

The Crystalline Mythos:



# THE MICE IN THE MAZE

A Short Story  
By Teej R.



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**THE MICE IN THE MAZE**

(A Short Story)

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2023 Edition

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(Story #7 of the “*Dream Operations*” Collection)

*This story follows Penelope Curtis, and to a lesser extent, Dr. Webweaver and his robot, IK. Most of it takes place south of Machina in the Machina Landfill, with its endless maze-like junkyards and garbage disposal zones. Within the landfill resides at least one of the seven known anarchist factions in the Machina area, Fort Tekk. While the powerful Artaro Corporation seeks Penelope for her potential future as a Dream Operator in their Dream Operations (advertising) program, Dissidents within the landfill seek freedom from both the Machina city-state and from the tendrils of large corporations like Artaro.*

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

[193 D.C.]

### **Part One: Dr. Ariton Webweaver**

As the clock struck midnight, the large building complex known as Artaro Labs Chrome Crow hummed quietly in a lonely and eerie fashion. Long corridors remained dimly lit, ready for the large Labs staff to return to their work across the building's many departments in the morning. However, even at this late hour, some small activity continued. In the first floor rec room, the espresso coffee maker spoke softly with the janitorial cleaning robot who had popped in from the main laboratory on its way to the adjacent Visus Mushroom tank room. Down the hall, the integrated technology specialist, Ron Verlyn, casually watched as the server systems of the building's many departments performed their periodic updates.

Upstairs, in a relatively small and hidden space behind the distributor room, Dr. Webweaver drank a cup of tea and sat on a small cot bed after a long day of work. Over his head, a lead shield designed to deflect the signals of dream advertisements extended out from a wall mount above his pillow. His eyes felt tired and heavy. Just as he began to take off his boots, he received a ping on the right-arm receiver of the machine gauntlets he wore along his forearms. He pressed one of the panel buttons to answer and project a hologram of the caller, Dr. Beatrice Delphonic.

Normally during the day, the Labs Manager, Janice Biggs, would have her support staff screen his calls. When Beatrice called, they usually would try to handle the matter for him as Beatrice could be a real headache. Janice was very skilled at figuring out ways to allow Webweaver to focus on his primary work without distraction. But, it was late—Janice and the rest of the office staff were gone for the night—and this call was unusual. Webweaver sat and thought about not answering it for a moment, but Beatrice was the boss, and if she needed to speak at this late hour, then it was probably something important.

“Hi Beatrice,” Dr. Webweaver said. “I’m done for the day, and if the Board is asking, Dream Operations are going—”

“No, it’s not that at all,” she answered. “I’m not calling you at midnight to berate you for subpar quarterly performance. The recent ads have been mostly fine. As far as I can tell you’ve logged as much work as the Apathia Labs division. Tell Dr. Wren that corporate is actually quite happy with her recent attention to the landscape environments of the dreams. Believe it or not, the feedback data all suggests that better backgrounds lead to higher product sales. But, that’s not why I called.”

“Okay, what is it then?” Webweaver yawned as he spoke. It really had been a long day.

“There’s a matter, which is possibly urgent.”

Watching the hologram projection on his gauntlet display, Webweaver could see that Beatrice was placing eye drops carefully into her pupils as she spoke. Her large pupils shrank revealing much more of the surrounding pale blue irises. This action strongly suggested that she had been out smoking Pollyanna, probably with the Drake brothers from the Apathia Labs division.

“It’s the new asset,” she continued. “The potential Operator we discussed, Penelope Curtis—I saw her tonight, strangely enough, downtown in the Optera District.”

“Really? Where?” He asked, mildly curious.

“In the Bicentennial Bar of all places, atop the Leavenworth Bicentennial Building. She was there with a young Ravell man, Grim Glitchfield. I’ve entered him into the database as a potential asset as well, though naturally of less significance. I was very surprised to see them in such an establishment. The Bicentennial Bar is very exclusive, Ariton. Why would a potential employee recruit be there? That was my thought. For fuck’s sake, she’s a waitress from the outer districts. I’m not even sure how they got into the place.”

“Okay,” Dr. Webweaver answered. “So, what happened? Did you talk to them at all?”

“Yes, I spoke to them briefly, and as a gesture I paid for their tab. But, I couldn’t stay much longer than that. I was just going to forget about it, but a little gnawing voice in the back of my head told me to look into their location whereabouts in the company databases. I thought maybe the boyfriend didn’t have a biochip, since he’s Ravell, but it turns out he does, and it’s synced to his wrist-connect watch. Anyway, he was back at his apartment in Apathia, probably sleeping. But Penelope, on the other hand, never went home. Instead, she passed her usual Maglev stop, Bug Station in Termite Hill. Then she rode all the way out to the Machina Landfill at the end of the line.”

