

The Crystalline Mythos

SECRET IN THE CIRCUIT

A Short Story
By Teej R.



The Crystalline Mythos:
SECRET IN THE CIRCUIT

(A Short Story)

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(Story #8 of the “*Dream Operations*” Collection)

In this story, Penelope and a group of anti-corporate Dissidents explore the virtual realm known as the circuit-interspace. It should be noted that interspace is governed by the incredible Artificial Intelligence known as the Diama Operating System. Diama (O.S.) typically appears as a holographic woman of a stern yet helpful disposition. She advises Machina's Parliamentary House of the Monolith and guides the many algorithms which allow the city-state to run smoothly. While Diama works closely with the Monolithic Government and the powerful Artaro Corporation, the Dissidents of Fort Tekk have a very different agenda.

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

[Irkus - 193 D.C.]

Penelope sat in her room with her orange cat, Murphy, on her lap. He was the only member of the family who knew how to shut up. In the living room, Penelope could hear her mom trying to pry the V.R. helmet off of Hollis's head. The kid was addicted, and even trying to compel him to take on ordinary tasks could be a major challenge.

“Hollis! I made you breakfast! Now get this damn thing off or I'm gonna chuck it out the window!”

It was a sad fact that Penelope's little brother was too absorbed in virtual interspace to notice his mother screaming at him. Of course, unlike Hollis, Penelope couldn't quite tune out the sound of her mother's shouting. Worse yet, Penelope could hear her neighbors as they argued through her paper-thin bedroom walls. The mild anxiety caused by all of the different screaming voices kicked her out of her comforting, peaceful bed, and into her dressing routine. In minutes, she would have to go into the city. That long commute followed by another lovely day at Archer Piglet's.

By the time she had stepped off of the train at West Onyx Station and climbed onto her yellow bicycle, it was mid-afternoon. The train station was stuffed full of people. Adverts buzzed overhead. Lifting her bike over her shoulder, Penelope came up the stairs, through the ticket terminal, and upstairs once again to the busy world above. Below pristine buildings, she hopped on her bike and took off through the wide streets. These were the streets where the mice chased cheese. Streets of cold business and calculated commerce. This was the heart of the Onyx District, a blur of humans and vehicle traffic. From the corner of Lilith Street and Ursula Avenue, Penelope cut through to Apricot Street where, several blocks west, Archer Piglet's Pancake House conducted its business. The crowded sidewalks beamed with life and chaos. Planted on her padded seat, aluminum handlebars in hand, Penelope flew through it all with great speed.

It had been several weeks since her adventure in the Machina Landfill with Sneak Lennox and the other anarchist Dissidents who lived there. Since then, the month of Mai had passed into Juno and on into Irkus. But, even as spring moved into summer, she couldn't help but be reminded of the uncanny landscapes of wreckage in the Landfill. Her mind drifted to thoughts of the many strange mice with beady red eyes which roamed and permeated the landfill's wide and labyrinthine junkyards. For some reason, their glares had projected a certain sense of recognition which Penelope found particularly peculiar.

The rats and mice of Machina's West Onyx district, on the other hand, were numerous enough, a number of them scurrying in the gutters along Penelope's bicycle tires—only these rodents were grey and brown with matted fur. They probably had diseases. Penelope made sure to avoid them as they ran and squeaked along the side of the busy road.

In West Onyx, the buildings and the cars were always clean, but the streets were filthy. Business people, hipsters, socialites, weirdos—these people were everywhere. It was all bodies and technology. People couldn't help but bump into each other as they walked with no one giving it a second thought.

To avoid crashing into the crowd, Penelope fell in line with other bicyclists and motorized beam cycles—all of them weaving in and out of vehicle traffic. She found herself surrounded by Artaro cars and taxis and automated compact transit buses. There were boxy street sweep vehicles with mechanized mop-like appendages which performed their functions near the sidewalks. Penelope thought to herself that these sweeping vehicles looked very similar to the one that Grim drove for his day job in Apathia. She was careful to avoid their large spinning arms as she rode past.

For a while, she sped along with grace. Everything was good and fine until she hit a curb out of nowhere and fell hard on the concrete. She was helped up by a man with computerized tattoos. He didn't ask her if she was alright. He kind of dust her off, then just turned and kept walking. Penelope took a breath, picked up her bike, and decided to try walking.

She noticed more civilian Cogs with similar computerized tattoos. They were colorful and interesting, and often moved, though their true splendor could only be seen through the lenses of augmented reality. If one were to wear a pair of augmentation contact lenses, such tattoos might come alive and swim into the sky to meet with the rest of the holographic sensory clutter. Penelope did not own a pair of these contact lenses, though she was always being pressured at work to purchase a set.

It wasn't that Penelope wouldn't enjoy augmented reality eye-contacts—in many ways she would love to purchase a set of them. She didn't want any extra after work visits from Archer Piglet asking her to come in early or cover shifts for the other employees. According to Agatha, who did wear such contacts, their holographic boss liked to pop up in your field of vision as if he were a commercial break implanted right into waking experience. This could happen during work or after work. It didn't matter to Archer. Without these contact lenses, Penelope found it easier to leave work where it belonged—at work.

It was enough to have a wrist-connect watch strapped on you at all times. She liked the look and feel of her blue watch with its rose colored wrist strap, but it was constantly getting work notifications—not to mention a constant flow of random crap from social networks and telemarketing scams, to life suggestions from the trusted algorithms of the Diamo Operating System.

There were many pressures to take up new cybernetic modifications. For instance, many chose to carefully save their colorful Stanley-bucks in order to upgrade their charms and charisma with facial implants. Such facial implants might allow a well-to-do citizen cog to smile for hours on end. Here was a modification that could help one to be competitive in the customer service driven workplace.

The most common of all cybernetic implants was the neural bio-port. Everyone had one of these, including Penelope. Most commonly, these ports were used in conjunction with plug-ins, and for the more affluent classes, wireless biochips. Some people, for instance, had access to insanely expensive chip units with functionalities almost beyond comprehension to more average interface users. While the bio-port was built in at birth, the ever evolving inputs and applications were always front and center in the hearts and minds of the faithful Artaro consumer. From serpent eyes to enhanced prosthetics and computerized skin; *Artaro had you covered!* The same had been true of artificial organs for a time, but the state had chosen to regulate this matter after too many individuals seemed to be living too long.

Mayor Omega Flink, a man whose internal organs were easily ninety-five percent artificial, had deemed himself certainly important enough to live out a longevity of years. Of course, his age was on the public record. Of course, his likeness was entirely holographic, as far as the public was concerned.

Despite circumstances, he had personally championed legislation on this very matter of regulation of longevity, stating that overpopulation of the city could, and inevitably would, stifle collective progress. Therefore, it followed that the state fixed prices on such organs at monetary values that the underclass public could not possibly afford. Still for the financially blessed, such as those often residing in the Smiley District, Ploutos, and High Optera, artificial organs had become as common as the utilization of sex holograms or the use of Pollyanna.

West Onyx was not as beautiful and grand as Optera or Plautos. It was disorganized place with trash and ratshit on the ground. Everyone always seemed to be banging into each other. There were many androids, cogs, and even Ravell citizens, and apparently they all drove like maniacs. Avoiding such dangers, Penelope still managed to pedal her way to work. However, she was a few minutes late and pay would be docked for that. Certainly her shortcoming in terms of punctuality had been noted. Such actions were *always* noted.

