

The Crystalline Mythos:
**PENELOPE,
THE SELLOUT**

A Short Story
By Teej R.



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The following story chronicles the month of Oakus, as seen from Penelope Curtis's perspective as a new Dream Operator at Artaro Labs Chrome Crow. The story also follows the transformations that she and her boyfriend, Grim Glitchfield, face as wealth and success come into both of their lives. From Penelope's new Dream Operator job, to Grim's first major art exhibition, everything is quickly changing. But, is all of the newfound success going to Penelope's head?

[Oakus 1st, 193 D.C.] -

It didn't take long for Penelope to realize that Dream Operations was a demanding line of business. Today, she was scheduled for an eleven hour shift. Most of the morning had been spent in a backroom medical lab conducting Visus Serum exposure tests in order to better measure the power and severity of what the Artaro Corporation labeled as *psychic side-effects*.

More precisely, Penelope spent the early hours sitting in a chair with electrodes attached to her head, face, hands, and wrists. Over the course of four hours, Penelope was fed a steady drip of Purple Visus Serum, while she was presented with a series of tests to examine psychic abilities under a variety of conditions.

For example, during a telepathy side-effect test, she was asked to guess the thoughts of a rainbow-furred spider monkey. While it felt unusual attempting to telepathically communicate with the small primate, her scores registered as high enough that she was determined to hold mild to moderate telepathic capabilities.

Her scores regarding telekinesis were much higher, however, as she had been able to lift a ten kilogram metal sphere a half meter from the floor without touching it. After this, Dr. Webweaver was very confident in the determination that telekinesis was Penelope's primary psychic side-effect.

Penelope was given other tests to see if she had the ability to create psychic hallucinations (phantom visions) or to see if she could ignite flammable objects (pyrokinesis), though in those tests, she achieved much lower scores.

Ever since starting the new job at Artaro Labs Chrome Crow, Penelope had been plagued by constant tests and preparations of all sorts. It had been many weeks, and she hoped the routine would have changed by now. She wanted to focus her energy on the actual work of dream advertisement creation. But, with all of the protocols and many technicians around, she always had some peripheral meeting or training exercise to attend to.

During lunch, she sat in the break room and ate a vending machine protein sandwich with a Politi-Cola neuro-boost drink. As it turned out, neuro-boosts served as a good countermeasure to Visus Serum exposure, and seemed a good way to quickly return to a state of mental normalcy and acuity.

Feeling more chipper, Penelope opened a cardboard pastry box to find lemon cupcakes that the Lab Manager, Janice, ordered for the staff.

A few minutes later, the lab's resident technology specialist, Ron Verlyn, came into the breakroom to grab a cup of coffee. The tall, nerdy gentleman was humming to himself, and seemed like he was having an easygoing morning at the office.

“Telekinetic, ey?” he said, adjusting his glasses. “I saw your test results show up on the data-board a few minutes ago.”

“Yeah, wow. Didn’t realize they’d put it on the data-board quickly,” Penelope said. “But, I guess Dr. Webweaver said everyone gets side-effects of one kind or another. Like Dr. Wren with her phantom visions. They told me that the Apathia Labs Operator, Sal Powers, has telepathy and hypnosis side-effects.”

“You know they only call ‘em side-effects because corporate policy says they have to,” Ron said. “If we’re being frank, they could just as easily call it superpowers. In that case, telekinesis sounds pretty sweet.”

“It did feel pretty cool lifting the metal spheres into the air like that,” Penelope said. “I just concentrated, and they lifted right up. It wasn’t until I tried to lift the heavier ones that there were any issues.”

“If that’s what the company calls side-effects, then sign me the fuck up. Hah!” Ron laughed, as he stirred his coffee. “Nah, I’m just joking. I don’t have the neural aptitude for Dream Operations. I’m pretty sure the Visus Serum would just give me an aneurysm or a seizure and I’d probably die. Oh well, I guess. We can’t all be Dream Operators, right?”

“Yeah, I guess that’s a pretty fair point,” Penelope said.

Ron walked over to the table and took a look at all the lemon cupcakes.

“Oh, hell yeah. Janice for the win, again! That’s what I’m talkin’ about,” he said, and proceeded to grab, not one, but two of the cupcakes.

After lunch, Penelope worked with Dr. Webweaver and 1K in the control room and observed Dr. Wren as she created a dream advert for a new perfume by Candy Cosmo, Inc. The perfume in question was called *Ephemera*. According to Dr. Wren, it basically just smelled like tangerine and leather, but as with many products, it carried stimulating neuro-effects, so it was popular with consumers.