“She probably fell asleep,” Dr. Webweaver said. “She’ll just have to wait til the morning or find a way home I guess.”

“There are dangerous anti-corporate Dissidents in the Landfill, Ariton. I need you to send a drone or a robot in to make sure she’s safe. I don’t want her getting killed, and I’m not thrilled about her getting involved with these sorts of people at this critical time. You can send Red-8 out from the garage, or maybe better yet, you can send your new Artaro P.C.-1000 Robot. Just make sure Penelope Curtis is okay. Then, see what these Dissident Factions are up to. The Patrol Robots in the region aren’t doing a very good job. A few of them have even been destroyed out there, so tell your robot to be careful.”

“Alright. I’ll send 1K. He’s the best robot we’ve got for something like this—as smart as a Deitron Robot and as capable as an Omni-Assist Robot. We’ll be in good hands. I’ll rest at the control panel on the Dream Deck so I can communicate with him if I need to. But, that’s the best I can do. I just got done with a very long day upgrading the Dream Machine and I’m exhausted.”

“Excellent,” Beatrice remarked. “I’m not going to sugar coat this, however. The landfill is a large and dangerous maze. People do get killed out there at night—even by our own Patrols. Nevertheless, I’m relying on you and 1K. Make sure she gets home on the next maglev out of there and everything will be just dandy. After meeting Penelope earlier this evening, I really do think that we’ll have another Dream Operator working with us very soon. Please don’t fuck this up.” Then, she hung up the call.

Getting up from the cot, Webweaver retrieved his orange protective vest from a hook and placed it over his thick thermal shirt. He then exited his quarters and walked along the Dream Deck's high rafters to the control room where 1K sat quietly in a chair at the control panel reading a book. The robot lifted its domed metallic head to look at Webweaver with bright eyes.

"Hey, Doc," 1K said casually. "Anything I can help you with?"

"Can you pack a surveillance drone and meet me in the hangar garage? Then, I'm going to need you to ready a Propulsion Craft for liftoff. We've got a job for you tonight."

## **Part Two: Penelope Curtis**

Penelope had only been resting her eyes for a while, or perhaps it was a light nap...

In her sleep, she had felt a slight tingle under her eyelids. If only she had seen herself, she would have witnessed the exposed whites of her eyes twitching rapidly in the moment of download. Jazz flutes played along with modern piano—the inner jingle of a subconscious dream advertisement. In her mind's eye, she found herself in a sparkly picturesque living space. Little Artaro Robots carried baskets of clothing, dumping them into a big stainless steel washing machine with an LED smile. The washing machine sang and spoke about how great it was at getting stains out of the clothes. The whole thing was hypnotic and musical, but soon it began to fade into the recesses of her mind.

Another dream took hold. Suddenly she was on a tropical beach. The music shifted into a collection of island string instruments with a relaxing vibe. She was handed a tube of Artaro Sunscreen and told: *Don't let the sun ruin your vacation!*

She must have been somewhere where the distributor broadcast signals were particularly strong. It was amazing they reached this far south of Machina's major districts, but they were and the dreams were vivid and clear. Of course, those who experienced the dream adverts did not comprehend this reality behind the curtain. To them, the dreams were just dreams, which fade upon waking.

The jingles left Penelope as she slowly opened her eyes. There she was on the maglev train, her bicycle leaning against the side of her seat. The air smelled horrible here, wherever she was. On a display a few seats ahead, a large message read:

*LAST STOP: MACHINA LANDFILL. GOOD NIGHT CITIZEN COGS!*

Looking around, she was the only passenger still in the train car. The exits were wide open. A muffled and indiscernible voice spoke over the loudspeaker. Penelope stood up and zipped up her pink sweater, then grabbed her bicycle and exited into the night.

Looking around, the Machina Landfill Municipal Station looked like some kind of desolate industrial site. There was a long metallic bridge with overhanging lights, so she hopped onto her bike and rolled along. The bridge went on for a considerable distance. Looking over the side, Penelope could see a polluted-looking concrete water transportation system. She could see that at the end of the bridge stood a small fluorescent-lit booth where it might be possible to get some assistance.

Approaching the booth, she could see that the exterior glass was heavily scratched up. It looked like there was some lonely cog inside, probably some bored-to-death municipal employee, but when

Penelope came closer, she realized it was actually an old beat up Artaro Robot. It was an earlier model, maybe a P.C.-500. It was unusual to come by such antiques in operation anymore—it was probably as old as the custom waiters at the Leavenworth Building. She tapped on the glass and spoke through the small voice box to get its attention.

“Excuse me.” she said politely, “I might need some assistance.”

The machine hummed for a moment, flickered, and finally lit up. It appeared basically humanoid, but with the same signature domed head one might see in the more modern models that were common in the city.

