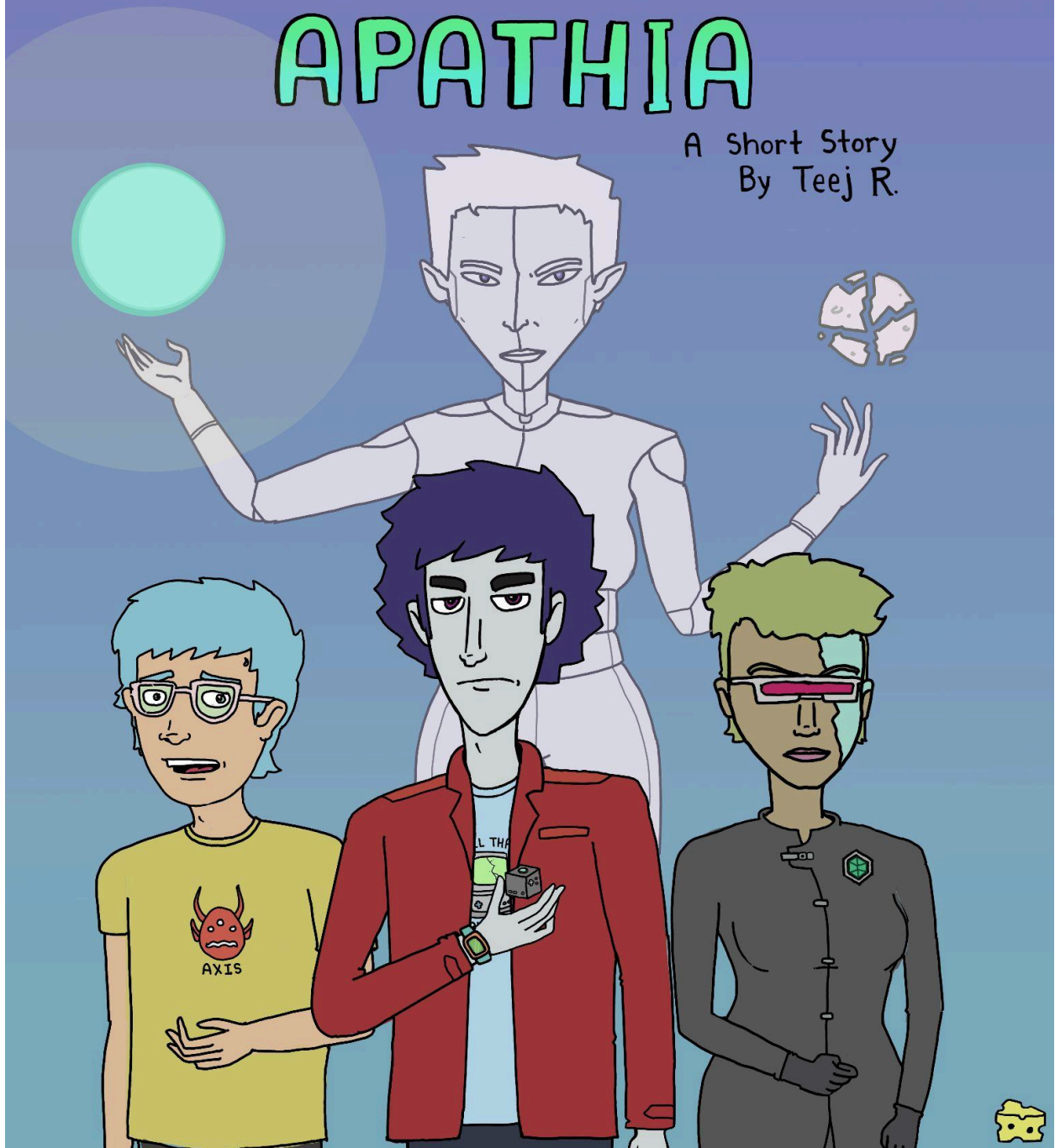


The Crystalline Mythos:

LOST IN APATHIA

A Short Story
By Teej R.



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(A Short Story)

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(Vol. 2 Pt. 3 of the “*Dream Operations*” Collection)

*While this story takes place after the tale, **The Artaro Life**, it can be read as a standalone piece. As Penelope begins her first day as a Dream Operator at the Artaro Corporation, this story shifts the perspective to Grim. The narrative follows Grim as his normal day is derailed by the chance sighting of an old acquaintance... someone who Grim, perhaps foolishly, tries to help...*

[Artarus 8th, 193 D.C.]

