

The Crystalline Mythos: PARADE DAY

A Short Story
By Teej R.



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(Story #9 of the “*Dream Operations*” Collection)

*At the end of the story, readers can find **Supplemental Character Information, A Map of West Enon, and a Parade Day Illustration** of Stanley Artaro presenting the new Artaro P.C.-900 Robots to the public.*

[193 D.C.]

Part One: Penelope Curtis

In the night, Penelope dreamt. She saw herself in a strange place, a tank of cloudy green fluid. Outside of the tank, she could see a cold room with cement floors and cobblestone walls. Inside its glass, the liquid was warm, but metal was prodding her neck with an icy chill. Through the murky glass of the tank, she could see figures in lab coats with eerie distorted faces. They were observing her. She did not know who these people were. One detail did stick out, however. One of these figures, a tall and thin man of pale grey complexion, had a large spider standing on his shoulder. The eerie creature, which appeared perhaps the size of a grapefruit, had a dark, furred exterior and many blood-red eyes. Through the clouded water, she could hear the spider's strange speech—as shrill and indiscernible as it was.

But from within her own mind, she began to feel another presence, perhaps even more powerful and terrible. A sweet, piercing pink beam of light. It expanded in full radial geometry from her core and grew, filling the tank. Penelope could sense small microbial lifeforms swimming within the water and felt recognition that they were alive. With this recognition came a deep hum, like the violin termites singing in the woods. As small growths of algae and amoebic life stirred, plant material clouded the tank. As this process continued, the cold scientific figures outside of the tank became noticeably distressed. Her eyes widened.

As the light continued to brighten, the pressure built. Finally, with an incredible shriek, the pink energy burst through the glass, sending shards and explosions of water in every which way.

The scientists were terrified.

Looking to the floor, it became apparent she was levitating.

Penelope awoke to the soul crushing buzz of her Artaro Super Alarm-o Clock. Her cat, which had been sleeping on her legs, reacted to the sound by scratching furiously and bolting with an intensely abrasive squeal. Sitting up groggily, Penelope stretched her arms above her head. Squinting, she attempted to open her eyes as light from the glass windows of the fire escape door filled the room. With a clenched fist, she smashed the big neon button atop the alarm, the annoying screech of it finally ceasing. Today was Artarus 1st, Parade Day—the annual celebration day where, in the summer of each year, the Artaro Corporation unveiled its latest and greatest products.

Penelope threw on a pair of old jeans and her Slug Wars t-shirt. Heading out into the living room, she could see Hollis passed out on the couch. He had been up late, devastated at the state of his dog's health. Now the dog was nowhere to be seen.

“Hollis! Wake up! I'm making you cereal!” She shouted from the kitchen.

She could hear his groans in reply.

“Come on, get up!” She repeated. “It's Polygon Day today! We gotta watch the parade!”

“I don’t want to get up!” Hollis whined, “Pee-wee died! He’s DEAD!”

Penelope’s eyes opened, somewhat in shock. She knew Pee-wee had likely kicked the bucket, but now she had confirmation. With two bowls of cereal in hand, she came into the little living room and sat on the couch with her brother.

“I’m sorry about Pee-wee, buddy.” She said, passing one of the bowls over. “He was old though. It’s tough, but it’s what happens when they get old. Anyway, let’s watch the parade, okay?”

“Okay…”

Flipping on the feed, they could suddenly see a very large civic gathering taking place on a big stage in front of the Artaro HQ Tower, one composed of thousands upon thousands of representative digital avatars. On a stage of radiant light, smiling female dancers with perfect bodies and creamy skin all sang ceremonious songs of Machina and Artaro in unison for the multitudes to see. Neon confetti fell and rose again before the crowd. A magnificent unveiling was soon to come.

A twelve foot tall man walked to the stage. It was the Lead Senator, Omega Flink—the mayor as they called him. With his ominous holographic form, he stood before the tiny podium. The atmosphere calmed, the music faded, and the audience fell silent.

“Today on this great day, Artarus 1st, the year one-hundred and ninety-three, we have gathered in unity, before the majesty of the Monolith and the wisdom of the Artaro Corporation to acknowledge the power of innovation and the role it plays in our prosperity and survival. For it was innovation which led us out of the void to reclaim the world as our own. It was innovation which allowed Winston Artaro to invent the first Artaro Robots that helped us to defeat the old Alchemist Empire so that we might establish the Machina city-state in peace. I could go on and on, but today is not a day for lectures. Today is a day for celebration. So might I introduce none other than the fantastical President Executive of the Artaro Corporation, our humble leader, Stanley Artaro!”

All at once, Polygon Avenue erupted in applause. The entire city could feel the excitement.

Horns kicked in, Stanley’s own personal theme song. The dancers kicked their legs. And then, with a glorious entrance, the young president took to the stage. Joining the dancers, he began to tap dance. Soon the focus was only on him as his shiny shoes kicked and moved. His suit was a marvelous blue, complimenting his slick turquoise hairdo. Today his hair was combed and clean, but still voluminous, with a perfect swirl in the front. His eyes were as piercing as always, his eyebrows bent above his unequally sized pupil dilations.

The routine came to its end and the audience erupted once more. In the clamor, Stanley strutted confidently; seizing the podium from the towering Senator Flink. Then, like only Stanley could do, he gave a commanding glare, his smile lifting before the crowd.

“Hello, you wonderful cogs!” Stanley greeted.

