

The Crystalline Mythos:
**A LESSON IN
DREAMS**

A Short Story
By Teej R.



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(A Short Story)

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(Story #10 of the “*Dream Operations*” Collection)

*At the end of the story, readers can find **Supplemental Character Information** and **A Map of West Enon**.*

[Artarus, 193 D.C.]

**Part One:
Grim Glitchfield**

Stepping out of an Artaro Taxi, Grim found himself about a block from his studio apartment on Inferno Street in the east end of Machina's heavily populated Apathia District. It was getting late, 9:30 PM or so, and the day had been both draining and alarming. His friend, or now girlfriend it seemed, Penelope, had been picked up by the MPD in Optera near the annual parade, and he didn't understand why. He was in the dark.

He zipped up his red jacket and took in the surroundings. Inferno Street was full of tall concrete and brick buildings, many of which were apartment buildings with lit up windows and people making noise from their little balconies. The night sky was almost entirely black, but in the light of the buildings, delivery and surveillance drones quietly hummed as they flew by.

The sidewalk in the area was frankly pretty gross, with a fair amount of littered trash paired against a faint piss smell. Still to many people, this neighborhood was home. It was run down, but also lively. People socialized in front of their buildings. Others minded their own business. Robots and androids weren't as numerous here, but there were a few.

Stopping at a liquor store, Grim bought a pricey bottle of offworld Phonic Water, a fresh pack of Happy-Go-Lucky cigarettes. The guy working the counter told him he looked grey in the face—a strange thing to say to a Ravell. But, when Grim looked in the glass near the front exit, he could see just how tired he did indeed appear. He brushed his indigo hair out of his face, and figured it was time to go home.

On the way to his building, he saw Patrick Puck, his old coworker. But, Puck was on the other side of the street, and looked rather frantic, so Grim decided to keep his head forward and continue along his way. He walked down the sidewalk past a group of goths and bikers, passing along street vendors, glow punk idiots, and a man walking a genetically modified dog. It was a good reminder that Grim needed to feed his own dog as soon as he got home.

Entering the Apathia Meadows lobby, it was empty as usual, he entered the service elevator and rode up to his floor. Unlocking his door, he found Rip wagging his little pug tail. Luckily, Grim had a few cans of soft food stocked up in his cabinet, so he opened one and greeted the dog with some much appreciated attention.

Grim sat by his window with no answers regarding Penelope's whereabouts. For a while, he stared at his wrist-connect watch, hoping for an answer. He tried to call her with no success, so he sent a few ping messages, and figured he'd try again in the morning. Checking his work schedule, he realized he didn't need to report to work at the street sweep garage until Wednesday, the third of the month.

Tomorrow was Tuesday, the second. In this small way, he was lucky.

Unexpectedly, there was a tapping sound on the glass of the window. Grim stood up and unhinged the window's bolt lock to look outside. As soon as it was open, a light Artaro Drone flew inside and quietly hummed in front of him.

He looked at it surprised. This was unusual. While it was common for delivery drones to enter the building to drop off packages and what not, they never entered the apartment spaces themselves.

“What is it?” He asked, hoping for an explanation.

The machine scanned his face with a soft array of lasers. He could see a hologram of his own face and information appear in the air. He looked it over.

Grim Glitchfield. Half Ravell. Hair: Indigo. Eyes: Raspberry. Apathia Resident. Active Cogship Status. Occupation: Street Sweep Driver.

“Okay then?” he said, confused. “What the hell is this?”

“You are Grim Glitchfield. Are you not?” said the drone.

“What's it to you?” Grim said.

“I've come to deliver a message from the Artaro Corporation. I was required to hand the parcel to you directly. I saw you by the window, and that is why I didn't use the normal entrance. Sorry if this was an intrusion. This parcel is important.”

The drone extended a pair of thin mechanical arms and reached into its central console. There it retrieved a light lavender envelope with pink pen work on its face.

Grim accepted the letter and looked at it. It was addressed: *Grim Glitchfield*

He opened it and found a letter on light pastel paper. It read:

Mr. Glitchfield,

Penelope is safe and in good hands. The Artaro Corporation has made a valuable discovery and a job opportunity awaits her. As you were with her during the time of our interception, I felt it prudent to inform you.

I feel I have inconvenienced you on your outing to Mega Mall this Parade Day. You and Penelope seemed to be enjoying yourselves... despite the very dangerous spider outbreak just a block away...

Please accept this Artaro Store Gift Card as a consolation. Thanks for your understanding.

*Regards,
Dr. Beatrice Delphonic - The Artaro Corporation*

Grim thought for a moment. He remembered Beatrice. She was the dark-haired woman in the long coat who he and Penelope had met after sneaking into the Bicentennial Bar at the top of the Old Leavenworth Building. This strange woman had paid for all their drinks. Now, she had used the MPD to corral Penelope for a job offer. She must have been very rich, he thought.

“Can I send a reply?” Grim asked the delivery drone.

“Absolutely,” the drone said.