“Hello, dear...” Its voice was blocky and deep. “...You have informed me that you *might* be in need of assistance. Does that mean you are in need of assistance or that you have not decided whether you are in need of assistance?”

“Yes it means that I am in need of assistance!” Penelope clarified, “I need to know when there will be a train running north. I need to get to Termite Hill, Bug Street Station.”

The robot clanked for an instant as it processed Penelope's request and then replied, “Happy to help. One moment while I calculate.” For a few seconds, the robot began to emanate soft boring lounge music. Then it finally answered, “Okie Dokie. At 5:40A.M. the Maglev Train will depart. At roughly 6:30A.M. you will arrive at your destination, Bug Street Station. Thank you so much for your patience. I do hope this information is satisfactory.”

Penelope could see on her wrist-connect watch that it was now half past midnight. It was going to be a long night. She realized that she wasn't going to be able to get home unless she called her mom or an Artaro Taxi. She decided that a taxi would be the better choice, so she made the call.

On the other side of the line, an automated system answered. Perhaps there was another robot sitting at a desk somewhere with whom she was currently speaking, but she couldn't be certain. Before long, Penelope was lost in some rather irritating computerized menus. For twenty minutes she stayed on the line, and still she hadn't spoken to anyone useful.

Hopelessly, she shouted at her watch's receiver, “If you can understand this, anyone, I need a taxi! I need to speak to a real person and not another robot! I need an operator or—”

“The system will now connect you to an operator,” the machine replied.

Then came about ten or fifteen seconds of elevator music with vibes and vocal harmonies which sang a surprisingly catchy jingle about the Artaro Corporation. They were followed by a click.

“Hey, welcome to Artaro Taxi, this is driver 16211010. Thanks for your patience. This is a flying automobile, so I'm sure, wherever you are, we can pick you up in a few short minutes. What's your current location?”

Then, just as Penelope was about to let the driver know where to pick her up, her watch's connection began to glitch and cut out. She tried to enunciate as clearly as possible, but everything sounded garbled. According to her watch's display, somewhere in space, the transmission satellite which guided her reception signal had been struck by a rogue meteoroid. Needless to say, the call failed entirely—as if things could get any worse.

Breathing out a gasp of hot air into the cold, Penelope nearly fell to her knees in frustration. She had no real clue about what to do, so she did the only thing she could think to do. She went for a walk. Even if all she could find was a place to sulk, that would still constitute a net improvement of the situation. The wind was cold. She buried her hands in her sweater pockets and stared at her sneakers as she slowly walked towards the larger junkyards of the landfill.

The ground was covered in broken glass and old nails. For this reason, Penelope decided to lock up her bike. At the very latest, she'd come back for it in the early morning when the maglev was running again.

She found herself wandering alongside a second train, but this train was broken down and rusted and covered in graffiti. Along the side railing of the busted railroad cars, she witnessed several small white mice scurrying about their way.

On the steel walls of the train carts there was a tag reading, *Grimelord*, and a tag reading, *Alphakiller*, and a quite prominent one reading, *Tekk*. These were Dissident titles. The names of anarchist syndicate factions. There were seven of them in total—the four others being *Darkboot*, *Moonshine*, *Flowerpot*, and *Snakebelly*.

Somebody had taken the time to spray paint a big weiner on an old train car billboard of Wolfgang Artaro and Mayor Omega Flink shaking hands. Graffiti such as this was a serious offense—a direct stab at the integrity of the city-state and the sort of thing that could almost certainly get somebody processed. Apparently, out here, nobody seemed to give a shit. There was graffiti all over the place.

Looking closer at a rusted old railroad cart, Penelope could see that it probably hadn't been operational in years. Still, she wondered if there might be an open compartment where she could sit down and rest for a while. When she found an entrance and finally got a look inside, however, it was full of garbage and broken glass. There was gross liquid pooled between the seats in the central aisle. Then she noticed what looked like a family of opossums living in the back. This was disappointing. She stepped out of the railroad car to explore elsewhere.

Her eyes were beginning to adjust to the dark. Looking at the sky, she was almost shocked to see how bright the stars and broken moon looked out here. In the dark of the landfill, the view of the night sky appeared even more vivid than it did from the roof of Apple Colony, where she lived, in Termite Hill.

In the distance, she heard a quick sound, maybe it was glass breaking. *What was that?* Her thoughts began to stir. *There could be people out here...*

She could see cars that had been crushed into stackable cubes, and long rows of heavy pipes and old industrial equipment. There were entire mountains of broken holographic display sets, many thousands of them—it was kind of mind-blowing for Penelope to behold.

Then there was an area beyond that full of huge stacked slabs of crushed plastic bottles and bags. Some bags remained loose and swayed in the breeze.