And again came the thunderous applause. With his hands, he calmed his faithful city, and continued.

“As the Mayor has said, today is Polygon Day! This means we have something special in store, a new product, and might I say, it is *brilliant*. A new product for a new productive year! Now, I’ve been

working closely with my friends at Artaro on this one. Our best minds have come together to bring you something sleek, stylish, and new. Using only the most cutting edge technology, we've created something that will blow your mind and quite possibly even change your life."

"But before we spoil the surprise, I'd like to tell you all a little story. Yah know," he went on, "My soon-to-be bride, Candy, is a very busy woman. She's always scheduling for air time, working on her latest fashion lines, creating newscasts, modeling, all of these things! She doesn't have the time to just be cleaning our fabulous penthouse suite all day. She needs assistance! She needs a helping hand! Well, we at the Artaro Corp have been working on this problem diligently, and I'm happy to announce that we've had some simply *fantasmic* results! That's why I'm very proud to announce our latest addition to the Artaro Polygon Robot line: The Artaro Polygon 900 Consumer Robot!"

Below the stage, a gargantuan titanium walled shipping truck rolled in as MPD officers in mechanical armor forced the audience to back up. Slowly, the truck moved ahead and the crowd retreated a hundred feet or so. For the most loyal of the Artaro shopping audience members, the ones who refused to back away from the stage, long distance electro-prods were used. When the space was cleared, the truck halted. Inside, the shiny new product awaited. The giant truck opened its massive doors, while the audience gazed in hypnotic amazement. A light drum roll and sparkly jingle ensued. At the tail of the truck, an automated ramp gracefully unrolled into the center of Polygon Avenue.

Then they came pouring out. Hundreds and hundreds of brand spanking new Polygon 900's with domed heads and oscillating smiles. They came in eight rows and eight exciting colors. The wonderful *Cotton Candy Blue*! Or you could purchase the marvelous *Purple Pastel*. Of course, *Mint Green* might be more your style! Also, *Bubble Gum Pink*! Oooh la la! And *Silly Salmon*! Or the slick *Professional Black* and classic patented *Commercial Grey*. *For whatever lifestyle you live, Artaro is looking out for you! You need us!*

"As we speak," Stanley went on, "Our first batch—25,000 units— are being activated and released onto the streets right before us. From here, they will march throughout Optera down to our lovely theme park, then to the Apathia Mega Mall, followed by stops in South Smiley, Smiley, Porkenpick, and Ploutos! As of late this very afternoon, they will be available for sale in locations everywhere!"

The first row, eight Polygon robots in eight colors, all at once, were activated. The patented Artaro proprietary sounds played, as their eyes came to a soft glow. Once active, their first actions were to all walk in unison to the side of the shipping truck, where they pulled open a latch and removed a large hose with a radius the size of a human head. Suddenly, they were popping dozens upon dozens of colorful miniature robots from the hose into neat, succinct lines.

"Yes, ladies and gentlemen," Stanley proclaimed, "I am also pleased to announce our new line of Artaro Minibot 900 Robots! They might be bite-sized, but they are still amazing in their functionality and design!"

Behind the stage, holographic billboards lit up with images of Candy Carmen smiling. As she waved her hands, the various robots appeared with their respective price-tags. Upgrades were listed, as well as suggested retailers.

"Okay, now to talk to one of our most talented engineers about the improved Artificial Intelligence on both the Polygon 900 and Minibot 900 models. From our much distinguished Artaro Labs research and development division, I'd like to welcome..." Stanley reached for a cue card, "...Dr. Arnie Webweavy!"

From the audience, sparse claps and faint cheers could almost be heard.

Dr. Ariton Webweaver entered the stage in a fine fitted shirt, bow-tie, and lab coat. He appeared to be sweating profusely, almost tripping over his feet as he walked to the mic. Behind him, followed the much more confident Beatrice Delphonic with her long black hair and tailored business dress. Stanley stepped away, leaving the podium to Webweaver, who slowly reached his shaking lips and beard to the mic. He looked around, knowing millions of eyes were currently on him. From over his shoulder, he could feel the presence of his supervisor, Delphonic, as she quite literally breathed down his neck.

He tapped the mic ever so gently with his finger, "...Hi... Hello... Excuse me... I'm ... uh... Dr. Ariton Webweaver..." He mumbled as he wiped his forehead with his sleeve. "...I'm a senior designer for Artaro... uh... I mean, the Artaro Corporation... I'd like to thank everyone for having me up here... I'm here today to tell you a bit about the new processors we've developed..." His anxiety was palpable. It was hard to watch.

The audience appeared bored.

From home, Penelope sat with her brother, looking at the screen. *That's the guy!*, She thought in bewildered amazement, *the guy with the pancakes who's after my... neural signature... whatever that is... and that woman with him, that's the woman Sneak and Vincent and Myra were telling me about.*

"I don't care about stupid 900 robots," said Hollis.

"Good, because we can't afford one," Penelope said, taking a bite of her cereal.

Hollis got up and went to his mother's room, banging on the bedroom door. Mai opened up, and Hollis went inside, immediately whining about his dog. His bowl of cereal sat untouched on the coffee table in front of the hologram display. After some minutes of inaudible banter, the bedroom door opened again. Mai stuck her head out.

"Penelope!" her voice called. "Would you put on the tea kettle, dear?!"

It was with her breakfast tea in hand that Mai pulled Penelope aside for a private discussion.

"You work tonight, right?" Mai asked.