“Tell Ms. Delphonic here that you Artaro Corporation people have a really strange way of going about business. But, if Penelope is fine, then I’m fine.”

The drone gestured so as to indicate comprehension. Then, just as quickly, it quietly floated its way back through the window and into the night sky.

While Grim had been assured that Penelope was accounted for, he still felt restless. He could tell already that he would not sleep easily tonight. He took another glance at his wrist-connect watch to see his Artaro gift card balance go up by \$200 Stanley-bucks. He laughed, even as he rolled his eyes.

Maybe I'll actually be able to afford some groceries this week, he thought.

Part Two: Penelope Curtis

Penelope sat, strapped to the padded backseat of a corporate police propulsion craft. Her wrists were restrained by a strong set of police laser cuffs. She wondered where she was being taken, and repeatedly asked the MPD Officers piloting the vehicle, though she received no clear answers.

After roughly thirty minutes of anxiety-filled time in the sky, the craft landed atop a large concrete complex of corporate office buildings somewhere in northern Machina. The loud hum of the engine turbines cooled as the vessel finally came to a halt. Exiting onto the roof, Penelope was passed from the MPD Officers to a pair of pale faced men in grey suits.

The men had very little in terms of facial expressions. Dispassionately, they led her to a station, where several personnel in full hazmat suits were prepared for some kind of scan. It became clear during the scan that extra focus was being placed on Penelope’s skull. Eventually, she heard a digital sound over a computer system tied to the scanners that seemed to indicate some kind of confirmation or success. This entirety of the experience was jarring and uncomfortable. When it was done, Penelope’s laser cuffs were

removed. Looking at her wrists, she could see irritation where the heat of it had singed her skin.

Then, entered the tall, dark-haired, well dressed Artaro Financier known as Beatrice Delphonic. Penelope recognized her immediately. *The woman from the Bicentennial Bar in that tower in High Optera... an Artaro Executive... probably a gazillionaire...*

As the Head Executive of Dream Operations at the Artaro Corporation, Dr. Beatrice Delphonic was in charge of several research and development departments, including Artaro Labs Chrome Crow and the nearby Apathia Labs operation. Furthermore, she was a master of logistics—across the world and even throughout the solar system. Also, she was fluent in four languages, and was a go-to individual for business dealings with foreign city-states. To the Artaro Corporation, she was indispensable.

Penelope was feeling quite out of place now.

But these strange men, and this woman—this was bizarre. Penelope's hands were shaking. Her heart was racing. For a moment, she thought about attempting to run away. But, she was on top of a high structure. Even if she somehow evaded the armed men in grey, she would have nowhere to go but a very high ledge over a very steep drop.

"You look a tad nervous, my dear. Don't worry, you haven't seen a ghost. My apologies for any confusion our meeting might have caused. I know you were in the middle of a shopping trip, after all."

The woman smirked. Her eyes were long and thin, deep and violet, under greying eyebrows. She was taller than Penelope and the way she carried herself was intimidating. She was wearing a long purple coat with fur trim with raspberry colored gloves and boots. She removed her gloves as she introduced herself, extending a proper handshake.

"I imagine you remember me from our previous meeting, as brief as it was," she said. "If you haven't caught my name it's Dr. Beatrice Delphonic... I'm a technology investor, among other things, and I serve as an Executive at the Artaro Corporation... in an area known as Dream Operations... and you... well, you're unique. It may come as a surprise, but I have a most interesting proposition for you."

She threw something like a black cloth. It hit Penelope right in the face, and fell onto the concrete. Picking it up, Penelope realized it was a fancy black dress. Looking at it, it was actually quite nice.

"Put that on." Beatrice spoke quickly, "This whole sweatshirt and jeans number you've got on won't do—not where we're going. We'll need to get you some adequate dress shoes as well."

Soon they were sitting, no longer in an office, but in the back of a company luxury car. Penelope wondered where Grim was now. She wanted to let him know that she was alright, if in fact, she was alright. Given the strange circumstances of the present moment, it was difficult to tell.

Beatrice stepped out of the vehicle, so closed the privacy divider on the limo's android driver and took a minute to put on the black dress. When that was done, Beatrice returned briefly and handed Penelope a fresh box of medium heeled dress shoes. Penelope was surprised to find she actually really liked them.

Penelope opened the car door to see Beatrice outside smoking and talking on some kind of conference call. She wondered how anyone like this strange rich lady could possibly be in any way interested in her or her life. Penelope never viewed herself as anyone of real importance, and all of these hints and clues coming from the Artaro Corporation over the past months still weren't clicking.

"What's this all about?" Penelope finally asked. This time she was hoping for a real answer.

"Aren't you the impatient one?" Beatrice retorted with a soft laugh, then handed Penelope a shoe box.

Penelope took a look. Inside there was a pair of sleek black dress shoes with heels slightly higher than was her preference.