One thing was obvious—she wasn't going to find anything resembling civilization. She began searching for any crack or cranny where she could hopefully stay warm. The sad truth, however, was that there was no comfort to be had. There were nails, and there were rodents, and there was the cold and the wind.

Yet, the time began to pass. For a long while she walked around and looked at junk. Eventually

she found a pile of wooden crates with a large tarp overhead where she could sit down and stay out of the wind. It didn't smell as much here. Still, there were the mice. She could hear their feet, scurrying.

Looking in her messenger bag, she found an old assorted variety pack of Artaro Happy-Go-Lucky Cigarettes. Most of the pack was already smoked, but a few were left—mostly flavors that weren't really her preference. She decided to choose a peppermint-tobacco blend with a watermelon filter.

For a long time she just sat there, unhappy and cold.

Then there was that startling sound of breaking glass again! When she rose in reaction, she could see a shadow scamper by. Slowly she lifted her head out of the tarp and scanned the area.

Again, she saw movement. It was a dude! For a moment she considered calling out to him, but then thought the better of it. The last thing she wanted was to get jumped by a hobo or drug addict. Instead, she kept quiet and waited for him to walk away.

A few moments later, a small red light appeared in the night sky. Penelope looked up to observe it, but wasn't able to tell what it was. She began to feel rather uncomfortable, like a machine was watching her. Soon, the red laser light became two red laser lights, and then three. It then became clear that she was being watched by some sort of surveillance drone. This was not good news.

She stood up and thought about walking back to the station. But in that direction, she could now hear the hum of slowing engine turbines. The sounds were not from the little drone which buzzed in the sky in front of her. It was now clear that the loud sounds were coming from a flat cement landing against a massive wall of car tires. Atop the landing, she could discern what looked to be a small plane or propulsion craft. In front of the craft, an Artaro Robot stood with an ominous glowing smile. The robot looked to be holding something. Though it was difficult to tell from this distance, she supposed the robot was likely piloting the nearby drone via remote control.

In frustration, Penelope decided to pick up a rock and throw it at the drone. Remarkably she hit it on the first try, causing it to momentarily veer off and lose a bit of altitude. She then turned and began to walk quickly in the opposite direction.

Penelope found herself moving further from the Machina Landfill Station, passing flat concrete zones into the wider junkyards and landfill. Stacks of smashed metal began to form walls. As she weaved through the environment, it began to feel like she had stumbled into a maze of sorts.

While the drone had not followed her, she now faced a different problem. This stretch of the junkyard was confusing and difficult to navigate. If she kept journeying in this direction, she might not make it back to the station so easily.

She turned a corner, walking alongside an old broken down hover-bus. As she passed the bus into an array of piled appliances, she found a guy eating food from a pot and sitting at a small fire. He looked surprised to see her standing there.

For a few seconds she just quietly watched the dude. Maybe he wouldn't say anything and she'd just ignore him. But instead, he turned to look at her. He was a short, thin Rodashi guy with long blonde hair covering his eyes. He was relatively young looking, probably in his mid to late twenties. As Penelope slowly approached, it became clear that he was holding something small in his hands.

The guy opened his hands to reveal a small white mouse with red-tinted eyes. He let it loose on



the ground and it almost immediately ran to Penelope, sniffing around at her green sneakers. She looked at the little creature. It looked up at her like it wanted attention.

*Really?* She thought to herself, looking at the little animal's dumb expression.

*Why didn't I just go home?*

She was feeling both melodramatic, and like shit. A real double whammy.

Slowly, the mouse was sniffing nearer. Penelope watched it do so, and was very startled at what happened next. Not twenty feet away, the faceless form approached. The little mouse on the ground turned, and scurried in its direction.

Out of the black, the guy stepped forth. Penelope couldn't necessarily tell how old he was exactly. His hair was dark brown and short on the sides, but longer and bleached on the top. It all flopped in one direction. He wore a faded green woolen coat over a tattered sweater. Around his neck, he had tied an old bandana, and on his feet there were a tough pair of pointy mud-ridden boots. In his hand, he held a jug of wine.

Luckily, he was relatively friendly and introduced himself. His name was Sneak Lennox. He explained that he lived in a place called Fort Tekk. Penelope recognized the name Fort Tekk as an anarchist group—one of the seven syndicates. It was one of those things a person might hear about in Termite Hill or see tagged on a wall somewhere.

"So you hang out here often?" Penelope asked, looking around at a bunch of garbage. Really, she wanted nothing more than to get the hell out of this place.

"Yeah, pretty cool! Ain't it? The stranger replied. "Nah, I'm just kidding. As you might guess, I live in Fort Tekk. It's much nicer than this corner of the junkyard. We have hydroponic gardens and hot food there. After rummaging around the landfill during the day it's good to return home to a hot shower and clean quarters. I'd introduce you to everyone and show you the common hall, but we have rules about sharing the Fort's location to new people. We can't risk having someone tell the Patrol Robots where it's at or else we have to fight 'em. A few people got killed the last time that happened."

"Wait. People got killed?" Penelope replied.

"The Patrols come snooping around out here. Them, and them goddamn hovering surveillance droids with the fucking lasers," Sneak Lennox laughed, "Those things'll kill ya, ya know! They'll cut you right in half!"

He took a swig of wine from his jug before explaining himself. "Oh, don't listen to me. I lost my cogship some years back and ended up out here in the beautiful Machina Landfill. Once I got stuck out here, my circuit tech all broke. First it was the neural bioport. Then the wristwatch unit shit out. You have to replace those things, you know. I'm just a human now... And what's that worth? I'm meat. Do you have any idea how goddamn boring life is when you can't connect to the circuit!"

"My watch isn't working very well out here, either," she commented.

"Are you from Termite Hill or the Scrap Belt or something?" he asked.

"Yeah, Termite Hill, how'd you know?"

He took a deep breath, and again another swig, "Eh, lucky guess I suppose. I can't risk spending too much time in Termite Hill. It may be an outer district, but Machina's tendrils reach far. I used to actually live in the city, years ago. I was a delivery guy. I wore a stupid uniform and everything. I had a sweet little beam cycle and a nice girlfriend. I used to rent a little flat in the Inertia District and do deliveries around Apathia. Life was good back then! I know! Crazy, right?"

No, it wasn't that crazy. Penelope knew the dangers of getting fired all too well. She had seen her own mother lose a job. After that, her mom stopped paying her annual cogship, thus condemning herself to a life in the outer districts. More recently, Penelope watched her acquaintance, Patrick Puck, get beaten by a Patrol Robot at Archer Piglet's Pancake House for the petty theft of an Orange Sugar Pop drink. In Machina, the system sometimes clamped down on normal and powerless people. While these sorts of occurrences were relatively common, few people paid much attention to them.

"So you couldn't keep up your cogship? What happened?" Penelope was puzzled over this matter. The story was getting interesting.

"Well, I was caught trespassing in the city. When they found me I had a bottle of Glow Worm on me... and maybe a blaster pistol, as well."

"Oh, wow," Penelope said, engaged by the story.

"They were going to stick a leech on my spine indefinitely after that. For a time, I relocated to Termite Hill. It wasn't so bad there for a while. Then, I found out their systems had classified me as an anti-corporate anarchist Dissident, which was just wonderful to find out. After that, I started seeing more and more drones and Patrol Robots moving into Termite Hill. People think it's still free out there, but for how long? Anyway, I figured if I'm a Dissident then I should start playing the part. I found others, and ended up here. It turns out a lot of good people were in a similar boat. A lot of us got organized."

It was at that point that Penelope noticed something in the sky again. It was that same damn surveillance drone, and it had followed her.

"Look at that," she pointed it out to Sneak.

"See, even here we can never get any peace with these drones in the sky," he said. "Come with me. I've got an idea."

Penelope followed Sneak along the rows of smashed metal to an area with a tarped roof, a few workbenches, and a bunch of random tools. Quickly, Sneak reached under one of the workbenches and retrieved a black metallic rifle.

"Oh, holy shit," Penelope remarked. "You've got a gun?"

"Yeah, well you sometimes need them out here," he responded. "Don't worry, it's just for emergencies."

The character of his voice changed. Suddenly, the alcoholic element almost entirely faded, and was replaced by a foreboding seriousness.

He removed his tinted lenses. Penelope could see the gold of his eyes. It contrasted acutely against the bronze of his skin, giving him something of a mystical quality she had not yet seen.

Sneak took the rifle and rested the long barrel against a large stack of metal slats. He took careful aim, waiting for the drone to approach in the sky. Where the drone appeared, he waited for a moment, and then fired. With a loud crack, the machine fell from the sky, and crashed in the dirt.

The next thing Penelope knew, she was on the back of a small crumby speed-cycle, shredding noisily along a beaten path through towers of crushed plastic and steel.

They rode like this for over half an hour, not stopping until they reached a cliff overlooking a long valley. In the valley it was more of the same. Junk. Lots of it. Magnetic pulleys circulated huge quantities of scrap parts, separating salvageable materials from waste. Large robotic mechanoids ran the operation, not a human to be spotted anywhere.

"No one comes out here." Sneak said, overlooking the valley, "No one but me, and the Tekk."

"Are you sure you should be telling me this?" Penelope asked, getting a sense that the location of such a place might be kept secret with good reason.

"I'm not worried about it." He answered, laughing. He grabbed Penelope's name tag, holding it up, "I mean, what's the harm in telling you, Penelope, where I live. It's not like you work for the Artaro Corporation."

Well, that much was true.

