

The Crystalline Mythos:
PHANTOM VISIONS

A Short Story
By Teej R.



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(A Short Story)

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(Vol. 2 Pt. 8 of the “*Dream Operations*” Collection)

In this tale, we follow the crew at the Artaro Labs Chrome Crow Dream Operation as they contend with the growing influence of the Iconoclast Faction of the Wardenclyffe Institute.

Supplemental Information and A Map of West Enon can be found at the end of the story.

[Februari 194 D.C.]

Penelope Curtis

[Monday, Februari 1st]

As winter in Machina moved into a cold and rainy Februari, the Dream Operations crew at Artaro Labs Chrome Crow made quiet plans. With the help of Dr. Webweaver, Penelope devised the specifications of a non-commercial dream. On paper, the project took the form of a blueprint—though its designs contained none of the standard characteristics of a corporate dream advertisement.

Amongst the small handful of trusted employees who were made aware, the project was referred to as the Lucidity Blueprint. By the time Februrari rolled in, the finer details of the plan were being mulled over and finalized.

During this same period, however, the wider crew of the lab was noticing an increasing uptick in indecipherable signals across Machina. After some work, they determined a series of Theta-wave broadcasts coming from somewhere to the north of the city-state. Over time, the frequencies of the broadcasts were only intensifying.

With the rise of these strange signals, an uneasiness spread across the many employees of the Artaro Labs Chrome Crow complex. People understood something strange was going on, and judging by talk across the company, the same discomfort was spreading through many of the Artaro Corporation's other divisions, as well.

While the meaning of the signals remained mysterious, it wasn't long before their origin point was determined with greater precision—all signs pointed to a large and well-fortified distribution tower located at the Wardenclyffe Institute Castle and Estate in the forested mountain region known as the Monolithic Government Wildlands.

Word soon spread that the man responsible for the anomalous signals was the old Ravell philosopher and psychologist, Dr. Chaz Scathe.

[Tuesday, Februari 2nd]

Penelope, wearing gloves and goggles, studied a small Black Necron Visus fungal sample under a microscope in Webweaver's primary lab. Under the lens, she observed the strange effects the fungus had on small amoebas and cell tissues. While she was no expert in the area, it was clear that this strain was much more reactive than the purple, magenta, or indigo strains. Her observations were interrupted, however, by a clamouring of employees in the outside corridor.

"If anyone has any questions about the signal broadcasts, I can answer a few questions," Dr. Webweaver said, addressing the gathering.

"Is this some kind of attempt to scramble our brains?" one engineer asked.

"No," Dr. Webweaver answered. "I don't think it's that."

"We think it's a new Dream Operation," his robot, 1K answered.

"Oh, well that's not a big deal then, right?" a marketer from the adjacent department asked.

"Well, it might be a very big deal, actually," Dr. Webweaver said. "But, we're on it, I assure you. If we need any technical help or expertise in the following days and weeks, we will come to you. Otherwise, please just continue with your work."

In the back of the lab, Dr. Thea Wren sat at a computer terminal analyzing the signals. While she paid little attention to what the rest of the lab was saying, she worked to decode them.

"Ron, come take a look at this," she called to the I.T. guy.

Ron Verlyn casually rolled an office chair to the terminal desk and sat next to Wren. Examining the waveforms on the monitor, the two puzzled over the possibilities.

[Wednesday, Februari 3rd]

The following night, after many long hours of work, Ron Verlyn managed to decode one of the recent broadcasts. In the unpacking of this signal, he verified what Dr. Webweaver had privately already suspected. The Iconoclast Faction were beginning to broadcast nightmares.

The dream in question was short and low resolution, probably crafted by an operator with a less than optimal lucidity rating. It contained distortions and instabilities, but it clearly depicted vivid horror elements. The dream was designed in such a way that the subject experiencing it was to open their eyes in their sleep. Paralysis would set in, and objects like large sharp teeth would form in the periphery.

But, at that point the dream failed to remain cohesive, and images of a figure struggling with a nosebleed appeared, glitching in and out of frame. This was not part of the initial design. It was some kind of mistake.

“What’s going on?” Ron asked Webweaver.

“I’m not exactly sure,” Dr. Webweaver said.

“Maybe that's the Operator,” Dr. Wren replied. “They couldn’t handle the Visus Mushroom injection or the Nightmare creation process.”

“Ah, yes, that seems right,” Webweaver said. “Damn. They’re using Black Visus Mushrooms for their serums, and it's giving their operators brain damage.”

“That is so... crazy,” Ron remarked.

“They don’t have the mental acuity for it,” said Dr. Wren. “They need a more experienced operator who can navigate the process.”

“No, this is just... madness,” Dr. Webweaver replied in disapproval. “They need to shut it down. I’m gonna call Beatrice. Someone has to talk some sense into the people at HQ. They need to get security on this.”

Dr. Webweaver turned to head upstairs to his private quarters. In the upstairs corridor, Penelope caught up to him.

“So, Thea and Ron cracked the signal?” she asked.

“Yeah, it’s bad.”

“Should we get the crew ready to broadcast the Lucidity Blueprint dream?”

“Not yet,” Webweaver said. “Don’t say anything to Wren about it. I don’t think I trust her on this project, okay.”

“But, soon then, right?” Penelope said.

“Yes, Penelope,” he answered, a bit irritable. “Look, I have to go make a call, but we’ll talk about this later.”

From Dr. Scathe’s castle, darkness was already oscillating through Machina’s skies. From the get go, news stories arose about random individuals experiencing nightmares so horrific that they jumped from high-rise windows into the streets. Hundreds of people were showing up in hospitals, complaining of night sweats and fever symptoms. While the news media had not yet placed the puzzle pieces into any discernible narrative, eyebrows across the city-state were beginning to raise.

[Thursday, Februari 4th]

The next afternoon, Dr. Thea Wren got into a disagreement with Dr. Webweaver again about Scathe's Dream Operation. Visibly upset, she stood up from her lab desk and terminal, left the lab and walked to the lobby, entering Janice's front office. There, she sat at the management desk and used the loud speaker to address the entire building.

"Hello everyone, this is Dream Operator and Operations Assistant, Thea Wren, here," she said. "I'm speaking to inform everyone that I am resigning from my position out of strong disgust at our hardheaded and completely narrow-minded boss, Dr. Webweaver. Before I go, I just want to say that the Wardencllyffe Dream Operation is nothing to fear for the technical professionals of this lab. This is simply the evolution in our industry. As change comes to our door, I would advise you all to adapt and get with the program. Alternatively, you can hide your heads in the sand like our boss would have you do. Okay, that's all. Good day."

According to a number of employees near the front office and entrance lobby, Wren also used her hallucinatory psychic side-effects (known as phantom visions) on her way out of the building to scare the absolute hell out of a couple of new interns who had ignorantly picked a very bad time to ask her for directions to the research department.

