

The Crystalline Mythos:
**STEP INTO THE
DREAM MACHINE**

A Short Story
By Teej R.



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DREAM MACHINE**

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2024 Edition

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(Vol. 2 Pt. 4 of the “*Dream Operations*” Collection)

This tale follows Penelope Curtis's first days as a Dream Operator for the Artaro Corporation. In it, we learn of Dream Advertisement, a valuable revenue stream for the company.

[Artarus 8th, 193 D.C.]

As Penelope passed through the open circular hatchway of the Artaro Labs Dream Machine, climbing into the domed inner chamber, she felt goosebumps form on her neck. Suited up in her Dream Operator Suit, and at the operator's chair for the first time, a certain sense of amazement washed over her.

"It's pretty cool, ain't it?" Dr. Webweaver was genuine in this remark. After all, he had designed it himself. The large and sophisticated machine had been geared, without misstep, for optimized operational ability. His enthusiasm in describing the device was not entirely mirrored by Penelope who was now beginning to feel rather uneasy at the notion of being inside such a machine when it would at last be activated.

Dr. Webweaver spoke into a small device on his wrist, calling Dr. Wren to the main deck. A minute passed, and 1K arrived back at the entrance door. Behind the robot, Dr. Wren stood, prepared to assist in some currently unseen way.

From a small monitor near the central chair and console, Penelope could see Dr. Wren join the others on the deck. The black-haired woman was wearing a pair of sleek, technical visor-glasses. It was also clear that she was wearing a Dream Operator suit, not too dissimilar to Penelope's own—only instead of a lavender colored protective vest, she was wearing a blue one, with a green utility belt instead of a yellow one.

Wren placed on a pair of green shockproof gloves, and approached the open hatchway of the machine.

"Glad you got the chance to take a look inside!" she called into the hatch. "You can come out now. This is only an introduction."

Penelope approached the hatchway and climbed out onto the entrance deck. As she did so, Wren passed by her, into the machine. Behind her, Dr. Webweaver followed.

"Wait here," Webweaver told Penelope, "and pay attention. This next part is important."

Peering in, Penelope watched Webweaver as he assisted Dr. Wren into the chair, adjusting the seat. A neural input was attached behind Wren's ear. Then, a bulky piece of technical equipment with many jumbled wires was pulled down from the chamber ceiling. This was attached to an interfacing helmet, which was promptly placed over Dr. Wren's head. A small arm extended from the overhead unit giving Wren a quick shot of Purple Visus in the neck, thus leaving her in a meditative trance. Her eyes were remotely opened using her own nervous system as the mechanism. Another small electronic arm extended down, dilating her pupils.

"This is how we track the dream creation process," Dr. Webweaver spoke loudly so that Penelope could hear from the hatchway. While the inner chamber wasn't massive, it was padded with white carbon foam in several places and seemed to absorb a considerable degree of sound.

“We have to track eye-movement, brain activity, and many other variables,” he added, and proceeded to flip a number of switches on the overhead unit above Dr. Wren in the operator’s chair. Finally, when things were ready, he raised his head and looked up with a grin, “Okay, looks like we’re good to go.”

Lights lit up all over the chamber, on the devices, the helmet, the chair, and surrounding space—an array of sophisticated measurement and start up processes were now taking place.

Webweaver exited the chamber, shutting the large round chamber door behind him, turning a thick wheel hatch to lock it shut as he did so. He made a few final adjustments on the main exterior panel before leading Penelope into a separate control room overlooking it all. Webweaver led her to the small director’s terminal where 1K sat at the dials with a bent steel microphone at hand.

1K looked at the performance console, “Wren has entered the lucid dream state, it appears. 89 percent. Climbing to 90. Okay, 91. That’s where she maxes out.”

“Alright, next step. Let’s see her work.” Webweaver looked delighted. Apparently, there were aspects of his job that didn’t just leave him grumpy.

“Initiating first protocol.” The robot spoke over the loudspeaker.

Wren was now centering herself, taking control of her trance. Over a monitor, Penelope could see the rapid rate at which Wren’s eyes paced. The image of Wren began to flash pink and intense bright white. Penelope watched the image as a partial translucent form, the form of Dr. Wren, emerged and arose from the sleeping Wren’s body. She arose into a world of static, the buzzing snow of cheap electronic displays.

Penelope witnessed as Dr. Wren began to transform the blank static of the dream world into a world of serenity, all brought to you by today’s product:

Tiger’s Pharma Mints!
(Made with Polybenzohydroxylopsychophedrine)

A master painter couldn’t have illustrated a fresher, more meditative vacation from waking life. Whoever was to experience this dream would be in for a real treat.

The setting would be a beautiful beachside manor with large open windows. Air would flow in from the breezy beach outside. The setting needed an outdoor pool, and a host of interesting and successful friends. The indoor and outdoor décor of the property would have to be superb. Over a short fence, a cool beach would extend into the open ocean. This would continue until the code faded and the backgrounds devolved into the Dream Machine equivalent of pixel textures and matte backdrops.

In this rich setting, there would be so much joy to explore; everything from delicious food to social interaction with the many houseguests. To clarify, there would still be guided aspects to this dream. One would feel compelled to follow certain paths and to address certain discussion points, and to entertain specific lines of storytelling. This is how the Artaro Corporation would begin to weave in its messages, by controlling the flow and narrative of the dream.

Of course, this was only the “carrot” portion of the grand design. Dr. Wren’s second function would be to create the “stick.”

The smiling, fresh-breathed inhabitants of the dream world would, by necessity, flip in demeanor. They would have to humiliate or scare the dreamer in some considerable way. This would, by design, reinforce the importance of participation in Artaro's very carefully crafted consumer capitalist ideology.

For instance, the dreamer may experience hunger while attending this beachside getaway. Naturally, they'd seek food, and find it by the outdoor grill. Burgers and golden beer would be served, and while they would taste delicious, they would be the catalyst Wren needed. Gassiness. A perfect recipe for the "stick" portion of a dream. Yes, the dreamer inevitably experiences sharp stomach pains and horrific flatulence.

This would be most unfortunate because the symptoms would occur just as attractive members of the opposite sex came into the picture. Maybe a burp would happen directly before or even during a kiss. The exact experience would vary dreamer to dreamer, but humiliation would resonate just the same.

And that's when Stanley Artaro would suddenly show up at the party with a fresh pack of *Tiger's Pharma Mints by Artaro*. He'd toss you the pack and you'd pop that first mint. Freshness would overtake you like an avalanche of crisp clarity and newfound confidence. Anxiety would wash away. Maybe that attractive potential from across the room would give you that blushed smile you'd craved so badly. Then, Stanley would approach, put his hand on your shoulder, give you a reassuring wink, and say something like, "Go get 'em, tiger!"

After that, you'd be the life of the party, and perhaps you'd find yourself in the upstairs master bedroom with that oh-so-attractive new friend of yours. Perhaps their eyes would flash like tiger eyes as they sprung on you in a flurry of passion. You'd have to give the credit to the Dream Operator, Dr. Wren, on those fiery cat eyes, as they would constitute an ingenious branding prowess. Any and all imagery relating to cats or tigers would stick within the dreamer's subconscious to remind them of these wonderful mints.

Of course, you'd probably awaken right about then. It's not like the Artaro Corporation could actually have you getting laid in your dream. This was a classy infomercial, after all. Not some mindless smut! So get your head out of the gutter!

Anyway, that's when you'd wake up in your bed worrying about the quality of your breath. It would logically follow that on your next grocery order or outing to the Mega Mall, Waste World, or other such super-shopping locale, you'd add a nice pack of *Tiger's Pharma Mints* to the list of necessary purchases. If the Artaro Corporation did its job right, you'd begin to see this product as an utmost necessity after that. Hell, you wouldn't be able to picture life without it! Thus, the Artaro slogan would be held in reaffirmation: Artaro—You *need* us!

Over the next several days, Penelope watched Wren craft dreams for a wide variety of products. She watched as, after each day's dream creation, Wren would use a pair of tongs to lift the crystal data from a cauldron-like device on the Dream Machine front panel. Wren's crystal data looked very much like a jagged orange piece of quartz or citrine. She explained to Penelope that different operators often yielded very different stones, and that the appearance of the stone would be unique to each operator. Once a stone was forged, the operator was to always use the same one, adding new dreams to it in each dream creation session. The collective body of dreams included in a given stone's crystal data would amount to the Dream Operator's portfolio.

Apparently, in all of the years since the initial invention of the Overlord I Dream Machine, there

had only ever been three functional machines including that original model, the Artaro Labs Dream Machine, which they were currently utilizing, and the Apathia Labs Dream Machine in the district of Apathia. The directors of the Apathia Labs operation were the highly respected Drake Brothers, the strangest and most secretive of men. In due fashion, they had acquired their own dream operator, a man by the name of Sal Powers. Powers held a rating even higher than Dr. Wren, a remarkable 95% lucidity. With such talented operators out there in the field, Penelope was going to have some stiff competition.

During this period of intense study and training, Penelope also underwent a series of physical and psychological tests. She was subjected to everything from mental aptitude tests, to free association, to comprehensive brain scans, and tests regarding psychic capability. Furthermore, the results had been interesting as she did, in fact, display more side effects from the Purple Visus myco-agent injections than most operators previously studied. Yet, her conditions were stable. She'd been sleeping regularly. No more continued nose bleeds. Her pupils appeared normal. Her brain scans appeared as though her neocortex was a bit more active than most, but she was still functioning well within the limits of normalcy.

In her home life, she began eating pressed, nutrient rich food, supplementing, and utilizing Douglas's skill as a personal chef. As the month passed, she began a new workout regimen using her Artaro designer exercise equipment and continued to see Grim Glitchfield in what the Artaro Corporation concluded to be a stable romantic relationship.

For this reason, Grim was subtly asked by the Artaro Corporation to undergo a mandatory physical examination. While the experience was uncomfortable for him, it did result in him receiving a digital pass for the Artaro Live-In Suites. This was good, because until then, he had been thrown off the lot multiple times as a trespasser.

[Artarus 29th, 193 D.C.]

Penelope was using her new home workout equipment when she received a notification that her mom and brother were coming to visit the new apartment suite.

As had been worked out contractually, Penelope's direct family members, including her father and step-mother, had all been granted visiting passes for the Artaro Live-in Suites building. While her dad hadn't yet reached out, her mom had been excited at the prospect of checking out the new place.

More importantly, Penelope's mom and brother were now granted full Cogship status in Machina, which was very good. This meant they could enter primary city districts without any threat of arrest or police violence. Given this new state of affairs, they took the opportunity to come to Chrome Crow and would arrive shortly.

Mai and Hollis arrived in a brand new automated Artaro Econ-o Car, which she had been able to purchase with funds gifted via one of the stipulations in Penelope's corporate contract. Stepping out of the car, Hollis had his robotic dog with him. The red dog, Pee-wee 2, was very well behaved and sat patiently by its new owner's feet, awaiting any commands. Penelope greeted her mom and brother, and asked them how they were doing, and it appeared they were doing quite well.

They were blown away to witness Penelope's apartment. While they toured the place, Hollis stared quizzically at the robot, Douglas. Douglas was such a silly little creature. He would putt around the house looking for messes to clean up. He'd complain about very trivial things and make very unusual

comments for a robot. He told Hollis that he was jealous of the fact that people get to wear shoes and that he wanted to start wearing human shoes in the near future. Hollis had never heard a robot express such feelings.

“Penelope!” Hollis shouted, “Your robot is stupid!”

“He’s just like that!” She responded from across the hall, “He’s a prototype, and I think my boss made him weird on purpose!”

Hollis then noticed the virtual plug-in setup that was built into the living room coffee table. As an extreme enthusiast of virtual interspace, he was very jealous.

“Holy guacamole!” he kept exclaiming. “I want one! I want to plug-in and see the Terminal City Map in full immersion. We could play the new *Slug Wars* game. You get to customize your own star ships with a full crew in the new one.”

“Maybe some other time, bud,” Penelope said. “After I get settled in and stuff. Then we can talk about that.”

“I made him leave his video game helmet at home,” Mai commented. “The kid needs fresh air for god’s sake.”

When Penelope and Mai came into the hall, there was the sound of a toilet jet flushing, and Grim stepped out of the bathroom.

“Hey, it’s grey boy. Haven’t seen you in a while.” Mai laughed, patting Grim on the shoulder.

“Mom, that’s racist,” Penelope said, folding her arms.

Mai put her arm around Grim. He rolled his eyes a bit, but seemed basically fine. People from the outer districts were sometimes prone to speak to Ravell in less than favorable terms, as Ravell were usually higher class and often looked down on the people (and Isopod merchants) from those regions. Grim wasn’t judgemental in that way at all, of course, but it didn’t stop people from making occasional comments, and Mai was no different.

She looked at Grim, “I hope you know I respect you. You seem like a pretty cool young man, and a good boyfriend to my daughter.”

“Thanks,” he said. “I appreciate that.”

“Definitely better than that last piece of work, Rocko. Sheesh. Fuckin’ alcoholic, that guy.”

“Okay, let’s change the subject,” Penelope said, noticeably annoyed.

“Okay, sorry.” Mai said. “So Grim, it looks like Penelope’s set you up real nice here! She buy you those threads?”

“Wow...” Penelope said, her arms still folded.

Grim looked down at his new linen button-up shirt and green corduroy jacket which Penelope had purchased for him from the Moonstone Fashion Catalogue. His new outfit was clean and stylish. He

remembered his cigarettes, waiting for him in the left jacket pocket. Grabbing his cigarettes, he suggested they go out to the patio balcony.

Soon, the three of them were outside smoking. From the patio, they could see much of Chrome Crow as well as downtown High Optera in the far distance. This really was an ideal living location.

“You know, in all my life, I’ve never been to Chrome Crow... not even once,” Mai said, looking at Penelope. “This part of Machina... was just out of reach for me. But, look at you now kiddo. You’ve gone and made something out of your damn self.”

“Listen,” Penelope said, “I’m the Dream Operator for the next run of product. I literally start work tomorrow. I’m actually a bit nervous about it.”

“What exactly does that entail?” Mai asked, a bit confused.

“I signed a confidentiality agreement. Not allowed to talk about it. Remember?”

“Well, what can you talk about?”

“Well. They think I might be capable of psychic stuff... telepathy... that sort of thing... but, I’m probably not supposed to really talk about that, either.”

“Yes, but you’re already telling me,” Mai said, placing her hand on Penelope’s shoulder.

Penelope felt somewhat troubled in that moment. She wanted to explain the intensity of her role at the Artaro Corporation, but couldn’t. The tests that the scientific staff had performed had returned results that Penelope wasn’t even fully able to process.

Penelope was quiet. Mai looked to Grim and inquired as to whether he knew anything about this. Of course, the first thing he did was look to Penelope, not sure what he should say.

“Well, okay. From what I understand, the Dream Operations Program is very well regulated, and there seems to be a highly skilled group of people working with Penelope. Obviously, Penelope is doing a sort of weird job, and I’m sure whatever the risks there are, they’re calculated... Penelope is well... she’s...”

“Go ahead, just tell her I guess...” Penelope sighed.

“She’s basically a psychic, as I understand it, and a powerful one at that.”

“...Oh... well, I knew that.” Mai answered, quite unexpectedly.

“What?” Penelope was staggered.

“Dorothy always said it, since you were a kid,” Mai explained, “I always took her word on it, too. Dorothy is a smart cookie. She knows a lot about a lot of things. All that time in the forests, ya know. Those Adularians are really intuitive people. Dorothy has visions and things, and she always told me you’d have a big future. Looks like she was right.”

It was true that Dorothy knew things, and Penelope understood this. The old Adularian woman had always been the best source of wisdom and advice in the Apple Colony building where she grew up.

For this reason, and many others, people across Termite Hill and the western woodland regions of the Crystalline Forest all knew and revered the old woman. As Penelope now thought about it, maybe her mom had a point. Maybe Dorothy somehow knew that Penelope would end up at the Artaro Corporation, or if the woman hadn't envisioned the dream advertisement industry specifically, maybe she simply knew that Penelope would one day use her mind to do something big and impactful.

Mai and Hollis only stayed for only a few hours longer, then decided to have the Artaro Car drive her and Hollis home. Hopefully she could take a nap during the drive, since she would have to get up early in the morning to take her two pet llamas to their haircut appointment at the local animal salon in Termite Hill.

[Artarus 30th, 193 D.C.]

Penelope grabbed a medium roast from the Corporate Coffee on the way to Artaro Labs Chrome Crow before making her way to the facility. Passing the lobby, the lab, and the rest of it, she made her way to the locker room at the head of the dream deck. Knowing that today she would finally pilot the Dream Machine to create her first dream advert, Penelope put on her body-suit, shockproof boots, utility belt, protective vest, and gloves.

When she came out onto the main dream deck, many people were present. Dr. Webweaver was there, and when Penelope arrived, he wished her good luck.

"You know why I call this Dream Machine the Lucidity Dream Machine?" he said to Penelope.

"No," Penelope said.

"It's because I aim to achieve the highest lucidity rating at the Artaro Corporation. That means the clearest, most vivid dreams. Our adverts will be the best, and I believe you might just be the key to our success."

"I will do my best," Penelope said, trying not to get too nervous.

"Look, everyone is here, but we all know this is your first time in the chair. There is no pressure, and if the crafting of the dream advert becomes unstable, or if anything doesn't go as planned, it's okay. We can always try again tomorrow. You understand?" he said, making sure to look Penelope in the eyes.

"Yeah, I get it, but I can do this," she said. "I prepared for this. I'm ready."

"Good. Let's get started."

Dr. Webweaver cracked his knuckles, and put on his fingers leather gloves. He then signaled to his robot assistant, 1K, and led Dr. Thea Wren, and their supervisor, Dr. Beatrice Delphonic, up a steel stairway to the control room.

As for rest of the observers, which included Janice Biggs, Enoch Clement, Ron Verlyn, a number of other staff members, and an industrial Artaro Omni-Assist Robot that they called Red-8—they were all directed to stand near the entrance way, on the opposite side of the deck from the flying electricity of the Dream Machine. All of them, excluding the robot, place goggles over their eyes.

With the hatch already opened, Penelope stepped into the Dream Machine, and rested in the white

machine chair at the hull's center. She watched as the lab's tall Omni-Assist Robot approached and shut the hatch door behind her. Though she could still see the dream deck and control room from a small set of television monitors, she now felt a distinct feeling of quiet and isolation. She watched as the robot returned to the entrance way and rejoined the others.

Penelope then turned her attention to the overhead light and robotic arm. A voice came over the loudspeaker. It was Dr. Wren.

"Make sure all of your straps are properly fastened," Wren's voice said. "If there are any issues adjusting things, I can come down there. Just let me know."

Penelope strapped herself in according to her training. "There's no problem," she said. "I've got it."

Once Penelope was secure in the seat, Dr. Webweaver threw on his own goggles, and prepared the machine for Dream Operations. With the flip of an activation lever, the dual coils above the Dream Machine's metallic dome lit piercing and bright.

There was a loud buzz and rumbling of electric energy, but in moments, it fell to near silence. Penelope could feel as the straps self-tightened. Now clung to the operator's chair, Penelope's only real task was to keep calm and control her mind. Protocols began, and Penelope watched as the liquid myco-agent filled a cylindrical syringe at the end of a sturdy mechanical arm. With quick precision, the cold needle positioned, and pressed into her neck, administering the Purple Visus Serum.

Her eyes and mind adjusted as the psychedelic effects took hold. Penelope had been trained to focus at this moment. She pulled herself into a calm state from the chaos. In an instantaneous rush, she found her mind transported into the static blank space where dreams were designed and created.

Here, she was no longer in the chair. Instead, she was floating, as gravity would only come into play if she willed it into creation. She did so, landing her boots on a grid-like floor, where she could begin the work.

From up in the control room, Webweaver and the others watched intently. From sophisticated neural reading equipment, they could see the dream environment as it began to take form. It was obvious that Penelope was demonstrating a quick and impressive learning curve.

"Okay, she appears to be beginning. This is good." Webweaver noted, "1K, let me see her performance metrics."

"Yes." The superior, Delphonic, clasped her hands in agreement. "I want to see her metrics, as well... and her lucidity rating, most of all. Can we expect her to pass ninety percent on her first try? Her neural signature made the idea seem plausible."

"In theory," Webweaver agreed.

"It took me many, many sessions to guarantee a ninety percent rating," Wren pointed out. "We're going to have to be patient with her."

"Actually," 1K exclaimed, pulling up the current reading, "her lucid dream rating is currently at ninety-four percent, and rising. Ninety-five now... in a moment she'll reach ninety-six."

“That’s a higher reading than even Sal gets.” Delphonic mentioned. This was quite startling because Sal Powers, the Dream Operator at Apathia Labs, was the Artaro Corporation’s most effective operator. “Are you certain this information is accurate?”

“Ninety-seven percent...” 1K commented.

“Does this mean we’ll get more funding?” Webweaver added.

Penelope worked tirelessly to shape a world out of the blank static. Resourcefully, she transformed the background noise into a blissful postcard backdrop fit for any successful dream advertisement. Her first product:

*The Glammo-Vac 5000!
The Vacuum Cleaner that Really Sucks!*

*Glammo-Vac: Make the World Sparkle!
Now on the Artaro Catalogue Store!*

The Glammo-Vac 5000 was a very fine vacuum cleaner. While this particular product wasn’t actually manufactured by the Artaro Corporation, Glammo-Vac Inc. existed as a popular and reliable third party vendor. Glammo-Vac also served as one of Artaro’s most consistent clients for ad campaigns in both traditional media and the modern frontier of dream adverts.

Glammo-Vac! Get yours with one-hour drone delivery!

This product could polish floors and leave a fine shine coat of sparkly cleaner! It was compact, light, modern, and totally overpriced! Just Imagine—your happy vacuum cleaner, bringing joy to your home and your carpet. Incredible!

Like every major product in Machina, it had passed through focus groups and marketing exercises, but it still hadn’t found that special place in the hearts and minds of consumers that it always deserved. Of course, the fine folks at Artaro Labs Chrome Crow were here to change that. With a new, reworked dream advert campaign, sales would certainly get back on track in no time. At least, that’s what the executives across the various marketing divisions were telling each other.

As was protocol, Penelope began by shaping the “carrot” portion of the dream. This was the portion where life was grand and full of reward. She did this by creating an experience where the dreamer who was to observe and experience the advert would find themselves in a beautiful hillside home with an adoring family, a personal classic-style mag-lev automobile, and very importantly—a long haired golden retriever!

Inevitably the picturesque perfection of this set up would fall away, and the “stick” portion of the dream would arise, as their family dog would shed hair all over the house. This shedding would continue, by design, building towards a furry, horrifying crescendo. Eventually, the whole house would be plagued with fur! *What a disaster!*

Only then, would a salesman arrive at the door to save the day, and that salesman was Stanley Artaro! *Wow, the Artaro Corporation’s CEO himself?* Artaro Corp. really did have a strong relationship with its third party vendors to get Stanley to back the product, and here he was with the patented new Glammo-Vac 5000! (Of course, this would only be Stanley’s ephemeral likeness, programmed into the dream advert according to careful instructions.)

“Life can get a bit hairy, at times,” Stanley would say. “Sometimes you just have to suck it up and... *Make the World Sparkle!*”

Penelope’s execution of the advertisement was well received by the rest of the Artaro Labs personnel, including Delphonic, who was often quite difficult to please. The fact was, they were all a bit blown away by Penelope’s competence and skill.

“...And to think, she’ll only improve in her ability to craft such dreams,” Dr. Webweaver told Dr. Delphonic, pleased by the shift in circumstances.

It was true. Good dream operators were hard to find, and suddenly the Artaro Corporation had found a tremendous new talent. This was going to mean business.

In reality, no one (not even Dr. Webweaver) truly understood what Penelope’s jump into Dream Operations would actually signify. For her, this was only the beginning on a very different kind of journey.

Even in her first excursion, Penelope had achieved a meditative lucidity rating of 99.9999 percent. For this reason, she had begun to encounter realms far beyond the bounds of simple dream advertisement.

She had begun to peer into the unknown, into the ephemeral lights of Adularia and the strange realm of time and dream which lived within their glimmer. The truth of what Penelope was now seeing was beyond anything she or anyone at the Artaro Corporation could really understand.

From the outside, the dream creation session clocked in at just under two hours, and by every measure was to be considered a huge success. From the monitor playback, the environments and dynamics of the dream appeared robust and well-polished.

Dr. Thea Wren then handed the advertisement’s instruction manifest to Webweaver on a clipboard. Retrieving a pen from his belt, Dr. Webweaver quickly notated his signature. With his final signoff as Dream Director, the dream advert was approved for mass-distribution.

When Penelope finally exited the chamber, Webweaver showed her to a steel and glass cabinet containing a nitrogen cauldron on one of the Dream Machine’s side panels. Unsealing the cauldron, he used a pair of tongs to carefully retrieve Penelope’s crystal data stone.

Looking at the glittering stone, its coloration was magenta. Penelope’s eyes grew wide as she observed its glow. It was subtle and entrancing.

“It really is striking,” Webweaver remarked. “Just look at that color. Pretty cool, ain’t it?”

“Yeah, but how does it work?” Penelope asked.

“Well inside the stone, the dream you just made is safely stored, etched in microscopic pathways. These paths serve as networks for quantum Aeon Particles to fill according to parameters set by the Dream Machine. The Aeon Particles are the same as those that occur naturally in our brains, especially in people with the sort of neural signatures seen in Dream Operators. That’s how the dreams we make become living things... organisms... just like you and me.”

“So, these particles... you’re suggesting that they’re alive, right?” Penelope said, understanding the basics.

“It’s more than that,” Webweaver answered. “We believe that these particles are actually the source of consciousness in the universe. This stone contains consciousness in the same way that your mind contains it. We designed the crystal data stones to serve as a manifestation and record of the Operator’s mind. It’s important that you understand—this stone is part of you now.”

“Oh...” Penelope gasped, entirely enamoured by the prismatic lights of the little gem before her eyes.

For a while they just looked at it. Then, once Webweaver felt satisfied that Penelope understood the value of the stone, he carefully submerged it again into the nitrogen of the cauldron, sealed the lid, and shut the Dream Machine’s side-panel cabinet.

“Pretty good first day, I’d say,” Webweaver said.

“Yeah, pretty good,” Penelope said, gathering herself.

Supplemental Character Information:

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]

Dr. Ariton Webweaver:

Class: Human Cog
Occupation: Dream Director at Artaro Labs Chrome Crow, Engineer
[Eyes: Golden] [Hair: Long, Grey with Beard] [Height: 6'2"]
[Born: 89 D.C.] [Background: New Worlder, Light Complexion, from Machina]

Thea Wren:

Class: Human Cog, Telepath (Phantom Visions)
Occupation: Dream Operator and Operations Assistant at Artaro Labs Chrome Crow
[Eyes: Dark Brown] [Hair: Long, Black] [Height: 5'8"]
[Born: 157 D.C.] [Background: Rodashi, from Machina]

Janice Biggs:

Class: Human Cog
Occupation: Operations Manager at Artaro Labs Chrome Crow
[Eyes: Auburn] [Hair: Styled, Lavender] [Height: 5'5"]
[Born: 148 D.C.] [Background: New Worlder, Dark Complexion, from Machina]

1K:

Class: Artaro P.C.-1000 Robot
Occupation: Assistant to Dr. Webweaver at Artaro Labs Chrome Crow
[Eyes: Glowing, Yellow] [Height: 5'0"]
[Booted Up in 193 D.C.] [Appearance: Metallic, Grey]

Dr. Beatrice Delphonic:

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

Grim Glitchfield:

Class: Half-Ravell Cog
Occupation: Street Sweep in Apathia District, Gig Worker
[Eyes: Dark Pink] [Hair: Messy, Indigo] [Height: 6'1"]
[Born: 165 D.C.] [Background: Half-Ravell, Light Grey Complexion, from Machina]

Ron Verlyn:

Class: Human Cog
Occupation: Integrated Technology Specialist at Artaro Labs Chrome Crow
[Eyes: Brown] [Hair: Dark Brown] [Height: 6'3"]
[Born: 161 D.C.] [Background: New Worlder, Dark Complexion, from Machina]

Other Mentioned Characters:

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

Timeline Notes:

Artarus 193 D.C.-	Monday, Artarus 1st-	Parade Day and Spider Outbreak in Optera, near Apathia. Penelope is taken by corporate police to meet Beatrice.
	Tuesday, Artarus 2nd-	Penelope learns of Dream Operations in the virtual archives. Penelope misses a pickup shift at Archer Piglet's.
	Wednesday, Artarus 3rd-	Penelope is fired from Archer Piglet's Pancake House. Delphonic investigates signals detected in northern Machina.
	Thursday, Artarus 4th-	Dr. Delphonic and Dr. Webweaver come to Termite Hill. Penelope signs a contract to work as Dream Operator at Artaro.
	Friday, Artarus 5th-	Robots help Penelope move to luxury space in Chrome Crow.
	<i>(Note: There are no weekends in Machina, or across Enon.)</i>	
	Monday and Tuesday-	Penelope settles into the Artaro Live-in Suites.
	Wednesday Artarus 8th-	Grim and Puck meet the Diama O.S. at a Monolithic Temple. Penelope begins work at Artaro Labs Chrome Crow.
	Thursday, Atarus 29th-	Penelope's mom and brother come to visit the Artaro Live-in Suites.
	Friday, Artarus 30th-	Penelope uses the Dream Machine to create her first dream advert. During this process, she achieves a lucidity rating of over 99.9%.
Oakus 193 D.C.	Monday, Oakus 1st-	Penelope's 24th birthday.

A Map of West Enon: Where our story takes place—this particular tale takes place at the Artaro Labs Chrome Crow Complex in Machina's Chrome Crow District (northeast Machina).

