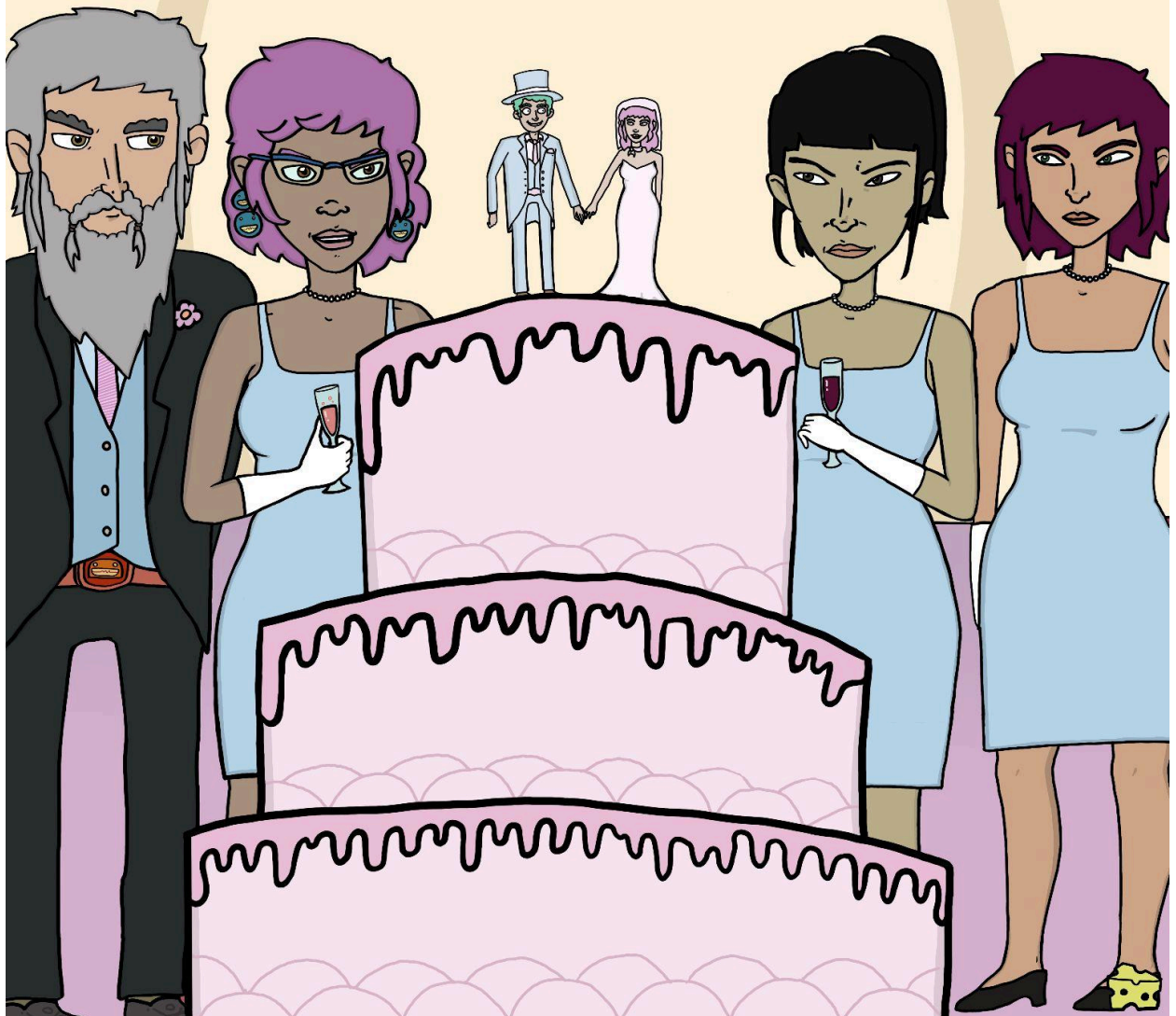


The Crystalline Mythos:

STANLEY AND CANDY

A Short Story
By Teej R.



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(A Short Story)

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[Endel 193 D.C., Eve of the Winter Solstice]

Penelope Curtis

At the front desk of the Artaro Labs building, a package was waiting. Janice had ordered three formal gowns—one for herself, another for Dr. Wren, and the last for Penelope. Penelope stood there patiently as Janice opened the box to reveal the three dresses. Carefully, Janice checked the sizes, making sure which was which, then handed one to Penelope. The gown shimmered silver-blue. She looked up to Janice who handed her a pair of white gloves to go with the outfit.

“I’ll be right back,” Janice said, “I’m gonna go find Wren.”

In the filing closet behind the front desk, they could hear Dr. Webweaver in a very argumentative holo-call with the Head of Dream Operations, Dr. Beatrice Delphonic. Finally, Webweaver was quiet. Opening the closet door, he had a very serious expression on his face.