"Yeah, I have to go in at 7 and a half PM. Night shift," Penelope answered.

"Well, Hollis wants a new dog, and I think you should get him one at the Mega Mall or something. I'll upload some Stanleys to your unit if you'd be willing to make the trip."

"In Apathia? I don't think there's a pet store at the Mega Mall. Also, I can't just bring a dog with me to work. Besides, the parade is today. Everyone is going to be lined up at the mall to buy the new robots. The mall is going to be completely packed."

"Obviously I'm not asking you to go to a pet store. We're not even supposed to have animals in this building anymore, and that damn cat of yours is enough. No, I meant an Artaro Pet. Like a little robot beagle or something, nothing too big."

Penelope thought about it for a minute and realized that, while the Artaro Robotics store would have a line stretched down the block, there likely wouldn't be much going on in their subsidiary chain store, Plastic Pet Land. Plastic Pet Land locations were all over the place in the northern districts, but the

location in the Apathia Mega Mall was, without a doubt, their biggest. If she bought a dog there, she could probably just vacuum tube it back to the apartment.

“Okay, yeah. I’ll go to the mall.”

Leaving the Apple Colony that day, Penelope left her bike behind and instead made her way to a bus stop in route to the train. The bus arrived quickly enough. It was over crowded, with people hanging on the top as well as on the back and sides. Penelope clung to a bar over a small platform on the back, barely fitting alongside an old man with his granddaughter. Riding in towards Bug Station, it was bumpy. Penelope kept noticing that the little girl was looking at her. Then, she noticed that in the girl's hand was a small stuffed robotic puppy. It was primitive and cheap, but it was cute.

Perhaps an Artaro Pet would be just what their little family needed. Artaro always carried exactly what you *needed*.

The train ride took much longer than the bus had. By the time Penelope actually reached the mall, she was hungry and a bit worn out. Northern Apathia was a sort of wonderland of colorfully lit retail outlets, artificial trees, glittering displays and shopping opportunities. The mega mall itself was just as spectacularly huge as Penelope had remembered. It stretched up perhaps ten or twelve floors with products of all types, all watched over by floating Surveillance Droids and armed Patrols.

Soon enough, Penelope found herself at a food court sitting at a large 3D display table with a cheese stick and a watermelon sugar pop drink. She noticed a guy in an Archer Piglet costume blasting music and waving a sign around in the distance. This reminded her of the extremely busy mall location, a thought which caused her to feel thankful she didn't have to work in Apathia—and even more thankful that she didn't have *that* job.

On the display, she brought up a live three-dimensional map of the building. Firstly, she scrolled about to monitor the activity at the Artaro Robotics Store on the seventh story. Next to the Artaro Store was Plastic Pet Land. On the map, she could see the renderings of all the little people waiting in the line. It stretched clear across the entrance of the adjacent Plastic Pet Land, to an out of service set of escalators, and down all seven stories to the mall’s main entrance. The line was largely composed of aristocrats and rich hip city people.

Penelope noticed a blinking orange light on the third floor of the map signifying a personal contact. It was Grim Glitchfield, and he was currently located in a business called the Apathia Arcade Hub. Perhaps she’d stop by on her way up stairs.

In the Arcade, she found Grim in a lowered central chamber where a tournament was taking place. From the above balcony, she watched a large overhead display as he decimated his enemies in the vast virtual immersion game, *Lizard Lord Simulator X*. While his body rested in a gaming pod, Grim’s digital avatar could be seen in the jungles of an ancient world of giant lizards. It appeared that he controlled a large army of other players and reptilian non-player characters. Most of the other players were playing supportive rolls, except for a pair of conjoined twins who were giving him a challenging opposition.

They had a system of dual command, working as a team with powerful effect. While Grim controlled his army from the back of a large Triceratops, the twins were able to play as two separate avatars saddled upon two monstrous crimson-skinned Pterodactyls. With large forces at their disposal, they fought furiously.

Penelope watched a gridlock of a battle for some time until boundary lines were agreed on and the game halted. When Grim decompressed his gaming pod, and his terminal slowly rose to a sitting position, Penelope walked down a set of magnetic field stairs to the central gaming area.

“Wow, Grim,” she said as he stood up. “You’re really good at this.”

He looked up, somewhat worn from the intensity of the gameplay. “Apparently not good enough to seize the Pterodactyl Lands from these full timers who do nothing else all day. I hate these guys. If you ever get a chance to play, you’ll know what I mean.”

Grim and Penelope exited the Arcade Hub into the mall at large. Penelope could see Grim’s thick eyebrows raise as he observed the line stringing down from the sixth floor to the first. Grim was ranting about how stressed he had been recently. Apparently, street sweeping work had been getting to him. Penelope didn’t see how. All you had to do was ride around in a little boxy green vehicle with spin washers going all day. She suspected it was keeping him from his video game. That would explain it.

Penelope explained the issue of Hollis’s dog. Grim was bummed to hear the news, as he was, himself, a dog owner. His pug, Ripley, was one of the goofiest looking creatures Penelope had ever seen. Every time she visited Grim at his grandparents’ building, they would take him for walks and give him lots of attention. Grim loved animals. So, naturally, he agreed to accompany her to Plastic Pet Land on the sixth floor.

