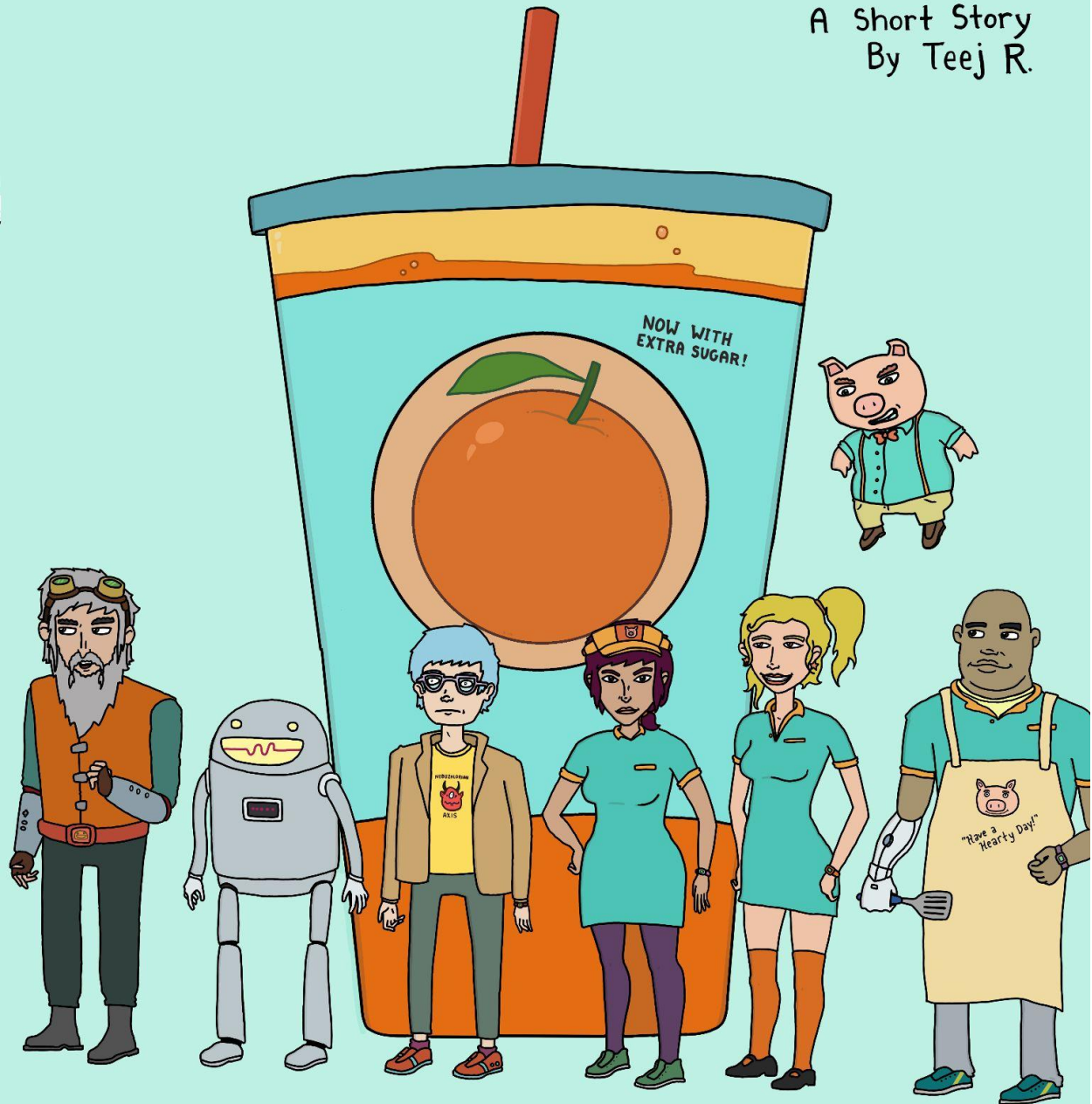


The Crystalline Mythos:  
**ORANGE SUGAR POP**

A Short Story  
By Teej R.



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(Story #5 of the “*Dream Operations*” Collection)

*This story is broken into two parts in order to see events from two perspectives. The first section is from the eyes of the Artaro Corp. Engineer and Dream Director, Dr. Ariton Webweaver. The second section is from the point of view of Penelope Curtis, an Archer Piglet's Pancake House waitress in Machina's West Onyx District. The story takes place approximately six months after the short story, Emoti-Punk, and serves as the beginning of Penelope's involvement with the Artaro Corporation.*

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

[193 D.C.]

### **Part One: Dr. Ariton Webweaver**

The Artaro factories and storage warehouses in East Chrome Crow were massive. In all of Machina, the most ingenuitive of the commercial city-states of Enon, there was no operation so wide ranging in responsibility or successful in its turn out. Endless rows of Artaro Polygon Consumer 900 Robots filled an incredible hanger. Small electric Artaro Cars rested in rows along another enormous steel shelf. On the cement floor below, Artaro consumer pets stood inanimate in a thousand colorful boxes, awaiting activation with patient, blank faces.

As the well-looked-after consumer, one of tens of millions of cogs in the marketplace, you could always count on Artaro to manufacture those much needed vacuum cleaners, and it would be Artaro that designed your rich employer's artificial heart. Yes, Artaro manufactured most things these days—everything of any real significance to you or to society at large. Sure there were trinket companies and useless gizmo companies, and those with a hand in the business of sugary pop sodas, clean drinking water, fashion cigarettes, or other marginal commodities of various sorts. But, for everything you really *needed*, it was Artaro. They knew it, and you knew it.

With a data report in hand, Dr. Ariton Webweaver walked the line, searching for imperfections in the first batch of 900 models, but alas, none were to be found! They were perfect. Production had gone smoothly from beginning to finish. The entire first shipment (about 50,000 robots) was standing tall and ready to hit the market.

Dr. Webweaver was twenty-eighth level material, which meant that he oversaw all operations in the complex known as Artaro Labs Chrome Crow. It meant he had an array of technical abilities, and that he knew many of the ins and outs of the company. Accordingly, he had twenty-eighth level clearance at the Artaro HQ Tower, a skyscraper located in the capital district, High Optera.

To be of high stature was to be a super-citizen, and the perks and powers of such status were many. But, it was the men on the twenty-ninth through thirty-first floor who dealt with the real business of Artaro. Above them, there was only the board, and the private penthouse of the President Executive—thirty-three floors in all—and for Webweaver, orders always came from above.

His current assignment was to see the 900 model through production. After all, he had been one of the most significant engineers on the project. Repairs were usually commonplace, but the production lines had been geared just right this time around. It wasn't long until Dr. Webweaver found himself in the recreation hall standing around with production and service managers, killing time, aware that he had nothing work related left to do.

“Hey, boss! What's that new project they got you working on?” one hard-hatted hover lift operator inquisitively questioned. “Is it another one of those dream thingies that do the thingy?”

Other assembly crew managers seconded the questions until finally Webweaver gave in. “No, it's nothing like that,” he responded, “but like those dream thingies, as you put it, the project is sort of under wraps at the moment. So, if I tell you a bit about it, then all of you must agree to keep your lips zipped tightly shut.”

He gave the inner crew captains a stern look. They weren't the healthiest looking men, their skin pale from the days spent in factory warehouses, but they could be trusted. With a sudden sense of pride, Webweaver grinned and continued his explanation. “You see, the tech unlocked during the development of the 900 model has been moving towards something bigger—*better*. We've made some real leaps in terms of deep programming and procedural intelligence modeling, so it only seems logical to get a jump on the next generation sooner rather than later.”

“You mean you've already begun working on the 1000 models?” the crew manager asked, surprised.

“I mean that we're already almost finished.” Webweaver's smirk grew ever larger. Running his fingers through his beard, he appeared quite pleased with himself. “Our lab manager, Janice, says the first prototype has already arrived for assembly. I think our I.T. guy brought it in like an hour ago. It's sitting in my office right now. You guys have to understand how hard I work. They didn't put me in charge around here because I'm some bean counter stooge. I really brought the bacon this time, boys. Stanley Artaro is supposedly quite pleased with my work. You know, I may even get the chance to finally meet him come Parade Day.”

Later in the morning, Webweaver stepped out for an early lunch. Temporarily leaving the business lot, he walked down the long and intensely urban roadway, passing along the factory buildings, carefully dodging fast flying Artaro Cars. Like this, he continued, until finally reaching a big industrial food truck. Glancing up, he saw a spectacular sign of liquid crystals which stated, *Narwhal Tusk Sold Here: Magical Properties!*

“What will it be today?” a voice came from the window.

“I'll just get a mollusk jerky bar, thanks,” Webweaver said, glancing up to see a tired sweaty truck cook.

“Stick or no stick?” the guy asked, bored and dreary.

“Stick, I suppose...” Webweaver didn't give a shit.

“We cook it in dolphin broth,” the worker noted. “Straight from the Plastic Ocean. That sound okay to you?”

“Whatever.” Webweaver wasn't even feeling hungry, but he knew he had to eat. His mind was consumed with work.

His wrist was then scanned for payment, the food processed, and served up quickly. What appeared before him was a large exotic sea snail. After applying the necessary condiments, he immediately shoveled it into his mouth. As he bit down, viscous blue ectoplasm dripped from his mouth,

settling in his coarse beard.

The walk back to the labs complex was uninteresting. Marching along carelessly, he avoided more Artaro Cars. On the sidewalk, he stepped over a homeless guy. He gave careless glances to the various yuppies, self absorbed socialites, and people with strange hairdos and piercings. Chrome Crow was full of strange subcultures of all kinds—everything from fashion elites to junkies and sexed up lifelike Leisure Androids—still, nothing Webweaver hadn't seen a million times before. This was just another typical day.

In the sky, he saw an airship, with the likeness of Machina's Mayor, Omega Flink, standing strong with a solemn look. The signage of the large blimp's exterior glowed with the words: *Trust the Algorithm!*

Dr. Webweaver laughed to himself. He knew these words only too well. After all, he had helped to program some of these algorithms himself. Webweaver had even helped in updates to the Monolith Mainframe Supercomputer—if only a few times. Such things were important to keep Machina in order. Despite all of this, to his mind, trust and order were fleeting and ironic concepts in this city.

Once returned, he approached the Labs Manager, Janice Biggs, in his main office lobby. Promptly, she reminded him of the boxed prototype resting on his workbench in the adjacent lab.

"Thanks, Janice," he remarked. "Did you ask the coffee pot to brew a batch?"

"You know it!" she replied. "What do I look like, an amateur?"

With that order of business complete, he turned to the door of his main private lab, only to again be interrupted.

"—Oh wait! Ariton, there's one more thing!" Janice sprang up from her desk, making sure to grab his undivided attention, "We got the file sent in today from HQ. It was Beatrice Delphonic. She says she has a lead on a girl who might prove to be a viable dream operator. She wants you to scout her out. She says this could be a big deal."

"Wow, okay, well... Why does she always have to stick me with the scouting?" His eyes tensed. He was clearly quite frustrated by this. *She knows I have work to do!*

"Agreed. That's what I told her," Janice answered, "I mean, the 900 model is set to roll out in less than two weeks." Janice shrugged, holding her arms out in exasperation. "But, what am I supposed to tell her? You know how forceful that woman can be."

"Yeah, I know. Listen, thanks for the update," Webweaver sighed. "I'm gonna get that coffee, and get started with my work. It'll probably be a little while."

Brightening the lights, Webweaver inspected his lab, as was routine. It was looking a bit messy. In the corner kitchen, he looked over his very high end Artaro designer appliances. He was especially proud of his wonderful coffee machine—a chatty little device that could brew you a cup infused with any flavor you could possibly imagine. For instance, today's blend had hints of raspberry, chocolate fudge, and cookie dough—as were Janice's preferences. Webweaver had to admit, she had good taste.

He drank his cup, walking to the workbench where his new delivery awaited. Unboxing it, however, would be delayed for the time being. To his right, he would first have to carefully repair a range of small defects in three Artaro Robots and then piece together the last of four Artaro Minibot 900

models. As usual, he did so with painstaking concentration until several hours had passed.

As he worked, he thought of the parade so soon to come. Luckily, it looked like the 900 models in the hangar were all quite ready, and that was wonderful news. Once sold, these robots would be perfect for consumer utilization, capable of cooking, cleaning, shopping, organization, even driving, and in emergencies they could perform childbirth operations. Of course these robots were no cheap luxury, but for those who could afford it, they could be extremely useful. In fact, they were so useful that it was quite common in business to purchase such robots, and to then fire all of your stupid employees. At least this had been true of the last few robotic generations, especially so with the Artaro 800 P.C. Robot consumer line. Now with the 900 models ready for release, certain segments of the population were staging protests, which often turned to chaotic rioting.

For Artaro focus groups, the P.C. 900 model held superiority over its predecessor in many notable areas. Soon these robots would be released and the trends of increased convenience and technological unemployment would continue. For this reason, it was up to Artaro to maintain the balance of the Machina city-state. Certainly this had been the thinking under Wolfgang Artaro's leadership. Now that the old man had passed, would the company under Stanley Artaro see things any different. If the Artaro Corporation could not maintain order, who could?

As a citizen in cogship, you needed Artaro, it was quite true. But, Cogship was no given; it had to be maintained. It was standard in all of Machina to charge an annual fee for this important marker of societal good standing, and while many people could afford this fee, others were inevitably unable to pay.

As a result, there certainly existed a radical segment of the population hell-bent on the company's demise. For this reason, keeping the location of the unshipped 900 models a secret was a high priority. If the locations were to be discovered by radical dissident syndicates, it could become a target for malicious terrorist attacks.

It was strange for Dr. Webweaver to think that while society was focused on ushering in a new generation of powerful robots, he himself was staring into a truer future. As large as the leap between the 800 and 900 would be, the leap between the 900 and 1000 model would be even greater. And now before him, ready for assembly, rested the packaged components of the first 1000 prototype. It wasn't until late in the night, after Janice and the rest of his staff had gone home, that Webweaver finally took to the task of unboxing the product of latest and greatest design.

The parts were many, some being small (but important) integral pieces, others being large, obvious components. He began configuration by placing the domed head element onto the cylindrical torso. It looked very much the same as the 900 model, only it held a certain new sheen to it—a more modern carbon fiber finish—a new height in elegance never yet witnessed. To Webweaver, even the most subtle strides made in the robotic design process were gorgeous to behold. Looking at his creation, a gleam of happiness lit in his eye.

After assembly, there was nothing left to do but run initial diagnostics and boot up.

“Lovely to join you, sir.” Those were the new robot's first words. “May I request your name?”

“Yes, you may. I'm Dr. Ariton Webweaver. If you refer to your input, you'll see that I was instrumental in your design.”

“Oh... yes, I see, Dr. Webweaver.” The robot glowed and hummed softly as it gradually came to terms with its consciousness. Its smiling mouth oscillated as it spoke. Its chest panel lit up with 5 crimson

lights in a black, glass-covered panel. "I am the first of my model, aren't I?"

"Well, you're certainly no dummy," Dr. Webweaver answered, confirming the robot's suspicions. "You're the first of your kind, indeed. Twenty-five thousand Artaro P-900 bots have just this morning been shipped out for consumer purchase, but you... you are my real masterpiece. The first Artaro Polygon—"

"1000." The robot finished his sentence, glaring with an oscillating smile and glowing eyes. It reached out to shake the hand of its creator.

Dr. Webweaver reached out and warmly accepted the shake. "Yes, you are the first 1000 model, vastly more versatile than the 900. Those are the robots of the present, soon to be released. But you represent the future. I'm going to call you 1K, alright 1K?"

The robot nodded, amiably.

Normally, Webweaver viewed his robotic creations as mere scrap metal, but this one was different. Webweaver could feel it in his gut. There was real consciousness and complexity here. Dense spindling filaments rich with Aeon Particles worked their magic from the central processor of the robot's positronic mind. Such powerful tech could not be ignored. As far as Webweaver was concerned, this robot had a soul.

"...Good," Dr. Webweaver continued. "I have to examine your operational ability, therefore, it follows logically that I might make you my personal assistant. You see, I have a busy job at the Artaro Corporation. There are a lot of complicated responsibilities to be had. It's not all engineering or robot design and oversight, either. You see, I'm what they call a Dream Mechanic. I build the stuff of dreams, my friend."

After initial diagnostics were completed, Webweaver began his next task of having to orient the robot to the world in which it now existed. He began by showing 1K to his work bench.

"Here's where you'll be stationed for most typical lab repairs," he began. "I'll make sure to get you some processors to fix or something. In time, I'm hoping you'll be able to help me with some of my duties. I need robots of intelligence to help me. I can't just have some slack jawed, nitwit, trash compactor bot working on the fucking Monolith supercomputer, or a Dream Machine with a project cost of over two billion Stanley-bucks. But, you—you're smarter than that. You can be of some use."

"Thank you, sir. That means a lot to me," the robot voiced.

"It sure does," Webweaver said gruffly. "It means you have purpose."

Gesturing across the lab, Webweaver then took his new mechanical assistant to the large glass tank at the end of the room—a fully enclosed ecosystem packed full of growing plants and fungi.

"Listen," Webweaver paused, "having a job like I do, you get to do a lot of strange things. For one, I have to maintain a constant supply of Purple Visus Mushrooms, a species related to dream operations. We use this mushroom to create a serum of extraordinary significance to the program. This serum is administered to our specially selected Dream Operators. This is an easily overlooked aspect of my work, but it is at the heart of what I do for the Artaro Corporation."

1K looked curiously into the tank. The Purple Visus Mushrooms appeared small, having thin,

bluish stems and prominent, violet caps.

“Dream Operations is a big deal around here,” Webweaver continued. “It’s Artaro Corp’s most effective means of advertisement. There’s a big Dream Machine in the back of the building. It’s the most important piece of equipment in the entire facility. Yet, without this little mushroom, it would be rendered useless.”

“The Dream Machine... May I see it?” 1K asked, the robot’s curiosity growing by the nanosecond.

Webweaver was caught slightly off guard by this, but agreed. “Sure, I suppose. I don’t see why not. You have a natural inquisitiveness to you. That’s quite encouraging to see.”

They walked down a long corridor along concrete floors under flickering lights. There were many doors with offices for corporate use. At the end of the hall was a large room with a sign on the door that read: *Artaro Labs Dream Machine: Authorized Personnel Only*.

The Dream Machine was planted at the center of the room. It appeared somewhat like a large armored hub—like a stationary ship to the moon. The outer body was covered in technical components, dials, and sophisticated computerized gadgets. Inside the main chamber was an operation chair. Once turned on, however, this chamber would transform into a world beyond explanation. Only a trained Operator could harness and make sense out of the nuanced nature of the realms therein.

“Yeah, it’s beautiful, isn’t it?” Webweaver remarked. “You know how much work it was to put this thing together? A Dream Machine—a machine that can literally navigate the deepest layers of reality. With it, we can craft dreams. Later, these same dreams are experienced by the masses via our state-of-the-art distribution tower.” It was obvious that Webweaver took pride in his work. He was not aware of it, but his chest puffed as he spoke. Looking up proudly, he pointed to a control room on a deck above the machine. “Up there is our control room where we can observe the operator at work. That is where you’ll be stationed, 1K.”

“And here at Artaro Labs,” the robot began to pose a question, “we use this technology to sell catalog products? Yummy Puffs, and designer clothing?”

“Exactly,” Webweaver mused. “We sell everything from Yummy Puffs and Emoti-Gum, to strip club visits, to designer clothes, and luxury cars. We promote business. As I like to say, we’re the ones who keep the wheels of Machina greased and spinning. Now come on! It’s your birthday, buddy boy. You’re zero years old, a perfect time to go see the city. I’ve got a gig I have to take care of, anyway.”

Stepping outside, this was the first time that the robot had seen the city of Machina—the Clanking City as it was called by some. This was Chrome Crow, one of the city’s most colorful districts, full of the most vivid and interesting characters. In the lots outside the labs, the valued employees of the Artaro Corporation roamed, discussed their marketing research, and conducted business. On half finished buildings, hundreds of construction robots labored away on high columns. There were civilians in colorful fashion with stylized hairdos and high end digital modifications. There were struggling civilians, workers, families, and an endless supply of consumer cogs. These were the lucky ones—the ones who roamed freely in the Northern districts where the rent was high and the air was clean.

Among the cogs in the streets, robots of all kinds marched—all the best ones brought to you by Artaro. There were many different makes and models in endless variation. They came in bright blues, reds, and oranges, but the most common were dull greys. There were small S-drones which scurried along



through the air above the crowds. These drones conducted surveillance and collected data, while large bulky Patrol Robots performed their all-so-necessary law enforcement protocols.

If any district ever exemplified the notion of the Clanking City, it was Chrome Crow. Here, large gears turned among the buildings and roads. Everything ran like clockwork. Factories spit out shipping vehicles which sped to their destinations in succinct, preordained fashion. Regardless of whatever confusion or disorientation the average cog on the street might find themselves in, the gears of Chrome Crow would keep spinning, ever efficiently.

Fittingly, the tall manufacturing and office structures found their highest brims lined with statues of crows coated in lustrous chrome metal.

Compact, robot-governed Artaro Cars flowed like a never ending fiberglass river. Among them, boxy industrial trucks and bicyclists weaved along. On a bridge above, the Municipal Train soared speedily by.

"We've got company business to attend to, my new friend," Dr. Webweaver threw his goggles down over his eyes, pressing against his wrist. When he did this, the hood cover on his slick private company convertible flew back. The car was a gorgeous green with orange trim, and built in turbines at the rear for that extra boost.

Soon, they were driving south through Chrome Crow, exiting into a massively complex super highway system. Wind blew against them as they sped. Webweaver's face was blowing back, his hair and beard in the wind behind him.

"Machina is a living, breathing organism!" he shouted loudly in an attempt to further educate his robot. "You have to understand, out here, you have to embrace it! Because, in the end, you're a part of this city whether you want to be or not!" He grinned, then turned on the music to a very loud volume. Flipping on the boosters, their speed quickly and dramatically increased.

In West Onyx, Webweaver and his new robot assistant pulled up across the street from the successful chain restaurant, Archer Piglet's Pancake House. The only problem here was that the parking happened to be metered. Webweaver would not stand for such insolence, and so took it upon himself to solve this most heinous of problems.

Of course, he could just pay the fee. In truth, he had a very extensive digital account. But, it was the principle of the matter. He was twenty-eighth level material. Why would he, of all people, pay for metered parking? It just wouldn't be right.

He climbed into the backseat, retrieving his shop torch.

*Yes, this will do nicely, he thought, quite nicely.*

Getting out of the vehicle, he crouched to the ground, lit the torch, and did what needed to be done. In a matter of seconds, the meter pole was cut, and the main device fell to the ground.

Carelessly, Webweaver threw the meter into the backseat, and laughed. "Okay, we should be good!"

When they crossed the street, he began to speak in a more hushed tone. "Listen, we're stopping here because we've got a lead on a new potential for the Dream Operations program. It's a waitress. Her

name is Priscilla, no—Patricia—I can't remember her last name, but it's a C name..."

IK's optical lights brightened. "Your file indicates one Miss Penelope Curtis as the subject on the itinerary."

"Yeah, I know that," Webweaver struck back forcefully. "Okay, well, she works at the diner right there, and, yeah, it's true, they've got a really good breakfast. But, that's why we're here. She's completely oblivious to the fact that her neural pathway configuration is both very rare and completely amazing. Can you even imagine? She's a Dream Operator in the making—a powerful one at that... and she doesn't even know it."

## **Part Two: Penelope Curtis**

Pulling up behind Archer Piglet's Pancake House, Penelope grabbed the bulky chain from her messenger bag, and locked her yellow bicycle to a rusty water meter. After, she opened the back door, and let herself in. It was another typical day at work, but now she was running late—another day of waiting tables, and placating fussy customers, all for little pay and disappointing tips. Much to her chagrin, the restaurant had already filled to the maximum occupancy with the line stretching out through the entrance. The busying hoard consisted of both irritated and irritating customers, many of them yelping and yacking in nonsensical cacophony.

Quickly, Penelope threw on her apron, and attempted to avoid eye contact with her boss while she made her way to the main kitchen. She was greeted by the overworked head cook, Thane Cutter, who had been in a state of deep focus, muscling his way through a fresh pig's innards to retrieve the organs used in the establishment's specialty burgers. Behind him a holographic projection blared loudly. It was none other than the great news anchorwoman and fashion icon, Candy Carmen. Her teeth were so white. Her figure was fit and sexy. It didn't matter what she said so long as the words poured forth from those sensuous, neon-colored lips. Put plain and simple, her very image represented a societal ideal. The corporate fashion consultants made sure of it.

The news coverage concerned the Artaro Corporation's President Executive, Stanley Artaro, and his recent decisions regarding Machina's digital currency system. Now a young man of incredible unilateral power, he had singularly created a new currency which he named after himself. In an instant, the Stanley-buck was the new standard. In reaction to this, the old Pulsar Credit had dropped significantly in value, as discussions surrounding the market dominated the news cycle.

Penelope grabbed her first serving tray of the day. It held so many stacked orders of food and drink that it almost immediately cramped her shoulder. Careful not to spill, she ran it out to the main floor. With all of her efforts, she managed to get the ice creams and breakfast waffles and Hearty Burgers where they belonged.

From over her shoulder, she could see her boss hovering across the restaurant. His name was Archer Piglet, the interactive hologram and company mascot animal so loved by the patrons whom he served. The customers only ever saw him smiling, assisting them with their greasy food needs in the most professional and hospitable manner. But, Penelope, as an employee, understood his other side all too well. He was a tyrant program, coded to ensure maximum efficiency from the workforce. Such a mode of behavioral programming translated into scrupulous eyed over-lording of staff and iron fisted enforcement

of policy. Bluntly put, there was little room for fuckups.

At the moment, Archer was floating slowly over the waiting line, taking the necessary time to greet a fun-sized family of three.

"Welcome! Welcome! Come on in, my loyal piggies! Today's special is our Hearty Pig Heart and Deep-fried Bacon Wraps," he squealed. "Get it in a meal, and receive a free action figurine!"

His salesmanship was superb. Even from this distance, Penelope could see its effectiveness on the obese child of the party. Soon, the fat little boy was begging his mother for one of these amazing plastic toys, vigilant and unrelenting until he was reassured that he would get one.

"Okey-dokey, snookums," his mother replied, pinching her son's cheeks with her stubby tendrils.

Next, Penelope caught a glimpse of her coworker, Agatha Coliander, a tall and attractive waitress with orange augmented eyes and confidence in her step. Her blonde, high-set ponytail bounced as she nimbly graced her way along through the tables. Yet, somehow she was unhindered by the tray on her shoulder, a tray so overstacked that Penelope would have fallen on her face if ever she had attempted to carry it.

Agatha's method of working was a fluid dance—weaving along, making friends everywhere she went. She delivered burgers, an enormous glazed pig heart, and a big banana split sundae to one family in particular. The father, an overly flirtatious tourist idiot, patted her on the back—the lower back. Agatha sprang upright in reaction. She let out a giggle as if what had just happened had been perfectly alright.

Agatha couldn't have handled the man more eloquently, "Oh, thank you!" she smiled. "I hope you all are enjoying your food very, very much! Is there anything else I can bring you? Sweet Sauce?"

She lowered her head, and placed her hands on her thighs, subtly exposing her neckline.

"Okay, we're all good here, hon," responded the tourist idiot's wife, a woman in a summer dress with a pearly fake smile. "Go help someone else."

With the table basically appeased, Agatha moved right along with her work. Now here was a real professional.

"Agatha! You're doing great work! Truly!" Archer Piglet couldn't have been more proud. He was certainly an employer who could appreciate a little bit of healthy self degradation—all of it in the name of good business, of course.

Agatha ducked to the hologram's level, as at the moment, he was standing on the floor looking up to her. This was unusual. His more typical way of doing things involved hovering high above the employees in deliberate superiority. But, not above Agatha—she was a crown jewel. Such could be noted in the back hall behind the kitchen where her smiling face appeared on several dozen employee-of-the-month photographs. Slowly, the photos would wave or blow kisses at you as you walked by, a constant reminder of the model citizen.

*Hell, maybe she's an android or a hologram herself,* thought Penelope. She knew Agatha fairly well, but that wouldn't make it a non-serious consideration. After all, androids of human appearance were moderately commonplace, and becoming more so. *That head tilt she's always giving—she smiles at you like she's calculating a means to win your affection.*

In the end, she decided that it couldn't be so. They didn't make holograms so obviously uncultured or vapid—and yet, Agatha appeared to be designed for this job, competent in a way that Penelope would never be.

Another set of orders came to the window. In a hurry, Penelope found herself fast at work. Unlike the model citizen, she was having a hard time not tripping over the feet of the customers. The truth was, it was ridiculously crowded in the restaurant. Her tray had too many dishes. It was lunacy. But, at the same time, it had to be done. It was her sustenance, that all-important paycheck. Everything was riding on her ability to survive in this hectic and hostile environment.

While delivering a fish sandwich to a young couple, a cocky looking technical worker and his oblivious girlfriend, she experienced her first complaint of the day.

"My fish looks undercooked," he told her, casually placing his arm around his girl's shoulder. The girl was applying her makeup right there at the table. It was caked on heavy. She had not ordered any food or even looked at her menu. In fact, even now, she did not so much as look at Penelope or her boyfriend next to her, only to a small mirror projected in front of her from a glass data block.

"I can have the cook throw the fish back on the atomic stove," Penelope offered. "It'll only take a small portion of a second to finish cooking."

"No. Don't bother." He was unengaged—too focused on whatever task lay on the complicated computer system in front of him. The machine made strange noises as its externals waved like thin telescoping spider legs in the air. The appendages curled about underneath the device which caused it to stand up in the fashion of a living creature.

Penelope was vexed for a moment at the sight of it, only to have her attention pulled back again by another customer query.

"You got drinks?" the girlfriend asked, her eyes never leaving her mirror. It was crucial that she continue to touch up her eye shadow. No way she would risk ruining an eyelash by moving her attention away from the task at hand.

"Fountain drinks, yes, but I'm afraid we don't serve alcohol." Penelope smiled amicably, but without reason.

No eye contact was to be made—the girl didn't once look away from her mirror.

The boyfriend's eyes were honed in on his weird, spider-like conferencing computer. He took a bite of his sandwich. He did not speak anymore.

Caking a blue finish on her eyelids, the girlfriend made one last remark, "Figures... this place is so last microsecond, it's agony."

When Penelope finished delivering to her remaining tables, she returned to the counter. Across the way, she could see that Agatha was still hard at work, dancing her way table to table without misstep. Penelope could not claim to match her in terms of endurance. Already, she was reaching for the coffee pot, desperate for its revitalizing power.

"What is it, break time already?!" It was Archer Piglet, directly above her. He was pinker than a

minute ago, his frustration boiling under his digitally represented pig skin.

Quickly back to work, Penelope pulled the next tray and went into the aisle. That was when she spotted him. It was Patrick Puck, and though he didn't know it, today was not his lucky day. Puck was her old friend, or perhaps more of an acquaintance. Sure, he was a nice enough guy, just a tad skittish—and a tad off putting. He was short, with bad posture, and he always seemed to find the wrong thing to say. His hair was a genetically-dyed light blue, shaggy and in his eyes. He always wore a giant pair of thick glasses. Through the lenses, his eyes appeared inhumanly large. And the way he looked at you, it could be likened to some weird insect.

At the counter, he ordered lunch instead of breakfast, choosing to order a Hearty Piglet Meal and free action figurine. The meal included a side order of delicious Piggy Pickles. It did not, however, include a fountain drink, so he requested a water cup. It was short, but it looked just like the other Archer Piglet's Pancake House to-go cups.

Behind Puck, an older man in goggles and a mechanic's jumpsuit appeared with a very modern looking Artaro Robot. The robot was brand new, something onlookers might notice. Penelope didn't know it, but this man was none other than Dr. Ariton Webweaver of the esteemed Artaro Labs Facility in Chrome Crow. He was a man of astronomical importance, a man who had helped to design many of the day's most iconic consumer products. In fact, he was a man of many important functions—even the mass psyche depended on his know-how and integrity.

His eyebrows were thick. Penelope noticed them as he turned to look at her. His stare was slow and piercing. *Why is he looking at me like that?* Just as she was about to speak up, Agatha unexpectedly cut in. He was led off without Penelope having a chance to say a word.

She was left with the shaky Patrick Puck, smiling goofily at her. “Hello, Penelope. You look wonderful today!” he said.

She did not feel wonderful today. She hadn't even had a chance to shower this morning. Her hair was unkempt. Her dress and tights probably needed to be washed. Apparently, Puck didn't notice that sort of thing.

“Thanks, bud,” she answered. “Let me get you a seat.”

“I was just gonna sit at the bar,” he said, nasally. “That way I can keep you company.” His smile was large and disturbing.

“Alright, then.” Penelope was attempting to be kind. *Where's my fucking coffee?* she thought, *I need to wake up from this monotonous, soul sucking workplace zombiedom.*

When Puck's order was complete, he went to fill his cup. At the machine, he pressed the button labeled “water” which poured a strange translucent yellow. It tasted like battery acid. His face puckered and tensed. To remedy this sorry state of affairs, he walked back to the machine, pouring the foul liquid down the drain. He turned to walk away, but could not do it. A strange feeling began to work its way up his spine—an urge like nothing he could pretend to describe.

Down the aisle, Webweaver and 1K sank into the booth seating. Webweaver glanced down at his menu, the cover being a dancing image of Archer Piglet.

“Try our razzleberry pancakes! Oink!” the menu exclaimed.

Webweaver couldn't help but jape, "Would you believe this?" He looked at his robot, "The menu got it pretty close. I'm getting blueberry pancakes... and to answer any questions, yes, that might be partly because I don't know what the hell a razzleberry is. But, the blueberry pancakes... well... do you know what heaven tastes like?"

"I don't eat food, sir," 1K answered, plainly. "Perhaps, I could download an algorithmic replication of the sensory process."

"Sure. Sure. Whatever." Webweaver sprung his hand up into the air. "Waitress!"

Answering his beckoning, Agatha approached with a big customer friendly smile. Her hand brushed through her golden hair. "Hello, there! Can I get you two anything to drink?"

"Who are you supposed to be?" Webweaver's face was stone cold.

Off-put by this, the waitress's smile bent and broke, "I'm Agatha," her voice cracked. "I'll be your waitress today." In an attempt to redeem her demeanor, she tried to thwart this brief bout of awkwardness with her award-winning charm. "Wow. Has anybody ever told you how adorable your robot buddy is? Whenever you two would like to order, just let me know!"

"I don't eat," 1K answered. "How many times am I going to have to say this?"

"Well, Agatha," Webweaver cleared his throat. "I'm afraid I'm not particularly interested in you being my waitress. I'm actually looking for a young girl by the name of Patricia—"

"It's Penelope," 1K corrected.

"Yes. Yes, her. I'd like to politely request that she be our waitress now." His expression was polite, but quite demanding.

"Really?" Agatha literally could not fathom this. Why would somebody request Penelope of all people to be their waitress? After all, it wasn't Penelope who had repeatedly received the prestigious employee-of-the-month award.

"Yes. I'm very particular about how I'd like my order, and I need someone of gumption and tenacity. Somebody, less like you..." His nose scrunched, and his hand reached out as if he were letting the waitress in on a little secret. "Yes, I believe Penny will do."

"Penelope, sir," 1K once again corrected.

Agatha's retort came swift, "Fine." Her anger was becoming obvious. She began to turn away. Quietly under her breath, she muttered, "It's obvious we don't live in the same reality, anyway."

"Well, I can't deny that," Webweaver spoke loudly and clearly. "You're wearing augmented eyes. For all I know, you're watching reality television in interspace as we speak."

"No I'm not!" Agatha answered with a pair of eyes like daggers. Then, just as quickly, she stormed down the aisle toward the register-scan.

Webweaver rested his menu on the table, placing a napkin dispenser over Archer Piglet's face.

Across the restaurant, Webweaver could see the life-sized Archer calming down a very angry Agatha. He tried to avoid eye contact, but Agatha pointed right to the table. In a short flurry, the holographic pig flew over to Penelope, directing her to take over the table.

“She seemed about ready to short circuit,” Webweaver mused to himself.

“You're really stirring up some drama there, Doc,” 1K commented.

Webweaver provided a rebuttal, “Didn't I just birth you into the world? You don't get to make comments like that yet.”

Down the aisle, Penelope came in Agatha's stead. For her, pressure was beginning to mount. Her boss had just warned her not to foul this one up. But, if Agatha couldn't handle this customer, how was she going to? As she approached the table, she could feel her stomach turn. There was nothing she could do but force a smile.

Webweaver looked at her, his expression cryptic.

She straightened her posture, and gave it her best shot, “Hello, I'm Penelope. I'll be your server today. Something to drink?”

To her relief, Webweaver's reply was harmless enough. “Yes, coffee for me,” he said. “Nothing for my robot friend who keeps reminding me of what a small appetite he has.”

“I don't have a digestive tract,” the robot clarified.

Penelope turned to 1K, “Understood.”

“Before you run off,” Webweaver added, “I'm actually ready to order... if it's all the same to someone of your magnificent neural configuration.”

*Magnificent neural configuration?* Thoughts began to stir. Penelope had received compliments before, but this was unfounded. *What the hell is this guy's deal? Maybe he's one of these virtual fetishist types. That would be gross.*

“Uh... yeah sure...” she answered, sounding a bit lost.

“Great!” he replied. “You guys have the fluffiest pancakes. If I could get some blueberry pancakes, and a side of bacon, that would be perfect.”

“Okay, I'll just scan your order in, and then I'll get that coffee for you.” Penelope pulled the scanner gun from her apron, and held it to Webweaver's wrist-connect. A small hologram of several crisp, golden Stanley-bucks digitally sprouted to an accompanied *cha-ching* soundbite.

With the transaction complete, she turned and walked down the aisle feeling relieved that it went alright. She could see Archer looking at her, remaining skeptical of her job performance.

Still at the fountain machine, Puck's eyes were again fixed upon the button labeled “water”. It was the most boring button of them all—plain letters with no appeal. The other buttons were lit, fantastical realms of pleasure and flavor. One button stood above all the others—a button labeled “Orange Sugar Pop”. The temptation to drink of the cool elixir it poured was increasingly overwhelming. It had become

entrancing, overtaking Puck at his very core.

But, why? Why was this temptation so pervasive and unbearable?

Nights previous, he lay in bed as it rained heavily outside, his sleep restless, his dreams deep. The world in which he found himself was a world of imagination. Nymphs—fairy women, some of them half naked, others fully so. Even more astonishing, one colossal furry unicorn dragon landed on the hilltops. Puck came to the dragon and stroked its fur, and it nuzzled him. Soon, the fairy women approached, and climbed aboard the dragon. Puck, too, climbed on, steering the beast along the majestic dreamworld skyline. It was a perfect dream, but it would not last. In a quick moment it was severely interrupted, infiltrated by a foreign signal. If Puck had been better educated, he would have known that the signal had been sent by none other than the Artaro Corporation. He was but a subject, like millions of others just like him, a thrall to invasive dream advertisement campaigns.

The gorgeous nymph babes fell away and disappeared. The furry dragon howled as it turned to ash and bone. Puck fell long and far toward the ground, though it never came—only a dark, formless void. Only then, in complete blackness, did he see a figure appear. It was the massive, towering likeness of Stanley Artaro—the boy wonder and business tycoon. His intense eyes looked down. They were distinct eyes, one large pupil, the other pinpointed. His satin top hat was slightly cocked, resting on his silky, perfect aquamarine hairdo.

With his immaculate, manicured hand, Stanley reached out. In his grip was an irresistible serving of Orange Sugar Pop in a cup the size of an Artaro Car. It popped and fizzed, leaving its hypnotic imprint. Puck was helpless against its power.

Now, back to his pathetic reality, Puck stood before the fountain machine with an intensified sense of helplessness. He was in a daze, his eyes enlarged, his vision blurred. All he could think about was that candy on his tongue. He had to have it.

He pressed his cup to the lever.

Starkly, a buzzer sounded! Machine guns fell from the ceiling! Archer Piglet turned a volcanic red, flying immediately to the scene of the crime. He was the mascot, but he had not appeared for his usual greeting or much-famed honest salesmanship. The pig's personality was nonexistent. The alarm had triggered an automated program, one which sounded heavily robotic and forceful. Puck had broken the law!

“The police have been notified. Units shall arrive shortly,” the pig droned. “The cog identified to be Patrick E. Puck must hereby remain on the premises until their arrival. Failure to comply shall result in additional charges and/or on site extermination. Thank you. Have a hearty day.”

The alarm came to an end, Archer Piglet's personality simultaneously rebooting. Puck was left in a state of shock and horror. Then, in a slow, sturdy rise, the customers who had fallen silent at the buzzer began to resume their previous conversations as if nothing had ever happened. Puck was alone in this matter. No one else had any reason to give a damn.

Of course, Penelope could only watch as the subsequent events began to unfold before her eyes. This was her friend—or perhaps he was just an acquaintance—but it was quite evident that he had suddenly found himself in a position of serious danger. There were no illusions to be held here. Once the Patrols were sounded, they would come, and when they would arrive, the punishment would be severe.



Webweaver too had taken notice, only with a quite different perspective. “Hold on just one second,” he directed to his robot, stood up, and walked to the counter.

Penelope was standing there, her wide eyes still on Puck in disbelief.

“Ma'am.” Webweaver spoke in an effort to seize her attention.

Penelope tried to snap back. Still, her shock was unmistakable. She tried her very best to recover her professionalism, and remembered that Archer was most likely watching.

*Okay. Back to the moment. Focus. Sweet Monolith! How am I supposed to—focus.* She took in a slow, much needed breath. Finally, after a pause, she put on that all important customer service grin and responded, “Yes? What can I do for you?”

“On second thought, I'd like to get my order to go.” The old man let out a mild laugh. “Call me crazy, but I'm inclined to enjoy my food in peace, and I can be squeamish at the sight of blood.”

*The sight of blood?* Penelope did not remark on this, but instead answered with a congenial, “Of course. Right away.”

In the back, she and Thane, the cook, saw to it that the order was quickly readied. It wasn't until she returned, order in hand, that she noticed something of potential interest. It was the old man's shoulder. There was a patch on it. It was a patch of the Artaro Corporation, one which read, *Labs Division*.

Shortly thereafter, Puck's order arrived at the counter.

Having nothing else to do, Patrick accepted his meal graciously. There was no use in running. Running would only lead him down a deeper, darker spiral. No, it would be better to just wait, and to deal with the situation as it presented itself.

Patrick found the burger to be delicious, although it had too much sauce—The Hearty Burger—as advertised. Well, perhaps not quite as advertised. In contrast to the billboards and virtual representations, the actual burger could quickly get very soggy. The trick was to eat it as quickly as possible before the condiments bled through. Having only a brief period of time before the arrival of the law, Puck devoured his burger in record time. Perhaps he ate it too quickly. He belched. His stomach turned. He broke a sweat and grew dizzy.

Still, there was something enjoyable about mainlining a Hearty Burger. It somehow took away the pain. Even the slime enveloped pickle slices were unexpectedly satisfying. Puck wouldn't have been able to articulate it, but something about the impending doom to come had caused his food to taste better. It was his final treat before the pain of capture. In a final action, he drank down his short cup of Orange Sugar Pop. He had already stolen it. He had already been caught. He was already to face terrible consequences for this illegal action of stealing. Why not enjoy the prize for which he would soon suffer?

Penelope noticed the sudden riled hurry that the old bearded man and his robot were in when they took their exit. The man put a pair of gloves on and touched his ear, thus initiating a conference call of some kind. Penelope could see he appeared quite annoyed. But, what the discussion was, she could not say. Oddly enough, the old man looked into the restaurant once more, his eyes fixing on her own. Then, just as quickly, he left.

Penelope thought of his puzzling previous statement, *Magnificent Neural Configuration*. How

*weird.*

Then, in the place of the old man, she could see the staggering form of an approaching Patrol Robot. It was beastly. She decided it best to walk behind the counter before it entered the establishment. She looked over to see Patrick waiting patiently with his hands folded on the table.

Silence came when the machine entered.

Then, a voice boomed and modulated, its character cold. "Patrick Puck. Born: 172 D.C.," it stated. "Cogship: valid. Record: minimal. Unpaid tickets. No other current charges."

Eyebrows shooting upward, Puck responded, "I was planning on paying those parking tickets."

"You are charged with stealing one cup, orange soft drink from the client, Archer Piglet's Pancake House, Incorporated," the robot fired back. "How do you plead?"

"I uh—" Puck planned to plead guilty, but was cut off before he could answer.

"The subject refuses to comply. Taking preventative actions." The robot smacked the young perpetrator hard across the jaw with the back of his pulse canon, knocking him to the floor. Blood spattered below. The young man screamed in pain, then dropped his head to the tile and wept.

The Patrol Robot continued its procedure, "You are hereby served a citation. The law bids me to submit sentencing on individuals who will not comply with direct payment. Direct payment is ten thousand Stanley-bucks. Do you wish to pay now?"

Ten thousand Stanley-bucks was roughly a year's salary for Patrick, so the answer was obvious. No, he would not pay the fee. In truth, this was just a formality. Most people could not pay. What this option really amounted to was a mechanism by which the more affluent classes could squeeze their ways out of such sticky situations.

"Since the subject has chosen not to pay," the Patrol Robot concluded, "I hereby use my authorization as an Artaro Civic Patrol Robot to sentence the subject to three months of purging. It is also my responsibility to service the subject with one beating. The subject is to report to the East Onyx Department of Purging within twenty four hours, otherwise cogship status shall be eliminated. The beating shall occur on site, outside. Right this way, Mr. Puck."

"But..." Penelope spoke accidentally. The tall and robust unit turned its domed head, looking straight at her. It was a very intimidating stare. Instinctively, she fell silent, stepping slowly behind the counter. She remained still for several seconds as it assessed her with glowing red eyes. Finally, its attention was returned to its primary target of interest.

Puck slowly helped himself back to his feet. He wiped the dripping blood from his nose on the long sleeves of his smelly, old shirt. "So, you're going to beat me?"

"Yes," the robot answered. "As required by law."

"You just hit me with your gun? Can't that count for the beating?"

"That act was an undocumented act. I must hereby serve one beating in concordance with the law as issued by the House of the Monolith. This provision was specifically put in place by Stanley Artaro. It

is imperative that I beat you.”

“Shit,” Puck tried to think of something else to say. “Is it going to hurt?”

“I am not programmed for explanation, and am thus unauthorized to provide an adequate answer to your query,” the robot stated, a staunch reminder that Puck was, in fact, speaking to a machine.

In all of this, the atmosphere of the restaurant had changed little. The heavy automatic weapons which had earlier fallen from the ceiling had since returned to their proper compartments. Customers were once again focused on their gadgets and Hearty Meals and action figurines. But, Penelope watched closely, her eyes following Puck as he willingly accompanied the robot outside. Through the glass of the entrance, she was even able to watch as Puck poised himself for his beating. He straightened his back and clenched his fists, only to be punched in the gut by a fist of metal. Even from inside the restaurant, Penelope could hear the muffled sound of the impact. Puck fell straight to the ground. Never taking her eyes away, Penelope could see the oscillations of continued speech from the Patrol Robot’s vocal display, though she couldn’t hear the words.

When it was done, the robot printed a receipt—a vastly outdated technological action. It handed the receipt to Puck, and left. It had other business to attend to elsewhere. Puck was simply one item in a much larger checklist of justice to be served.

Puck helped himself up slowly, and walked away, clutching his stomach. Archer Piglet saw this, just as Penelope did, and made his feelings known.

“I don’t want to see him in this establishment again!” the pig shouted. “If you see him here, you inform me, and we’ll have him processed for good. Now, clean the blood up off the ground, will you?”

Penelope did as she was told, working on the floor with a bucket and soapy rag while the surrounding customers continued with their lunches, careless of what had taken place. When the tile was clean, she could see her reflection clearly. She looked stressed. Her hair needed to be fixed.

In the bathroom she washed her hands, and observed herself briefly in the mirror. She brushed her raspberry magenta hair back, and splashed water on her face. She blinked, looking at her tired green eyes. She knew she needed sleep, but the power of caffeine would have to do.

Later in her shift, she accidentally broke a glass, and for it, she was thrown on dish duty. The dishes were stacked high, each one to be washed under an industrial hose in a big sink. She and Thane listened to the circuit, Candy Carmen and the latest buzz. Candy’s buzz phrase of the day—*so last microsecond*—just as that girl with the makeup had said. Most of the time, Penelope paid attention to Candy and the Daily Data Dose, just like everyone else did. However, the fervor some had for the program could not be matched. For example, it was not uncommon in the slightest to see Candy’s fashions copied to the tee by loyal fanatics throughout the city-state. Recently, in the short months following Stanley Artaro’s ascension to Presidency, proud statues of Candy’s form had arisen in several city districts, which led many to believe she may soon join the prestigious Artaro Family.

There wasn’t much else of importance said on the program after that. It became background noise, secondary to Penelope’s thoughts as she cleaned. There was one bit about a parade in upcoming weeks to unveil the latest Artaro Robot. This was exciting, but it was nothing new. Penelope had known about the upcoming unveiling for months, as the matter was widely discussed and speculated upon. Mostly, it was just gossip and nonsense, and Penelope didn’t pay it much mind.

Instead, she thought about Puck. A word came up during his interaction with the Patrol Robot. Purging. *That means he's going to have to report to one of those leech facilities.* Penelope shuttered at the thought of it. Purgers were individuals forced to walk around with a special creature known as a Blodlek Leech on their backs. Apparently, a sack in the creature's body could transform human fluids into drugs with very specific pharmaceutical applications. Although, like with many other things, not much more was known by the public, as it was company information. Penelope did understand that this was a majorly serious operation, however. When she was a child, her mother had once been purged for a period of months after entering the heart of the city with an undocumented bushel of apples.

Penelope had never liked Puck all that much, but purge-patients were painful to look at, and for whatever greater good they were giving back, it was classified.

By the shift's end, Penelope had been staring at the clock intently for some time. Still, there were more dishes to do, and she worried she would have to stick around. Luckily, Thane agreed to finish the remaining batch, as he was working through the night, anyway. He could work like a machine. This was because of certain optical and brain modifications he had recently installed. Thane was growing more cybernetic by the month, it seemed. After a terrible skirmish with the hot fryer and a batch of oil, he was hospitalized, only to have his right arm replaced with a titanium Artaro Bionic Limb. In the end, his modification had been a miracle, in that it allowed him to keep a competitive edge in a position rapidly being taken over by both open source and Artaro P.C. 800 robots. Penelope was thankful for this, as well. Thane might have been her most cybernetic of coworkers. Still, he was perhaps the most human.

“Are you working tomorrow?” he asked, taking over dish duty.

“Yeah. You?” Penelope replied, throwing her apron in the laundry shoot. The laundry shoot shot the apron through a clear tube into a pressurized washer in the adjacent room.

“Every day this week, eighty-five hours total, I believe. I only have to sleep three hours for my brain to perform optimally. Anyway, it's a good thing. I just re-upped my cogship and I've been thinking about having a virtual tank installed at the flat. That shit is expensive, but I need it if I want to get on a dilated time network to get my social life back.”

After work that night, Penelope boarded the maglev at the West Onyx Station. This was a particularly jam packed passenger cart—a sardine can, really—with hundreds of cogs inside. She had a very difficult time trying to shovel in with the rest of 'em, especially considering the yellow bicycle at her side. Elbows stabbed into her from many directions, people brushing continuously by, at each and every stop. It made it difficult to maintain a good footing. One guy kneed her hard in the leg. It was an accident, but she shouted at him just the same. He paid little attention, as he was currently projecting some kind of racecar application in his eyeglasses. Moments later, Penelope turned to see that a small child was spinning her bicycle pedal, the tire leaving a black mark on some lady-cog's dress. When the woman saw the mark, she complained loudly, but quit fussing when a virtual message appeared on her wrist display.

The train ride took a few hours, as was customary. After a while, the passengers thinned out and Penelope was able to find a seat to close her eyes for a while. Even in her light sleep, her dreams tingled, as if there was much content to them, though the second her eyes opened again, the specific images left her and only a feeling remained.

She was nearing her stop. Reaching her arms out, she yawned and stood up. The train stopped, a mechanical voice speaking incomprehensibly on the loudspeaker. The doors opened, passengers storming in and out.

Exiting to the platform outside, Penelope climbed back onto her bike and surveyed the flat lands. Where there had been endless city before, there were wreckage yards and industrial bridges, and beyond, markets and massive crowded settlement structures. Below, dry dirt continued for terrans—the dust of it rising and blowing with the winds. This was Bug Station, at the forefront of the Termite Hill Colonies.

It was here in this outpost that Penelope lived, in one of the lesser colonies at the easternmost edge, a place known as the Apple Colony. Buses ran to and fro from the station, but tonight Penelope had a bike to ride. As she did so, her eyes followed the cracks in the hardened terrain below. They weaved and flowed like dry rivers, and continued like this through the entirety of the outland district.

Out here, bicycles and motorized cycles were very common, as were buses and modded vehicles. Some people rode on the backs of donkeys. People walked with goats, and others with dogs. Occasionally, Penelope would even see gargantuan tortoises—animals brought in from Alchemia and the Royal Soil Forest east of there. But more than that, there were people—people with dirt on their faces, their clothing often torn or tattered.

Many of them were cogs like Penelope, legally granted the privilege to enter the heart of the Clanking City. Still, many others were of the outlander class, not permitted for entry. One day, and who could say when, Termite Hill would likely be absorbed into the radius of cogship, and the outlanders would have to move elsewhere.

She came into the markets. They were mostly packed up. Huge fires roared, and people sat around them on benches and seating. Many people here lived in tents, and were eating dinner outside. Penelope sped through them, and passed by the largest of the many colonies—the New World Mound. This particular colony was colossal, but it wasn't known for its size, but instead for how densely packed with human activity it was. Thousands upon thousands of people, all coexisting in tiny compartmental spaces.

She passed between the concrete walls of a thin alley, making her way to the main road that led home. This was an alley where cats liked to spend their time, a place where people could come and sleep on the ground or drink outdoors without being bothered. Perhaps more noticeably, this was an alley where a troubled kid or even a militant dissident could come with a spray paint materializer and tag away without worry. This was evident, as the alley had been marked heavily with the tags of the Seven Syndicates of the dissident factions.

Penelope had heard stories of these factions, but had no idea to what degree they actually existed. All she really knew was that they consisted of dissidents who were strong in their disdain of Artaro. They were dirt punks, most likely, and the stories pointed to them living underground. Whatever they were doing, it sounded like a bad idea.

As Penelope pulled back onto the main road, she could see the Apple Colony in the distance. This colony had its own special defining characteristics—the most notable being the apple orchards on the structure rooftops. As Penelope neared home, she could see them lit in starlight.

Outside the tunnel entrance, Penelope's mother, Mai, sat on a cart with varied market items inside. She was wearing a second hand pair of binoculars around her neck, and a bandanna which tied back her curled, blonde hair. She was smoking a cigarette with lavender and cloves. It was one of the fresh rolled cigarettes sold at the Termite Hill markets—not those Artaro Happy-Go-Lucky brand smokes like Penelope was addicted to. Penelope climbed up onto the cart next to her and sat down. Her eyes faced west where she could see the gleam of city lights fill the horizon. She could see tiny blimps, lit up and hovering in the air. The buildings were too small to see from here, but together the mass looked like an

endless glowing ocean of computer circuitry.

Looking in the back of the cart, she could see the aluminum container where her mom usually kept food. Inside, there were a number of drinks. Penelope noticed that one of them was marked Orange Sugar Pop. She picked it up and looked at it. Then, cracked it open. “How's Hollis doing?” she asked, inquiring about her ten year old brother.

“He's fine—upstairs,” she answered. “Probably just sitting on the couch with that damn virtual helmet on his head. He's really stuck on that Harvey Slug, Mollusk Battle Squad game. I'm having a hard time getting him to do anything else.”

“Well, maybe we should take Pee-wee for a walk. Hollis likes playing with the dog, so maybe he'd like to tag along for that.”

“Yeah, that should be good. We'll see.” Mai looked a bit annoyed at the situation. She had been the one to buy the helmet from a stand in the markets. “Anyway, I don't really feel like talking about it. How was work?”

“Well, I saw a guy get the shit kicked out of him by a robot.”

Mai took a drag from her cigarette, let it out slowly and answered, “Yeah, what else is new?”