“Everything alright?” Janice asked Webweaver.

“Let’s just get ready to go,” he answered, impatiently. “Give me a few minutes. I need to change. Probably gonna need to comb my beard.” He walked off quickly. Whatever he had discussed with Delphonic was clearly bothering him.

Today was the eve of the winter solstice. In terms of daylight, it would be the shortest day of the year. At night, the stars would come out, and a great silver star known as Gem would hang beneath the Shattered Moon, prominent, for all to see.

On this celestial evening, a fantastical wedding was to be held. The man of the hour would be none other than the CEO, Stanley Artaro, who was to be joined by his alluring bride, Candy Carmen—soon to be Candy Carmen Artaro. Their union would mark a momentous showcase of power and style for all of the Green Earth to see.

To Penelope’s mind, this wedding was a welcome distraction from the strange mood which had overtaken the company and lab in recent weeks. While short grey days with cold rains and nighttime frosts had become the norm, huge waves of technical issues had begun to overwhelm various departments across the Artaro Corporation. There had been hacks, power issues, stolen money—things of this nature. These were complicated matters. Many of the specifics remained murky, especially to Penelope who wasn’t fully in the know on these kinds of issues.

Nevertheless, it was clear that there had been some kind of internal revolt after the recent removal of the company’s Head of Security, Claude Hubert. Despite his fall from grace, some in his department had remained loyal to him. As a result, many others from the Artaro Security department had been fired for reasons of insubordination. This was causing turmoil, and even spilling out into the press.

In the midst of the corporate tumult, there had been more than a few headaches in the Chrome Crow lab just to keep the Dream Machine and other systems online and working. Yet, even after all of this, the higher-ups at the Artaro HQ Tower were requesting more dream advertisement output from the Chrome Crow crew. But, from everything the lab had heard, Stanley and Candy had remained entirely determined to go on with their very large and public wedding. Against all odds, the show would go on.

“Go get dressed,” Janice told Penelope. “We don’t have that long before we have to go.”

“Right,” Penelope said. “I’ll be right back. I won’t take long.”

Penelope, still wearing her operator suit, headed back to the Dream Deck lockerroom to change out into her new gown. She peeled the green operator gloves from her hands, and placed them on the top shelf of her locker. Below that, she hung her lavender vest, yellow utility belt, and grey rubber bodysuit on hangers. When all that was done, she took a moment to look at her shiny silver-blue dress. Apparently, these dresses had been selected for all the female guests of the wedding. Thinking about it, this made sense. Candy Carmen was, after all, the Head of Fashion at the Artaro Corporation. So, it would only be logical that her wedding would be very classy and particular.

Around the corner, Penelope saw Dr. Thea Wren dressed in her own matching gown. Wren opened her own locker and hung up her own grey operator suit with its blue vest and green utility belt.

Then, Penelope noticed a very strange thing. There was a black leatherbound book sticking out of Wren’s personal bag. In Machina, it was weird to see anybody reading a book. But, this one was particularly odd to see in Wren’s possession. It was a copy of Dr. Scathe’s writings that Myra Jax had described the night she had come to the apartment suite. The title could be read clearly.

Penelope’s eyes widened as thoughts poured through her head. *Iconoclasm and Nihilism by Dr. Chaz Scathe.*

Penelope recognized the name from her conversations with Myra Jax and the Dissidents. Scathe was the guy with the Dream Operation up in his Wardencllyffe Castle in the wildlands, north of Machina.

Why is Thea Wren reading a book by that guy? Penelope wondered.

“Hey, I actually heard about that book,” she told Wren, trying to sound casual.

“Really? This is obscure reading. I wouldn’t have guessed that,” Dr. Wren said. “Yeah, I just had this copy from years ago... an old college boyfriend gave it to me. Anyway, I just thought it would be interesting reading this during my lunch breaks. Would you do me a favor and not tell Dr. Webweaver. He really doesn’t like the guy who wrote it. He’d probably get mad.”

“Oh,” Penelope responded. “That’s fine. I just heard it was an unusual book and that the guy had a philosophy about Dream Operations that was different from the Artaro Corporation’s programs. Just thought it sounded interesting, I guess.” She decided to leave it at that—no reason to mention Myra Jax or anyone’s opinions on Dr. Scathe or his controversial ideas.

“Well, the Dream Operations stuff is just like one chapter,” Wren said, tucking the book back into her bag. “Mostly, it’s just philosophy and psychology. Stuff like that... maybe, we should keep this between us, okay.”

“Yeah, it’s whatever,” Penelope said. “I won’t mention it.”

Wren zipped up her bag and threw it in the locker. She shut the locker with a crash, then turned around again to see Penelope standing there in her fancy gown.

“Ah, you look really good all dressed up,” Wren said, pivoting towards the door. “But, I look

better.”

Certainly, Wren was just joking around. But, then again—it was kind of hard to tell.

A maglev limousine pulled into the Artaro Labs complex’s parking lot. Dr. Webweaver opened the door for Dr. Wren, and Penelope followed. Webweaver, looked mighty dapper in a full tux. Wren, Janice, and Penelope all looked quite classy in their matching blue gowns. 1K, also in a tux, approached the vehicle, but sat in the driver’s seat, placing a driver’s cap on his polycarbonate dome of a head.

“Everyone situated?” He asked. “... I’ll take that as a ‘yes’. All aboard!” The robot seemed quite jovial as the vehicle pulled out of the lot and into the orderly streets of downtown Chrome Chrow.

The ride took a bit longer than usual, as Dr. Webweaver requested they avoid the big teleporter freeways, as he held contrarian opinions on this otherwise boring subject.

“Yeah, no molecular disentanglement for me today,” he told the driver, “I’d prefer to preserve my continuity of consciousness, thank you.”

None of the other passengers particularly cared. Penelope, like most people, had used the freeway teleportation system several times without issue. But, they weren’t running late and a small detour was no problem.

The slightly prolonged drive led them through High Optera, which eventually led into the wealthy northern district of Ploutos. The green meadows of this district were distinct from anything one could find anywhere else in the world, let alone in Machina. The twisting roads were lined with short granite walls, where grassy hills extended for long terrans. There were large healthy trees to be found here. Furthermore, there was wildlife—some of it engineered, some of it imported from the Crystalline Forest regions.

“Look, next to pine trees,” Webweaver said, looking at the view. “Those are spirit elms. They must have had the arborists from Artaro Expeditions division bring a few in from the Crystalline Forest. They grow ‘em here, but they have to spray them for lichens and fungus. They don’t want any of those contagious Adularian spores or algae getting into the air and water.”

“Well, it seems like the people around here can afford ‘em,” Penelope said, observing the Ploutos district's carefully maintained landscapes. Cracking open her window, Penelope lit a Happy-Go-Lucky cigarette.

“Can I get a couple of those for later,” Wren said. “I try not to smoke, but I might need to tonight.”

Penelope laughed lightly, giving her a few cigarettes, which Wren tucked into her side-purse.

“Look up ahead, that tree up there,” Janice said, pointing ahead into the hills.

Penelope looked to see a much taller, larger tree near a walking trail in the distance. Near the top of the tree, she could see utility drones carefully prune and maintain the higher branches.

“Ah, wow,” Thea Wren remarked, seeing the tree. “A Glow Tree. I wonder when they planted that one. I wish we could see at night, when it lights up.”

“I think they brought it in when Stanley inherited the company a few years back,” Janice said. “Maybe we’ll get the chance to see it at night on our way home.”

The maglev limo drove slowly down a hillside road past a series of very prominent ranches and mansion houses. They noticed a large manor known to be owned by Guy Greencap of the Greencap banking family. It appeared as a tall, stone manor building with well-trimmed hedges and rose gardens. Nearby, they could see a second manor building believed to be owned by Guy Greencap’s niece, Cora Greencap, who just so happened to be the Chief Financial Officer of the Artaro Corporation.

“Oh, trust me,” Dr. Webweaver commented. “All those Greencap people will be there at the wedding. Them and the Finnegans and the Leavenworths and all the money people... they wouldn’t miss this for the world.”

Next, they passed the famous Leavenworth Family Estate, and began to see signs of the commotion. Other limousines and personal Artaro Cars lined the roads, many of them parked. In the evening sky, a blimp hung, flying autos and propulsion vehicles scrambled about, searching for places to land. 1K, took the limo into the air, hovered above the vehicles in the road, and cut directly in line to the Grand Artaro Family Manor.

At the gate, a quite stunning android woman worked to check guests and vehicles in for parking. 1K made sure to sound charming, and for this reason, promptly received valet parking services. In a massive driveway, before a mansion that could just as easily be called a castle, the party exited the limousine and overlooked the spectacle.

Quietly, Dr. Webweaver adjusted his blue vest and striped pink tie. As with the women in his group, his wardrobe had been designed to match with other guests. He pulled a small flask of whiskey from his inside jacket pocket and took a swig. “1K, do you have the invitations?”

“Yes, sir,” 1K answered, tapping each person on the wrist so that a holo-ticket could be transferred.

Thea Wren gestured to Dr. Webweaver, who passed her the flask. Clearly, everyone was feeling their nerves as they approached this massive event.

“Wren,” Webweaver said, “you good?”

“Yeah, I’m good,” she said. “Ready to smile and mingle, right?”

Penelope shared some of this uneasy feeling. There seemed to be a lot of very rich people, walking along the front path to the Artaro Manor. A lot of the men, and a few of the women, wore tophats. That was a good way to know the corporate bigwigs and politicians were around. You just had to look out for the tophats.