Up the escalator, Penelope’s eye wandered past the collection of booths in front of the Waste-World outlet on the fifth floor. The booths included Delete Booth Plus: *The Easy Breezy Way to End it All*. After that, her attention moved to the Candy Cosmo Body Alterations: *Don’t Be Average, Average is Shitty*. But that wasn’t all. There were more—a Candy Cosmo Colonoscopy Booth, a Choke-a-Cola Booth, an experimental new reconfiguration station that could augment your facial structure, and a pricey teleporter that could send you to the Ultra Mall in Optera.

Gliding steadily up, their escalator came to its end parallel to the halted escalator line. The front of the line consisted of only the most serious of Artaro Robot fanatics. From here, Penelope and Grim looked up to see the Artaro Robotics Store in all of its glory. It was magnificent. The line had yet to move, as customers were yet to be admitted. But now, a second smaller line of very, very rich looking types was forming, and by golly, they were being let in with that exquisite service only Artaro could offer.

Grim turned to the edge rail, and looked down to the first floor. “Look! Below!” He shouted, “The robots!”

Penelope joined him to see the march of Polygon 900s enter the building. Ecstatically, the line began to cheer. The whole mall fell into celebration. Still in their color formation, eight rows of robots walked up set ramps, floor by floor. Perhaps a thousand such robots entered, marched up all six stories, and entered the Artaro Robots Store via a red carpet. After much amazement, Penelope and Grim witnessed the first robot sold to a man in business attire.

“Isn’t that the guy from the Phonic Water commercials?” Grim pointed out, “He must be so rich!” His guess was correct, as was his speculation into the matter of the man’s income. Phonic Water, shipped all the way from the sparkling, off-planet reservoirs of Paradise. The product was wildly popular, much better in quality than your standard bottle of Artaro Water. Whoever this guy was working for was making a lot of money.

It was around that time that an alarm sounded. Over the loudspeaker, a voice called for an

immediate evacuation of the Apathia Mega Mall. Within minutes, security was shepherding crowds of people down the various stairwells and escalators of the building into the outside parking structures.

There was a lot of commotion coming out of Optera to their north. Penelope and Grim found themselves outside, near the parade again. Only, now it was becoming clear that something had gone terribly wrong. A blockade was now set around the Artaro HQ Tower, with Opteran Military vehicles present and a large showing of MPD officers setting the perimeter.

“Come on, let’s find a way out of here,” Grim said.

The two attempted to head south, away from the chaos. As they moved, they heard increasingly more panic and unrest. For a moment, Penelope thought she saw some kind of creature crawling up the concrete walling of a local building.

“Did you see that?” she said, grabbing Grim by his jacket.

“See what?” he said.

Just as they were freed from the worst of it, they found themselves at a checkpoint retinal scanner. A half dozen MPD officers stood in their way in armored uniforms with blaster rifles in hand.

“This zone is restricted,” warned one of the officers. “You can’t stay here. You’re going to have to head through the scans to your right and then south away from downtown.”

While all of this was unexpected and a bit alarming, it wasn’t anything that either Penelope or Grim hadn’t experienced elsewhere in the past. They followed the officers lead to the scans in compliance. Grim walked across the scanning area without issue, but when Penelope scanned, the machines began making strange sounds, emitting red alerts.

A sudden sense of bewilderment came over Penelope. Her first instinct was to look to the nearest officer for an explanation.

“Oh boy. Looks like we have a hold order for you,” the officer said. “Okay, let’s see what it says. Penelope Curtis... works in Onyx... resides in Termite Hill... This is corporate business. There isn’t much I can tell you.”

“...Really? You mean the Artaro Corporation?” Penelope asked.

“That’s what I’m seeing here, yes.”

A female officer approached Penelope, placing a pair of laser cuffs on her.

“Don’t worry,” the officer said. “These are just temporary. I’ll take you to the roof of this retail building over here. Artaro is going to have a propulsion craft come and pick you up.”

“Where are you taking her?!” Grim yelled over to MPD officers and Penelope. But soon, he was forcibly led out of the restricted zone.

Penelope attempted to shout after him, but he was led away so quickly. She looked down to her cuffed hands. Whatever was happening, she didn’t feel good about it, but she had no choice, but to follow the officer's lead.

Part Two: Dr. Ariton Webweaver

After completing his Parade Day speech, Dr. Ariton Webweaver found himself positively drenched in sweat and overcome with anxiety. When he got back to his car in downtown High Optera, he found his prototype P.C.-1000 Artaro Robot, 1K, waiting for him patiently.

“I listened to your speech from the car,” the robot said. “You sounded like you were about to have a panic attack.”

“I was having a panic attack,” Webweaver said. “I’m not sure I can drive right now. I’ll need to put on the automation function if we’re going anywhere.”

“Maybe you could use a drink,” 1K suggested.

Shortly thereafter, they found themselves in a small snobby restaurant where politicians and business people liked to eat lunch and drink overpriced martinis. Webweaver ordered a fish sandwich and a beer. 1K didn’t order anything on the account of his being a robot.

Looking over his shoulder, Dr. Webweaver could see coverage of downtown and the parade on the holographic television. But, even just looking out the bar’s large glass window, he could see the new P.C.-900 Robots marching in the streets. In the distance he could hear trumpets and tubas, part of a robotic marching band.

After a while, most of the noise died down. But there were still many people shopping and drinking. While the bar he sat in remained relatively low key, the businesses across the street filled with large crowds of people, mostly visitors from neighboring districts.