They decided to sit at the cliff's edge. From there they could see the vast landscape of the waste processing yards and furnaces. Sneak went on to tell Penelope quite a bit about Fort Tekk. There were no security cameras to be found there, except on the perimeters where they were used to keep an eye out for incoming Patrol Robots. When initiated into the Fort, a lot of people choose to toss aside their previous identities. That was when he started using the name, Sneak Lennox, as an alias.

For a few hours, Sneak showed Penelope around and told her stories about his friends from the Fort. He told her a bit more about the dangers of the landfill, of which there were many. He explained that Patrols and surveillance drones were just the beginning. There were rabid rats and weird aggressive weasels out here, as well scorpions and snakes. Then, there was toxic waste in certain parts of the landfill that you had to make sure to avoid. But, he also claimed that there were cool things out here, if a person knew where to look.

Sneak didn't mention it, but Fort Tekk really wasn't that far from where they were. They came to a path, where if they had chosen to head southeast, they might have reached the Fort in an around an hour's walk. But instead, they meandered, then sat down at a metal picnic table where landfill workers probably ate their lunches. It was good to sit down again. Sneak gave Penelope a bag of peanuts, which she gladly accepted, and shared some of his wine in a thermos cup.

For a while, things were alright here. But, then Sneak looked in the opposite direction and signaled for Penelope to drop silent. Her eyes opened wide, but her mouth sealed shut. She looked to Sneak for some explanation.

"What's going on?" she asked. "Is everything okay?"

"Look, down there in the ravine, by those walls of appliances..." Sneak pointed, lifting a pair of binoculars to his face, "Do you see what I see?"

“No, not really. It’s dark.” She squinted, but it was useless.

Sneak handed her the binoculars. Quietly, they left the table and crouched closer to the ground where the dirt sank into a steep downward slope. With the lenses at her eyes, she focused on what appeared to be movement in the distance. Then it was clear; it was a Patrol Robot, a big one, not too unlike the one which had clobbered Patrick Puck outside the diner not long ago. Perhaps this one was even more intimidating, more full-bodied, with beaming red eyes and a dark coal grey finish.

Steadily, it patrolled—its soulless glare ceaselessly gazing. It wielded an enormous rifle weapon and scanned the area with red laser eyes.

“Don’t worry.” Sneak said quietly, “It won’t see us from way down there...”

Penelope continued watching the machine run its surveillance route. Then, without warning, Sneak yanked the binoculars right back from her, his excitement now amplified.

“They’re here!” Sneak exclaimed, “Rick, and Vincent, and Liliana!”

“Once again, I can’t see anything.” Penelope answered.

Sneak directed her to one of the many pouches on his speed cycle. Digging into the bag, she pulled out a second pair of binoculars. This set was a bit bulkier, but when she looked through the lenses, the image was much clearer, lit bright with night vision enhancement.

“Be careful with that set,” Sneak instructed Penelope. “Those were hard to get a hold of. They work really well. I’m sure you’ll get a kick out of ‘em.”

“Yeah, wow, I can zoom in and everything,” Penelope commented. “These are pretty cool.”

With this second set of Binoculars to her eyes, Penelope could see three of Sneak’s compatriots crawling along a ridge in the distance. Below them, a Patrol Robot monitored the maze-like corridors of crushed metal that composed the appliance junkyards.

“Alright, get a good look at the Patrol Robot,” he laughed. “The good news is my friends are taking care of the situation. We’re getting to the fun part!”

“Okay, what’s going on down there, exactly?” Penelope asked. “Are they going to shoot it?”

“C’mon, shut the fuck up for a second,” he said, looking through his binoculars. “This is the super cool part.”

“Dude, Sneak,” Penelope said, irritated at his rude, ridiculous way of speaking. “I know this dump is basically your house, so you can say what you want, but tell me to shut the fuck up again and I’ll sock you in the nose.”

“Okay, sorry, just please stay focused,” Sneak apologized. “I have a really sweet plan for this one. You’re not gonna want to miss it.”

Sneak took a small device from his pocket and spoke into it briefly. A muffled voice came back. Penelope couldn’t really tell what was said, but she guessed that the communication had been with one of

the others down on the concrete ridge by the robot.

“Okay, so what’s your plan, genius?” Penelope asked. “Are they going to straight up attack that Patrol Robot? Because that’s nuts.”

“Look. We’re pretty safe up here,” he assured her. “They know what they’re doing. Just watch.”

Penelope toggled the zoom function to get a better image of the three human figures—two male, one female. She watched as the three figures crept slowly along a concrete wall close to the Patrol Robot. From above, they watched and studied its movements carefully. The large and dangerous robot continued down the path, scanning and monitoring the area. In its robust arms, it held a heavy blaster-cannon with a mounted light. In their attempts to engage with the Patrol, the three Dissidents were taking a very real risk.