With Wren out of the building, Dr. Webweaver had Ron check work communications on her computer terminal. After a few minutes, it was discovered that she had been dealmaking with the Artaro Corporation's former Head of Security, Claude Hubert. Apparently, their discussions on the subject dated back to before the time of Stanley and Candy Artaro's wedding. This was a surprise.

Dr. Webweaver slammed his fist on a desk.

[Friday, Februari 5th]

Just as some employees were reporting for work the following morning, messages were sent informing the staff of their current job status. Employees received a green thumbs up or a red thumbs down. Those with the thumbs up were to continue their workday as usual. Those with a thumbs down were instructed to stay or go home until further notice. By the end of the day, over two dozen employees were terminated from their job positions.

Around 6:00 PM, Penelope put aside her operator suit, and headed downstairs from the dream deck to the first floor lab room where a meeting was to be held. There, she found Dr. Webweaver at the head of the room. Janice, the Operations Manager, was also present. The Technology Specialist, Ron Verlyn, and the Research Department Head, Enoch Clement, both stood to Dr. Webweaver's opposing side. The robots, 1K and Red-8, stood behind the others, quietly observing. The only inner core crew member not present was Thea Wren, and her absence was felt.

“We’ve been through a lot,” Dr. Webweaver said. “I need to level with all of you. You are the only ones I trust to hear what I have to say. But, what I tell you here can’t leave this room. Got it?”

“We aren’t getting fired, are we?” Ron Verlyn asked, having seen several employees sent home that day.

“No, Ron. You’re safe,” Dr. Webweaver said. “I have fired a number of our secondary staff members out of necessity. But, all of you in this room are safe.”

“Is this because of all the security related commotion?” Penelope asked.

“That’s one way to put it,” Dr. Webweaver said. “As you all are aware, Beatrice’s ban on Nightmare Operations has been relaxed by the Artaro Corporation. I’ve spoken to Beatrice about this matter, and while she’s compliant with the rest of the Board, she isn’t happy. I suspect that if the new policy isn’t reversed soon, Beatrice Delphonic may soon resign as the Head of Dream Operations at the company. If this were to happen, it could jeopardize our Dream Operation in a thousand possible ways. As for me and our lab, we will not be exploring any nightmare related operations. That is my final decision.”

“Is that why Thea left?” Penelope asked.

“Dr. Wren has chosen to accept the ideas and practices of Dr. Scathe and his Iconoclast controlled Dream Operation. I believe she has already gone to work for them. She’s cleared out her personal locker, and moved out of the Artaro Live-in Suites building. She is technically no longer employed by the Artaro Corporation, yet her clearance remains intact. This all leads me to believe she’s been given an okay to work for the Wardencllyffe Operation.”

Everyone in the room looked at each other, uneasy, as the mood darkened.

“Make no mistake—that operation is a Nightmare Operation,” Dr. Webweaver continued. “Its conception was defiant of Beatrice’s ban. The truth is, many at the Artaro Corporation saw this ban as a limiting regulation. While Stanley Artaro didn’t want to shift policy away from the ban, he has agreed to allow the Wardencllyffe Operation to exist independently from the company. As long as the agreement is maintained, the Artaro Corporation is to not interfere with Wardencllyffe.”

“It’s a deal the higher-ups brokered,” Janice added. “The Ravell cities are becoming interested in Dream Operations, and it’s led to some strange outcomes.”

“It’s true,” Dr. Webweaver said. “This became apparent to me during the World Summit meetings a few months ago. I was confused at first. It’s troubling, but it’s also the reality, so I’ve been strategizing. All of the staff I fired this week were individuals I suspected to be sympathetic to Nightmare Operations, and if Dr. Wren had not quit so dramatically in front of everyone, I would have fired her, as well.”

“Wow,” Penelope said. “This really is serious.”

“It is,” Dr. Webweaver agreed.

At home that evening, Penelope did her best to explain the complicated situation to Grim.

“You remember when my coworkers and I went to the big wedding for Stanley and Candy Artaro, right?” she asked.

“Yeah, of course I do,” Grim said, eating a pack of bitesize mochi ice creams. “The whole thing streamed on the Daily Data Dose. I could see you in the audience at one part.”

“Well, I met Candy Artaro at that wedding, and she sort of offered me a promotion. It wasn’t for a job at Artaro, per say, but it was a similar role outside of the company.”

“Wait,” Grim said, his attention finally leaving his food. “You met Candy Artaro?”

“That’s not the important part, Grim,” Penelope said. “I was offered a job for another Dream Operation. It was a big deal.”

“Okay,” Grim said. “So how come you never told me before? What’s the deal? Did you take the job?”

“No, I couldn’t accept the job,” Penelope said. “I contacted HQ and refused the position, and from what I’ve learned since then, I’m glad I did.”

Penelope stood up from the living room couch and began to pace around.

“I’m not sure how to explain it, but shit is going down, okay,” Penelope said, frustrated. “The other Dream Operation, it’s led by this guy, Dr. Scathe. My boss, Dr. Webweaver, sort of knows him, or maybe they’re more like contemporaries or competitors—basically, Dr. Webweaver made it pretty clear that this Scathe guy is a nutcase—I mean, he’s out of his mind.”

“Well, you didn’t take the job, right?” Grim replied. “So, why are you so stressed about it now?”

“Around the time of the wedding, a lot of weird stuff began to happen,” Penelope said. “There were security problems and a lot of people getting fired. There were also all these broadcast tests from this new Dream Operation, and they were making our job harder. According to the I.T. guys at our lab, we kept getting hit with all sorts of digital disruptions. Our Dream Machine got knocked offline a number of times. It was disorienting, but that’s really not even the worst of it.”

“Okay, so what is it? Just tell me what’s going on,” Grim said. “Whatever it is, I’ll help you figure it out.”

“This Dream Operation—they don’t make advertisements like we do,” Penelope answered, trying to remain calm. “How do I put this? They make fucking nightmares, okay. It’s psychotic, but that’s what they do. We just learned that their Dream Machine is operational, and that’s what all their broadcast tests were about. They were setting up shop, and now they’re ready to get to work, just like us, but instead of adverts, they’re making nightmares. Worse yet, Stanley Artaro and rest of the bigwigs at Artaro HQ refuse to do anything about it because of some stupid deal they have with the Ravell city-states. So, we’re supposed to just pretend like nothing is happening.”

“It’s not your job to save the world, Penelope,” Grim said. “The people making the nightmares are the ones at fault. It sounds like Artaro isn’t really that involved—they’re just staying out of it.”

“It’s called the Wardencllyffe Institute Dream Operation,” Penelope clarified. “They use an entirely different strain of Visus Mushroom for their Dream Operators in the process. This is really messed up because the Operators will go insane if they keep using this strain, and the psychic side-effects that this strain brings about could be really dangerous. I still don’t know all that much about this side of things, but it sounds really scary and strange.”

“Okay, here’s a question for you,” Grim said, his eyebrows raised. “Let’s say they start pumping out these nightmare dreams you’re talking about. Then what? Is the point to just terrify people? Are people going to start acting crazy? This sounds shortsighted maybe—like maybe people will react very negatively and then it will get banned again. I’m not really sure, but do you see what I’m saying?”

“As far as my understanding goes,” Penelope said, “the point is to increase compliance and control. Fear is a potent motivator, and Dr. Scathe knows that. He has a background in psychology, so his nightmare method serves as a sort of conditioning strategy.”

“Woah,” Grim said, “I wonder what the Monolithic Government thinks about this. It sounds like a disaster.”

For Grim, the weight of the situation was finally beginning to settle in. He put his food to the side, and thought for a minute.

Finally, after a moment of quiet, he asked, “So, how are you planning to deal with all this? Have you talked to your boss about it?”

“We’re working on a plan,” Penelope said. “There are risks involved, and I can’t say much about it, but we’re going to make a new kind of dream. The hope is that we’ll be able to inoculate people from dream manipulation. It could potentially help protect people from nightmare broadcasts, but it might diminish the Artaro Corporation’s ability to advertise, as well. So, we have to be quiet about it. You can’t mention this to anyone, alright.”

“Of course,” Grim said. “My lips are sealed.” He gestured as if to zip his mouth shut.

“Look, after we broadcast our non-commercial dream, things are going to get really weird,” Penelope said. “As the Dream Operator responsible, it’s likely that I’ll have to go off the grid for a while until Dr. Webweaver can negotiate something with the people from HQ.”

Grim stood up from the couch, visibly upset. “Are you sure about this?”

“Yes, Grim,” Penelope said, “I am. Look, I’m sorry, but you need to start looking for a new apartment, as well, because I don’t know what’s going to happen to this place after this.”

“That’s fine. Don’t worry about that part,” he said. “Look, I just want to know that you’re going to be safe.”

“I don’t have all the answers,” Penelope answered. “Look, Dr. Webweaver is really smart, and he’s going to help me. So, we’re going to figure it out.”

For a while, the two simply stood in the living room without talking. Eventually, Grim went into the kitchen and fixed a gin on the rocks. Processing the situation, he headed to the back patio balcony.

He opened the glass patio door, and stepped into the starry night. Behind him, the moon hung in the sky, bright and broken. Turning again into the hallway, he said, “I’ll start looking for a new flat first thing tomorrow. Just whatever you and Dr. Webweaver decide to do, think through every angle, and be safe.”

Penelope watched as he leaned on a rail and lit a smoke, his view fixed on the stars and cityscape.

[Monday, Februari 6th]

All day Monday, Grim searched for a new living space. With recent oil painting sales earnings, he had more options than in the past. He wasn’t interested in renting. Given his growing art career, he decided to put a down payment on a luxury flat in South Optera, in an area sometimes referred to as Machina’s Arts District.

Grim understood that Penelope was going through a lot at work, and he wanted to be supportive, but it was obvious that peril was ahead. He didn’t know what to do or how to help. While Penelope had told him quite a bit about Dream Operations, there were aspects of the job he really couldn’t wrap his head around—not without seeing for himself. As she described it, things were in a state of rapid fluctuation, and the thought of nightmare broadcasts was hard to process. He wondered how many insane and dangerous things were going on in the world that, as a civilian, he would never know about.

He hired two robotic movers to bring his belongings to the new flat, and received the keycard in the mail shoot a few hours after paying the initial deposit.

[Tuesday, Februari 7th]

The following night, Penelope left work to meet with Grim. They met down by the garage of the Artaro Live-in Suites building. Since Grim's beam cycle had already been moved to the new flat, they decided to drive to South Optera together in Penelope's barely-used midnight grey Artaro Car. Having only arrived from the catalogue recently, a few months prior, she had only driven it to work and back. It still had that new car smell. The tires folded horizontally, as the vehicle levitated into the air.

Pressing the automation function, Penelope put on an old Emoti-Punk cassette cartridge and watched Grim light a Moonstone cigarette.

"Thank you," she told him.

"For what?" he said.

"For putting up with all of this recent chaos," she said.

"You want to talk about it?" Grim asked, curious and worried. "Has there been any more developments with your plan?"

"Let's just focus on us right now," Penelope said.

By the time they arrived at the new address on Salon Street in South Optera, rain was coming down. Parking in a residential lot, they took a look at the Lichtencault Residences Building. It was an old stone structure, standing six floors in height. It was only one of many strong buildings, most of them similar in stature. Along the sidewalks, people in coats walked with umbrellas and hot drinks, while others shivered in the cold.

From Grim's front doorsteps, they could see the large skyscraper, Moonstone Tower—its surfaces shining in metallic gradients of pink and blue.

"Seems like an alright neighborhood, I guess," Penelope commented.

"Well, the galleries are over here, so..." Grim said. "It just seemed like the place to be."

The door opened from the inside and the two Omni-Assist robot movers stepped out, heading to their truck.

"I ordered a few pieces of furniture. These guys agreed to bring it over," Grim explained.

Grim's pet pug, Rip, jumped out from his kennel and scurried to the door to sit by his feet. The dopey animal scratched itself, sniffing Grim's sneakers.

"That's good you got your buddy, here, to keep you company," Penelope said, crouching to pet the animal.

"Had him dropped off this morning. Artaro has a new doggy drone delivery service app on the catalogue."

Finally, Grim stepped into the front entrance of his new flat for the first time to peek inside. While most of his stuff was still packed away in boxes, a really nice synthetic leather couch had been dropped off in the center of the room.

Penelope took a quick look inside, as well, though she didn't have time to hang out for very long. She had to get back to Chrome Crow. The lab crew needed her, and there was a lot of work to be done.

"You want to hang up your jacket?" Grim asked, noticing Penelope's old leather Emoti-Punk jacket was all wet from the rain.

"No, I'm going to get going in a few minutes, here," she said.

Outside, the rain was picking up, however.

"Here, let's heat up some tea at least," Grim said, rummaging through a box of pots and pans in his new kitchen.

Since there was no kitchen table yet, they sat on the counter while their tea boiled in a stovetop kettle.

"So, about that dream you were planning to make, the noncommercial one," Grim's voice held a hint of concern. "Are you still going to go through with it?"

"Yes, and soon—within the next forty-eight hours, I think," Penelope said.

"And you're all prepared?"

"I'm about as ready as I'll ever be," Penelope remarked. She was trying to keep an optimistic attitude, despite the obvious impending disaster.

She gave Grim a kiss, both of them with the understanding that they likely weren't going to see each other for a while. And just like that, she turned and walked to her personal Artaro Car. The wheels folded in, as it lifted off. Automating the driving function, she looked back to see Grim light a cigarette as she soared away. He had stepped out onto the sidewalk, and was just standing there, getting rained on.

[Wednesday, Februari 8th]

Early the next morning, Penelope tried to appear focused on her normal work. After suiting up, she came to the main deck and saw 1K alert in the control room. The day's dream advert, an ad for Jet Pack Shoes, would not be difficult to craft. She sat herself in the white leather chair in the Dream Machine's main hull. From there, the advertisement content came pouring out in a skillful display, as was usual.