"Here is what I'll say first," Beatrice said. "We at the Artaro Corporation have had our eye on you for a little while now. A standard set of public retinal scans informed us that you hold a very particular sort of mental configuration, and we believe you may have certain untapped mental talents... talents that shouldn't go unnoticed."

Once Penelope put on the shoes, and took a breath, it became clear to her that she really was in a very luxurious setting. The limousine in which she now sat came equipped with a versatile minibar.

Beatrice leaned over and grabbed a tall thin bottle, pouring each of them a drink.

"This is a Pollyanna Wine. Very expensive—bought it at a restaurant that I'd like to show you." Beatrice's eyes now began to gloss over, changing to a soft, lavender color. "Oh... you're looking into my eyes, aren't you? Well, that's quite romantic, but perhaps you should look in the mirror."

Beatrice produced a small silver mirror from her purse. Opening it, she watched as Penelope witnessed her own eyes. Pollyanna had this effect where the user's eyes grew milky and purple. For this reason, most of the wealthy people who enjoyed these products carried tinted glasses with them. Penelope didn't have any glasses, but she didn't particularly care. She was with Beatrice Delphonic. Wherever they were going, she felt very classy.

They pulled up to a tall building with sophisticated architecture and curving designs. Valets approached, and they were gently assisted out of the vehicle. Penelope followed Beatrice to the lobby. There Beatrice met with a few business assistants, giving notes about her busy schedule. Once the assistants departed, Beatrice and Penelope took an elevator up several levels to a very upscale restaurant called *The Nimble Prince*.

Sparkling water and a selection of Nimble Prince Pollyanna Wines were brought out. The wine bottles matched closely to the one from the limousine. Penelope realized now that Beatrice probably drank a lot of this stuff. When Beatrice lit up a cigarette, a purple plume of smoke billowed from it, the color surely denoting the presence of yet more Pollyanna.

She must be some kind of addict, Penelope quietly thought to herself.

Appetizers were served soon after, followed by plates of pasta and a wide silver platter of absolutely gigantic prawns lathered in cream sauce. There were multiple waiters, each one of them being entirely over-attentive.

Slurping down a strip of asparagus, Beatrice decided it was the proper time to talk business.

“Alright. Alright.” She said, “I’ve kept you waiting long enough. So why, you might ask, would the Artaro Corporation be keeping an eye on you?”

Penelope’s mind instantly turned to the Patrol Robot she had destroyed. Then she began to think about all of her other dealings with Sneak and the other dissidents. Now, they had found her out, surely, and they were toying with her, twisting the knife. Soon, they’d purge her and process her, remove her cogship, and send her to Artaro Jail or to slave away in some deep space mine shaft, never to return.

"Don't look so scared, young lady. Remember, I stated before that you have certain talents... talents that we admire. For instance, we believe you are capable of telepathy, perhaps one day when our extraction methods improve, telekinesis, as well. More accurately put, we believe that you are genetically disposed to a successful merging with certain biochemical agents. We have much use for those who can merge in this way, and believe me, in this way you are very, very special."

“You have been chosen...” She said, “...chosen to be our new Dream Operator. Tell me, have you ever heard of a Dream Machine?”

“Dream Machine? No...” *What is this strange woman talking about? Telepathy? What on earth is a Dream Machine?*

“Of course, you haven’t...” Beatrice laughed to herself, “... How silly of me. Well, let's just say that whether or not you've heard of these things, they've had quite a profound impact on your life... well... you and everyone else. It's funny how monumentally important a thing can be, and yet nobody even pays attention. Dream Machines, in concept, aren't even classified information. I'm sure if you spend some time in the archives, you'll learn all about them. And I suggest you do just that. You're going to be operating one of them, after all.”

“...What is it that makes me so special? My neural signature?” Penelope’s reply was a gutsy one, “I saw you at the parade this morning on the display. You were with that man, Webweaver. He came into my work some time back, and I remember he was spouting off about my *magnificent neural signature*... whatever that means...”

Beatrice put her wine glass and dining utensils to the side, “We've had our eye on you for a little while now. Yes, your neural signature is quite an anomalous one. For starters, you seem to have the ideal brain configuration for the use of lab-concocted technologies known as Visus Serums. They're a class of agents that would kill most recipients, but you're neurochemically very well equipped to utilize them for a number of psychic applications associated with the field I work in... the field we call Dream Operations.”

“Okay, so you’re saying that you want to give me some experimental drug so that I’ll gain psychic superpowers? And then you want me to operate this Dream Machine you’re talking about? And let me get this straight, if you’re wrong about my brain, I’ll die.”

Beatrice laughed again. “Technically, we consider the psychic abilities that accompany the Visus Serums to be side effects... manageable as they are. Your brain will then be able to handle vast amounts of input stimulus. It’s a major factor. When learning to operate a Dream Machine, your mind must deal with vast amounts of data. Then, you'd be creating new dreams for the company—dreams that we'll be

sharing widely with customers all over Machina. Think about that. You'll literally be creating dreams that people will get to experience... to help sell products, of course.”