Dr. Webweaver added some of his own commentary, as well. “The Catalogue added a bunch of these Candy Cosmo products into the advertisement pipeline over the past two or three years. It’s all because of the big wedding engagement. When a CEO like Stanley Artaro makes plans to marry a fashion empire mogul like Candy Carmen... well, that’s what we call an impending corporate merger.”

Penelope had never met Stanley Artaro or Candy Carmen before, but she knew all about them. Everyone did. Now, she was manning the helm for their many products. In this way, the control room for the Artaro Labs Dream Machine felt like a front row seat to witness the engines that powered commerce in Machina.

The coils lit with electricity, as the Dream Machine fired up. Inside of the Dream Machine, Dr. Thea Wren performed her Dream Operator functions from the chair and central console with a visored-helmet on her head and over her eyes. From a set of monitors, Penelope could see Wren in the matrices of dream creation, moving about in the development of the advert. Penelope watched closely, paying careful attention to Wren’s unique technique and style—the many subtle ways she promoted the product using the environment, characters, and other simulacra. She seemed like a real professional with a lot of experience and plenty of wisdom to teach a newcomer like Penelope.

Little did Penelope know, Dr. Wren was quietly feeling rather self-conscious about the presence of a new Dream Operator in the building. After all, for all of Thea Wren's hard work, she had never achieved lucidity ratings to the level that Penelope had reached during her very first use of the Dream Machine.

At the end of the day, as they gathered their belongings from the locker room, Penelope made sure to tell Thea Wren that she appreciated watching her work as Dream Operator.

"You just know exactly what to do next, inside of the creation process, like you anticipate everything," Penelope said. "When I use the machine, and I'm inside, I always feel like I'm not sure what to do next, and I just have to improvise until I get it right."

"That's your strong suit, Penelope," Wren answered. "Your ability to improvise might just be the thing that sets you apart."

That evening, Penelope and Grim went to a Fluffy Cat's Food Palace, a techno-forward restaurant where custom meals were based on your social-feeds and shopping data. Penelope ended up with a big plate of sashimi with a mac-n-cheese side, which was not at all what she envisioned for herself, though she didn't complain.

After dinner, Grim gave her a pair of shoes that he bought her as a present. They were Ravell-made Mars Tech shoes, from Alchemia. They were really light, but the material seemed strong. It was nice to get something that wasn't made by Artaro every once in a while.

[Oakus 14th, 193 D.C.]

Over the next couple of weeks, Penelope's ability to craft commercial dream advertisements continued to improve. She followed an itinerary of products, quickly moving through with amazing skill. Corporate was very happy in that this was essentially shaping into a brand new dream advert campaign. Rumors of her skill began to spread throughout all of Artaro's higher divisions.

Penelope tied her dark hair into a bun and put it in a rubber cap before placing the operator's helmet and visor over her head. The white leather machine chair reclined as she looked up to the Visus needle and machine arm. Now for the injection. That cold feeling, and the psychic euphoria that followed. She was beginning to like her job.

Inside the static of dream creation matrices, she found quite a lot of creative reward. So what if she was using her talent to accomplish corporate goals? At least she was stimulated by her profession and growing in her potential.

In her new home life, she continued to live it up. She found herself exceptionally well entertained, well fed, and groomed, and in better physical shape than ever. Chrome Crow had a lot to offer to the cogs with the most. Penelope's bank account was starting to grow fat, and she was finding all sorts of fun ways to spend copious quantities of money. Grim Glitchfield didn't complain either, as she was buying him clothes and virtual reality gear and art supplies like he never had before. He cut his hours at work to hang

out with her more. In a bid to keep him around on her day off, she advised him that he could quit his job if he wanted, and then transferred 25,000 Stanley Bucks to his personal account to make her point. For Penelope, that was about a single weekly pay period download, but for Grim that amounted to more than his previous year's salary. Needless to say, soon her boyfriend was unemployed.

They made new friends with other Artaro employees, engineers, research scientists, sales executives, people like that. As more time passed they attended gallery exhibitions and made friends with successful artists and curators and people in the design industry. Both Penelope and Grim had laser tattoo work done. As an impulse buy, Penelope ordered the two of them a couple of brand new Beam Cycles, which were very flashy yet ultimately destined to mostly sit in the Artaro Live-In Suites garage. She also bought herself a nice flashy Artaro Car with a slick midnight grey paint job. From there on out, Penelope and Grim decided they order drone delivery meals and start going to the day spa regularly.

Penelope also found herself in a unique position to help Grim get some recognition for his oil painting work. After showing some photos of the paintings to a few coworkers, word got to one of the marketing departments who made a few calls.

A few days later, while Grim was piloting the street sweep for his day job, he received a holo-call from the Mighty Crow Gallery in west Chrome Crow. In the relatively short discussion with the curators, he was made an offer for a single day exhibition event, which could open a door to high dollar art sales.

He was also told that if the exhibition was successful, he might be able to later participate in the larger, more prominent galleries of South Optera. For both Penelope and Grim, the many new corporate connections were really beginning to pay off.

After the holo-call with the gallery ended, Grim called Penelope, "Oh my god, praise the monolith... holy cow," he said. "I actually got the gig."

"They came through? You really got the gig," Penelope replied, delighted for him. "How's it feel to win?"

"It's just a bit overwhelming is all," he said. "I swear, if this goes right, I'm quitting the damn street sweep company, for real this time..."

"Then let's hope it goes well," Penelope said, then let him get back to work.

[Oakus 20th, 193 D.C.]

Grim's art exhibition was scheduled for six, but he had been at the Mighty Crow Gallery setting up since the previous evening. When Penelope showed up, a few guests were already filing in. While Grim wasn't the only artist in the building, he had a whole small wing of the building to himself, enough space for a sizable crowd.

For the event, he had pulled every major oil painting he could find. Some of them were things he had at his studio apartment in Apathia. Other pieces were from a storage unit he had kept since his time in art school. When everything was said and done, he had twenty oil paintings, a small batch of illustrations, and ten hologram sculptures from his school days. It wasn't a whole lot, but it was enough for a debut.

Penelope checked on him for a few minutes, and saw how preparation had gone. They ate a few crackers and had a glass of champagne together, but were then pulled away from each other by all the

many gallery guests. Soon, there were over a hundred people in the space, all of them snacking on fancy cheeses and chattering, while quiet art critics carefully dissected Grim's works.

But, Penelope was just there for support and to mingle and socialize. For a start, she finally got to meet some of Beatrice Delphonic's people from the Apathia Labs Division. Sal Powers seemed like an impressive guy. As a Dream Operator, he had a number of questions for Penelope and a few tips.

Sal made sure to compliment Penelope's blazer jacket and Harvey Sluggington t-shirt, though he was likely just trying to sound cool. He was very charismatic, especially when he described his experiences crafting dreams. It was fun trading notes with him. But he definitely struck Penelope as a bit of a tool, and he seemed, perhaps, a little intimidated by her skill as she was already making better dream advertisements than he could, and the higher ups at the Artaro HQ Tower had obviously taken notice.

The Drake bros, the dual Dream Directors of Apathia Labs, were actually interested in Grim's oil paintings, analyzing his virtual designs as well, making almost psychoanalytic assertions about his style and iconography. Tonight, they were sporting a chic and luxurious pair of tuxedos, Ramses wearing crimson red, Nero in a deep royal blue—both men, ever so bald, and ever so creepy. They spoke to Penelope with a certain level of analytic curiosity.

"I find you fascinating," Nero Drake spoke to Penelope with a Pollyanna pipe in his pasty, blue hands. "It's not just your competency with the Dream Machine or your high lucidity rating, either. Your tale is that of a true heroine. That's what sticks out to me. You've risen from nothing, and now, look at you. Your gift exceeds your humble beginnings. Is it true that you're from the Rust Lands?"

"Termite Hill, actually... and, thanks for your kind words..." Penelope tried to accept the compliment graciously. "Dr. Webweaver and Dr. Wren and everyone else at Artaro Labs deserve the credit, though."

"Quite the jest!" Ramses Drake butted in with a toothy smile, "While modesty is a useful skill, please recognize that it is lost on us. Clearly, Dr. Webweaver is lucky to have you. You're the star of the show, and let's not parse words about it. I second Nero's assertion. Your dream craft is visionary! An evolutionary landmark in advertisement, medicine for the lifeblood of capitalism."

Ramses Drake turned and with his pink fingers pointed to Grim across the room. Grim was discussing some artwork with potential buyers. The oil painting was based on an avatar that Penelope liked to use in interspace. He called it *The Wizardess* and it was depicted as a caped woman with green floating hair and a crystal ball.

"When did he paint this one?" Ramses asked.

"Pretty recently, at my house." Penelope explained, "It's a costume design we came up with a long time ago. Sometimes, I'll use it as an avatar in interspace."

"Very fine, indeed." Nero concentrated briefly, thinking to himself. Then spoke up again, "...your boyfriend is a skilled artist... We'd wish to purchase it, I believe."

He and Ramses turned and walked immediately through the crowd to Grim. Penelope remained in place, picking up champagne from a passing waiter. She turned and watched as the Drake bros approached Grim, who was having a discussion with the curator. Grim looked like a real artist in his new green suit jacket, gold belt, and black slacks. Penelope was proud of him for following through on his oil paintings and other work, and she got a kick out of his reaction when the Drake brothers made their offer.

He was ecstatic, almost to the point that he made an ass out of himself. Penelope smirked, sipping her champagne.

That evening, when Penelope and Grim got back to the apartment suite, they stretched out on the couch to relax. Grim looked to be quite pleased with how the evening had turned out. His wrist-connect notified him that the payment for *The Wizardess* was successful—another 8,000 Stanley Bucks in the bank.

“Wow,” Grim laughed. “Holy shit.” His wrist-connect watch emitted a *cha-ching* as he showed Penelope this fortunate transaction.

“Livin’ the high life! Now you won’t have to mooch off me, buddy!” Penelope jested, then grabbed his arm and put it over her shoulder. A sense of peace washed over her, like success was finally a part of life’s great equation, not only for her, but also for the people around her.

“Can I ask you something, Grim?” she asked.

“Yeah, of course,” he said. “What’s on your mind?”

“Would you want to just move in here with me?”

Grim looked a bit surprised, but took the thought seriously.

“I suppose I could,” he said. “Now that I sold that painting, I can aim for more gallery exhibitions in Optera and Chrome Crow. So, I don’t really have any reason to keep working at the Apathia Street Sweep Company—and if I quit my job, then what’s the point of living all the way down in the Apathia District. Living with you would make a lot of sense—if that’s what you want, I mean. Moving in together is a commitment, you know. I’m happy to make it happen, but only if it’s something that you want, as well.”

“I know it’s a leap, Grim, but the time is now,” Penelope said. “We’re finally getting a chance to live in a cool, luxurious part of Machina, and the puzzle pieces are finally coming together for once. We might as well start living it up and enjoying our lives.”

Grim thought about that for a moment. Clearly, Penelope’s point was resonating with him.

“I’ll order a moving truck on the Artaro Catalogue then,” Penelope said. “We could have a few robots just bring your stuff over.”

“Okay, but what about my dog?” Grim said, “I don’t think I can dump him on my grandparents again.”

“Hmmm...” Penelope hadn’t thought about that, yet. “Yeah, I guess that’s fine. There’s a small deposit fee that we’d have to pay downstairs at the front lobby desk. I had to pay one for my cat when I brought him. But, I think it should be fine. I just hope the dog and the cat get along.”

“I guess it’s settled then,” Grim said. “That’s good. I think my neighbor is getting sick of dog-sitting for me, anyway. We’re moving in.”

Penelope used her watch to schedule the moving truck, three Omni-Assist robots to bring Grim’s music equipment and furniture, with a special request for his pug, Rip. The whole thing took ten minutes,

with the move scheduled for the following day.

“That went smoother than I would have imagined,” Grim said.

“Everything becomes easier when you can afford it,” Penelope said. “No different than ordering dinner or laundry service or something.”

“Wait, you get laundry service here?” Grim asked, mildly excited at the prospect.

For a moment, everything seemed right in the world.

Ding!

“Someone’s at the door!” The robot Douglas screamed from the hall. “I wonder what it is! I hope it’s a delivery!” The robot continued to chatter as it went back and forth between the kitchen and hallway.

“Yeah, yeah.” Penelope answered, “I heard! I’ll get it.” She got up from the couch and went to the door. “...That robot won’t shut up sometimes...” she said, quietly to Grim, then checked her home security system.

On a small display monitor, she pulled up an image of the corridor outside her suite. There on the flickering terminal display was an unexpected sight—a jumbled fish-eye image of Vincent Sinclair. Behind him were two women, though it was difficult to tell who they were. One of them might have been...*yes*... it was Myra Jax from the Gilded Serpent in Termite Hill. The other she recognized from the time she got stuck at the dump with Sneak Lennox, but she couldn’t recall her name.

In the feed, Vincent’s face looked huge and twisted, his stark eyes behind a pair of red-tinted sunglasses. He was wearing a leather jacket over a t-shirt with a picture of a hamburger on it. Behind him, Myra appeared less distorted. She was wearing a long coat, and her optic implants were glimmering on the monitor. The other woman, whose name she had missed, was taller and had long purple hair, and a tourist’s tank top that read: I HEART MACHINA.

“Who’s there?” Grim asked, curious.

“Uh, old friends, it looks like...” Penelope replied. *This is going to be rocky*, the thought occurred, *how do they know where I live?* Hesitantly, she opened the door.

Vincent Sinclair let himself in, scoffing immediately at Penelope’s apartment suite.

“Well, I gotta give it to Artaro. They really know how to set their people up, comfortably,” he remarked. He took a look around and then sprawled out on the couch like he owned the place.

Grim was visibly irritated by this and stood up from the couch.

“Okay, what is going on?” Grim said.

“Thanks for barging in,” Penelope said, “Yes, welcome to my house. Try not to get mud on the new carpet.”

“Okay, I get it. I am from the landfill... We just came here to talk to you about a few things,” Vincent snapped back, “But, I wanted to try out the couch. It’s pretty cushy, I like it. Anyway, I can

appreciate a bit of luxury. Same as you.”

Myra followed. Her demeanor, as usual, was much more professional. She took a moment to hang up her coat. Beneath, she was wearing her regular technical jumpsuit. She sat at one of Penelope’s stools near the kitchen counter.

Third to enter was the tall, purple-haired woman. Penelope had seen her around with the others, both at the landfill and once at Myra’s virtual interspace plug-in site in the back of the Gilded Serpent Noodle Bar in Termite Hill.

“I don’t know if I ever introduced myself,” she said, extending her hand for a shake. “The name’s Liliana Sioki. Put ‘er there!”

“Hey, welcome,” Penelope said, and shook her hand. She noticed the glint of a side arm holstered to Liliana’s belt. “That’s a neat blaster you’ve got there. How’d you get past the security guards downstairs?”

“Well...” Liliana replied, “That’s what we do... to clarify, Vincent does seem to enjoy getting into trouble—but that’s precisely why he needs someone like me around when going to a place like the Artaro Live-In Suites with all these corporate types. Chrome Crow is the kind of place where they’ll slap a pair of laser-cuffs on you if you aren’t careful. But, of course, we are careful.”

As Liliana and Penelope spoke, Grim, in a state of confoundedness, observed as Myra scanned the room with some sort of baton. She proceeded to wave it all around the house. It was beginning to look like she might be searching for a bug or a camera or something of that ilk. When she moved into the kitchen, suddenly it began beeping. Grim peered in to see that Myra was holding the scanner to the small robot, Douglas.

The robot wiggled about as Myra picked him up and brought him to the coffee table.

“What the hell is this?” Vincent barked.

“That’s Douglas,” Penelope replied. “Well, I mean, I wanted to call him Sprocket, but he wouldn’t let me. He made some apple pie. I suppose, since you’re here, you could have a slice.”

“So, he’s bugged?” Vincent asked, looking at Myra.

Myra nodded.

Vincent grabbed the little Artaro bot, as it shouted and squirmed.

“Hey! What the hell, man! Don’t hurt him!” Penelope again thought about the Patrols they had destroyed that fateful night in the landfill. “He’s just a little robot! He made apple pie!”

“I’m not going to hurt him! I’m just making an adjustment!” Vincent pulled a screwdriver from his belt, and opened a panel on the back of the robot’s head. “Yeah, just as I thought. His data is not only accessible, but somebody is checking in on you. That’s what happens when you get a job for fucking Artaro!”

Now it was all too clear. Vincent was here because Penelope worked for Artaro. He was a dissident Tekk operative, and hated Artaro like Artaro, likely, hated him.

“Hey, maybe we should just wrap this up, dude,” Grim said with a stern look.

“Have I overstayed my welcome, already?” Vincent gave Penelope a look of harsh judgement. “I saw that you’re working in that Artaro Labs Chrome Crow outfit. I read your file, found it in a corporate archive. You really think they want you because of your merits, do you? I doubt it. There’s always a catch.”

He took a pair of wire cutters from his belt, snipping a small wire exposed on the back of Douglas's head. The robot shut down slowly, with a sort of low-pitched groan as the lights in its eyes faded.

“You can’t trust ‘em,” he said. “You think the folks at Artaro Corp. are your friends? I imagine they are paying you pretty handsomely. Let me make it clear—your robot is monitoring you, undoubtedly, on behalf of some nefarious security apparatus at Artaro. From what I can tell, the security wing is corrupt, selling their own company out to the highest bidder. Someone should look into that. That’s just par for the course with these types of people, and the price of admission is your fucking soul, as far as I can tell.”

“Okay, that’s it. I need you to leave, Vincent! I don’t need this bullshit!” Penelope pointed to the door. She was furious. Whatever fun it was hanging with dissidents and anarchists, the truth was, she had a life now. She had a career and a really nice apartment, and the whole anti-corporate song and dance was the last thing she needed.

“We didn’t come here to upset you,” Myra interjected. Sitting down in one of Penelope’s designer vegan-leather chairs, she leaned forward with a pair of folded hands resting under her chin, “The truth is, I’ve got a story to tell you, and perhaps a proposal. Just hear me out, and I believe you’ll understand.”

“Okay, fine. What is it?”

“Despite Vincent’s remarks, a lot of the folks working in the Chrome Crow Lab are actually good people. If I’m to honestly discuss the Artaro Corporation with you, first I need you to understand that I do not speak from the position of an outsider. To make it simple, I have a rich understanding of company motivation, and the long history of Dream Operations programs—*this is because I was once a Dream Director*. Your director, Dr. Webweaver, and I were colleagues.”

“...Really? ...” Penelope appeared skeptical.

“Yes... Myra Jax is an alias I devised after I went underground. My real name is Dr. Synthia Thesia, and I used to be the Dream Director for the Optera Labs Division where I oversaw the dream advertisement campaigns of the Overlord 1 Dream Machine.”

“The Overlord 1...” Penelope had been told of this Dream Machine before. “I was told that there was an accident of some kind—maybe a fire?”

“You’re correct, and it was a chemical fire, yes... but it was no accident. It was the Dream Operator, Gilliam Lennon. He was skilled in making dream advertisements, but after time it became evident that he was also a powerful telepath, and more dangerously, an unpredictable pyrokinetic. He would read minds, and speak to people. For this reason, they confined him to the premises, and studied him carefully. For the longest while, it was just a limited problem. Even the pyrokinesis could be managed. We knew how to put out fires at the Artaro Corporation, or at least we thought we knew. But,

eventually, it came to my attention that he was having discussions, using his telepathy to converse with parties outside of my care and jurisdiction... discussions with someone else looking for a Dream Operator.”

The whole room was listening intently, but Myra paused, gathering herself. She appeared to be having a difficult time discussing the matter.

“A Dream Director...” she stated “...not Webweaver, of course.”

“The Drake Brothers?” Penelope asked.

“No, not them. I suppose I should tell you what I know. There is a Ravell scientist from Alchemia, Dr. Charles Scathe. He’s a foreigner, a Ravell man from Velvet Olympus in Alchemia, but the state granted him cogship status in Machina for his engineering talent. As I understand it, they call him the Iconoclast for challenging the history of the Monolithic Faith at Artaro University. Generally speaking, the Artaro family doesn’t have the best dealings with the city-states of the Mystic Lands—neither Alchemia, nor Arcanica. I don’t know what kind of project he’s got going on exactly, but it’s not your basic dream op, but he’s got something big going on at the Wardencllyffe Institute north of the city. I suspect it’s a new Dream Machine, but of a new kind. The problem is that the project goals of his operation aren’t aligned with the mission statements of the other dream operations. But, his plans are almost certainly more sinister than advertising. His goals have more to do with his strange philosophical views, which are laid out in papers he’s written—*Iconoclasm and Nihilism*.”

“Have you thought about discussing this with Webweaver? I mean, considering that you know him, apparently.”

“Actually, yes, I have.” Myra replied, “Of course, he’s currently under the impression that I died fifteen years ago in that terrible fire that Gilliam created. That event really made it clear to me why the company labelled psychic phenomena as side-effects. His pyrokinesis was just too erratic, and with Dr. Scathe in his ear, the kettle just boiled over.”

“I’m sorry,” Penelope said. “That must have been horrible for you—for your employees and lab crew.”

“It was a tragedy,” Myra said. “But now I have a new problem. As you might imagine, Dr. Webweaver purposely remains outside of political matters at the Artaro Corporation. He’s too wary of his supervisor, Delphonic, and extremely nervous of Stanley Artaro’s inner circle. He’s survived in the company for a long time, because he’s smart, capable, and because he keeps his head down. Still, I have thought about contacting him.”

“You’re not wrong. He does seem to hold his cards close,” Penelope answered, not knowing precisely what else to say. “What are you getting at with this? I don’t understand what you’re trying to tell me here.”

“Ask her, Myra,” Vincent chimed in. “Ask her about the wake-up advertisement.”

“Wake-up advertisement?” Penelope replied, “What are you talking about?”

“Well, we had a proposition to make.” Myra pointed out, “Given that we know you, and that you work as a dream operator for one of the major Dream Machines... we want to ask a favor of you.”

“A favor?” Penelope didn’t exactly like where this was going.

“We need someone to craft a dream, off the books—a warning of sorts—a dream that, once transmitted, will make people aware that the Artaro Corporation is literally advertising to them in their sleep. The public has to comprehend what is happening to their minds... the truth is, it’s time to end this terrible advertising practice altogether, and this would be the appropriate first step.”

Penelope stood up, placing her hands on her waist. “...Wow. Are you kidding me?” She answered. “I appreciate the discussion, though. Really... it’s been eye opening, but there is no way in hell I would ever consider doing something like that.” She walked to the door, opening it. She looked to Vincent, to Myra, to Liliana. “You guys need to leave, now. I apologize, but I probably shouldn’t talk to you anymore.”

With perhaps a hint of frustration, Myra got up without speaking, grabbed her coat, and exited the suite into the corridors of the main building.

“Well, nice talking’ to you folks, I guess...” Liliana said, “Even if it was a waste of time.” Quickly, she put her things together, exiting behind Myra.

Vincent zipped up his jacket, and followed, pausing for a moment to say, “Penelope, you’re a sellout. I’m not mad at you, but I want you to know that. You come from Termite Hill, not from Chrome Crow or Optera. The truth is, this city is going to swallow up those districts, and it’s going to continue to consolidate its power, while the folks in the dust suffer. Anyway, I’ll tell Sneak that you said ‘Hi’.”

Penelope shut the door.

After a few hours of troubleshooting, Grim figured out how to re-activate Douglas. But, the little robot didn't work quite right after that.

[Oakus 21st, 193 D.C.]

The following morning, when the robot attempted to make breakfast, he made a mistake with the blender and splattered banana smoothie all over the walls. In his frustration, he kept asking to speak with the manager, whatever that meant. Most startling of all, his voice kept modulating and distorting; he began slipping in and out of different languages, even producing animal sounds. Penelope ended up having to open his back panel to just shut him off.

That week had been pretty sleepless for Penelope. Co-workers were beginning to comment that she looked groggy.

In the Artaro Labs front lobby, Janice Biggs gave her an inquisitive eye. “Do you need anything, sweetie? Ice water? Maybe a Polybenzo would be useful.”

“I’m fine, just a bit under-slept, maybe a tad bit distracted.”

“How’d that art show go? It seemed awfully kind of you to help your friend, Grim, out like that. That’s his name. Correct?” Janice was always good at remembering the little things. She was the sort of woman who everyone in the entirety of the Chrome Crow division loved, because no matter who you were, she would ask questions about how you were doing and check up on you. Penelope loved that about

her.

“Yeah, Grim, sold a painting to the Drake Brothers, actually. I think he’s going to try to make a career of his art. I’m going to help him get some of his virtual design work in the galleries, if we can manage.”

“Are you sure you don’t need anything?” Janice asked, “Maybe a coffee will do the trick?”

“Alright. That sounds good.”

Janice and Penelope went to the talking coffee maker in the main lab to find Webweaver looking over some robot circuitry under an electron microscope.

“Anybody call, Janice?” He asked, his eyes remaining in the microscope’s viewfinder.

“Yes, actually, the secretary from the Artaro HQ Tower got back to me about the diplomatic trip to Nickelpoint Mountain. As it turns out, Stanley Artaro’s people still need a technical adviser on hand at the World Council meeting. You’re going to have to go in and get a briefing this week. After that, you’re set to participate in preparation regarding a Dream Machine set up. You might have to give a talk on the usefulness of Dream Machines for advertising purposes. That’s about the extent of information I was given.”

Webweaver shot up in his seat, “Really? A Dream Machine? What the hell does dream operations have to do with the World Council? That doesn’t make any sense.” He stopped to contemplate this fact for a moment, then shrugged, returning to his work. “I’m going to have to talk to Beatrice. This sounds like a class 5, grade A shit storm. The Mars Dynasty and all those Ravell diplomats from Alchemia are going to be at that meeting.”

“Yeah, I thought similarly.” Replied Janice. “I have to suspect that Dream Operations may be going inter-city-state pretty soon here.”

“No, no. The Artaro’s would never let the Ravell gain access to a Dream Machine of their own. Plus, those creatures are engineered, remember? They’re biologically incapable of dreaming. Anyway you cut it, Artaro is up to something, and I won’t know until I talk to Beatrice or go entertain this briefing, whatever it is.”

“Penelope,” Webweaver’s attention turned, “if I’m out on project assignments more often in the upcoming quarter, are you confident that you’ll be able to continue your work without my supervision?”

“Of course. Whatever you need.”

Penelope wasn’t sure exactly what the Director was thinking. She tried to study his expression. His brow appeared heavy, like he was thinking through complicated matters. But, he said nothing else, and soon his eyes returned to the viewfinder of his electron microscope, his work again absorbing him.

Supplemental Character Information:

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]

Dr. 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]

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]

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]

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]

Douglas:

Class: Artaro Minibot

Occupation: Household Assistant

[Eyes: Glowing, Yellow] [Height: 2'0"]

[Booted Up in 193 D.C.] [Appearance: Canary Yellow]

Nero Drake:

Class: Human, Cog/Clone Twin

Occupation: Dream Director at Apathia Labs (Artaro Corporation), Art Collector

[Eyes: Pale Blue] [Hair: Bald]

[Born: 137 D.C.] [Background: Test Tube Grown by Beatrice Delphonic at Artaro University, Albino Complexion]

Ramses Drake:

Class: Human, Cog/Clone Twin

Occupation: Dream Director at Apathia Labs (Artaro Corporation), Art Collector
[Eyes: Pale Pink] [Hair: Bald]
[Born: 137 D.C.] [Background: Test Tube Grown by Beatrice Delphonic at Artaro University, Albino Complexion]

Sal Powers:

Class: Human Cog
Occupation: Dream Operator at Apathia Labs (Artaro Corporation)
[Eyes: Blue] [Hair: Blonde]
[Born: 155 D.C.] [Background: New Worlder, Light Complexion, From Machina]

Dissident Faction Characters:

Vincent Sinclair:

Class: Human Dissident (Fort Tekk)
[Eyes: Hazel] [Hair: Short, Black][Height: 6'1"]
[Born: 161 D.C.] [Background: Rosari, Light Complexion, from Machina]

Dr. Synthia Thesia (Alias: Myra Jax)

Class: Human Cog turned Dissident
Occupation: Dream Director at Optera Labs (175-179 D.C.); Hacker, Dissident leadership (by 193 D.C)
[Eyes: Walnut Brown] [Hair: Black]
[Born: 141 D.C.] [Background: New Worlder, Dark Complexion, From Machina]

Liliana Sioki:

Class: Human Dissident (Fort Tekk)
[Eyes: Dark Brown] [Hair: Long, Dark Violet][Height: 5'10"]
[Born: 168 D.C.] [Background: Rodashi, Tan Complexion, from Machina]

Sneak Lennox:

Class: Human Dissident (Fort Tekk)
[Eyes: Brown] [Hair: Long on Top, Dark Brown with Bleaching] [Height: 5'7"]
[Born: 168 D.C.] [Background: Rodashi, Tan Complexion, from Machina]

Relevant Timeline Notes:

(This story takes place in the month of Oakus, in the year 193 D.C.)

Artarus 193 D.C.-	Friday, Artarus 30th-	Penelope uses the Dream Machine to create her first dream advert. During this process, she achieves a lucidity rating of over 99.9%.
Octus 193 D.C.-		Penelope settles into her new job and career. Grim continues work as a Street Sweep.
Oakus 193 D.C.-	Thursday, Oakus 14th- Friday, Oakus 20th Monday, Oakus 21st	Penelope displays more improvement in dream advert creation. Grim's First Art Exhibition. Grim begins the process of moving into Penelope's apartment suite.

A Map of West Enon: *Where our story takes place—*