In the bathroom, Penelope changed into her Archer Piglet's employee dress, her orange collared button up underneath. She pinned on her name-tag and tied the back of her small waist-high white apron. She pressed the hand sanitizer dispenser which farted out a big puddle of goop into her hands, as was custom at the beginning of one's shift, and gave herself a brief glance in the mirror. Penelope's dark hair was growing longer, so she tied it back. She thought she appeared tired, and slightly whiter than usual; normally her complexion was an olive color, tanned relatively dark. With her eyelids a bit sunken, the first thing she did after stepping out onto the main floor was to pour herself a cup of coffee.

She greeted her two coworkers for the evening. Agatha responded with the usual white-teethed smile. She was wearing her orange cybernetic iris-contacts. Her glare was bright and eerie. Her corneas were likely being bombarded with augmented reality garbage and gossip as they greeted each other.

In the kitchen, the cook, Thane, was preparing eggs and hash-browns for the single customer sitting at one of the booths by the front windows. He was watching a small dingy virtual-pad depicting smiling talking heads waving their hands in front of them and through dimensional space like living statue busts.

The image cut sharply to a news alert. On the news set, Candy Carmen sat with her Gastropod co-anchor, Simon Slurpe. Both of them looked tailored and polished. Candy was wearing a new outfit from her famous Candy Cosmo's Candy Forever fashion line—a three-piece plastic women's business suit, both sensual and professional. Slurpe, on the other hand, was living proof that oceanic beings from the Plastic Ocean could integrate into Machina's society and look good doing it. Without doubt, the enormous humanoid slug's tailored suit was lined with slime resistant materials to keep his studio chair hygienic and fresh. Slurpe was the best in the business. Whatever his opinions happened to be, they were surely expert opinions. Today, his expertise was laser-focused on the new bill which was now making its way through the House of the Monolith.

"I think it's an excellent piece of legislation." Slurpe enthused, as his blue-green antenna-like eye appendages shifted in discordant directions. "The *Silver City Expansion Act* helps the Monolithic Government and its top corporations in their efforts to help you, the citizens cogs of Machina. Even now, as I address our millions of viewers, Senators are receiving the council and approval of the Monolith Mainframe Supercomputer and our wise Diama Operating System on this new bill. With her oversight and guidance, this is the moment for Machina's Parliament to act. All signs now point in a singular direction. The vote shall be held today."

"To think, just weeks ago," Candy shared with a hint of nostalgia, "this bill was totally gridlocked by the late senator, Chip Huggins. Untimely as his passing was, we here at the Daily Data Dose would be

lying if we didn't admit what a thorn in the side of Parliament the man could be. He was a wrench in the very spokes of the financial system. Why a man might work so hard to keep the rest of us from getting rich, I'll never know." A sparkle lit in her teeth as she smiled.

"Yes, Candy, well it looks like the Artaro Capitalists have prevailed once again," Slurpe added. "As the last member of the Choice Populist Party within the chambers, the loss of Chip Huggins means the end of an era. Only a few short decades ago, before Wolfgang Artaro came along, the Choice Populists were strong in their numbers. They were spending taxpayer money to build blockades and tighten trade policies. Let's make one thing clear—while I don't necessarily agree with all the ways that the Ravell or Adularians might do things in their societies—I'm damned sure glad that, in today's age, we can trade freely with land and ocean-based civilizations from all around the Green Earth. I have no doubt that the influxes of new capital, from city-states around the globe, have raised our standard of living in ways that sociologists and economists at Artaro University are only barely beginning to understand. Indeed, the rise of the tides lifts all ships. With Diama's guidance, we are growing our stock market and expanding the reach of the algorithms."

"Yes Simon," Candy replied, "and where the algorithms go, happiness follows. As our Mayor always says, we must *Trust the Algorithm*."

After a couple of product advertisements, the program shifted to the floor of the House of the Monolith where Senators were preparing for the vote on the *Silver City Expansion Act*. With this bill, the Machina city-state was taking steps to better incorporate several major outland districts into the city so that their inhabitants may be included in the benefits of cogship.

Back in the kitchen, Penelope stood with Thane and watched the small virtual news presentation above the little projection pad with the hairs on her neck now standing. She examined a headline dictating Machina's greater expansion plans. Among the many Outland Districts to be absorbed, Termite Hill was to be pulled into the fold by the year 200 D.C..

She always suspected this would eventually happen, but it was a shock to see a date slapped on it.

"Wow," She gasped. "I wonder what my mom is gonna say about this. We might have to move or something."

"Damn, you hear what that slug just said?" Thane answered. "These Artaro people just do whatever they want. Doesn't matter if it turns our shit upside down. Doesn't matter one bit. If this gets passed, I know people in the Burroughs that are gonna just flip. You think my cousins keep up with their cogship? Hell no. They're gonna be out on the street."

"Yeah, well same with my mom," Penelope answered. "If this bill goes through, the Apple Colony where I live will probably collapse. Nobody there pays annual cogship. The whole economy out there is built on unregulated flea markets, and if Termite Hill gets incorporated into Machina, that will all fall apart. The whole thing is a mess."

"The companies will no doubt head out there and turn the place into a bunch of chain stores and parking lots and hubs for online shipping drones," Thane laughed. "It's funny to say it out loud, but it's no joke." He finished preparing the next few plates of Hearty Burgers and pancakes then placed the completed plates on the serving counter.

Penelope grabbed the orders and headed for the main floor of the restaurant. She dropped the food off with a few customers who were seated at one of the booths and then walked over to helm the cash

register.

The automated front entrance door slid open and in walked a new customer. To Penelope's surprise, she recognized this man. It was one of three people whom she had watched a some weeks before in the Machina Landfill using a pair of binoculars. The guy was an anti-corporate Dissident. She had seen him help two others plant an explosive on a Patrol Robot. If she remembered what Sneak Lennox had told her correctly, this guy's name was Vincent. That night he had been wearing some odd clothes—like pajamas and slippers. Now he was at least wearing normal pants, with a leather jacket, and boots. She noticed the various buttons on his cybernetic arm light up and change colors as he entered. He sat down at the counter with a blank look on his face.

Penelope suspected that he must have tracked her down. *What does he want? Did Sneak tell him about me? This could be something bad...*

She walked over to him as he stared at the wall. He was wearing sunglasses. His hair was short and black, and in the fluorescent lighting, Penelope could see a scar across the left side of his face.

“Hey, there. Can I help you?” Penelope asked politely, perhaps in an effort to avoid conflict.

“Cup of coffee,” The guy pulled the front of his sunglasses down, and as he did this, eye contact was firmly made. Then, he looked up to the wall behind Penelope, shooting his gaze back to her face quickly before fixing the positioning of his sunglasses. Penelope looked over her shoulder to see that he was addressing the issue of the workplace security camera.

“I'll be right back with that,” she answered.

When she returned with the cup and gave it to him, he didn't order anything else, so she provided his bill. But when she did so he protested by belatedly asking for a refill.

“Okay, then,” she replied. “Refills are free, anyway.”