“In the new landscapes of mechanized society, luck lives on the head of a pin. Those who fail and those who succeed are one, connected by the grand algorithm of nature. The unfolding of the universe, which has presented us with technological modernity, now asks us for its trust. Only in the careful balancing of all scales, can we bring about a new universal utopia. This is why we must trust the designs of a new Operating System. Diama—she who will guide us.”

—The First Cleric, From “The Purple Book” (Monolithicist Religious Text)

Grim Glitchfield sat on the modern orange leather sofa of Penelope’s new apartment suite. While Penelope had already left for her first day of work at the Artaro Corporation, Grim’s day hadn’t yet begun. In front of him, a mug of green tea rested on a coaster on a clear top coffee table. In the reflection of the table’s glass, he could see his own face. As usual, he appeared pale and grey, with deep set fuschia eyes. His breakfast earlier this morning had left him feeling full and tired, and now he was having to convince himself to get the day going.

Penelope’s canary yellow Artaro Minibot, Douglas, entered the livingroom to find Grim looking lost in thought with his tea in hand.

“You just gonna hang out here all morning?” the robot asked in a sort of way that suggested he’d prefer that Grim left now. “I have to vacuum and dust and sweep and mop today... and I like to listen to my songs while I do that.”

“Okay... well, don’t let me get in your way,” Grim answered. “Whatever you need to do, bud. I’m gonna get out of here, so you don’t have to worry. You can have the whole place to yourself.”

Looking at his watch, Grim found his work schedule for the Apathia Street Sweep Company and quickly noticed a vacant shift available. After a moment’s thought, he decided he could probably use the extra money. The company garage was located in central Apathia so Grim would have to take the Maglev or an Artaro-Taxi to get there. After a moment of contemplation, he settled on the taxi, and in two minutes an automated car showed up at the door. While it arrived on wheels, once Grim was in his seat, the vehicle reconfigured into flight mode and took off into the skies towards Apathia.

Rather than getting dropped off at work straight away, he went home and checked on his little pug dog, Rip. He found the dog sleeping, and woke him up with a pat on the head.

The neighbor, who had been dogsitting, left a note which said that Rip had been taken for a walk. Grim noticed that the neighbor had been eating lunch in his apartment and leaving trash on the small kitchen counter. He decided to send the guy some money for the help using a program on his watch, and made sure to include a gentle request to throw all food trash in the garbage can in the future.

After a few minutes of straightening up the apartment, Grim locked the place up, and left for the company garage to pick up his street sweep. While the street sweeps were capable of driverless pickup, he still needed to check in with the manager’s office.

When he arrived, the managers were eating sandwiches and gawking at holographic videos of people competitively fighting in robot mech suits. The managers said hi, and then went back to what they were doing. It was almost like nobody around this place did any work anymore. The robots and driverless vehicles seemed to take care of everything, and most of the remaining human employees simply tried to look busy—the managers didn't even bother trying to do that anymore. Even in the course of the past year or two, this job had grown much weirder. The automations had almost become as numerous as the regulations to maintain a non-robot workforce. Grim never complained, but he did recognize a certain absurdity in all of it, as well as a quality of alienation, which could be difficult to describe.

Throwing on a work shirt under his red jacket, he bought a few snacks from an overly talkative office vending machine. With a green Flurpe drink, some cheese crackers, and a pack of Emoti-Gum in hand, he headed for his assigned street sweep vehicle.

Once on the road, he could relax a bit, while his street sweep drove and performed its cleaning functions along the east end of Machina's large and hectic Apathia District. The entirety of the process was automated, but in order to satisfy policies an employee had to remain present in some unknown fraction of the street sweep fleet.

Grim's only real job was to make sure nothing went wrong. For this reason, he avoided sleeping during work, usually trying to maintain at least some level of general alertness. Today, he had decided to continue listening to a meditation program on the dashboard holo-system. The deep professorial voice in the program covered a number of topics. Currently, the subject of the audio was the importance of being useful to others. It was an ironic topic, because sitting in the seat of this robot-like vehicle, Grim didn't feel useful to anyone—he was simply logging hours and getting paid.

As street sweep continued along the roadside, Grim observed a few plug-in interspace cafes, a laundromat, an android brothel, a vending machine mall, and a bunch of other random businesses. Dense crowds of city people walked along sidewalks and across busy intersections. Robots and androids walked amongst them, as metallic drones scurried in the air. As the Apathia District buzzed in its typical, hectic way, Grim observed slime and muck being washed from its gutters. For a while, he lost himself in the spinning motions of the street sweep's mop-like appendages as the vehicle hosed and buffed the terrain.

Eventually, the meditation class on the dash speaker came to a section about helping others.

Kind souls are all around us, the meditation guru said. You only have to seek them out. The best way to find kindness is to pay attention, and help those who need it.

At this point, Grim was getting a bit bored with the program. Instead he watched the buildings that the vehicle passed. The route had led him into the outer parking lot of the local general hospital. His eyes drifted to the many glass doors at the building's main entrance.

A sudden surprise hit him as he noticed someone immediately outside of those doors. He knew this person—it was his old coworker, Patrick Puck.

Grim's eyesight was pretty good, one of the few gifts from his mother's Ravell side of the family, and from this distance, he could see Puck clearly.

There he was in a wheelchair looking drained and pale. Puck cleaned his pair of rimmed glasses and placed them again on his face—the thick lenses made him look like he had big bug eyes. His powder blue hair was a complete mess. This was a guy who needed a hairbrush desperately. He was wearing an

old worn t-shirt. It became apparent that there were blood spots on his shirt near the shoulders near the back.

Grim considered ignoring the situation, but the meditation class on the loudspeaker kept going on about the importance of helping people. Without further thought, he switched to manual mode and drove into the main parking lot.

“Screw it,” he said to himself, as he pulled into a compact parking space.

A smiling notification lit up the dash and cutely read a short message:

Oops! The street sweep has ceased its function. If a malfunction has occurred, please promptly log it in our system. Work mode has ENDED. Sweep fleet vehicle unit will remain on STANDBY. Okie Dokie, employee 404-A, GRIM GLITCHFIELD. Best luck, OKAY.

The side doors lifted, and Grim exited into the parking lot.

As Grim walked to Puck, he was reminded of his old coworker’s assigned spinal Blodlek Leech. What a terrible thing it was. After an unfortunate run in with a Patrol Robot concerning the high theft of an Orange Sugar Pop soft drink, Puck had been ordered to place a large leech on his back some unspecified amount of time. The strange parasite had been hideous, and for months Puck had been forced to continue his work and life while it clawed and sucked at the space between his shoulder blades.

“Hey Puck!” Grim shouted and waved his hands in the air.

Puck sprung to attention as Grim approached.

“Oh, hey? Grim...” Puck seemed a bit battled. “Did you come to check up on me? How’d you know I was here?”

“Sorry, Puck, but not really, no,” Grim said. “I was just driving by the hospital, doing my sweeping route, and I saw you, and I thought you looked like you could maybe use some help. I had no idea you were at the hospital.”

“Wow, alright... yeah,” Puck said. “I guess you’re right. I’m having kind of a tough day if you could believe it.”

“Oh don’t worry, I can definitely believe it,” Grim said. “Are you bleeding? Your shirt is all fucked up.”

“Today, they finally detached the Blodlek Leech from my spinal column for final processing. So, the good news is that it’s all finished now... I don’t know how much more of that I could have handled... it wasn’t beginning to drive me crazy. Anyway, they gave me painkillers so I’m a bit out of it right now. But wow, you showed up right in time. I guess I had luck on my side for a change.”

Grim thought about the situation for a moment, and decided he better help get Puck home. The truth was, even though he had worked with the guy at his old job, he didn’t really know Puck very well. Even so, he couldn’t just leave him here. Hopefully, he didn’t live too far.

“Alright, man,” Grim said, “I’ll tell you what—I’m gonna help you get back to wherever it is that you’re staying these days.”

“Ah, thanks, Grim. That’d be great. I really appreciate the generosity,” he said. “There aren’t enough people like that in the world these days. Okay, you probably need some directions. I live up in the Inferno High-Rise, the big tall ugly one. You know where that is? It’s near the northeast end.”

Grim knew the spot. It meant that Puck lived a bit closer to West Onyx. That made sense. Penelope had explained to Grim a few times how Puck used to come to Archer Piglet’s Pancake House (in West Onyx) on an almost daily basis. So, while neither Grim nor his girlfriend were very close to Puck, they both knew him a little bit and they were both used to seeing him around.

“Oh, yeah, okay the high-rise,” Grim said. “That’s interesting, and not far at all. I actually live just a few terrans south of you...”

“I remember,” Puck said. “You told me about it when you were moving—when you were getting ready to quit at the fishery. I was a bit bummed you never wanted to hang out.”