The man at the front of the three Dissidents was an older man, physically strong with silver hair and a tan complexion. He had a bulky vest and a leather belt with a holstered blaster, and a couple of cigars in his vest’s front pocket. There were some noticeable cybernetic modifications on his left forearm and wrist, presumably where a wrist-connect watch might have once attached to a wrist port. According to Sneak, his name was Rick Yuri, and while he was a newer addition to the Fort Tekk crew, he had previously served as an MPD officer in South Machina. With his training and experience, he was teaching the rest of the Fort new ways to defend themselves.

The second guy, Vincent Sinclair, looked to be in his early thirties. His right arm appeared to be fully cybernetic. This was a much more serious modification than the one seen on Yuri. It was clear that, at some point, Vincent had been injured badly. Not only had his arm been replaced, but he had a big scar running down his face. Even weirder was the fact that he was totally wearing a bathrobe and pajama pants with slippers. He really had the look of a guy who didn’t care about anything. He had black hair, and a beanie on his head. There was a grin plastered across his face as he quietly moved in the darkness.

Just behind Vincent, a stealthy Dissident woman, Liliana Sioki, moved tactically with a blaster rifle aimed and ready. She wore combat boots, thick trousers, and a backpack, and from behind her gun, one could see long flowy purple hair. To Penelope, looking through the binoculars, she appeared both tough and quite pretty.

The three Dissidents crouched in the shadows, as the robot loomed below. Quite slowly, the girl, Liliana, put her rifle to the side and reached into her backpack to retrieve some small gadget. With great care, she crept out even closer to the robot practically hanging from the concrete walling just above it, and just as the machine passed, she reached out her arm, attaching something to the back of its head.

“What are we watching? Is that some kind of bomb?” Penelope was sweating now. “I don’t know if I want to stick around for this. This is weirding me out.” She pulled the ocular device off, and stood up. She turned to Sneak.

Sneak reached into his pocket and handed Penelope a small control device.

“I think you should do the honors,” he said. “Press the button.”

Penelope looked at the control and unexpectedly felt compelled. For a moment, she hesitated. But then, she surprised herself.

“Alright. Fuck it,” she said, and pressed down on the button.

In an instant, she heard a loud boom, and turned behind to see the Patrol Robot's big domed head and big hulking torso explode in flame. Its heavy body fell to its knees and then flat to the ground with a thud.

In a state of disbelief, Penelope looked to the dissipating smoke and flames, and finally back to Sneak, realizing that she had in fact triggered the explosion.

Sneak reached for the other smaller pair of binoculars and looked down at the inferno. Taking in the scenery, he laughed, pleased at the situation.

"Okay, that was pretty awesome," he said. "I wasn't sure you had it in you. But, goddamn, Penelope. That's how it's done."

Penelope felt both horrified and exhilarated. Emotionally, this was confusing. In the heat of it, she couldn't help but laugh.

"I can't believe you had me press the button," She said, "I don't even live out here. I work in Machina, in a main fucking city district. That was clearly corporate property and this is completely fucking crazy."

"Yeah, but it was pretty cool though, right?"

"Holy shit. What the hell did we just do?"

"Oh come on!" Sneak groaned, "There's nobody out here! Seriously, we blow these things up all the time. It's routine!"

"Well, it's not routine for me, okay!" Penelope shouted right in Sneak's face. "I don't know if you can't tell by uniform and name tag, but I'm a goddamn fast food employee, not some kind of anti-corporate freedom fighter! That might literally be the craziest shit I ever did in my life, and yes—alright—it was kind of cool and thrilling, but I don't just go around doing things like destroying Patrol Robots for fun, okay!"

"Okay! Okay!" Sneak gave in, "Sheesh." He dusted himself off and returned to his bike. "Come on, I'll get you back to the station so you can get out of here. But, you did a good thing. You probably saved someone's life by taking that damn robot out."

It was true. The Patrol Robots were total dicks, and the adrenaline rush Penelope had just experienced was nothing short of priceless. She had grown up in Termite Hill, and people from Termite Hill were no big fans of the Patrols, or the MPD, or the big corporations in general.

She climbed on the back of the speed cycle, holding onto Sneak's shoulders as he kicked the ignition. The noise of the engine began flurrying as they sped along the beaten dirt path.

It was a long distance back to the station. Through stacks and stacks of random junk they sped, finally reaching the place with all the abandoned train carts. They continued along to the spot where Penelope had locked her bike.

As the blue sun began to rise in the sky, Penelope could see the massive amount of graffiti that littered the dump. Only in Machina's western district of Sludge Graffia had she ever seen so much

decorous vandalism. The sight of so much color and chaos was really something marvelous.

While Penelope retrieved her bike, Sneak discreetly hid his speed cycle behind a row of junked Artaro Cars. Then, with Penelope, he got on the train.