From the kitchen she pretended to work, but really she was just watching this Vincent guy, wondering why the hell he had come here. He just sat there, gripping his coffee mug with the synthetic hand of his polymer-coated cybernetic arm.

Looking at Thane's virtual display pad setup again, it was projecting a heavily choreographed advertisement. The little hologram displayed a bunch of female dancers in bright leotards and heels singing about the upcoming Polygon Parade Day on Artarus 1st when the Artaro Corporation's President Executive, Stanley Artaro, would be unveiling the latest Artaro product. *What would the new product be?!* According to the commercial, the public had to know! The month of Irkus would come to an end, and soon they would finally find out! People were already lining up outside of the Artaro HQ Tower, the Apathia Mega Mall, and other commercial centers ready to buy this new product despite the fact that they didn't even know what it was yet—they were frothing at the mouths in their utter impatience!

But Penelope's mind was still fixated on this Vincent guy and his unsettling presence in the restaurant. When she poked her head back out of the kitchen, she saw his payment left on the table. Not surprisingly, he had chosen to pay in physical currency. Two shiny brass full-Stanleys sat next to his empty coffee mug. She came back out onto the main floor to see Vincent lighting a cigarette as he walked out of the automated door into the street.

Why would he come in here?, she thought, ...only to then just leave like that...

Nevertheless, this was the case. He had come in, made his order, enjoyed a solemn moment, and then walked out. Penelope decided to check to see if he had been gracious enough to tip. He hadn't been.

Then, she felt something in her hand. Under the money, there was a note written on a small piece of paper. Looking at it, she realized that she had been given a secret message! Discreetly stuffing the paper into her dress pocket, her instincts now reminded her of the security camera that she had failed to consider just moments ago.

Into the bathroom she went. Flipping the light on, it was dim, but not so dim that she couldn't read what it said:

Penelope,

I know we've only met once, but new information has recently come to light. Your safety is at stake. I will be in Termite Hill tonight at the Gilded Serpent Noodle Bar at the street front of the Rodashi Colony. Please meet me there. 11pm sharp.

I want to show you a secret in the circuit.

*Sincerely,
Sneak*

PS- Make sure to destroy this letter.

It was a message from Sneak! That would explain why that other one, Vincent, was not so particularly chatty. He was only the messenger.

Penelope checked the clock and saw that she still had to work for another two hours. All she wanted was to get the hell out of there, but the thought of it only made the piggy clock on the wall tick slower. She spent the time biting her nails. The note said that she was potentially in danger. Her safety was at stake. What could this mean?

When the shift finally came to an end, Penelope went outside to unlock her bike. She was about to ride off when she spotted Patrick Puck standing outside of the Plug-in Arcade across the way. He noticed her as well, and when he did, he giddily began making his way over. He was hobbling, and was almost hit by a delivery craft as he attempted to cross the street. Artaro Cars whizzed around him. As he got closer, Penelope could see a big lump on his back. His ugly beige jacket was dampened red near his shoulder blades. Penelope smiled, and waved, but inside she was feeling a sense of dread.

“Hey! Howdy stranger!” Puck shouted in his usual awkward way.

As he came nearer, Penelope could now see how terrible he looked. He had not fully healed from his previous beating. The lump on his back was very obviously a sizable Blodlek purging leech. It had undoubtedly been attached to his spine as a condition of his punishment for stealing that soft drink weeks ago. On the perimeter of the lump, she could see pus foaming through the fabric of his jacket. Luckily, she didn't have to look any closer. Yet, even as Puck spoke to her, she couldn't take her eyes off it.

“You look terrible, Puck,” Penelope said. “Are you okay?”

“Yeah, I've been getting a bit dizzy. It's this dang leech. They stuck it on there at the Purging

Clinic, the day after I got busted. It's not only sucking my blood, but spinal fluid as well. And it injects some kind of toxin to keep me alive while it does, otherwise I'd be dead right now. The clinic included a brochure handout on how it works when I got the procedure."

Puck pulled up the brochure on his wrist watch unit. In the air above his arm, she could read the words, *Purging with Love*. Below that, there was an animated graphic of a Blodlek Leech, only it looked cartoonish and friendly.

Patrick was purple under his eyes, but he was almost laughing as he spoke, like he found the whole thing to be comical in a twisted way, "They pick these things from a large glass tank of saltwater and cyanobacteria, then they place it right on your cervical vertebrae, between your shoulder blades up to the base of your neck." He strained to point at the disgusting mess on his back. "The brochure explains it all with so much clarity. Then, after a month's time, you have to come back so they can remove it for processing. Then, they attach a new one to repeat the process, until you're off the hook." Puck answered, "Anyway, there's this drink they sell to replenish you as well. Just another thing meant to keep people from dying. A lot of people just die! But I'm buying the nutrient drinks, so I don't pass out so much, and I'm doing good! Don't worry about me!"

"Why are you out and about? Don't you think you should be home resting?"

"Well, I still have to go to work on the line at the fishery out west of the city in Easy Breezy. I don't get to just blow off work because there's a giant leech on my back. It doesn't work like that. Thousands of prawns come through every day, and they need me to clean the poop out of 'em. My boss told me so! He knows how that stuff works. That's why he's the boss. Anyway, now I'm just back home, so I figured I'd go to the arcade. Plus I can still get Archer Piglet's delivered by drone from the shop on my wrist-connect watch—as long as I don't step foot in the building, of course."

Thane stepped outside, appearing to be on break. Approaching, he chimed in. "So, is it tough sleeping at night with that thing on you?" It was a pretty solid question. Penelope was curious to know the answer.

"I have to sleep on my stomach, because if I slept on my back I could hurt it, and then it'd bite me really really hard. Also, if I killed it by accident, I could end up having to purge for even longer."

Penelope felt bad for the guy. She didn't know exactly what to say in response.

Patrick sighed to himself, "So, what's up with you guys? What about you, Penelope? Has anything exciting happened in your world lately?"

"No, it's been pretty normal." She couldn't tell if she was lying or not.

After the rest of her shift, Penelope took the maglev home to Termite Hill. By the time she got to Bug Station in Termite Hill, it was raining outside. Soon, she was bicycling through the night-lit shanties of the central markets, making her way home to the Apple Colony. There were motor buggies and pull carts making their rounds. Small cheap cars whizzed by with noisy, dirty engines. On the back of one small truck, she could see a full chicken coup in the place where the back seat had once been. Graffiti lined brick walls and parked shipping trucks and storage containers. There were large salt-water carts, which meant that Isopod merchants had come from the Grey Beaches hundreds of terrans south. Penelope liked to look at the big tanks on top of their carts, as sometimes there were very strange and interesting oceanic animals for sale and on display.

On a large cement wall outside of one of the taller brick Vidana Colony buildings, where thousands lived and worked, there was one bit of graffiti that Penelope had seen before, though it had never appeared to have any meaning until now. It read:

Mice stuck in the maze?

Penelope realized that Dissidents of Fort Tekk were the ones tagging the building she lived in. For years now, she'd seen similar tags, but never had they held any real meaning to her. In Termite Hill, as in all of Machina, one had to be concerned most of all with protecting their own interests, and not worrying about the periphery. But now that she had met the Tekk face to face, she had begun to come to grips with the fact that these individuals were highly motivated ideologically. They even struck her as educated and skilled in their own way. And now they wanted to meet with her.

There were many colonies in Termite Hill. The largest one, the New World Mound, had nearly 40,000 people living in one single structure. Here, everyone was forced to cohabit. Cogs living on top of outlanders, intermingled with gangsters and thugs and criminals. There were androids, Ravell, the occasional Adularian tribes, even Scythapod sea merchants with salt-water tanker carts. Most everyone was poor. Still, they looked up to the same smiling images of Candy Carmen, the same holographic billboards, the same ads for Polybenzos and Ultra-Shiny Bubbly Bath products.

The Apple Colony was actually fairly small in comparison to many of the other surrounding compound structures, housing only hundreds as opposed to thousands. However, it was still very much a significant colony, and most of the locals knew it by name. The name had first been coined by a tenant, an elderly woman by the name of Dorothy Patton. Several decades earlier, Dorothy started an apple orchard and nursery business on the structure's roof. Since then, she had grown the orchard larger in scope until it appeared more like a small forest rather than a small business. For this reason, among others, people knew Dorothy. She was a gifted botanist and medicine woman, but also very outspoken. She was unapologetic in her way of speaking—the kind of lady who told it like it was and didn't give a shit what anyone might say or think.

Growing up, Dorothy often served as a caretaker for Penelope while her mother worked during the day. Penelope's father, Bruce, left the picture when she was growing up, divorcing and immediately remarrying an Artaro Leisure Companion Android named Darlene. She barely knew her father, except for the very occasional and often sour visits, but she knew the apple orchards well. Dorothy was never a particularly friendly or social woman, but she was very nurturing to Penelope as a child, and later to Hollis as well.

"Tea is ready!" the old woman would call. She would pour it from a tin kettle. They would drink it together and feed the birds that landed on the roof. Penelope remembered that the tea tasted like the earth. Yet, it was sweet, flavored with sap Dorothy collected from the nearby Sapphire Woods. Dorothy spent so much time collecting and cataloging flora from these woods that many in Termite Hill referred to this region as Patton's Woods. For the people of Termite Hill, the woods were the path eastward, away from Machina into the massive network of forests known as the Crystalline Forest System—where the Adularian people lived, separate from the ways of Machina, in scattered villages and temples.

Dorothy also owned a giant tortoise named Methuselah, and Penelope remembered riding around on its back. Importantly, Penelope also recalled very clearly the day she turned ten and Dorothy had given her a necklace, one that she still wore to this day. It had a silk cord, with green stones, and a single small pink gem. Even now, as Penelope walked through Termite Hill, it hung around her neck, tucked securely under her collar and work uniform.

Dorothy was always a storyteller—she knew stories from the temples in the forests—and other stories learned from a small collection of old banned books from Machina in the Deisel Engines Era. These rare books were all dated from before year 100. It was in that time that many old books were banned. It was also around that the big companies all got together and removed weekends from the calendars, replacing them with casual Fridays.

Some of the old books from that time contained excerpts from the lost and ancient Good Ol' Days before the two-century void. Dorothy had one strange old book with a lot of notations regarding the ancient past with many sections entirely blacked out. There was one story in there she would speak of often. It was about a man named Sisyphus whose job was pushing a big rock up a hill. From what she could piece together from the story, the man's employer would never let him keep the rock at the top and it would always roll back down.

So, Sisyphus would roll it up, and it would roll back down—on and on in a loop like that forever with no vacations. Dorothy would say that you have to push the rock up the hill, no matter who you were, and it would roll down in a unique way for everyone, no matter what. Fittingly, the story always sort of reminded Penelope of working at Archer Piglet's.

It was interesting hanging out with Dorothy, even as Penelope got older. She was the kind of lady who was always working on some project, whether it was cultivating some plant or working in the markets selling saplings with Mai. It wasn't spoken of often, but it was clear that Dorothy was an Adularian by practice. Firstly, she had no neural implant or port of any kind, only a small scar behind her ear where one might have once been. Furthermore, she never once paid praise to the Monolith, not even at mealtime, and not out of forgetfulness. To Penelope, it never entirely made practical sense, but it struck her curiosity nonetheless. To live without any connection to the circuit-interspace at all seemed profoundly strange, but somehow this woman had done it.

Walking by the main Apple Colony building, she spotted her mom returning the cart llamas to the corral for the evening. It was still drizzling out and the wind was picking up again. Mai's bandanna flew from her head, and Penelope had to seize it from the rushing air in order to return it. Handing the bandanna back, Penelope looked into the corral to see the tortoise, Methuselah, eating from a trough full of greenery. The big guy lifted his head, dumbly looking over with a mouth full of food.

"Wow, he's getting big," Penelope mentioned. "I bet you I could still ride on his back."

"Dorothy's been riding him," Her mother answered. "She went to the market. I've seen her do it a few times now."

"Oh, wow. I was just thinking about her," Penelope shrugged.

"She was over here earlier. She came back with me from the markets," replied her mother. "I can help you find her if you want."

"No. It's Okay," Penelope replied. "I've actually got some place I need to be. I just wanted to stop in and clean up real quick. I'm gonna take the freight up."

Penelope hugged her mom, and began toward the tunnel between the two main colony buildings which led to the freight elevator entrance.

"Wait!" Mai shouted. "There's something else." She put her hand to her brow and kicked the dirt,

“It’s your brother’s dog. Pee-wee is sick. He’s all bloated and glassy eyed. He pooped all over the carpet and I had to clean it. Hollis is pretty broken up over it. He hasn’t even been using his headset. I actually told Dorothy about it, and she’s probably gonna come take a look. Anyway, I just thought I should warn you.”

“Oh wow? Did he eat something bad? What about Murphy? Is Murphy okay?”

“The cat is fine. He was sleeping on the fire escape last I saw him.”

“Okay, well, I’ll go talk to Hollis…” Penelope replied uneasily. Looking up, she could see the rain clouds stirring overhead once again. With only the quickest of goodbyes, she sunk her hands into her sweater pockets and turned abruptly again to the tunnel.

Coming into the sixth floor apartment, Hollis was without his helmet. Instead, his attention was on his dog. Like Mai had described, the dog was not doing well. Penelope crouched down and looked at her brother.

“Hey, buddy. Mom says she’s gonna have Dorothy come over to take a look at Pee-wee, so he won’t feel so sick anymore.” Penelope then turned to inspect Pee-wee closer, to his sunken pink lids and eye-boogers.

Hollis looked up. His cheeks were puffy and red from crying. He didn’t say anything, only sniffled and nodded.

All Penelope could do was give her brother a hug. Quickly, she went to her room, put on her street clothes and sneakers. She washed her face in the bathroom, put her pink sweater back on, and returned to the living room. From a hook, she grabbed a big turquoise rain jacket. Some time in the interim, Hollis had decided to put his helmet back on, and to log into another game. He didn’t look very joyful, but at least he was occupied for the moment. At the doorway, Penelope just observed him for a minute. Then, without another word, she left.

Penelope buzzed the freight. When the heavy doors lifted and dropped, opening like a pair of steel jaws, she could see Dorothy standing there with that huge tortoise at her side. Dorothy’s eyes squinted as she smiled and said hello. Quickly, Penelope ran into the elevator before the doors shut. Problematically, the elevator was still heading up, so Penelope would have to take a quick detour to the roof before leaving.

“I heard you were planning to come take a look at the dog.” Penelope said.

“Yes.” Dorothy replied, “I will come take a look, but I’m not entirely sure if there is much I can do. From the sound of it, the animal is…”

“—Going to die…” Penelope finished the sentence without thinking.

“You have seen it as well,” Dorothy answered.

“What? I just… I could feel it, I guess. It was just a feeling. I’m just being bleak.”

“When you know, sweetheart, you just know. You’re like me in that regard.”

The freight doors opened at the roof. Warmly, Dorothy hugged Penelope, exiting the elevator.

Behind, her tortoise followed, until both of them stood in the wet grass with the rain falling onto the apple trees.

“I’ll come take a look at Pee-wee tonight, as soon as I put Methuselah in his pen,” Dorothy said. “Even if there’s nothing I can do to heal the animal, at least I can ease his suffering. And Hollis could certainly use the comfort as well. It’s never easy for a kid to lose a pet.”

Penelope nodded in understanding, reaching to the down button for the elevator.

“Looks like you’re going out tonight,” Dorothy said.

“Yeah, I have to meet up with a friend.”

“Okay, dear. Well, at least you’ve got a coat on. It’s gonna keep pouring tonight. Be careful. You’ve already got enough on your plate. Last thing you need is to catch a cold.”

The metal slid, making a deep twang as the jaws of the elevator locked once again. The sound of the rain was gone. Penelope stood in the heavy silence. Suddenly, she felt nervous at the idea of meeting these Tekk characters again. Then, with a clank, she was heading down.

As she continued through the field between colonies, she was really beginning to feel cold. The rain was falling again, the wind blowing it right into her face. After a while, her hair was soaked and she was shivering. Still, she continued toward her destination, the Gilded Serpent Noodle Bar in the Rodashi Colony. Along the way, she passed by a number of cloaked pedestrians, watching them as they passed under the blue glow of night lights. She didn’t say anything to them, but felt very much curious about them. Out from one of the hoods, she could see the face of an Adularian woman. The woman had no hair and tattoos glowing on her cheeks and chin.

Penelope then passed through a merchant tent. Inside, the vendors were selling an assortment of things from optic cameras to thorny lizards. When she exited the tent and came to the gate at the head of the colony, there were paper lanterns lit in a variety of colors. There were many umbrellas being used in the market streets and she was beginning to feel envious of those who had them.

“Penelope!” a voice shouted. She turned to see that it was Sneak! He sat on his old speed cycle in the lot outside of the main Rodashi building. “I was waiting for you out here. It’s cold! I stood around long enough to smoke a half-pack of Happy-Go-Luckies waiting for you. Meanwhile, Vincent’s inside having at it, drunk off a bottle of clear, and stuffing’ his face like he’s having himself a fucking vacation! Come on, you’re shivering. Let’s go in and fix that!”

He put his arm around her shoulder and passed her his cigarette. This was one of those new Moonstone Fashion Cigarettes. For a guy who lived in the dump, Sneak had expensive tastes. She dragged it and felt the warmth of the smoke enter and fill her lungs. It tasted like a feeling, like the thought of feeling cool. It was just like the advertisements in one of those *Neon Optera* or *Rich People* hologram magazines. Vincent came to the door and signaled for them to come inside.

They came to the entrance and stomped the mud off their shoes before entering. A dark complected woman with eyes that shined walked through the entrance behind them. Penelope wasn’t able to get a good look at her. She said a few quiet words to Sneak and then disappeared.

The Gilded Serpent was a long thin little place. It must have been converted from a laundromat or something. Yet, there was a busy noodle bar stretching from the front to the back of the left wall with

dimly lit booths running along opposite. Large cauldrons of soup steamed from the kitchen in full view. Skillets and flat pans fried a myriad of ingredients. There was rice liquor and hot tea being poured all across the establishment.

It was to a rounded booth in the back corner that Sneak led Penelope. There were stacks and plates of food, many of which were already served and eaten. Hot vapor steamed from decorative iron kettles. Extra dishes and silverware were delivered by a Rodashi woman with an animal like a strange monkey on her shoulder. Penelope hung her raincoat on the back wall and sat down with the group.

“That's a beautiful monkey you have there, ma'am.” Vincent had some charm, but it was obvious that he must have ingested his fair share of booze, the empty bottle of clear still sitting in front of him. Either way, he was in much better spirits then when she had seen him at Archer Piglet's.

“This isn't a monkey,” answered the woman. “It's a bamboo lemur. They experiment on them at Artaro University, but they breed so many that you can get them as pets. You can get them in all sorts of colors. Anyway, he's a lucky little guy. If I didn't pick him up, he might have ended up as an experiment subject for some pharmaceutical testing outfit.”

“You hear that, buddy.” Vincent smiled at the animal, “You could have ended up with a thousand electric needles in your brain.”

The server didn't find the comment very humorous.

The mood did quiet down eventually, but still there was no heavy discussion or explanation of why it was that they had called to meet with Penelope. They ate a dish with duck meat in broth and spices, then the three of them smoked cigarettes, Vincent ordering a kettle of hot rice liquor for the table.

Sneak began to speak quietly for a while about the Tekk holdout in the landfill. Apparently, they had gutted and rebuilt the Patrol Robot that they had taken out on the night that Penelope had first encountered him. Since then, the Tekk had utilized the intact parts from the machine in conjunction with other junked components from the robot disposal yards at the north end of the landfill. Now Vincent was helping a crew to reprogram it. They had already given it a new paint job, one that he and Sneak seemed pleased with.

“It looks like a real mean juggernaut of a droid now that they've brought it into the shop,” Sneak explained, “The technicians at Fort Tekk are some of the best recyclers in the world, if you catch my drift. Feels like some of those brainier guys in the underground shops can find new uses for almost anything. Hell, there was this one guy who converted an old plug-in rig into an entirely enclosed simulation to teach people how to cook up their own explosives. Now they're designing grenade launchers out of old Artaro Car engine parts.”

Then, Sneak huddled in nearer to Penelope, so as to emphasize the seriousness of his next statement, “Speaking of plug-ins...” he began, “...in the back room of this building, there is a passage cogs don't normally get to follow... a passage to a hub... one that city-living cogs don't normally get access to...”

“Why are you telling me this?” Penelope asked.

“We have reason to believe that the Artaro Corporation has taken some interest in you. Have you had any strange people come speak to you lately? Anybody come asking you any questions?”

“Besides you guys, you mean? This isn’t because of that robot you made me blow up. I swear by the Monolith, if you guys get me busted for that bullshit...”

“No, this isn’t about that. We looked up your file after we met. The fact is that we stumbled upon an encrypted file. Somebody collected a retinal scan of you a month or so ago, probably while you were boarding a train. It looks like they marked your connectome map for some kind of deep-scanning procedure. It’s your brain. They think it’s special for some reason. The footer on the doc said something about it...”

“It said you have a magnificent neural signature!” Vincent belted. “Whatever the hell that means!”

“Wait, so they’ve done what with my brain?” Penelope asked in discomfort.

“Well, probably nothing yet. But we have reason to believe they’re going to want to take you in for scanning. Beyond that, we don’t know much.”

Penelope sat there staring at the bowl of soup in front of her. *Holy fucking shit! Holy fucking shit!*

Sneak grabbed her by the shoulders.

“There was an old man!” Penelope answered, “He had a beard and a robot and a patch on his vest that said Artaro Labs. He came into my work.”

“What did he want?” Sneak asked.

“Pancakes. He wanted blueberry pancakes! He said I have a magnificent neural signature! Just like you said.”

“Wait...” Vincent sat up in his chair. “Beard? Robot?! This is Dr. Ariton Webweaver she’s talking about!”

“Who?” Penelope bent her brow.

“He’s one of Artaro’s best scientists,” Vincent answered. “We don’t know much about him. He isn’t so public as some of the others. But he’s very high up and integral in some of their robotics projects, and super secret stuff as well.”

“We haven’t been able to find out too much about it,” Sneak added. “The data on this stuff is too well encrypted. But yes, he’s a very important man. If he came to see you specifically, then you must be of some serious significance.”

“There’s more though,” Penelope said. “I was at this bar... the Bicentennial Bar at the Leavenworth Building in Optera. My friend and I... we snuck in... and this lady... she bought us our drinks and she told me the same thing. I didn’t know what to make of it, but now it makes sense!”

“You got into the Bicentennial Bar?!” Vincent nearly spit his drink out.

“What did this woman look like?” Sneak asked.

“She was older, but she was attractive. Tall. Kind of scary, I’d say. She had this fancy purple coat

and a red pair of tinted glasses.”

Sneak put a data block on the table. From it sprung a projection of that same woman, tall and comely with two hideous bald men at her side. Penelope recognized them as well. They had been sitting in the dark at the same table in the bar before the woman had first approached.

“Her name is Beatrice Delphonic,” Sneak stated. “We think she might be the one who first marked you as an asset. She’s even higher up than Webweaver, probably his boss. She’s a financier, a bit more public, and she’s on the Artaro Corporate Board.”

“Wow, you guys seem to have really done your homework,” Penelope posited. Suddenly, she needed to understand their motives. *What is it with these two? What are they after here?* “What is it with you guys and the Artaro Corporation? First you blow up one of their robots, by the way... not something I particularly felt like implicating myself in... then you track me down to tell me that they’ve flagged me as an asset... I’m getting the feeling that my having any involvement with you Tekk people is probably not what I need to be doing right now.”

“They don’t care about their stupid Patrol Robot,” Sneak answered. “They are only interested in what is sitting between your ears. That’s what our information is telling us.”

“And why are you telling me this?”

“Because I want to help you,” Sneak answered.

“Why me? What’s so damn special about me?”

“Your magnificent neural—”

“Shut up. Okay, I get it,” Penelope sat thinking for a moment. Then, she tried another line of thought. “Fine. How do you propose to help me? I mean, the Artaro Corporation is the most powerful business in the world. If they want to dissect my brain into a million little pieces, I’m pretty sure they’re going to dissect my brain into a million little pieces.”

“It isn’t outside the realm of possibility,” Vincent scoffed, knocking back another drink.

“To be perfectly honest, we don’t know what they want,” Sneak answered. “But this is Artaro we’re talking about here. People in the city—they look to Artaro for the newest biochip updates. They want to see the Polygon Parade and see what new crap they can add to their shopping lists. They see Candy Carmen’s perfect figure in a swimsuit, or they see Stanley’s tailored suits and white teeth, and they think... if I could only make a few more bucks... I could be like that. I could be just like those snobs in Optera and Ploutos.”

Sneak took a pause and a breath, then explained, “What I’m trying to say is, it’s all bullshit—an illusion fed to us by the billboards. I feel as though we met in the landfill that night for a reason, and that reason was that I am supposed to help you. We have ways of hiding, changing identity, ways of evading the city-state and Artaro Corp.”

“So, what? I’m supposed to just give up my life and move to the dump with you?” Penelope was beginning to feel angry. “Is that what you’re telling me right now? Because, if that’s what you’re telling me, you can forget it. I’d rather let them kill me.”

“Well, at the very least. Let me show you something.”

Soon they were walking down a corridor... then through a nondescript door. Then down a steel ladder. And then through a heavy double door.

The room into which they came was hexagonal, lit with white panels, with small pillow chairs placed in a circle at the center. There were larger computer towers in each of the six corners, each one with a thick cord extending toward the center, bolted to the floor. Penelope looked to the cable inputs at the center table. The neural input cables were propped up, clipped to a thin glass stand, awaiting use. The space was obviously high end, but it also wasn't so different from any Plug-in store or cafe you might run into on the street.

There was a woman overseeing the room. It was the same woman who had walked by at the entrance, where she had spoken to Sneak. Sneak introduced her as Myra Jax, an ex Vision Technician from the Artaro Corporation. This was an important fact because it meant that she had been involved in high level secret operations and knew many of the powerful players in the company first hand.

Penelope only knew what Sneak told her of Myra Jax, and it was hard to know which stories were true. One story went that Myra had been accused of insubordination while serving at the Artaro Corporation. After this event, she discovered that she had been elected for the Path to Paradise. Myra knew the truth of this place, however. The Path was simply a launch port for rockets heading to an ice planet in the outer solar system. There, on the ice world, existed the largest of all off world colonies: Paradise. Most accurately, it could be called a prison, a very *very* cold prison. It was upon this discovery, that she came to the conclusion to take up a new false identity, and the name Myra Jax.

Other than that, there was no mention of Myra's previous life or identity. There was another story about a fire, and an Artaro employee that Myra might have once known who had apparently gone insane. Sneak said this couldn't have had something to do with Myra's decision to leave the Artaro Corporation, but he didn't understand how it fit into the story, and mostly disregarded it as hearsay.

Looking at Myra, her appearance was that of a technician and professional. She wore a perfectly tailored jumpsuit, grey and a hot popping blue. Her skin was bronze. Her face held high-set cheekbones—her eyes modified into a large round pair of silver optics. Around her head, she wore a bio-port headset. From the device, bright multicolored cords tangled and extended to one of the six computer systems.

When they came into the room, she gave Sneak and Vincent each a warm hug. She reached out one of her gloved hands and put it on Penelope's shoulder, “Ah, the waitress!” Her smile stretched ear to ear. “So you took out a C-716 Patrol Robot, didn't you?”

“...Well... yes,” Penelope answered. “I suppose, I did. I don't know the models though.”

“Make yourself comfortable,” Myra said, gesturing for everyone to take their shoes off. They all did so, and put them in a cubby container by the wall. Then, she sat everyone down on the center pillows. “This is the backdoor hub. It's basically an anonymous access point to the circuit.”

That didn't sound so particularly amazing. Penelope had used the circuit her whole life—everyone did. It was a place for entertainment, commerce, commercial enterprise, and news from the Artaro Corporation. The truth was that the circuit, like everything else, was run by Artaro. You *needed* the circuit. And therefore, you *needed* Artaro.

But the backdoor hub represented something different. You, the user, were empowered... in that you, the user, were invisible.

Penelope's first proof of this concept came only minutes after they had booted the circuit into their conscious experiences. They found themselves in a cyber-shop. Such shops were common in interspace. The shop was rendered as a large creative space, designed and facilitated by none other than Artaro. Here, users could try on a myriad of costume avatars or try out a massive array of interactive items. These represented digital commodities to be purchased for real cash. Special items spanning from insignificant to useful to mind-expanding and game changing could all be added to the buyer's personal account, granted funds were sufficient.

"Look at this," Sneak remarked, pointing out a pair of ice skates on a shelf. "These are made of light. They're not real. And yet they cost two-hundred and eighty Stanley-bucks. Could you believe that? Some people can't even maintain Cogship, and others are shelling out almost three-hundred Stanleys for skates that aren't even real. Does that make any sense to you?"

"Yeah, I mean it's a cyber-shop. They look real..." Penelope picked one of the skates up. "They have weight in my hands... So, what? People like to buy them so they can skate at the ice-pond."

"Okay, but think about this," Sneak replied. "Those people who go down to the ice-rink, they pay an extra fifty Stanleys just to get in. And for what?"

"To skate," Penelope answered.

"To skate in a lake made of light and code in a set of servers somewhere," Sneak answered. "You buy fake skates to skate on a fake pond, all to the financial benefit of Artaro... Those skates took all of five seconds to design, and the lake is there because the circuit is regulated in such a way that users can't create their own environments without licensing. Come on, pick an avatar, and let's get the heck outta here."

Penelope quickly settled upon a digital avatar which appeared very much in the way of her normal self, though her hair was a vibrant neon green, her clothes tight and form-fitted like some kind of super-powered fashion model. An orange lightning bolt was painted across her face. She wore a thick belt over a short dark green skirt with a large ominous eye on the buckle. Lastly, she added a flowing cape, as a final touch. She quickly added this costume to her inventory and entitled it *Warlock Diva*.

Sneak appeared ridiculous and glamorous with jewel adorned sunglasses and a golden double horned helmet. Vincent had the tenacity to sport a bright pink Sasquatch avatar. While to some, such a selection might have sounded outlandish, it was actually one of the more popular avatar selections. Myra, on the other hand, kept it pretty classy, wearing a silver sequined gown.

Leaving the cyber shop, they walked straight into the zaniness of the circuit-interspace. Through the multitudes, they weaved their way out of the crowds. Continuing even further, they began to walk away from the business of constructed space, finally coming to the scanner gates at the far edges. This made Penelope feel very strange and worried.

"Don't worry. The scanners won't be able to see us," Myra added. "We're ghosts. These sorts of devices won't be able to make any sense of who or what we are."

They continued to a place where much of the busy landscape of the construct faded to a dim grid in blank space. Finally, when they were a considerable distance from everything else, Sneak pulled a

small blue device from his pocket. It looked almost like a plastic toy. It had a dial and several buttons.

“Okay. Prepare to have your mind blown,” he said.

He pressed a button, and in response a large swirling portal manifested before their eyes. Even within the context of the circuit, Penelope had never seen anything quite like it.

“Woah! You mean you can program your own passageways?!” Penelope's mind was blown. Passageways were not something typical users could control. Passage portals were normally only set up for use by corporate actors. No average user was granted the privilege to hop so freely around interspace.

“Look at that. A passage...” answered Sneak. “This is Myra’s work. Just genius! This is how people like Vincent and I manage to track down information. We find passages to archives, secret data halls, that sort of thing. It’s also a great tool to spy on these big money motherfuckers.” Sneak turned to Vincent and handed him the device.

They stepped through the hum and glow of the portal opening.

Suddenly, they were in a tunnel, an almost entirely transparent tunnel. It was located in the sky, and below... it looked like—it was High Optera! Penelope, Sneak, Vincent, and Myra had found themselves in a secret sky born tunnel located directly above the city’s very epicenter.

“This is a spy network. We tapped it months ago.” Myra stated. “Follow me.”

Penelope did just that.

They followed the tunnel which led directly through the walls of a major downtown skyscraper. Inside, they hovered above office workers, none of which suspected the tunnel space above them.

“So this... is this real? This doesn’t feel like virtual interspace...” Penelope said, looking puzzled as she gazed down at the busy office staff below her feet.

“This is all real,” Sneak answered, “We’re the virtual ones. This network allows us to pass through basically anywhere in the city. Still, there are places where we avoid. We don’t want to tip Artaro off to our activities. But for now, we’re ghosts... we operate invisibly.”

“This particular building is a rather low security risk for these kinds of spy operations.” Myra answered, “We’re standing in a pharmaceutical building. These are big businesses, but these companies are all subsidiaries. No actual Artaro presence here. And that means the circuit security is probably not too up to date.”

“Let’s see...” Vincent spoke as he examined a small digital blue-print representation of the structure. “Ok, so this building has a Beef Gunz Extreme nutritional supplement facility. Plus, there’s a counseling office for Polybenzohydroxylpsychophedrine. And it looks like there’s a Blodlek Leech clinic—”

“Really?!” Penelope cut Vincent off. “Can we see that?”

“Uh... sure...” Vincent answered, “Why?”

“I just know a guy who had to get purged... It looks pretty brutal.”

Vincent and Sneak gave each other a look, one which conveyed that they might have understood some element of the purging process which Penelope did not. From here, Vincent showed Myra the building's blueprint, which she briefly looked over before leading them several paces forward. Ceasing to a halt, she turned to the force-field exterior of the virtual tunnel wall. Penelope witnessed as Myra's silver optics lit up in code, thus rendering a new perpendicular network tunnel.

Down the path, they soon found themselves hovering directly over the Blodlek Leech clinic. The room consisted of several dozen large Blodlek Leech tanks monitored by scientists and personnel. In the center of the room, atop a stainless steel table, rested many splayed leech specimens.

"Look at the size of those fuckers!" Vincent squealed.

Looking at Vincent's fuzzy pink get up, it was even more difficult to take him seriously than when he was wearing those stupid pajamas.

"What are they doing to those leeches?" Penelope asked.

"Just watch..." Myra answered in a whisper.

Quietly, they observed as a stringy haired, emaciated looking man in a lab coat approached the table with a plastic tub of fresh Blodlek Leeches. Watching as the man pulled the first few from the container, it became apparent that the creatures were still alive. Penelope could only witness as the scientist made incisions into their purple abdomens, reaching his latex-gloved hands in. The creatures convulsed and squirted oily discharge, but the man did not flinch. Instead, he slowly pulled a fleshy organ out from the belly.

"That's the chamber... where the Pollyanna comes from... isn't it?" Vincent said.

"That's definitely it," Myra replied.

"The chamber where... what?!" Penelope looked at the others in shock and disbelief.

"Yeah, so as it turns out..." Myra answered, "The whole real reason for Blodlek purging is to satisfy a demand for processed human spinal fluid. The leeches contain a sack where the fluid can be processed and transformed into powerful psychoactive substances. These substances are pretty much the basis for the drug Pollyanna.

"Have you ever tried it? It's expensive, but it'll get you high," Vincent said.

"Actually, yes, I have. Once or twice," Penelope answered. "That's horrible... that they make it this way, I mean..."

"Welcome to market politics," Vincent replied. "If people want to get high, there's gonna be somebody sellin' 'em a way to get high. Whether it's Artaro or some random subsidiary or some dealer on the side of the street, there's always a profit to be made on a decent kick."

"Hold on a second," Myra said. "I think it's time we get out of here. There's a surveillance drone in the building. If it gets too close, it might register our signal."

Penelope looked at Myra's face. For a second, she could see as Myra's optics lit up and charged.

Then, just as quickly, they were all back to sitting cross-legged on pillows in the secret plug-in hub in the back of the Golden Serpent Noodle Bar.

Penelope looked to see that Vincent and Sneak were still plugged in, but Myra was present. With a pair of metal eyes, Myra helped Penelope to her feet.

“The world isn't as simple as you might think,” Myra said. “It’s not as simple as Dissidents like Sneak and Vincent suspect it is, either. Vincent in particular holds a view of the Artaro Corporation that I’m not entirely comfortable with. He holds a psychology of envy if you ask me.”

“Why are you telling me this?” Penelope asked.

“I have a sense that great achievements are ahead of you. I sense in you the capacity to navigate this chaos. You have to be careful where you put your trust. There are entirely ideological movements in combat, whether within the Artaro Corporation or among Dissident groups. There are Iconoclast Faction ideologues sinking their claws into things that are worse than the greediest capitalists. You wouldn’t believe how many people out there have completely lost their minds.”

Penelope did not know what to make of these statements, but she thought about them. She had never heard of the Iconoclast Faction before, and didn’t understand why Myra was telling her about them. She wondered further why Myra sensed that any achievements were ahead of her at all. These were strange things to hear.

On the cold walk home, she thought about the few times that she had previously consumed Pollyanna, never realizing the way in which the product was produced. She had always just thought it to be a drug for rich people, but the idea that it was extracted from people’s spines put a whole new perspective on the matter.

She wondered about Puck and if he was okay. Quickly, she looked him up on her wrist-connect watch and sent him a brief holographic message, but did not receive any reply.

Leaving the activity of the Rodashi Colony, she came into the vacant wastes that separated the various colonies of Termite Hill. It had stopped raining, and the stars had come out. Looking up, she could see the guiding light of the Dreamstar in the night sky. The star was bright and soft, surrounded by the faint constellation known as the Diamond Crown. Tonight, its light was less obstructed than normal, nearly as radiant as the shards of the broken moon.

Penelope’s attention shifted to the deep and billowing background noise which filled her ears. Clearly it was the hum of Violin Termites in Patton’s Woods. Many a night, she could hear this same sound from her bedroom window or while sitting on scaffolding outside, but tonight it was particularly loud. The tone reverberated in an ominous, almost-musical fashion.

Then it struck again. With the sound came the frightful thought of the Artaro Corporation. They were watching her... and she knew it, though she still did not understand why. The Dissidents had elucidated her to this fact.

And what would she do about it? *What should I do? Do I go live in the landfill with Sneak and Vincent and the rest? Is that what’s left for me? Or are they full of shit? Maybe Artaro doesn’t want anything to do with me... My brain... There’s nothing special about my brain... I’m not even good at math...*

Supplemental Character Information:

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

Curtis, Penelope:

Class: Human Cog, Telepath/Telekinetic

Occupation: Waitress at Archer Piglet's Pancake House 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. Ariton Webweaver:

Class: Human Cog

Occupation: Dream Director at Artaro Labs Chrome Chrow, Engineer

[Eyes: Golden] [Hair: Long, Grey with Beard] [Height: 6'2"]

[Born: 89 D.C.] [Background: New Worlder, Light Complexion, from Machina]

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]

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]

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]

Archer Piglet:

Class: Hologram

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

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

[Booted Up in the early Mid-Tech Era]

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

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]

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]

Agatha Coliander:

Class: Human Cog (or perhaps not...)

Occupation: Waitress at Archer Piglet's Pancake House in West Onyx

[Eyes: Cybernetic, Orange] [Hair: Long, Blonde] [Height: 5'10"]
[Born: 161 D.C.] [Background: Unknown, Light Complexion, from Machina]

Thane Cutter:

Class: Human Cog
Occupation: Cook at Archer Piglet's Pancake House in West Onyx
[Eyes: Brown] [Hair: Bald] [Height: 6'2"]
[Born: 161 D.C.] [Background: New Worlder, Dark Complexion, from Machina]

Dorothy Patton:

Class: Human Adularian and Outlander
Occupation: Gardener, Medicinal Healer, and Merchant in Termite Hill
[Eyes: Dark Hazel] [Hair: Grey] [Height: 5'0"]
[Born: 83 D.C.] [Background: Adularian from the Crystalline Forest, Tanned Green Complexion, Lives in Termite Hill]

Curtis, Hollis:

Class: Human, Outlander
Occupation: N/A
[Eyes: Green][Hair: Short, Dirty Blonde] [Height: 4'0"]
[Born: 183 D.C.] [Background: New Worlder/Rosari, Tan Complexion, from Termite Hill]

Merriweather, Mai:

Class: Human, Outlander
Occupation: Merchant at the Termite Hill Markets
[Eyes: Green] [Hair: Curly, Blonde] [5'5"]
[Born: 147 D.C.] [Background: New Worlder, Light Complexion, from Termite Hill]

Sneak Lennox:

Class: Human Dissident (Fort Tekk)
[Eyes: Brown] [Hair: Long on Top, Dark Brown with Bleaching] [Height: 5'7"]
[Born: 168 D.C.] [Background: Rodashi, Tan Complexion, from Machina]

Vincent Sinclair:

Class: Human Dissident (Fort Tekk)
[Eyes: Hazel] [Hair: Short, Black][Height: 6'1"]
[Born: 161 D.C.] [Background: Rosari, Light Complexion, from Machina]

Liliana Sioki:

Class: Human Dissident (Fort Tekk)
[Eyes: Dark Brown] [Hair: Long, Dark Violet][Height: 5'10"]
[Born: 168 D.C.] [Background: Rodashi, Tan Complexion, from Machina]

Rick Yuri:

Class: Human Dissident (Fort Tekk)
[Eyes: Grey] [Hair: Short, Grey/Brown][Height: 6'0"]
[Born: 143 D.C.] [Background: New Worlder, Tan Complexion, Former MPD Officer from Machina]

Other Mentioned Characters:

Candy Carmen: Host of the Daily Data Dose/C.E.O. of Candy Cosmo, Inc. Note: Candy is also engaged to the President Exec. of the Artaro Corporation, Stanley Artaro.

Simon Slurpe: Co-host of the Daily Data Dose. Slurpe is a Gastropod (humanoid slug) from the Island of Slugport (an island west of Machina in the Plastic Ocean.)

Mayor Omega Flink: Machina's wise and powerful Mayor. Mayor Flink is a big advocate for the Monolithic Mainframe

Supercomputer, the Diama Operating System, and for the algorithms such systems create to help govern Machina in the world.

Stanley Artaro: The President Executive and C.E.O. of the Artaro Corporation. Having inherited the company from his father, Wolfgang, Stanley Artaro owns what is perhaps the world's largest and most important single company.

Senator Chip Huggins: A recently deceased Senator from the oppositional Choice Populist Party. With the death of Huggins, the Choice Populists waning power has fallen into nearly total obscurity.

A Map of West Enon:

