

The Crystalline Mythos:
EMOTI-PUNK

A Short Story
By Teej R.



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(Story #4 of the “*Dream Operations*” Collection)

*Note: This story takes place approximately six months before the Artaro Corporation's discovery of Penelope Curtis. It follows Grim Glitchfield when he first meets Penelope at the Wizard's Bar in West Onyx. In the world of **The Crystalline Mythos**, the term **Emoti-Punk** refers to a subculture (and musical genre) which was common in the underground music scene of Machina's West Onyx district.*

Supplemental Character Information and A Map of West Enon can be found at the end of the story.

[192 D.C.]

For Grim Glitchfield, the month of Oakus meant a month off work. While he found it enjoyable to reclaim his personal time, he wasn't getting paid and that wasn't good. It wasn't a vacation and he wasn't sick. The street sweep company that he worked for was considering having all of its vehicles switched over to Artaro Minibot pilots, and this month was testing month. It had been scheduled since the beginning of the year, so he knew it was coming. Still, he hadn't been able to save much money to live off during this period.

He thought about job hunting, and even went so far as to fill out a few digital applications. Perhaps, if he had to, he could go back to his old job at the Easy Breezy Fishery west of the city—but that sounded like a horrible prospect. For a while, he surfed interspace on his wrist-connect watch looking for a better job to appear, but most of the jobs available seemed very underwhelming, and the good ones appeared completely beyond his ability to attain. Instead, his focus shifted to a projection of his work schedule. He could see that he was still on the schedule for the following month—so he wasn't out of the job, entirely. There was still hope to be had.

Daphney, Grim's girlfriend, drove a pretty cool van. He enjoyed riding around in it with her. It always felt a bit adventurous. She played the electric guitar in a band called *Memetic Night*. So, the vehicle was pretty much a band van—with the band's lightning infused logo painted on the side. She drove like a lunatic, and often yelled at oncoming traffic. She also liked to blast loud music.

Sometimes, Grim would pack his old motor-scooter in the back, and drive himself home when the time came. This was often the case back when he lived west of the city in the Easy Breezy fishing village and also during the times when *Memetic Night* was playing lots of shows. Daphney could often be very busy with her band, to the point that the relationship sometimes suffered for it.

Still, when they did find time together, life had been fun. A few times, they had taken the van camping in Patton's Woods southeast of Machina near Termite Hill. They could see the stars and rifts of the broken moon clearly from out there. Grim remembered those trips fondly. But, tonight there were no big outdoor adventures, and none of Daphney's rock concerts, either.

Instead, it was a boring night, and now that they had eaten some dinner in West Onyx, they drove home towards Grim's place in Apathia. Daphney seemed rather frustrated with the street traffic. While many of the Artaro Cars were automated, she always drove manually. For a while, she found herself yelling out of the window at the other drivers. To Grim, this was nothing new. Looking out from the passenger window in the opposite direction, he sat half awake and ready to go home.

When they finally got back to the Apathia Meadows Building on Inferno Street, they took a rickety service elevator up to the fifth floor. The name of the apartment building was not at all fitting. The

walls in corridors were cracked concrete and ugly wallpaper, and there weren't any meadows to be found near the place. They were greeted at the front door of the small studio by Grim's very excited pug, Ripley. Daphney picked up the dog, scratching his chin while Grim opened a can of already opened dog food out of his Artaro mini-fridge.

After that, they went out the window onto the steel fire escape balcony. There, they sat and smoked lavender-tobacco cigarettes and looked out into the Apathia night sky. It was impossible to see stars here. Still, they were high up enough to see a wide view westward into the crowds and chaos of Machina's wide Apathia district. Many businesses and bright billboards lit the cityscape. They could see the sparkling attractions of two large theme parks. Artaro Land blazed with light, right behind the creaky roller coasters of the much older (and now fading) park, Squirrely Land. The sounds of the rides and the lights of big hologram projections were enough to hold their attention for a time. In the far distance, a very large depiction of Candy Artaro waved hearts across the sky and greeted the many theme park goers of Apathia.

But, even Artaro Land was eventually overshadowed by a series of light up advertisement zeppelins which passed far nearer to Grim's apartment building. One of them was for The Old Leavenworth Company who were advertising golf memberships at their country clubs in the elite district known as Ploutos. Another zeppelin advertised Phonic Water sponsored vacation resorts in the space colonies known as the New Bahamas.

"I have to pay rent tomorrow morning," Grim said. "I'm not going to have any money after that."

"I've got a case of Phonic Water in my van," Wendy said, pointing to the zeppelin. "If you want some to get you through, you can take 'em... might help you out a bit."

"Thanks, sure. Sounds good," Grim replied. "But I don't really need any help. I'll be fine. I have food to eat. I'm just worried about bills and all. Like, if I have to go anywhere, I'll be broke."

"You should have saved better," Daphney said. "Even if you were working this month, it isn't like you would get paid before next week."

"I know. I know," Grim dragged his smoke and chilled out for a while.

Grim woke up the next morning to his dog jumping on the bed. He looked over to see Daphney still sleeping. But, Ripley was moving around a lot, and it didn't take long for it to wake Daphney up, as well.

She yawned and stretched, and then sat up in bed, "Dude. I had the weirdest dream last night. I was just having this normal dream, like I was at the beach, but then I saw a giant jar of those Flamingo Isle Dill Pickles, and now I really want to go buy some dill pickles from the store."

"Cool, sounds fine. We can pick some up," Grim said, still half asleep.

"You dream of anything interesting?" she said.

"No. What do you mean? I'm Ravell, remember? I don't dream."

More accurately, Grim was a Half-Ravell, which accounted for his light grey skin tone and natural indigo hair. It was also true that the Ravell were incapable of dreaming, but Grim wasn't entirely Ravell, and did occasionally wake up to the feeling of faint, fleeting dreams leaving his consciousness. This was certainly a trait inherited from his human side, which was his father's side of the family. However, this morning, he didn't remember anything remotely dreamlike. His sleep had been still and black, and without interruption—until the dog woke him up, of course.

"I'm going to practice today, and then I've got to stop off at the bar to help with things for a while," Daphney said. "But, I'm only working a super short shift tonight. So I can ping you at nine. Sounds good?"

"Yeah," Grim said. "That's cool."

Grim could hear as Daphney got in the shower. He was still feeling tired, however, and soon dozed back to sleep. When he next awoke, she was already gone. Luckily, she had left the coffee pot on.

"WANNA TRY THE CARAMEL VERSION?" the coffee pot's smiley interface asked in a loud fuzzy tone.

"...Uh... yeah okay."

Grim rubbed his eyes while the machine mixed caramel into the brew. Of course, it charged a half-Stanley to his wrist-connect for the service.

After that, he went to the laundromat up the street for a while to wash some clothes. He ate some lunch at a local *Sluggy Sea's Tacos and Tendrils*. It was a pretty good spot—it was located on the corner of Cash Street and Purple Book Road, which was about halfway between Grim's east side apartment on Inferno Street and the Apathia Mega Mall in the north center of the district. The restaurant was cheap and a bit greasy, but there was a lot of seating and the place was always busy. The store manager was a tall humanoid slug guy who didn't speak New Worlder too well, but he was very talkative and would talk to many of the customers. You didn't run into too many Slugs in Machina, so it was always interesting talking to the guy. When Grim was done eating, he got his laundry from the atomic coin dryer and returned home.

Getting in the door, he realized that he smelled bad, so he took a shower and changed into some fresh clothes. He put on a t-shirt from an electronic band he liked called *Kill Tha Algorithm*. They were the sort of Dissident punk band that had played The Wizard's Bar a zillion times. Grim thought about the bar, figuring maybe he would head that way soon. Though, he didn't really have the money.

It was around that time that Grim got a text ping from Daphney which read:

Change in plans tonight. Wizard's Bar is hosting a show tonight. Band is going to play. Plus a party afterwards. Come out!

Grim looked at the text and wrote back:

Yeah I was planning on heading that way soon. See ya in a bit.

Grim took an Artaro Taxi down to the venue. Looking out the cab window, the blue of the sun was almost gone from the sky, but the shards of the moon were obscured by city lights. The Artaro Polygon Robot in the driver's seat wouldn't shut up, so Grim pressed the privacy button and a barrier layer arose from behind the driver's seat. Now, there was some peace.

When he arrived at the venue, punks were lined up outside. Some of them were pretty crusty, others were rich poser imports from Optera and Ploutos. There were a variety of skin and hair modifications to be seen—an eclectic collection of holographic tattoos. Leather jackets and hoodies were probably the most popular style choices. There were plenty of boots and neon sneakers. Everyone smoked, more people than normal, which was certainly notable since Machina was a cigarette smoking city. There was so much smoke that it hung in the air like a thick cloud and obscured the faces of the random hipsters that stood, chatting in line.

When Grim got to the door, the bouncer recognized him, and let him in without issue. The place was already packed, and it was still only about eight o'clock. The Wizard's Bar was, of course, a wizard themed establishment. There were two tall staffs with light up LED crystals set at the door set for decoration. Above, a large and complex light fixture was suspended—designed to appear as a mythical flying dragon of an unknown forgotten time. Grim didn't know much about dragons, and wondered if they were from the Good Ol' Days or if they were just made up to sell merchandise. He had only ever seen them in virtual reality games at the Mega Mall. Perhaps they were a type of dinosaur, he thought. But, in all likelihood, dinosaurs were just an invention of the entertainment companies, as well.

He ordered a *Blood and Gin*, a classic Ravell drink, which he quickly received. With his drink in hand, he moseyed over to a Nebuzalorian Axis franchise themed pinball machine. He took a Quarter-Stanley hard coin, and a metallic pinball entered the area. He launched it into a world of lights and noises stylized by flames, sultan demons, snakes, and spiders. In the center of the game, there was a beautiful depiction of the Sultan Maiden gatekeeper, Diazarah. She was nearly nude in a cloth skirt—her athletic form with bright red scaly skin. She stood in a dramatic powerful pose with a glowing sword in hand. A single green snake curled around her waist and rested over her shoulder. Grim slammed the paddles at the precise moment to cause the metallic ball to react with the glowing green sword causing the whole of the machine to light up in a flurry of synthesized congratulatory sounds.

“Oh nice.” A voice said.

Grim turned to see a girl in a leather jacket standing behind him. She had green eyes and a tan complexion with dark magenta hair and a bottled beer in her hand.

“You're on a roll,” she said. “Don't fuck it up.” Then, she laughed and took a drink.

“Thanks, I'll try not to,” Grim replied.

The girl wandered off, and he continued with his game. It wasn't long before he swung the paddle and missed an important shot. The ball fell to the bottom and it was game over. Grim looked over his shoulder to see the purple haired girl talking to some guy with a beard and big squid tattoo on his arm. The guy must have been in one of the bands.

Grim finished his drink and went outside to smoke. He stood by a brick wall. Above him, on the wall, there were a bunch of wheat-pasted flyers for rock shows and punk shows and so on. He noticed a *Memetic Night* flier, as well as flyers for *Squid Valentine*, and some rapper called *Peacho* who was rumored by his fans to be immortal.

There was Daphney on the *Memetic Night* flier along with the rest of her bandmates. There was the singer, Betty Satellite, who was the singer and the one who got all the attention. The drummer, Vlad Neptune, stood behind her with a mohawk and his middle fingers in the air. Meanwhile the bass/synth player was an android. He was called Saturday 404. He was named after the old day of the week, which had disappeared from the calendars long ago. He looked quite human—wearing a tropical short-sleeve shirt. Lastly, there was Daphney—Daphney Tsu-Avilon—who hadn't responded to Grim's last few text-pings. He was beginning to wonder if she was okay.

As the night wore on, Grim didn't hear from Daphney again. He listened to the bands for a while, and had another drink. But, Daphney and the band never showed up, and eventually he got pretty tired.

After one last drink, Grim found himself again at the brick wall. He traded one of his Artaro Happy-Go-Lucky lavender-tobacco cigarettes for a lilac-tobacco hybrid with some guy who was probably an android. Sometimes, it could be difficult to tell an android from a human. Many androids appeared very similar to flesh-and-blood humans, while many humans were heavily augmented with cybernetic implants. Grim couldn't really tell which one this guy was, but he didn't ask.

After a bit of small talk, Grim wandered off and sat on a curb, where he stared at the little electric cars that whizzed up and down the road. Feeling rather bored by this, he decided to order a taxi on his wrist-connect watch. The car arrived almost immediately. This particular vehicle had no driver, and while it arrived with a set of tires, they were soon retracted into the vehicle as it lifted into the air. It didn't take long to get back to Apathia using the skyward roadways.

The vehicle's A.I system was kind enough to drop him off on the fire escape balcony which led to his apartment. He waited until the car left to climb back in through the window. Then, he went to his bed and fell into it. The dog quickly climbed up on the bed and curled up next to him.

He woke up the next morning to a bunch of missed calls and messages from Daphney. Apparently, she had dumped him in his sleep. Her explanations were convoluted, but somewhere several messages down she alluded to having met some guy at a show. She had been contemplating hanging out with him, and now she had decided to. Her messages explained that she wanted to break things off with Grim before she hung out with the other dude. Of course, she had chosen to do the break up via a text sent over a wrist watch—a fact that Grim wasn't particularly thrilled about.

Over his morning coffee, Grim thought about the sudden, unexpected break up. Maybe he should have seen the signs coming. Afterall, she spent a lot of time with her band. They had been together for more than two years. While it was true that he had been somewhat frustrated with her tendency to spend all of her time with her band and music friends, he hadn't really considered breaking up with her. Now that she had in fact dumped him, he considered ways he might've mishandled the relationship. He had definitely worked too much—which hadn't been a great idea. But, money was always tight and he had bills to pay. It was what he had to do to get by. He thought she understood that. Now, he wasn't so sure.

Then, he realized that he didn't really have strong feelings for Daphney anymore, anyway. He felt surprised that she had dumped him, but not all that particularly heartbroken. It was, like many things in Apathia... just whatever.

An hour later, she called him, and they had a hologram chat. She was apologetic. Grim listened intently to her reasoning, realizing her to be confused and very likely into some dude. He acted a little bit sad, and he was a little bit sad. But, all in all, it was a short and fairly amiable discussion. When it was done, he drank an Artaro protein shake, and stepped outside.

Grim looked at his wrist-connect, and realized that his grandmother had sent him a hundred and fifty Stanley-bucks. A message showed up, as well.

Your Grandfather told me you haven't been working. Buy groceries with this money. Don't spend it on cigarettes. If you need cigarettes, stop by for tea, and you can smoke Pops's cigarettes. He shouldn't be smoking anyway.

Grim hadn't seen his grandparents in a while, but he had talked to his Grandfather, Ray, over the watch a few days earlier. His grandmother, Petunia, liked to check in on Grim and was often pretty insistent about sending him money. He sent her a brief thank you message in response. He felt appreciative of the help. The truth was—he didn't make enough money to refuse it. Ray and Petunia Glitchfield were small business owners, and though they weren't rich, they were always willing to help out a little bit. They were especially concerned to help make sure Grim's Cog Citizenship was fully paid off annually, which was a huge help considering how expensive the fee had become in recent years.

Now that he had a little bit of money, he decided to take his scooter north of Apathia into the Arts District of South Optera. He liked the area. Sometimes, he thought he might live there one day, but it was way outside of his price range. It would probably cost more to rent a closet in Optera than his current studio in Apathia. Of course, his current apartment wasn't anything special and living in Apathia was difficult enough.

There was a bizarre little shop Grim always liked to visit when he visited South Optera. It was an interesting place called Wolf's Rare Items. Outside the shop, it appeared like a hole in the wall type place, but once inside, customers could see that the store extended far back and included a basement level. There were all sorts of weird items there. There was music, and videogames, and secondhand neural plugins. And, in glass cases, there were all kinds of rare old items from the Engines Era. In the back, there were even some items from the Good Ol' Days, including music cartridges and antique books. Of course, most of the books were edited during the Engines Era, and most of the cartridges were copied recordings, but still, this stuff was rare. A lot of it was also really expensive, but you were allowed to listen to the music on headphones in the shop. You weren't allowed to read the books, but you could look at the covers, and that was pretty cool.

"When are you going to give me a job here?" Grim said to the shop owner. He was joking, but only sort of. In reality, he would love to work at a place like this. It certainly seemed like a better gig than driving a street sweep.

The shop owner, Chuck Wesley Wolf, laughed. "You know the wife runs the register when I'm not around. And, we bought a Polygon Robot, Kim-9, so she's also on staff now. We programmed her to

be female, since my wife wanted to buy one with a pink paint job. Anyway, she's somewhere around here."

"Yeah, I get it. I haven't been at work because a robot is driving my street sweep. It's just cheaper to do business that way. But, what are we going to do when every job is occupied by an Artaro Robot? And what the hell is Artaro Corp. even going to do? Who's going to buy all their crap when their robots take all of the jobs? I literally only came here today because my grandma wired me money. Without her, I'd probably lose my damn Cogship."

Grim knew Chuck reasonably well from having come into the shop so many times. It was fun to talk to Chuck because he knew so much about so many things. As a businessman, Chuck knew quite a bit about politics and the economy. He came off as a free market guy—probably didn't like paying taxes much. Secondly, Chuck was a collector and seller of rare items, which meant that he knew all sorts of things about history and Machina and quite a bit about the rest of Enon, as well.

As a Rodashi man, he knew a lot about the history of the Rodashi people going back to the Days of Void. He had a lot of Rodashi prints and illustrations on the walls that were interesting to look at and think about.

"Yeah it's tough out there, but I've been keeping the shop afloat, and business is alright," Chuck explained. "We just got the robot to save some money. Watching the recent news, I'm thinking things are starting to get better. Now that Stanley Artaro took over at the Artaro Corporation, he could conceivably try to push the government to lower the price of Cogship. That might be a good thing for Machina. Anyway, I don't think he is the same as his dad. I think he actually believes in Artaro Capitalism for real. He's not as wrapped up in all the dirty dealmaking as his dad was. Even so, Mayor Flink is still out there fucking everything up. He's the one pushing up the price of Cogship, ya know. And meanwhile, we're supposed to believe he's twelve feet fucking tall? I don't buy it. That's just a hologram. I'm telling you, he doesn't really look like that. He's a dwarf. He's like two feet tall in real life."

Grim thought about what Chuck was saying. He agreed that the Mayor sucked, but he didn't really believe the conspiracy theories that he was a dwarf or any of that. That was just crap getting shoveled out on the circuit by basement-dwelling interspace trolls. Grim thought of Mayor Flink as an imposing figure. He probably wasn't twelve feet tall in real life, but he had to be a big guy. He always looked so strong and commanding on the holographic billboards and advertising zeppelins. As far as politics went, Grim felt it was usually better when the Mayor wasn't in the news, because anything he said usually meant more rulemaking or more cyborg cops everywhere. On the other hand, Grim wasn't so sure about Stanley Artaro. He didn't really understand why Chuck was buying into all the Artaro P.R. hype, and he didn't see any reason to think Stanley Artaro would be any different than his father. Now that Wolfgang Artaro was dead and Stanley was in charge, he would very likely fall into the same corrupt patterns. It would be naive to think otherwise.

