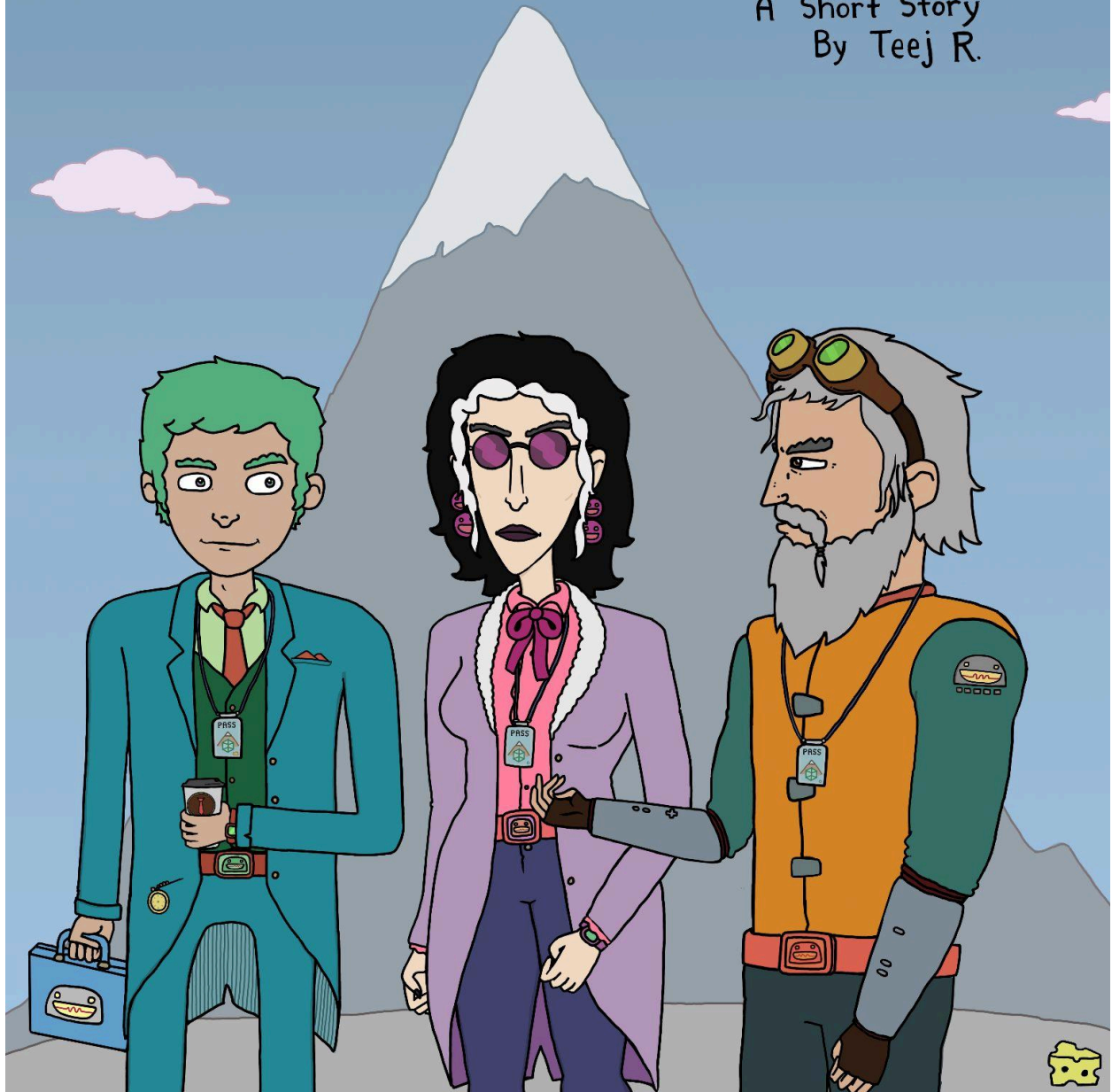


The Crystalline Mythos:
**NICKELPOINT
MOUNTAIN**

A Short Story
By Teej R.



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(Vol. 2 Pt. 6 of the “*Dream Operations*” Collection)

[Samui 193 D.C.]

Dr. Ariton Webweaver

The Dream Operations crew waited in the large garage hangar of the Artaro Labs Chrome Crow building. Together, they watched and assisted Dr. Ariton Webweaver as he prepared for his long journey to the World Council Summit gathering at the high snowy peak known as Nickelpoint Mountain.

Among the crew, the two Dream Operators, Dr. Thea Wren and Penelope Curtis, held the icy cold crystal data stones that would be used to transmit dream advertisements to the wider Machina city-state for the Artaro Corporation and its partners.

Carefully, they passed the two stones to the robot, 1K, who took them upstairs to be plugged in for the mass distribution process.

Like a workaholic, Penelope had spent the last six weeks going through entire product lines, creating dream advert after dream advert—much of her best work to date. But now it was becoming less enjoyable; a dispassionate factory line process like any other job.

Thea Wren had done similarly, but with the added responsibility of performing Dream Director duties whenever Dr. Webweaver was out of the lab or busy preparing for his imminent diplomatic mission.

Both Penelope and Thea followed 1K up to the control room, where the robot plugged the two crystal data stones into the distributor's main terminal. With two Dream Operators now in house, the terminal had been reconfigured to distribute from the two stones in succession. The dreams kept on Dr. Wren's blue stone were now set for automatic upload and broadcast, followed immediately by the ready adverts on Penelope's magenta stone.

With this important task complete, 1K directed Penelope's attention to the ladder at the back wall of the control room.