The main entrance consisted of an enormous pair of bronze double-doors, a very distinguished looking gentleman working as a greeter, and two silent, yet very imposing MPD Patrol Robots standing guard. The extra security help was good to see, considering the recent drama with the Artaro Corporation’s own security division.

Janice took Dr. Webweaver by the arm as they approached the entrance. Likewise, 1K offered an arm to Penelope, and she took it. The doorman checked their holo-tickets, and they were in.

Thea Wren, however, decided to step to the side to place a business call, telling Webweaver she'd meet him inside in a few minutes. Lighting the cigarette she bummed from Penelope, she walked off.

Penelope turned her attention to the huge hall. Here, many ornate seats were set. Webweaver led their party to a designated section on the groom's side. 1K and Penelope were seated a row behind Webweaver and Janice, who in turn sat a row behind Dr. Delphonic and the Drake brothers. She could see Stanley's sister, Lucky, in the front row with her husband, Julius.

With five or six hundred guests seated, the room was filled. While most of the guests were from Machina, some had traveled from the other city-states of Enon, and some had come from across the green globe.

Guests took their seats as the room attempted to get settled. Butlers and service workers, both human and robotic, ran back and forth, providing the highest standard of assistance. Soon, the butlers cleared, however, and the space quieted for the ceremony.

In the front row, Penelope spotted the Mayor, Omega Flink. The large, glowing holographic man sat, quietly among the others—blocking the view for the unfortunate guests behind him. His very presence at this event was a testament of the power of the Artaro Family.

Then, sprang the moody sound of a space organ. Silently, a grey robed Monolithic Cleric came to preside over the wedding ritual. On his chest, he wore the Necker Cube symbol of Machina and a sigil of the Monolith Mainframe Supercomputer. Lowering his hood, a silver mask was revealed.

Everyone in the room turned to the rear, awaiting the arrival of the wedding party. Johnny Delphonic approached, having traveled all the way from Europa to act as best man. At his side, Candy's business rival, Sylvia Moonstone, walked the aisle as maid of high honor. Moonstone was wearing her signature blue lipstick. Unlike Candy, she wasn't wearing a dress. Instead, she took to wearing power suits with sharp shoulders, even at this very formal wedding. Nevertheless, it was a great symbolic gesture of respect to see Moonstone as the maid of honor, especially considering the endless tabloid reports about widening business rifts between herself and the bride.

Then, Stanley entered, escorted down the aisle by his widowed mother, Clementine Artaro. Clementine smiled brightly, and cried as she walked her son down the aisle. Having avoided the spotlight for the past several years, she nevertheless remained beloved in the hearts of the people of Machina. Her long sky-blue hair shined as silky as ever, and though she had a few wrinkles, she had aged quite gracefully.

As Clementine walked along the aisle, she paused briefly to hug her longtime friend, Margot Leavenworth of the Leavenworth oil family. Stanley paused as well, shaking hands with Margot's stout, mustached husband. Artaro's acting Vice President, Reginald Leavenworth, took a moment to congratulate Stanley with the tough sensibility of a distinguished capitalist. While Mr. Leavenworth appeared proud and cordial, however, his quiet indignation at this marriage was known well in elite circles. For him, this wedding meant a serious demotion.

To the audience, this friendliness between families was noteworthy, considering all of the recent business news media coverage about Candy's ascendance at the Artaro Corporation. Effective immediately, Candy was to step into the position of company Vice President, thus completing the merger

of Candy Cosmo Inc. and the larger Artaro Corporation. This would knock Reginald down to the role of a simple investor. Whether he would remain on the Corporate Board at all was yet to be seen.

When the organ sounded again, now with an accompaniment of strings, a large pair of doors opened from the back of the hall. Brilliantly, Candy strode in on the back of a beautiful white unicorn mare.

In the audience, the Artaro Labs Crew sat quietly, in observation of the ceremony.

Janice leaned over to Penelope to make a quiet remark. "I heard through the internal chat forum that Stanley had that horse specially engineered as a gift to the bride."

"Hell of a gift," Penelope whispered in reply.

At this point, a small legion of news drones hovered in close to capture the bride's most treasured moment for all of the world to see. Candy's white dress was elaborate, embroidered with diamonds and twinkling with light. A lavish white headpiece veiled her face and eyes.

When she reached the front of the audience, she was assisted off of the unicorn's back by Stanley. The animal was walked to the side, and attention was turned to the wedding proceedings.

The cleric began to speak. "As the solstice comes forth, our young and gracious President Executive, Stanley Artaro, plants his feet firmly in the soil where his fathers before him built this great city and empire. Nearing twenty years on this earth, he now begins his new life, wedded to the most beautiful and successful creature in all of Machina, and perhaps all of Enon. Let their marriage serve the will of the Monolith Mainframe Supercomputer and bring joy to the hearts of cogs, widgets, and all who observe their stately and royal stature as man and wife. May the respectable Artaro brand live on for centuries to come..."