It was around 5pm that the parade coverage shifted into news coverage. Simon Slurpe appeared this time with a microphone from a downtown rooftop. In the background, Candy Carmen could be seen boarding a private Propulsion Craft with Stanley Artaro and a few other members of the Artaro Corporate Board. They looked as though they were in a hurry as security agents guided them onboard.

“It looks as though we have some breaking news,” Simon Slurpe reported. “Around 5:00pm today, just as Parade Day was wrapping, an unexplained event broke out in High Optera. Initial reports indicate an unusual and undetermined attack or outbreak only blocks away from the Artaro HQ Tower in High Optera. As it stands, the details remain mostly unclear. We are hearing, however, that there have been some human cog casualties as the event seems to have intersected with parade crowds moments ago. Containment crews from the Monolithic Government have arrived and are dispersing crowds, and clearing the streets. While our host, Candy Carmen, has been removed from the district, field reporters from the Daily Data Dose will be on the ground to follow the story as it develops.”

“What the hell is it now?” Webweaver said to his robot. “I guess I’ll call corporate and find out what the hell is going on.”

Just as Dr. Webweaver lifted his watch, he noticed an incoming call from his Lab Manager, Janice. “Are you watching the news?” she asked. “It’s an attack, corporate told me. They’re trying to keep it quiet, but the word is that it was Iskyliskan Skull Spiders brought in by a rogue actor of some kind. They released a bunch of them from a truck or something.”

“Skull Spiders?” Webweaver answered, surprised. “Damn. Another Nebuzalorian outbreak. No wonder corporate isn’t talking.”

“They’re probably fending them off with flamethrowers as we speak,” she added. “Just like we had to do when that Black Visus contamination turned all those nature tourists in the Crystalline Forest into host zombies. Anyway, they set up a perimeter. I’m here, looking at it now. Where are you, exactly?”

“Not far. I’m at a restaurant,” Webweaver said. “I’ll send you my location.”

Dr. Webweaver got up from his seat.

“Hey 1K, would you put the bill with the company card for me?” he asked the robot. “I’m going to step out for a minute.”

“No problem, doc,” 1K replied. “I’ll keep an eye out for Janice, as well.”

Exiting the business through the back door, he called for his car from the console on his machine gauntlet. The convertible arrived from a nearby parking location within a few short minutes. He popped open the trunk and retrieved a large supply box, which opened with a scan of his thumb. Inside, there were two Finnegan Blaster rifles, two Artaro Siren-500 Flamethrowers, and his own lucky green Finnegan Blaster Pistol.

“This should do the trick,” he said to himself.

Holstering his trusty pistol in his vest, Dr. Webweaver returned to his table.

When he got inside, he saw that his colleagues had indeed arrived. Janice Biggs had come, and with her was the Dream Operator, Dr. Thea Wren, and the Tech Specialist, Ron Verlyn.

“Okay, everyone. Follow me,” he said.

The party which now included Webweaver, Janice, Wren, Verlyn, and 1K now exited the business through the rear to the back parking lot where they found Webweaver’s Flying Artaro Car. Again, Webweaver popped the trunk and opened the weapons case.

“Ron, do you know how to operate a flamethrower?” Webweaver asked.

“Absolutely not, sir,” Ron answered.

“Alright, then I suppose you don’t get one,” Webweaver replied. “Here take this one. This should work.” Webweaver retrieved a two handed Finnegan blaster rifle and handed it over Ron.

“I don’t really know how to use this either,” Ron said, accepting the rifle.

“Sheesh my guy, figure it out,” Webweaver said. “It’s either that or you’ll end up like that other intern.” Dr. Webweaver was referring to their old intern, Don Duffy, who had joined the Artaro Labs Crew several years before and died in an incident involving a Nebuzalorian Host Zombie outbreak in the south eastern reaches of the Crystalline Forest System.

Ron found the weapon’s safety switch and turned it off. “I think I’ve got it,” he said. “It’s just

point and shoot after this.”

“Good,” said Webweaver, handing Ron an extra pulse charge clip.

He handed Janice one of the large flamethrowers and helped her put the light backpack unit on. Fortunately, this wasn't her first rodeo. She would be essential for keeping the rest of the crew safe when they entered the Nebuzalorian contamination zone.

1K, reached into the case and retrieved the other large blaster rifle.

“I suppose I'll use this one then,” the robot said. “If nobody has any objections.”

“That sounds fine, 1K,” Dr. Webweaver said, turning to Thea Wren. He reached into his vest, retrieving his green Finnegan Blaster Pistol.

“Remember this is my lucky gun,” he said, handing it to Wren. “So, please stay alive, and give it back when the job's done. And please, try not to use telepathy unless it's an absolute emergency. I don't want to get stuck with a bunch of company paperwork because you up and decide to create a bunch of phantom visions or telekinetic charges in the middle of High Optera.

“Of course,” Wren answered, loading a fresh charge clip. “Thank you. This will do quite nicely.”

Dr. Webweaver placed his flamethrower pack over his back, tightening the straps, and preparing the spray-fire nozzle. When all was said and done, they began their march down a side alley towards the contamination zone.

Referring to her wrist-connect watch, Janice was able to confirm the location of the walled off zone to be centered around a back street named Fresh Air Boulevard, positioned to the north, behind the Ithaca Hotel and Artaro HQ Tower. While some of the chaos had leaked over to the far-busier Polygon Avenue, where the parade had been held. The truck which had released the Skull Spiders and other ecological monstrosities had been parked. After a number of minutes where the spiders and other creatures were released, the vehicle lit up in what was most likely a timed self-destruction.