“About the Patrol Robot,” Sneak said, “I shouldn’t have handed you the control. If anybody ever asks, it was me who pressed the button, okay.”

“I just wish I would have had a bit more time to think about it beforehand. I feel like it was pretty impulsive of me to just press it like that. But, yeah, I get it. I don’t like the Patrols, either.” Penelope was smart enough to realize that it was probably fine, considering how remote the area was, but the idea of being involved in something like that still bothered her.

“Look, you’re from Termite Hill so I’m sure you can see how Machina and the Artaro Corporation are shitting all over the rest of us,” Sneak said. “If you ever get tired of waiting tables and want to meet more of the Fort Tekk crew, maybe I’ll introduce you to a few people. We’ve got more infrastructure than you might think. You don’t have to work five days a week, with nothing to look forward to but casual Friday.”

“Okay. Okay. I hear what you’re saying and. I get it. Livin’ on the dark side seems thrilling, but I’m gonna go back to my normal life now and be boring and hopefully not blow up anymore robots.”

Penelope waved goodbye and entered the Machina Landfill Municipal Station. When the maglev arrived, she boarded and took a seat. As the train departed from the concrete tunnel, she looked out the window to the emerging morning sky and the concrete lots outside of the station.

There, in the lot not far from the train, Penelope could see a standard looking Artaro P.C. Robot—metallic grey, five feet in height. She watched as the robot boarded a large corporate propulsion craft, and lifted off into the sky. It suddenly became clear to her that this robot was the same one she had seen with the controller and the drone the night prior. Zipping up her sweater, she placed the hood over her head, and sunk back into her chair.

Penelope didn’t know it, but this robot was 1K. Sent from Artaro Labs Chrome Crow by Dr. Webweaver, 1K had looked after her safety for the entirety of the night. Even as she had assisted the Dissidents in the destruction of a company manufactured Artaro Patrol Robot, 1K watched without judgment. 1K and Dr. Webweaver couldn’t have cared less about any of that. They simply needed to know that the potential new recruit was unharmed and safe and would return home to Termite Hill or to work in West Onyx soon. With Penelope on her way home, this particular mission was complete.

As for the thoughts which now stirred in Penelope’s own mind, her first priority was to go home and rest. The fact was, even after all of that, she had a shift at the restaurant later. The thought of dealing with annoying, fussy customers after an all-nighter spent adventuring in the landfill sounded positively dreadful. Already her eyes were beginning to ache from having not slept. She needed to get home to her bed and her cat, even if only for a little bit before the day truly started.

She looked down at her green sneakers, deciding maybe it would be wiser to stay awake until she got back to Termite Hill. That was when she noticed a little white mouse on the floor, similar to the ones she had seen around junkyards. For a moment, it sniffed and glanced up at her with beady red eyes, then it turned and scurried along its way.

## **Supplemental Character Information:**

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

### **Curtis, Penelope:**

Class: Human Cog, Telepath/Telekinetic  
Occupation: Waitress at Archer Piglet's Pancake House  
[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 Chrow, Engineer  
[Eyes: Golden] [Hair: Long, Grey with Beard][Height: 6'2"]  
[Born: 89 D.C.] [Background: New Worlder, Light Complexion, from Machina]

### **IK:**

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]

### **Ron Verlyn:**

Class: Human Cog  
[Eyes: Brown] [Hair: Dark Brown][Height: 6'3"]  
[Born: 161 D.C.] [Background: New Worlder, Dark Complexion, from Machina]

### **Grim Glitchfield:**

Class: Half-Ravell Cog  
[Eyes: Dark Pink] [Hair: Messy, Indigo][Height: 6'1"]  
[Born: 165 D.C.] [Background: Half-Ravell, Light Grey 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]

### **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]

### **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]



**Rick Yuri:**

Class: Human Dissident (Fort Tekk)

[Eyes: Grey] [Hair: Short, Grey/Brown][Height: 6'0"]

[Born: 143 D.C. ] [Background: New Worlder, Tan Complexion, Former MPD Officer from Machina]

**The Seven Forts of the Anarchist Dissident Factions:**

**Fort Tekk:** A fort with location somewhere within the Machina Landfill.

**Fort Grimelord:** A fort with a location somewhere in the southern Scrap Belt.

**Fort Darkboot:** A fort with a location somewhere in the Southern Boroughs of Machina.

**Fort Alphakiller:** A fort with a location somewhere in the Far Shanties, south of Machina. (Dangerous Faction)

**Fort Moonshine:** A fort with a location somewhere in the central Rustlands, south of Machina.

**Fort Flowerpot:** A fort with a location somewhere near Patton's Woods.

**Fort Snakebelly:** A fort somewhere in the west Rust Lands, southwest of Machina.