"Dr. Webweaver wanted me to send you up to the roof for a minute," the robot told her. "He'd like to speak to you before final departure."

As Penelope looked to the ladder, she noticed there was a large welding cannon hanging next to it, and a sign reading: *Artaro Dynamo G9 Plasma Welding Cannon, For Emergency Use Only!* She took note of this sign, thinking it curious, but did not ask about it. Instead, she did as she was told, and climbed quickly to the roof. 1K followed after Penelope, while Dr. Thea Wren helped him to shut the latch to the roof.

1K continued up the ladder to the roof, to find Penelope standing on its flat concrete under the grey clouds of the Machina skyline. From this vantage point, they observed the mechanistic, turning gears of the Chrome Crow district coated in snow. The cold month of Samui had almost passed into the winter month known on the Cool Calendar as Endel—the year was almost to its closing. The blue sun was beginning to set, the shattered moon appearing just above the horizon.

Penelope watched and listened as a huge rooftop door opened directly above Dr. Webweaver's hangar garage. Wind circulated and boomed as, slowly, the doc raised his company propulsion craft out into the open sky. When the door shut below the vessel, it provided a sort of helipad, on which he could vertically land. Once he had done so, he lifted the glass of the windshield, and stepped out from the cockpit.

In the previous weeks, he had been briefed on his new responsibilities regarding the World Council Summit; but on the specifics of these responsibilities, he was tight-lipped. He hinted that new Dream Machines might be constructed soon, perhaps two of them. He didn't discuss details, but Penelope speculated this might have been some kind of deal made with the government of Alchemia.

Overlooking the city, Dr. Webweaver spoke to the others quietly for a time, while 1K went through a checklist of items to inspect regarding the propulsion craft. Over the last month or so, Webweaver had granted Penelope substantially more independence as an employee and operator. There was certainly a growing mutual respect between the two of them.

"Not sure how long I'll be gone," Dr. Webweaver explained, frost gathering in his beard. "As you probably imagine, Dr. Wren will be filling in as Dream Director while I'm gone, and will be overseeing all Dream Operations related activities. But, Janice Biggs will also be around—managing the building and all corporate affairs. Just so you're aware, I instructed both of them to give you full autonomy. The advertisement instruction dockets will arrive each day through the lab. Just get as much done as you can. Other than that, you're on your own, boss."

"Good luck up there, at the mountain," Penelope said.

"Yeah, well... no doubt I'll be swimming with the sharks," Webweaver said. "This time it won't just be a bunch of Artaro Executives, either."

When the time came, Dr. Webweaver's propulsion craft was fired up for takeoff. Propellers whooshed as the craft began its ascension while snow whizzed and flurried all throughout the air. Soon, Dr. Webweaver was high in the sky, heading south and east.

His journey would bring him far from the city-state, far from even the most outer districts, across the Sapphire Woods, south and east over the spine of the Postcard Mountains to the highest peak, Nickelpoint Mountain. At the top of this great mountain, he would find World Council Headquarters, where powerful leaders from across Enon made the truly impactful decisions.

Webweaver's internal gears were turning as he lost himself in deep thought over the course of the flight. Out of the visor, he overlooked foggy grey skies and clouds, which hung over a sea of tall conifer trees in the southern Sapphire Forest. He could see the Jade Mountains to the east, and the Postcard Mountains to the south.

When he reached the craggy range of the Postcard Mountains, he began to rise higher in altitude. Eventually, Webweaver's craft broke the cloud line, and the dreary sky turned a magnificent blue. From there, he could see the singular peak of Nickelpoint Mountain, the highest point in all of Enon. The mountain's hue was of dark grey granite and nickel with tones of metallic blue under a white peak of dense snow. Built into the sides of the enormous mountain, and in the sides of nearby lesser mountains, there were wide landing structures of steel and cement.

Webweaver brought down his propulsion craft upon a wide cement strip on the westernmost side where the official entrances of the Machina and Plastipoly city-states resided. Already present were a

dozen similar Artaro manufactured propulsion crafts. Webweaver's stuck out as a bit of sore thumb, as his ship's exterior was worn and aged with a faded orange trim. Six of the ships located to the north side of the strip were clean titanium with aqua-marine trim, and cobalt necker cube symbols as seen on the Machina flag. On the south end of the landing strip, six other crafts rested, appearing similar, but with lighter tinted exteriors, lavender trim, and smoky grey necker cube symbols as on the Plastipoly city-state flag.

Stepping out, he walked along the cement towards a large lit tunnel at the snowy edge of the mountain where leading men and women of these two sister cities awaited. A group of custom hospitality robots appeared, and gathered Dr. Webweaver's luggage and computer equipment.

"Welcome to Nickelpoint Mountain, sir," one of the robots said. "Your accommodations can be found down the mountain. Our lift can take you down there lodging, or up for the summit meeting, which will begin in one hour. Here is your personal guest badge and keycard."

Dr. Webweaver accepted these artifacts, walking to meet the rest of his group. Taking a look around, the landing zone was kept clean, despite the light pockets of snow near its perimeter. Besides a few sparse clouds, the sky appeared big and bright and blue. The sun's warm blue rays were radiant here, though the air carried a light chill.

Approaching the other guests, he could see Beatrice Delphonic standing next to a tall Deitron robot—probably a diplomat of the mountain—as well as a group of armed cybernetic officers. Beatrice was easy to spot in her long, lavender coat. Like Webweaver, she had a guest pass around her neck.

Dr. Webweaver decided he would greet her first. As he came into proximity of the group, however, he spotted the CEO of the Artaro Corporation, Stanley Artaro, himself. Stanley wore a blue suit with a green vest and red utility belt. His hair was short, styled, aquamarine green in color. Stanley appeared to be holding court with all the various business people around him. Even from this distance, his charisma was obvious.

Dr. Webweaver waved to Beatrice, walking over to join her. She waved back, but continued her discussion with the robotic official.

Making his way over, Dr. Webweaver passed into the crowd, finding himself temporarily stuck in a cluster of executives from the Plastipoly city-state. This quasi-governmental faction, known as the Tophat Elite, consisted of prominent capitalists in loose affiliation. Under this framework, the Artaro Corporation utilized Plastipoly as the primary location for its manufacturing operations, with Stanley Artaro's lavender-haired sister, Lucky Artaro, serving as Artaro's Chief of Operations and a major power player among Plastipoly's leadership.

This group also included Lucky Artaro's very rich husband, Slammer Jones, who had been promoted in recent years to Head of Entertainment at the Artaro Corporation. Along with Lucky Artaro and Slammer Jones, there were a half dozen more representatives of other major corporations. The reps came from most of Machina's major companies. These included Finnegan Machinery, the Old Leavenworth Company, Moonstone Corporation, Glammo-Vac Incorporated, the Emoti-Gum Empire, and the Greencap Bank.

There were other business interests from Machina, as well. For instance, there were *executives* representing so-called yacht clubs on behalf of the Kamari Elite gang organization. There were front investment groups and art dealers tied up with Optera's powerful Doomsect mafia.

There were a few quiet government reps, as well, which included High Clerics of the Monolithic Order. They were silent and masked. Their presence only cemented the official nature of this gathering. Dr. Webweaver noticed others from the government, as well. He could see the MPD Commissioner, a couple of prominent Artaro Capitalist Senators. He even noticed a few nameless grey suits from the Office of Paranormal Affairs who seemed particularly adept at fading into the background.

There must have been over three dozen propulsion crafts and hundred elite guests gathered in the Machina/Plastipoly landing zone. All the major financial players seemed to be here—the only truly important person not present was the Mayor. Whether he would be in attendance or not, Dr. Webweaver didn't know.

Finally, after a hectic few minutes, Dr. Webweaver checked in with Beatrice, and found his place in the crowd.

“Having fun yet?” Beatrice laughed.

“Well, I made it,” Webweaver said. “That's the important thing.”

Shortly thereafter, Dr. Webweaver turned around to see Stanley Artaro's pinwheel eyes looking over. The young man ran quickly over, offering a warm greeting.

“Good to see you, again, Doc!” President Stanley said, extending an energetic handshake, and a pat on the back. “I believe I haven't seen you around since the Parade Day. I'd like to thank you and your lab crew for your help in the neutralization of certain unspecified threats on that day.” Clearly, Stanley was referring to the Nebuzalorian Spider outbreak which had happened on that day. With the use of a few flamethrowers and blaster rifles, Dr. Webweaver and his crew had shown considerable initiative in assisting military and police forces.

“Thanks, sir. I felt it was a duty, considering the readiness of the lab crew, and our clearance for such matters,” Dr. Webweaver said, keeping it professional.

“Well, luckily today will just be talking, hopefully,” Stanley said. “No need for the flamethrowers, today.”

“I'm here for whatever technical information is needed,” Dr. Webweaver said. “I've prepared a talk on Dream Mechanics and the utility of Dream Machine advertising, which I can give if needed.”

“No need for anything too formal, but I'm glad you're here,” Stanley replied. “Believe it or not, we actually flew in a brand new, full-sized prototype Dream Machine this morning. It's sitting in a crate, and will be kept in a secret location not far from here while its future is determined.”

“So, you're not certain of its use case yet?” Webweaver asked.

“Well, we won't know that until we know who the buyer is,” Stanley said. “We're calling it the Utopia Machine, the first dream machine designed to be sold to a third party. We built it with some new safety and security features that will insure its symbiosis with our own ecosystem of dream broadcasts. That way we can all grow the Dream Operations industry together, but the Artaro Corporation can still quietly monitor things as needed.”

“Oh, I see,” Dr. Webweaver responded. “I'd love to see the blueprints when the time comes. Assuming everything is similar to our other machines, I can answer any questions needed.”

“Don’t worry,” Beatrice said. “I’ll send the blueprints over now.”

Dr. Webweaver heard a musical pinging sound as holographic blueprint files arrived on his wrist-connect watch. He glanced at them briefly as Stanley continued talking.

“Our main concerns here, today, are fluid, but we have an idea,” Stanley explained. “Dream Operations expansion is the obvious one. Either we contract out a Dream Machine, or expand our own advertisement operations to other city-states. We are also looking to expand the market for Artaro Cars, and of course, Artaro Robots. Speaking of robots, Dr. Webweaver, I’d love to speak to you about your new Artaro P.C.-1000 Robot prototype.”

“Ah, yeah,” Webweaver said. “I call him 1K. He serves as my assistant at the lab. He’s smart, capable, emotionally intelligent, and his central processor houses a very dense array of Aeon Particle filaments, which I believe means he’s more conscious than most humans.”

“I was very impressed by these upgrades,” Stanley Artaro remarked. “I sent his blueprints over to the robotics development lab in Plastipoly, a step closer to manufacturing. They built three more of them for tests.”

“Really?” Webweaver said. “Already?”

The main chamber of the World Council Summit meeting was circular and ornate. It was cold at Webweaver’s seat. He noticed that his name was etched into the desk in front of him, as was everyone else’s. The people of Machina and Plastipoly only took up a portion of the chamber seating. Stanley and his sister, Lucky, sat in the front near the central flooring.

Dr. Webweaver and Beatrice sat a row behind Stanley, with Webweaver pushed a bit to the side. But even from this vantage point, Dr. Webweaver could see the whole of the circular chamber space as guests began to flow in through its large stone entry doors.

The first of the other city-states to join was the Paradise-Space Hub. While Paradisian Colonists were not uncommon to see in Machina, their Earth-based city-state was located to the northeast of Machina. It was a smaller city, but still very dense in its population and infrastructure. Most of its resources went into importing and exporting people and resources back and forth between the Green Earth and the further regions of the Blue Sol System.

The Paradisian Colonists were a shrewd people, different from the Machina’s citizens in a few key ways. Firstly, most of the colonists had spent time offworld, everywhere from Red Ares, to the expanding space-station archipelago known as the New Bahamas. These were people who dreamed of untethering themselves from any one world, who were comfortable living in zero-gravity environments. While there were some Ravell among them, most of them were regular, standard-issue humans, tired of the Green Earth and eager to build out new networks for a spacefaring future.

Secondly, the Paradisian space colonists were *Space-Atheists*—a term originally coined in Machina—it referred to their refusal of Machina’s many systems of algorithms. They refused the Diamo Operating System, the Monolith Mainframe Supercomputer, and all closed system neural-port technology. Disconnected from Machina and Plastipoly, the offworlders believed Machina’s ideas around Cogship citizenry to be oppressive. Instead, the space colonists practiced their own brand of open-source brain augmentation, holding heavy privacy rules around neural scanning and mind reading technologies.

Over the decades after the inception of the Space Hub, diplomacy and cooperation with the space colonists had become increasingly more prickly. Even so, Machina and the Paradise-Space Hub had many business dealings. While the Artaro Corporation had some relevant rocketry and propulsion tech in its catalogue, Machina's most notable player in the space exploration space was the Delphonic Corporation, which held a growing array of offworld assets related to its mining operations.

From his seat in the World Council Chambers, Dr. Webweaver observed these Paradisian diplomats as they filed in and took their seats. They were wearing slick, dark suits. A few of them had technical machine gauntlets on their arms, not too different from his own.

"I'll be right back," Beatrice Delphonic told Webweaver, standing up from her seat, then heading in the direction of the Paradisians. "Hopefully, they'll be able to tell me if my son is still alive. He hasn't been answering my communications."

The CEO of the Delphonic Corporation was Beatrice's son, Jonathan Delponic. Sadly, he would not be in attendance at the World Council Summit, as he was currently in the outer solar system. His team of corporate representatives would have to serve in his place.

The next member group to join the ranks of the World Council Summit were the Oceanic Beings of the Sentient Sea. This group of Isopods and Gastropods had journeyed north from their homes near the southern river deltas of Enon, at the foot of the wide ocean. Among them were six Isopod diplomats, three Slug men, and a single Reef Squid diplomat kept in a portable tank of seawater.

Unfortunately, most of the powerful interests in Enon didn't care much about the Oceanic Beings. Additionally, there was a longstanding xenophobia against oceanic arthropods in places like Machina. They were felt to be a warlike race, though there was very little evidence to back that up. The truth was, nobody cared about the Scythapoda, and nobody wanted to include them.

In truth, most of Enon's land-based leadership would have almost preferred that the Oceanic Beings remained at the sea bottom. Even so, there was important commerce between the cultures of Enon and these strange creatures, and trading deals were necessary. It was necessary to at least include them in formal gatherings, such as today's Summit, in at least some representative capacity—even if they were likely to go mostly ignored.

Next to join the chamber was the diplomatic leadership of Arcanica. The leaders of this Ravell state wore long robes. Their hair was well groomed, and most of them wore jewelry. Even here at a meeting with other cultures, they brought with them human slave-servants.

Of Enon's two major Ravell city-states, Arcanica was certainly the more difficult group to politically entertain and deal with. It was a society constantly looking down on humans. To the Arcanicans, all of the technology and innovation of Machina meant little. When they looked at places like Machina, all they saw was humans with more computers.

The leadership of Alchemia was more favorable, though challenging in a myriad of ways all their own. The Mars Dynasty of Alchemia was much more favorable to human societies, and had its own problems with its southern neighbor, Arcanica. The Alchemist Ravell worked closely with Machina and Plastipoly, and many of Alchemia's citizens held visas to live or work in Machina. When the leader of Alchemia, Queen Cyprus Mars, entered with an envoy, she greeted the other factions with an elegant wave of the hand. Behind her, members of the Alchemic Guard held the scarlet, gold-sealed flag of the Dynasty. Members of this entourage were guarded closely by eight large Mars-Tek Athenroid Guardian Robots with large, intimidating pulse-rifles.

While Machina and Alchemia were on good political terms, the Mars Dynasty still represented Machina's most powerful competitor in perhaps the entire world. Beneath a golden crown and thick indigo hair, the Queen's lavender-grey complexion and violet-blue eyes peered intelligently around the room. As she found her seat, Stanley Artaro, stood up from his own to go greet her.

Dr. Webweaver observed Stanley as he did so, but remained seated by himself, thinking quietly to himself about the complicated politics of the Artaro Corporation and places like Alchemia.

For many long years, Queen Mars had served as a thorn in the side of Stanley's father, Wolfgang Artaro, before his unfortunate death. Alongside her, her younger brother, Lucian Mars, was present.

Dr. Webweaver noticed that Lucian Mars's chair billed him as Alchemia's Ambassador to Machina. Most of Alchemia's attending court members wore flamboyant and sumptuous suits, many of them with robes and furs. Theirs was a baroque culture, one of great wealth and pride. At least they could be spoken with reasonable comfort, unlike their Arcanican neighbors.

The next big group to enter the chamber was the Adularians of the Crystalline Forest System. The leader of the Adularians, the Crystalline Queen, would not be present. Master Thron, the Serpentine Priest, would serve as the head diplomat for this meeting.

He wore a wool hat and subtle face paint over his naturally blue skin. With him were tribe and military leaders, as well as shamanic monks and guards. Like the Drividians, the Adularians were not granted full membership into the elite council, but unlike the Drividians, their opinions were always taken into account and their leader given a seat on the center floor with other leaders. Still, they simply did not wield the same voting power as the other five city-states on the main floor, as it could potentially create stalemates on important issues. But it was also true that their culture was not entirely understood or respected by the other city-states, and they held significant gripes with some of the others, chiefly Alchemia and Arcanica.

Lastly, an impartial Deitron robot entered the hall, sitting up high to preside over the meeting. This robot was the General Chancellor of the World Council. It had very little in terms of personality programming, and by design, held very few personal opinions. But, its many eyes, which collected and recorded visual data, glowed an eerie red. The gathered world leaders of the council were starkly aware of this being's ominous gaze.

Stanley stood up from his assigned seat and approached Dr. Webweaver again, this time speaking in a quiet voice. "There is another issue that I need to speak with you and Beatrice about, a bit later, after this initial meeting."

"Sure, no problem," Webweaver said. "Any clue as to what it's about?"

"Company security," Mr. Artaro said, and returned to his seat in the council chamber.

With the elites of the various city-states all in the chamber, the General Chancellor arose from a central desk-station. "Hello, and welcome to the World Council Summit of Enon. As agreed upon, each member group has one key representative who may address the room. You may now begin opening statements."

At this time, green holographic lights appeared above the heads of seven selected floor members.

| | |
|--------------------------------|---|
| Machina: | CEO Stanley Artaro, Cog Leadership, Artaro Corp. |
| Plastipoly: | COO Lucky Artaro, Widget Leadership, Artaro Corp. |
| Paradise-Space Hub: | Captain Tim Voyāge, Colonist Leadership, Paradise-Space Innovations, Inc. |
| Alchemia: | Queen Cyprus Mars of the Mars Dynasty of Alchemia |
| Arcanica: | Archon Alexander Proteus of the Temple of Mystic Lifeforce |
| The Crystalline Forest: | High Priest Master Thron of the Serpentine Temple of Adularia |
| The Sentient Sea: | Representative Krilok of the Legion of Squid-Lord |

The first to speak was Queen Cyprus Mars. She stood from her seat and looked around the room. She appeared elegant and grounded. She wore a long white dress with a red cape and had a golden crown set atop her indigo hair.

“We know there are many issues that we are here to entertain today,” she said. “Some of you want to talk about business, expansion, things like this. I get it. You have things to sell, and the Dynastic Government of Alchemia has plenty of Nightgold and Pulsar Credits to spend.”

Quietly, Dr. Webweaver rolled his eyes, and wondered to himself if there was any food or booze in the lobby. Today, the civilizations of the world would discuss their many grievances in long-winded and likely fruitless discussions. His role in these discussions would be minimal.

“The fact is, however,” Queen Mars continued, “I have more pressing matters to discuss in this forum.”

Webweaver decided he would listen for a few minutes longer, at least to see what this was about.

“Rather than going on about embassies and ambassador appointments, I need to discuss recent outbreaks of certain northern spiders and insectoids in our lands. We have had zones contaminated by black fungi, and worst of all, by host-zombies both human and animals. Our intel tells us that the same phenomena has been on the rise for many of you, whether you wish to discuss it or not.”

“It’s true,” Stanley Artaro replied. “We’ve had the same issue, mostly in outer districts and nearby woodlands, but there was a coordinated spider outbreak in downtown High Optera, as well. We’ve asked our media to help keep a lid on it, but the public are asking questions.”

“We’ve had pollution in our waters,” the reef squid known as Krilok spoke using computerized translation equipment built into his transport tank. “We’ve had issues with fish, sealife, and corral. Black fungus blooms in our reefs from time to time. We quarantine such spaces, and extinguish the infected ecology. It has been painful, but we have managed the situation with care.”

“We’ve seen similar things, and we’ve examined the black fungal goo,” Captain Tim Voyāge said. “There are microscopic spiders living in it. We all know what this is, though none of us speak openly of it.”

“It’s Nebuzalorian, the ecology of a darkly realm,” Alexander Proteus of Arcanica spoke with a dark voice. “It’s the sort of force that could sink this world, again into the darkness of the apocalypse. Our old texts from the time of the Doom and the Void that came after confirm this danger. We must take these threats seriously, always.”

“We have had issues in our rivers,” Master Thron of the Crystalline Forest added. “Crocodiles. Fish. Plant-life. You name it. All of it becomes polluted by this goo. We’ve seen dead animals reanimated by its presence. Our only solution has been fire, though we hate to see regions of our forest lost in this way.”

“We’ve also been experiencing signal attacks in our skies,” Tim Voyãge said. “It’s created difficulties for our rocket and satellite launches.”

“Yes, us too.” Stanley Artaro said. “Theta wave signal broadcasts, not related to our communications or Dream Operations projects. Very strange.”

“And us,” Stanley’s sister Lucky Artaro agreed. “We can confirm these theta signals, mysterious though they remain.”

“I wish to ask the representatives of the Wardencllyffe Estate, north of Machina’s reach, about these issues, in a more private setting,” Queen Cyprus Mars stated. “If they know anything about these signals, it is their responsibility to tell us.”

“I would like to be included in that,” Stanley Artaro added.

The other lead diplomats agreed, feeling similarly.

“Very well,” the Grand Chancellor Deitron Robot, replied from the central floor, “I will add this private second summit meeting to the docket. Now we may shift to questions concerning ambassadorships, or we can move on to a discussion of trade agreements.”

While the conversation had been more interesting than Dr. Webweaver had anticipated, this seemed like a good time to step away. Casually, he got up and exited the chamber hall to the outside lobby.

To calm himself a bit, he spent a few moments looking over old paintings and statues that had been donated to the World Council Summit Headquarters. Then, he spotted the snacks. There were fancy cheeses, ripe and exotic fruits, wine, and caviar. Webweaver helped himself to all of the above, and for a few minutes, he was content.

“Hello there, doctor,” a voice from behind approached.

Dr. Webweaver knew this face. This was Dr. Chaz Scathe, the Iconoclast, as he was known. Scathe’s face was worn, as he was quite old, even for a Ravell. His hair was white, combed to the left, and shaved at the sides. His nose arched downward from the brow. Upright, he stood with a strong and intelligent expression. Across his right eye, a long scar ran down to his jaw.

“Dr. Webweaver, I’ve heard so much about you,” Dr. Scathe smiled. “It’s a shame we’ve never previously had the chance to meet. You must understand, I’m generally not much for social functions.”

“Oh, yes. Well, I suppose I’m in agreement with you on that matter,” Webweaver replied. “I think they might have been talking about you in there, Doc. People are starting to have concerns about that little group you’re calling the Iconoclast Faction, like maybe you know something about those signal broadcasts and spider attacks... or maybe you have a Dream Operation going that you’re not talking about.”

“Don’t be outrageous. We know nothing of any spider outbreaks. But, the Wardencllyffe Dream Operation Program... I should have disclosed our progress before today, but I’m prepared to speak on that subject, regardless,” Scathe answered.

“Oh,” Dr. Webweaver was surprised to hear it. “So, it’s real then?”

“Look, we work outside of your Artaro Corporation, but we have still complied with all regulations as stated by your Monolithic Government. Our Dream Operation is an area of sensitive work. Our project is much like your own, only with differing aspirations, and differing methods. I’d love to explain further, but you see, this information is classified under personal instruction from the Monolith Mainframe Supercomputer. I can inform your higher ups of the details in a closed setting, as needed, and that’s all I am obliged to tell you.”

Dr. Webweaver needed to process what he was hearing. He now had confirmation that a Dream Operation had been in development at the Wardencllyffe Estate, north of Machina. For a long time, he suspected something like this could be happening. But now, for Dr. Scathe to state the situation so casually—this was alarming. Dr. Webweaver tried not to let the bewilderment show, and instead maintained a dispassionate expression.

“Tell me,” Webweaver asked. “Does your Wardencllyffe project have a Dream Operator?”

“It’s funny you should ask such a thing,” Scathe replied. “We’ve had our eye open for some time, and I must admit, we’ve had our eye on your staff.”

“Yes, well, while Dr. Wren is technically available for hire, I believe she is well suited for the job she’s already got.”

“No. No. I was speaking of Penelope Curtis, the telekinetic.” Scathe clarified, “From my position, Dr. Wren appeared to be performing quite functionally as Dream Operator before Ms. Curtis came along. It seems much more apt that Ms. Curtis pursue a destiny more attuned to her vast, untapped psychic potential.”

“You know, Dr. Scathe,” Webweaver replied, noticeably frustrated. “It’s true that I’ve never met you, and that you’ve been quite skilled at keeping your involvement with the Artaro Corporation quite secret, but I have to tell you, I remember the days of the Optera Labs Program well. Our mutual colleague, Dr. Synthia Thesia, before her death... she and I were close. She knew you. She knew you all too well. And never, ever did she trust or respect your methodology.”

“I’m a scientist,” Scathe replied. “You of all people should know that. I do what works. I make observations, and act on that knowledge. I’m simply not afraid to ask the real questions.”

“A real Iconoclast,” Webweaver snickered.

“Here’s one for you now—which is a more powerful motivator: vanity or fear? Because all you Artaro Corporate types are selling is raw vanity. Society can’t reach its true potential through consumer advertising. You’re not stupid, Webweaver. You know this. Sure, the dream adverts pipe right into the brain, but do they really inspire loyalty? No. Not really. But, if you add a dash of horror to the mix, well then, now you’re talking business.”

Dr. Webweaver thought quietly for a brief moment until, after a few scratches of his mustache and beard, he said, “Listen, Chaz—I hope you don’t mind me calling you Chaz. Artaro is here to make dreams that sell stuff. It’s simple. The population soaks up the advertisements, and the wheels keep spinning. We do what works. What you’re talking about sounds... complicated... reckless... it’s the sort of shit that could cause a lot of damage.”

“Fear is the great motivator,” Dr. Scathe said. “It’s a truism. I know it—maybe you don’t. And, you know what—that’s okay with me. In fact, it gives me the edge. While you’re stuck on the losing side, I keep my eye on the prize.”

“Alright, I think I’ve had enough cheese and crackers,” Dr. Webweaver said, looking at the snack tray. “Good talk. Best of luck in the chamber meeting.” He did his best to muster a smile, then turned to walk away.

“The Violet Visus agent you use is useless, Webweaver. I’ve been tinkering with new means to create a more efficient state of mind to create the sorts of effects we’d really like to see in the markets. I’m switching out the Violet Serum for Black Visus Serum. I’ve isolated it from Necron Mushrooms, and have learned through extensive studies that there is a great wealth of psychic power to be explored. Dreams forged with this agent will create order. People will get with the program.”

Dr. Webweaver thought about turning back around to say something, but then decided he was done talking. To hear someone advocate the manufacturing and distribution of nightmares crossed the line. Walking away, he began to think.

Peering back into the chamber, he saw Beatrice sitting in her seat, as she quietly listened to the selected speakers discuss the various interests of their city-states. He didn’t want to disturb anything, and decided he would find a seat near the doorway to watch the rest of the discussion.

When everything was done and said, the room cleared, and Webweaver had to step out into the lobby again with all of the other guests. He wanted to find Stanley to relay the information Dr. Scathe had told him, but was unable to reconnect with him before his private meetings began.

So, after a stop at the nearby snack cafe, Dr. Webweaver headed to the mountain lift to get a ride down to the Nickelpoint Mountain lodgings.

At the bottom of the lift, near the cabin style hotel where guests from Machina and Plastipoly were staying, he found Beatrice arguing with a vending machine.

“Hey, Beatrice, I think we need to talk,” Webweaver said.

“Give me the orange-sunset gum, damn it,” Beatrice told the vending machine. “That’s the one I paid for.”

“I’ve already vended the purple paranoia flavor,” the vending machine said.

“I will kick you,” Beatrice said.

The vending machine buzzed and clanked and a new stick of Emoti-gum fell into the vending receptacle. She picked it up, unwrapped a stick, and threw it in her mouth.

“I ran into Dr. Scathe,” Dr. Webweaver said, “While everyone was in the chamber, earlier.”

“You want a stick of gum?” Beatrice said.

Dr. Webweaver accepted the stick of gum, and continued, “Scathe confirmed that he’s got a dream operation in development. He basically gave away that they’re building a new machine, and their planning to use Black Visus Mushrooms on their Operator to create nightmares.”

“That’s against our policy,” Beatrice said. “You’d think Scathe and his Iconoclast Faction would know better by this point.”

“Did corporate ever find out if the Iconoclast Faction were behind the spider outbreak that went on in Optera during the big parade?” Dr. Webweaver asked.

“We were never able to confirm for certain,” Beatrice asked. “But the company board still thinks it was them. Artaro corporate security also told me that Dr. Scathe would be skipping this year’s Summit. He shouldn’t even be here.”

“Stanley told me there was something going on with the Artaro corporate security,” Dr. Webweaver said. “Or at least he said he wanted to talk about it.”

“We’ll have to ask Stanley when we see him,” Beatrice said. “My question though is about Dr. Scathe. If he and his people are building their own Dream Machine, who are they going to use as their Operator?”

“Well, he made a comment about that back at the cheese tray, actually... made it sound like he wanted Penelope to work for him. I don’t think she would go for that, obviously, though.”

“Do you think they’ll try to go for your other Operator, Dr. Wren?”

“I’d be lying if I said she hasn’t been favorable to Dr. Scathe’s Dream Mechanics lectures,” Webweaver said. “It goes way back with her, to her college days, before we even hired her. You remember the Operator, Gilliam Lennon, I imagine. They would attend Scathe’s talks on Dream Operations and psychology. That was a long time ago, though.”

“Maybe he has someone else in mind that we don’t know about,” Beatrice said.

“I don’t know,” Dr. Webweaver said. “Possibly.”

For the next two hours, Dr. Webweaver took some time to freshen up in his lodge room. He tried not to think too much. Back at the lab, he always worked long days with great focus. This was more tiring than that. There were so many complicated people at this Summit, and so many dealings. It all was leaving a poor taste in his mouth, especially this business with Dr. Scathe.

When Webweaver decided it was time to find the others, he walked down a long stone path to an outdoor restaurant with fire pits and heaters. While not every summit guest gathered in this place, many did, especially those who were from Machina. After a few minutes of walking, Dr. Webweaver managed to find Beatrice at a wooden table with Stanley and his older sister, Lucky.

Dr. Webweaver took a seat with the others and ordered some soup and a turkey leg.

“I don’t know if we’re going to have time here for you to eat dinner, Dr. Webweaver,” Stanley Artaro said. “We have to meet with our colleagues from the Moonstone Corporation in twenty minutes.”

When the waiter returned with Dr. Webweaver’s soup and turkey, he ate as much of it as he could, as quickly as he could.

“Did Beatrice fill you in on Dr. Scathe?” Dr. Webweaver said, turkey leg in hand.

“I’m aware of his Dream Machine project, yes,” Stanley said. “I’ve already contacted Mayor Flink about it. I don’t know if it’s something I can put a stop to at this time, but I have my people on it. Now, about this company security issue that we’ve been meaning to discuss, I need you to listen up.”

“Alright then,” Dr. Webweaver said, putting his food to the side. “I’m all ears. What’s going on?”

“We’ve discovered an issue with our Head of Security at the Artaro Corporation,” Stanley explained. “His name is Claude Hubert. He’s a Board Member—he owns a lot of company stock. Anyway, we’ve canned him, and turned him over to the MPD. Turns out he was funneling money—Dream Operations money—out of the company through the Opteran gang known as Doomsect.”

“Really?” Webweaver said, “Where’s the money going?”

“We believe he was using it to fund the Iconoclast Faction and their new upstart Dream Operation.”

Suddenly, the pieces all clicked and Dr. Webweaver understood. Dr. Scathe was several steps ahead. Now, with his dream operation funded and nearly ready, he felt confident enough to discuss his plans more openly.

“It’s time to meet with Moonstone’s people,” Lucky Artaro said, looking at her wrist-connect watch. She put her tophat on, and stood up.

“Okay, dinner is paid for. I hope all of you are ready,” Stanley said as he fixed his tie. “We have a deal to close, so put on your game faces.”

Dr. Webweaver, Beatrice, Stanley, and Lucky got up and left the restaurant. As they left, Dr. Webweaver noticed a few Iconoclast Faction members at a table across the way. In their black jackets, they smoked pipes and mingled with other guests like normal business people.

But soon, Dr. Webweaver was back on the lift, as his group headed up to the concrete landing zones. When he got to the large landing pad where all of the Machina and Plastipoly based propulsion crafts were waiting, he saw something surprising. A group of Artaro Robots were loading a full sized Dream Machine onto a large cargo craft for Machina’s own Moonstone Corporation.

“The Mars Dynasty deal fell through,” Stanley said. “They didn’t want the new Dream Machine, so we decided to sell it to Machina’s own Moonstone Corporation.”

“They’re our competitors,” Beatrice said. “Why’d you go with them?”

“They’ll comply with our regulations,” Stanley answered, “even if those Iconoclast Faction fuckers refuse to.”

“Maybe it’s the best thing,” Lucky said, quietly. “The Moonstone Corporation is somewhat manageable, at least. I mean, dad would have hated it, but we can handle a little friendly competition.”

“Dad would have crushed Moonstone with his boot,” Stanley snickered. “But, we’re not him.”

They stood and watched while the new Utopia Dream Machine was loaded onto the craft. Dr.

Webweaver knew this was an important business deal, but couldn't find the energy to care. In truth, all he could think about was this Nightmare Operation that Dr. Scathe had spoken of.

"I don't know if I feel very good," Dr. Webweaver said, as a knot formed in his gut.

"Are you going to be okay to go over the Dream Machine technicals with Sylvia Moonstone's team?" Beatrice asked Dr. Webweaver.

"Sure, no problem," Dr. Webweaver said. "I just need a minute to catch my breath."

At that moment, Dr. Webweaver began to feel really sick. He walked away, and rushed for a bathroom. He found one not far, and splashed water on his face. Looking in the mirror, he realized he was panicking. This wasn't usually his style. So, he took a breath, and gathered himself, then returned to the group to perform his function as the resident engineer and explainer. When he found the Moonstone Corporation team, he put on a grin and shook everyone's hands. He answered their questions and went over the specifications of the Dream Machine with great care.

He did his job and tried to enjoy the rest of the informal meetings, but that evening when he retired to his lodge room, it was hard to sleep. All the issues with the Artaro Head of Security and Dr. Scathe and his Iconoclast Faction—these were problems—corruption, money, ideology, and nightmare.

Dr. Webweaver wondered what had been said in the private meetings between Scathe's Iconoclasts and the rest of leadership in Enon. He wanted to trust Stanley Artaro's leadership in these matters, but in his heart, he couldn't shake the feeling that the dangers were mounting fast.

He looked out his window, at the Postcard Mountains in the night—the white peaks lit silver by the shards of the broken moon. From this vantage point, at the top of the world where all this power was gathered, he felt unease. This didn't feel like business as usual. It felt like the world was beginning to go off the rails.

Supplemental Character Information:

World Council Attendees from Machina and Plastipoly:

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]

Stanley Artaro:

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

Dr. Beatrice Delphonic:

Class: Human Cog
Occupation: Head of Dream Operations at the Artaro Corporation
[Eyes: Pale Blue] [Hair: Black w/ White Streaks] [Height: 5'11"]
[Born: 94 D.C.] [Background: New Worlder, Pale Complexion, from Machina]
Occupation: Head of Dream Operations at the Artaro Corporation

Sylvia Moonstone:

Class: Human Cog
Occupation: CEO of the Moonstone Corporation
[Eyes: Dark Brown] [Hair: Long, Wavy, Purple] [Height: 5'9"]
[Born: 164 D.C.] [Background: New Worlder, Tanned Brown Complexion, from Machina]

Lucky Artaro:

Class: Human Widget (Citizen of Plastipoly)
Occupation: COO of the Artaro Corporation
[Eyes: Turquoise Blue] [Hair: Medium, Light Lavender] [Height: 5'5"]
[Born: 160 D.C.] [Background: New Worlder, Light Complexion, originally from Machina]

Ravell Attendees from Alchemia and Elsewhere:

Queen Cyprus Mars:

Class: Ravell
Occupation: Queen of the Mars Dynasty of Alchemia
[Eyes: Deep Purple] [Hair: Long, Indigo] [Height: 5'10"]
[Born: 133 D.C.] [Background: Ravell, Pale Grey, from Alchemia]

Lucian Mars:

Class: Ravell
Occupation: CEO of Mars-Tek/L-Lux Motors, Oligarch Baron, Brother of the Queen
[Eyes: Deep Purple] [Hair: Styled, White] [Height: 6'1"]
[Born: 140 D.C.] [Background: Ravell, Pale Grey, from Alchemia]

Dr. Chaz Scathe:

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

Other Notable Attendees:

Tim Voyāge: A Ship Captain and Diplomat from the Paradise-Space Hub.

Master ThronD: The High Temple Leader of the Serpentine Domain of the Crystalline Forest System.

Representative Krilok: A Reef Squid sent to represent the interests of the Oceanic Beings.

Archon Alexander Proteus: A High Archon of Aracanica, Order of the Mystic Lifeforce.

A Map of West Enon: Where our story takes place—Nickelpoint Mountain is located south and east of Machina, in a region known as the Postcard Mountains.