This would, in all likelihood, be Penelope's last normal by-the-books dream advertisement. She took a look at the product specifications. According to the background info, Artaro's research and development departments had long understood the dangerous frequency at which the popular product, Artaro Jet Pack Shoes, had caused fatalities to occur. Yet, the public was completely in the dark about it. This standard ad would only further the delusion that Jet Pack Shoes were a safe, exciting leisure-time product. This new found confidence in the safety of the product line would, in turn, bolster sales numbers. With a magical quality that could only be fully appreciated in the format of dream, the product would surely fly right off the shelf. Hence, the campaign slogan—

Jet Pack Shoes: They fly right off the shelf!

Crafting it only took a few short hours, and when Penelope was done, she removed the heavy helmet interface from atop her head, and sat up in the machine chair. She unstrapped her arms, and opened the hatch door to retrieve the glowing crystal data, fully rendered, from the cauldron on the Dream Machine's side panel. She then followed the steel stairway up to the control room where the data would be readied for distribution. Jet Pack Shoes would inevitably seize the attention of all who slept, and dreamt of their glory.

Once in the control room, she took a look at the distributor interface.

“Hey!”

Penelope shot her glance up to see the hatch to the roof open. Webweaver was up there.

“Climb up,” he said. “We gotta talk, and I'm weary that the lab could be bugged.”

Taking the ladder up, it was foggy on the rooftop.

“I can't tell you whether or not to go through with this dream we prepared,” Webweaver said, “This is a decision you have to make for yourself. If you decide to go against protocol, then you'll only have two options. Option one: you'll face the consequences of moving against corporate protocol. This might be what Scathe wants. He could use your mistakes as leverage to get the Artaro Corporation to sanction moving you to the Wardencllyffe Institute to work for the Nightmare Operation. Or I suppose they, despite your usefulness, could opt to throw you in Artaro Jail or stick you on house arrest with a parasite leech.”

“Option two?”

“Option two: you put me in an awkward position where I have to help you. I'll have to remove your bio-chip. Then, you'll have to be taken out of the city. I'll have to dump you some place desolate. Probably in the Rust Lands somewhere. And, you'll have to lay low until I can negotiate something—that

may take a long time. In which case, you're screwed because you're stuck out there."

"Okay, option two, it is."

"Good. Fuck it. I'm happy we're doing this," he said. "The Artaro family, I could deal with. Beatrice, I could handle. But these Iconoclasts are just evil. The substitution of using the Black Visus agent instead of the Purple Visus—this would melt your mind. Every recipient of the dreams produced would be infected by Scathe's lunatic vision of reality and control. What little bit of rationality remains would be stripped of us. True unmatched tyranny would be, by my calculations, an absolute certainty. Destruction. Mayhem. Brutality and death."

"That is a stark way of putting it, but I guess you're right," Penelope said. "I didn't expect that you would help me. But I'm glad you are. I'd be lying if I said this wasn't a scary thing we're doing here. I suppose, on the bright side, at least it's not another advert for sunglasses or vacuum cleaners."

"Yeah, at least, there's that," Webweaver remarked. "Come on, let's go talk in the lab."

Preparation for the dream took many hours. 1K analyzed the plans carefully, adding the extra precision only an advanced Artaro Polygon 1000 robot could provide. They were now co-conspirators in a great and dangerous work. Together, they would create a mental construct that would help the recipients of this new and special dream to find some sovereignty of mind.

Carefully, they discussed the blueprints that would need to lay the foundation of this new dream. First, there would need to be a view of reality that actually reflected reality. Dream Operations would need to be communicated as real and impactful.

Secondly, there would need to be a pathway to objectivity made available to the psyche. But, the will to see this truth could not and would not be forced upon the dreamer. This dream would need to nurture free will, not override it. For this reason, not everyone would truly embrace the designs of the dream, but everyone would be given the choice, and that would be good enough.

Lastly, for those dreamers who, by whatever strength of spirit, would choose reason as the method by which reality and truth were perceived, an ethic would emerge. They would find mastery over their own minds, and rid themselves of the virus-like designs of dream propagandists, Artaro and Scathe alike. This would be the fruit of their understanding—what it would mean to be lucid in Machina.

[Thursday, Februari 9th]

It was midnight when Penelope finally climbed back into the Dream Machine. She meditated over these plans as she buckled into the white leather chair. Never had she felt so claustrophobic within these walls as she did now. It felt as though the hull could cave in and crush her at any second. Despite this sense of anxiety, however, she was ready.

The machine fired up.

The lights went dim as the machine arm readied the purple visus injection procedure. Steadily, operations began, and consciousness expanded. The static television snow of the dream creation matrices surrounded Penelope. But, for the first time, she had no advertisement to craft, no bullshit product to sell—instead, only imagination would guide her.

Logically, she started by painting the sky blue. Then, she continued by adding fluffy clouds and a bright golden sun, like in the old days.

What does a dream designed to wake people wake up look like? She thought. This was the aesthetic question—one which they had not discussed at much length. She would have to trust her creative senses.

In the control room, Webweaver and 1K overlooked the dream design process, as was the norm. From the computer terminal, a small plane could be seen flying in the blue sky. A banner waved from the back of the plane, which read:

Now presenting: The World Beyond Artaro!

The dreamer would appear in a scape of endless green hills. In front of them, a long path would be set. If they chose to follow the path, they would ascend in elevation, traveling through increasingly thick fog. They would see cows, and conifer trees, but eventually that would fade. The terrain would become steep and craggy. Mountain goats would be seen, as well as large majestic birds. If they continued to climb, after a long while, they would reach the summit. From here, the dreamer would have vantage over the wide surrounding lands.

“The exposition seems to be set. Penelope is working steadily,” 1K remarked from the control terminal.

“Yes, this all looks to be going rather smoothly,” replied Webweaver, perhaps having spoken too soon.

Back in the dream, from the peak of the mountain, a pink blaring light pierced far off in the skyline. This was not part of the plan.

Webweaver hunched in toward the monitor, suddenly startled. “Look at that. I wasn’t expecting it to look like that,” he commented. “What the hell is she doing?”

White light flooded in, distorting the various monitor images in the control room. The read out of the dream appeared to melt. Everything went fuzzy.

1K began banging on the monitor. “Dr. Webweaver, the system is glitching!”

“Yeah, I’m aware of that.” Webweaver leapt up, shifting around wires, attempting to recalibrate the system. The only monitor image he could bring back was the cam feed of Penelope inside the hull of the Dream Machine.

Checking Penelope’s neural map, it was lit up across the board at peak levels. But, the read out wasn’t making complete sense. The screens and holographic imaging systems were beginning to flicker and fail. Then, unexpectedly, the power went out entirely. It was dark—nearly black.

Webweaver wouldn’t have been able to see a thing if it weren’t for 1K’s faintly glowing eyes and

smile. “She’s sucking too much power out of the system,” he noted. “We need to fire up a manual override or the whole thing will shut down.”

“DO IT.” Webweaver demanded.

