneak replied. “We've already got him in cuffs. He isn't posing any danger to us.”

“Correction. He isn't posing any *immediate* danger. This asshole is going get us all killed. I say we blast him, and evacuate before the Patrols show up.”

“You don't get to decide that,” Sneak said. “It's not your call to make.”

Dr. Myra Jax walked slowly to Sneak's side. She looked to Vincent, “Sneak's correct. You don't get to decide.”

Vincent took a long look at the officer. “Fine,” he said. “Keep your heads in the sand. When will you guys see? These corporate punks are insects! There's only one way to deal with them. And, yet, you frame it like I'm the bad guy. But, that's okay. I can be the bad guy.”

In a quick single motion, Vincent lifted his blaster to the Moonstone Officer's visor covered eyes, and pulled the trigger. The officer's helmet ruptured, and sparked with electricity as the man fell to the ground, and spasmed before becoming still.

Vincent simply looked at Sneak and Myra. “Cowards.” He spit on the ground, placed his blaster back over his shoulder, and said, “You guys can do whatever you want. I'm getting out of here. I'm done with you people.” Then, he turned, and walked away. There was blood all over his slippers.

Penelope watched as he marched away without so much as turning back once. Sneak appeared angry, and cursed after him. Myra didn't say anything.

Whatever dilemma Kat Tanaka had presented for Dissidents, Penelope could see now that Vincent was not choosing the same road as Sneak and Myra. If they were to even consider working with

Artaro money or assistance, people like Vincent would rebel. But, how then could they ever reach their goals? Penelope could see now that people like Vincent would be of no help to her. He was a short term thinker. On the surface, he appeared decisive, and strong. But, a person who thought like Vincent would never be able to properly stand up to the dark intellect that was Dr. Chaz Scathe and his Iconoclasts. Vincent was stuck in his own war against corporations—in his oversimplified, low resolution vision of Machina. He couldn't comprehend the complexities of the big picture. He would only bring about more chaos.

Penelope returned to the entrance to Fort Tekk, found her dirt bike parked where she had left it, and climbed on. She now felt that her trip had reached its conclusion, and that Fort Tekk was in for serious danger. It would be in her best interest to not be present when such danger would arrive. So, she took her knife and started the ignition.

Myra Jax saw her, and ran over.

“Thank you for coming today. I'm not sure when we will see each other again, but hopefully it will be as allies in this mess—if we make it through the night.”

“Absolutely,” Penelope said. “I'm glad we were able to talk. Tell Kat Tanaka, if you see her, I will remember what she said. And, tell Sneak I said thanks for everything. Good luck.”

Dr. Myra Jax nodded. It was going to be a long night for the Dissidents.

Penelope kicked the gas and sped off in the direction of home. As she drove and the fort disappeared into the distance, Penelope could see propulsion crafts swarming overhead. Their lights were bold in the darkness, but she remained unseen. They appeared to be from Socialite Sunshine, Inc.—but perhaps they were from Artaro, as well. Penelope did not stick around to find out. Instead, she flew westward, full speed toward her quaint home amongst the trading posts of the Rust Lands.

She thought about Kat Tanaka's point regarding the Artaro Corporation. *Is Artaro the great evil in all of this? Is Vincent right about them? Or, is there a deal to be made? Could the Adularians and the Dissidents possibly trust Artaro in their battle against the Iconoclasts? Or, was it a devil's bargain?* Furthermore, Penelope wondered what it would mean to be, as Tanaka put it, “the link between worlds.”

These were vexing questions, and Penelope did not know what would come next. She only knew that she would think it all over very closely, and act only in accordance with this very careful thought. Machina was entering a period of great turmoil. This much was becoming obvious now. Her role to play would be of great importance. She understood this now as she rode through dust storms and fields of rusted, broken scrap metal.

## **Events Between Books One and Two:**

Mantis 195 D.C.-	Penelope heads east to Fort Tekk
Mai 195 D.C.-	Penelope leaves the Fort Tekk to live in Glowheart
Irkus 200 D.C.-	Penelope Curtis strikes a deal with the Artaro Corporation and is rehired
Samui 200 D.C.-	Plans begin on the new Logician's Dream Machine to be built at a secret location
Januari 201 D.C.-	Penelope Curtis chooses Synthia Thesia (Myra Jax) as new Dream Director Webweaver and Thesia develop a plan to defeat Scathe's Dream Machine

**Character Info:** (For the characters in this story, which are not found in "Lucid in Machina")

**Eckis:** Eckis is a Scythipoda merchant trader who presides over a workshop and trading post in the Rust Lands. He is gifted in pottery and metal work.

**Karu Maru:** Karu Maru is an Adularian warrior of the Fox Totem, based in Glowheart, in the Copper Domain of the Crystalline Forest System. He is stoic and disciplined in his demeanor, and serves as a fierce military leader for the Adularians.

**Kat Tanaka:** Kat Tanaka is the Crystalline Priestess, and is considered both a spiritual and political leader to the Adularian peoples. She presides over the Quartz Temple in the Quartz Domain in the center of the Crystalline Forest System. She is also the head of the Wise Counsel in the secret city of Lithulumi, which is hidden in the northern reaches of the forests. She claims to be over 400 years old, and to have known the world before the blue sun, and even before the void. She possesses an artifact known as the Wand of Ephemera, which can create portals used for teleportation.

**Sally 600:** Sally 600 is a nurse android of the Artaro Nurse Sally 600 line. After years of serving in Machina's Apathia General Hospital, she was dumped and found in the Scrap Belt, south of Machina. Some time later, the android was repaired and sold by merchant traders to Penelope Curtis.

**Sunny Glitchfield:** Sunny Glitchfield is Penelope's infant daughter. Since Penelope is living amongst the Outlanders of the Rust Lands, she has not told Grim Glitchfield of the existence of Sunny. Sunny is one fourth Ravell, and looks similar to a Ravell. Her eyes are very pale, and she has very poor eyesight, but Penelope believes Sunny to be a psychic. Still, not much is known about this matter.