Janice explained this information as they crossed the panicking crowds of the Parade, crossing barriers set by MPD, Opteran Military, and other corporate officials. Approaching the contamination zone, they were given protective gas masks of the Opteran Military. The masks consisted of large clear visored face masks which allowed them to see clearly, and heavy filtration systems which strapped to their chests and connected via hoses to the bottom of masks.

While suiting quickly up, they saw the first signs of Nebuzalorian Ecology in the street. A large segmented creature wrestled down one hazmat suited official, causing a flurry of chaos, before a number of other officials surrounded the strange organism, blasting it full of bullets and pulse charges.

Webweaver looked to his people, assuring them that they would be alright. Ron Verlyn looked especially anxious. Clearly, the man was sweating.

“You good?” Webweaver asked him.

“I'm good.” Verlyn replied, tightening the clamp on his visor mask.

“Alright, crew,” Webweaver said. “Time to kill some bugs.”

As the five crew members passed the side street onto Fresh Air Boulevard, they crossed a large group of military and MPD officials in trucks and on the street. They could see many body bags, where many civilians who had been gored or otherwise killed by the creatures were being zipped up for containment and incineration.

“We should be studying those civilians,” Wren said to Janice. “Not just incinerating them.”

“You know the policy,” Janice said in response. Janice prepared her flamethrower.

When they came to their first large group of spiders, it was clear that they were taking dead civilians and reanimating them into Nebuzalorian Host-Zombies. This process was something that the Monolithic Government and the Artaro Corporation both preferred to keep out of public knowledge. With this in mind, Janice sprayed hellfire, burning the creatures which screamed unearthly screams and pleaded in dark unintelligible speech.

Moving on to the next corner block, Dr. Webweaver and the others discovered a large pile up of Artaro Cars and other city vehicles which had been wrecked in the chaos. Paramedics were already on task getting people out of there, but some were dead, and others were injured. Most of the spiders had cleared the area, but could be seen terrorizing civilians in the near distance.

“Come on. There they are,” Webweaver communicated to the others.

They stopped across wreckage and many innocent human casualties before arriving at the relevant calamity. Unfortunately, there were people here as well as the spiders, which meant they couldn't yet use the flamethrowers. IK, Wren, and Ron quickly took to targeted blaster attacks on the menacing creatures while Dr. Webweaver and Janice focused on helping survivors to separate themselves from the onslaught. It took several minutes before Webweaver and Janice could return their attention to clearing the Nebuzalorian biologics from the streets. When they finally resumed with the flamethrowers, the spiders writhed and shrieked in intense agony—and cursed in hellish, indecipherable speech.

Over the course of the next three hours, the Artaro Labs crew were joined by additional forces of the MPD and High Opteran Fire Department to extinguish the threat. As the last of the creatures were stomped under heavy boots and blasted into flaming oblivion, order was slowly restored. Perimeters were fortified as the injured and dead were taken to the appropriate destinations. It didn't take long before higher ups arrived—men in suits from the Office of Paranormal Affairs. It quickly became clear that whatever happened here, did in fact not happen. At least that is how it would be explained to the media and the public. As far as the official story would go, there was no otherworldly spider attack.

Instead, the media was led to believe that an armed mad man, acting alone, caused a series of fatal car accidents which cascaded into large spread regional panic. Any unexplainable details beyond that were the result of hysterics and conspiratorial thinking on the circuit interspace. As holographic videos of the incident would inevitably circulate, media channels quickly came to dismiss paranormal evidence as part of an elaborate manufactured hoax.

At this point, the situation was rising even beyond the paygrade of the Artaro Labs crew. By the end of the day Dr. Webweaver and the others were forced to sign Monolithic Government gag orders on the incident.

When the crew finally returned to Dr. Webweaver's flying auto in the parking lot behind the little restaurant, Webweaver was hit with a ping from the boss. He opened the line, and Dr. Beatrice

Delphonic's likeness formed in the air above his wrist-connect watch.

“Good job responding, today,” Beatrice said. “Tell your crew that the company appreciates everything you did down there.”

“That was quite the outbreak, Beatrice,” Webweaver replied. “I imagine this is going to be quite the headache for everyone in the know. Any intel on who started this damn thing?”

“I can't help but think the actors here were involved with the Iconoclast Faction,” Beatrice said. “Of course, we have no proof of that at this time. We weren't able to get a solid visual on the truck driver who released the spiders. The truck itself was lit on fire, and the driver escaped on a motorbike.”

“Sounds like a professional,” Webweaver commented.

“Artaro HQ thinks it could be gangster—Doomsect, perhaps. They're a well connected bunch. They likely have the resources for an attack like this. But, then again, that might come back again to the Iconoclasts. If that's the case, I'm not sure what we can do. Some of the board members are sympathetic to Dr. Scathe and his work. The Artaro Corporation may have banned Nightmare Operations as a legitimate Dream Operation, but broader Iconoclast practices and ideology still remain popular, even within the company. This isn't exactly a cut and dry situation.”

“I see,” Webweaver said, thoughtfully. “Anything else I should know.”

“Yes. It's about the psychic asset, Penelope Curtis,” Beatrice said. “I have her in company custody now. We are preparing our contractual negotiations now. Our plan is to return her home to her family's meager living quarters in Termite Hill, but the deal is to be finalized by the end of the week. It's important that you'll join me for that meeting. We're skipping the normal matriculation and phasing her in as a full fledged Dream Operator as soon as possible.”