“But, the manual override is tied to the distributor tower. If we fire up manually, then the dream will have to go out live.”

“I guess there’s no time as good as the present.”

1K pulled a toolbox out from the control desk, and proceeded to an electrical cabinet located on the back wall. He opened the panel doors, exposing a dozen different levers. One by one, he engaged them. Lights returned.

Webweaver immediately climbed the ladder which led to the roof, opening the latch and peering outside. Huge bursts of electricity soared across the several antenna and coil structures to the very top. Patterns signaled through the Chrome Crow skies. It was clear. The dream was live in transmission.

“No going back now.” He muttered to himself. Turning to 1K, he shouted down to the control panel, “Get the feed working! I want to see what this dream looks like!”

“That’s affirmative!” 1K pulled up an image which now appeared to be Penelope sitting with her legs crossed, floating in the air at the mountain peak. Except now, the forest surroundings were entirely gone, replaced by something which looked more like a series of psychedelic Adularian mandalas. Sequentially, they would expand and contract, creating bizarre and beautiful patterns.

“Wow, can’t say I was expecting that.” Webweaver exclaimed, raising a brow.

From Penelope’s point of view, a new state of consciousness had been achieved. It was a state of awareness regarding sensory reality. This would contribute to the metaphysical message of the dream, and would hopefully help the dreamer experiencing it to take a closer look at the relationship between the mind and the noumenal world. The aesthetics she used to express these ideas had largely been drawn from Adularian art. The mandalas, in particular, adorned the rugs and shawls of Dorothy Patton’s little home atop the Apple Colony in Termite Hill. Penelope had remembered these images, and was now using them as part of her creative process.

There was something about the state of dream creation, unhindered by the instructions of corporate advertisement, that led her to Adularian religious iconography. Whether consciously or subconsciously, the iconography was continually expressing itself in the work. It was a complex endeavour. Still, for the time being, everything was going smoothly.

Then, something altogether strange happened. She began to notice an influx of feedback data from dreamers experiencing the dream live as it was literally still being designed. Without warning, all of the various dreamers experiencing this very dream began to appear in the mandala skies surrounding the mountain. So many different faces; people slumbering in their beds. Average looking cogs, exhausted from their shitty jobs. So many of them.

She recognized one of them...

Meanwhile, outside, the distributor system was firing full blast. Across Chrome Crow it could be

seen blazing in the sky. Of course, to the average know-nothing, it just looked like another light up piece of mumbo-jumbo to be filtered out as background noise.

Far away at the Artaro HQ Tower in High Optera, Stanley Artaro, Beatrice Delphonic and a few other select reps from the Artaro Corporation held a secretive meeting with Dr. Chaz Scathe and three of his Iconoclast officers. Such discussions were meant as a form of diplomacy, but as things unfolded, the mood had become tense. While the Artaro Corporation wasn't stepping in Dr. Scathe's way, per say, they weren't making things easier, either.

Even when it was over, Dr. Scathe was left grinding his teeth. When he stepped out of the building into the busy atmosphere of downtown High Optera, he was rejoined by more of his people.

His Iconoclast Faction stood loyal and obedient. Scathe fixed his long, black coat and approached them. He looked to his newest lieutenant, a former employee of Artaro Labs Chrome Crow. There, she stood at the head of his team. She called the squad to attention. Then, she faced him, awaiting orders.

It was Dr. Thea Wren, now a full fledged Iconoclast. She was learning Scathe's ways, sporting the traditional black long coat of their like. She was reading the right scientific papers, and absorbing the ideas of Wardencllyffe. Most importantly, she was proving her loyalty to Scathe. Where Webweaver and Artaro Labs had discarded her dedication, Scathe saw her true worth, or so she hoped.

"I've received word from one of our inside moles," he began, sternly. "There is an unscheduled dream coming out of the Dream Operation in Chrome Crow. Dr. Webweaver is a nuisance and must be dealt with immediately. I grant full permission to shoot on sight. The same goes for his atrocious abomination of an assistant, the robot, 1K. His Operator, Ms. Curtis, however, must not come to harm. She is to be obtained for the Wardencllyffe program."

"I won't let you down, Doctor," Dr. Wren stated. There was a look of seriousness in her eyes, and a scowl from her thin lips.

"Good. I wouldn't have it any other way," Scathe answered. "I've got dreams to cook up, and a new world to create. Isn't that right?"

"Of course." Dr. Wren replied, "Whatever it takes. We have work to do."

It was time to seize Artaro Labs, once and for all. The Overlord 2 was to be the only Dream Machine. And, Penelope Curtis was to be its chief and only operator.

Scathe summoned his personal propulsion craft, which landed in the street. Climbing in, he called to Wren, "Remember what I taught you. However strong your opponent may be, the most powerful dreams are nightmares. Webweaver fooled you by defining your psychic abilities as side effects. His purple visus agent was designed to control your abilities, but the black visus will unleash them. Best of luck, Wren. You'll need it."

With a powerful gust of wind, the craft rose into the sky, and soared off.

At the lab, the dream progressed. But, it was getting out of hand. Of all the idiots in all the world,

Patrick Puck had somehow just shown up in the live feedback. Penelope could see him, sleeping with drool forming a small river down his cheek, in some crappy apartment in West Onyx. She had been crafting the dream to change the world, and now this schmuck was ruining it, throwing off Penelope's rhythm. Then, he woke up. Or did he? His eyes opened, and he sat up, looking right at Penelope. Weirder yet, his eyes lit up white. His eyes were pure light.

"Puck?" she said.

"Penelope? What are you doing here?" he asked, confused.

This was no creation of Penelope's imagination. *This is really Puck*, she realized, *He's experiencing the dream. Everyone is*. She had caused this psychic communication to occur. And now he could see her, and the whole of the dream.

She looked over to the sun—the one she had created in the sky. It fractured into a thousand geometric designs. Beams of pink and white light burst forth from the sun.

Penelope's eyes began to glow with blaring pink and white light. She could not control this phenomenon. The light blasted out from her eyes as an intense and powerful psychic energy. It was as if she were powering him up. He lit with heat, flew out of his bed, and through his window, shattering it. She could see him fly out from his apartment and into the street. Then, he was gone.

Outside, in the parking lots of the lab complex, dark forces were gathering. Multiple large, armored black trucks came and halted. Several dozen men in uniform emerged. The Iconoclast forces seized upon this opportunity to please their master and to exercise his will. At last, after the vehicles had unloaded, a final pair of boots hit the ground. Dr. Wren stood, sinister and determined, her mission laid out before her.

At the head of the forces, Dr. Wren moved forward with laser focus. She knew the most effective way to enter the building undetected. She also knew how to avoid Enoch Clement who was undoubtedly working late on his pharmaceutical experiments in the basement level labs. But, Dr. Clement was not so lucky. On his way to take a post-cheeseburger shit, he was confronted by the full force of the squad. With the quick firing of a blaster, his guts, cheeseburger and all, were left to decorate the entrance level corridors.