## **Supplemental Character Information:**

### ***Primary Characters:***

#### **Curtis, Penelope:**

Class: Cog, Telepath/Telekinetic  
Occupation: Waitress at Archer Piglet's Pancake House  
[Eyes: Green] [Hair: Medium length, Raspberry Purple]  
[Born: 170 D.C.] [Background: New Worlder/Rosari, from Termite Hill]

Penelope Curtis is a waitress who is found to have a neural schematic of much value to the Artaro Corporation's Dream Operations Program. Born in the outer district of Termite Hill, she holds working-class values and quite a bit of common sense. This story catalogs her sudden employment by the Artaro Corporation and the Dream Operations Program. It becomes evident that Penelope is a very powerful psychic, particularly in telekinesis. It's also important to note that while Penelope's family practices the state religion of the Monolith, she was partially raised by an Adularian woman named Dorothy Patton.

#### **Webweaver, Ariton:**

Class: Cog,  
Occupation: Dream Director and Lead Scientist at Artaro Labs Chrome Crow, Engineer  
[Eyes: Golden] [Hair: Long, Grey, w/beard]  
[Born: 89 D.C.] [Background: New Worlder, from Machina]

Dr. Ariton Webweaver is a tremendously gifted engineer and inventor at the Artaro Corporation. Having studied the life and works of Peabody Artaro, he is skilled in building and maintaining Dream Machines. It is for his massive intellect that the Artaro Corporation employs him as Director of Artaro Labs Chrome Crow. He is generally not very well liked, however, as he can be cynical and prickly in nature. Beyond Dream Operations, Webweaver is also a high level designer of Artaro Robots, having done considerable work on the P.C. 800 and 900 models. More recently, he has developed a singular 1000 prototype, which works for him as an assistant. It's also worth noting that while he doesn't look it, Dr. Webweaver is over one hundred years old, having treated his own aging for many years.

### ***Other Major Characters:***

#### **Biggs, Janice:**

Class: Cog  
Occupation: Labs Manager at Artaro Labs Chrome Crow  
[Eyes: Auburn] [Hair: Styled, Lavender]  
[Born: 148 D.C.] [Background: New Worlder, from Machina]

Janice Biggs is the Labs Manager at Artaro Labs Chrome Crow. While Dr. Webweaver might technically be in charge of the Labs Complex, Janice typically runs all of the day to day operations for the building and larger staff. While she did attend college, most of her experience comes from the private sector. She has worked at Artaro Labs Chrome Crow for many years and is known for being kind, inquisitive, and very capable.

#### **Coliander, Agatha:**

Class: Cog  
Occupation: Waitress at Archer Piglet's Pancake House  
[Eyes: Augmented, Orange] [Hair: Long, Blonde]

Agatha Coliander is a waitress at Archer Piglet's Pancake House and is clearly the favorite of management. She has received numerous employee of the month awards. Always providing the best customer service, Agatha is really only smiling on the outside. She is obsessed with communicating on the circuit, and keeping up with the latest trends in pop culture, etc.

#### **Cutter, Thane:**

Class: Cog  
Occupation: Cook at Archer Piglet's Pancake House  
[Eyes: Brown] [Hair: Bald]

Thane is the cook at the Onyx location of Archer Piglet's Pancake House. He works extremely hard to afford and maintain an apartment flat. He is known for working many hours. His right arm was incinerated in a workplace injury involving a deep fryer. As a result, he has an Artaro manufactured bionic replacement.

**Piglet, Archer:**

Class: Hologram  
Occupation: Manager and Mascot at Archer Piglet's Pancake House  
[Pig Hologram, Bow-tied, w/Suspenders]

Archer Piglet is a Class C Tyrant Program designed for corporate business management. There is one Archer Piglet hologram located at every Archer Piglet's Pancake House location. There are several restaurant locations in every district of Machina, as well as many more locations in places like Plastipoly and the off world colonies.

**Puck, Patrick:**

Class: Cog  
Occupation: Fishery Worker  
[Eyes: Sky Blue][Hair: Messy, Light Blue] [Born: 172 D.C.]  
[Background: New Worlder, from Machina]

Patrick Puck begins as a fishery worker and weird anxious type who very much enjoys fast food. He is an acquaintance of Penelope Curtis, and had been a regular at Archer Piglet's Pancake House until he was banned from the premises after stealing a fountain soft drink. Puck is known for his incredible unluckiness. In fact, it is thought that his unluckiness may have some deeper cosmic origin or purpose.

**1K:**

Class: Artaro Polygon Consumer 1000 Robot,  
Occupation: Lab Assistant  
[Appearance: Metallic Grey, Domed Head, Glowing Smile]

At the time of this story, 1K is perhaps one of the most sophisticated robots in all of Enon. On the surface, he is a prototype for a new, updated Artaro P.C. Robot. But, Webweaver made a leap in the design of 1K. He is much more advanced than any other Artaro P.C. Robot in terms of cognition, having a very unique and individualistic personality. As an assistant to Dr. Webweaver, 1K's help is invaluable.

***Important Mentioned Characters:***

**Artaro, Stanley:**

Class: Cog  
Occupation: President Exec. Of the Artaro Corporation, 33<sup>rd</sup> level clearance  
[Eyes: Unique, Turquoise, w/ hints of Pink][Hair: Aquamarine Green] [Born: 173 D.C.]  
[Background: New Worlder, from Machina]

Stanley Artaro is the recently ordained President Executive (C.E.O.) of the Artaro Corporation (after the death of his father, Wolfgang Artaro in 191 D.C.) The company he inherited is perhaps the most powerful company in the world. The city-state of Machina is utterly dependent upon the Artaro Corporation, with the company having unprecedented control of the Capitalist Party (now known as the Artaro Capitalists) in the parliamentary House of the Monolith. As a young man, Stanley is both inexperienced and idealistic. As an example of his boldness (or even recklessness), before taking power, he changed the entire currency system over to a new currency named after himself. He does seek to restore competition, however, which is a large departure from his father's ruthless power grabbing strategies. At the time of this story, Stanley is engaged to marry media superstar and fashion mogul, Candy Carmen.



**Carmen, Candy:**

Class: Cog

Occupation: Head of Candy Cosmo, Inc., Host of Daily Data Dose, Artaro Board Member

[Eyes: Blue][Hair: Pink] [Born: 169 D.C.]

[Background: New Worlder, from Machina]

In the time of this story, Candy is known throughout Machina as a very prominent media personality, hosting the popular Daily Data Dose on the Circuit Interspace. She is also an Artaro advert billboard girl, media superstar, investor, and the President Executive of Candy Cosmo, Inc. As a fashion mogul, Candy Artaro is renowned for her beauty and business prowess. She is also engaged to be wedded to Artaro Corp. C.E.O., Stanley Artaro.

**Delphonic, Beatrice:** Class: Cog

Occupation: Artaro Corporation Board Member, Head of Dream Operations

[Eyes: Pale Blue] [Hair: Black w/ Grey streaks] [Born: 94 D.C.]

[Background: New Worlder/Rosari, with small traces of Ravell lineage, from Machina]

Dr. Beatrice Delphonic is a member of the board at the Artaro Corporation, and is effectively in charge of both the Artaro Labs and Apathia Labs Dream Operation Programs. In the year 193 D.C., Delphonic is ninety-nine years old, though she appears relatively young and healthy, despite some grey hairs. Her slow aging is due to cellular reprogramming and reconfiguration therapies, which Dr. Webweaver has also utilized. She is addicted to the drug Pollyanna, and smokes it regularly. She is exceedingly ambitious and has become very rich as a result. Her son, Johnny Delphonic, is the President Executive of the Delphonic Corporation, which is located offworld, and is the primary supplier of clean drinking water in Enon.

**Flink, Omega:**

Class: Hologram

Occupation: Head Senator in the House of the Monolith and Mayor of Machina

[Appearance: Golden-orange, Tall, Strong, Bald, Mustached]

Omega Flink is the eleventh Mayor of Machina's Monolithic Government. As Mayor, he acts as the congressional leader of the Artaro Capitalist Party, and is the Head Senator in Machina's parliament (House of the Monolith.) He appears as a very tall (up to twelve feet), radiant titan with bold features, stately dress, and a deep, commanding voice. There is some evidence and speculation that Mayor Flink's hologram is actually piloted by a rich and mysterious human man from a secret location within the city.

***A Map of West Enon:***