“Alright,” Webweaver said. “Why the sudden urgency though? I know it's good to have strong Dream Operators to create advertisements, but this feels a little bit unusual.”

“I think it may just be a hunch, Arition, but I'm beginning to think we need to beef up Dream Operations considerably over the next couple of years. While the ban on Nightmare Operations at the company is full proof, I have reason to believe there might be other Dream Machines under construction out there, outside of company control. It might just be hearsay at this point, but we have to be prepared in case outside operations ever come online. If advertisement competitors arise, we need to be prepared for that, yes. But, if Dream Machines come into use for other applications, especially by hostile actors...”

“Then, we need deterrence,” Webweaver said.

“Precisely.”

Webweaver thought for a moment.

“Alright,” He said. “Just let me know when we're finalizing things and I'll come with you to the meeting. You know where to find me.”

They ended the call.

Once the weapons were packed safely in their cases in the trunk, the crew climbed into the vehicle and lifted into the air. Rather than taking the usual sky lanes out of there, Webweaver put the vehicle into manual and circled up around buildings until they reached an altitude near the pinnacles of High Optera's tallest buildings. From here, they could see soot ridden steam lifting into the air from the fire response teams down below. News vans and press were on the scene now, as the aftermath was only beginning.

"Strange goddamned world out there." Janice said. "Think of all the things we do for this company, just to keep the house in order. I've read about Skull Spiders, but I've never seen them up close like that. Just to think that one of them could potentially burrow in someone's brain and just take over. It's horrific."

Webweaver let out a long sigh. "What's worse is that someone out there felt it was a worthwhile proposition to release a plague of them into the streets. I can't help, but wonder what's coming next..." he said, scratching his beard. "I suppose we could look at it this way—as far as the public can tell, Parade Day went well. All of the reporting coverage seems pretty glossy and positive. All of the focus is on Stanley Artaro and the wonderful new Artaro Robots. Consumers line up and buy the new robots even though the last generation worked fine. That's where the attention is. What our lab crew saw today, on the other hand—it's a stark reminder that there are dangerous actors out there—also, there're literal spider monsters to worry about. But, the Monolithic Government isn't going to make the public privy, and HQ is in full agreement. It would just scare the piss out of people. So, the company, the MPD, and those spooky characters from the Office of Paranormal Affairs worked together to handle the situation quietly, and it seems like we've all been mostly successful."

"If this is what success looks like," Janice looked over, "I'd really hate to ever witness a failure."

Webweaver took in Janice's words, then hit the electric peddle and accelerated east towards the Chrome Crow District.

Supplemental Character Information:

Note: Descriptions are based on the year 193 D.C. when this story takes place.

Penelope Curtis:

Class: Human Cog, Telepath/Telekinetic
Occupation: Waitress at Archer Piglet's Pancake House in West Onyx District
[Eyes: Green] [Hair: Medium length, Raspberry Purple] [Height: 5'6"]
[Born: 170 D.C.] [Background: New Worlder/Rosari, Tan-Olive Complexion, from Termite Hill]

Dr. Ariton Webweaver:

Class: Human Cog
Occupation: Dream Director at Artaro Labs Chrome Crow, Engineer
[Eyes: Golden] [Hair: Long, Grey with Beard] [Height: 6'2"]
[Born: 89 D.C.] [Background: New Worlder, Light Complexion, from Machina]

1K:

Class: Artaro P.C.-1000 Robot
Occupation: Assistant to Dr. Webweaver at Artaro Labs Chrome Crow
[Eyes: Glowing, Yellow] [Height: 5'0"]
[Booted Up in 193 D.C.] [Appearance: Metallic, Grey]

Janice Biggs:

Class: Human Cog
Occupation: Operations Manager at Artaro Labs Chrome Crow
[Eyes: Auburn] [Hair: Styled, Lavender] [Height: 5'5"]
[Born: 148 D.C.] [Background: New Worlder, Dark Complexion, from Machina]

Dr. Beatrice Delphonic:

Class: Human Cog
Occupation: Head of Dream Operations at the Artaro Corporation
[Eyes: Pale Blue] [Hair: Black w/ White Streaks] [Height: 5'11"]
[Born: 94 D.C.] [Background: New Worlder, Pale Complexion, from Machina]

Grim Glitchfield:

Class: Half-Ravell Cog
Occupation: Street Sweep in Apathia District, Gig Worker
[Eyes: Dark Pink] [Hair: Messy, Indigo] [Height: 6'1"]
[Born: 165 D.C.] [Background: Half-Ravell, Light Grey Complexion, from Machina]

Thea Wren:

Class: Human Cog, Telepath (Phantom Visions)
Occupation: Dream Operator and Operations Assistant at Artaro Labs Chrome Crow
[Eyes: Dark Brown] [Hair: Long, Black] [Height: 5'8"]
[Born: 157 D.C.] [Background: Rodashi, from Machina]

Ron Verlyn:

Class: Human Cog
Occupation: Integrated Technology Specialist at Artaro Labs Chrome Crow
[Eyes: Brown] [Hair: Dark Brown] [Height: 6'3"]
[Born: 161 D.C.] [Background: New Worlder, Dark Complexion, from Machina]

Hollis Curtis:

Class: Human, Outlander
Occupation: N/A
[Eyes: Green][Hair: Short, Dirty Blonde] [Height: 4'0"]
[Born: 183 D.C.] [Background: New Worlder/Rosari, Tan Complexion, from Termite Hill]

Mai Merriweather:

Class: Human, Outlander

Occupation: Merchant at the Termite Hill Markets

[Eyes: Green] [Hair: Curly, Blonde] [5'5"]

[Born: 147 D.C.] [Background: New Worlder, Light Complexion, from Termite Hill]

Other Mentioned Characters:

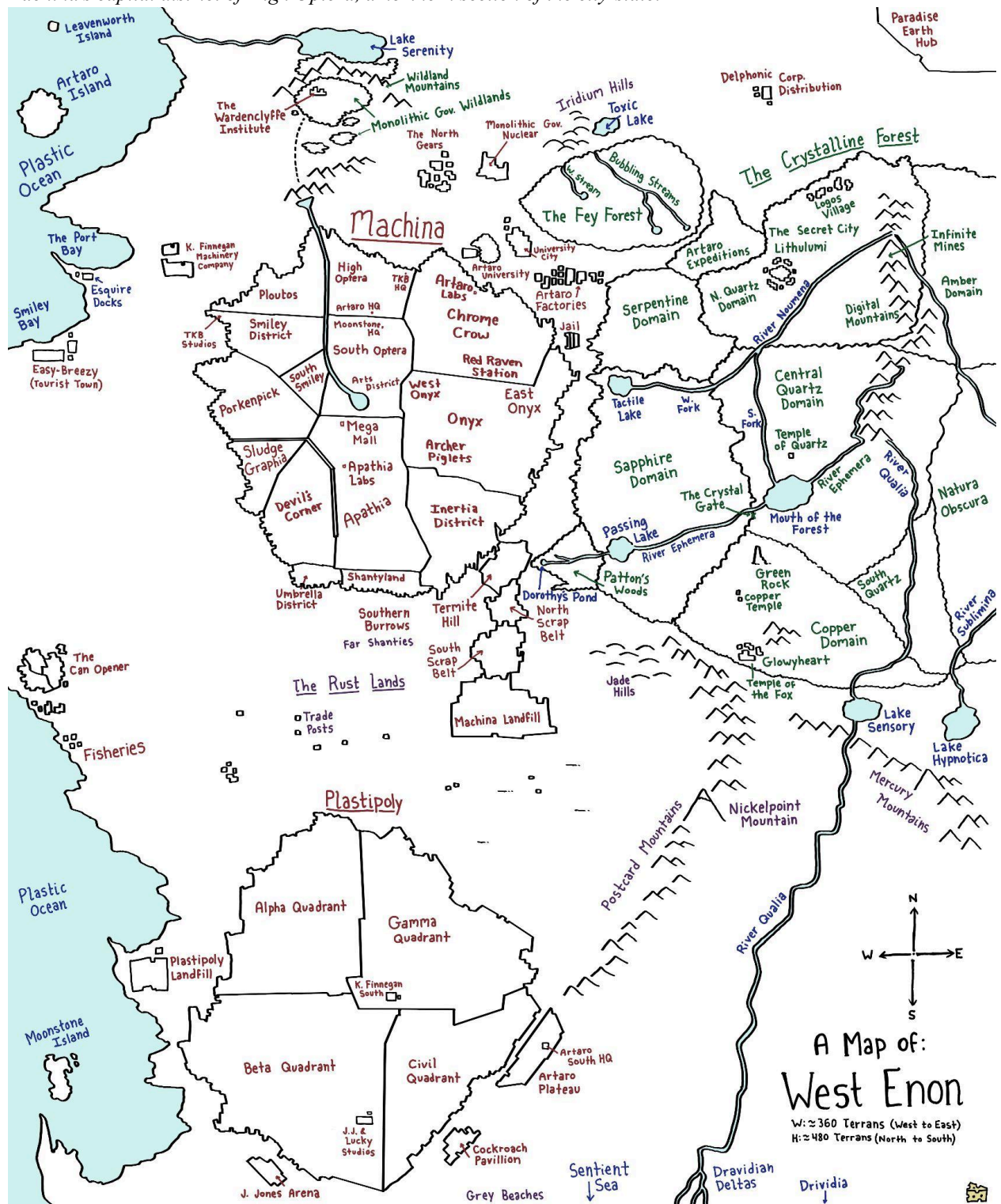
Candy Carmen: Host of the Daily Data Dose/C.E.O. of Candy Cosmo, Inc. Note: Candy is also engaged to the President Exec. of the Artaro Corporation, Stanley Artaro.

Simon Slurpe: Co-host of the Daily Data Dose. Slurpe is a Gastropod (humanoid slug) from the Island of Slugport (an island west of Machina in the Plastic Ocean.)

Mayor Omega Flink: Machina's wise and powerful Mayor. Mayor Flink is a big advocate for the Monolithic Mainframe Supercomputer, the Diama Operating System, and for the algorithms such systems create to help govern Machina in the world.

Stanley Artaro: The President Executive and C.E.O. of the Artaro Corporation. Having inherited the company from his father, Wolfgang, Stanley Artaro owns what is perhaps the world's largest and most important single company.

A Map of West Enon: Where our story takes place—more specifically, most of the events in this story occur in Machina's capital district of High Optera, a northern section of the city-state.



Parade Day Illustration: *Stanley Artaro presents the new Artaro P.C. 900 Robots at Machina's annual Parade Day in High Optera.*