Rather than continuing with the conversation, Grim decided to help Puck get up.

“You have to leave this here, right?” Grim said, referring to the hospital wheelchair.

“Careful,” Puck said, wincing as he stood up. “My back is still a bit sensitive. It’s the dang bite points from the leech’s sucker teeth. The pain medication isn’t really doing its job.”

Once Puck was standing, Grim did some quick thinking and ended his work shift through the work app on his watch. This triggered the street sweep vehicle to depart for the company garage. With that done, he decided to order his second Artaro-Taxi of the day.

They walked out towards the taxi’s arrival point, and waited for a short time. It took only a moment for the taxi to pull up, and the ride to the Inferno High-Rise Building only took a few more minutes.

Tinny speakers hummed soft music as they rode up the old elevator to Puck’s studio apartment on the 13th floor of the High-Rise. Entering the small living space, it became apparent how compact and uncomfortable it was—much more cramped than Grim’s place—and his apartment was nothing special. Looking at Puck’s apartment, it couldn’t have been more than 10 square feet. It had a tiny adjoining bathroom and a very small kitchenette with a minifridge and no stove, but that was it. There were no closets and only one window which looked east towards the many plastic-metal and brick buildings of Machina’s Onyx District.

Grim held back any comments, but to him it looked a bit depressing. It was basically just a twin bed, a dresser, a lot of random electronics, a bunch of scattered virtual game cartridges and hologram-magazines, a big pile of dirty laundry, and way too many old food wrappers.

While Puck went in to clean up, Grim decided to just wait near the door in the hallway. The first thing Puck did was tear off his shirt. As was to be expected, his skinny back was covered in circular red leech bites. While there were a few bandages, much of the damage was left uncovered.

“Okay, so are you good then?” Grim said, thinking it might be a good time to part ways. “If you need anything else, just let me know, otherwise I might get—”

“Yeah thanks!” Puck blurted out. “You can go with me to my Wellness Cleanse. I have to go to it,

so you can go with me.”

“...Oh...uh...sure thing.” Grim said.

Grim had never seen or experienced a wellness cleanse, but he had heard of them. They were something that was recommended for people who suffered an illness or an injury, but also for people who had lost a loved one or who were experiencing psychological problems. Sometimes the wellness cleanses were voluntary, and other times they were mandatory. Either way, they had to be approved by a doctor or specialist of some kind.

The least he could do was accompany Puck to the nearest Monolithicist Temple. From a holo-map he could see the nearest temple was about six blocks west.

“You cool with walking there?” he asked. “If not, I could order another taxi.”

“No it’s fine, let’s just walk,” Puck answered.

They walked west on a big business street called Purple Book Road, named after the Monolithicist text. While copies of the Purple Book were usually reserved for important institutional spaces such as temples and government buildings, most people were aware of the book’s significance.

While many of the buildings here were related to business, they found themselves walking past a number of institutional buildings. First, there was the Apathia Cartridge and Minidisk Library, followed by the much smaller Apathia Adularian Monastery & Embassy. Those were followed by the Artaro Robotics Historical Museum. It wasn’t until they had walked some distance along these locations that they spotted the building they were looking for. Finally, they stood before a large unpainted concrete building in the shape of a cube. A stone plaque read:

*Apathia Monolithicist Temple of the Cube
Dedicated to Nikolai Trivium
Mayor of Machina (136 D.C. to 140 D.C.)*

As Grim and Puck ascended a grey staircase to the front of the structure, two large stone doors glided open exposing a darkly lit front lobby. Once inside, they noticed two silent robed clerics standing at the sides of a wide rectangular entrance to a much larger main sanctum. The guards were masked and displayed no acknowledgment of Grim and Puck’s movements or presence within the building.

Once in the sanctum, Grim and Puck were quickly directed to a defined waiting area with an entrance scanner and metal detector. As they passed this barrier, small drones flew down and imaged their faces, as larger machines performed advanced x-rays and other various scans. Some of these procedures were about security, while others were related to the wellness cleanse processes which occurred in this place.

Across the wide space, they could see a number of Monolithic Clerics. Some wore masks, standing solemnly, while others wore no masks and seemed to be performing various functions and working. At the back of the sanctum, staircases and elevators lead several floors up to strange and ambiguous government offices.

“I see you there,” a voice said.

They turned to see a number of clerics in the dim space behind them. Grim felt confused. But

after a moment, one of the figures approached. It was a woman in a grey government suit with gloved hands. Over her eyes, she wore a set of advanced eyewear—a kind of visor which glowed soft red. Part of her face, on the left side, looked like it had been replaced with carbon plating, perhaps to cover cybernetics alterations of some kind. Despite all this, she had an inviting, calm demeanor.

“One voluntary visit...” she remarked, glancing at Grim. She then turned her gaze to Puck, and said, “—and one mandatory.”

Grim could see Puck’s posture change as she said this. It was as if he had been pulled instantly into a state of acute hyperalertness. His hands appeared to be shaking.

“I came for a wellness cleanse,” Puck said. “The hospital... uh... requested that I come here. So, I’m here. Is that okay?”

“Yes, that’s right. Very good,” she said. “I’m Cleric Mercury and I will be guiding you on your visit today. I serve at the will of the High Clerics—that means High Cleric Steel, High Cleric Trivium, and the others of the Necker Cube Table—as all of us of the Monolithic Order, I follow the will of the algorithm, and the wisdom of the Diamo Operating System.”

“Uh... okay,” Puck said, noticeably uncomfortable.

A second cleric approached. This one was a bald man, who was addressed as Cleric Hammer.

“The personal sanctums are ready for visitation,” Hammer said, addressing Cleric Mercury.

“Very well,” she responded. “Then, we are prepared for the wellness cleanses.”

Cleric Mercury led Grim to the first doorway, while Cleric Hammer led Puck to the second. Grim’s door led to a sort of corridor with a moving tread floor—one which slowly led in the direction of a larger circular hall. Along the way, Grim was subject to additional scans, but this time, with data projected in the air regarding his health, status, and determinations regarding his mental health and “neural configuration” readings.

It was now becoming clear that Grim was set to undergo his own “voluntary” wellness cleanse. He had not indicated that he wanted one, and now that he had come this far, he didn’t feel like he had much of a choice. At least, if he did decide to bail, things might have become rather difficult and awkward in a way he didn’t feel particularly prepared to deal with.

“The Diamo Operating System analyses and evaluates every individual who comes into our sanctum,” Cleric Mercury explained. “Looks like you’re Half-Ravell, but surprisingly you can still experience dreams. That’s rare in anyone with Ravell DNA. Our system looks to your DNA, perhaps not with the same rigor as Ravell technicians in Alchemia, but still with much curiosity. We seek data for the algorithms to better serve you, so that Machina as a home and city-state may better align with you as an organism within its grand complexity. Tell us, do you dream regularly?”

“No, I dream only rarely,” Grim said, “and I can hardly remember them.”

“Let’s see, it says here you experience seasonal depression... also rare in Ravell. Your intelligence readings are relatively high... but you may suffer motivational issues.”

“Yeah, that all sounds about right,” Grim replied.

Through a dark window across the corridor's far wall, Grim could see Puck moving through a process similar to his own—only Puck's scans seemed much more intensive with electric red lights circulating around him.

“What's happening over there?” Grim asked, instinctively.

“Theta Wave analysis, it looks like,” the Cleric said. “Your friend Patrick may have been exposed to unknown theta signals, likely in the north of the city. There is also a chance that there is something anomalous about his neural signature scans. It isn't clear yet, and that's all I'm permitted to say.”

Grim attempted to watch what was happening, but the tread floor continued to move and distanced him from the observation window until it was impossible to see anything.

In the air, closer to Grim, holograms now displayed conclusions regarding Grim's health, social status, mental fitness, and broad interests according to the algorithms.

“Okay, let's do a few notes on your scans...” Cleric Mercury said. “It looks like you have the brain of an unusually lucky person. We can see that from the way your cognition processes stimuli. Perhaps, in your case, the old saying, *whatever doesn't kill you can only make you stronger*, might actually be true.”

“How the hell could you know that from a brain scan?” Grim asked.

At this point, Cleric Mercury stopped. “I cannot accompany you into the personal sanctum,” she said. “When you get there, you'll be able to establish contact from the control cube at the central console.”

As Grim approached the personal sanctum, he couldn't help but wonder what the hell the Cleric was talking about. But, soon the Cleric was out of sight. He was alone in a large circular space with high ceilings, and a single central console. Atop the console he spotted a dark grey plastic cube with various buttons and lights. This must have been the control cube that the Cleric mentioned.