Getting up from her chair, Beatrice finished the remaining portion of her drink and wiped her mouth with a silk handkerchief. “But yes, you’re correct about the potential danger. If an average person were introduced to the same Purple Visus molecule, they would have an aneurysm, profusely bleeding from their eye sockets. It's a terrible way to die. I've seen it before.” With that, Beatrice smiled one last time, and left the table. “But our internal research tells us that you are a strong candidate, and that you’ll very likely be alright. So, think it over.”

“From their... *eye sockets*?” Penelope asked to clarify. “Does that mean their eyes exploded?”

“Better not to think about it, honestly,” Beatrice remarked. “Remember, you’ll be compensated generously for your work. There are many perks to working at the Artaro Corporation. Hell, maybe you’ll even get to meet Stanley one day.”

A few moments later, one of the waiters approached and informed Penelope that another Artaro Limousine had been sent especially for her, and it was now waiting outside. Somewhat flummoxed at the gravity and sheer strangeness of the evening, Penelope got her things together and left the restaurant.

For most of the quiet ride home, she thought about the Artaro Corporation. She had never met anybody as important (or wildly rich) as Dr. Beatrice Delphonic. But then again, there was also that man who came into the diner... Dr. Webweaver. These were important people, and suddenly it felt as though she might be important, as well.

This explains so much, she thought, everything that Sneak and the others had told me. It was all because Artaro wanted me to work for them.

She laughed to herself at the ridiculousness of it.

Eventually, the limousine dropped her off at Bug Station near the edge of Termite Hill. From there, she hopped the bus and was home within ten minutes.

At the foot of the Apple Colony building, she found her mom unloading wares and produce from a work cart. Their llamas were there, tied up, so Penelope decided to help by taking them to their corral. When all of that was done, she took one of the building’s little elevators up to the family apartment.

In the little kitchen space, she found her brother eating cereal and drinking an apple Flurpe drink.

“Where’s mom?” Hollis asked.

“She’s putting away stuff from work. She’ll be in soon, I’m sure,” Penelope said.

“Want to watch Slug Wars?”

“Sorry, Hollis. I had a long day. Maybe tomorrow or something. You should go to bed soon too.”

“That’s dumb. I’m gonna watch Slug Wars.” he said.

“Don’t stay up too late, okay,” Penelope said and went to her room.

Sitting down, she thought a bit about her job at Archer Piglet’s Pancake House. For some time, she had figured she’d probably be stuck working there until the day she died, but now... she might end up really working for the Artaro Corporation... and with telepathic powers? And she was to operate some kind of Dream Machine? It was difficult to take it all in, but also very exciting. Maybe she wasn’t in fact doomed to work a mundane job on the brink of poverty forever. She was destined to go corporate. This was going to mean a big paycheck. She could almost feel the dollar signs forming in her eyes, though perhaps that was just a lingering effect of the Pollyanna Wine.

Later that night, Penelope got a hold of Hollis’s V.R. Helmet to learn about Dream Machines in the Artaro University Archives. From her cramped bedroom, she could hear the laugh tracks of stupid sitcoms coming in from the old hologram television in the living room. Hollis was staying up past his bedtime again. He was laughing—a good sign. He was warming up to his new Artaro Pet. But, the sounds were muffled. From beneath the bulky yellow headset, Penelope was in another world. With a pair of matching control gloves, she synced her bioport module to the helmet and selected the stylized *Warlock Diva* avatar from her personal inventory. From there, she was ready to explore the circuit. Though it was not quite as immersive as the Plug-in experience, the reality was still photorealistic with the potential for massive surreal environments, complex lighting effects, and advanced physics engines. Yet, she could feel her cat, Murphy, climb onto her lap and start purring—so there was still the underlying feeling that she was sitting on her bed at home in the real world.

Within the circuit-interspace, the default room had white walls. It was a clean, minimal space, designed to serve the basic functions. There was a command station with a large white panel where she could navigate the wider net. Seeing all the news, social feeds, and trending entertainment, Penelope paid little attention. As usual, Penelope chose her Warlock Diva superhero avatar, but took a moment to dial it down a few notches. She returned the hair from its green pigment to match the peony purple shade of her real-life genetic hair color. She removed the cape from her outfit, and opted for fitted white trousers instead of the golden skirt she had previously used. It looked good, she thought, and it went well with her warrior boots.

When that was done, she left the default space, and entered a major map within interspace—a place referred to as Terminal City. Here, tall twisted architecture hung over busy skies and wide white sidewalks. At varying speeds, users from across the world zipped along their personal trajectories. Penelope took a moment to figure out where she was going.

In order to get to the Artaro University Archives, had to jog her way through Terminal City’s master public square, a busy intersection visited by millions daily. Using a cheap digital jetpack, she managed to avoid most of the crowds. She flew above a major landmark, the central holo-statue of the

Daima Operating System which governed this place. The holo-statue appeared as a translucent white woman with sharp features, short icy hair, and light digital jumpsuit. Standing hundreds of meters in height atop a large digital marble platform, she held a strong pose and demeanor. Her movements were slow and graceful. As she scanned the surrounding environments, her eyes appeared calm, but also quite acute.

Penelope glided alongside the massive holo-statue, enjoying the experience. Unfortunately, the pleasantness of the moment was somewhat interrupted as she noticed her jetpack fuel was nearing empty. When she landed on the ground, she took a moment to examine the jetpack. It was pretty clear that it was basically designed for a single use, so she discarded it in a nearby delete bin.

Walking the rest of the way, she did the best she could to avoid the crowds, and games, ads, theme-worlds, and the endless digital circus of it all. She passed many pathways leading to all sorts of interspace destinations, including the central Civic Hub where Mayor Flink usually broadcasted his speeches. As efficiently as possible, Penelope hunted for a suitable journey point to the Artaro University Archives, until eventually she came across one and used it to quickly zip over.

From the journey point, the University Archives finally sprung into view. It was a large academic building set to appear as though it had been wrought in pure marble, as if chiseled into existence by some master sculptor. The entrance to the main halls was set with many columns before a wide slab wall where stairs extended downward to a lush green garden. The environment appeared crisp, fresh, and very academic.

In the trees above the garden, bamboo lemurs ate leaves and socialized, while smart parrots quietly held conversations amongst themselves. The plants in these gardens were those of the eastern lands, Vidan and Llambia, as well as those from the southern rainforests of Far Ecologia. Of course, all of these plants and animals were just holographic representations—just as the rest of the digital environment.

At the head of the gardens, a large and clearly marked stone plaque indicated this place to have been designed in tribute to the Artaro Family Botanist of the Atomic Tech Era, Herriot Artaro. In life, she had gathered such plants and animal specimens from across the Green World, creating significant gardens at Artaro University's real brick and mortar location northeast of Machina.

At the edge of gardens, in wide green lawns just outside of the Archives, the many avatars of various interest groups campaigned and protested for a variety of causes. While, in the physical world, most of these protests would be broken up by battle-ready Patrol Robots—here in the circuit, a great cacophony of public opinion could be heard.

Some of them were interested in the welfare of genetically modified animals. Others were upset about the Artaro Corporation's continued partnership with Glammo-Vac, a company notorious for its poor treatment of workers. These causes made sense, but others were stranger. One group gathered to demand that the occult writings of Machina's second Mayor, Marcus Trivium, be taught in schools across the city-state. Penelope didn't know much about this matter, and tried to avoid getting caught up in the crowd.

But as Penelope attempted to cross the moat of human avatars, she was slammed into by a tall and imposing figure. She looked up to see three people step forward with indecipherable faces. They were wearing long black robes with hoods with faces which appeared like masks. Their expressions were empty—a mess of digital noise.

“Have you come to learn about dreams?” one of the figures asked in a grainy, distorted tone.

“I’m just here to see the archives. Can you let me by?” Penelope replied, impatiently.

“Where there are dreams, there are nightmares,” said another of the three.

“Please, I’m just here for research,” Penelope replied in an attempt to avoid conflict.

“Where dreams and nightmares clash,” the third figure said, “there you will live—a stabilizing force in the great maze.” The opaque figure began to cackle.

Penelope didn’t like this at all. Impatient, she did her best to barrel past them into the larger crowd. *What a bunch of weirdos*, she thought.

Through the pool of avatar humans, she moved until she reached the marble steps of the building structure. As she climbed up the stairs, she looked back. The three figures had disappeared. Now she simply observed the various conglomerations of people and ideas below her. Checking her own avatar, she dusted off her digital outfit a bit, and continued up the steps.

She was too focused on the University Archives module that she needed to locate. In the halls of the digital building, she could feel the air cool as the noise from outside faded into near silence. While there were people studying here and there, most of the wide halls appeared mostly empty. Eventually, she came to a large archive computer directory where she used a voice control to search for a department labeled Dream Operations.

A levitating platform arrived. Stepping onto it, she was lifted slowly across wide spaces filled with interactive, media-filled shelves. Soon she was gliding over statues and long wooden desks, historical artifacts, skeletal fossils of long lost megafauna, and holographic representations of all sorts. This continued until she reached a grey marble room with a plaque at the door which read, *Dream Operations and Dream Machines*.

These were the halls she was seeking.

Once in the hall, she stepped down from the platform, and browsed the shelves until she found a large educational disk labeled: *A Lesson in Dreams*.

Removing it from the rest, she took with her into a smaller adjacent viewing room. Once in the viewing room, she placed the disk into a console at the center of the space and sat down in a cushioned metal seat. The lights dimmed for a moment.

A hologram lit and materialized. Suddenly, the famous inventor, Dr. Peabody Artaro, was there in the room. The man himself was long dead, but his digital likeness was as vigorous as ever. Penelope knew a little bit about him, having learned his name in school when she was little. He was thought of as a man who brought great optimism into the world, restoring a belief in progress with his many scientific inventions. This man was heavily associated with the use of atomic power and a plethora of new technologies which came into use during his lifetime and especially during his years at the helm of the Artaro Corporation.

Appearing as he did in his mid-forties, the years of his prime, Dr. Peabody Artaro was like an older and brainier depiction of the current Artaro CEO, Stanley Artaro, who was in fact his grandson. Peabody's hair was greener than Stanley's—also darker, styled with hair grease and combed to one side. He wore big round spectacles, and under his nose there was a waxed, curly mustache. He wore a yellow bowtie, a blue vest, and a white lab coat with a patch of an Artaro Polygon 400 Robot at the chest.

Penelope took another look around the room. In the back, a number of small Artaro Minibots arrived and sat in desk chairs. The space now seemed more like a class. Another Minibot entered, wheeling in a cart with an old vintage film projector. Once the cart was set into place, the Dr. Artaro hologram gave a signal, and the robot turned the machine on. A large projection screen lowered.

The projector flickered on with a click followed by light and music. The film was grainy and completely in black and white. The first scene began with a busy intersection, full of faces. So many people—it could only be in Apathia. In the streets, the multitudes went about their usual activities. They appeared lost.

An unseen narrator spoke in a masculine tone:

EVERYDAY, MILLIONS STRUGGLE. THE STRUGGLE FOR SUBSISTENCE. HAPPINESS. MEANING. FOR SOME, HAPPINESS CAN BE FOUND TEMPORARILY IN A MOMENT. FOR OTHERS, IT IS AN ILLUSIVE COMMODITY.

THE ARTARO CORPORATION CONSIDERS IT TO BE A PRIMARY OBJECTIVE TO MANUFACTURE HAPPINESS FOR THOSE WHO CAN NOT OBTAIN IT FOR THEMSELVES.

From the street, the perspective shifted far above to a building top. Here was Peabody Artaro, wearing the same confident grin in the film as in the classroom outside of it. Only this was no hologram. This was the man, as he was in the Atomic Tech Era. Watching himself, the hologram appeared pleased.

“What if I were to tell you that dreams really can come true?” Peabody Artaro, the one in the film, explained, *“What if I were to tell you that not only can they come true, but they can be shaped?”*

“Really?” He replied to himself, “Now, that’s just fascinating.”

The film’s location then transitioned to an Artaro research lab. Penelope now observed a metallic

dome-shaped machine with an enormous interface covered in buttons and levers. At the front, there was a circular door to a very high-tech looking chamber. The film version of Dr. Artaro again entered the image. Carefully he turned the wheel of the hatch entrance to bring the viewer inside of the machine. Holographic effects slowly extended out from the film into the classroom space. Penelope felt very much as though she was now being pulled into the informational movie.

She found herself looking into a Dream Machine's domed interior hull where a reclined space-foam chair was ready for use. A clean cut gentleman in a protective jumpsuit and rubber boots proceeded to join Peabody in the chamber. The man took a seat in the chair and leaned back with a calm look on his face. Overhead, a helmet of sorts was lowered onto his head. A visor lowered over his eyes. Soft popping sounds were heard, like pressure releases, as the helmet initiated some kind of startup sequence. From the back of the helmet, a thick bundle of metal cables lit up with digital lights so as to indicate the activation of the machine.

"Welcome to Artaro University's first fully functional Dream Machine," Artaro proudly proclaimed.

Was this the Dr. Artaro hologram? Or the one from within the film. It was now impossible to say.

"This is an interior hull of a prototype Dream Machine," he explained. *"Breakthroughs on machines such as this ushered in the advancements of the Atomic Tech Era. During that period, Dream Machines were still in development... but, the basics were already being tested. With a Dream Machine like this, we could create dreams of all kinds. So, we developed our fabulous distributor in the hopes of one day seeding such dreams for public consumption! Impressive! The man you see here in this chair is its Dream Operator. Using the Dream Machine, our plucky and reliable Dream Operator will be able to craft a visceral dream to be experienced by anyone within a specified signal zone."*

One of the little Minibots in the classroom environment behind Penelope approached, "The Dream Machines developed in those days were never used by the company... a lot of the kinks still needed to be worked out."

"That's exactly right!" Dr. Artaro exclaimed, *seeming to jump out from the film.* *"It wasn't until the year 175 that the Artaro Corporation first used a Dream Machine on the wider public. That particular device was called the Overlord I Dream Machine! Sadly, it was operational for less than five years... due to an unfortunate lab accident... but no need to worry about that! The Overlord I was soon replaced by two superior machines, one located in the Apathia Labs research division, and the other at the Artaro Labs research division located in Chrome Crow."*

On screen, the image slowly zoomed into the Operator Helmet's visor, through the operator man's eyes and into his head. A sudden and powerful bright pink beam of light could be seen, one which flowed into the helmet as electrical information. From there, the light information passed from the helmet into its attached cables. Visuals now showed light and data moving from the helmet to an overhead module and throughout the machine. But, most importantly, massive cables led to a central object below the operator.

“You see, the dreams are built within the Dream Machine Core,” he said. “That’s the large spherical object located beneath the Operator’s Chair. The Dream Machine Core uses quantum technology at extremely cool temperatures to produce brain-compatible experiences. Using the Operator’s Helmet, you can interact with this powerful core to create and tailor dream experiences.”

Penelope now witnessed images of the operator using sending a stream of signals back and forth with the core. Meanwhile, outside of the Dream Machine’s domed hull, electricity boomed from large coils built into the top of the structure. However this machine worked, it created huge quantities of excess electricity.

From the Dream Machine itself, the information passed through more complex data systems and long tubes full of glass cable. It now became apparent that the Dream Machine existed in some underground facility, and information was traveling up. Once at the surface, the cables ran through soil and along the terrain for a considerable distance to a large electrical tower in the distance. The tower lit up brightly as the signals of dreams transmitted. The film’s score introduced the sweet and haunting sounds of theremins as dreams traveled in waveforms across clouds and sky.

Images came of distraught civilians sleeping uneasily in their beds and at their office desks. Electric signals flew into their windows as they were soothed by the caring touch of the Artaro Corporation. The masses dreamt of comfort brought to them by their favorite trademarked pop-culture character icons. Citizens were reminded of the deep feeling of security of Cogship Renewal. All were reminded of the virtue of Machina, the love of Artaro, the wisdom of the Monolith, the sanctity of Mega Malls, the benefits of fashionable hats, jackets, gloves, and scarves, and of the loveliness of vacuum cleaners, and the latest trending kitchen appliances.

When the video was finished, Peabody Artaro once again grabbed the attention of the class. Clenching his fist, he made the case for Dream Mechanics.

“So, you might wonder if people really need to be guided in this way,” Dr. Artaro said. “The answer to your question is that humanity needs strong leaders. We don’t just tell them to buy products. We remind the public not to litter! We tell them to wear the seat-belts in their little electric cars! We see to it that humanity doesn’t again recede into darkness, as it was in this land before the days of my grandfather, Winston. This is why we need companies like the Artaro Corporation. Machina must survive, you see... otherwise, this precious world would again become... just an unthinkable hellscape.”

Every miniature robot shifted in their seat, all of them turning directly to Penelope. With his hands behind his back, Peabody Artaro leaned in, looking at Penelope intently.

“I have one question, I suppose.” Penelope replied. “I was told about a serum, made from Purple Visus serum. Can you tell me how that works?”

Then, Peabody stepped back. His body language and the tone of voice shifted noticeably as he began to speak, *“I’m sorry, but information on the Visus family of mushrooms is not permitted public discussion. At this time, this area is rendered TOP SECRET by the Artaro Corporation. I’m going to have*

to check your status level at this time...”

After a tense moment, Dr. Artaro’s eyes finally softened. Returning to normalcy, he smiled, “*Ms. Curtis, it appears that you have been entered into Artaro’s corporate system at 28th level clearance. This status is pending, however, so I won’t be able to answer such questions at this time. Regardless, this is GOOD NEWS, as civilian inquiries about top secret material are highly frowned upon. But, lucky for you, you are no longer to be considered a normal civilian—as of about an hour ago. Very lucky. Hah!*”

Just then, the entirety of the room was sucked into the projection screen and Penelope found herself sitting in an endless sky of static white noise. Dr. Artaro was gone. The program had somehow ended.

She removed the module connection from her temple, and powered down Hollis’s virtual reality helmet. There she was, back in her bedroom. It was normal to need a short readjustment after time spent in interspace, but this time, Penelope felt more wound up than usual.

In the bathroom, she splashed water on her face. When she returned to her room, she noticed the clock. It was now 1:00 AM. For a while, she rubbed her temples and lay on her back looking up to the ceiling above the nook where her bed rested.

There was a buzz at the door of the apartment. Maybe it was her mom returning again. Penelope stepped out into the living area to see Hollis sleeping on the couch. Her mom must have left. Again another buzz at the door. Hollis didn’t seem affected by it.

When she finally answered the door, it was Grim, with his red jacket and a blue Easy Breezy forward-billed hat, and that usual tired look on his face. She was a bit surprised to see him all the way out here in Termite Hill. He hardly ever ventured into the outer districts. Most of their time together was spent in Optera, Onyx, or at his place in Apathia.

“There you are,” he said. “Sorry to show up so late. I’ve been trying to reach you all night. I couldn’t sleep. I just felt like I needed to come check on you.”

“I should have called you,” Penelope said. “Look, this is weird, but the whole reason the MPD stopped me was because the Artaro Corporation needed me. I’m going to start working with them, I think.”

“Actually, I know. A drone told me... sent by Dr. Beatrice Delphonic.” Grim said. “It said they were offering you a job, and that they wanted me to know you were alright.”

“Oh, damn, that... figures... these Artaro people really cover their bases, don’t they?”

“Yeah, it feels like it,” Grim said. “So, what’s the story with this job, anyway?”

Penelope went on to explain her evening and everything she understood about the job offer. She relayed all of the details Delphonic had told her, and explained what she could do about Dream Operations and Dream Machines. Grim was attentive and a bit blown away by the situation. He asked a lot of questions, trying to make sense of the situation.

“Wow. I always wondered what working for Artaro would be like,” he said. “You know, I’ve heard they broadcast dreams, but it always sounded like... I don’t know... a conspiracy theory or something, so I haven’t really thought about it. I don’t really ever have dreams very much. Because I’m half Ravell, you know. I don’t think Ravell brains work quite the same in that way. At least that’s something I’ve read before.”

“Basically, Beatrice said that the company would reach out again soon, so I’m just going to wait for that, and then I guess I’ll put my two weeks in at Archer Piglet’s. I’m sure that will go over well.” In truth, Penelope felt really anxious about putting in her two weeks.

After Grim left, Penelope returned to her room and again laid down to relax. As she stretched, her cat jumped onto the bed, nesting next to her. For a few moments, she pet the cat, and calmed her mind. Over the course of a few minutes, she drifted into sleep.

Sleep can be a peculiar thing. For the people of Machina, it was that necessary gap between the days where life was processed and the body was restored. But for the Artaro Corporation, naptime was just another venue. It was a time for public relations, a time for oversight and order. Though the public did not widely know or understand it, both companies and government held the technologies to quite literally create and broadcast dreams.

It was at dawn that Penelope awoke to the eerie sound of Violin Termites. Their song hummed pretty loud, certainly for a bunch of otherwise unremarkable bugs. She looked out her open window and felt the chill of the morning air. It was foggy, and still very early—the sun had barely just risen.

Penelope’s wrist-connect watch beeped. Looking at the projection display, she noticed there was a message, only it wasn’t from Artaro—it was from Archer Piglet’s.

Oh, fuck. The realization came to her that she had been called in for a night shift the previous evening. For whatever reason, she had been called in. Maybe the restaurant had gotten busy from extra traffic from the parade and what not. With everything that had happened, she missed the notification.

As soon as she saw it, it became clear that Archer Piglet was going to be totally pissed. Like a bus crash to the face, she could already feel her boss’s impending wrath.

She looked at the memo on her wrist unit. Projecting in the air, it read: PENELOPE CURTIS, IT APPEARS YOU HAVE AN UNANNOUNCED ABSENCE AT ARCHER PIGLET’S PANCAKE HOUSE. PLEASE REPORT TO ARCHER PIGLET IMMEDIATELY. THANKS. HAVE A HEARTY

DAY.

Penelope took a breath and looked again at her schedule. It was just as she thought. They had changed it at the last minute. They had pinged her a number of calls and messages about it. But, she had been in the hands of corporate police, and then with Beatrice Delphonic. With everything that had happened, she had hardly thought to check her notifications.

Trying to remain calm, she reminded herself that she would soon have a new employer and the rantings and ravings of Archer Piglet would no longer matter. But, it was hard to shake the feeling that the job at the Artaro Corporation was too good to be true—that she had somehow been fooled or misled.

“Alright,” she said to herself. “One day at a time. You got this.” Then she got her messenger bag and work uniform together, and left the apartment for another not-so-fun day at Archer Piglet’s Pancake House.

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]

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]

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]

Archer Piglet

Class: Hologram

Occupation: Manager and Mascot at Archer Piglet's Pancake House, West Onyx and Other Locations

[Eyes: Light Brown] [Hair: None] [Height: 3'0" though Holograms can adjust size]

[Booted Up in the early Mid-Tech Era]

[Appearance: A Talking Pig in Business Clothes, Suspenders, and a Bow-tie]

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]

Dr. Peabody Artaro

Class: Hologram (based on the deceased historical Inventor)

Occupation: Inventor, University Cofounder, Former CEO of the Artaro Corporation

[Eyes:] [Hair: Sea Green w/Mustache] [Height: 5'8"]

[Born: 65 D.C., Died: 151 D.C.] [Background: New Worlder, Light Complexion, from Machina]

Dr. Herriot Artaro

Class: Hologram (based on the deceased historical Botanist)

Occupation: Botanist, University Cofounder, Inventor

[Eyes:] [Hair: Long, Light Green] [Height: 5'5"]

[Born: 65 D.C., Died: 151 D.C.] [Background: New Worlder, Dark Complexion, from Vidanar City, Vidan]

Stanley Artaro:

Class: Human Cog

Occupation: President Executive of the Artaro Corporation (Current CEO, High Tech Era)

[Eyes: Turquoise, Hints of Pink, Uniquely Captivating Eyes] [Hair: Aquamarine Green]

[Born: 173 D.C.] [Background: New Worlder, Light Complexion, from Machina]

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 and Machina's outer district of Termite Hill.*

Note- Circuit-Interspace locations are not on this map. One must use plug-in tech to access such places.