The Cleric led them through their vows, which went on for some considerable time.

Penelope tried not to shift too much in her chair. Looking to the row in front of her, she could see Webweaver grinding his teeth.

What's going on with him? She thought. Webweaver had kept to himself so tightly the past few weeks. Whatever was going on was approaching its boiling point.

Above the wedding party, a large window opened to display the broken moon, bright in the night sky. Above it, the silver star, Gem, hung in the sky.

"May the gods, and stars, and the might of the algorithms smile upon this union," the Cleric said.

Mr. and Mrs. Stanley Artaro kissed as a united married couple. Behind them, the back wall opened up, presenting an extraordinarily ornate domed ballroom. The wedding band began to play again. This time, the strings were lessened, as the horn section took the lead. The music built in a strong display of triumph and celebration.

"Thank you, cogs, and wonderful guests from elsewhere," Stanley Artaro stated in a booming voice. "It is our great privilege and honor to be here amongst such esteemed guests today. The bride and I now welcome you to join us in the ballroom for the masquerade ball!"

“If you look under your seats,” Candy added, “you’ll find masks awaiting you. Now without further delay, let us celebrate!” The ceilings in the ballroom were so high that designer fireworks were set off as the band’s full ensemble joined in the music.

Penelope looked under her chair, and retrieved a decorative mask. Hers was a feathered black facemask, which she placed over her eyes. Looking to 1K, who sat next to her, she watched as he placed a very flamboyant mask with many colored feathers over his radiant robotic eyes.

In an orderly fashion, the audience proceeded to file into the ballroom. As they did so, butlers were readied with champagne glasses, fine cheeses, sashimi cuts, baguettes, and the like. As there were many aristocratic types among the audience, organized ballroom dancing took form almost instantly. It wasn’t long until Penelope found herself outside smoking.

She meandered about and ate a number of little sandwiches, and spoke to a few people she barely knew, eventually settling at the back patio bar. There, she drank a few cocktails, and passed perhaps an hour. She thought about heading back in, but ended up passing even more time cycling through junk news and hologram memes on her wrist-watch.

“I’ll order what she’s having,” a familiar voice spoke to the bartender.

Penelope looked up to see Candy Artaro standing right there next to her. It was strange to see someone of such celebrity and political prominence so up close. Out of reflex, Penelope stood up from her seat and at once realized that Candy was shorter than she had previously thought. Still, she was very beautiful, especially now in her sleek reception dress. Over her eyes, she wore a small white mask for the masquerade, but pulled it up over her bangs as she sat down at the barstool.

“Excuse me? But, could you take off your mask for a second?” she asked Penelope.

“Sure, yeah,” Penelope said, and removed the black, feathered mask from her eyes.

“You have interesting eyes,” Candy said. “There’s depth in them, and I’m not just saying that. I mean it, and I built my fashion business by noticing such things.”

“Thank you,” Penelope answered, slightly embarrassed. She extended a hand for a shake, “I’m Penelope Curtis. I work for Dr. Webweaver at Artaro Labs Chrome Crow. Congratulations on your wedding. The ceremony was lovely.”

“Yes, I know who you are,” Candy laughed. “You’re the Dream Operator everyone keeps talking about. Your dream adverts are shattering every sales record in the books.”

“Thanks. I’ve been very fortunate, recently.”

“Yes, but does your ambition really end here?” Candy responded. “I think that you have more potential than you realize. Your climb doesn’t have to end at Artaro Labs. There are other opportunities to be had.”

“Oh... yeah, of course. I should be more ambitious,” Penelope commented. Candy Artaro was certainly a bit intimidating. “Sorry, I’m just a little star struck right now. I mean, I sometimes use makeup from Candy Cosmo, and definitely the shampoo. There’s a little holographic snapshot of you on my gene-shampoo bottle.” Penelope smiled and waved like the bottle.

Candy found that funny and laughed. “Ah yes, I know the one.” She pulled the olive out of her cocktail and knocked back the rest of her drink. Then, she placed the olive in her mouth and continued, “Can I ask you a question?”

Penelope nodded, curious.

“How would you like to work at a newer, state-of-the-art Dream Machine—one so powerful it could reach literally millions more dreamers than the one you currently utilize? How would you like to receive a pay raise and receive stock in the company? How would you like to work with our most talented Dream Operations staff ever, and carve a path to the company board?”

“Well... I suppose that sounds amazing.” Penelope answered, almost speechless. “Although, I do like the people I work with.”

“Let’s be honest. Dr. Ariton Webweaver is a bore,” Candy smiled. “Stanley would have fired him already if he weren’t so damn useful with the technology. The truth is, we don’t trust him enough for a project like this.”