Through a pair of barred doors, the Iconoclast forces traveled up the stairwell until they reached the dream deck. Kicking open the doors, they stormed through the preparation room. Here, Wren lowered a pair of protective goggles over her face. Lovelace directed the squad to do the same.

There it was. The Dream Machine. Lit up and fully active—the energy of its dual coils electrifying the air above.

Sitting in the control room, Webweaver was astonished to see this squad rush onto the dream deck. He sprang up from his seat, peering down through the tinted glass.

"Someone's here," he whispered to 1K.

Webweaver recognized that these were Scathe's people. They were all wearing those black long coats. Somehow, he knew this was Beatrice's doing. This was it. He was dead meat.

1K had no time for this sort of rational fear for his own safety. Instantly, the robot jumped into action, turned to the back wall, and read the sign: *Artaro Dynamo G9 Plasma Welding Cannon, For Emergency Use Only!* Clearly, this was an emergency. Cannon in hand, he opened the door, and tried to make his way down the staircase without being noticed. He reached a steel railing wall where he ducked, then signaled for Dr. Webweaver to follow him. Webweaver reached into his desk, and shuffled around. It took a moment, but he unearthed an old K-Finnigan energy pistol. He loaded up a cartridge, and proceeded to join 1K.

On the deck, Wren emerged from the group of Iconoclasts, gun in hand.

“Webweaver!” she shouted, looking up to the control room.

Quietly avoiding detection, 1K and Webweaver moved along the steel hangar above the dream deck to an opening in the ventilation system. Several of the Iconoclast men traveled up the stairs, kicking open the control room.

“They’re not up here,” one soldier reported.

“Search the area!” Dr. Wren ordered in reply.

The Iconoclast men searched the premises in a thorough, methodical fashion. But, Webweaver knew his way around the building better than anyone, even his own staff. He and 1K found themselves in a major ventilation shaft. From there, they could see the large distributor tower on the rooftop as it released the powerful signal of Penelope’s dream creation.

Across Chrome Crow, Onyx, and Optera, countless dreamers slept peacefully in their tiny, overpriced apartment flats. Now, the signal had reached them. For the vast majority, the dream would inevitably be ignored. Doomed to remain as cogs in the clockwork of Machina’s great gears, they would not have the courage to escape their little worlds. They would not reach the metaphorical mountain summit to see the whole of the forest. They would get lost in the dense thickets of trees, until the morning came, and they woke up, never wiser. But even now, as the dream transmitted, thousands were witnessing the magisterial epiphany as it was designed to be experienced. They were at the mountain summit.

The wide view of the forest landscape held within it a meticulously crafted vision of clarity. The dreamers who witnessed it, who really soaked in the view—they would experience a sense of understanding. They were now free to act as the authors of their own minds. It was a simple realization of personal sovereignty and independence. They were not simply cogs. They were individuals, capable of industriousness and creativity, of reason and adventure.

Even as the Artaro Labs Chrome Crow facility crawled with enemies, Webweaver couldn’t help but feel a sense of satisfaction. In all of the years of his service at the Artaro Corporation, never once had he ever allowed a dream to go off script like this.

He and 1K took great care to stay quiet as they moved through the ventilation system. Behind the dream deck, they found themselves in an industrial storage space. Looking down, Webweaver saw what he was looking for—a full shipment of twenty unactivated Artaro 900 robots, surplus from the annual summer Parade Day.

As quickly as they could, Webweaver and 1K activated each of the many robots. There were perhaps two dozen Iconoclast soldiers out there. Now, they could be matched.

With a careful adjustment to this robot platoon's behavioral settings, the initial boot-up to life began with a battle cry. The calls were so loud, in fact, that they could be heard on the dream deck.

"Everyone, quiet!" Wren demanded of her soldiers. Listening, the Iconoclasts prepared themselves.

Through the corridors of the labs complex, Webweaver led his army. They entered the preparation room, attacking from behind. The attack began with 1K. Wielding the wondrous Artaro Dynamo G9 Plasma Welding Cannon, a powerful shimmering beam launched the first skin-melting attack. The Iconoclasts who were first struck were done for, but the rest readied themselves for retaliation. Gunfire ensued.

At that moment, the rest of the Artaro robots rushed to the scene. Besides a few garage tools for use as blunt weapons, these robots were not well armed. Many of them were taken out. But, many still reached their opponents, dishing out devastating blows. A few of the Artaro robots managed to seize blasters from some of the slain Iconoclasts. But, the enemy still had the upper hand.

Even through the chaos, Penelope's dream progressed, and continued its transmission.

As for Dr. Wren, she approached the side panel of the Dream Machine. Inside of the cauldron, she could see the crystal data gem through which this dream flowed.

"Look at this beautiful gem. All of the art you've created. Your entire professional portfolio. A whole array of Grade A, top notch quality dream advertisements. The best in the business. I could never create dreams like these. Certainly, the Artaro Corporation demands only the highest caliber dreams from the highest caliber creators."

Wren reached in the cauldron, severely burning her hands. She clutched the crystal data stone, even as electrical energy flowed through it. Then, as hard as she could, Dr. Wren slammed the stone against the floor. It shattered into a hundred tiny fragments. All at once, the sparks inside dissipated and faded. Wren looked pleased. But, her mission was not yet complete. Eagerly, she ran back into the chaos of the fight.

Penelope awoke, suddenly torn from the dream. Looking around, stunned, she sat up in the white, leather chair. She ripped the machine helmet from her head. Moving the overhead apparatus away, she unstrapped herself, slowly climbed out of the chair, and stood up. With her balance a bit shaky, she came to the helm door, and opened it.

Stepping out onto the dream deck, she could see the conflict taking place—Scathe's soldiers in black coats locked in battle against Webweaver's team of pissed-off robots.

Among all of the calamity, 1K fought at the very center. In his arms, he held the Artaro Dynamo G9 Plasma Cannon, and he was having an absolute field day with it. It was perhaps ten of the Iconoclast foot soldiers who were instantly caught in his sights. They had no time to return fire or thwart 1K's attack. They were too busy melting everywhere.

The flame was terrifying and Penelope had to scoot back as fast as humanly possible to avoid it. Still, she was happy to see help had arrived.

BANG!

With a single shot from behind, the back of 1K's head caved in as his glowing smile exploded forward. Glass, metal and silicon brains glittered in the air. He fell hard to the ground among the remains of dead enemies and his fallen robot brothers. The light of 1K's battery power dimmed as his life force faded into nothingness.

Penelope's eyes widened.

Behind, Dr. Wren stood, with a blaster pistol still smoking. Slowly, she lifted her vision to meet her fellow dream operator.

Tossing her weapon aside, she addressed Penelope, "Your answer to dream advertisements is incorrect, you know. What do you possibly think you can show the sleeping masses that they haven't been shown countless times before? You think your little 'lucidity-for-the-masses' experiment is any different from selling them vacuum cleaners? There's no meaning to any of it. Meaning doesn't exist. That's the first lesson."

"What are you talking about, Wren?"

"I'm talking about nightmares. It's Scathe's alternative. There is no reason to sell anyone anything, whether it's an expansion of consciousness, or a handbag. It makes no difference! We have other tools at our disposal. We have *fear*."

Wren centered her concentration, and clenched her fists. As she did so, a large shadow grew around her, engulfing her. She appeared ghostly, dream-like.

Penelope understood that the only way to combat this would be to access her own psychic ability. She channeled her focus, reaching for the same sense of awareness she had experienced each day within the Dream Machine. But, here outside of the Dream Machine, she was finding it difficult to attain the necessary state of mind.

Enraged and determined, Wren sprinted forward, and pounced at Penelope, slamming her against the domed, outside walling of the Dream Machine. Shadows grew in the air as she attacked. She punched Penelope in the nose, drawing first blood.

This was the catalyst Penelope required. The sudden rush of adrenaline and visus energy triggered her to react with an incredibly powerful telekinetic push. She could feel the energy exit through her hands and slam her opponent. With great force, Wren flew back, hitting the ground, and sliding several meters.

Wren was pretty banged up, but she arose to her feet. She removed her leather long coat, and let out an aggressive scream. There was a darkness in her eyes. It had solidified. There had been so much envy in her. Now, she was harnessing it, and directing it into raw, psychic warfare.

"Really, it's quite funny," Wren announced. "Leaving Artaro Labs is the best thing that ever happened to me. I feel upgraded, and liberated. For once, I have the advantage."

From Wren's fingertips, phantom forms loomed in all directions, like snakes and serpents shaped in black nothingness. With Wren's visions expanding, a strong sense of fear and madness took hold. It seemed that her abilities had been morphed and heightened. A snake formed in a black cloud, biting

Penelope in the shoulder. The pain and physical damage was all very real.

“You’ve been taking Black Visus Serum, haven’t you?!” Penelope winced and shouted.

Wren said nothing, but laughed as black shrouds spread throughout the dream deck.

Penelope retreated a number of paces, trying to remain firm, careful not to lose her footing while shadows pounced and bit at her. She could see Wren’s eyes looking through her like two gateways into hell. Penelope knew that if she didn’t make a move soon, she was toast.

Concentrating, Penelope glared back, utilizing her own psychic energy to its fullest extent. Her eyes charged with bold, pink and white light. Her expression grew fierce. The light grew and raged like a thunderous storm around her. Then, using all of her willpower, she lifted Wren high into the air, throwing her against the high ceiling at an incredible speed.

The impact was devastating. Dr. Wren slammed into the floor, debris flying up around her. When the dust settled, it was clear she wasn’t moving. A pool of blood formed slowly around her head as the darkness around her subsided, and the breath of life left her body.

The few remaining Iconoclasts were put down shortly thereafter, defeated by Webweaver’s dutiful robot army. The few robots who remained alive joined their master, who walked out to the center of the dream deck.

Dr. Webweaver looked down to Wren, saddened by what had happened. But, he was glad that Penelope had survived this encounter, free from the capture of the enemy.

Webweaver was also heavily disheartened by what had happened to 1K. He walked over to see the extent of the damage. Ducking down, he scooped up his dead partner and tossed him over his shoulder. Then, without as much as a word, he left the dream deck, and headed for the main lab.

Penelope regained her calm, and followed.

Eventually, they left the remaining robots to clean up the mess on the dream deck. Returning to the first floor lab, Webweaver placed 1K on his main worktable. Whatever was to happen with the robot, however, would have to wait. In the present, his concern remained with Penelope and the crew. For all he knew, more Iconoclasts were coming. Whatever escape plan he was going to have to come up with, he would have to do it quickly.

“Penelope, I’m going to remove our biochips. First yours, then mine. For the rest of the crew, they’ll just have to install fresh modules.”

Grabbing a scalpel, Webweaver created a small incision in Penelope’s temple. Then, taking a pair of clamps, he reached into the opening and pulled out her Artaro patented bio-chip. The pain of the procedure was considerable, but her tears were not for the pain. The thought of leaving her life in Machina was the cause of her sadness.

There was also a sense of disconnection and irrational loneliness that over-swept her as she realized that she could no longer connect to the circuit. Never in her whole life had Penelope not had a bio-chip installed. Technically, she was no longer a cog—no longer a citizen of this grand city. That was it. Her entire identity plucked out like a rotten tooth.

It took only a few minutes before the procedure was complete.

Webweaver took a few moments to perform the same procedure on himself. He did this all with ingenious ease. He was a very capable technician, even in these circumstances.

When he was done, he grabbed a bottle of whiskey from his desk, and looked out the lab windows. It was dawn. Light was creeping in. A door opened.

“There you are!” a voice exclaimed. It was Janice Biggs. “What’s going on here? Are you bleeding?!”

“Actually, yes I am,” Webweaver answered. “I had to remove my bio-chip, and Penelope’s, as well. A large group of men stormed the building—Iconoclasts working for Scathe. But, we fought them. I had to power up a fleet of robots to do it. Wren is dead. 1K is dead.”

“Oh, god! Wait. What was Wren doing here?”

“She was with the Iconoclasts,” Penelope interjected. “She tried to kill me.”

“Messed up my goddamn day. That’s for sure,” Webweaver added, and took a drink. “It’s a tragedy of the worst kind. Look, Janice, you and Ron and the rest of the tech and research staff need to install new bio-port modules. Make sure everyone gets the secure ones.”

“I’ll have to send them out,” Janice said. “We can’t have the employees come in. The front of the building took damage in the attack, and there’s electricity all over the place in the dream deck. The place is a wreck...”

After some time, they went to the control room. From there, Webweaver was able to establish a secure line for Penelope to use to contact her family. In this conversation, she chose not to explain the full extent of what was transpiring. Instead, she simply told them that she was going on vacation for a while.

Avoiding the electrical situation and remaining mess in the dream deck, Webweaver took Penelope to the garage where he kept his propulsion craft and excess robot parts.

He handed her a scarf and an old cloak. “Here is a disguise. The best I could come up with. I figure that if I drop you in the Rust Lands, there are a lot of scavenger types, outlanders, dissidents—the occasional Adularian kook. Let’s get you looking like some dusty mechanic or something. From there, you’ll have to lay low and stay outside of the city at large until this all blows over. I’ll find you once I’ve figured this thing out. But you’re going to have to be patient, because it might take a while.”

“What about Termite Hill?” she asked. “Can I go there quietly and check on my family if I need to?”

“It’s risky,” he replied. “Probably too risky. I wouldn’t recommend it.”

While the others continued in their preparations, Penelope rested her eyes. Sitting against a wall in the hangar garage, she fell asleep.

[Friday, Februari 10th]

Almost four hours passed by the time Penelope again opened her eyes. By then, it was time to leave. From a small terminal, Webweaver could see reporters, a fire truck, and some MPD gathering near the front parking lot of the building. Whatever damage the building had taken the previous night, it had not gone unnoticed.

Janice gave Penelope a hug. Webweaver pressed a bag of hard-coined Stanley-bucks into Penelope's hand, seeing as credit could no longer function without her implant. It was quite a bit of money—enough money that to carry it in this form was unusual and somewhat dangerous.

“The money in your bank account is safe,” Webweaver said. “But, I don’t have a way for you to get to it until I sort a few things out. That might be some time.” Then, he pulled the goggles from his head. “Here. Take these with you. It’s dusty in the Rust Lands. You’re going to need ‘em.” He handed them over.

“There’s one more thing,” he continued. He removed his K-Finnigan energy pistol from its holster and gave it to her.

Penelope accepted the pistol, and examined it. “Do you think I’m going to need this?”

“Unfortunately, you might,” he answered. “The Rust Lands can be dangerous.”

“Alright, I’ll take it,” she agreed. “In that case, I’m ready when you are.”

Without another word, they climbed aboard the propulsion craft, started it up, opened the roof hatch, and took off.

An hour into the flight, the blue sun had fully risen into the morning sky. While Webweaver piloted, Penelope flipped on a circuit program of the morning news. Above the dashboard, a hologram projected, and displayed the TKB network logo. There on the Daily Data Dose, an interview with V.P. Candy Artaro replayed from the previous day. Suddenly, the program was cut short by an unexpected development:

“We temporarily interrupt with some BREAKING NEWS!” the famous humanoid-slug news anchor, Simon Slurpe, reported to his wide audience. *“Late last night, in the Onyx District: A single perpetrator, an individual identified via S-drone to be Patrick Puck, previously charged with high theft of a sugar pop soft drink, has now viciously attacked an Archer Piglet’s Pancake House location using what appears to be psychic abilities. His record suggests this location to be the same Archer Piglet’s Pancake House where his original theft took place. The building looks to have suffered great damage, with fires having spread into the street. Authorities and firefighter civic droids rushed onto the scene. The perp has been captured and taken into the custody of Artaro board chairperson, Beatrice Delphonic. There is no comment from the Artaro Corporation at this time.”*

Looking out the front visor of Dr. Webweaver’s propulsion craft, Penelope could see the steel and concrete of the city fade and turn to desert. Soon, they had passed from the Far Shanties through the Southern Burroughs. There was only dust and debris after that. They flew above a wide expanse of sand and rolling dunes. But eventually, structures of mortar and shacks cobbled together from sheet metal and scraps appeared, and Webweaver began to pull the craft to a standstill in the air. Slowly, they descended to a flat stretch of dirt a half-terran outside of a nameless trade post.

There was a thud as they landed in the dirt. When the hatch opened, she could feel the dry wind

immediately as it blew into the craft from outside. Webweaver stood up from the pilot chair.

“You know, they’re going to smear the shit out of your name, Penelope,” Webweaver said. “I don’t want you to be naive about that. The Iconoclasts are gaining ground within Artaro. I have to wonder just how many of them there are. But, Scathe’s tentacles are spreading quickly. Now, I don’t know what the Artaro family is going to think or do about any of this, if anything. Don’t be surprised if the next time you see Candy Artaro on the morning news, she’s condemning you as a villain and traitor.”

Penelope thought for a second, and then responded, “I’ll lay low. I’ll bleach my hair or something. Maybe after some time, I’ll find Myra—I mean, Synthia. I can trust her, and Sneak Lennox, and there are a few others I know. If I’m careful, I might be able to meet them in the Machina Landfill.”

“Perhaps, but be very cautious, no matter what you choose to do. Whatever is happening in Machina, my sense is that this Iconoclast presence isn’t going away. And who knows how people will behave once they start getting nightmares pumped into their heads. You have to be vigilant, and you have to have courage.”

“I will,” Penelope answered, and put the goggles over her eyes. Then, out from her pocket, she pulled a faded brown scarf, which she wrapped around her head and neck. Lastly, she put up the hood of her cloak, and stepped out of the vehicle.

She walked a few paces. But, she decided to turn around. She had to speak to Webweaver one last time. “That dream that I created worked,” she said. “It was transmitted all across the city, and countless men and women dreamt it—a lucid dream, glitched. Some of them will wake up, and they will begin to reason. The truth is never so simple as it is in the tabloid news. I designed my dream to foster reason, and if people can reason, there’s hope. For us, and for them.”

Webweaver listened with an expression of admiration. In this moment, he felt a real respect for her. She was tough.

“Well, then,” Webweaver smiled, “you know truth will light the way.” He exited the hatch and stepped down onto the ground. He walked to Penelope and they shook hands.

She watched as he returned to the ship. There was a deep hum as the door lifted and shut.

The propulsion craft lifted into the air, and left her. Then, there was just the desert. She surveyed the barren surroundings. These were the Rust Lands—the long stretches separating the neglected southern boroughs of Machina from far off Plastipoly in the south. It was a wide, sparsely populated zone. Outlanders and dissidents made small lives here away from the rule of Machina. Non-cybernetic human populations survived by hunting, scavenging, repairing clunky broken machines, and building robots from spare parts. The air here was always thick with dirt. A pack of stray dogs could be seen playing near a trade post in the distance, but beyond that, objects and structures disappeared into the harsh, unsavory atmosphere.

Penelope wondered how long she would be out here. She also wondered what might come of Webweaver for assisting her in leaving. It was hard to discern whether this was the sort of thing that could be resolved through careful negotiation, or if she was doomed to simply survive in the dust forever.

She thought of old Dorothy’s story of that man, Sisyphus. *I push a rock up a hill, only to watch it roll down...so I roll it up again... and it rolls down... on and on in a loop like that forever with no vacations...*

She had no answers, only more questions, as she stared into thick dusty air—like clouds of uncertainty in a desert of waiting. There was a pain in her stomach. But, now was not the time for her to give in to weakness. So, she did the only thing left to do and gathered her resolve. Pushing against the wind, she headed to the trade post, her cloak blowing in the wind behind her.

Supplemental Character Information:

Penelope Curtis:

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

Dr. Thea Wren:

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

Dr. Ariton Webweaver:

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

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]

1K:

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

Ron Verlyn:

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

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. Chaz Scathe:

Class: Ravell
Occupation: Professor of Dream Mechanics, Psychologist and Dream Director at Wardencllyffe Estate
[Eyes: Dark Violet] [Hair: Short, White] [Height: 6'0"]
[Born: 73 D.C.] [Background: Ravell, Pale Grey, from Alchemia]
Note: While Dr. Scathe is from Alchemia, he currently resides north of Machina, at the Wardencllyffe Estate Castle.

Dr. Enoch Clement:

Class: Human Cog
Occupation: Research Scientist at Artaro Labs Chrome Crow
[Eyes: Brown] [Hair: Short Grey w/Goatee] [Height: 6'1"]
[Born: 103 D.C.] [Background: Rosari, Tan Complexion, from Machina]

A Map of West Enon: *This story, **Phantom Visions**, takes place at the Artaro Labs Chrome Crow complex in Machina's Chrome Crow District (northeast Machina.)*