Grim took time to very carefully dislodge the cube from the console. Holding it in his hands, it felt solid, heavier than it appeared. He puzzled over the correct way to hold it, considering the placement of its buttons, dials, and a small display. Eventually, he attempted to use it. Pressing a large grey button with his right thumb, synthetic tones chimed. Digitized light ignited, quickly moving all throughout the space of sanctum. Grim couldn't help but feel somewhat overtaken by the power of the system booting up.

“Hello, user, Grim Glitchfield,” a tinny female voice said, emerging from garbled noise.

It took a few moments of loading, but eventually the computerized entity known as Diama arrived. She appeared as a woman built entirely of virtual, monochromatic light. Her pale, almond shaped eyes were strong and sharp. Her hair was short and icy. She was clothed in a white bodysuit, mechanical in its design.

“I transmit now from the Monolithic Mainframe of the Artaro HQ Tower, where dreams and technology collide,” she said, her voice now holding more depth and power. “Like a stream diverted from an ocean of quantum-digital data, I have come to you to bring you wellness.”

Grim had seen Diama many times before, governing interspace in gigantic hologram form, or in the print design of Monolithic Government propaganda. He knew her likeness well, but had never actually spoken to her one on one. The opportunity had simply never come up before.

“Thanks. It’s good to meet you, in person, I mean,” he said.

“I will begin with a few remarks on the course of your life,” Diama stated very plainly. “You were born in the year 165, a product of artificial development, what in common parlance is referred to as a bag birth. Your mother was Ravell, an Interior Designer for the Government of the Mars Dynasty. Your father was a butcher shop owner, beloved by Machina locals until his unfortunate cardiac failure. Even while he was alive, he worked constantly, and so you were raised by your grandparents. But they too worked without ceasing and so you grew up in their pawn shop and floral stand, and only saw your mother on special occasions. Still to this day you wonder why she elected to bring you into the world only to then play such a marginal role in raising you. You also wonder why a Ravell of Alchemia would choose a human partner from Machina only to leave him. You were caught in strange circumstances growing up, Grim.”

“Yeah, you hit the nail on the head, I suppose,” Grim said. “Where are you going with this?”

“You went to public school, and interestingly, to art school,” Diama continued. “But you’ve only used your education for small art installation gigs and personal oil painting projects. In terms of business or career, you’ve fallen into factory lines and gig work and countless other meaningless traps. You’ve kept your Cogship paid for and intact, only with the help of family, while you’ve spent your personal income on musical equipment, collectible cartridges, and sneakers. You are highly creative, but not well motivated.”

“Wow, well... thanks for that...” Grim wasn’t sure if he was enjoying this process anymore.

“Your life does indeed have purpose, however, I must surmise. For one, you’re falling in love, in a way you haven’t experienced in past relationships. Penelope Curtis is a noteworthy young woman. Our system, as well as the Artaro Corporation, has had an eye on her for a little while now. I tell you now, in guidance and in good faith, you will not be able to keep up. You must look out for her, but her path will always be beyond you.”

“I don’t know exactly how to respond to that, but okay,” Grim said, trying to process this information.

“As the Cleric has touched on, your soul is imbued with an inherent luck and value. I can detect such realities. You don’t feel it or recognize it, but you have the heart of a hero.”

“What?” Grim said, “That doesn’t even make any sense.”

In each of Diama’s ghostly hands, holographic forms fizzled and shaped as if they sprung from cosmic creation. Above her right hand, a spherical depiction of the blue sun lit bright, emitting a radius of palpable warmth. In contrast, the cold broken rock of the shattered moon rotated slowly above the palm of her left hand. Diama now appeared not as an assistant in interspace, but as a sort of computerized god.

“Sometimes, the Earth places favor in the souls of some selected few, for reasons unknown... unknown to my algorithms... it is all opaque to me,” Diama said. “Like the sun and moon, I can only observe this Green World.”

Grim remembered a clover leaf he had once found on the ground outside the Easy Breezy Fishery, back when he worked there, near the ocean, west of Machina. He wondered to himself if that instance and this one held some connection. There had only been a feeling then, one that he had mostly ignored. It was a feeling of strange significance, though he could not understand it at the time.

Now a grid and model of Machina formed before Diama. She looked down upon its many skyscrapers, roadways, and electrical towers—her cold white eyes calculating from the skies.

“There is a danger coming to Machina,” Diama said. “Theta signals have spread across Optera as Iconoclast Militias have unleashed spider attacks within city limits. Dark ecological contamination zones have appeared in various locations in the city and across the lands of Enon. Black goo full of microscopic arachnoidal forms. The outbreaks have led to an array of mutations in humans, flora, and fauna. Host-Zombie attacks have been responsible for over three hundred deaths in the past five years alone. The news reports have been suppressed by corporate actors, but you’ve seen them nonetheless.”

“I read a few articles about, yes, but I don’t keep up with it that closely,” he attempted to clarify.

“There are people behind these occurrences,” Diama said. “It is unknown to my system who is the prime mover of this broad attack, but there is much evidence that Iconoclast Faction Militias are involved. I believe you will play a role in all of this. My algorithms see it.”

Grim now found himself anxiously beginning to bargain with the hologram. “Very sorry, but if it’s all the same to you, I’d prefer not to get involved in all that,” he said. “I really just want to live my life, drive my street sweep, and live in peace, if that’s okay with you, I mean.”

“It will take time for you to understand, likely several years. In the meantime, your luck will serve you well. Your oil paintings will serve you well. Find time to keep working on them. That is key.”

“Okay, that I can do,” Grim said, “but if we can go back to the zombie and spider thing for a second—”

“I have said what I have meant to say. It is time for wellness,” the Diama O.S. interrupted.

Grim felt a small machine prick his finger, as a feeling of calm overtook him. The next thing he knew, a grey cushioned chair had emerged from the floor, and he sat down.

“Things are going to change for you, Grim, by an appreciable degree,” Diama said, in a soothing voice. “There is nothing you can do to avoid it. Penelope will help you, though. You will see.”

Synthetic tones again filled the space of the personal sanctum, as Diama dematerialized and the wellness cleanse moved to the next phase. All at once, the lighting of the sanctum softened and the temperature of the air noticeably dropped. For the next several minutes, Grim sat with a cool head, and a strange sense of restedness.

Eventually, an exit light appeared above a previously unseen door. When Grim stood up, he felt like he had just awakened from a long nap. He took a moment to adjust his clothes and yawn, then took the exit to wherever it would lead.

Naturally, it led to a small gift shop and a wide set of corridors at the edge of the building where visitors could reconvene or find the main exits. Noticing that Puck had not yet emerged from his own wellness cleanse, Grim decided to browse the gift shop.

Quietly, he glanced at the pricey copies of the Purple Book, the primary text of Monolithicism authored by an unknown masked figure known as the First Cleric. One could also buy certain ceremonial masks, but they were very expensive. For a more reasonable price, you could get a Machina citi-state flag—fashioned of steely dark grey fabric, complete with the symbol of the marine-green State Necker Cube.

What Grim didn't fully realize was that in another personal sanctum, Patrick Puck was still experiencing the latter portions of his own wellness cleanse, and his experiences were going very differently than Grim's had gone.

Surrounded by an array of scanning devices, Puck stood under the scrupulous gaze of the Diamo O.S. Hologram. With icy, probing eyes, she attempted to assess the extent of theta-wave effects on Puck's neural map.

"You may be one of the most unlucky people I've encountered," Diamo said. "I don't know when or why, but your brain has been struck by particles from a still unknown source. This has affected what the Artaro Corporation would call your neural signature."

Puck was in a total state of fear and disorientation. He had come into this process expecting some level of discomfort, but in service of his recovery from the leech. Now, he was instead being told he had been struck in the head with strange particles. This was not at all what he wanted to hear.

All the while, tiny flying drones continued to scan and probe, as harsh robotic noises blared in his face.

"You have the makings of a Dream Operator, be advised—meaning you may be viable for certain academic programs... though perhaps you would be less suited for corporate life. For a more predictive analysis, the algorithm needs time... Artaro University may be interested in studying you... that much is clear... I would offer you the services of the university right now, but your path... it is like a cloud has hidden you, and I do not yet understand why."

"I just wanted to get a normal wellness cleanse," Puck cried out, agitated. "I don't know what the hell this is, but I'm not interested! No, thanks!"

A mechanical needle struck Puck's finger and the mood of the room swiftly shifted. As he fell into a newly arrived grey cushioned chair, the harsh lights and sounds softened into a pleasant ambiance. Puck felt rattled, but the calm soon washed over. He sat quietly, defeated, and in a state of artificial peace.

Puck stared into the abyss, drained, for perhaps ten minutes. Eventually, the exit light illuminated, and Puck stumbled out towards the gift shop.

Grim spotted Puck, wandering aimlessly in the outer corridor.

"Hey, how'd it go?" Grim asked. "Mine was a bit weird, but not so bad, I guess."

Puck didn't say anything, but instead looked at Grim with a downward scowl and a twitch in his eye. While Grim didn't know the specifics of Puck's wellness cleanse, it was clear that something was off here.

When all was complete, Grim and Puck left the large cube-shaped building through the front exit,

coming down wide cement stairs to the roadside where they were soon picked up by another Artaro-Taxi. As they buckled in the backseats, Grim could see Puck seemed twitchy and out of it.

“Hey, that was something else. Wasn’t it?” Grim remarked. “... I mean, look, are you doing okay? Hopefully, you should feel more normal soon. I know it was an intense process in there.”

“You have no idea...” Puck said. “It’s like there’s something wrong with me. I don’t fit in, in Machina, or anywhere, and the algorithm is confused by me... and it sounded like I have brain damage or something. The Diama hologram said the university might want to study me—I didn’t really understand.”

“Hmmm, wow,” Grim said, not certain what to think. “Look man, maybe we should just get you back to your apartment, and you can sleep it off.”

“Yeah, okay,” Puck said, then stared off into space.

When the taxi arrived at Puck’s high-rise building, Puck looked a bit better, at least capable of navigating his way back to his apartment. For that reason, Grim remained in the vehicle, only having the energy for a fist bump and mild goodbye.

“Hope I was at least helpful today,” Grim said. “Now that wellness stuff is done with, and you can order a drone drop off of Hearty Burgers and take a nap.”

“Maybe I’ll just get some french fries...” Puck said, with tired eyes and a snarky laugh, and gave a thumbs up as he walked towards his building.

Grim went home and spent the rest of his afternoon hanging out with his dog. Taking the animal for a short sniff around his own building, he wondered how Penelope’s first day at the Artaro Corporation might be going. As he walked the sidewalk of south Inferno Street, taking in the neighborhood and the pink cloudy skies, he thought a bit more about his own meeting with the Diama O.S. and wondered about his place in the world. He decided that while he’d check on Penelope later, he might stay in for the evening and see what painting supplies he still had.

As he walked back towards his building, he felt suddenly struck by a propaganda sign on a concrete wall. It was an image of Machina’s Mayor, Omega Flink, with his holo, light-up eyes, a strong jaw and broad mustache.

The sign read: *Trust the algorithm! Become the hero you were meant to be!*

He had never put much stock in these government posters before, but after his conversation with the Diama O.S. at the Monolithicist Temple, he couldn’t help see an added layer of uncanniness in the message. Whatever destiny was calling for Grim, he didn’t want any part of it. If he could bend the world to his will, all of Machina’s endless technology would be shut off, and he’d go fishing or read a book. But instead, Machina’s structures of power were drilling into the soul of the populous and advertising it all right back to them. Grim had seen the hologram billboards and the interspace infomercials. He knew it worked that way. He wasn’t stupid... just annoyed.

Supplemental Character Information:

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]

Patrick Puck:

Class: Human Cog, Blodlek Leech Recipient (Odd Neural Signature)

Occupation: Fishery Worker

[Eyes: Sky Blue] [Hair: Messy, Light Blue] [Height: 5'6"]

[Born: 172 D.C.] [Background: from Machina]

Cleric Mercury:

Class: Human Cog, Cleric Class

Occupation: Monolithicist Cleric

[Eyes: Pale Grey] [Hair: Shampoo Blonde] [Height: 5'4"]

[Born: 163 D.C.] [Background: from Machina]

Cleric Hammer:

Class: Human Cog, Cleric Class

Occupation: Monolithicist Cleric

[Eyes: Pale Gold] [Hair: Short, Grey] [Height: 5'9"]

[Born: 161 D.C.] [Background: from Machina]

Diama (O.S):

Class: Hologram

Occupation: Governance of the Circuit-Interspace/Adviser to the Parliamentary House of the Monolith

[Eyes: Cold White] [Hair: Short, White] [Height: 6'2" though Holograms can adjust size]

[Booted Up in the Engines Era around 33 D.C.]

[Appearance: Cold Porcelain Complexion, Strong Physique, Wears a White Bodysuit]

Penelope Curtis: (mentioned)

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]

Cleric Steel: (mentioned)

Class: Human Cog, High Cleric Class

Occupation: Monolithicist High Cleric

[Eyes: Pale] [Hair: Shampoo Blonde] [Height: 6'0"]

[Born: 144 D.C.] [Background: from Machina]

A Map of West Enon: Where our story takes place. More specifically, most of our story takes place between East Apathia and the western edge of Onyx. Both of these districts are in Machina.

