



POWER WAVE

THE PRIME WAVE ACCOUNTING, BOOK ONE

DON JONES

Power Wave

Book One of the Prime Wave
Accounting

Don Jones

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ZERO: MICHAEL

: Scan complete. All biologics removed from Iteration 12-72662. Ready to move to the next iteration.:

:In a second:, I thought, tiredly slumping onto the remains of a knee-high concrete wall. The ground under my feet was charred and blackened, and the air was filled with thick, gray soot. Visibility was only a few feet, and only my Halo kept all the filth off of me and out of my mouth, as well as off of my pure-white uniform of flowing meta-fabric. These 12th-generation iterations were proving to be as exhausting as they were numerous. Making self-sustaining, perpetually-powered worlds seemed all well and good in the initial Board presentation, but when Engineering discovered a significant design bug and yours truly got tasked with cleaning them all up... well. I longed for the 11th-generation days when instances would collapse once we removed external power support.

It was, I suspected, the Builders' fault. The idea of creating self-sustaining, undirected worlds capable of surviving for trillions of iteration cycles was compelling, but the actual engineering seemed spotty. In previous generations, the Architects had designed a world, the Engineers had worked out the maths for it, and the Builders had created it. The worlds sprang into life fully formed and functional, ready for experimentation and observation. But those worlds started to feel artificial, and they required

constant power input to keep them going. They weren't sustainable, and all of them had eventually been discontinued.

For the twelfth generation, the Authority directed the Builders not to build worlds but instead to make rule-sets, so that a tremendous burst of power at the start of the iteration results in an "organically evolved" world. Each iteration would be unique and special, which is why nearly a hundred thousand of them were launched. But if a world is genuinely self-sustaining and undirected, why did the Prime Wave need to remain connected to each? Why not merely withdraw it once the power was in place and the supposed rules were in effect? Because we'd need to monitor each iteration, the Builders had argued, quite reasonably at the time. And if there were any problems, we'd need full root access to make corrections or shut an iteration down. Except that, it turns out, we *couldn't* shut an iteration down; the Prime Wave ran through them all in sequence, and wouldn't tolerate a "gap." Except that, I *suspected*, the so-called rules didn't run as deep as the boardroom pitch had suggested, and the Builders were relying on the Prime Wave to hold things together at some low, fundamental level.

All of that was so far above my pay grade, however, that it was scarcely worth considering. I was little more than a meta-cosmic janitor, tasked with cleaning up others' spills. *:File the report:*, I thought to the Ghost. The 12th-generation iterations had all been running for billions of years, calculated locally, and they'd all evolved their own

quirks. Having dispatched me to clean them up, the Authority required meticulous records of my actions. Fortunately, my Ghost was capable of handling most of the paperwork automatically.

:Filed: it responded.

I stood and cast one last glance around what had been, until a short while ago, a reasonably attractive coral reef at the bottom of what had been, until a short time before *that*, a deep, life-filled ocean. Fire had proven to be the only sure means of preventing a re-emergence of life in an affected instance, a world-consuming, flaming fire. I'd run across only a couple of instances, out of tens of thousands, where life hadn't progressed to produce a dominant, sapient species. Almost all the rest, I'd burned. I winced as I remembered the one unusual instance where dominant life had evolved as a subterranean species. My world-consuming fire hadn't been enough to eliminate them, and I'd been forced to split the very planet into pieces of dead, smoldering rock.

I worried about those few exceptions. Once I reached the last iteration in this generation, and doubtless extinguished its life in fire, would there be any reason to keep those few remaining iterations? Or would the Engineers deem it safe to finally disconnect them from the Prime Wave and just – as I suspected would happen – let them vanish into the ether?

:Okay; I thought to the Ghost, *:off we go.:* I inhaled. It was unnecessary, but it was a habit I'd developed a few thousand iterations ago, and one I didn't feel was worth

spending the effort to break.

The world melted around me, fading into the soundless gray of the Void. Just as quickly, a new world began forming, at first just blobs of color but promptly resolving into recognizable shapes. As the transition completed, I exhaled, extended my Halo around me, and floated into the sky. *:Transition complete. Iteration 12-72663,:* the Ghost announced.

:Analysis: I commanded. While I waited for its report, I took in the local scenery. I was standing in the middle of a quiet meadow, situated atop a low rise amid a deciduous forest. The sun was beginning to rise, casting a warm glow over the grassy earth. I'd come to be an expert on sunrises and sunsets, particularly in these 12th-gen worlds where the Architects had stuck with a straightforward pattern instead of experimenting between iterations. Soft birdsong surrounded me. The sheer variety of the iterations continued to astound me, even after seventy-two thousand-odd of them. The previous iteration favored aquatic life, with a planet covered in deep, temperate oceans filled with life. This iteration, from the looks of it, had gone with a more varied approach.

:Analysis complete,: the Ghost answered after a brief pause. A schematic appeared in front of me with glowing lines delineating the key aspects of this world. More varied, indeed: approximately three-quarters oceanic, but with landmasses scattered across them. A bit deeper of an axial tilt than the last one, which suggested more extreme seasons. The biologics living near the poles would have to

be pretty hardy, while the ones in the middle would need to be almost entirely different in design. The variation never ceased to delight me, making it all the more difficult to wipe it all out.

I gestured to the schematic, taking it in from various angles. My superiors would doubtless consider some of my behavior a little eccentric, but after tens of thousands of these, you needed something to break up the monotony. Besides, given how many of these iterations wound up being wholly purged, it made sense for me to take stock of what was before me, in preparation for that task. *:Report:* I ordered.

:Evidence of Prime Wave tampering,; the Ghost announced in my mind. No surprise, as that was the exact outcome of the bug I'd been sent to correct. I could feel the quiet tremolo in the Prime Wave myself. *:Prime Wave is altered but stabilizing. No immediate action required; estimated re-stabilization in 1.2 local millennia.:* Not bad. I'd certainly seen worse. '662 had been a mess, but righting it should help this next iteration get hold of itself more readily. That had honestly been the most significant problem. A Prime Wave distortion in one iteration could affect two or three more downstream ones, so that even if they were stable and untampered-with, they'd still wind up needing purging or significant reductions in biodiversity.

The Ghost continued: *:No dominant species detected.:* Well that was less usual in an iteration, but it might explain why the Prime Wave wasn't in complete chaos. The so-called rules that the Builders had created included

a robust yet straightforward chemical-based system for biological life, enabling life-forms to evolve themselves to best align to their environment. The intent had been for each iteration to be mostly randomized, right from the first power infusion. Biological life would merely try different combinations of its basic chemistry until it hit on a solution that worked for the local conditions. Unfortunately, those “local conditions” always included the Prime Wave. In nearly every iteration, at least one bio-variant would settle on a configuration that somehow connected it to the Prime Wave. The resulting infusion of meta-power would disrupt the rules because the Wave operated above and outside of them. That, in turn, resulted in biologics that could manipulate their environment without regard to those rules. *That* led to environments that drew too much power from the Prime Wave, de-stabilized the biologics or something else, and too often resulted in an iteration permanently immolating itself. That couldn’t be allowed, as any gap between iterations would throw the Prime Wave completely off-balance, wiping out *every* iteration with the resulting feedback causing untold chaos in the real world.

Frankly, I’d been tempted just to let them all destroy themselves. I’d seen nothing in the 12th-gen iterations that seemed worth saving, their ephemeral beauty and variety notwithstanding. The Engineers were worried about the release of energy into our world, though, and hadn’t yet come up with a solution to redirect it or contain it.

Enough, I thought to myself. Time to get back to work.

:Detailed landscape analysis: I ordered. The iteration's dominant life-form going missing or not evolving wasn't unheard of, but there was always a reason, and if the Prime Wave was tampered with here then *something* had done it. Sometimes mass-extinction events just happened, while other times a lack of a dominant bio-variant was the result of more complex and difficult-to-manage reasons. One time in one of the 50,000-cohort, I'd run across a tiny, incredibly robust single-celled biologic. It lived mostly dormant during its life-cycle unless it came into close contact with a higher-order biologic that had connected to the Prime Wave. When it did, it completely infected the higher-order variant and invariably killed it. I'd honestly thought it was an elegant, self-regulating solution to the entire problem with the 12th generation until I realized that each death resulted in a near-catastrophic release of Prime Wave power, which inevitably caused random shuffling of the local rule-sets. That had been going on long almost enough to split the planet in half, so I wound up having to wipe them all out entirely.

Hopefully, this time it was one of the more straightforward reasons, and not—

:Analysis complete: the Ghost replied, interrupting my reverie. *:Massive power-based life extinction event, probability 99.992 percent;* Ah, well, one of the more straightforward reasons, then. They'd tapped the Prime Wave, gotten carried away with the ability to manipulate their environment, and wiped themselves out. The situation with the previous iteration's less-stable Prime Wave probably

hadn't helped, but at least this one hadn't been driven to complete collapse. Now I just had to worry about the bug cropping up again.

:Are there remaining biologics?: I asked.

:Affirmative,: the Ghost replied. *:Lower-order biologics fill most available ecological niches. Dominant precursors are thriving on two continents.:*

Unfortunate. Precursors meant that there were bio-variants who were climbing to the top of their food chain, and either developing or about to develop their first tools. Once one of them developed tools, in my experience, they'd try to wipe out the other one. The rule sets in this generation didn't seem to favor parallel dominant species very often. Unfortunately, dominant biologics also tended to be more chemically complex, with more potential for subtle variations. That almost always led to a Prime Wave connection, meaning this whole problem would crop up again. For some reason, lower-order biologics had only connected to the Prime Wave in one or two instances I'd seen, and both were reasonably harmless. There was one iteration, I remembered – it must have been in the low 5,000s – where an entire species of sea-kelp was firmly connected to the Prime Wave. As far as I'd been able to determine, they didn't do anything to it, although they'd had a stabilizing effect on surges passed along from the previous couple of iterations. I hadn't had to wipe them out, at least. I'd actually toyed with the idea of bringing some of them along to further iterations and seeing if they could be used to stabilize them, but carrying biologics

across iterations was beyond prohibited. It'd be detected almost immediately, and I'd be end-of-lived practically as fast. Janitors didn't get to play Engineer.

:*Germplasm analysis of precursors*: I ordered. Analyzing the genetic makeup of an entire species from across the world was non-trivial, especially with a partially unstable Prime Wave to work from. That analysis would inform my next steps, though, so it was worth the time. While I waited, I took in the quiet, idyllic vista spread out below me. Forest nearly as far as even my eyes could see, although I thought I detected the glimmer of an ocean or sea off to the east. I was in the world's Northern hemisphere, about halfway between its equatorial belt and its Northern pole. It seemed to be a reasonably temperate zone, and there was a great deal of lower-order life scattered around. The plant life, in particular, was especially striking. As the Ghost processed, I reached out with my mind and lightly touched some of the nearer plants. None of them were Wave-connected, unfortunately. Connected plant life, like the sea kelp, was always interesting.

:*Analysis complete*: Ghost announced. :*Germplasm exists to support dominant re-emergence. Likelihood within 50 millennia is 82.884 percent considering only precursor species*:

Well, that tore it. Damn Engineers for 12th-gen built so many redundancies into the system that you pretty much had to wipe it out wholesale or risk the problem reoccurring before I even got off-shift in a few million years. Although the Builders had vehemently denied an

instance having any kind of “memory,” it seemed to me that once an instance evolved a biologic capable of connecting to the Prime Wave, it’d do so again pretty quickly if I eliminated only that bio-variant. Even in the Authority, a vacuum was abhorred; it seems that instances, having discovered and connected into the Prime Wave, didn’t like being disconnected. Iteration 12-2289 had quickly evolved a single-celled biologic into a Wave-connected dominant species in just a few thousand years of brutally dynamic evolution, and I had to go back and wipe it all out anyway.

All of that meant this instance, like so many before it, would need to be purged of all life.

I expanded my Halo and rose higher, reaching out with my mind to capture the more-stable fundamental frequencies of the Prime Wave. My Halo wrapped around me in a protective cocoon. *:Prepare for the eradication of all biologics:* I ordered, and felt the Ghost preparing the necessary sequences. Then I felt the Prime Wave filling my mind and body, and I opened my mouth to sing.

ONE: SPECIAL POWERS UNIT

“I’m inbound hot,” Tom Hartley, also known as Stratosphere, said into his helmet communicator. A crackling static was his only response, reminding him that he needed to have Intellect look at the damn power connection again. He hoped that they had the parts to fix it.

Stratosphere was hurtling through the sky toward downtown Harbor City, responding to a police summons for help with yet another super-villain attack. As he flew, he admired the little coastal city he’d made his home. Back in the Fifties, its old, mid-rise buildings were demolished by the super-powered menace calling himself Dhoso, who had the power to summon powerful earthquakes. Dhoso had subsequently been taken down by Major Supreme, leader of Harbor City’s primary protectors, the Titans. The Titans’ inability to stop Dhoso *before* the town was practically destroyed did nothing to endear them to the populace or the government. Public sentiment eventually forced them all into retirement. Even now, heroes were tolerated as a necessary evil, given the ongoing presence of super-powered criminals. The Harbor City Special Powers Unit, Stratosphere’s team and the successor to the Titans, was required to always work with the police, and to wait for them or another authority to call them in. They were paid—

minimally—from the police budget, and equipped—again, minimally—from the police armory.

It didn't help that most cops called them "the spoo."

The city had recovered from Dhoso's earthquake, of course, and had rebuilt over the years. Today, Stratosphere had to stay hundreds of feet in the air to avoid the gleaming new skyscrapers of the Financial District, which was his current destination. He slowed and hovered over the intersection of Main Street and Elizabeth Avenue, Harbor City's "Four Corners of Banking." A towering skyscraper on each corner, each owned by a separate mega-bank, surrounded him as he descended toward the street. He could see the police cruisers below, lights flashing as they blocked off the roads leading into the intersection. Dead in the middle of the intersection stood Earth God gesturing at huge floating chunks of concrete and asphalt he'd telekinetically torn from the street. "It's Earth God," Stratosphere said into his communicator, hoping a signal was getting out, "he's pulled up the street at Four Corners."

"Probably planning to smash up one of the banks again," came the staticky reply from Overseer, the team's coordinator. "Idiot. None of those places keep any considerable amount of cash on hand, anymore. I'm getting into position now." Overseer's super-senses made him invaluable for coordinating the team, but anything in the downtown area got tricky because he couldn't see around the massive buildings. For these kinds of engagements, he relied on a rickety old hover-disc that Intellect had invented years ago using spare electronics parts. "Keep an eye out for

Rocketeer, man,” Overseer reminded Stratosphere. “I’m completely helpless on this stupid thing.”

“You think the Krewe is involved?” asked Sultana, the team’s powerful telekinetic.

“Earth God rarely works alone. Okay, I’ve got him in sight,” Overseer said. Stratosphere looked around and saw the man—perched on a two-meter-wide, foot-thick, wobbly round platform—approaching up Main Street, about a hundred feet higher than himself. “Yeah, it’s probably the whole group,” he added. “I’ve got Vertigo as well.”

Stratosphere looked down, spotting the green-clad villain close to one of the buildings. Vertigo was bad news: his power to disrupt a person’s sense of balance and induce extreme nausea had a hundred-foot range, and he’d used it in the past to knock Stratosphere out of the sky. Stratosphere raised himself a few feet further into the air. “What’s the plan?” he asked.

“I’m right below you,” came a new voice, one Stratosphere recognized as Ultrasonic. She was an on-again, off-again part of the team, but she provided a valuable counter to Vertigo since her focused-sound projections could disrupt *his* sense of balance, effectively neutralizing him.

“Perfect,” Overseer said. “Strat, stay in position. Ultra, pin Vertigo down. Sultana, see if you can lock down Earth God.” Sultana and Earth God were technically both telekinetics, although Earth God’s powers only worked against dirt, rock, and similar materials. Sultana could move anything with her mind and had greater range than

the villain, but she tended to be a bit weaker than Earth God. “Everyone ready? Go!”

Stratosphere watched the two women spring into action and felt a twinge of jealousy. Not of them, but of the villains they were attacking. Both Vertigo and Earth God wore flamboyant, custom-made, comic book-inspired... *costumes* was the only word that fits. Earth God wore a deep red, fitted leather ensemble with armored joints, heavy boots, and black trim. His face mask allowed his long blonde hair to flow gracefully in the breeze. *He* looked more like a hero than anyone on Stratosphere’s team. Vertigo had chosen an emerald green outfit, complete with a half-cape and a glowing yellow logo on his chest. The entire thing was constructed to look like it was skin-tight and to give the impression that Vertigo had bulging muscles. Stratosphere knew from past encounters that the suit was merely padded, like something in a Hollywood movie.

Stratosphere’s team, by contrast, wore repurposed police tactical gear: green camouflage uniforms reinforced with sewn-in Kevlar panels. They were tailored to be a bit more comfortable for hand-to-hand situations, but they even wore the same dingy boots you’d expect a field soldier to be wearing. They’d added armored shoulder pauldrons and forearm bracers to beef them up, but they looked decidedly low-rent. Stratosphere’s one indulgence—paid for out of his savings—was a custom helmet. Painted in matching green camo, it provided a full-face visor to protect him from the wind during flight, and a custom

communicator to patch him into the rest of the team. A communicator that was—

“Rocketeer spotted!” he shouted, catching the orange-clad flier out of the corner of his eye. He jinked backward in midair, allowing the flying villain to hurtle past him. Rocketeer was fast, but he could only fly at that one speed, and only in one direction unless something pushed him onto a new course. To change directions, he had to shut down his power, free-fall, and twist in midair to reorient, and then blast off in a new direction. It was funny to watch when the man wasn’t slamming into you at altitude. Stratosphere had added gel pads under the Kevlar in his flight suit after Rocketeer almost broke his spine in one encounter.

“Moving,” Overseer said, steering his beat-up hover-disc to the flat roof of the Bank International building. The disc was one of Rocketeer’s favorite targets, and the smartest thing to do was to get out of the air altogether. That would limit Overseer’s ability to coordinate, although hopefully, all the bad guys were in one place by this point. “He’s reorienting,” he added.

Stratosphere focused on the opposing flier, who’d let himself drop a few feet to twist back around. A barely visible burst of energy indicated that Rocketeer re-ignited his powers, and he rapidly began growing larger in Stratosphere’s vision. Rocketeer was rarely a threat, but he did require your *full* attention, so he could take you off the playing field by merely keeping the pressure on. Stratosphere lowered himself several feet, knowing Rocketeer

would have to reorient. He looked down at his teammates.

Sultana had found some tarp somewhere and used her telekinesis to wrap it around Earth God. Effectively blinded, the man had dropped the chunks of the street he'd been levitating and was struggling to rip the tarp open. Sultana was juggling him in midair, keeping him off-balance. Ultrasonic had Vertigo pinned down, and the villain was on his knees with his hands over his ears. The police were already inching carefully toward him with a damper collar held out in front of them. Everything seemed under control.

Stratosphere glanced back toward Rocketeer, who was just about to hurtle past above him. Realizing that Rocketeer could cut power when he was just above Stratosphere, drop down, and re-ignite into him at full blast, Stratosphere started to maneuver down Elizabeth Avenue to get out of the way. "Guys, I'm—"

Rocketeer twisted in mid-flight and came directly for him.

Stratosphere's eyes went wide, and his heart pounded. Impossible! Rocketeer couldn't change directions without turning his power off! But it was happening right in front of him *and he was going to get hit!* He could see Rocketeer's wicked grin as the man held both fists out in front of him. Stratosphere made a last-second attempt to twist to one side, praying to avoid being pummeled—

Rocketeer vanished.

"Shit!" Stratosphere looked wildly around, trying to spot the villain. "Hey!" Ultrasonic yelled over the commu-

nicator. "He's gone!"

"What the—" Sultana said. "He quit— what the hell happened?"

Stratosphere looked down. Sultana had pulled her tarp off, and instead of Earth God, she'd merely trapped a few large rocks. The street was undamaged, with no sign of the missing chunks the villain had been tossing around. Ultrasonic was looking around, and Vertigo was nowhere in sight. The police officers who'd been sidling up to him were looking around; damper collar still held out in front of them.

"Strat," Overseer's voice came over the communicator, "I need help." His voice was quiet and deliberate. Stratosphere shot back to the top of the skyscraper and saw Overseer standing there. Behind him was Whiplash, the fourth member of the Krewe. She wore a provocative blue catsuit, with a full cowl. Her hands were outstretched, palms out and pointed at the back of Overseer's head. They glowed a bright blue-white, indicating that she was preparing to unleash her power-whips and seriously injure the hero, if not kill him.

"What's the matter?" Ultrasonic said. "What's going on?"

"It's Whiplash," Stratosphere said. "She's got Overseer."

"How?" Ultrasonic cried. "Where are the other two?"

"It's Mirage," Overseer said. "The other *three* were never there."

"On the contrary," Whiplash yelled, loud enough to be picked up by Overseer's communicator. "They're very

much here. They're just not where you thought they were.”

“Then how do I know *you're* real?” Overseer asked. In response, the woman pointed one hand slightly to the side, unleashing a shimmering, roiling whiplash made of searingly bright light. It struck a ventilation cover and smashed it to pieces. It faded immediately, and she reaimed her hand at Overseer's head. “Okay,” he said. “I believe you. What do you want?”

Stratosphere saw her smile. “Oh, nothing,” she said. With that, she aimed both hands skyward and generated two glowing whips, each at least fifty feet long. At the same time, an orange blue—Rocketeer! Stratosphere thought—blasted over her, somehow grabbing the ends of the glowing lashes. Whiplash was picked up from the roof and carried along, reeling herself in by retracting the two power-whips. It was over in a moment.

“What the hell?” Stratosphere asked.

“Tom,” Overseer said quietly, sagging slightly, “can you escort me home? At this point, I'm afraid I'll fall off this damn thing.”

* * *

Lucas Sokolov, currently in his persona as Intellect the team's technology genius, tinkered with Stratosphere's helmet on a workbench. The rest of the team, including Critical Mass, their radiation emitter and expert, spread themselves around the workshop, sitting in dilapidated chairs, leaning against the dusty walls, or plopping down wherever else there was free space.

“Mirage is the only one that makes sense unless there’s a new player,” Overseer said. Intellect grunted. He wasn’t in full fugue-inventor state, but he still wasn’t much of a conversationalist when he was working on something.

“But she’s hardcore,” Critical Mass said. “Like, she’s a full-on badass for hire. What’s she doing hanging out with losers like the Krewe?”

“Those losers have better gear than we do,” Stratosphere muttered, watching Intellect poke around inside his helmet.

“That’s a point,” Overseer said. “The Krewe has been getting upgrades from someone in the last month. That outfit Whiplash had was new, and Rocketeer’s never used that extraction maneuver with her before. Maybe they’ve been adopted by someone who’s also providing them with more muscle. Someone who can afford Mirage.”

“But what was the *point* of it all?” Ultrasonic wondered. She was sitting on the end of the workbench, twirling a screwdriver in her hand.

“Distraction,” Intellect grumbled.

“Sorry, Lucas,” Overseer said. “We can take it—”

“No,” Sultana said, “not us. The Krewe. They were just there to tie us up. *They* were a distraction.” Intellect grunted agreement as sparks flew out of Stratosphere’s helmet.

“From what?” Stratosphere asked. “And be careful with that,” he added to Intellect, who didn’t respond.

“Huh,” Overseer said. “We obviously won’t know from what, but that’s more evidence that the Krewe has upgraded their criminal associations.”

“How so?” Critical Mass asked.

“Well, think about it,” Overseer said. “If you were a higher-end criminal and you wanted to steal something or destroy something, or whatever, then you might want some room to do it without us or the cops interfering. So you get nimrods like the Krewe to create a distraction for you. All they’re really good at is destruction and smash-and-grab jobs anyway. Everyone knows they get a good police response because we’re all used to them causing so much destruction. Maybe, if you’re a well-funded criminal, you tease the idiots with some fresh new gear, and maybe you pair them up with a babysitter who understands basic strategy.”

“And we bought it,” Critical Mass said quietly.

“Not us,” Sultana reminded him. “Harbor City P.D. bought it, and they called us in.”

“Whatever we were being distracted from didn’t attract enough attention to get called into the cops,” Stratosphere said.

“Exactly,” Overseer agreed. “And unless something turns up missing or broken someplace, we’ll probably never know what we were being distracted from.”

“Done,” Intellect said, sitting back and pushing Stratosphere’s helmet across the workbench toward the flier. “I epoxied everything back down, should be fine. You should get a few hundred extra meters of range now, too. I don’t know how you could be so stupid.”

“Cool, man,” Stratosphere said, ignoring the insult and picking up the helmet and looking inside. “Thank you.”

“Thoughts on our theory, Intellect?” Overseer asked. Intellect wasn’t a multitasker, but with nothing else to focus on, he could spot any flaws in their thinking in a second or two.

Intellect shrugged. “There’s no data,” he said, “but circumstantially, it fits. If you factor in some of the other powered criminal activity we’ve seen, it starts to add up to something.” He leaned back in his chair, and his eyes fluttered. He was coming out of his fugue.

“The Directorate?” Ultrasonic asked.

Intellect—now back to being Sokolov—sighed. “I don’t know why everybody goes straight for the world-domination cabal theory. We’ve been seeing evidence of a well-funded, strategic criminal organization. You don’t need the genius to see that, and it’s a far cry from evidence of a globe-spanning evil cult or something. And nobody’s ever proven that the Directorate is a thing.”

“But it’s not impossible,” Critical Mass said. “Everything you hear about the Directorate is that they’re under-the-radar, well-funded, and extremely strategic.”

“But it could just as easily be the Dark Masters, couldn’t it? Based on just those factors?” Sokolov asked. When not under Intellect’s influence, Sokolov was better at synthesizing abstract information.

Critical Mass frowned. “Who are the Dark Masters?”

“They’re nobody,” Sokolov said, grinning. “I just made them up. They’re a well-funded, under-the-radar, extremely strategy-driven criminal organization.”

“Are you trying to be funny?” Critical Mass said, stand-

ing. Nadim Jabari was a big man, and he intensely disliked being teased.

“Settle, settle,” Sokolov said, holding his hands up placatingly. “All I’m saying is that anyone can create rumors and start fleshing them out. We don’t *know* anything. And we’ve never seen high-level criminals who were willing to work with each other. Idiots like the Krewe, sure, because they’re practically nonfunctional on their own. But real masterminds—they hate to share, they like to take all the credit, and they’re all too Type-A to work with someone else.”

“Dhoso has a team,” Ultrasonic pointed out.

“Dhoso *led* a team,” Sokolov countered. “He was firmly in charge of it all, and the fact that he killed most of his team in that last ‘quake kind of suggests he wasn’t too attached to them.”

“Okay, okay,” Overseer said, standing. “We could do this all day. I, for one, could use a shower, assuming the hot water heater is working today?” He glanced at Intellect, who nodded. The Guard headquarters was an old World War II-era bunker, located beneath one of the oldest police precinct buildings in Midtown, and had less-than-reliable utilities. “A shower, then. And I suggest we all get something to eat. We’ll keep an eye on the news and see what other facts arise. Deal?”

They all nodded and made their way out of the workshop.

* * *

“I don’t know, Commander,” Overseer said. He had the joy of debriefing the police commander in charge of Special Powers Unit operations, and he hadn’t yet had the pleasure of that shower. “We suspect Mirage was working with them to create that farce, and we don’t know what we were meant to be distracted from.”

“So it worked.”

Overseer shrugged. “We’re not detectives, sir. We go where you send us and try to subdue the bad guys until you can get containment units on-site. So yeah, it worked.”

The man on the other end of the video link sighed. “I’m not trying to blame you, Dave. And I’m glad there was no actual damage for once. I’m just worried that we’re up against something bigger than smash-and-grab robbers.”

“You’re right to be worried,” Overseer said. “We are, too.”

“Alright,” the Commander said. “We’ll wait to see if we hear anything from anyone. Get some rest.”

“Overseer out,” the hero said tiredly, pushing the button to close the link.

Harbor City Herald: Another Downtown Attack

Christine Lane
HARBOR CITY

Harbor City's Downtown and Financial districts were the targets of yet another property-devastating attack by the supervillain team known as "The Krewe." This team, which our superheroes of the Special Powers Unit have often termed "B-listers," was reportedly joined by formerly independent superpowered criminal Mirage as they attempted to rampage through Four Corners, right here in the city core. The Harbor City Metropolitan Police reports their Special Powers Unit was able to stop the criminals before they caused any damage. Unfortunately, all of the criminals were able to escape.

David Porter, known as Overseer, the leader of the Special Powers Unit told the Harbor City Herald that the presence of Mirage in the attack suggests that The Krewe is moving beyond their recent smash-and-grab style bank robberies and into a level of more extreme crime.

Danielle Tourant, Director of Special Projects at Q-Launch Labs, reported that additional super-villains broke into the facility during The Krewe's attack. They made

off with unique and valuable pieces of equipment that Q-Launch had been developing. Ms. Tourant surmised that the Financial District attack was a distraction, a position Mr. Porter acknowledged was a possibility. “But just because it happened at the same time,” he said, “does not mean the two are related. However, we continue to investigate to the best of our ability and will assist Q-Launch in recovering their equipment.”

Ms. Tourant said that surveillance video shows the super-criminal Mind Master gaining access to the company’s quantum research laboratory by mind-controlling the on-duty security guards. Other Q-Launch employees, speaking on the condition of anonymity because they were not authorized to discuss the theft, say that another criminal accompanied Mind Master but was either invisible or able to otherwise conceal her presence.

The Harbor City Herald’s resident super-expert, Thomas Van Damm, agrees that the two attacks were coordinated and that this is further proof of the existence of The Directorate, a shadowy world-domination organization that has been postulated for years by conspiracy theorists and super-watchers alike. “Those other Q-Launch employees are doubtless talking about Shadow, a high-end mercenary that we’ve suspected for years operates under the instructions of The Directorate. Combined with the presence of Mirage, a known Directorate soldier, this seems to provide concrete evidence that the Directorate is real and that they’re operating right here in Harbor City. The police and the S.P.U. would do well to take the threat seriously.”

Mr. Porter provided no comment to Mr. Van Damm's remarks.

TWO: THE DIRECTORATE

“Excellent work, Mirage.” Devon Delesante, known professionally as Professor Power, smiled at the nondescript young woman known as Mirage while running one hand through his thinning, dull-brown hair. “Our sources within the police department tell us that the S.P.U. didn’t know our true target until it came out in the news.”

“I’m pleased that you’re satisfied,” Mirage said. “And I appreciate you inviting me to this... facility. It’s more impressive than I could have imagined.” The Directorate’s West Coast headquarters was beyond “impressive.” This was a large, well-funded group. She’d seen at least a hundred thousand square feet of the facility so far, and there was much more she knew she hadn’t seen. What she had seen was gleaming and modern, more like a multimillion-dollar office building than the lair of a secretive worldwide organization of evil. Even Delesante’s—*outfit* was the only appropriate word—was impressive. It was a form-fitting armored suit, constructed from rigid steel-blue panels. Glowing yellow lights were distributed across the chest and abdominal plates. He wasn’t wearing it now, but the suit had a companion helmet. It looked *badass*, and the odd nick and scratch made it clear it had seen use in battle. It was far more than she’d expected for a “Professor.”

She wondered if he wore it to bed.

“Well, it’s my hope you’ll continue working with us,” Delesante said. He was seated in a sleek leather chair, situated behind a minimalist white desk that looked like it was carved from a single piece of marble. He leaned back. “In fact, while I appreciate what you’ve accomplished as an independent operator, I’m curious if you’d be open to working with us on a more... hmm, perhaps call it a ‘full-time’ basis?”

She looked hard at him. She was absolutely inscrutable, he thought. Short, with frizzy dark hair, a prominent nose, kind brown eyes—she could be any college senior. Not one of the popular girls, but one of the ones everyone saw and didn’t pay notice. She wasn’t bombshell pretty, nor was she unattractive in any way. She just somehow... *was*. He wondered if she used her powers to mask her appearance and make herself less memorable.

“I could consider it,” she said. “But I’d have some conditions aside from the financials involved.”

“Such as?” he asked, twirling an armored finger in the air. He had several little personal affectations, and she already disliked them.

Shana Moskowitz, the freelance villain, known as Mirage, paused for a beat. The opportunity to work within a larger organization was appealing because making ends meet hadn’t always been easy as an independent. But she didn’t want to be under the thumb of this effete super-genius. She once again raked her eyes over his incongruous high-tech battle armor. This was a “professor?” This was

the co-leader of the largest superpowered organization on the planet?

“I dislike working with idiots, for a start,” she said firmly.

He nodded. “And I do apologize for that. We needed Earth God to provide a tangible target for the S.P.U. And Whiplash isn’t so bad.”

“She’s a showboating idiot,” Mirage said, disgust clear in her voice. “I’m a professional.”

“And they’re a blunt instrument,” he acknowledged, “but one that we needed in that particular instance. But worry not. My vision for you in our organization has you well above the level of blunt instruments. I want to put you in charge of a tactical team, reporting directly to me.”

She tilted her head. “Tactical team?”

“Let me share the bigger vision with you,” he said, leaning forward and resting his elbows on his desk. “Have you ever wondered why, with all the superpowered people on Earth, not a single one of us has ever shown more than a single power?”

She frowned slightly. “What do you mean?”

“I mean,” he said, leaning forward even more and looking at her with an intent gleam in his eyes, “have you ever wondered why the comic-book heroes have never come to exist? Someone who can fly, shoot lasers from his eyes, stop a bullet with teeth, all that? Any *one* of those, certainly, but never more than one?”

She shrugged. “I guess I hadn’t thought about it.”

“Well I have,” he said, leaning back. “I’ve thought about

it a lot. And I believe I know the answer.”

“You... you do?” she said. This guy was either crazy or really was an evil genius.

“I have a theory,” he clarified, “and it’s a theory I intend to test. It’s why we had a tactical team, consisting of Mind Master and Shadow, obtain a quantum monitor from Q-Launch.”

“That’s what I was providing cover for?” He nodded. “What’s a quantum monitor?”

“I believe our abilities come from a connection to something bigger. Something more universal. Something that’s all around us. And I believe that connection exists on a quantum level, feeding us our powers. The monitor is designed to measure quantum relationships, so it will help me prove or disprove my theory.”

“And if your theory is accurate?” she asked.

“I fully expect it will be,” he said, “and it means we will proceed to the next step. That will require us to obtain a great many more pieces of equipment, raw materials, and so on, and it’s where I believe you could be of great value.”

“And what is that next step?” she asked.

“Why my dear,” he said, spreading his arms and smiling. “I plan to give us all a great many more powers.”

* * *

“Is she in?” Tessa Moreau, the light-controller known as Night Queen and Professor Power’s Directorate co-leader, walked into the Professor’s lab. She wore a flowing white

dress that perfectly offset her dark features. Her hair was the same color of complete white, and she knew she cut a dramatic figure. Anything that gave her an edge over her co-leader.

“Ah, Tessa,” he said, turning to smile at her. “Yes, I believe she is. I think you’ll enjoy working with her, especially seeing how similar your powers are.”

“Where is she now?” Moreau asked.

“I left her in the main cafeteria with one of the HR adjuncts. They’ll take care of her onboarding paperwork and get her assigned to a stateroom.”

Moreau nodded and walked to the workbench Delesante was standing over. She gestured to the odd-looking contraption in front of him. “And this is it?”

“It is,” he said, a pleased tone in his voice. “I’m just getting the final power couplings connected, and we’ll give it a spin.”

“And if you’re correct?”

“*When* I’m proven correct,” he said, holding a finger in the air, “then we’ll need to acquire the isotopes for the entangler I’ve got Troll building downstairs.”

“Troll,” she said flatly. “I know he’s been useful to us, but I don’t trust him with something of this import. He creations are all so—” she paused, not wanting to offend Delesante.

“Haphazard?” he said. “I know. It’s a quirk of his power that everything has to look like it is assembled from spare parts. But it’ll be fine. The alternative would be to steal one, and the only one I know is in working condition is halfway

across the planet in a Russian stronghold.”

“We could ask the CEO to facilitate a conversation with the Directorate branch there,” she suggested.

“We could,” he said, turning to her, “but I would prefer not to. Why should we, the Directorate’s largest branch, continue to bend the knee to a so-called ‘CEO’ who doesn’t even have any powers?”

“Because he’s fabulously wealthy?” she asked, frowning at him. She knew Delesante was a megalomaniac. Hell, one look at that armor of his and you could tell that he was both overcompensating and continuously dreaming of taking over. But the CEO had *built* the Directorate, and he hadn’t done it without challenge. Moreau preferred to bide her time.

“You lack ambition, my dear. If we can make ourselves the only multi-powered humans on the planet, *we* will be fabulously wealthy. And *we* will control who has access to that technology.”

She smiled. “I have plenty of ambition, you fool. Have you not even mentioned your project to the CEO?” Delesante smiled and shook his head. “You risk much,” she said with grudging admiration. At least she could play both sides of this, claiming to the CEO she’d never known of the Professor’s plans while benefiting from them if he managed to pull it off. “And there are no other entanglers closer to home we might target?”

He waved dismissively. “Q-Launch has one,” he said, “but they’ve taken a difficult and questionable design approach. I’d have to have Troll tear it apart and rebuild it,

and it'd wind up looking like the inside of a scrap heap anyway."

She nodded. "All right. We'll proceed with your plan and your Troll's ramshackle invention. What's next, then? Those isotopes you mentioned?"

"Yes," he said, turning back to the quantum monitor. "I have a list in the central computer already, if you'd like to organize a team. I suggest not using Mirage on this one."

"Why?"

"Mmmm," he said, tapping the workbench with a finger. "Let's just say I think we need to ease her into daily life with us. Let her adjust." And not develop any loyalty to you, he thought.

"Fine," she said. "I have a team in mind anyway." She turned to leave. "You'll let me know when all this," she added, waving broadly at the workbench, "happens?"

He turned to look at her, giving her his most winning smile. "But of course, my dear. I expect news by tomorrow afternoon."

* * *

Moreau smiled coolly at the various minions she passed in the corridor, cultivating her persona as a friendly senior leader who would dismember you in a moment if you didn't deliver what she needed. As intended, she was met with small, nervous smiles and averted eyes.

The corridor ended on a circular mezzanine over three hundred feet in diameter. She felt a frisson of pleasure as

she took it all in. The corridor she'd just exited was one of six on this level, each a spoke on the mezzanine's hub. Two more identical levels sat above this one, and four below. In the middle was nothing but wide-open space, softly lit by the indirect, temperature-balanced lighting bouncing off the clean white floors and frosted glass walls. She almost grinned, imagining the Special Powers Unit festering in their disused concrete nuclear bunker, while the "bad guys" had this glorious facility. Her only regret was that, as the heroes', the Directorate's facility was underground. A nice view wouldn't have gone unappreciated.

"Night Queen?" A quiet voice interrupted her reverie. She turned to see a short, dark-haired young woman who... she blinked. The woman's appearance refused to cement itself in her otherwise-excellent memory. Ah, she reminded herself. Mirage.

"Hello, Mirage," Moreau said, giving her a genuinely warm smile and extending her hand. "It's wonderful to meet you." The younger woman took her hand and gave it a firm shake.

"Thank you. I just wanted to—" she paused, and bit her lip. "I just wanted to tell you how much I've admired your work," she said in a rush.

Oh, Moreau thought. A fan. Excellent. "Why, thank you. And I'll admit, I'm something of an admirer of yours, as well. Your work with that lunkhead telekinetic down in the Financial District—pure patience on your part."

Mirage frowned. "Yeah, he was an idiot. Professor Power assured me—"

“That you’ll never have to work with idiots again?” Moreau said, smiling. “We will certainly try. And if you find yourself working with one anyway, please come directly to me so we can put a stop to it.”

“Oh,” Mirage said, smiling shyly. “Thank you.”

“We *do* appreciate you being here,” Moreau said sincerely. Even if I’m not entirely clear on *why* he wants you here, she said to herself. “And did you and the Professor discuss working arrangements?”

She nodded. “The Professor said I’d be running a tactical team and reporting directly to him.”

Did he, Moreau thought. “Oh, well, that’s excellent. I mean— well, never mind. That’s certainly a workable arrangement for both of you, I’m sure, and I wouldn’t want to interfere. Well, then, I’ll leave you to it, and—”

“Wait,” Mirage said, stepping forward and holding a hand out. “What were you going to say?”

“Well,” Moreau said carefully, “just that I’m personally going to be leading a strike team to acquire some more critical elements for our plan. Given how complementary I suspect our powers are, I selfishly wanted to invite you to join that team. But I wouldn’t dream of asking you to give up on a team of your own, and I—”

“No!” Mirage interrupted. Moreau smiled inside. “I’d love to work with you! More than— I mean, I’m sure he’s—”

“The Professor is my co-leader here, and I respect him very much,” Moreau lied, “but we can all be difficult to work with, in our own unique ways. Tell you what,” she added, leaning in conspiratorially, “why don’t we go get

a glass of wine in the officers' lounge and discuss my upcoming mission?"

Mirage smiled, and the two women walked toward the nearest elevator bank.

* * *

Delesante delicately connected the last control wire to the Q-Launch quantum monitor and stepped back to admire his work. Q-Launch had intended the monitor to provide feedback and visualizations for their flawed quantum entangler mechanism, and so it had been relatively easy to repurpose it. He'd detached the sleek detector array from the main housing, and mounted it on a tripod that pointed into a tall, cylindrical glass housing.

"Now," he said, addressing the young girl inside the cylinder, "this isn't going to *do* anything to you, my dear. I'm just going to see if it can detect whatever it is you *are* doing. Okay?"

She nodded. Code-name Interdict was the Directorate's prized possession, and Night Queen would have a kitten if she knew he was running tests on the young girl. Delesante had found her in a run-down tenement building they'd been scouting as an emergency safe house—found her, he recalled, by nearly stepping on her. She, her mother, and her two younger brothers were all squatting exactly where he'd been about to walk, and yet he'd not see them until he'd nearly trampled them. Somehow, the girl could create an exclusion zone. Anything in that zone was imperceptible to the outside: you couldn't see in, you couldn't hear

what was happening, you couldn't detect infrared, *nothing*. Even supers with enhanced senses couldn't see past her veil. Delesante had been able to amplify her power to conceal the entire Directorate facility from detection, in exchange for providing her little family with sumptuous quarters, free food, and quality, private education for the kids.

"Let's begin, then," he said, smiling and turning back to the workbench. The control and output portions of the device were still attached to its main housing, with power and control cables snaking out the gaping hole in the back end. He flicked a switch, and the whole thing started to hum softly. He looked back at Interdict and smiled. "See? Just some lights and noises." The girl smiled and nodded again. She never said much.

He looked closely at the output unit. An illuminated gauge was indeed detecting significant quantum activity, far above the usual background noise. He adjusted a dial, and the larger display lit up. An outline of the young girl appeared, brilliantly lit by the number of excited quantum particles. He nudged a switch, and the display rapidly zoomed out. So much, that the graphic of Interdict became a single bright dot. He frowned and nudged another dial. Nothing. He peered at the screen and then flipped another switch to reverse the display colors. He pulled back immediately as the screen turned bright white. He flipped that switch again.

Good God, he thought. It's *everywhere*. She's not entangled to *something*. She's entangled to... to *everything*.

This was excellent news. He bent over the device and continued to fine-tune the readings.

THREE: MICHAEL

:Transition complete. Iteration XXXXXX-664,: the Ghost said.

As this new world settled in around me, I reached out to the Prime Wave. Habit, really; the Ghost would tell me what is condition this iteration. But I was accustomed to sampling it myself, taking in its flavor and measuring its intensity.

It felt... *good*. For the first time in longer than I could remember, the Prime Wave felt *tuned*. It felt liquid, as it should. It smelled of harimsumuth, that delicate aroma I only experienced when I was around the highest of the Authority. It sounded like the definition of harmony and tingled all my senses. This instance didn't throb with an angry, destabilized, flickering fire. Instead, it merely glowed with a soft, delicate light. This instance seemed unharmed. It seemed perfect. After so many, many iterations, here was one of the very few that I might be able to preserve. Here might be a world that didn't have to die by way of an inferno.

:Report,: I ordered.

:Inconclusive,: the Ghost reported after a moment. *:Extended analysis required.:*

My mind paused. That had never happened before, particularly in an instance that felt so balanced and innocuous as this one. There couldn't possibly be a dominant, sapient species if the Prime Wave felt so untouched. It-

:Dominant species detected,: the Ghost said. Well, so much for that theory. *:Biological Prime Wave connection is present,:* it added. Impossible. Not with the Wave feeling so much as it should.

:Full analysis,: I ordered. “Inconclusive,” it had said. We would see. While I waited, as was my tradition, I extended my Halo and rose into the air. I’d arrived in this iteration on what appeared to be a small, uninhabited islet located in a harbor or bay. In the distance, on what I presumed was the mainland, I saw the gleaming evidence of the life forms’ constructs. A city, most likely. A city with tall buildings, indicating a reasonably advanced technological base. Impossible, unless such a species had, in the course of its evolution, somehow not developed the Builders’ shameful, systemic bug. But the Ghost had said the Prime Wave was being tapped. *Local schematic,* I commanded.

:Unavailable. All resources dedicated to full analysis,: it replied flatly. My mind required a moment to absorb that. The Ghost was a construct of the Prime Wave itself; it might need a moment to assimilate every mind and molecule of an instance, but that wasn’t because it was taxing. It was only because there was so much to reach out to and to sift through. For “all resources” to be dedicated to an analysis implied that the entire Prime Wave was itself being fully utilized, or close to it. That would require a power expenditure on the order of the one the Builders had initially infused into the substrate when creating this instance in the first place. I imagine that amount of primal energy being utilized...

It was impossible, although I was starting to think that the word “impossible” wasn’t applicable in this instance.

:*Analysis concluded*,: it said. Another novelty: usually, an analysis was *complete*. How could it be concluded if it wasn’t complete?

:*Report*.:

:*Dominant species is at end-stage evolution*; it began. A species, in other words, that had evolved to the point where it no longer required evolution. This species was likely master of its environment, not a subject of it. :*Prime Wave shows evidence of centuries-long tapping. Taps appear to be minimal, balanced and absorbed by individuals of the dominant species. Approximate structural parallel to the Authority, although much smaller in individual scope*.:

Imposs— Well. Obviously not. Unprecedented, then. No species, in tens of thousands of iterations, had ever evolved to interact directly with the Prime Wave without destroying themselves, if not their entire world. The Builders’ rules shouldn’t have permitted access to the Prime Wave, let alone *harmonious* access. And for a biological life form, something the Authority *had created*, to touch the Prime Wave in the same way as my kind... this was unthinkable.

I let myself rise higher, rolling these new facts around in my mind. I was indeed adjacent to a coastal city, and a deep blue-gray ocean stretched out in every other direction. The city itself was situated on a harbor that must have afforded protection from damaging weather. Large oceangoing ships streamed in and out, surrounded by small flocks of smaller vessels. Beyond the city were lightly

wooded areas, flanking a thin, sinuous river that snaked out of the tall, white-capped mountains I could now see in the distance. Evidence of smaller settlements dotted the landscape. This would, therefore, be the coast of a vast continent, one that had survived the immense tectonic activity that the Builders' rules mandated for a world's early development.

:Schematic available,: the Ghost said. Finally. I needed something from which I could develop an understanding of this instance.

I raised my arms before me, and the glowing schematic appeared. This world was around three-quarters water, which was a standard configuration. Landmasses were distributed roughly evenly across the globe, with a significant amount of land in the temperate zones that this world's axial tilt would afford. I moved my hands, spinning the schematic before me. Polar landmasses would help maintain temperature and provide oxygen reservoirs – like many iterations, life on this one had evolved in a delicate balance with that corrosive gas. Their dominant element would be iron, based on my past experience, and their biology would use oxygen to drive many of their internal chemical reactions.

I brushed the schematic with a finger, and a delicate web, representing taps into the Prime Wave, overlaid the image. It was a dense, bright latticework that covered every landmass, with a few lines stretching into the ocean areas. Likely life forms aboard oceangoing vessels, I imagined, rather than a secondary aquatic life form capable

of tapping the Wave. That kind of evolution would be... I stopped myself from using the word “impossible” again. *:Diagnostic,:* I ordered. *:Prime Wave,:* Ordering a diagnostic of the Prime Wave was permissible, but discouraged. Asking the Wave, through the Ghost, to look at itself ran the risk of collapsing certain functions to create a determinate, observable state. The diagnosis must, therefore, be fleeting, avoiding any lasting imposition.

:Complete,: the Ghost said. *:The Prime Wave is stable. Approximately two percent of the dominant life forms are connected to the Wave. Each connected individual draws on only a single aspect, causing a determinate state collapse at the time and place of the tap. These taps are distributed evenly enough that they affect only the surface tension of the Wave. The inner core is untouched, other than by yourself,:*

Fascinating. A species had evolved to sip at the Prime Wave, to caress it, rather than gulping from it or reaching in, ham-handed, to grab at something not meant for biological life.

:Analyze supporting structures,: I ordered. Each iteration had a single world intended by the Authority for experimentation and study, but those worlds existed inside a universe that was, for all intents and purposes, fully formed. Initial development in an instance focused only on the immediate region, which would have entire planets, all spinning around a primary fusion source. That was all according to the Builders’ most fundamental rules. If a species had evolved to tap the Prime Wave, however—

:Supporting structures are intact,: the Ghost said, with barely a pause. *:Supporting definition has spread to approximately seventeen I.E.U.s. Instance logs indicate preliminary automated exploration efforts as the source for rules-based definition expansion.:* The locals had been sending automated probes out into local space, then, forcing the instance to further define itself to present a realistic and consistent picture. Seventeen Instance Expansion Units was impressive. If I recalled the Engineers' framework specifications correctly, this instance's species would be close to colonization capability. Forcing the instance to develop more planets for them to explore.

:Are there signs of a second-level rule set engagement?: I asked. The Builders' plans called for a species to first explore and understand the basic, observable rule set of their world. Then begin postulating and experimenting with lower-order rule sets that couldn't be directly observed. This would eventually lead them to faster-than-baseline travel, something the Authority was quite keen on, and something more or less required for colonization to happen.

:Affirmative,: the Ghost said after a moment. *:Two aspects.:*

Two? There was only one underlying rule set. *:Elaborate,:* I ordered.

:Evidence exists that basic experiments have been undertaken to validate second-level rule set facts,: it said. Precisely what the framework was designed to do. *:Evidence exists that meta-level rule sets have also been postulated*

and observed, at least in part.:

Wait, wait. *:What?:*

:There is evidence that the dominant species has postulated the existence of the Prime Wave, and taken steps to confirm its existence and behavior. Instance logs indicate the impingement on the Prime Wave.:

By the Executive, I thought. This...

This might be a reason to destroy this world. This was not only unprecedented; it was outside the parameters of my mission. No species, in tens of thousands of instances, had actually *known* about the Prime Wave. Many had managed to tap its energy but had never known exactly what they were tapping. This was *dangerous*. *:Recommended protocol?:* I asked the Ghost. It knew the rules better than I. Perhaps somewhere, buried deep in the mission guidelines, there—

:Unknown,: it said. *:No protocol exists for this combination of factors. Recommend contacting a Supervisor.:*

I snorted. That was unlikely. The last time I'd had to summon a Supervisor, it had been a borderline case, and I'd been unsure of whether to let the instance survive or not. But the Supervisors just acknowledged the request and never responded. After waiting a few hundred local years, the situation had become less borderline, more clearly pointing toward destruction. So I'd erred on the side of caution and destroyed it. This world, though... this wasn't a borderline case. This was so far outside, above, and beyond the borders that I doubted a Supervisor — even if one could be persuaded to get their hands dirty inside an

actual instance – would have a protocol to cover it. I began lowering myself back to the islet. Perhaps a–

:Alert. There is significant access of Prime Wave energies occurring in the nearby settlement.:

I perked up. Observing the dominant species in action could bring valuable information.

* * *

Moving within an instance was far more straightforward than moving between them. With a thought, I merely *existed* at the location the Ghost had indicated. A sizable cityscape, with tall buildings made from sturdy materials. The Prime Wave usage was immediately evident: one biped was floating in mid-air, staring down at the hard surfaces below. Another was floating on a disc-shaped mechanical contrivance of some sort. A third aerial biped was some distance off but was inbound fast. Two more bipeds were on the surface. Three more were on the rooftop of one of the buildings. All were highlighted in my vision as Prime Wave energies trickled through them. Each was violating the fundamental rule-set of the instance, defying gravity, manipulating visible light, and so on.

:Live analysis.: I ordered, holding up one hand in front of me. *:Visual.:* The Ghost responded by displaying a seven-dimensional schematic in front of me. A live analysis omitted the eighth dimension, time, and instead updated itself according to the local chronology. I could see the delicate interface between the Prime Wave's causally locked

outer layer and the bipeds. Specifically, the bipeds' densely packed central neural package in their heads. Something in their brains, then, had evolved to touch the Prime Wave. Not unusual, although it was more common for lifeforms to develop a dedicated organ that tapped the Wave.

I zoomed in on one of the rooftop bipeds, who seemed to be manipulating several large chunks of granite on the surface below. *Hold position along eight*, I ordered the Ghost, and it obediently stopped me along the instance's flow of time. Everything around me, even the small creatures flying in the air, froze immediately, but I was far more interested in the pattern of electrical impulses within that biped's head. It was a fairly typical arrangement: small cells passed electrical impulses between each other. Each grouping of cells sometimes spread throughout the brain, lit up to recall memories, form cognitive connections, and transmit orders to the being's musculature. But a second web of cells was also energizing, in a pattern completely different from normal cognition. I felt as if I'd seen this before. I rotated the scene before me, but couldn't quite pick out the pattern that my mind was hinting at. *:Remove schematic,:* I ordered, leaving me with just the biped and the model of electrical impulses in its brain. The overlapping patterns were still challenging to see, especially now that I'd limited myself to the three dimensions the biped existed in. I thought for a moment.

:Extract that pattern,: I ordered. The Ghost had far more processing power than I did, so I might as well utilize it. *:Separate this,:* I added, indicating the pattern

that seemed to be supporting normal cognition, *:and this,:* indicating the secondary, overlaid pattern.

:Complete,: the Ghost said. The two patterns appeared before me in schematic form. I rotated them, overlaid them, and pulled them back apart. After playing with the visuals for a moment, I moved the cognitive pattern to one side of my vision and focused on the other. There was something about this lattice that was... familiar. And yet not. I stared for a moment, and it dawned on me.

:Invert,: I told the Ghost, and the glowing schematic in the air shifted. The new representation was far denser, showing the neurons that *weren't* active in the current pattern. I gasped.

The inactive portions of the creature's brain should, in a normal situation, mainly be random. There should be no pattern here because there was no activity. This was simply the areas of the lifeform's brain that weren't doing anything at the moment. But there was, inexplicably, a pattern here.

I was looking at the primary cognitive pattern of my own mind.

FOUR: SPECIAL POWERS UNIT

“Okay,” Stratosphere said, “explain why they’d need a quantum monitor.”

“And why we had to find out from the news,” Sultana added.

“Because Tourant’s an idiot,” Intellect said. “That’s easy.”

“And the entangler?” Hartley asked.

Sokolov shrugged. “I assume they want to monitor something quantum-y.”

“Like?”

“You’re going to make me do this, aren’t you?” Sokolov groused.

“It’s literally why we keep you,” Overseer reminded him.

Sokolov grimaced and closed his eyes. Unlike most super-geniuses, Sokolov’s power wasn’t at his disposal all the time. He had to enter a sort of high-functioning fugue state, during which he’d become one of the smartest people on the planet, with the weakest social and communications skills. Asking him to do so to simply to answer questions was... questionable.

Intellect opened his eyes, and they could all see the burning intelligence in them. He started to stand, likely to

go invent some fantastic new device, but Sultana placed a hand on his forearm, and subtly increased his weight. Overseer saw the sofa he was sitting on strain slightly. “Intellect,” he said. “If someone stole a quantum monitor, what’s their next most likely target?”

“A quantum entangler, obviously,” Intellect said. “You use them in pairs.”

“What’s a quantum entangler do?” Overseer asked.

“Entangles quantum particles, obviously,” Intellect sneered. “Ties them all up in a place and time. Makes them *friends*,” he added with disgust.

“And the monitor would let you measure this,” Overseer said.

“What else would it do?”

“And what would be the point of entangling quantum particles that way?” Stratosphere asked. Overseer shook his head. They were already nearing the likely limits of Intellect’s patience.

The savant’s eyes opened wider. “Teleportation. Predicting the future. Faster than light communications. I—” He stopped, and his eyes fluttered. He collapsed back into the sofa, and Sultana removed her hand from his arm. When his eyes reopened, it was Lucas Sokolov staring out of them. “I was going to invent a teleporter, I think,” he said in a strained, raspy voice. “We did that once. I was under for six months with nothing to show for it.”

“And a lot of dead rabbits, if I remember correctly,” Overseer said. Sokolov nodded. “All right, then, where would someone go to steal a quantum entangler?” The

question was met with silence. “Should we ask Ms. Lane? She seems to have more facts than we do anyway.”

“Actually,” Sokolov said, “we probably already know who has an entangler.”

“We do?” Sultana asked.

“Yeah, Ms. Lane basically told us, right? Q-Launch Labs was the target. That’s where the monitor was stolen from. Wouldn’t they be the ones to have an entangler as well?”

Everyone thought about it for a moment. “I’ll call Q-Launch,” Overseer said, standing and walking out of the room.

Everyone chatted while they waited for him to return. After several minutes, he walked back into the room. “It’s not Q-Launch,” he said. “They’re involved in the development of an entangler, but the equipment is at Harbor University.”

“That’s the target, then,” Stratosphere said.

“Maybe not,” Overseer said, raising a hand. “They’ve never gotten it working.”

“But they’ve got the base equipment,” Sokolov said. “So they’ll be the target.”

“The equipment is useless without certain rare isotopes,” Overseer said, “and Q-Launch has been holding onto those for safekeeping.”

“Two targets, then?” Stratosphere asked.

Overseer nodded. “I think we have to assume so,” he said. “Look, I think everyone should try and get some rest. I’ll stay on-duty—I want to call this in so the police can have backup in place.”

“I’ll stay up with you,” Sokolov said. “I can’t rest right after a fugue. Even a short one. I can already feel it jittering to go invent something.”

“Do you think we could get something to detect these isotopes, at least? Maybe use it for hunting down the criminals behind all this?”

Sokolov shrugged. “Hard to say. I’ll go down to the lab and let him out.”

* * *

“Two targets is not ideal,” the Commander said over the video link.

“I know, but it’s impossible to guess whether they’re after the equipment, the isotopes, or both,” Overseer said.

“It’s going to stretch you guys thin.”

“That’s why we’re going to need whatever backup we can get on short notice.”

“How’re you planning to divvy this up?” the Commander asked.

“I think the isotopes present the biggest risk. Sultana and Critical Mass seem to be the obvious choice for those. Nadim can dampen any radiation if things go sideways, and he’s an effective weapon against most of the villains we believe are in on this. I’ll take the university with Stratosphere and Ultrasonic.”

“And Intellect?”

“He’s not a field asset. And he’s in the lab trying to cook up an isotope detector. It’s impossible to say when he’ll come out of there.”

The Commander grimaced on the screen. “That’s a weird man,” he said. “Make sure he eats.”

“He usually drops out of fugue on his own when he’s hungry enough. We keep a mini-fridge with sandwiches in it for him.”

“Okay. Look, I’m not excited about this. I’ll have SWAT on standby, but Q-Launch and Harbor University are on opposite sides of the city, so it’ll be ten minutes either way. I’ll get you some tactical snipers at both locations, but—”

“But they’re all but useless against most of these guys. Maybe if we can draw their attention, one of your guys can get a lucky shot. Nobody has invulnerability, yet.”

“Praise be,” the Commander said. “Okay. Last question: do we have any idea when this will go down?”

Overseer shrugged. “Not really,” he said. “But I presume within the next day or so. These guys seem pretty eager. That set up downtown was a lot more professional than we’ve seen before.”

“Okay, one more, then,” the Commander said. “And be honest with me. Can we handle this?”

“With the top-of-line equipment, generous staffing, and enormous technology budget we work from? How can we not?”

“Sarcasm,” the Commander said.

“Truth,” Overseer said, shrugging again.

“Get your plans together and be ready to move.”

* * *

Intellect moved around his lab in fits and spurts. He knew his current fugue wouldn't last long; Overseer would be in here soon enough demanding answers, equipment, solutions, miracles. Intellect was excited, though, because there was a solid chance he'd be able to provide such a miracle.

Not for finding isotopes, though. He had one of the brightest minds on the planet, and he wouldn't be caught dead inventing some souped-up Geiger counter. That was beneath him.

But quantum entanglement?

He'd already unearthed the remains of his previous quantum experiment. It wasn't much to look at, but few of his prototypes ever were. Hell, he thought to himself, grinning madly, most of his production equipment wasn't much to look at, either. While he'd gotten sidetracked from this old experiment, though, that didn't mean it hadn't worked. In fact, his initial results had been quite promising, all without the fuss and bother of special rare isotopes. True, it wasn't quite an *entangler*, but it was a beast of the same breed.

He reconnected the power leads to the machine and turned it on. Like most of his pilots and proofs-of-concept, this device was explicitly attuned to him. If he got it working, he'd worry about broadening its applicability. For now, he could feel its effect, however minor.

Intellect and Lucas Sokolov were not separate people. They were not distinct personalities, and he didn't have schizophrenia. It's just that the neural activity associated with Intellect was too much for an average human body

to take for very long. A few hours, sure, after which he'd have a slight headache and lowered potassium levels. A few days? Maybe. He'd done it before and emerged hungry, shaking, and an inch away from a heart arrhythmia. It had taken Lucas a week to recover from that. Any time Intellect was fully active; he could *feel* his brain and body struggling under the load. His heart rate increased as his heart struggled to dump some of the tremendous heat his brain generated. His skin became flushed. He started to sweat profusely. Even now, Intellect could feel his body struggling to keep up, like a 20-year-old refrigerator sitting in the hot sun.

But with this little quantum gadget running, the pressure eased significantly. Intellect's body became more durable, more resilient. The heat didn't build up as quickly, and while his heart beat faster and stronger, it didn't feel like a struggle. He'd noticed the effect the last time, but had chalked it up to the excitement of getting the device running. This time, though, he knew it was a genuine effect. Somehow, he'd become *less vulnerable*.

Which was impossible of course, it was a fact that anyone with a special power could have precisely that: *a* special power. One. Singular. Period. Nobody in the history of powers had ever exhibited multiple powers.

So how was his little quantum gadget enhancing his body? Did that mean *all* powers were a quantum effect of some kind?

With a burst of sparks and smoke, the device overloaded and shut down. *Again*, Intellect thought with an

audible sigh. If only the quantum effect could enhance these cheap capacitors he was forced to work with. The device used a tremendous amount of energy, and the best electronic components the S.P.U. could afford were still crap.

He sat down, stared at the still-smoking device, and let Intellect fade into the background.

* * *

“Jesus, David, we can’t keep working on a shoestring budget to solve global problems,” Stratosphere said. “I’ve got a cobbled-together helmet between me and a splatted brain. Sultana’s been hand-stitching her uniform for over a year—it’s more thread than cloth, at this point,” he added, ignoring Sultana’s glower. “Your mask is so scuffed I don’t even remember what color it used to be. Critical Mass is the only one with a decent outfit, and that’s only because he’d give us all radiation poisoning otherwise. And now we’re supposed to tackle two supervillain teams on two fronts, for an unknown period?”

Overseer pinched the bridge of his nose, feeling a headache coming on. “I know, Tom. I get it. We’re not Vantage, up in New York City. We’re not the Coastal Champions out in L.A. We’re—”

“We’re not even Bon Temps in New Orleans,” Ultra-sonic said, poking a finger through a hole in her uniform. “They’ve got *vehicles*, David. Actual vehicles. And helmets. And—”

“I know, I know,” Overseer said, holding his hands up in defeat. “I know. Our City Council doesn’t like us, doesn’t trust us, and doesn’t fund us. The police only want us when they run across something they can’t handle. So why are we all here?” He looked around at their silent faces. “Yeah. Because this is home, so, buckle up and let’s do this.”

Ultrasonic sighed. “Fine. Sorry. We’re not beating up on you. It’s just that this feels no-win.”

“It might be,” he said. “There we are.” He paused to let that sink in. “It’ll be Nadim and Alya at Q-Launch to protect the isotopes. They’ve moved them into a high-security vault, and it’s in a room equipped with power suppressors. That might help. Everyone else, we’re heading to Harbor University to try and protect the quantum entangler.”

“This is the quantum entangler that doesn’t even work yet, right?” Stratosphere asked.

“Right,” Overseer confirmed. “And before you ask, we’re going because we don’t want the bad guys even getting a head start from it, okay?” Stratosphere held up a hand in assent. “Fine. Any questions?”

“Who’re we up against?” Sultana asked, spreading her hands. “What are their powers? When will they attack? Will they attack both targets? Will the police have our backs? Will they even show up?”

“All good questions,” Overseer said, nodding. “Any others?” Nobody spoke. “Great. Let’s go.”

* * *

Overseer's high-tech, high-concept plan was for each team to rent a hotel room near to each target. That way, they could eat and rest, and be on-hand when something eventually went down. The police budget being what it was, and the S.P.U.'s portion of that budget being what *it* was, both teams wound up in fairly fleabag motels. The University team took up position in a motel room that was, by the looks of it, rented by the hour to horny college students who couldn't get their dorm rooms to themselves. The Q-Launch team was in a slightly classier motel that they suspect was rented, for similar purposes and periods, to visiting company executives.

"And so now we wait," Sultana said, sinking into the battered mini sofa.

"Indeed," Critical Mass said, his voice sounding mechanical and raspy over the voice modulator in his protective suit. "If you're wondering," he added, "I can't detect the isotopes from here."

"I wasn't," she replied sourly. They fell into silence.

Across town, Stratosphere had opted to take up a lookout position on the roof of the three-story motel. His communicator was working again, and he maintained a bemused running litany of the activity at the Student Union building across the street. "Kids seem to either wear too many clothes, or not enough clothes, and none of it fits correctly," he said. Overseer and Ultrasonic had given up on replying to him an hour ago and stopped demanding he shut up about fifteen minutes ago. "And what's with all the scooters?" He fell silent, bored with his commentary.

“Strat?” Overseer asked a few minutes later.

“Yeah,” he replied.

“Just checking.”

“Two days, huh?” Stratosphere asked.

“I know, buddy.”

“Livin’ the dream,” the flier said sadly.

Harbor City Herald: Tangled Quantums

Gerald Chevalier, Science Desk

HARBOR CITY

Harbor City's Q-Launch Labs is on the cusp of creating the future, and it's smaller than you can imagine.

Danielle Tourant, Director of Special Projects at Q-Launch, met with me to describe an exciting new technology that the company is developing. She calls it *quantum entanglement*.

"Quantum particles are fascinating in that they can be in several different states at once," she said. "And it requires you observing them for them to 'collapse' into one state or another. But we've proven that two quantum particles can be entangled, or joined up so that they share a similar state. They continue to share that state no matter how much distance you put between them, as well. It's a popular theory for how we might one day be able to achieve teleportation. Our goals right now are to enable instantaneous communications across potentially vast distances."

I asked how two particles could be used to enable long-distance wireless communications and how that would differ from current communications technologies.

"Everything we use presently moves at the speed of light or less," she explained. "Even in terrestrial commu-

nications, that creates some lag time. If you imagine a large, planet-wide distributed computing system, that lag would add up rapidly, slowing down calculations. Quantum particles can be used to represent the same binary, on-or-off states that computers are built on. If we can reliably entangle two particles, then they can exist on the other side of the planet and always reflect the same state. It's truly instant wireless communications."

That future is a long way off, though. While the teams at Q-Launch have had several promising early successes, the equipment they're designing hasn't yet been able to reliably entangle particles at scale.

"It's a difficult challenge," Tourant told me. "And we certainly expect to fail a lot more before we finally achieve success. We're currently on the third generation, and we likely have four or five to go."

As she mentioned, the primary application for this technology is enabling globally distributed computing clusters. Rather than an entire computer needing to exist in a single data center or within a small city, computers could be built, maintained, and powered at great distances from each other. They are then linked via quantum entanglement to tackle supercomputing tasks like weather modeling, DNA analysis, and much more.

Just when you thought being "tangled up" in something was a bad thing!

FIVE: THE DIRECTORATE and SPECIAL POWERS UNIT

“They’ll have Q-Launch under observation,” Night Queen pointed out.

“Of course they will,” Professor Power acknowledged with a smile. “Although I’m informed that they’re hedging their bets and also watching the University.”

The two Directorate leaders were comfortably seated in the facility’s operational readiness room, informally known as the “Green Room.” They were joined—to the Professor’s annoyance—by Mirage and a cadre of tier-2 powered villains, deciding how they would proceed with the isotope acquisition.

Delesante was keeping a close eye on his co-leader. He knew that she was in closer confidence with the CEO than he, and he was always half-ready for her to turn against him at the slightest hint of something going sideways. Then again, he was smart enough to recognize his paranoia. As a child, he’d always been bullied and disliked. When his “genius-gene,” as he called it, activated during puberty, he’d taken immediate steps to protect himself from bullies and perceived threats. His first augmentation suit—little more than armor and strength-enhancing actuators—had

been completed before he was seventeen. Each successive suit—he was currently on the Mark XI model—had made him stronger, more durable, and better able to attack at range. He grinned wryly to himself over that, as he was also careful to rarely, if ever, place himself into an actual battle situation. His physical weakness is what drove him on his current project: why should he be limited only to super-intelligence? Why couldn't he have Heavy Lift's strength, too?

“Full-frontal assault on Q-Launch, then?” The Professor looked at the flunky who'd spoken and then waved a hand dismissively. “Of course not,” he said with a sneer. “They're expecting that. I imagine they've more than a little conventional police force backing them up, which means all of you non-powered soldiers will experience a significant reduction in effectiveness. No, I have a novel idea.”

“Oh?” Night Queen asked archly. “And what might that be?” She was annoyed that Delesante continued to make plans without consulting her but acknowledged the man's tactical brilliance. She knew he was jealous of her close relationship with the CEO, but he didn't realize how brittle her actual loyalty was. Moreau was in it for herself, and whatever alliances would best ensure that were the ones she gave lip service. Her tenure in corporate America, before her powers bloomed in her late thirties, had taught her to be a cutthroat, sweet-talking, back-stabbing ladder-climber. Being able to control light and dark wasn't going to change her fundamental rules of life.

“We attack their headquarters,” he said with a grin. The room was utterly quiet, although Night Queen began to grin. “It makes the most sense,” he continued. “At most, Sokolov will be there, but he’s no fighter. We already know they’re running on a shoestring budget, so I’m not expecting any real resistance. Certainly nothing like the automated defenses we have here.”

“And so we force them to choose what they’ll defend,” Night Queen said. “Audacious.”

“At the very least, we split them three ways,” the Professor said, nodding. “We’ll send a team of heavy hitters into their HQ, with instructions to make for Sokolov’s workshop and do as much damage as possible. We’ll send a very small strike team, led by Mirage here,” and at this he gestured to the woman, who gave him a tight smile, “to Q-Launch. They’ll go in disguised as S.P.U. members and access the isotopes.” He looked carefully at both Mirage and Night Queen. He suspected Moreau had made her own attempt to win Mirage’s loyalty, and he wasn’t at all sure Mirage hadn’t aligned herself with his co-leader. For now, the two of them weren’t even making eye contact with each other.

“Who’ll be on the HQ team?” Night Queen asked.

“You, for starters,” the Professor said. “It’s an underground facility with no natural light. You’ll be able to control light and darkness to your team’s advantage fully.” She nodded, gesturing for him to continue. “Earth God. Whiplash. Heavy Lift. Idiots all,” he acknowledged, holding up a hand to forestall her objections, “but they need do no

more than cause as much damage as possible.”

“And me?” Mirage asked.

“We’ll send you in glamoured as Sultana, along with Mind Master posing as Overseer. He should be able to use his powers to convince the Q-Launch personnel to retrieve the isotopes from wherever they’ve squirreled them away, and the two of you can leave unchallenged.”

“You’re presuming S.P.U. will completely pull out of the Q-Launch site?”

“I presume nothing,” Professor Power said irritably. “But I have a good idea where they’re holding their stake-out. We’ll send in conventional troops to harry them if they don’t head straight out to respond to the attack on their base. And I’ll send Vertigo in to support our troops.” He grinned at the phrase. “And just for good measure, we’ll send troops and Rocketeer to the University location, so they’re forced to defend on all three fronts.”

“We’ll still be seen on approach if you hold the troops back to see whether the S.P.U. even engaged,” Mirage pointed out.

“Ah, that’s where our new secret weapon comes in,” he said, smiling broadly.

“You’re sure it’s time?” Night Queen asked. He nodded. “Well enough,” she said. “Mirage, I’ll introduce you to your final team member. She doesn’t... well, let’s just say she doesn’t get out much.”

“A recluse?” Mirage asked.

“Sort of,” Night Queen said, smiling. “Her power makes her somewhat unstable. Nothing you can’t handle, I assure

you,” she said quickly, “but she prefers to stay here, away from... stimulation. She’ll get you into the facility without being seen, but you’ll be on your own for extraction.”

“Ideally, there’ll be enough chaos at that point that getting out won’t be a problem,” the Professor added.

“What is her power?” Mirage asked.

“Blip is a teleporter,” Night Queen said, her glee evident in her voice. “The first and, as far as we know, the only teleporter.”

It took all of Mirage’s formidable personal will to force her jaw not to drop.

* * *

They were on their second day in the hotel rooms, and it already seemed like a week. Overseer sat on the worn chair in the corner while Ultrasonic lounged on the less-noisy of the two beds, watching Harbor Action News. They were running a story about a sudden rise in fraudulent phone calls directed at senior citizens. Stratosphere remained on the roof, although he’d long since abandoned his running commentary on student life. Tom hated being boxed in, and he’d even slept on the roof the night before.

“Guys!” Sokolov’s panicked voice suddenly came over the all-team channel. “We’re under attack!”

“Under... what did you say?” Overseer replied.

“We’re under attack!” Sokolov repeated. “Jesus, they’ve just caved in the blast door! It’s Earth God and a bunch of—shit, David it’s Night Queen! She’s draining the light out of the—” his transmission cut off abruptly.

“Lucas!” Overseer shouted. “Lucas!” When there was no reply, he said, “Shit. Tom, can you—”

“You know this is a deliberate distraction, right?” Stratosphere said. “They’re just trying to—”

“They’re attacking HQ!” Overseer shouted. “I’m sending a notification to the police, but Lucas is in danger! You can get over there faster than anyone else. Go, for God’s sake! Go!”

“Fine,” Stratosphere said tightly. “On my way.” What he could do against Night Queen, Earth God, and whomever else they’d sent in was questionable. He wished yet again that they’d at least been permitted to carry firearms. “David,” he said as he rocketed away. “You’ve got incoming.”

“Incoming?”

“Looks like a small company of ground troops. Tactical gear. Maybe a dozen. Half of them are taking potshots at our police backup.”

“Just go,” Overseer said. “We’ll—”

“CRAP!” Stratosphere yelled.

Overseer involuntarily looked at the ceiling of their small room, as if he could see through it to the skies above. “Tom?” he asked. There was no reply. “Tom!”

“I’m fine,” came the reply. “Rocketeer is out here, and he caught me. Bastard. Padding probably saved my spine. I’m avoiding him, but he’s got me pinned. I can’t get anywhere near the guys who are coming into your building.”

“Just get to HQ,” Overseer said. He could hear a ruckus outside as the tactical troops started making their way into the building. “Who the hell are these guys?” he said.

“Ultrasonic, prepare to repel.”

Ultrasonic nodded grimly, bracing herself in front of the room’s flimsy door. Her powers could hold back a substantial number of people in a tight environment like this, but only for so long. And meanwhile, Overseer was certain the attack on the University was happening. He’d been right: this was all about the quantum entangler. She peered out the window and wished they’d just camped out in the University building. “Sultana, you guys okay over there?”

The team’s communications equipment exhibited a noticeable delay over long distances, relying on the police department’s system of relay stations to get the signal across the city. After a few seconds, Sultana’s voice came back: “No, we’ve got tactical troops inbound. They’re focusing on us, though, not the labs. Can’t talk.”

Overseer cursed. Both teams pinned down, and their most mobile member taken off the board by what likely was a distraction. This was not the random act of a few unaligned villains. This was an orchestrated, coordinated effort. He flipped his communicator to the police command frequency. “Commander, this is Overseer. We’re being attacked on all fronts by tactical troops and powered individuals. We—”

“We’re aware, Overseer,” the Commander’s voice cut in. “We’re dispatching assistance. The special teams assigned to your positions are already surrounded and pinned down. It looks like they’re only sending a few in after you guys, so we—”

“It’s not that, Commander,” Overseer said heatedly. “It’s Q-Launch and the University. Can we get any contact with them? These attacks are all to keep us pinned down. If they’ve got this much manpower, they’re probably already going after the isotopes and the entangler.”

There was a moment of silence. Then: “Shit,” the Commander said. “Just a minute.”

There was a bang at the door, and Overseer’s super-sensitive hearing detected Ultrasonic’s powers kicking in. The high-frequency waves she was blasting would pass right through the thin door and walls, and disrupt the troops’ sense of balance by oscillating the fluid in their inner ears. Overseer peeked out the window, but couldn’t see anything happening outside. *C’mon, c’mon*, he silently prompted the Commander.

“Overseer, Stratosphere,” the flier’s voice cut into the comm line. “Lucas managed to set off the gas system, and the bad guys have bailed out. He’s shaken up, but he’s okay. They trashed the place, though. They—”

“They’re telling me you and Sultana showed up five minutes ago and took the isotopes,” the Commander’s voice said, interrupting Stratosphere. “You’ve been set up.”

Shit, Overseer thought. “Acknowledged.” He cut the line. Then: “Deb, it’s sideways. We gotta go.” He activated the all-team channel. “Everyone, bailout. They got the jump on us. Get out. Tom,” he said, “stay at HQ. We’ll regroup there.” This pretty much confirmed that whoever they were up against was both well-coordinated, and in possession of an illusionist of some kind.

“I think they’ve cleared the hallway, David,” Ultrasonic said.

“The troops here are moving out,” Sultana said over the communicator at nearly the same time.

Overseer listened closely. “They have,” he confirmed. “They’ve got the isotopes,” he added, “so they’ll probably clear off. Let’s go, but be careful just in case.”

She nodded, and they began edging their way out of the hotel.

* * *

“What’s the damage, then?” Overseer asked. He was at police headquarters, sitting in the Commander’s office. The S.P.U. Liaison was with them.

“Pretty thorough,” the Commander said with a sigh. “They got the isotopes. There was never any attempt to steal the quantum entangler from the University—they just went after you guys to put you off-balance.” Overseer nodded. “The bunker is trashed,” he said. “We’ve got some crew down there now helping your guys move out. They pulled almost the whole damn ceiling down in Intellect’s lab—it’s all rubble and rebar, now. The blast door’s completely off. The power lines were all buried, and they’ve severed them someplace, so they’re all working with flashlights.”

Overseer had stopped by the bunker before he’d come to the station, and Lucas had been bruised but otherwise undamaged. His workshop had been trashed, he’d said, with nothing recoverable. “So what next?” he asked.

“Shit, David, I’ve no idea,” the Commander said. “You know how City Council is about funding when it comes to you guys. No,” he said, holding up a hand as Overseer opened his mouth to protest, “this isn’t about you not stopping the bad guys today. We had no idea there was that much muscle on the ground in Harbor City, and nobody expected you to handle it. But I don’t know where we’re even going to put you all.”

Overseer nodded. Maybe it was just time to give it up. He’d gotten into this life because he had an ability, and felt a responsibility to use it to help people. The big-city hero teams were an inspiration, but Harbor City still held a grudge about Dhoso, and the politicians found it expedient not to try and overcome that history.

“I know you’re down right now, David,” the Commander said, looking him in the eyes. “This isn’t the time to back off, though. If we’ve got that many powered bad guys in the City—hell, maybe that ‘Directorate’ and ‘Cabal’ chatter we’ve heard for years isn’t a red herring after all—then we can’t afford to have you guys go away.”

“I hear you,” Overseer said. “But—”

“Commander?” A uniformed officer stuck her head into the office. “Call for you, sir. Line 4.”

“Is it important?”

She nodded. “It’s the Feds, sir.”

Great, Overseer thought wryly. That won’t make it better.

* * *

“An unqualified success, my dear,” Professor Power crowed. He was back in his immaculate office, seated in a comfortable conversation area with Mirage and Night Queen. “Absolutely masterful.”

“It couldn’t have been easier, to be honest,” Mirage said, shrugging. “I’m not even sure Mind Master had to do much. They accepted my story and broke the isotopes out. I changed us to look like a pair of corporate security types, and we just walked out a back door. I will say, though,” she added, rubbing her temples, “that I would prefer never to be teleported again. I was barely able to get my powers working; my head hurt so much.”

“Mmmm,” the Professor mused. “We’d gotten mixed reactions from different people, and I wasn’t even sure how to prepare you for that. Now we know.”

Mixed reactions, Night Queen thought. *You know we’ve never had Blip teleport another person before.* She’d hold on to that item for now, but if the time came to create some distance between the good Professor and Mirage, then she’d have a useful lever.

“And you, Tessa! I’m told the S.P.U. is being permanently moved out with nowhere to go!” The Professor smiled broadly. “You’ve put the city’s only superhero team entirely out of business!”

“Between the two brutes, it wasn’t that difficult. That bunker was never made to withstand a geo-kinetic. But I doubt the city will stand down completely, given how much of our hand we just showed them.”

The Professor shrugged. “My sources tell me the Feds

are getting involved, so we may even see a step-up in powered enforcement. They've got some heavy hitters they can call on."

"You take that as good news?" Night Queen asked.

He shrugged again. "Is what it is. And it won't matter for long anyway. Remember what this was all for if I'm right—and I always am—we're each about to possess far more power than whatever the Feds can call on."

SIX: MICHAEL

This instance was *fascinating*. Everywhere I went, the natives had harnessed the Prime Wave, but only lightly. Their touch was gentle and harmonious. In some cases, it gave them amazing abilities—but even those seemed tightly scoped, and impinged in only the most minor way upon the Wave.

Seeing my thought patterns in that native's mind had thrown me for something of a loop, and I'd decided to investigate further. I'd instructed my Ghost to take me to other locations on the planet where Prime Wave-influenced activity seemed to be taking place.

:Local designation David,: the Ghost said. I shimmered into existence above an enormous open area. This had obviously once been a lush rainforest, for the stumps of massive trees were visible all around. I supposed the land had been cleared for agriculture or some other purpose. *:There,:* the Ghost said, directing my attention. I saw it: one of the natives, this one with intensely dark skin color, was kneeling on the ground near the middle of the open area. He was concentrating intently, both hands opened and flat against the churned soil. I could feel the Prime Wave reacting, somehow wrapping around the man, flowing through him and into the ground.

:Analysis,: I ordered.

:Indeterminate,: the Ghost said after a moment. *:Core*

pattern resembles Stage Three instance generation, but the underlying details of the Wave activity are inconsistent with known Stage Three variations.: I blinked, taken aback. Stage Three was a serious part of the creation of any new instance, the point at which biological life—usually in the form of plants—was first seeded into the instance’s basic structure. For a native creature to be manipulating *that* level of code was—

:*Caution*,: the Ghost said. I quickly withdrew further into the sky and immediately saw the reason for the Ghost’s warning. Below me, the soil throughout the clear-cut area was churning violently. I felt a humming in the Prime Wave, something I ordinarily associated with significant processing activity. Modifying my vision, I could see threads of the Wave winding underground throughout the entire open area. Moments later, plants began pushing through the soil and reaching toward the sky. Within just a few minutes, fully formed, if young, trees had grown up throughout the clear-cut area. The bare stumps had churned themselves under the ground. The forest had been reborn—in an instant.

:*The native life-form is deceased*,: the Ghost reported. :*Overexposure to Prime Wave energies is the likely cause*.: I snorted at the understatement. The man had forced an entire forest to shortcut decades of natural growth by tapping into the primal energy that had created this instance in the first place. Small wonder it had overwhelmed his tiny body. Still, it was disappointing, as I hadn’t had time to analyze the being’s connection to the Prime Wave, nor how he had

impinged on it. Pity.

:Next: I ordered.

* * *

:Local designation Beirut: the Ghost reported. The ecology here couldn't have been more different, I thought. Where the last location had been lush and green, this one was dry and brown. A desert environment, harsh but not unlivable. This "Beirut" was a thriving city, even if the buildings looked old and somewhat run-down. Below me, a crowd had gathered on the street, carrying signs and chanting. I declined the Ghost's offer at translation, preferring to take in the scene more broadly. I scanned with my enhanced vision and saw tendrils of the Prime Wave's power drifting gently through the crowd. I couldn't detect any center to it.

:Identify the controller: I ordered. I felt the Ghost scanning the energies, seeking the shared connection that would tie them all together.

:There: it said, designating one individual in my vision. A young woman, almost completely covered in black clothing and drapes, standing on the edge of the crowd. Focusing on her, I could sense the intensity of her emotions, feel her tenuous, anxious grip on the bits of the Prime Wave she was connected to. As I watched, her grip became firmer. Tighter, somehow. It was as if the Prime Wave was a wriggling reptile, struggling to escape her hold, but she squeezed harder until I thought it might all erupt.

And it did. With a vicious *yank*, the woman caused the drifting tendrils of energy to harden into spikes, and she drove them throughout the crowd. The people became angry, their chants devolving into screams. They cast down their signs and picked up rocks from the street. Their anger was directed not at each other, but at a building in front of the crowd. As I watched, a man emerged. He was dressed in some kind of formal costume, replete with shining buttons and other decorations.

The crowd immediately began stoning him.

:Analyze that woman,: I ordered quickly. She was already moving away from the scene, but distance didn't matter to my Ghost. It completed the analysis, and again I saw my cognitive pattern, inverted in the creature's mind.

* * *

:Local designation London,: the Ghost said. A crowded metropolis full of tall buildings, hard surfaces, and the occasional green space. The Ghost drew my attention to one of the tall buildings. A man had somehow climbed up its sheer stone facing, skirting windows and architectural decorations. I zoomed my vision in and saw that the man's hands and feet were somehow *embedded* into the stone. A trail of holes led down to the ground, indicating that the man had somehow scaled the building by sticking his appendages *into* it to find purchase.

:Energy buildup,: the Ghost said.

As I watched, the man focused and brought concentric rings of Prime Wave energies to bear on the building.

A large section of the building's outer wall, easily large enough for the man to crawl through, began to melt away. The solid stone turned fluid and ran down the side of the building until it seemed to re-harden and crumble into dust. After a moment, the man crawled through the hole.

:Enough,: I said, vanishing. I didn't need to see the man's cognitive patterns. Given that he'd just tapped into the same capabilities I used when burning a planet, I already knew what I'd find.

* * *

I hovered in the quiet of space, just outside the planet's atmosphere, my Halo protecting me from the powerful radiation emitted by the system's single star. It was, I thought, a fairly typical system. Eight or nine planets, depending on how you defined them, and evidence of another that had been fractured early on in the instance's cycle. One of many perfect arrangements for biological life, as was almost every instance. As they had been designed to be.

So what was different about this one?

In every other instance I'd cleaned, the local life forms somehow attached themselves to the Prime Wave and began harvesting its energies. The Prime Wave was a set of instructions superior to those that the instance itself ran on; tapping it let the natives perform acts that were in complete defiance of local physics. And yet they always tapped too much. They burned themselves out, and more often than

not burned the entire instance, shattering its rules and rending the instance useless. The shockwaves in the Prime Wave would often destabilize succeeding instances, forcing me to cleanse them all to re-establish the Prime Wave's necessary stability.

And yet in this instance, the native genome seemed to exercise caution. Rather than greedily snatching all they could from the Wave, these beings seemed designed to sip at it. Even after what I'd seen, the Prime Wave was stable and harmonious.

:Begin genomic evaluation,: I ordered, knowing that a detailed comparison to the other genomes they'd encountered would take considerable time. *:Focus on differences in the sequences known to impact Prime Wave sensitivity.:*

:Commencing,: the Ghost replied.

Watching individual beings was informative enough, I supposed, and it had undoubtedly revealed a breadth of capability I'd not seen before. But I wondered if it was enough. It might be useful to find a situation where multiple individuals were tapping the Prime Wave in concert. Would a problem arise if multiple proximate violations occurred? Would that create the same kind of instability that I'd seen in almost every prior instance?

My gaze returned to the coastal city where I'd first arrived, which was just now spinning into view.

SEVEN: SPECIAL POWERS UNIT

“Good morning... it’s Overseer, right?”

Overseer nodded. The Federal agent was surprisingly polite and deferential, given the situation. Cities were, by and large, permitted to handle their own powered problems, but when something as big as this went down, the Feds tended to steamroll in and take over.

“I’m Special Agent Alyssa Thomas,” she said with a smile. She held out a hand, and Overseer shook it. “I’m glad to meet you. You’re probably wondering what we’re doing here, and what’s going to happen, and so I’d like to start with that if you don’t mind.”

“Sure,” Overseer said, glancing at Stanley, the S.P.U.’s police liaison, who shrugged and nodded. “Go for it.”

“Harbor City P.D. remains in charge of the situation at this time,” she said firmly. “But the National Powered Threat Act can kick in if this situation escalates further. Given Harbor City’s... history, let’s say, with powered criminals, we’d like to avoid activating the N.P.T.A. if possible. It’d just cause panic.” Overseer nodded again. Harbor City had the distinction of being the only American city to be decimated by a powered criminal, and the N.P.T.A. had been passed mainly in response to Dhoso’s attack. “But we would like to loan you some help.”

“What kind of help?” Stanley asked.

“Two powered agents. Both are completely legit, badge-carrying Federal agents. Tracker is just that—a manhunter. He may be your best shot at finding your bad guys. Phase can pass through solid material, including solid earth. He’s great at infiltrating, once we find out where your guys are holed up. They’ll report directly to you for the duration, of course,” she said with another smile, nodding at Overseer.

“Actually, agent Thompson—” Stanley started.

“*Special Agent Thompson*,” she corrected him.

“*Special Agent*,” Stanley acknowledged, “your boys will need to report to the Harbor City P.D., through me as their liaison.”

Thompson paused for a beat. “Interesting. City-based powered squads are usually independent and coordinate with the police. When you said you were a liaison, I assumed—”

“Harbor City has, as you pointed out, had something of a different history with powered people,” Overseer said, attempting to forestall an argument. “We’re paid members of the police force, and we report to the chain of command.”

“Ah,” she said. “Well, I can’t directly loan Federal agents to a local police force without a greater level of legal red tape, but we can certainly put them on detached duty if you don’t mind a somewhat less formal arrangement?”

Stanley clenched his teeth and nodded. She’d put him in a no-win situation: it’d look terrible for them to turn away the informal Federal assistance, but it ran counter to department policy to permit outside powered people from

operating in the city. Still, they were at least badged agents, Overseer thought.

“Great,” she said with yet another smile. “I’ll have them contact you directly when they arrive.”

* * *

Overseer’s next meeting was one he wasn’t looking forward to. Nominally, the S.P.U. reported to the mayor and city council, although their day to day orders came from the police Commander. Being summoned to Council Chambers was never good, but that’s where he headed next.

It had been a long night of digging through rubble and debris before the team finally moved into a decent hotel to catch some sleep. They’d awoken early this morning, pulling on whatever fresh clothing they’d managed to retrieve from their destroyed headquarters. In Overseer’s case, that had at least meant fresh underwear, but he was still in the same camouflage uniform he’d had on in the hotel the day before. He and Ultrasonic had left a few sets of clean clothes in the room, and the police had promised to send someone over to retrieve them.

As he walked into the room, he saw that all six of the council members, along with the Mayor, looked just as haggard and red-eyed as he felt. The Commander was there, along with what must have been two other Federal agents.

Mayor Auburn wasted no time in getting to the point. “David, you know we’re all grateful for the work you and

your team do, and we recognize the fact that you do it with minimal funding and practically no public appreciation.” Overseer blinked. This was not how he’d expected the meeting to start. “And you’re a smart enough man that I know you appreciate why that’s been the case. But we’ve been up all night with these two gentlemen,” he continued, gesturing at the probably-agents, “and we as a council have come to several decisions.”

“Long overdue decisions,” Councilwoman Clary chimed in. She was the oldest member of the council and represented the ward covering the downtown area of Harbor City. The area where the most powered crime happened to occur. She’d always been a big supporter of the S.P.U., and much of the funding they *did* receive was due to her arguments and influence.

“Indeed,” Mayor Auburn said with a nod. “Well. Here’s where we’re at. These two agents have been outlining some of the ways other cities our size have organized their efforts to fight powered crime. They’re familiar with Harbor City’s unique relationship with powered criminals”—Overseer noted yet again that almost nobody would use Dhoso’s name in conversation—“and they’ve made us aware of some Federal funding programs that can assist with those efforts.”

Overseer’s eyebrows raised.

“Just get to it,” Clary grumbled.

The Mayor looked at her with annoyance before turning back to Overseer. “There are some legalities we need the legal staff to work out,” he said, “but the intent here

is to shut down the Special Powers Unit.” Overseer’s jaw dropped. It had sounded like they– “From now on, you’ll be known as Harbor Guard,” he added. Overseer closed his mouth and noticed the two agents trying to hide their grins. “You’ll be a standalone team, with a liaison to the Harbor City P.D. Federal funding will immediately provide more up to date uniforms and basic equipment, and we’ve already identified a site for a new, more public headquarters.”

“Headquarters?” Overseer said, his voice almost squeaking. His head was spinning.

“The old Harbor Commerce building,” Clary said. “Every museum project we’ve tried to slot in there has failed. The main floor will be a memorial to everyone who died... back then,” she finished quickly, again refusing to name Dhoso. “It’s time for people to see who the heroes are. The upper floor will be administrative offices and apartments for you and your team. The two sub-levels are already graded as bomb shelters, and they’re better built than the one you were in. It can be lab space, whatever you like.”

“Construction will take a couple of years,” Auburn said, taking back the floor, “but we’ll work on the apartments first and take care of lodging until then.”

One of the agents raised a finger, and the Mayor gestured at him to proceed. “We’ll also be providing you with better equipment, along with a couple of administrative personnel. But there’s a catch. A big one.”

“I would expect so,” Overseer said.

“Your options are to take this arrangement or stop

acting as a powered enforcement officer entirely. As part of this arrangement, you'll be independent operators with a connection to the local P.D. But you'll also have a connection to the Federal powered enforcement program, and you can be deputized at need for enforcement on a global scale. There are certain policies and procedures you and your team will need to observe—"

"Done," Overseer said.

"—but the personnel we provide will handle most of that. It's mostly about preserving evidence and such so that the police can do their jobs, and I know you guys are already more familiar with that than most super teams. The—"

"Done," Overseer repeated, making the second agent smile.

"The one last thing," the first agent said, cracking a smile of his own, "is that everyone on your team will have to pass some Federal training classes, as you'll be Agents-in-Reserve." He paused. "That's it," he finished.

"Done," Overseer said again, smiling. "This is what we've always wanted. But," he said, his smile fading, "there's still—"

"The Directorate," the second agent said, his face turning grim.

"They're real?" Overseer asked.

"They are," the agent confirmed. "And this is why we're trying to get as many teams as possible into a central intelligence-sharing network. The Directorate prefers to operate in fairly isolated cells so that nobody catches on

to how large they are. And the Directorate itself is just the North American arm of a larger, international group called the Cabal.”

“And they’re here,” Overseer said. It wasn’t phrased as a question.

“They are,” the agent said again. “We don’t think yesterday’s operation is connected to any other cells, but we’re concerned that a city the size of this one has a dedicated cell. We believe they’re small, and that’s why you’re seeing them ally with the smaller operators who were already in town, but they’re a real concern.”

“So what do we do?” Overseer asked.

“We’ve got Tracker and Phase coming in, and they’ll be critical in helping you locate *all* of this group. They’re adept at spreading out their assets, at least in other cities. But in the meantime, we believe we’ve got a lead on their local base of operations.”

* * *

“Well, *this* is more like it,” Stratosphere said.

The Feds had anticipated a positive response from the council, Overseer realized and had rolled in with a truck full not only of modern uniforms and necessary equipment, but uniforms and equipment customized to the members of the Harbor Guard. The next morning, they all trotted out right after sunrise to try out the new gear.

Stratosphere was wearing a sleek, smooth outfit that made of some kind of flexible carbon fiber. It was a glossy

silver, with a blank spot on the chest where the team's logo would eventually go. The technician who'd fitted him into his outfit swore he could get hit hard and survive. The interlocking plates of the armor would stiffen on impact, absorbing the force of a hit. His forearms were fitted with tranquilizer darts and tasers, while a rifle-like gun firing rubber bullets was strapped to his back. A full-head helmet, complete with a tinted visor, completed the look.

Sultana was outfitted in a similar kind of armor, although hers was lighter and a deep, metallic red in color. A set of special glasses protected her eyes while leaving her long hair free. Ultrasonic's outfit was in a metallic blue, although leaving her hands uncovered as she needed them free to use her powers. Both outfits came with the same trunk-and-taser combination in the forearm pieces.

Critical Mass' outfit was a deep metallic green, and it covered him from head to toe. The Feds had brought a special changing booth for him, although he'd assured them that his powers were sufficiently under control that he didn't need it. They still stayed well back while he changed. When he was once again contained, they showed him how the unique arm panels worked, enabling him to control the radiation he emitted through special vents in the suit. Critical Mass—always willing to share a bit too much information—was particularly delighted with the suit's built-in catheter system, since his old suit had required the assistance of a hazmat team so that he could pee. The techs had also promised to send complete specs for his new apartment, which would be completely shielded

and include a double-shielded sleeping pod.

Intellect had the lightest outfit amongst them, consisting of little more than a lab coat over a very lightweight, white-colored set of armor. His gear included Gauntlets and a helmet in the event he found himself in combat, and his suit contained a 10-minute emergency oxygen supply that could be used once the gauntlets and helmet were on.

Overseer's outfit was similar to the ladies', with sort of half-cowl-helmet replacing their armored glasses. His was deep black, with gold details on the shoulders that designated him as the team leader. His eyes and ears were unencumbered, ensuring his enhanced senses wouldn't be blocked. His new uniform had one unique item: a compact jet backpack that, with practice, would enable him to leap up to 30 stories straight up or take exceptionally long building-to-building jumps. The Feds had studied his preference for remaining high above a battle to get the best views and to better coordinate the team. Packs along his waist provided powerful, long-range communications with each of the team members. While their communicators all acted in a mesh system, his was a central link that provided more range, along with connections to the police and Federal communications networks.

"All gussied up, I see," Special Agent Thompson said, walking around the back of the truck where they'd been outfitted.

"These were made specifically for us?" Overseer asked.

"Very much so," she said. "And don't buy all that political theater from your council. We've been strong-

arming our way into plenty of cities and setting up similar arrangements. There's zero reasons why you guys should be operating on a shoestring and hand-me-downs. The wealthy big-city guys might not need us—although most of them are working with us anyway— if we're going to create a credible opposition to the bad guys, we need to do it.”

“How in the world did you guys get funding for this?” Sokolov asked.

She shrugged. “A little black ops budget here, private philanthropists there, a pinch of political opportunism over there. It adds up. Most of the equipment was engineered by High Flight up in Canada, actually, and the fabrication is less than you might think once you run at scale. The trick has been keeping each team looking a bit distinct, so you don't all come off as Federal stormtroopers or something.”

“Well, good job,” Sultana said. “I appreciate not being in a bikini, by the way.”

Thomson laughed. “You're referring to the Golden Six, I presume,” she said, naming the Southern California super-team that was known more for their public appearances and model-like good looks than their law enforcement chops. “We're not impractical.” She paused. “Now, I know you guys have been told about the Directorate base we're hitting this afternoon. Are you all still onboard?” The team nodded. “Excellent. Who'll be joining us?” she asked Overseer.

“Myself, Stratosphere, Sultana, and Ultrasonic,” he said. “Intellect and Critical Mass will finish going through our

old HQ and retrieving the last few things. Critical Mass, you guys will mainly be working off infrared.”

“Much easier to control that emission in this thing,” he said, thumping a fist into his chest. “Without bleeding into radio waves, that is.”

“All right,” Thompson said. “You’re geared up, but grab some grub. We’ve got about two hours to deploy.”

EIGHT: THE DIRECTORATE

“Professor Power to the Operations Center. Professor Power to the Operations Center, please. Condition Omega.”

Delesante’s head snapped up from his computer monitor when the announcement came over the public address system. He was *never* paged publicly. Then again, he thought wildly as he leapt from his desk and bolted toward the door, they’d *never* set Condition Omega before.

The executive level of the facility featured an exclusive express elevator that descended directly to the deeply buried Operations Center in under 5 seconds. It was usually an unnerving ride, but Delesante barely noticed it this time. Condition Omega meant they were under attack. Belatedly, he realized that the elevator’s lighting had switched to a bright red, highlighting the severity of the situation.

“Status,” he said into the Operations Center as the doors whisked open. The Ops personnel were at their professional best: bustling, with a strong sense of urgency permeating the room, but quiet. They spoke in hushed tones, ensuring their leaders could hear whatever announcements needed to be made.

“Outpost Four is about to be under attack,” a technician said. Delesante’s eyes rose to the enormous screens that formed the forward wall of the Operations Center. One

screen showed a close-up schematic of Outpost Four and its environs, almost exactly across the city from this facility and located adjacent to the largest power generation systems in Harbor City. Outpost Four was explicitly designed to tap some of that power for the Directorate's use and as a means of causing immense damage to the power grid if deemed necessary.

"What is it?" he asked.

"Blue indicates police," another technician said, and Delesante saw a cluster of blue icons a few blocks away from Outpost Four. If he recalled correctly, the outpost was underneath a bar, or a laundromat, or something equally prosaic. "Red," the technician continued, "indicates inbound powered individuals."

They were moving *fast*. Four dots, clustered tightly together, were moving at Rocketeer-level speeds, clearly flying as they were superimposed over buildings.

"S.P.U.?" he asked faintly. Couldn't be.

"Affirmative," the technician said. "Visuals from CCTV installations along their route have captured images. Displaying."

Another screen switched to a blurry photo of four... armored? *Where'd they get armor?* He wondered. Four armored figures, each seated on a... *where'd they get flying motorcycles?* he wondered next. "That cannot possibly be S.P.U.," he said flatly.

"New outfits and equipment, sir. We've just picked up an article from the Herald indicating that they're now getting Federal funding and a new headquarters Downtown."

After a moment of silence, another technician asked, “Sir? Any actions?”

Professor Power paused, and then said, “You know what? No. Let’s see how this plays out. We’ve plenty of reserve power, and Outpost Four was always more of a contingency thing. Cut off direct feeds and get me what video you can.”

“They’re coming in to land, sir,” someone said. “We’ve got blanket CCTV coverage there. Should just be a minute.”

“Fine.”

Less than a minute later, two additional sections of screen switched over to a live video feed. The four heroes, dressed in chrome, blue, black, and red armor of some kind, had come to a halt on the street just outside—*ha, a laundromat*, Delesante thought—Outpost Four’s concealed entrance. *Three* flying motorcycles, he noted, since the chrome figure seemed to be Stratosphere. The black figure cocked his head slightly and then pointed to the laundromat. A couple of police officers entered the frame and then went into the shop. Shortly later, they came out with two short men in handcuffs. The black hero—*Overseer*, Delesante guessed, noting the gold bands on his shoulders—walked slowly around the area, cocking his head this way and that. *He’s trying to listen for something.*

After a moment, he paused, just outside the shop, and pointed at the ground. The red-clad figure joined him and directed both hands, palms first, at the spot he’d pointed out. *Sultana?* Delesante thought. *Ultrasonic?*

“Sir, Outpost Four reports a loss of gravity throughout

the facility,” someone said.

“They should probably bailout,” Delesante said wryly. *Sultana*. He’d always wanted a full gravity controller, not just a geo-kinetic like Earth God. *Earth God*, he snorted to himself with derision. *What an idiot*.

“Yes, sir,” the technician replied.

The blue-clad figure joined Sultana and Overseer and pointed her own hands, palms down, at the same spot. “They’ll be losing their hearing and balance now,” Delesante called out. Nobody replied.

“What’s going on?” came a voice behind him. Night Queen.

“Ah, there you are,” he said, turning slightly. “Good you could join us.”

“I was in the shower,” she said. “Besides, you can handle it.”

“Nothing to handle,” he said, gesturing to the screens. “Seems our local heroes have gotten a Federal upgrade, fancy equipment, and a lead on Outpost Four.”

“Four?” she asked. She never dealt with the city outposts if she could avoid it.

“Power management, mainly. Redundant,” he answered.

“Staff?”

“Four, ma’am,” a technician supplied.

“And what are we doing?”

“We’re watching our newly armored friends,” Delesante said.

Night Queen took a few steps closer to the screens, squinting slightly as she peered at them. “Those,” she said,

“are Mark Fours.”

“Mark Four what?” Delesante asked.

“Those outfits,” she said, pointing at the screen. “They’re manufactured by a Cabal-owned weapons supplier in Germany and resold through a Directorate-owned distributor out of Canada. We make them at cost. The US government has been buying them in bulk for the past year or so. I think we sell them basically at cost.”

“You are kidding me,” Delesante said.

“And those vehicles,” she added, “come from a Chinese Cabal conglomerate. I think they’re resold through a French subsidiary, and then imported by the government through our Atlanta branch.”

“You’re saying these heroes are using equipment *we* made.”

She nodded. “If you read the dispatches from Europe, you’d know. The Federal government decided to start piecing together all the smaller hero teams, using equipment and facilities as the carrot.”

“Please tell me those suits are booby-trapped.”

“Of course they are,” she replied, turning to him with a smile. “So are the vehicles. Go read the file.”

He smiled broadly and settled down into one of the comfortable command chairs. “I want to watch the show first,” he said, “but I have some reading to do.”

NINE: MICHAEL

I decided to descend physically to the city, so as to better appreciate its layout. My Ghost guided me down until I could discern two distinct groups of Prime Wave-connected individuals, located on roughly opposite sides of the city.

:Choose a number between one and ten,: I thought.

:Four,: the Ghost replied immediately.

I moved rapidly toward the first of the two groups, which seemed to contain two individuals. When I arrived, I was greeted by a scene of immense destruction. It appeared as if an entire underground building had been... ruptured, somehow. Since my current state was incorporeal, I ignored the damage—and all the remaining building materials—and descended underground toward the two energy signatures I was tracking.

They were both males, both clad in some highly stylized armor of some kind. One, dressed in white, was picking through a pile of damaged devices, while the other, in green, was emitting infrared energy. Given the lack of either natural or ambient light, I suspected they were somehow using that infrared light to see. The one in white wore coverings over his eyes which could easily have amplified the infrared, assuming he could not natively detect that frequency.

They were talking. I touched the Prime Wave, and let it translate for me.

“So what the heck were all those isotopes for?” Green said.

“Running a quantum entangler,” White said. “Although they must have built their own.”

“And a quantum entangler is what?” Green asked.

“Man, don’t you even read the *Herald*? It’s a way of connecting two subatomic particles so that they mimic each other. In theory, you could apply a charge to one, and the other would pick it up. Basically, I’m mangling the facts, but that’s the gist.”

“Why in the world would they want that?” Green followed up.

White sat back on his heels and looked up. “Can you do visible light for a minute? This black-and-white stuff is eerie.”

“Not really,” Green replied. “I tend to bleed into UV really easily. It’d fry you.”

“Worth asking,” White said. “So, I went into Intellect last night for a few hours to think about it. And I think I know why they want it.”

“I’m listening,” Green said.

“So look, we know that it’s something in our DNA that makes us powered, right?” White said. Green nodded. “And they’ve even sequenced the exact bit of the genome that does it. But the funny thing is, every powered person has the exact same sequence.”

“Yeah, so?” Green said. “We’re all powered.”

“But we’re not the same,” White argued. “We all have *different* powers. So how could one block of the same DNA

enable all of our different abilities?”

This was a fascinating conversation, and I nudged my Ghost, still engrossed in its genomic evaluation, to pay attention and record what was being said.

“I suppose you know?” Green said.

“I have a theory,” White said. “I think our DNA sequence just *connects* us to something that lets us alter the nature of the world around us. You produce radiation across a huge spectrum, which is impossible. My brain kicks into an impossible overdrive. It’s whatever is *powering* all that, whatever’s behind it, that decides what we can each do. Our DNA just turns on the spigot.”

“Okay, makes sense. But what’s that got to do with quantum?”

“Quantum *particles*, actually. What if something about quantum particles is making that connection? What if it’s regulating the connection somehow, and that regulation is what limits us each to one power? If you could entangle those particles differently, attach yourself to... I don’t know, *more* of them, or *different* ones, or—”

“You’d have multiple powers,” Green said.

“Exactly,” White said. “And I’m betting the Directorate wants multiple powers.”

I rose into the air.

* * *

This was a significant development. Looking into the native’s minds, I could indeed see a single, gossamer thread

of the Prime Wave delicately connecting to each of them. And, in each of them, a Basal Indeterminate Node—what I expect they were calling a “quantum particle”—was indeed moderating that connection. Any time they used their abilities, their B.I.N. would pulse gently, ushering just enough Prime Wave power through to understand their wish and metering what was sent back for the Prime Wave to do.

The problem is that B.I.N.s are literally *everywhere*. As the name implies, they’re a base part of every instance. They form a crucial part of how the Prime Wave created each instance in the first place. If these creatures had devised a way to *manipulate* B.I.N.s, then they could easily lead themselves directly to the over-manipulation of the Prime Wave that had destroyed every other instance. They’d be negating the strange evolutionary advantage that had kept them all alive this long.

I had to stop it.

I rose slightly higher, casting my senses across the area. I felt a tickle, just to my right, only slightly beyond the rubble of the half-destroyed underground building. Extending my senses, I saw a facility of moderate height above ground level but extending deep underground. A significant amount of B.I.N. interference blanketed the area. I drew closer...

And suddenly saw nothing. The entire area had vanished from my sight. *:Pause analysis.:* I ordered.

:Local spatial latticing does not permit a pause. If I do not maintain state, the analysis will end prematurely.: my

Ghost answered.

:End analysis,: I ordered. *:Scan this area,:* I added, indicating the now-vanished area.

:Scanning,: it confirmed. Then, *:Error. This area has been subject to a Prime Wave partitioning. It is not currently accessible.:*

A partitioning? The situation was dire, indeed.

I returned my attention to the two natives in the underground building. It was time we talked.

:Prepare to incorporate,: I ordered, and felt the Ghost move to comply.

Around Town: The New Guard

Jon Forsythe *Special to the Harbor City Herald*

HARBOR CITY

It's been big changes for our hometown superheroes, Harbor City P.D.'s own Special Powers Unit. Or, as they're now known, the Harbor Guard. That's right, for the first time in forever, Harbor City has once again taken its place alongside major metropolises with our own independent team of powered enforcers. And lest you think our guys and gals are overnight vigilantes, fear not! They're now connected with the broader Federal hero network that's supporting powered enforcement in cities just like ours, all over the nation.

With the brutal demolition of the old S.P.U. Headquarters on the edge of town, everyone was wondering what would become of our dashing damsels and courageous men. We all know how little funding our penny-pinching City Council has been sending to our team in the past years, and we all cringe when we see them fly in wearing those ragged old Army uniforms. Well, no more! I am here to share with you the team's new headquarters, and even some candid photos of their extremely hot new fighting gear, days before City Hall's media machine formally announces anything.

You'll remember the Harbor City Museum of Natural History? What about the Harbor City Science Institute? Or the excitingly named DISCOVER, our first museum dedicated to exploration? Of course you don't, because they all never came to be. But what they had in common was the beautiful old Harbor Commerce building, right Downtown and just on the edge of the Financial District. This gorgeous old building was one of the few to survive the destruction years ago, due to its solid, Empire State-era construction and liberal use of rebar and concrete. It's sat empty for years, just waiting on the right project and funding to once again be a vibrant part of our bubbling Downtown scene.

Wait no more, Harbor City! I'm here to *exclusively* tell you that the Harbor Commerce building will now be Harbor Guard Headquarters! The beautiful, soaring, and wide-open space on street level will become a memorial to all the heroes, powered and not, who have given their lives for our city. The Harbor Guard will take up residence and office space in a fully rebuilt second and third level. And below, in the fortified sub levels, they'll form their secret working spaces. No word yet on whether they'll hold regular meet-and-greets in the building, but I will apply what pressure I can to that end, my friends!

Construction permits have already been tendered to City Hall and the timelines I've sneaked a look at suggests the whole project being completed in just two years, complete with hiring a new museum staff, docent program, and administrative staff for the Harbor Guard themselves. Of

course, I expect we will be charged for admission, but it's all in the name of supporting the team that keeps us safe!

Click through to the gallery for photos of our amazing team in their stunning new gear!

TEN: HARBOR GUARD

“Hello.” Materializing always felt odd to Michael, although he’d done it often enough in various instances.

Sokolov and Critical Mass jumped. “Who the hell are you?” Sokolov demanded as Critical Mass raised his arms and prepared to emit something slightly more lethal than infrared light. “This is a restricted area.”

“My name is Michael,” Michael said. “I believe we need to talk. However, could we do so on the surface? I estimate that a portion of the roof here will collapse within the hour.”

“Do you have *wings?*” Sokolov asked quietly, staring intently at Michael. Then: “Okay, sure. Let’s go up to the surface. Why don’t you go first, and we’ll follow you?”

“Thank you,” Michael said. Phasing slightly out of tune with reality, he rose up through the rubble and crumbling ceiling above them.

“Well,” Sokolov said. “I didn’t expect that. Overseer,” he said, toggling his communicator, “what’s your situation?”

“A bust,” came the immediate reply. “It’s definitely a facility, but it’s a small one, with only a couple of people. At least only a couple who didn’t get away. We—”

“Actually,” Sokolov interrupted, “I’d love it if you could hightail your asses back to the old HQ, *right now*, as if a life depended on it.”

“Lucas, what’s going on?” Sultana asked, worry in her voice.

“*Right now*, please. Now.” He cut the comm off. “Well, let’s go up and say hi,” he said to Critical Mass. “You first.”

The two of them carefully picked their way back out of the ruined bunker. The man who’d floated up through the ceiling was standing there, hands by his side, quite calm. His face was almost expressionless. He didn’t have wings, as such, but there was some hazy *suggestion* around him that *hinted* at wings, as if they’d been sketched in but never finished. He was clad, head to toe, in a smooth, seamless... *Actually*, Sokolov thought to himself, *that might be his skin*. It was a shimmering, opaque khaki color of sorts, although “shimmer” and “khaki” had never been used together before. As they approached, the light shifted across his skin as if it was happy to be there, but not entirely sure it was welcome. It glinted and gleamed, seeming to change color with every change in perspective.

“Michael, you said?” Sokolov started. “I go by Intellect. This,” he added, gesturing to his green-armored companion, “is Critical Mass. Don’t let the armor scare you, he’s—”

“His covering does not scare me. Your friend is about to land,” Michael said in a friendly voice.

“Our— oh, right.” Just as Sokolov started to speak, Stratosphere set down, his chromed armor providing an interesting contrast with Michael’s skin-or-clothing. “The others?”

“Right behind me,” Stratosphere said. “Who’s this?”

“My name is Michael,” Michael said. “Your friends should arrive in just a few heartbeats. It would be best to wait for them.”

Sure enough, he'd barely finished that pronouncement when the other three Guards arrived on their flying vehicles. They dismounted and walked toward the small group. Michael, however, continued to stare at the vehicles. "Those do not conform with the requirements of local physics," he noted. "I assume they were made by someone with extraordinary abilities such as your own?" He turned his gaze to the six heroes.

"I'm Overseer," Overseer said, ignoring the question. "This is Sultana and Ultrasonic, and you've already met the others, I presume."

Michael nodded. "I am Michael. I am not like you, in that I am not of this world, and I do not derive special abilities in quite the same way that you do. However, I believe we face a common enemy and a common threat. That threat is more existential than you realize."

Overseer blinked. "Not of this world?"

"No," Michael said. "Although it is probably difficult for you to comprehend, your world is one of tens of thousands of instances created by my superiors. Many were flawed, and I have been dealing with those. Your instance, however, is unique, in that you have gained abilities that do not correspond to the local rule set, yet you have not destroyed your world. I believe that may change soon."

"Destroy— okay, maybe we could just slow down a minute," Overseer said, holding up a hand. "Maybe—"

"You are finding this difficult to process and place trust in," Michael said. It wasn't a question.

"Mildly," Sokolov said with a small grin.

“I understand. However, time is of the essence. I will provide you with updated information. Proceed,” Michael said.

Unseen by the heroes, Michael’s Ghost reached out and touched their minds, instantly modifying their synaptic networks so they simply *knew* what Michael was and what Michael believed the Directorate was doing.

All of them promptly sat on the ground with a thud.

“What the—” Stratosphere started.

“We already know the answer to that, Tom,” Overseer said. “I— I’d like to say need a minute to process this, but I actually don’t.”

“You see the urgency of the situation, then,” Michael said.

“Wait,” Sokolov said, “you don’t mean to tell me that we’re just going to accept what’s been shoved in our minds.”

Interesting, Michael thought. Usually the Ghost also modified its subjects’ sense of chronology, making it seem as if they’d always known whatever the Ghost was imparting. This “Intellect” was a unique mind, indeed.

“It *is* urgent,” Overseer said, “and we’ve proof enough that this... man, I suppose, is something unique. He’s already exhibited more than one power.”

“And the Directorate with more than one power...” Stratosphere said quietly.

“God,” Sultana said. “If the Directorate can assign themselves multiple powers, they’ll be unstoppable.”

“They *will* be stoppable,” Michael corrected her, “be-

cause doing so will likely unbalance the Prime Wave, the core flow of energy that created all the instances and stabilizes them. Unbalanced, your world will fall into chaos and I will be forced to Burn it. It will likely affect downstream instances, which I will also be forced to Burn. I would like to consider the possibility of avoiding that.”

“The— sorry, ‘Prime Wave?’” Overseer asked. The Ghost’s rearranging had only included essential details, not all of the background information.

“Correct,” Michael said. “And—”

“Wait a goddamn minute,” Sokolov said, his eyes struggling to focus as he tried not to slip into his Intellect fugue state. “The Directorate headquarters *is right here?*”

“Correct,” Michael repeated. “Although they have somehow managed to hide themselves from perception using a low-level partitioning technique that should *not* be functional in this instance. But I can point you in the correct direction.”

“I think we’re batting above our league already,” Stratosphere muttered.

“He’s right,” Overseer agreed, finally standing up again. “If you’re this world-walking troubleshooter, why don’t you do something about it?”

Michael sighed. “I could,” he admitted. “However, for me to do so would require me to break several of the fundamental laws of your local physics. It seems safe enough for *you* to do so in your limited fashion, but I still do not understand the balance your species has found with the Prime Wave. My actions could unravel that balance and

result in the very chaos and destruction I seek to avoid.”

“This is a lot,” Ultrasonic grumbled, rubbing her forehead. “Could you at least go get us some help?”

Michael considered. Teleportation was unlikely to cause an imbalance; that was more an intrinsic capability of himself and his Ghost and less a manifestation of Prime Wave energies. “Yes,” he said cautiously. “I can bring help. Who would you like me to bring?”

The six heroes looked at him. “Really?” Overseer said. Michael nodded. “Well, then... guys, who would be a help here?”

Stratosphere stood. “Fyre,” he said immediately. “His—”

“I do not know your individual designations,” Michael said. “What are his abilities?”

“Ability,” Stratosphere said. “He shoots fire out of his hands.”

Michael paused, then nodded. “I believe we have identified him. Who else?”

“In terms of abilities,” Sultana said, standing, “a geokinetic. Someone who can move earth. *Not*,” she said pointedly, “Earth God, the one in this city. Someone else. Someone, not an asshole.”

Michael nodded. “Others?”

Each hero named one or two others they’d like to have. “I will indicate the location where I am unable to see,” Michael said. His Ghost imparted the information to the heroes’ minds. They grimaced and squinted, but the ones standing stayed up this time.

“Right next to us,” Stratosphere said. “I can’t believe it.”

“I will—” Michael started, and then stopped. He turned to look in the direction of the Directorate facility. “No,” he breathed.

“What? What is it?” Overseer said, stepping forward.

“They’ve already begun. We are too late.”

ELEVEN: THE DIRECTORATE

“Is it working?” Night Queen asked.

She and Professor Power were in a dimly-lit, glass-enclosed control room. They were looking through the glass to their experiment: a young powered boy they’d kidnapped. He was strapped to a carbon-fiber rack, upright but tilted back a few degrees. His face was a mask of pain and confusion. The entire room was suffused with a soft, greenish-blue glow as if the air itself was electrically charged. The glow was most intense around the boy’s skin, outlining him in energy.

“Look for yourself,” the Professor said, gesturing at the quantum monitor readout. “His level of entanglement is increasing exponentially.” Calibrating Troll’s entangler only to enhance the boy’s existing quantum connections had taken a great deal of trial and error earlier in the day, but all indications were that things were finally on track.

“But is it giving him additional powers?” Night Queen demanded. The boy’s natural ability was minimal, enabling him to hover a few feet above the ground but not giving him actual flight.

“We won’t know for a while, I suspect,” the Professor said. “And it’s hard to say if new abilities will manifest immediately, or if they’ll have to come out naturally like his

native power probably did.” *It’s also possible*, he thought, *that we’ll just enhance his existing ability*, a development which, while not perfect, wouldn’t be unwelcome, either.

They watched for a few moments until the boy’s face had become a tense rictus of pain, and the green-blue glow had intensified. “You suppose it always hurts that much?” Night Queen asked. She was imagining subjecting herself to this process and hoped they could find a way to mitigate the obvious... discomfort.

The Professor shrugged. “It probably depends. You said your powers hurt quite a bit when you first got them, didn’t you?” She nodded. “Mine didn’t,” he said. “Probably depends on the person and the power. Speaking of which...” he said, trailing off and gesturing to the overhead lights. “Want to reign it in a bit?”

She looked up and chuckled at the rapidly dimming lights. “I suppose it’s the excitement of it all,” she said. “I’ve not leaked control like that in ages.” She frowned a bit, and the lights returned to their normal level of brightness.

The Professor’s mind immediately started calculating the amount of energy Night Queen had been siphoning off the lights and correlating that to the energy input of the building itself. *Factoring in the wattage dissipated by the lamps themselves*, he thought to himself, *you’d be... wait a minute*. Brilliant as he was, his mind didn’t usually dive into that kind of detailed analysis on its own.

Just then, an alarm started blaring. Both villains’ attention snapped to the quantum monitor readout, which was flashing “CAPABILITY EXCEEDED” and chiming its

alarm sound.

“What is it?” Night Queen said.

“It’s working,” the Professor said in a tense voice, his hands flying over the keyboard in front of him, “but it’s working too well. The field of effect is expanding into this room. It’s enhancing our powers as well.” As if to punctuate his statement, the lights in the room dimmed sharply as Night Queen’s ability drained their photons from them.

A raw, guttural scream filled the room as the young boy ripped his limbs free from the carbon-fiber rack. “Strength,” Night Queen breathed, her now-enhanced powers still greedily reaching for every bit of light in the room. Even the quantum monitor’s backlit display began to dim.

“I’m shutting it down,” the Professor said, his brain furiously calculating the exact power curve by which the quantum entangler could be safely deactivated. Too fast and it might blow, although another part of his brain noted that the thirty seconds required was far too long and that it might be better just to shut it all down than risk—

“WARNING,” the facility-wide alert system announced, “THIS FACILITY IS UNDER ATTACK.”

“What?” the Professor shouted, his attention momentarily diverted from the monitor in front of him. “That’s impossible. Interdict should—”

“SUB-LEVELS TWO AND THREE COMPROMISED,” the alert system stated. “INTERDICTION FIELD OFFLINE.”

“*Shit*,” Night Queen said, dashing for the exit. “I’ll see what I can do.”

And you’ll bail out of here if it’s looking bad, the Pro-

fessor thought. He returned his attention to the quantum entangler and began lowering its power input. The boy in the procedure room was kneeling on the floor, bent over, supporting himself with one hand on the floor. His hair, dripping with sweat, hung over his eyes.

“They’re almost here,” Night Queen said fishing back in the room and securing the door behind her. “Somehow they’re tracking us directly,” she said. *The quantum energies*, the Professor thought. “What do we do?”

“We let me shut this down,” he said tersely. “Draw as much of the light from the surrounding areas as you can, and see if it at least slows them down.” He toggled a communicator, which refused to activate. *Control systems offline*, he noted idly to himself. They’d be unable to summon help. He grabbed his helmet from the counter beside him and quickly pushed it over his head. He felt the collar locks engage, and the displays in the visor lit up. His suit was fully charged and would offer at least some basic defenses.

“There’s a fire team of troops in the corridor,” Night Queen said, “and Rebound is with them.” Rebound’s ability to absorb almost any kind of energy—including kinetic—and direct it back toward its source had often proved useful in tight defensive situations.

“This’ll be offline in twenty—” the Professor started, but he was interrupted by the room’s reinforced door ripping out of its hinges—along with a decent chunk of the surrounding wall—and crashing to the floor. *Those heroes don’t have a super-strength ability*, he thought, so—

ah, gravity, of course. Sultana's never been observed to pull half a wall down by increasing the pull of gravity on the wall itself, *but I'm willing to bet they've all been in the range of the entangler's field of effect,* he thought. *Unexpected.*

"That's the device," a voice said behind him. Almost instantly, he felt a blast of intense sonic energy fire beside him, causing him to duck away from it involuntarily. It shattered the glass of the observation window and continued into the room, destroying the quantum entangler.

It exploded.

* * *

Michael's head reeled as he felt the Prime Wave buck and lash. It had been too much: too many people had been connected to it too intensely, combined with the backlash from the destroyed entangler. Michael's Ghost overlaid a power distribution pattern onto his vision, and Michael could see the effect the entangler had had on those present. In fact, the effect was increasing, with every hero and villain in the area becoming more tightly coupled to the Prime Wave and, as a result, becoming more and more powerful.

The room plunged into darkness.

* * *

Stratosphere had caught just a glimpse of Rebound and immediately launched himself toward the villain. They'd

run into this character before and knew his power couldn't absorb a full-on ramming by something Stratosphere's size and mass. The last time he'd tried it, Stratosphere had been tossed back just a few feet in the direction he'd come from, the most Rebound's power could manage.

But both Stratosphere and Rebound were supercharged.

Rebound braced himself just as Stratosphere collided with him in a near-perfect shoulder tackle. Rebound's enhanced ability absorbed as much of Stratosphere's increased flight velocity as it could, applying as much force as possible in an opposing vector. It wasn't enough to stop the impact from caving in Rebound's ribs, piercing his heart and lungs. But it was enough to snap Stratosphere's neck.

* * *

"The escape pod," Professor Power gasped.

"I know, you idiot," Night Queen spat, tightening her grip on the man's arm and dragging him through the blacked-out corridor. Her power let *her* see where she was going, even as it absorbed every available photon within its vastly magnified range. She rounded the corner, shoved him into the pod, and climbed in after him. With the facility already on alert, the pod's door closed automatically, and the soft interior wall panels inflated, providing additional cushioning and locking them into place as the pod launched from its tube and into the sky.

* * *

“Be calm,” Michael said, holding a hand out to the young male. He could see the boy’s intensified connection to the Prime Wave and—just as he’d feared—could tell that it came from *multiple* connections. The boy would exhibit multiple powers, now, and if he—

He launched himself at Michael. Michael’s Halo reflexively contracted around him, protecting him, even as Michael’s reflexes eliminated the boy from existence. *:Prime Wave is meta-stable;* the Ghost said. Meaning it was pumping far more energy into this instance than it was meant to do but was at least holding in a steady-state. Michael needed to find a way to damp it down, but they’d already destroyed the device responsible for the situation. He’d never encountered an instance where the Prime Wave was at a lethal level of engagement but *not* in a state of outright chaos. If the power transfer was limited to a small area, perhaps it could be offset. If not...

:Analyze power distribution throughout the instance; he ordered the Ghost. That would take time, but it will tell him where to best focus his efforts on saving this instance.

If it could be saved.

* * *

Harbor City P.D. had dispatched every officer they could spare, include two S.W.A.T. teams. Whichever villain had been leading the Directorate was gone, escaping in a custom-made rocket that only Stratosphere would have been able to follow. Most of the other powered individuals in the facility had either run off, or were in police custody.

Sultana knelt on the ground outside the facility's main entrance, tears running down her face. Ultrasonic stood behind her, one hand on Alya's shoulder. Critical Mass was still underground, consulting with University specialists who were attempting to locate and remove the fragmented isotope remains. Overseer was standing nearby, staring blankly at the facility's demolished entrance. Intellect was also below, in full fugue state, attempting to analyze whatever the Directorate had accomplished. Michael, their mysterious visitor, had vanished.

The bodies of Rebound and Stratosphere had been carried out and were currently on gurneys, covered from head to toe in thick sheets. Whiplash's body had also been found and brought to the surface. It was covered in deep, sizzling burn marks, as if her energy-whips had gotten out of control and wrapped themselves around her, instead of her victims.

A tired, terrified girl going only by Blip was escorted out by a female police officer, accompanied by one of the department's psychologists. Word had already gotten out that she was a unicorn of the powered world, capable of teleporting individuals safely across distances in the blink of an eye.

Another young, terrified girl, this time accompanied by her parents and even younger sibling, was code-named Interdict. She had been the one responsible for generating the field—what Michael had called a *partition*—that had hidden the Directorate facility for so long.

The last powered individual to be brought up was

named Troll. He was a small, twisted man who'd served as the Directorate's resident gadgeteer, and had allegedly been responsible for building the quantum entangler that Ultrasonic had destroyed. The man was under heavy police escort, and Sokolov would be interviewing him later to see what he could tell them.

"Mr. Porter?" The team's police liaison, Stanley McCormick, walked up to Overseer.

"Yes?"

"I'm very sorry about Mt, Hartley," McCormick said sincerely. "If there are any special arrangements we can make, I'd—"

"Tom would have been proud to be treated as any police officer killed in the line of duty," Overseer said quietly. "I know we're not technically part of the department anymore, but—"

"Say no more," McCormick assured him. "Both the Commander and the Mayor have already approved it if that's what you and your team want. If it's what *he* would have wanted." Overseer nodded silently. "I'll take care of it," McCormick said, walking away.

Overseer walked over to the two women. "We've nothing more to offer here," he said softly. They looked at him. "Let's just..." He stopped. They didn't have a home, or even a proper headquarters to go back to. "There's a pub down the road," he said at last. "I'm buying."

HARBOR CITY HERALD: POWERED HEROES, VILLAINS SUDDENLY OVERPOWERED

Christine Lane
HARBOR CITY

This is a breaking story. Be sure to check back throughout the week for updates.

Word is spreading of numerous worldwide incidents suggesting that powered individuals have gained increased powers.

Here in Harbor City, a series of major powered attacks on infrastructure and facilities has suggested that even our own Harbor Guard are enjoying enhanced abilities—enhanced beyond normal levels, making them super-super powered.

News wire reports from London, Tokyo, Sydney, and other major cities describe similar situations, where even formerly low-powered heroes and villains are demonstrating radically increased capabilities.

We have no news on how this has occurred, how long it may last, or how widespread the phenomenon is.

TWELVE: HARBOR GUARD

“None of you are supposed to have these abilities,” Michael said softly. “It’s all a mistake.”

Overseer, Ultrasonic, and Sultana had retreated to a nearby pub. The owner, who had already heard of Stratosphere’s death on the news, immediately closed the pub. “You guys been good to me and mine,” he’d grumbled, and informed them that their money was no good here, on this day. Sokolov had joined them by the time they were on their third drink, and just as he’d sat down in front of his own pint of beer, Michael had appeared and made that pronouncement.

“What do you mean, ‘supposed to?’” Overseer asked tiredly. “There’ve been powered individuals for at least a hundred years, and likely thousands more before records were kept.”

Michael sighed. “There are things you need to understand if we’re to save your world.”

“Save the world? A bit melodramatic, isn’t it?” Sultana asked.

“You know what I am,” Michael said, “and I assure you that your world *will* end if the current situation is not addressed.”

“Please, then,” Sokolov said. “Explain.”

“As I have related to you, your world is one of tens of thousands of similar worlds, all created by the leaders of my people. We call them the Authority, and creating worlds is their profession and their passion. With each new world, they learn more about the primal energies of the universe, about how life forms and exists, and so on. The Authority defines their grand experiments, the Architects design them, and the Builders implement them.”

“So we’re all just an experiment,” Sokolov said with a smirk. “Sounds like half the sci-fi novels of the fifties, frankly.”

“And so you’re one of these Builders?” Overseer asked.

“No,” Michael said. “The Architects designed fifteen models, each of which supplied a unique set of base rules. Those rules formed what you know as physics. Those physics, combined with a suitable injection of bootstrap energy, created tens of thousands of distinct instances of those models. Between all fifteen series, there were over one million instances created.

“The instances of the first ten series collapsed or otherwise failed almost immediately for various reasons, including fundamental instabilities in their rule sets. Your series of instances, the twelfth, was the most successful. At least at first.

“The bootstrapping energy was supplied by something my people call the Prime Wave. It is a universal, constant supply of energy. The Prime Wave was used to construct the core framework of each series of instances and was used to push the base rules sets of those instances into

action. The Architects intended that the Prime Wave would then be withdrawn from each instance, forcing each one to succeed or fail on its own. From this, the Authority hoped to gain better insight into how self-sustaining worlds could be defined and created.

“But the Prime Wave was never withdrawn. Personally, I suspect that the Builders were not confident of the models’ stability, or that they were unable to keep the instances running without the Prime Wave’s energies. Unfortunately, none of the base rule sets were designed with the Prime Wave’s presence in mind. Those rule sets do, however, provide the instances’ life forms with a great deal of flexibility in how they adapt to their environment. As a result, in almost every instance in this series, life has evolved to touch the Prime Wave in some way.

“The Prime Wave supersedes your physics. It *created* the rules you live by, and so is not subject to those rules. By tapping into it, you can violate your own base rules sets, enabling you to maintain heightened senses, control gravity, or... or fly,” Michael finished.

“So our powers come from... what, the same energy that powered the Big Bang?” Sokolov asked.

Michael paused while the Ghost translated. “Essentially, yes,” he answered. “But the Prime Wave was never designed to be used in that way. Although your instance has evolved a delicate and, until now, sustainable balance with it, most other instances’ life forms connect far too strongly and deeply to it. They drive the Prime Wave out of balance, disrupting their instances as well as the

downstream instances that the Prime Wave flows to.”

“So you’d informed us,” Overseer said.

“Which brings me to my role. My people rely utterly on the Prime Wave for our existence. It defines *our* base rules, even if we use those more deliberately and with more flexibility than you. If the Prime Wave becomes too unstable, it will affect the Authority and all my people. It would be the end of us. And so my job has been to follow the Prime Wave through each instance in your series, Burning the worlds which have corrupted the Wave and restoring balance and stability.

“Your world is now perilously close to unbalancing the Prime Wave, which would force me to wipe you all from existence.”

“It’s just all the old sci-fi tropes, isn’t it?” Sokolov muttered.

“How many worlds came before us?” Sultana asked quietly. “How many have you destroyed?”

“Yours is instance 72,664 of this series,” Michael said. “Not every world before yours evolved life capable of touching the Prime Wave. Most did, though,” he said softly, “and I have Burned them all.”

“And we’re next,” Ultrasonic said flatly.

“I hope not,” Michael said. “Your symbiotic relationship with the Prime Wave is worthy of preservation and study. The Authority might learn a great deal. And...” he paused.

“And?” Overseer prompted.

“I am tired of Burning worlds of life,” Michael said with a sigh. “Even if the remainder of this series must die, I

would very much like to walk away from this job knowing that one instance, at least, survived.”

“So how do we stabilize your Prime Wave?” Sokolov said. Michael saw energy come into his eyes, almost like a light. He sensed the Prime Wave’s energies rushing through the man as Sokolov became Intellect. “Talk to me,” Intellect said in a flat voice.

:Power distribution analysis complete,: the Ghost said, almost startling Michael.

“One moment,” Michael said before thinking, *:Report.:*

:I am now capable of mapping each individual’s tap into the Prime Wave,: the Ghost said. Michael’s vision expanded and he, too, could see precisely how Intellect and the others connect to the Prime Wave. Whereas before he’d been able to make out each individual’s broad connection, he could now see that each person’s link had a unique, often multi-pronged aspect. Intellect’s was the cleanest of them, perhaps because his connection wasn’t always-on as the rest were.

Michael could also see how the Prime Wave was unbalanced. Before the quantum entangler, the various human connections to the Prime Wave were almost evenly scattered across its twelve-dimensional surface. Stronger connections had been balanced by several weaker ones on another axis, allowing the main flow of the Wave to proceed unimpeded.

Now, each individual was drawing power from multiple discrete locations along the Wave’s surface. Nearly all of the connections were broader as well, drawing far more

power. As a result, the Wave was fluctuating in places. The fact that not every powered individual was drawing maximum power all at once seemed to be the only thing keeping the Wave from collapsing entirely and entering a chaos state. However, if the people touching the Prime Wave could be managed... balanced against each other in some fashion, Michael thought, then the situation could perhaps be handled.

"Impossible," Intellect said when Michael mentioned the idea. "If what you're saying is true, then we would have to somehow coordinate a global powered population of more than a million individuals." Michael frowned. "Howeverâ€¦" Intellect said musingly.

"What?" Overseer asked.

"Well, the way he's presenting this is a matter of power balance, right? It's like a nuclear reactor. Too many damping rods, and you'll cut off the nuclear reaction. Too few, and you'll get runaway reactions and meltdowns. If you want more power, you draw the rods out a bit, but you need to be able to consume the resulting power. When your power needs dampen, you push the rods in and dampen the reaction. That's all a gross oversimplification, of course," he added with a scowl, "but you get—"

"We get it," Overseer interrupted. "How does it apply?" He'd learned, over the years, that Intellect responded better to terse, highly directed questioning.

"Michael here just needs to monitor the Wave, and when there are excess draws on one side of it, he can counter those with a corresponding, opposite draw."

“Can you do that?” Overseer asked Michael.

He shook his head. “No,” he said. “I cannot draw against the Wave in the way you’re suggesting. I am *part* of it, not an external connection like all of you. I can help stabilize small portions of it as part of my unique role, but that ability is limited over time. However,” he said thoughtfully. “*You* might be able to. By exercising your powers at the right time, and in the right fashion. But I would first need to understand *exactly* how you each connect, and how your powers draw upon the Wave.”

“Can you do that?” Intellect asked.

:Affirmative,: Michael’s Ghost said.

Michael nodded. This would be the first detailed study of these instances’ Prime Wave problem in action. If nothing else, it would provide valuable data that might help save other instances. “This may feel a bit odd,” he told them. *:Begin,:* he commanded his Ghost.

THIRTEEN: THE DIRECTORATE

Their landing had almost gone badly. The escape pod was meant to rocket them to one of three preprogrammed safe bases, but Professor Power's now-supercharged intellect inspired him to select and program a fourth location as they accelerated upward. He hadn't factored on Night Queen's equally supercharged powers, though, and found himself working in near-darkness. In the end, she'd wrested control over her ability long enough for him to set them down near one of the Directorate's remote warehouses, disguised as a disused ranger station in the middle of the deep forest inland of Harbor City.

"Stay here," he told Night Queen curtly, still annoyed at her lack of control.

"Why the hell are we out here?" she asked through gritted teeth. The lights inside the pod were still bleeding their illumination toward her, casting a dim, sickly pall over the interior.

"The pod's camouflage functions will honestly work better out here," he said, "and this is an old storage facility. There's some tech here that might help us reign in our powers." The quantum entanglement incident hadn't yet unlocked additional powers for them, but their existing powers were in full overdrive. Even he was having trouble

concentrating on anything for very long. *This must be what Intellect's fugue states are like*, he thought, and then had to check himself as his brain grabbed the tangent and started calculating what Sokolov's powers must be doing to him right now.

Delesante crawled out of the pod and, almost absent-mindedly, unlocked the four series of complex locks that secured the storage facility's hidden entrance. Maps of the facility's basement levels, something he'd paid scant attention to in the past, burst into his mind as if he'd designed them himself. While parts of his brain worked on calculating the interior volume of the space, another ran through lists of the base's inventory, allowing him to focus on finding the location he needed. In just a few minutes, he'd located the crate he was after and pried the lid from the top. Inside were a series of flat, round discs, about three inches thick and about a foot in diameter. Their exteriors were a glossy black, and he moved his fingers across the surface of one disc in an intricate pattern. Immediately, a set of blue lights flickered to life along the rim of the disc, and Professor Power could feel a thick, honeyed sensation in his brain.

These devices had been his first attempt at manipulating the quantum entanglement that he'd suspected gave them all their powers. Rather than enhancing their capabilities, though, these discs were meant to dampen them. Unfortunately, he'd only managed to produce a small area of effect around them, and their internal batteries typically lasted under an hour. They were also indiscriminate, damp-

ing the powers of anyone within range. All that conspired to make them useless as weapons against powered heroes, but right now they were doing a perfect job of dialing his powers down to something more manageable. He let out a sigh of relief as his concentration returned to him.

Another few minutes later, he'd returned to the pod's landing site and handed another activated disc to Night Queen. She too sighed in relief as her powers dialed down, and punched Professor Power in the face hard enough to make him blackout.

* * *

"What the hell, woman?" Delesante said when he came to. She'd found a length of chain somewhere in the station and had used it to tie him—quite thoroughly, it felt—to a nearby tree. She was sitting on the wooden steps at the station's rustic-looking entrance, tapping on her Directorate smart communicator. A stack of inactive power dampers sat next to her.

"Shut up, you idiot," she muttered. Then, more loudly, "You could have killed us all back there. You're completely out of control. I've messaged some of our allies to rendezvous here, and I'm sending a communique to the Cabal leaders to let them know I'm relieving you of co-leadership."

"You're insane!" Delesante shouted. "You can't—"

"I can, and I have," she said, tapping a button on the communicator. "And there's more. You're going to—"

“Oh my God,” a voice said, and they heard the distinctive sound of several people retching.

“Ah,” Night Queen said, “that’ll be our reinforcements.”

“How?” Delesante asked. “Did Blip—”

“No, you fool, the entire facility was compromised. They probably have that poor girl in lockdown. But you didn’t seriously think you’d found the only teleporter in the world, did you?”

“How can—”

“Idiot,” she spat. “The Cabal is bigger and more powerful than you’ll ever know. They—”

“They need to figure out a way for teleporters not to make us throw up every time,” a female voice said. “I’m Shrike,” she added. “I coalesce light into lasers.” The woman speaking was in a jet-black combat suit, her red hair bound into a tight bun. Even through the bulky suit, she looked like a bodybuilder, and Night Queen would initially have taken her powers to be strength-related.

“That’s an ironic support power,” Night Queen said.

Shrike gave her a shrug and a small grin. “This,” she said, gesturing to another combat-suited woman, this one with a shaved head, “is Skyfall. Precision flier, but also a precision sniper.” Night Queen noted the rifles strapped to her back. Recruiting powered individuals and then giving them complementary mundane skills, she thought, was an excellent idea. If only the local Directorate hadn’t been mostly limited to powered children and idiots.

“We’ve got incoming,” Night Queen said, nodding to her communicator. The facility had basic detection and

automated defenses. “Looks like police helicopters, not whatever the S.P.U. has been flying.”

“The heroes got standard Cabal hero kit?” Shrike asked.

Night Queen nodded. “Fresh from the manufacturer, and they’re completely oblivious. We’ll get an even earlier heads-up if that equipment is inbound,” she said. “We’ve even got trackers in their suits.”

“Well, then let’s take down a couple of choppers,” Skyfall said with a grin, rising into the air.

“Wait,” Night Queen said. Skyfall paused. “Your powers,” she said. “Are they... are you in full control?”

Shrike nodded. “It’s more difficult. I have to be very careful.”

Skyfall also nodded. “I feel like I’m exerting about ten percent, which usually wouldn’t lift me a foot off the ground. I’ve been figuring it out for the past hour. What happened?”

Night Queen tossed a damper disc at Shrike, and another to Skyfall, who shot down to grab it from midair. “It’s a long story. These dampers will last about an hour, and they should dial your powers down to something closer to normal.”

“Interesting,” Shrike said, turning the disc over in one hand. “Standard activation pattern?”

Night Queen nodded. “Should be.”

“Thanks. Skyfall, go get ‘em.”

The flier took off.

“We’ll talk soon, you and I,” Professor Power muttered.

“We won’t, you stupid, vain little man,” Night Queen

said, steel in her voice. “You were never the Cabal’s lead here. You’ll be shipped to a lab far, far from here, and you’ll be little more than your old friend Troll.”

“A Cabal team will assume local Directorate operations,” Shrike added. “They should arrive sometime tomorrow morning.”

Delesante seethed. He glanced at the damper disc lying on the ground next to him. It’s rim-lights showed under ten minutes of power remaining.

* * *

“I need to interrupt the process,” Michael said. His Ghost had started mapping the entire team and was a bit more than halfway through. “Additional connections to the Prime Wave are detected nearby,” he said. *Two additional users;* his Ghost clarified in his mind, overlaying a map on his vision. Four powered individuals were highlighted in the forest past the edge of the city. “And I believe I have located the two individuals who escaped from the facility.”

Overseer stood. “Alright, team,” he said. “Let’s go get them.”

“It will be faster if I take you there,” Michael said. “And I can continue the mapping process, which is almost complete. With any luck, we can work to counterbalance them using your abilities.”

Overseer nodded. “Agreed,” he said. “Everyone ready?” A round of nods. “Do it.”

* * *

They arrived in time to see a powered flier take down a police helicopter. "They're fine," Overseer said, his even-more enhanced vision locating the pilots through the wreckage. "Sultana," he ordered, "take down the flier."

She nodded, lifting an arm toward the woman, who was circling toward the other helicopter. Sultana's gravity control overwhelmed the flier's powers, and she crashed to the ground.

"This is excellent," Michael said quietly. "Your powers are operating in almost direct opposition. Your taps into the Wave are balancing, and the local—"

He was interrupted by a blast of coherent light. It smashed harmlessly into his Halo.

"There," Overseer said, pointing. Critical Mass raised an arm, and outlets in his suit opened to help direct a blast of invisible, concentrated radiation. It struck a red-headed woman a few dozen feet away, and she fell to her knees, hands around her midsection.

Everything went black. Night Queen had shut down her power damper and was letting her light-eating powers operate at their full, enhanced strength. "Ultra," Overseer said, his enhanced hearing pinpointing Night Queen's location. He reached out and grabbed Ultrasonic's arm, pointing it at the villain. "Hit her hard." Ultrasonic unleashed a debilitating sonic blast. The forest returned to daytime.

"Your offset is not stable," Michael warned.

Still on her knees, Shrike emitted a blinding, less-concentrated blast of light. Overseer cried out, his hands over his eyes, spots searing his sensitive vision. Sultana

turned to hit the woman with a gravity wave, but a bullet pinged off her shoulder armor, spinning her around and knocking her to the ground. Her gravity wave struck a tree instead, causing branches to come crashing down.

:Unsustainable,: Michael's Ghost told him. *:Fluctuations are increasing in intensity,:* it added.

Michael waved a hand, and all the local oxygen went away. The humans gasped for a minute, and then passed out.

:Local fluctuations stabilizing,: the Ghost said.

"But this situation will not last," Michael said. "We will not be able to balance the Wave in this way. Certainly not on a global scale."

:Recommend destruction of this instance,: the Ghost advised.

"Perhaps, even yet," Michael said. "I need to think." And with that, he disincorporated.

FOURTEEN: MICHAEL

The Ghost might be right, I thought. This instance was starting to exhibit the same extreme imbalances and fluctuations that I'd seen in nearly every prior instance, and I'd destroyed *those* with barely a thought.

But this instance still spoke to me in a meaningful way. Before their tampering, this species *had* maintained a healthy and balanced relationship with the Wave. I still felt that there was something to be learned here.

:How complete are your recordings of this instance?: I asked the Ghost.

:Fully complete,: came the reply. *:Full genomic breakdown and Wave interactivity have been recorded and can be analyzed at any time. Local resources will require lengthy computation; recommend transferring data to Authority resources for complete analysis.:*

Not yet, I mused. *: Let's broaden our examination,:* I ordered, and we vanished.

* * *

:London,: the Ghost said. I was floating above an open green space, where a powered individual had lifted an entire section of earth into the air and was cackling madly. *:Uneven power draw,:* the Ghost confirmed.

* * *

:*Tokyo*.: Two powered individuals were engaged in a knock-down, drag-out brawl using a highly stylized—and over-powered—fighting technique. Several buildings in the downtown core had already been severely damaged.

* * *

:*Seattle*.: A group of powered individuals was ravaging the waterfront town. Some were attempting to stop the others, but they were all causing an equal amount of damage using their newly boosted abilities.

* * *

I sighed and rose high into space above the planet's atmosphere. I'd grown fond of this instance, but although it had taken a different path, it had still wound up in the same place as all the others.

:*Observation*.,: the Ghost said.

:*Proceed*.,: I replied.

:*Evidence exists to support the theory that the dominant species in this instance naturally evolved to co-exist with the Prime Wave. The exhibition of individualized Wave-enhanced abilities indicates that this instance was uniquely stable until the recent change.*:

:*Conclusion?*:

:*That exceeds my specifications.*:

Obviously. But I agreed: this instance was unique. Life here had evolved not in ignorance of the Prime Wave, but

alongside it. It had developed a natural balance which had been sustainable over the long-term. All I needed to do was put things back to the way they had been.

:There is more,: the Ghost said.

:More?:

:Power distribution analysis suggests that this instance may have a buffering effect from upstream instance instabilities.:

Incredible. If that were true—if this instance had been absorbing and stabilizing the problems from all the previous instances I had visited—then this instance offered genuinely unique value. A value that even the Authority might agree was worth saving.

I smiled.

FIFTEEN: HARBOR GUARD / THE DIRECTORATE

Critical Mass was the first to recover, hauling himself to his knees and wishing he could rub his head. The disappearance of oxygen had included the small reserve tank in his suit, and the feeling of suffocating had been terrifying. He'd managed to pop his visor open a bit before passing out, and as oxygen began to return to the area, he'd been able to regain consciousness.

"Bastard," a female voice said. Critical Mass looked up, his vision still blurry, and saw the redheaded villain struggling to her feet. She held her hands out in front of her, and he prepared to blast her.

"Stop!" Overseer's voice rang out. "We surrender. Guard, stand down."

"What the hell?" Sultana said, her voice raspy.

"We can't keep fighting," Overseer said. "They don't know what's going on, and we're all just making it worse. We have to stop using our powers, all of us, at least for a minute."

"I've got my sights on 'em," Skyfall said. She'd crept out of the woods and had two rifles out, attempting to cover the four heroes.

“Fine,” Overseer said, holding a hand up toward her. “Just give us a minute to explain?”

“Proceed,” Night Queen said, standing and brushing pine needles off of her costume.

“We’ve been in touch with a... creature, I suppose, who knows where our powers originate. We’re all connected to the same energy source, and it’s what enables each of us to do what we do.

“He’s how we were able to... teleport, or whatever, here so quickly. He located you because you’re connected to that energy source. He’s able to use it much more thoroughly than we all can.

“But whatever you did back at your base... it connected us even more to that energy source. It’s too much, though. Each of us, using our powers, is destabilizing it. The source is going to... well, it’s going to be bad. If we can’t stabilize it, somehow, then apparently his job is to wipe us all out of existence so that we stop affecting it.”

Everyone was quiet for a moment. “This is bullshit,” Shrike said.

“It might not be,” Night Queen said slowly. “Professor Power,” she said, gesturing to the man who was still slumped against his chains, “had surmised something very similar, and it’s what his quantum entangler was meant to affect. We *all* got more powerful. She asked, looking intently at Overseer, “What do you suggest we do? What proof can you provide?”

“We can try to attract his attention,” Overseer said. “And we need to shut down whatever you did.”

“It already is shut down,” Professor Power said groggily. “It’s blown up.”

Overseer cursed. “So this is a persistent effect. Can it be undone?”

“Tried,” the Professor said, laughing. “That’s what those discs do. But they’re not permanent, they’re not long-range, and they don’t last very long.” He giggled.

“What’s wrong with—” Night Queen started, when the chains around Delesante separated.

“Forgot about all the little tricks up my armor, did you?” he sneered at her. “I did too until my disc gave out.” Her eyes widened, and the light in the area began to dim as her disc lost power and unleashed her enhanced capabilities.

“No!” Overseer said. “You have to stop!”

“I do believe you,” the Professor said. “About this energy source, I mean. It fits my theory perfectly. But the process can’t be reversed. Only... temporarily abated, on a per-person basis. I—” there was a sharp crack, and he looked down at his abdomen. “Wha—?”

“Armor-piercing rounds, asshole,” Skyfall said. Night Queen sneered as Delesante collapsed to his knees.

“Stop!” Overseer cried. “You all have to *stop!*”

“Do we, little hero?” Shrike said. The last dregs of light in the area began pooling around her fists. “Do we have to stop, or do we merely have to stop *you?*”

“Try it, bitch,” Ultrasonic said, just as Sultana unleashed a gravity pulse that dropped Skyfall to the ground.

“Michael!!” Overseer cried out.

There was no answer.

SIXTEEN: MICHAEL

:I must enter the Prime Wave,: I thought to the Ghost.

:This procedure is highly dangerous and recommended only in extreme emergencies,: the Ghost immediately began reciting. *:By continuing, do you acknowledge the risks and–:*

:Acknowledged and skip it,: I said. I could sense the Wave's delicate stability worsening by the moment. *:Prepare for entry,:*

Diving directly into the Prime Wave was possible even for a janitor such as myself, but it was fraught with risk. As the Ghost transitioned my presence into the powerful wave of energy, I reminded myself to relax into it, to ease gently into the flow rather than fighting to remain in control. Within the Wave, there was no, could be no control.

After a moment, my consciousness connected, and I could feel what the Prime Wave itself was feeling. *Pulled in a million directions* is what it felt like, I thought. I could feel the skin of the Wave puckering as the energy drawn from it increased in intensity.

Perhaps they can be cut off from here, I thought. I reached out for one of the stronger connections, mentally pinching it and trying to cast it off. I was able to attenuate the flow of power sharply, but only while I maintained intense concentration. The moment I faltered, it snapped right back into place. So long as the individual represented

by that energy flow was awake and drawing power, I couldn't cut it off.

Awake and pulling power, I mused. I looked at the vastness of the Prime Wave, and at the tens of thousands of connections to it. I zeroed in on one notably weaker connection, one so thready I was surprised it was able to remain attached. It was surrounded by a distinct, separate kind of energy. If the Prime Wave itself was a deeply colored, constantly shifting rainbow, this other energy looked more like small black particles. They formed a small pool around the thread of energy, just on the surface of the Prime Wave. I poked at them, and they dissipated—and the thread of energy they'd surrounded thinned to nothing and broke. *This is what they've done*, I realized. Looking more closely, I could see thin rivers of the small black dots connecting each of the energy taps. I poked at them, and they moved in eddies around my virtual hand when I withdrew they resumed their flow from place to place.

After a moment, I came to a decision and informed the Ghost.

: *This will result in significant loss of life*: the Ghost warned. There was no judgment in its voice; together we'd eliminated a seemingly infinite number of lives. It was just programmed to remind me.

:*Proceed*: I ordered. :*Make them all unconscious. Every single one of them*.:

SEVENTEEN: HARBOR GUARD / THE DIRECTORATE

That's twice in one day, Critical Mass thought as he came to again. *I'm getting a real migraine*, he added to himself. "Overseer?" he said aloud.

"Yeah," Overseer said, his voice making his discomfort apparent.

"What the hell?" came Shrike's voice.

"Michael again, I assume," Overseer said.

"Overseer, this is Harbor City command," a voice said into the heroes' communicators. "There's been... there's been an incident."

"Go ahead," Overseer said, warily watching Shrike. Night Queen was again hauling herself upright. He gestured to Sultana, who nodded wearily and focused on keeping Skyfall down. Professor Power's body lay in a muddy pool of blood.

"It's... it's bad, sir," the communicator said. "There've been accidents everywhere. All over. All over the *planet*. Airplanes are down. Every car on the road seems to have crashed. It's—"

"What, what the hell happened?" Overseer said. He looked at his teammates in shock.

“Millions are dead, sir. Millions. We could sure use your help.”

“We can be there in—” he was interrupted by a second *crack* from one of Skyfall’s rifles. As he whirled to look at her, he saw Sultana collapse. “Alya!” he cried.

“Bitch,” Critical Mass said, unleashing a torrent of radiation. The villain screamed.

“Alya,” Overseer said, rushing to her side. She’d taken a bullet to the chest, and he could hear air wheezing wetly out of her.

“My powers, David,” she whispered. “They’re back to normal. She... I’m sorry.”

He realized his senses had returned to their usual level of enhancement. “Nadim, stop,” he heard Ultrasonic saying. “Stop, Nadim. She’s... she’s down.” He detected a blast of her ultrasonics as she ensured Shrike was also down. Skyfall must have been able to fight back against Sultana’s decreased power, and gotten a rifle lined up.

“Command, we—” he stopped. All planes down. That would mean all helicopters, too. There was no way to get medical assistance.

A blast of light filled his vision, missing him by less than an inch. “*Bitch*,” Ultrasonic said, blasting Shrike with a relentless volley of debilitating noise. “I’ll—”

“*STOP*,” a voice said. Michael reappeared in the sky above them, his Halo flaring around him like fiery wings. “The crisis has passed. There is no need for you to continue battling each other in this fashion.”

They all looked up. “Shit,” Shrike muttered. “They

weren't kidding."

"What have you done?!?" Overseer screamed.

"What was necessary to save this entire instance," Michael said. "I have reversed the damage that done to the Prime Wave. I—"

"You've killed millions!" Overseer screamed at him. "Innocent people!"

"My concern is the health of this entire instance," Michael said coldly, "and your ability to safely tap the Prime Wave at your original power levels. That concern is fulfilled. I am here only for an answer to a lone question." The heroes stared at him in silence. "The machine that created the problem. What were its critical components?"

"Why?" Critical Mass asked.

"I will ensure that it cannot be recreated."

Critical Mass reeled off a list of the isotopes that had been stolen. *:Order by increasing frequency of appearance,; Michael ordered the Ghost, :and eliminate the rarest two from this instance.:*

:Confirmed,; the Ghost acknowledged. :Working.:

While the Ghost worked, Michael surveyed the scene below him. "I regret the loss of another of your companions," he said, noting Sultana.

"She's not dead yet," Overseer said. "You can help her. You can—"

"I cannot," Michael said his voice growing even colder. "My interference in this instance can thus far be justified to some degree. No further. The damage you have inflicted on yourselves remains."

“And the damage *you* inflicted on us?”

“Acceptable loss given the outcome,” Michael said. “But regrettable,” he added, his voice softening. “I have taken so much more life than you can even comprehend. To be able to preserve this instance is a great joy to me, but the taking of yet more life wearied and saddens me.”

:*Complete*,: the Ghost said.

Michael nodded and vanished.

POWERED LOCK-DOWN

Christine Lane
HARBOR CITY

The continuing sequestration of powered individuals continues worldwide, with Harbor City—so recently a re-convert to the idea of powered heroes—a notable exception for a metropolis of our size. However, that all comes to an end this week, on the six-month anniversary of the Incident, as the President of the United States signs the Federal Powered Sequestration bill. Going into effect next month, it makes the U.S. the latest country, and the last superpower, to force all powered individuals into one of the U.N. exile zones.

Ironically, it was our super-powered hero Intellect who made the exile zones possible. By reverse-engineering and improving on the power dampers used by the former Directorate madman, Professor Power, Intellect was able to create large zones where superpowers don't work. Now, he'll be confined to one for the rest of his life.

Governments are continuing to cooperate with heroes as they round up powered villains. Once charged, if convicted they are dispatched to the Siberian Exile Zone, where conditions are uncompromisingly harsh. These heroes' reward? Lifetime retirement in the Equatorial Exile Zone,

where even now construction of apartments, grocery stores, malls, and other trappings of civilization are continuing to be built. Any other powered individual who has not been convicted may turn themselves in for free housing in the Midwest Exile Zone, with promises of good-paying remote-working jobs and access to modern amenities.

The Human Rights Campaign, Amnesty International, and other nonprofit human rights organizations have protested the exile zones from the beginning, likening them to the concentration camps of Nazi Germany. But the entire U.N., and indeed most governments worldwide, remain steadfast in ensuring another powered Incident never happens again.

EIGHTEEN: MICHAEL

I remained in the instance for several local months, ensuring that the Prime Wave remained stable. Periodically, I checked in on the small group of humans I'd come to think of as my own: the Harbor Guard. Two of their members dead, yet they still worked tirelessly to round up other powered humans in their area, relegating them to one of the three exile areas that the human governments had created. Their work was almost done: my Ghost confirmed that they were amongst the last powered individuals in the area. So soon they would check into a zone that was surrounded by power-dampening quantum fields.

Over the past weeks and months, I'd watched the connections to the Prime Wave dim and almost fade. *Almost*; these exiled humans remained connected to it through whatever evolutionary quirk had joined them in the first place, but their connections were too tenuous and delicate to conduct power to them.

When the dampers had first been deployed, I'd worried that they'd have a direct effect on the Prime Wave, but they appeared not to. I saw none of the small black motes wandering on the surface of the Wave. Although, when I looked closely at one of the exiled humans, I could see the hazy disturbance that thinned their connection to the Wave. The dampers worked on the humans, and not on the Wave, and so I was content to leave it be.

Of the three exile zones, the one for the greedy, criminal powered individuals was, predictably, the most chaotic. They constantly fought, stealing their scant resources from each other. The physically strongest amongst them led groups of weaker ones, forming clans and tribes that attempted to protect each other—but which were ruled with an iron fist of intolerance.

The zone set aside for the former “heroes” was, while far from luxurious, far more orderly and livable. The “unaffiliated” zone, where mostly low-powered individuals went after peacefully turning themselves in, was also mundane. From media broadcasts, I understood that these individuals were all supplied with jobs that did not require them to leave their exile, ensuring they could earn the resources they needed to live.

All three zones were, of course, prisons. They were simply each of a mildly different nature.

A thought occurred to me. *:Analysis of the three cohorts,; I ordered the Ghost. :Look for correlations between and amongst them.:*

The Ghost had spent ample time over the past months analyzing the formerly Prime Wave-connected groups, and so the response didn’t take long. *:Cross-set detected. Cohort One:—that was the name I’d given to the wrong-doers in their prison of chaos—:have a segment of genetics that is common across 95% of individuals. That same genetic set exists in only 5% of Cohort Two:—the heroes—:and approximately 8% of Cohort Three. Conversely, Cohort Two individuals have a separate genetic set common to 98% of*

individuals, which appears in only 5% of Cohort One and 8% of Cohort Three.:

Interesting. So their natures were, to at least some degree, dictated by their biology. And more importantly, they could be differentiated. Perhaps in my report—

No, I decided suddenly. *There will be no report for this instance.* Such a thing was not uncommon; instances with no dominant life form didn't warrant a report, and the Authority would likely assume that applied to this instance.

It was time to go. *Proceed to the next instance.:* I ordered, and we vanished.

* * *

:Instance—: the Ghost began, but my attention was immediately diverted by the flaming hell I observed.

EPILOGUE

:Instance -664 lacks a report?: the Accountant asked.

:Affirmative,: the Operator confirmed. *:And yet the custodian's linear time spent in that instance exceeds by far any other instance where a report was not filed.:*

:Inconsistent,: the Executive mused.

:Inconsistent,: the Operator agreed. *:And there is more. Analyst?:*

:The Prime Wave showed minimal instability in instance -664, which could be consistent with a lack of dominant evolved life. However, instance -665, immediately downstream, is entirely disrupted. The instance is no longer functional, and we are not able to pinpoint the custodian's presence within it.:

:Disturbing,: the Executive said. *:Downstream from -665?:*

:Unknowable at this time,: the Analyst replied. *:While a complete collapse of the Wave can be ruled out, our instruments are not able to provide data or a visualization beyond -665.:*

:And the custodian unaccounted for,: the Executive said. The rest of the Authority emanated agreement and concern. *:Decision,:* the Executive said after a moment, and waited while the others' attention firmed upon him. *:Intercedance,:* he said. *:Alert the Builders, and place Demolition on standby.:* _ The minds of the Authority confirmed their

obedience and faded away to execute their duties.

Sample: SUPERIOR WAVE

Enjoy this exciting sample from *Superior Wave*, Book Two in the *Prime Wave Accounting*.

* * *

:Alert. Transition anomaly:

:No kidding; I shouted, wrapping my Halo around me for protection. We'd left iteration -664 and emerged into an undifferentiated fiery hell. All around me, masses of burning plasma and hot gas roiled and churned. *:Where in the Authority's name are we?:* I shouted in my mind.

:Iteration 12-72666; my Ghost said. Its calm, unflappable recitation was in stark contrast to the burning chaos surrounding me.

:What happened to -665?: I asked. It wasn't like the Ghost to mis-navigate a transition.

:Unknown. We appear to have skipped iteration 12-72665. The Prime Wave in this iteration is severely damaged.:

:It's completely berserk!: I cried. I'd never run into this before. Was it possible that the Prime Wave in -665 had been so de-stabilized that the instance itself was unreachable? Is that why *this* instance was in such turmoil?

I hardened my Halo more – calling down fire on an entire planet was one thing when you were safely floating above it. Being embedded in the middle of it was another thing altogether. *:Can you take us back to -665?:* I asked.

There was a brief pause, and I could feel the Ghost trying. *:Negative,:* it replied. *:Iteration 12-72665 is unreachable.:* That was bad news. Aftershocks in the Prime Wave tended to flow upstream, toward the end of the generation, so -664 should be safe enough. For all I knew, the situation in -664 had caused the problem in -665. So the Prime Wave *must* still be flowing through, but not solidly enough to reach the iteration.

What should I do?

There was no protocol for this that I was aware of, aside from a general directive to report significant anomalies. This certainly felt like a significant anomaly. But reporting it now would likely draw attention to -664, and I still wasn't sure how the Authority would feel about that iteration. On the one hand, they might feel it was a breakthrough, a way to make these 12th-generation iterations feasible. If the Engineers could reverse-engineer the exact configuration that kept biological interfaces to the Prime Wave mostly stable, the perhaps the Builders could codify that in a new generation.

Or they could all decide that it was just a variant of the bug I'd been sent to clean up and order me to immolate yet another world.

:Can we move on to -667?: I asked the Ghost. Staying here was getting to be unsustainable, as even my Halo

started letting heat and plasma leak through.

:Affirmative,: it said after a pause to check.

Go, I ordered.

The burning plasma melted away. *:Instance 12-72667,:* the Ghost said. A new world faded into view. I was in midair, my Halo still clutched protectively around me. I let it unfold a bit and saw a world damaged by direct exposure to the Prime Wave. It wasn't as bad as the firestorm I'd just left, but the Builders' rules were struggling to maintain themselves and had been for some time. Gravity had shifted, and the abundant plant life had responded by growing to soaring heights, only to twist down upon themselves when gravity reasserted itself. I saw lower-order animals that, despite being different species, had somehow mated and produced hybridized offspring.

:Report,: I ordered. I needed to see what the situation was with the biologicals.

:Scanning,: the Ghost replied. Then, after a moment, *:Scan complete. No evidence of Prime Wave tampering. No dominant species detected:* Well, that was a miracle. I'd found one of the rare instances where no dominant life-form had arisen, which means the Builders' bug hadn't reared its ugly head. I could feel the Prime Wave pulsing irregularly here, but that was almost certainly from the upstream chaos in the previous two instances.

:Detailed landscape analysis,: I ordered.

:Analyzing,: the Ghost said. *:This instance is not compliant to Builder specification,:* it reported. *:Fundamental rule-set has been altered.:*

That wasn't excellent news. *:How recently?:* I asked.

:Unable to determine,: it said. *:There is evidence that the fundamental rule-set alteration occurred more than once. Several features of this instance do not themselves comply with the current rule-set, nor do they adhere to the specification. Recommend destruction.:*

If the Prime Wave was running amok, then that might be the safest action. And if there was no dominant life-form, then I felt a lot less wary about it. But... *:Clarify,:* I ordered. I'd only rarely had to destroy an entire world; usually, wiping out life was sufficient.

:Recommend complete destruction to create an empty instance,: it said.

I had no protocol for that. Not one I'd ever used. These instances were each an entire *universe*, built on a set of fundamental rules, populated with one key world. To empty that... it seemed unthinkable. I decided to try another tack.

:Analyze Prime Wave stability in this instance,: I ordered. *:Relate to patterns in the previous three instances.:*

The Ghost was silent for several minutes. While I waited, I moved through the world, taking in the almost macabre elements of the landscape. This world had eschewed large oceans and instead gone for a single massive landmass dotted with numerous lakes, streams, and inland seas. I'd seen that pattern before, and for some reason, the Builders' starting rule set didn't favor those worlds for the development of a diverse biosphere. It seemed that, without larger oceans, biologics settled into protected

niches and didn't go much further.

:Unable to comply,: the Ghost said. *:Iteration 12-72665 remains inaccessible. Iteration 12-72664 cannot be analyzed due to disruption in the intermediate Prime Wave junctions.:*

:Can't you use your records from -664,: I asked, *:and extrapolate?:*

:Negative,: it replied. *:We were not in iteration 12-72664 for a long enough period of time to re-sample after that iteration's Prime Wave disturbances were resolved.:*

Well, that gave me something to act upon. *:Return to iteration 12-72664,:* I ordered and watched the twisted, water-dappled world of -667 melt away. As -664 once again faded in around me, I heard another voice in my head. It surprised me because for millennia it had just been my Ghost and I.

:Ah,: the voice said. *:Michael. What have you been up to?:*