“A Dream Machine?”

“Yes. A project of a lifetime.” Candy placed her glass down on the bar and removed herself from her barstool. “Think about it. Stanley sees you as the best candidate for our Operator, and frankly, so do I. I see a bright future for you, without bounds. Just think it over. Now, I’ve got a lot to attend to, but I’m so happy you’re here.” With a flip of her bright bubble-gum hair, Candy strode back to the ballroom.

“Congrats again on your wedding!” Penelope’s last remark fell flat as Candy was already gone. A bit mystified, Penelope downed the rest of her drink.

After a few moments, she decided to go inside to find Dr. Webweaver and the others.

The ballroom party looked to be in full swing. At the center floor, couples waltzed to the sounds of harpsichord. Penelope spotted Dr. Webweaver dancing with Janice. This was a bit of a let down, as Penelope was hoping to talk to him.

At the edge of the dance floor, guests socialized. Penelope could see Dr. Wren, who looked to be fairly out of place. Wren was smoking a thin, extended stick of Pollyanna. With her velvet-gloved hands, she poured a top shelf royal wine imported from Alchemia. She turned to see Penelope, giving her a look of recognition, then proceeded to make her way over.

“Wow, fancy,” Penelope said, commenting on the wine bottle.

“Must be exciting, being the star of the ball,” she scoffed, in an unexpectedly combative tone.

“What?” Penelope replied, confused. “Actually, I don’t feel like I’m too good at these things. I never really know what to say to anyone.”

“From the looks of it, you know exactly the right things to say,” Wren answered. “A year ago, you were some little nothing peasant, and now you’re drinking cocktails with Candy Artaro. She seems like she likes you, by the way.”

“Yeah,” Penelope replied. “She just came up to me and started talking.”

“Tell me, did she mention a new Dream Machine to you? I think she did. I think that she wants you to operate it. That sound correct?”

“She might have mentioned something to that effect.”

“Did she tell you what Dream Machine or who you’d be working for? Do you have any idea what you’d be getting yourself into?” Wren’s questions were pointed and angry.

“No,” Penelope said. “We only talked for a few minutes.”

“They’re trying to work out a deal with the Iconoclast Faction, Penelope.” Wren said. “They’re considering bringing Dr. Scathe back into fold as a Dream Director, maybe even amending Beatrice’s ban on nightmare operations to allow them with certain limits and restrictions.”

“What?” Penelope was a bit shocked. “Is that why Dr. Webweaver was so upset this morning? I don’t want to make nightmares. If that’s the job, I don’t even want it. Beatrice had nightmare use in Dream Operations banned for a reason.”

“Well, now things are changing, and that job should be mine,” Wren said. “Do you have *any* idea how hard I’ve worked as a Dream Operator—how many countless hours of work and study and craft I’ve put in? It should be *me* they ask to operate the new machine, not some fresh-off-the-apple-cart, rookie shit like you.”

This pissed Penelope off a bit. Perhaps she should have taken a step back to calm herself, but instead, she took a step forward. “Look, I just said I don’t want to make nightmares, but if I move up in the company, that’s none of your business. Maybe you should get over yourself, and consider the possibility that someone might be better at your job than you.”

Just like that, wine splashed right in Penelope’s face.

As it did so, she could feel the notes of the music deepen, as time dilated around her. She recoiled slowly, and her eyes lit up a blazing pink. She could feel the traces of purple visus left over in her veins from work. Psychic energy stirred within her.

Wren’s furious scowl slowed in front of her. Above, a large chandelier seemed to swirl and flicker. The crowd turned to Penelope and Wren, in shock. Margot Leavenworth clutched her pearls. Gasps of awe could be heard, deepened and sharpened by Penelope’s widening perception.

Suddenly, Thea Wren was hurled backwards by an unseen force, only to be caught by Dr. Webweaver. Penelope’s telekinesis had suddenly been placed out in the open, for all to see.

With the sensation of Janice grabbing her wrist, Penelope softened towards a state of normalcy, her eyes returning from an eerie white to calm green.

“Okay, I think this would be a good time for us to get out of here,” Janice said.

Penelope quickly followed Janice out through the ceremony hall to the lobby. Behind, Webweaver walked, holding Wren in his arms. Looking back, Penelope could see she was fine, but had fallen pretty hard.

“Here, take this,” Janice said, handing Penelope a handkerchief. “Your nose is bleeding.”

“Oh... this shit, again,” Penelope felt her face only to see blood gather all over the white fabric of her right glove.

The hover limo pulled up to the estate driveway with 1K at the helm. Opening the back door, Webweaver gently placed Dr. Wren in the backseat.

“How many fingers am I holding up?” He asked her.

“You’re a prick,” she answered, and laughed before leaning her head back on the leather seating.

“Okie dokie,” Webweaver replied, slamming the door shut. He lifted his head and looked at Penelope. “I don’t know if it’s the Pollyanna, or if Wren just has her head up her ass for some reason.” With a big sigh, he fixed his coat. “I’ll tell you what, these guys can make sure she gets back alright. I’ll send for the propulsion craft to pick you and I up. I need to talk to you for a minute.”

Penelope took her gloves off, and threw them in a nearby trash can. “Look, I didn’t mean to let the psychic side-effects flare up like that. It was completely involuntary.”

“I know, I know,” Webweaver said.

1K waved as the limo took off, and Penelope and Webweaver were left standing at the edge of the driveway. Walking back up toward the mansion, Webweaver bummed one of Penelope’s cigarettes and lit it up.

“No one’s gonna judge you for that little scene you two pulled in there. As a matter of fact, it probably scored you points with the newlyweds. There’s talk that they’re positioning you for a job at the fancy new Dream Machine.”

“Yeah, Candy Artaro approached me about it earlier.”

“No wonder Wren flipped out on you like that. She’s been vying for that job since before either of us were aware it even existed. But, I have to tell you... and I’m serious when I say this...you can’t take the job.”

Penelope didn't say anything. In one sense, this information was a relief to hear, though she also wondered what impact declining this offer might have.

“At the big Nickelpoint Mountain summit,” Webweaver continued, “I sort of bumped into the man building the Wardenclyyfe Dream Operation. Dr. Chaz Scathe. The Iconoclast. He’s a nutcase, Penelope, and you don’t want to work for him. He built his Dream Machine outside of the company and Machina, against all protocols. He’s planning to use fucking *nightmares* in the Dream Machine to control the public. Artaro is going down a dark path, here—and I don’t think you or I, or anyone from Artaro Labs, should be part of it.”

Penelope was feeling really freaked out. “Yeah, don’t worry,” Penelope said. “I agree with you. That sounds fucked up. How could something like this even happen?”

“From what I can tell, it’s complicated. Stanley was trying to sell a Dream Machine to the Mars

Dynasty in Alchemia at the summit,” Webweaver said. “Alchemia’s population is Ravell though. They don’t dream easily like humans, so the deal fell flat. He ended up selling a machine to the Moonstone Corporation instead. But, later, after the summit apparently, the Archon leadership of Alchemia’s sister-city, Arcanica, expressed some interest. Dr. Scathe has connections all over the place, with the Arcanicans, and with gangs inside of Machina, and with bad actors within the company. It’s a mess.”

Penelope knew enough about Arcanica to know it was a scary place. The Ravell of that city-state hated humans and subjugated them. Furthermore, they were always causing turmoil with the Adularians.

“Anyway, after the summit, the Arcanicans convinced Stanley to work with the Iconoclast Faction in exchange for their business,” Webweaver said. “At least, that’s my understanding as of now. But, the Arcanicans wanted policies that allow for nightmares, and they want Artaro to sign off on those policies as they expand Dream Operations across Enon.”

“So they want Dream Operators like me to craft literal nightmares and to broadcast them like their adverts?” Penelope asked. This idea sounded terrible to her.

“It’s not even possible,” Webweaver said. “As a Dream Operator, you can’t just craft nightmares all day. You’ll go insane. There have been studies, and the results were very clear. Crafting nightmares *is a nightmare*. Plus, yeah, it’s bad for the dreaming public. It’s like a thousand disasters all rolled into one.”

Penelope thought for a few moments about what Webweaver was telling her.

“Okay, so, what in the hell are we going to do?”

Webweaver paced for a minute, “I don’t know. I’ve been trying to negotiate something with Beatrice, but she’s giving me the runaround. She’s the one who banned nightmares in the first place, but she seems to only care about the bottom line. Thinking about it has been making me sick to my stomach. The other Dream Directors, those Drake goons—they won’t mind this shift to nightmares at all. They’re too detached to care about the ethics of it. They’ll do whatever HQ asks without hesitation. I don’t know who’s left to turn to.”

“Actually, I might know someone,” Penelope replied. “This woman, Myra Jax. She’s one of those anti-corporate Dissidents from Termite Hill. She’s got cybernetic optics, and this whole virtual plug-in installation in the back of a noodle bar. Anyway, she came to my apartment, and told me some things. She says she used to know you—that she worked for Artaro as a Dream Director.”

“That’s crazy. The only other Dream Machine was—”

“Optera Labs,” Penelope said, “...before it burnt down.”

“Synthia?” Webweaver puzzled. “So, she really did fake her death. I received communications about this years ago, though she never gave me an alias. I didn’t know what to think back then.”

“She calls herself Myra Jax. She’s been hiding out in Termite Hill and around the Machina Landfill with Dissident groups that operate there. She has a plan for this.”

Webweaver considered this for a minute.

“If we worked with Synthia against Scathe, we’d effectively be bypassing upper management. That’s twenty-ninth level stuff—at least! It’d be a breach of my clearance. We could get thrown in a meat

grinder for that!”

“What’s the alternative?” Penelope asked.

“That’s a good point,” Dr. Webweaver said, thinking.

That night, once Penelope had been dropped off at the Live-in Suites, she lay next to Grim in bed. After a long day of oil painting and attempting to schedule more art exhibitions, he was sleeping soundly.

Looking up at her ceiling, Penelope thought about all the company drama. Over time, her thoughts turned to the emerging dangers of the Iconoclast Faction. In all truth, she didn’t know all that much about them. She did know a tidbit about the Wardencllyffe Castle Estate where they operated from, however. It was a historical structure with a lot of history. Penelope recalled from her school days that in the Engines Era, the company’s founder, Winston Artaro, used to live there. Maybe it had been sold after that. Penelope wasn’t sure.

Then, she thought of Thea Wren at the lab that morning, hiding Dr. Scathe’s book in her locker. Penelope never really considered that someone like Wren might actually believe in this nightmare talk. But, it was also possible that Wren just wanted the job for reasons around status. Penelope wasn’t sure, exactly.

Previously, Penelope had rejected the idea of creating any off-the-books dreams for broadcast. But now, she quietly thought through the various steps that would go into such a plan.

Maybe Myra Jax (or Synthia as Dr. Webweaver had referred to her) had been right all along. Penelope could make a dream, or a series of dreams, designed to awaken people to the realities of Dream Operations. This was a plan of action—one which might actually help protect people from the new threat of manufactured nightmares.

It was strange enough to understand how corporations pumped advertisements into dreams. But, these new developments were something altogether darker. Like Webweaver before, Penelope began to feel anger at the situation.

Looking at her wrist-watch, she decided to order a couple of led shield sleep caps from the Artaro Store Catalogue. It was very late, but drone deliveries were open twenty-four hours, and she could probably get the sleep caps delivered in a half-hour or so. That would help her rest a bit easier. Just to imagine the possibility of nightmare signals flying through skies like radio waves, Penelope thought it best to stay on the safe side.

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]

Stanley Artaro:

Class: Human Cog
Occupation: President Executive of the Artaro Corporation
[Eyes: Turquoise, Hints of Pink, Uniquely Captivating Eyes]
[Hair: Aquamarine Green] [Height: 5'10"]
[Born: 173 D.C.] [Background: New Worlder, Light Complexion, from Machina]

Candy Carmen Artaro:

Class: Human Cog
Occupation: V.P. of the Artaro Corporation, Head of Fashion (Candy Cosmo, Inc.)
[Eyes: Blue] [Hair: Pink] [Height: 5'5"]
[Born: 169 D.C.] [Background: New Worlder, Light Complexion, from Machina]

1K:

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

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]

Mayor Omega Flink:

Class: Hologram
Occupation: Mayor of Machina
[Eyes: Glowing White] [Hair: Bald with White Mustache] [Height: Fluctuates, Tall]
[Born: Unknown] [Background: Unknown, Thought to be piloted by a Human Cog in Machina]

Reginald Leavenworth:

Class: Human Cog
Occupation: CEO of the Old Leavenworth Company, Former V.P. of the Artaro Corporation

[Eyes: Golden Brown] [Hair: Light Brown] [Height: 5' 8"]
[Born: 115 D.C.] [Background: New Worlder, Light Complexion, from Machina]

Relevant Timeline Notes:

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

| | | |
|-------------------|---|---|
| Artarus 193 D.C.- | Friday, Artarus 30th- | Penelope uses the Dream Machine to create her first dream advert. During this process, she achieves a lucidity rating of over 99.9%. |
| Octus 193 D.C.- | | Penelope settles into her new job and career. Grim continues work as a Street Sweep. |
| Oakus 193 D.C.- | Thursday, Oakus 14th- Friday, Oakas 20th- Monday, Oakus 21st- | Penelope displays more improvement in dream advert creation. Grim's First Art Exhibition. Grim begins the process of moving into Penelope's apartment suite. |
| Bluumon 193 D.C. | | Dream Advertisement production continues to ramp up. |
| Samui 193 D.C.- | | Dr. Webweaver attends the Summit at Nickelpoint Mountain. Dr. Chaz Scathe reveals his new Dream Operation. Artaro sells a Dream Machine to the Moonstone Corporation. |
| Endel 193 D.C.- | Eve of the Winter Solstice- | The Chrome Crow Lab Crew attend the Artaro Family Wedding. Stanley and Candy Artaro are wedded, company merger complete. |

A Map of West Enon: This story, *Stanley and Candy*, takes place mostly at a mansion in Ploutos, which is located in northwest Machina.