Unfortunately, Grim didn't really have the money to buy anything, so after looking around for a while, he left. He rode west for a while in the direction of the Smiley District. He came to a stop light which used three smiling Artaro Robot faces for the three colored lights. As he waited for the light to turn green, a large crowd of people crossed the street in front of him. That was when he noticed one of them to be the girl he had met at the bar. There she was, wearing a Lt. Slug t-shirt from the Space Rabbit movies under a punky leather jacket.

He took his helmet off and waved at her.

“Hey!” he shouted. “Remember me? I think we met at the Wizard’s Bar!”

She turned and saw him. And waved, but she had to keep crossing the street.

But when she got to the sidewalk, she stood there waiting for him. Grim hung a right and parked by the sidewalk, then climbed off his bike. She walked up to the bike to meet him.

“Yeah I remember you. I was trying to talk to you, but you were so focused on your pinball game,” she said. “What’s your name, man?”

“I’m Grim.” He said, extending a handshake. “I didn’t catch your name, either.”

“Penelope,” she said. “So, are you going back to the Wizard’s Bar tonight?”

“I wasn’t planning on it. Why?”

“Well, I spent all day in Smiley, helping my dad at his computer store. It was honestly pretty stressful, but he offered to give me a little money if I helped him move some stuff. I was thinking about going over to the bar to see Ghost Guillotine rap tonight.”

“I just hope Memetic Night isn’t playing there tonight...” Grim laughed awkwardly, with his hand on his neck. “...I was dating the guitarist until... well until early this morning, actually. We just broke up. Or, rather I got dumped.”

“Oh, well, that sounds shitty.” Penelope replied, then laughed. “May as well come out and have a drink then. Yeah, I’ve been kind of seeing this guy, Rocko, but it’s not really serious, and he’s kind of an asshole. Anyway, he told me we’re not exclusive last weekend so I was a bit surprised to hear that. I sort of thought we were more of a thing than that.”

“If he’s an asshole, why did you get involved with him?” Grim asked with a raised eyebrow.

“Oh, I don’t know. Dudes are complicated. I guess I liked that he was in a band. But, I feel like the musician thing has sort of lost its luster. I heard all those songs so many times, I don’t even really like them anymore. Is that a horrible thing to say?”

Grim just laughed.

“Let’s not talk about that bullshit anymore,” she said. “So are you going to let me ride on your scooter?” Penelope asked.

A bit surprised, Grim replied, “Sure. You want to head towards West Onyx?”

Soon, they were speeding alongside the little electric Artaro Cars on the road. Grim’s scooter wasn’t all that fast, but it was good for weaving through the messy vehicular traffic on Mega Mall Way in

northern Apathia. They continued east until they passed the Machina 5.0 Police HQ Building and came into West Onyx where the cars cleared up a bit. Grim parked the scooter on the roof of a parking structure on Apricot Street. From there, they could see West Onyx from a high vantage point.

They could see the Wizard's Bar a couple of blocks to the east. There were the deep sounds of bass and drums coming from that direction and there was a lot of chatter coming from a large crowd outside of it. Penelope pointed passed the bar to a chain restaurant location for Archer Piglet's Pancake House. It was set about a block further east of the bar. She explained that she worked there, but that she was happy she had the night off. She then opened up her green messenger bag, and pulled out a couple of cans of Sugar Pop.

"You want Blackberry or Raspberry flavor?" she asked.

"I don't know. I don't really feel like drinking soda right now." Grim replied.

"I'm going to put vodka in it."

"I'll take Blackberry."

They sat for a while on one of the concrete ledges on the top of the parking structure. The sun was slowly starting to go down, but it was only about 5:30, so it would be a while before it got dark. Penelope explained that she lived in Termite Hill with her mom and little brother, but that she wanted to move closer to her work. She was in her twenties now, so living at home was getting tiresome.

Grim knew the feeling. "Yeah, I lived with my grandparents until I turned twenty-four. It was less than ideal, but renting is expensive. Add bills and Cogship costs to the equation, and no wonder so many people hide in the slums or move to the outer districts."

"Yeah," Penelope replied. "If I wasn't hired at my restaurant job, I probably would have ended up in one of the Dissident gangs by now, living in the Scrap Belt or something..."

They chatted a bit longer, but eventually it was broken up by a large Artaro Omni-Assist Robot who told them that they weren't permitted to hang out on the roof. The O.A. Robot was friendly in its tone, but also rather imposing. It wouldn't have been wise to argue with it. Instead, Grim and Penelope got up and waved goodbye, then headed swiftly for the exit.

When they got to the Wizard's Bar, they could hear the rapper Ghost Guillotine performing inside. The place was absolutely packed, inside and outside. It was around that time they noticed the cover charge. It was thirty Stanley-bucks. It was a steep price to get in, and neither Grim nor Penelope wanted to pay it. Instead, they stood outside, against the brick wall in the side alley, looking at flyers and smoking cigarettes and talking about life.

They talked about the big movie franchises, and their cassette cartridge collections, and about the various subcultural interests they had found in the circuit-interspace. Eventually, Penelope grabbed Grim by the collar and they began to kiss. Grim was a bit surprised, but he was happy to roll with it.

When a side door to the show opened up in the alley way, they peaked in, hoping nobody would notice. When they realized nobody was paying attention, they let themselves in and watched the second

half of Ghost Guillotine's performance from backstage. Then, also without notice, they let themselves back out the side entrance.

"Wow, for such a packed show, they really didn't have very good security," Penelope remarked.

After that, they retrieved Grim's motor scooter from the parking structure, and rode back to his apartment. When they got there, Penelope looked around the apartment, and commented on a few of Grim's small oil paintings, remarking that she really liked them.

They sat on the small couch for a while and talked a bit more. But, soon they were kissing and undressing each other. Penelope climbed up on Grim, but his couch was too small, and they nearly fell off the thing. Penelope stood up and laughed. Then she took Grim's hand and led him to bed.

Later in the evening, she got up and walked naked to the cassette system to turn on some music. She grabbed her t-shirt from the floor and put it on, then went to the apartment's small refrigerator where she found a half finished bottle of wine and uncorked it. Taking a drink, a weird expression came over her face.

"What the hell kind of wine, is this? Holy shit. This tastes pretty weird."

"That's blood-wine from Alchemia." Grim replied. "I'm Ravell, Penelope. We drink that shit."

"Elk blood? Damn. Gross," she said.

"Yeah, well. Like I said, we drink that shit."

Disappointed, she put the wine back, then moved across the small space to sit near the window ledge. There, she picked up her messenger bag, found her Happy-Go-Lucky Cigarettes, and lit one.

"I don't know why I smoke so many cigarettes. I'm starting to think these things are addictive."

"The doctors say they're healthy unless you have some kind of issue with your lungs," Grim replied, citing an advertisement he had seen somewhere.

"Yeah... But, I still think they're addictive," Penelope said.

They listened to music and talked some more for a while. The wind began to pick up outside a bit, and Grim had to shut the window. He shut the lights off and returned to bed. Penelope cuddled up to him and pulled the covers over.

The next morning, Grim woke up a bit earlier than Penelope. So, he went to his little electric Artaro coffee maker and requested it make breakfast tea this morning. He took a couple of quarter-Stanleys from his coin jar and the brewing process began. He poured a cup, and left a second serving for whenever Penelope woke up. He drank a cup, and checked his wrist-connect. It was only 7:00AM. He decided to sit on his window ledge by the fire escape, and drink his tea. His dog came and hopped up on the ledge next to him, then plopped down for a belly rub. Grim watched the flying cars whiz passed the slow lumbering zeppelins in the sky.

“Hey,” Penelope said, rubbing her eyes.

“Hey, morning. I made some tea. Want some?”

“Do you have coffee?” Penelope said. “I’m more of a coffee drinker in the morning.”

“Oh yeah, sure. One second.” Grim said, running to his coffee pot, plugging in the new brewing recipe.

When the coffee finished, he brought it over and sat down on the bed next to Penelope.

“Thanks,” She said, accepting the cup. She took a sip. “Listen. About last night, that was fun. I mean, actually it was really pretty great, but I literally just got out of my last relationship and I feel like that was a bit fast.”

“Oh. Yeah. That’s totally chill. No problem at all.” Grim replied, understanding her point, but not knowing precisely what to say in return. “Yeah, I guess you’re right. I only just got out of a relationship too.”

“I’m not trying to be dumb, okay.” Penelope laughed a little bit, “I’m just saying, we basically just met, and we should probably get to know each other a little better before we get too involved. I hope that sounds cool to you.”

“Yeah... yeah, of course. Makes sense. Totally get it.” Grim was trying to play it cool, but outwardly, he was likely appearing a little bit awkward.

Penelope leaned over to him. “Okay, well I suppose one more kiss is fine.” She placed her hand around his neck and kissed him. She smiled, then went back to drinking her coffee.

After coffee, Penelope gathered her messenger bag and went into the bathroom. She quickly explained that she actually had work today and that she had to get ready. When she came out from the bathroom, she had on a full waitress uniform, a turquoise-blue Archer Piglet’s dress with an orange visor hat, along with a pair of tights and sneakers.

“Don’t laugh. They make me wear this shit,” she said.

“I know what the uniforms look like. I eat pancakes. I’ve been to Archer Piglet’s plenty of times. Although I usually eat at the one in Apathia, but, uh... yeah I like to eat there. And, it’s fun to talk to the Archer Piglet. He always seems so chipper.”

“Not from my end it isn’t. Archer Piglet holograms serve as the restaurant managers at each location, and behind the scenes they’re programmed to act like total assholes to the employees. It’s called a tyrant program. I guess it plays into how their whole business model works and stuff.”

“Oh, wow damn. He seemed like such a nice guy.” Grim said, processing this bizarre factoid. “Really? I can’t really picture Archer Piglet bossing people around.”

“Yeah, neither could I until I started working there. They basically programmed Archer to act like a total goddamn dick. Honestly, if I didn’t work there, I’d probably find it kind of ironic and comical,” Penelope said. “Unfortunately, I work for him. And, he’s a pig, and he’s cute and all that, but if I show up late he’ll tear me a new one and probably fire me. Speaking of which, I don’t want to be late today. Can you give me a ride over to the Municipal?”

“Sure, okay. No problem.” Grim said.

He quickly fed the pug, then threw a red bomber jacket over his blue *Kill Tha Algorithm* t-shirt.

When they got to the Apathia Station, Penelope had to run to catch the next mag-lev train. As she did so, Grim could see a routine laser scan her retinals. When that was finished, she waved goodbye and headed for the escalators to the platform level. Grim kicked his scooter on, and sped away.

He didn’t see Penelope for several months after that. Sometimes, she would message him on his watch. A couple of times, she even left him short hologram messages. There were a couple of boardgame applications they both enjoyed, and they ended up playing those together, but those didn’t include any face to face.

It wasn’t long until Grim was back on the schedule at work. When he arrived at the main Apathia office to pick up a street sweep he found that half of the employees had been fired. There were now a great number of Artaro Minibot 800 robots running around the building. They were painted in green, blue, and earthy brown—the colors associated with the street sweep company. In the main vehicle garage, many of them readied their street sweep cars for the morning shifts. Others were already out on the road. As for Grim, he had to double check with the management to make sure he hadn’t been replaced. When he found his manager, he was assured that his job hadn’t been cut. His boss explained that management had pulled names from a hat to see who could stay. Apparently, Grim’s name had been selected by sheer chance. He had simply gotten lucky.

Settling back into his work routine, he found himself at the Apathia Mega Mall each day after his shift. It was the arcade which had pulled him in. Each night, he would plug into virtual reality, until he lost track of the hours. Sometimes he would play *Mollusc Battle Squad*. Other times, he would play games from the *Nebuzalorian Axis* franchise. He played space adventure games like *Slug Wars*, and real-time strategy games like *Lizard Lord Simulator X*. The Mega Mall Arcade was an entertaining way to spend an evening. On the other hand, now that he lived in Apathia so near to it, the late nights spent gaming after work were slowly sucking his life away.

A few times at the arcade, he saw his old coworker, Patrick Puck. Puck had worked with him at the Easy Breezy Fishery the previous year. Strangely enough, Penelope knew Puck, as well. Puck was a regular at the pancake house and Penelope had spoken with him more than a few times. While at the arcade, Puck was usually glued to the *Nebuzalorian Axis* game machines. It was weird to see how overcome he was by the thrill of the fully immersive gameplay. Whereas some people, like Penelope, could look at the video games and walk away without problem, both Grim and his old coworker found the whole experience hopelessly addictive.

Whenever finished at the arcade, Grim would ride home on his scooter each night. He also came into the habit of eating late dinners at Sluggy Seas and Tendrils. While he liked the place, it sometimes felt a bit lonely going out to eat by himself.

One night, he skipped dinner and drove into West Onyx instead. He found himself again at the Wizard's Bar. It was a rather slow night, and the only music was from the open mic. Daphney was working that night, but in the back kitchen and not as the main bartender. At some point in her shift, she took a break for a while, and came and talked to Grim over a beer. She apologized for breaking up with him, and everything. She went so far as to make a suggestion that they could try to fix things, but Grim was pretty over it, and he made sure to let her know.

Many months later, Grim found himself walking around West Onyx, feeling rather tired from a long day of errands. In the early evening, while the sun still hung blue in the sky, he stopped and sat down in the grass of a small park and pulled his V.R. headset from his backpack. The park was pretty crowded, and the cars flying overhead produced a lot of noise pollution. But, Grim didn't particularly care about the atmosphere. He just wanted a good spot to sit down.

Once comfortable, he put the V.R. mask on and logged into his *Lizard Lord Simulator X* game to make sure the pyramids and columns of his desert city were well defended. Over the past months, he had fallen deep into playing the game. And, while he usually played the game from the full immersion plug-in consoles at the Apathia Mega Mall, he began to use this mask as he went about his day. But, he was pulled from the gameworld when he heard a familiar voice.

"Hey dork. What are you doing? Playing video games in the park?"

He lifted the mask up to see that it was Penelope. There she was, just standing there in the park with a friendly pair of green eyes looking at him.

"Yeah..." Grim replied.

"Mind if I sit down next to you?" She asked.

"No, of course not. Come, sit." Grim laughed, taking off the V.R. mask.

Penelope sat down next to him. From there on, things were different—a connection had formed. Neither of them knew quite yet what that connection was or what it would mean in the future. But, they would be together in the world from this moment for many years, even when they were apart.

Supplemental Information:

Primary Characters:

Grim Glitchfield:

Class: Half-Ravell Cog

Occupation: Street Sweep in Apathia District, Gig Worker

[Eyes: Dark Pink] [Hair: Messy, Indigo] [Height: 6'1"]

[Born: 165 D.C.] [Background: Half-Ravell, Light Grey Complexion, from Machina]

Grim is a street sweep (and former fishery worker) who lives in a studio apartment in Machina's Apathia District. Having previously lived in a with his grandparents, then a college dorm space, then in a fishing town hotel for a while, he is excited to finally have his own place—even if it is rather cramped.

Penelope Curtis:

Class: Human Cog, Telepath/Telekinetic

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

[Eyes: Green] [Hair: Medium length, Raspberry Purple] [Height: 5'6"]

[Born: 170 D.C.] [Background: New Worlder/Rosari, Tan-Olive Complexion, from Termite Hill]

Penelope is a waitress working at Archer Piglet's Pancake House in West Onyx and living in a small cramped apartment in the outer district of Termite Hill. She lives with her mom and little brother and desperately wants to move into Machina proper.

Other Characters:

Patrick Puck:

Class: Human Cog, Blodlek Leech Recipient

Occupation: Fishery Worker

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

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

Puck is a hopelessly awkward nerd who lives in West Onyx and commutes all the way to Easy Breezy for work everyday. He used to work with Grim though the two were never close. He also knows Penelope because he eats at Archer Piglet's Pancake House regularly. Like Grim, he is addicted to V.R. video games and sometimes plays them at the Apathia Mega Mall.

Daphney Tsu-Avilon: Daphney Tsu-Avilon:

[Eyes: Dark Brown] [Hair: Black] [Background: Rodashi, Tan Complexion, from Machina]

Daphney is a working musician and part-time bartender who lives in Machina's West Onyx District. She plays electric guitar for a popular underground Emoti-Punk band called Memetic Night, and lives in West Onyx with her bandmate, Betty. While she has tried to be a good girlfriend to Grim, by the time of this story, their relationship isn't working.

Rocko Lacan:

[Eyes: Hazel] [Hair: Dark Brown] [Background: Rosari, Tan Complexion, from Termite Hill]

Rocko is a punk-rock musician and dishwasher based out of West Onyx in Machina. He managed to move into West Onyx by hustling barback and restaurant jobs and by selling engine parts out the Scrap Belt south of the city. Despite his independence, he lives like a slob, drinks too much, and never took his relationship with Penelope very seriously.

Chuck Wesley Wolf:

[Eyes: Dark Brown][Hair: Black] [Background: Rodashi, New Worlder, from Machina]

Chuck Wesley Wolf owns a shop in South Optera called Wolf's Rare Items. The shop is known for carrying old books and strange items from around the world and across time. He is known for always wearing tropical shirts.

Kim-9:

[Artaro Polygon Consumer 800 Robot][Color: Pink]

Kim-9 is an Artaro P.C. 800 Robot who helps out at Wolf's Rare Items. The robot is programmed to have a female voice and wears a blue felt sun hat.

Rip (Pug Dog): [Color: Brown] [Size: Small]

Ripley, or Rip for short, is Grim's pug dog. He wears a green collar and is a bit fat. While he isn't particularly well trained, he is totally adorable, so he has that going for him.

Murphy (Cat): [Color: Orange/Brown][Size: Fat]

Murphy is a fat tabby cat owned by Penelope Curtis. He wears a red collar, but likes to slide it off with his front paws when he can. He can usually be found sleeping on whatever couch cushions or pillows are available.

**Note: Below, there are listed a number of musical entertainers in the West Onyx scene of the High Tech Era.*

Popular Bands/Musicians of West Onyx:

Kill Tha Algorithm: Grim's favorite band. They play Glow-Wave and electronic club music. They are known for their use of musical gadgets, pedals, and beat machines. They are also known for their anti-algorithm/anti-supercomputer activism.

P.K. Vision on synths/drum machines
K. Le Radio on synths/drum machines

Memetic Night: Daphney's band. They play Emoti-Wave and Emoti-Punk music. Their singer, Betty Satellite is known for both her snarky lyrics and anarchist politics.

Betty Satellite on vox
Saturday 404 on bass and synths
Daphney Tsu-Avilon on guitar
Vlad Neptune on drums

Squid Valentine: Another Emoti-Punk band. Penelope's ex, Rocko, plays bass in this band. Their singer, Zep Finnegan comes from the powerful Finnegan Machinery empire. Though he comes from this background, this band is known for its strong (and sometimes very angry) anti-corporate sentiments.

Zep Finnegan on guitar/vocals
Rocko Lacan on bass
Bobby Barf on drums

Ghost Guillotine: A rapper based out of Machina's Inertia District known for his hallucinogenic Glow-Rap performances.

Zena Ultra: A DJ based out of the Plastic Ocean Yacht Club with links to Kamari gang networks. She typically plays industrial dance (Glow-Wave) music.

Queen Vuq: A decorated producer/pop artist celebrity who claims to be several hundred years old. The public believes her to be a hologram created by the large record company, *Phony Records*. Her music is often dark with Goth and Glow elements.

A Map of West Enon:

