



# SUPERIOR WAVE

THE PRIME WAVE ACCOUNTING, BOOK TWO

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# **Superior Wave**

Book Two of the Prime Wave  
Accounting

Don Jones

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# ONE: MICHAEL

*: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 misnavigate 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 me.

*:Ah,:* the voice said. *:Michael. What have you been up to?:*

## TWO: MICHAEL

*:Caution,:* my Ghost whispered into my mind. *:There has been a time slippage of approximately fifty local years.:*

Fifty— I didn't have time for that now.

*:This iteration is off-specification, Michael,:* the other voice said. It was deep, and full of nuance and power. A Voice of the Authority.

*:Who is this?:* I asked.

A being shimmered into existence before me. We were both floating in midair and incorporeal; the inhabitants of this iteration wouldn't be able to perceive either of us. He— or she, it wasn't clear if the being had adopted a gender identity yet—glowed with a depth that I knew I didn't. This wasn't a Architect, or even a Builder. This was one of the Authority, the leaders of my people. The ones who'd sent me, a mere Custodian, on a job. A job I'd admittedly not followed through on as completely as they might have desired. *:I am Third in Authority,:* it said, and my shoulders clenched in fear. This was one of the Upper Council. *:You may call me Hadraniel.:*

*:Greetings, Third,:* I said, bowing low. Its name was irrelevant; I'd never use its name directly to its face.

*:I repeat my question, Michael. What have you been up to? Why does this iteration continue to exist and continue to support life? It has clearly touched the Prime Wave, in direct contravention of our orders and of your purpose.:*

*:This one is different,* I said. *:Until recently, they'd managed to live in harmony with the Prime Wave. It altered them, but they'd achieved a balance. I thought—:*

*:You thought,* it said. *:You were not created to think.:*

*:But I was given discretion,* I protested, trying to maintain a respectful tone. *:Iterations which have not damaged the Prime Wave, and which showed no sign of doing so, were to be left alone.:*

*:And does this iteration meet that criteria?* it asked.

It demonstrably did not. *:It had achieved a balance,* I said, falling back to my previous argument. *:That is unprecedented. I thought—:*

*:You thought to preserve them,* it said. It was quiet for a moment and then added, *:I can feel them impinging on the Wave, but delicately. How could this have caused the upstream disruption that alerted us to the problem?:*

It was my turn to pause and collect myself, but only for a moment. One did not keep a member of the Upper Council waiting. *:There was a moment,* I said slowly. *:I'm told it was fifty years ago by local reckoning. One of them attempted an experiment, and it connected many of them even more closely to the Prime Wave. Too close,* I finished.

*:An experiment? You imply a deliberate, conscious tampering with the Prime Wave?:*

I nodded. *:Something in their science is aware of the Prime Wave. If not its direct existence, then its effect on their world. They—:*

*:This is indeed unprecedented,* it said. *:In terms of its danger to the Prime Wave, to all of our kind, it is completely*

*without precedent. Do you realize these... creatures are touching the core of the universe itself? Tampering with it? Drawing on it?:*

*:I thought the Architects, perhaps, would want to study them,:* I offered weakly.

*:I will see for myself,:* it said.

*:Connected for inquiry,:* my Ghost said, its voice even flatter than usual. I tensed. From anyone but a member of the Upper Council, this would have been an abominable invasion of my privacy, but it was well within Hadraniel's rights. *:Inquiry complete,:* my Ghost announced at last. I didn't un-tense.

*:I see,:* Third said musingly. *:I see also that the Builders were somewhat deceptive in how they implemented the Architects' designs. When we sent you to clean this generation, we were... hmm, unaware, perhaps, of the degree of their deviation.:*

I was shocked. The Authority hadn't even looked into *why* this generation of worlds was disrupting the Prime Wave? They hadn't even *questioned* why the Prime Wave couldn't be detached? They had to have known about the Builders'... shortcuts. Hadn't they?

*:Still,:* it said thoughtfully, *:the idea of an evolved species coming to balance with the Prime Wave, naturally and purely by chance... this interests us.:*

My breath caught in my incorporeal throat. Unbidden, my Ghost ran a series of projections through my mind. As far as any of us knew, the First of the Authority had essentially created all the rest of us for its great Purpose.

Our abilities, our very lives, were all connected to the Prime Wave, which, we were taught, emanated directly from the First's own mind and power. Most of us were little more than base servants, though, built to perform tasks and expected to do nothing but. Certainly, the Architects received better treatment than a Custodian, but the Architects were just as much subject to the will of the First as I was. If the humans of this iteration had managed to connect themselves to the Prime Wave—and they demonstrably *had*—then they were just as likely to be subsumed under the First's control. They'd be servants, although doubtless lower in rank than those of us the First had created personally.

What was a lesser servant than a Janitor?

*:What will you do with them?:* I asked carefully.

*:I am uncertain. For life to have evolved that can safely touch the Prime Wave as we can... is unique. Even if it evolved under a set of rules we devised, it was unanticipated.:* Third replied.

*:In... a good way?:* I asked.

*:There is neither objective good nor bad here, Michael.:* Third rebuked me, although its tone was gentle. *:There merely is what is. Even as Third, I do not know the full mind of the First. Perhaps this outcome was part of its plan. Or perhaps this is nothing more than the anomaly we originally thought it to be.:*

I waited a moment before asking, *:What will you do now?:*

It also paused for a moment before replying. *:Show me*

*this iteration, Third ordered. :Show me its creatures. Show me how they touch on our power.:*

I told my Ghost where to take us.

# THREE: WORLD GUARD HARBOR CITY

“Defiant! Have you got that or not?”

“I got it,” Connor Davis, code-name Defiant, grunted. “You’re looking at antigravity here, not actual flight,” he added, “but he’s got a ton of it. I’m gonna need some help before he lifts us both right off the ground.”

“I’m screaming into his brain, so that’ll distract him a bit.” Louis Del Grande, code-name Scanner, was the team’s telepath. He was fully capable of ratcheting up his telepathic “scream” to the point where it’d melt someone’s brain.

“Get out of my head!” their perpetrator screamed. Defiant grunted again as the short, squat man poured more power into his antigravity effect, threatening to tear himself out of Defiant’s super-strong grip.

“Containment is inbound, five minutes,” their team lead said over their helmet communicators. Michael Shanks, code-name Hawk, tended to use his power of flight to stay well above the action, giving him a good line of sight and the opportunity to coordinate the rest of the team. “Christ, I wish we still had a T-K on the team,” he added. The team’s previous telekinetic, Lift, had been seriously injured in a situation almost exactly like this one a year ago. She’d opted to move into a desk job with the World Guard, rather

than returning to active duty, and Director Sokolov had granted her request.

“This guy *is* a T-K, I’m telling you,” Aniyah Williams, code-name Nightspeed, said. “We got called in because he was tearing up the road.”

“He’s a late-life activation,” Hawk said. “You get a lot of crossover effects. Containment is 2 minutes out, Defiant. Get ready to let him go.” Most powered individuals gained their abilities fairly young, typically just after puberty. In those cases, powers tended to ramp up slowly, letting the person get used to them—and letting the World Guard detect them and enroll them. Late-life activations were often caused by extreme stress, and were usually more... dramatic in nature.

“You guys know Powered Free was hiding him, right?” Nightspeed said. The Powered Free was a group of renegade powered individuals, along with numerous non-powered sympathizers, who refused to enroll in the World Guard as required by international law. They mostly laid low, but they were known to harbor like-minded powered individuals, especially older people who activated late in life and didn’t want to serve in the World Guard. The Powered Free weren’t villains *per se*, but they were certainly breaking the law.

“It’s the best explanation,” Hawk agreed. “With this low a level of control over his powers, he had to have someone supporting him. Thirty seconds, Defiant. They’re moving fast and coming in hot.”

“So why’d they let him go?” Defiant asked, gritting his

teeth. The man was still screaming; Scanner's telepathic scream was clearly doing its job. "Don't kill him, Scan, the posse is almost here."

"You know how hard it is to keep this even," Scanner gritted.

"They're right above you, Defiant," Hawk said. "Let 'im go!"

Defiant released the man at the same moment Scanner stopped pummeling his brain. The man shot up forty feet in the air, a look of shock on his face. Hawk swooped in underneath him, pushing him even higher and faster, until he *clanged* to a stop in a World Guard containment cell that was suspended from an enormous helicopter. The opening in the bottom of the cell irised shut, trapping the man inside. Quantum dampers—the crowning achievement of the World Guard's Director Sokolov—flared to life, blocking the man's powers. Hawk heard his body hit the now-sealed bottom of the cell. "Take him away guys, and thanks for the assist," he said.

"No problem, Harbor City. You're free to stand down," the helicopter team replied.

"Not quite," Hawk said. "We suspect he was being hidden by the Powered Free. We need to scout the area in case any of them are still about."

"Affirmative, Harbor City," the helicopter team replied. "Give us a holler if you turn up anything."

"We could sure use a T-K," Hawk muttered. There was no reply as the helicopter, containment cell in tow, vectored away from the city. Hawk landed below, where

Defiant was stretching his back.

“Jeez, that was a tough one,” the strongman said. “I don’t know if I could have held on for much longer. He was lifting me right out of the street.” He pointed to where he’d kicked his feet into the concrete surface of the road to anchor himself. “Someone’s gonna need to repair those,” he added.

Hawk nodded. “There’s a cleanup team in route. But we need to scout for Powered Free agents. Nightspeed, could you—”

“Already on it,” she said. She was the team’s speedster, but with a twist on the usual ability: she was faster in the dark. At nighttime, she could patrol the entire Downtown core in under two minutes; in full sunlight like she was now, it’d take her five times longer. Still, it was faster than any of the rest of them could manage. Hawk could put on short bursts of supersonic speed, but at this altitude he’d wreak even more damage on the Downtown buildings.

“I can create a cloud cover if it’d help.” That was from Malia Akau, code-name Surfrider, the team’s weather-control specialist.

“Negative, Surfrider,” Nightspeed said. “I only need to cover a few surrounding blocks, and I’m about done now anyway. My suit’s not giving me any indication of quantum activity.” The World Guard’s duty suits provided quantum damping in the event of a surge, protecting the occupant from harm, and also provided detection capabilities that were fairly effective at spotting other powered individuals—even ones that weren’t actively using their

powers at the time. “Yeah, I’m definitely seeing some of the Powered Free’s calling cards,” she said. The group was known to mark safe houses, sympathizers’ locations, and other resources using a complex and often-changing series of logos and graffiti tags.

“This area was swept less than two months ago,” Hawk complained. “They couldn’t have moved in that fast.”

“They could have,” Scanner said. “It’s easy for them to vanish and just as easy for them to set up shop. Night, you seeing any safe-house marks?”

“I can’t tell, these are all new, but they have the same pattern,” the speedster replied. “I’m tagging the locations in my suit-comp, and we can send an investigative team in later.”

“They’ll bail after today anyway,” Hawk said. “They’re probably already on the way out, in fact. Nightspeed, tag what you can and let’s regroup.”

“I’m just about to—whoa!” she cried.

“What the hell?” Hawk exclaimed. Everyone’s helmets had started sounding an alarm for a major quantum event. “Are we being—”

“Harbor City Guard, this is Director Sokolov.” The voice of the World Guard’s Director, Lucas Sokolov, formerly code-named Intellect, cut into all of their communicators. “This is an anomalous quantum event. But... I recognize this pattern. Stand down, but remain cautious. I expect you’re about to have a visitor.” He paused for a moment, before adding, “It’s been a while.”

The team looked around for a moment, before Defiant

asked, “What exactly are we—oh!” he exclaimed.

A man appeared before them. He appeared to be bald and... naked, but somehow not-naked. He was well-built, almost like an idealized version of a human male, but lacking any obvious genitalia, despite his apparent nudity. He glowed a soft, deep golden hue that seemed to cover him like a skin-tight outfit of some kind. A hazy suggestion of wings floated behind him, less a tangible thing and more like a smearing of fractal light, wavering in and out of sight. His feet floated a few inches off the ground.

“Hello,” he said. His voice was moderately pitched, but resonate, cutting through the team’s helmets and somehow ringing directly in their ears. “I am Michael.”

## FOUR: MICHAEL

The group of white-clad individuals in front of me quickly grew by one as another sped in and came to a halt. *:A Prime Wave-powered runner, exhibiting speed far in excess of their species' norm,:* I said to the Third. It had chosen not to incorporate itself, but I was able to sense it and communicate with it regardless. *:You will note not only the delicacy of the Prime Wave connection, but also the instinctive completeness of it. Its entire muscular and skeletal structures have been enhanced, a field has been deployed to protect it from friction, and its cognitive processes have been modified to process much more quickly. Yet these enhancements only activate when it is running. Now, at a standstill, they remain latent.:*

*:Fascinating,:* Third said. *:Each of them has twisted just a fraction of the Prime Wave into itself, with highly variable and specific results.:*

I felt Third deploying its own Ghost to perform a more detailed analysis and respectfully fell silent. The humans appeared frozen before them, as they had stepped outside the local time stream. These humans seemed much more professional and well-off than the ones I had last encountered. Those had been dressed in haphazard, poorly-assembled uniforms, each barely specialized to its wearer's abilities. These humans, on the other hand, were clad in nearly uniform white armor, their heads fully enclosed in

featureless white-and-silver helmets. He could see small individualizations in each: the runner had more durable-looking and flexible boots, for example, while the one obviously sporting mental abilities had a helmet apparently modified to permit his power to radiate through the material.

It occurred to me that these suits strongly resembled Professor Power's suit, although these were a pure white, and somehow seemed more carefully designed.

*:Their clothing is somehow insulating them from a more complete connection to the Prime Wave,:* Third said. *:Is this usual?:*

I was taken aback and ordered my own Ghost to liaise with Third's. *:It was not usual during my previous visit here, no,:* I replied, examining the analysis. *:However, this may have been a correction based on the incident that occurred then. A way of ensuring they do not connect overmuch to the Prime Wave?:*

*:Seemingly. Interesting. I wonder what would happen if we disabled the dampening effect?:* Third mused.

*:I would advise caution,:* I said, maintaining a respectful tone and trying to suppress my anxiety. *:As I mentioned, during my last visit, they had discovered a way of strengthening their connection to the Prime Wave. The results were devastating.:*

*:Yes, I have been informed of what happened to the -665 and -666 instances. You believe it was the result of what happened here?:*

*:Damage to the Prime Wave has always flowed toward*

*higher-numbered instances;* I replied. *:That's why I was instructed to begin with -001 in this generation, and work to the end.:*

*:And so the incident in this instance...:* Third prompted.

*:Flowed to the next instance and apparently destroyed it, continuing through to the -666 instance,:* I said.

*:Interesting. We, of course, do not experience the Prime Wave so linearly in our own domain, but of course it provides a power link between these instances. Ah, the Builders' hubris,:* Third said softly. *:And what of these natives, then?:*

*:I would like to ask them some questions,:* I said. Sensing Third's assent, I dropped back into the normal time stream.

"Michael," one of the white-suited humans said, "This is Lucas Sokolov. Do you remember me?"

"I do," I said. "From my perspective, we last met only a short time ago."

"It's been fifty years, here," Sokolov's voice said. "I'm not actually present; I'm speaking to you through the electronics in one of my team member's suit. I'm an old man now, Michael."

"It is good to hear from you, Lucas. Do you still also go by 'Intellect?'"

"No," Sokolov said with a raspy chuckle. "Not anymore. The Harbor City Guard—my old friends—are all gone. Died, I mean."

"And your enemies?"

"Professor Power, who caused the quantum bonding incident, is in a secure detention facility in the Falkland

Islands,” Sokolov replied. “He’s 87, Michael. He’ll be dead soon as well. As will I.”

“May I ask you some questions before then?” I asked.

Another dry laugh. “Of course Michael.” The other white-suited team members shifted uneasily, unaccustomed to taking such a passive role in a situation like this. “What would you like to know?”

“After the incident,” I asked. “What happened?”

“Well, you left, to begin with,” Sokolov said, disapproval evident in his voice.

“I have a job to do, powers to report to,” I said. “What happened after I left?” I asked, attempting to direct the conversation.

“The world panicked, naturally,” Sokolov said. “And I offered them a solution. The team before you is wearing the sixth generation of my quantum containment suits, but the Mark I suits were my first offer to the United Nations. Legislation was passed in every country on Earth,” he continued, “that all powered individuals must enlist with the UN—a centralized body originally intended for international cooperation and coordination—and agree to wear a containment suit at all times. They became the World Guard, a force to protect us all.”

“To restrict their connection to the Prime Wave?” I asked.

“Yes, that’s what you called it. I never fully understood, you realize, what you were talking about. This universal—meta-universal, to hear you describe it—flow of power that you say grants us our abilities. But yes, the suits regulate

and control that connection. In the event a wearer draws too much power, it dampens it. All to prevent another incident.”

“And your people—they comply with this requirement?” I asked.

“Most do,” Sokolov said. “The rest are deemed criminals, and teams like the one before you exist to apprehend them. Refusal to cooperate mandates quarantine in a facility equipped with even more powerful dampers.”

*:Interesting, Third said in the back of my mind. :Even without fully understanding the Prime Wave, they move to restrict their connection to it and prevent further damage to it.:*

*:I do not recall an incident causing more damage occurring amongst a sapient species, excepting where the entire species self-destructed, I said. :They are unique to have survived to this point.:*

*:You were here to help them, though, weren't you?:* Third asked. I silently acknowledged that truth. *:Interference, then, but producing a potentially valuable result. Given the entire experiment's basic corruption by the Builders' shortcut, this may be the only valuable outcome of it. Evolved life that not only connected to the Prime Wave, but that moved to moderate its own use of it. Hmm,:* Third mused.

“So you have gained a greater understanding of how you connect to the Prime Wave’s energies?” I asked aloud.

“Hardly,” Sokolov replied. “We’re aware that there is a quantum connection between us and the energy source.

We're aware that, left loosely bound, the connection affords us with super-human abilities, each with their own limits and restrictions. Tighten the bond, and our abilities become stronger and less restricted, but the effect rapidly goes into a runaway loop of some kind. More power is poured into us, and the underlying quantum fabric of the world itself begins to waver."

*:Show me this 'quantum' he speaks of,:* Third ordered. My Ghost responded with the analyses it had performed on the prior visit. *:Ah, interesting. As if each of them has a small part of the Prime Wave inside them, feeding them power. Open the tap too far, though, and it overwhelms. Could we not...:*

I felt Third reach into the Prime Wave and *twist* it. Third's position afforded it far greater command of the Prime Wave than I had; I could *use* the Prime Wave, but could not order it about. The six white-suited individuals standing before Michael collapsed to the ground.

"What the hell—Michael, is this your doing?" Sokolov's voice cried out.

The Prime Wave *twisted* again, and the six World Guard members began slowly returning to their feet. *:They can be disconnected, then, but doing so would probably terminate them. And it creates a strange buildup within the Prime Wave. I would be uncomfortable leaving the blockage in place without careful study.:* Third was, I belatedly recalled, the Council's lead scientist.

"Apologies, Lucas," I said. "A... colleague was examining the situation and disconnected them."

“Your colleague disconnected *everyone*,” Sokolov spat. “I’ve got a building full of dazed people. What the hell is this— wait, what? No, it’s fine now, it’s— what?” Sokolov’s voice cut off for a moment. Michael waited patiently, until Sokolov resumed: “Harbor City Guard, we show an incident. I know you’re probably still dizzy—Lord knows I am—but I need you to respond. Michael, this conversation will have to continue another time.”

“Roger, Director,” Hawk said, taking to the sky. Night-speed took off at maximum daylight speed, and the remaining Guard members ran for the transport vehicle they’d left parked nearby.

*:That was abrupt,:* Third said.

*:It was often so,:* I agreed.

*:My Ghost has detected several such groupings of individuals. Now that we understand what the suits are for, it is relatively easy to isolate them. Shall we follow this group or seek out another?:*

*:With your permission, I am inclined to follow this one,:* I said. *:The flying one and the runner appear to be moving north out of the city at high rates of speed. This may be an opportunity to see them and their suits in action.:*

*:Agreed,:* Third said. *:Let us study them.:*

# FIVE: WORLD GUARD

## BAYOTTEVILLE

Not knowing where the Guard members were headed, Michael and Third were obliged to follow them. Their transport vehicle could fly, and it rocketed up the coastline just behind Hawk. Michael detected Nightspeed zipping along below, easily pacing them. After a short while, they arrived in Bayotteville.

“What’s the status?” Hawk asked as they came within range of the local World Guard command network.

“Sending you precise coordinates,” the local command post replied. “You’re looking at a six-story building in the middle of a commercial district. It’s been bombed. There were at least four hundred people working in it at the time, and we do not have any data on injuries or fatalities. Glacier, Strata, and Shockwave are already on-site. Request assistance.”

“Jesus,” Defiant whispered. Then, more loudly, “Are we looking at terrorists, here?”

“Unknown, but possible,” the command post replied. “We’ve been seeing some evidence of more radical splinters of Powered Free. There’ve been threats before. It’s possible.”

“All right,” Hawk said as they approached the still-smoking, half-standing remains of the building. “Defiant

and Nightspeed, assist with rubble removal and moving the injured. I'll work with Strata to see if we can rescue anyone from the upper levels. Thunderclap, let's see if we can get a light rain going to bring the smoke and particulates down a bit. Scanner, I know it's not your thing, but we need whatever people-detecting you can do. Everyone else, stand-by."

Everyone acknowledged just as local command cut across all channels: "There's been an announcement. It's what we suspected: a Powered Free splinter is claiming responsibility, saying the company based in this building was working with the World Guard to oppress powered humans. They say they've planted more bombs in the area and that nobody is safe."

"Shit," Hawk said fiercely. "What was the company? Do we know?"

"It was one of mine," Sokolov's voice replied. "I am monitoring the situation and am assembling a Special Response Unit. Bayotterville Command, begin issuing advisories and evacuation orders."

"Are there any demands?" Nightspeed said as she arrived on-site.

"None yet. They've said only that they're proof that nobody is safe, despite the World Guard. They seem to be making a case that the Guard isn't necessary and so mandatory enlistment should be abolished," Bayotterville Command replied.

"We've got some flooding on the lower levels, Hawk," Nightspeed said as the Harbor City Guard's transport

landed. “Probably a busted main. Surfrider, can we provide an assist until someone can shut off the main?”

“Affirmative,” Surfrider said. Her water-control powers were formidable. “I can pull out what’s there, too, and dump it on any hot spots.”

Michael and Third hovered incorporeal nearby, observing the Guard. *:It is extremely fascinating to see the wide variations in the Prime Wave’s utility across them all,:* Third noted. *:Each of them connecting to the same source of power, yet drawing different capabilities from it.:*

*:It is a more subtle use than any I’ve seen in any other iteration,:* Michael said.

*:That’s an odd energy pattern,:* Third noted, just as Michael noticed a strange wrapping in the local continuum. He’d seen that before, though, and—subjectively—not that long ago.

“Special Response Unit onsite,” Sokolov announced, as three blue-suited World Guard members appeared out of nowhere.

*:They called her Blip,:* Michael told Third. *:She was a child when I last saw her.:*

*:Translocation,:* Third said. *:Quite a complex use of the Prime Wave for such a relatively primitive life-form.:*

*:I am given to understand it’s an extremely rare manifestation,:* Michael said.

“Suppressor, EMP, get to it,” Blip ordered.

“These buildings are pretty tall, boss,” one of her companions said. “I’ll get better coverage if I can get a lift.”

“Strata, are you on-site?” Blip asked over the commu-

nicators.

“I am,” a female voice replied. Michael and Third watched a white-suited form lift itself into the air above the shattered building. “Who needs altitude?”

“Me,” one of the blue-suited Special Response Unit members said, lifting an arm. “EMP.”

Strata flew down and landed behind EMP. She wrapped her arms around his waist and rose into the sky. “Engaging,” EMP said.

“Engaging,” Suppressor said.

Two overlapping energy fields blanketed the entire commercial park, centered on Suppressor and EMP.

*:Incredible,: Third said. :Notice how their internal-combustion vehicles have stopped? One of those fields is suppressing any kind of combustion. And the other one seems to be doing something to randomize the local electromagnetic field.:*

“Blip, you’ll want to explain what’s happening to local responders,” Hawk said.

“Already on it,” she replied. “Everyone, EMP and Suppressor can hold these fields for an hour or so, tops. I know the rescue is important, but we need to focus on locating any more bombs in the area while they’re disabled.”

“That’s me,” Nightspeed said. “I can do this faster with some more cloud cover, Thunderclap,” she added.

“Affirmative,” Thunderclap replied. “There’s plenty of dust in the air. Surfrider, can you push that water up and atomize it a bit?”

“Wilco,” Surfrider said, and a dense mist began rising

into the air. Thunderclap collected them into clouds. “Hey Glacier, any chance you could pull some of the heat off this?” Thunderclap asked.

“That’s not exactly how I work, but I can get you what you need,” the local Guard replied.

“How will you know what to look for?” Defiant said, moving a piece of rubble out of the way of the non-powered first responders.

*:I believe that’s enough,:* Third said. *:I am returning to the Authority. You will join me,:* he added.

*:But I-:* Michael started.

*:It was not a request,:* Third said. *:This has been interesting, but it does not end our fundamental need to stop the Prime Wave tampering by these iterations. Only good fortune has presented any disruption at the Prime Wave’s source. Leave this iteration for now, and return with me.:*

Michael bowed his head in acknowledgement, and the two of them winked out of existence.

“I’ve got the chemical detector package in my suit, remember?” Nightspeed replied to Defiant. “Seems to still be working.”

“The suits are shielded against the effects of EMP’s field,” Blip confirmed.

“Found one,” Nightspeed said. “It’s portable. Disposition?” she asked.

“Bring it outside and give me the address,” a male voice replied. “Sorry, this is Shockwave. I’ll run over and shatter it. Blip, that’s safe now, right?”

“It can’t explode, and its electronics won’t be function-

ing. It should be fine,” Blip replied.

Nightspeed read off the address, and Shockwave set off at a run. “Wasn’t even an attempt to hide that very well, and now I know what I’m looking for. It’ll go a bit quicker.”

They located and destroyed six more bombs over the next forty minutes. Hawk and Strata traded off EMP-lifting duties, giving each other a brief rest while the search continued. “That’s it,” Nightspeed said. “Hopefully that’s all of them, but that’s every building.”

“Continue the evacuation,” Sokolov ordered. “We’ll send mundane teams in to verify, but this will hopefully prevent any more loss of life.”

“EMP, Suppressor, stand down,” Blip ordered.

“Good God, my arms are tired,” Strata said wearily.

Hawk grunted in agreement. “Director Sokolov, I’ll repeat my request for a replacement TK.”

“You and every other team,” Sokolov snorted. “But noted. Good work everyone. Blip, bring your team home. Harbor City, if you can continue assisting as able with the rubble, you’re free to return home afterwards.”

“And thanks for the assist,” Glacier added.

Everyone turned back to the grim task of freeing injured people from the wreckage and extracting the bodies of the dead.

# SIX: WORLD GUARD DIRECTORATE

“This is *ridiculous*,” Sokolov spat. He was still at the World Guard Directorate, sitting in his high-tech office. In front of him, on a ceiling-to-floor screen, was the oversized face of the UN Secretary General. “It’s bad enough that the Powered Free continue to flaunt the law, but now they’re active terrorists. We *must* be authorized to put an *end* to them, once and for all.”

“I was given to understand that the incident was caused by a radical splinter cell,” the Secretary-General said.

“For now, perhaps,” Sokolov said. “But they will regard this as a success. Other cells will be inspired to copy them. This will become a crisis before you know it. And *this* incident didn’t even involve a powered person, as far as we know. They *do* have powered assets they can deploy.”

“What are you suggesting, Sokolov? That we exterminate them? Such an action would be far beyond the mandate of the World Guard. It would be—”

“Do you not understand that the Powered Free, and the powered humans they protect, *are not equipped with quantum dampeners*? At literally any moment, one of them could extend their powers and create another incident. They could *destroy* us all. If they will not accede to the extremely generous terms of World Guard enlistment

and submit to dampening, then they *must* be destroyed!” Sokolov took a moment to calm himself.

“The Security Council is meeting this morning about it,” the Secretary General said. “Once they—”

“They will decide *nothing*,” Sokolov said, real anger making his voice harsh. “They never do. *You* must bring the matter to the entire UN.

“We have, in our lifetimes, achieved a worldwide peace. Supervillains are no longer a thing, thanks to the World Guard. Every powered human, once the subject of fear and jealousy, is now a public servant, or is held in detention. And most of those are perfectly comfortable, their power nullified, if they committed no crimes.

“Even the design of my dampener suits has been a success. Polls show that the World Guard members are seen as trustworthy, reliable rescuers, law enforcers, and protectors. There is no identity cult around any of them, no use of the word ‘superhero’ anymore.

“We have been *successful*, Secretary General, and the Powered Free threaten to take it all away.” Sokolov snapped his mouth shut and glared at the screen.

“Supervillains are hardly gone,” the Secretary General reminded Sokolov. “Or we wouldn’t be maintaining the Falklands high-containment facility.”

“A minority,” Sokolov objected, “and only those powered humans who have committed a crime. Notably, less than one percent of them have ever committed *multiple* crimes, because we bring the entire weight of the World Guard down upon them for even a single offense. And

more than *half* of those in the Falklands are believed to have connections to the Powered Free.”

The Secretary General paused for a moment, looking carefully at Sokolov’s face and giving the old man a moment to cool off. “What are you requesting?” he said at last.

Sokolov took a deep breath. “Two things,” he said. “First, a temporary lifting of the restriction on reassigning Guard members.” Currently, UN rules only allowed Sokolov to move members around within their home countries; moving a Guard member to a different country required time-consuming bureaucratic approvals. “Only three or four months, and then everyone goes home. Certain powers, especially telekinesis and telepathy, are rare, and extremely useful in tracking down Powered Free cells.”

“I think I can issue a temporary waiver on my own authority,” the Secretary General said. “What is the second thing?”

Sokolov took another deep breath. “A permanent lifting of the ban on quantum experimentation,” he said quietly. “We can’t rely on the dampener technology alone anymore. We need to understand, and control, where our abilities come from. If we can gain control over the wellspring, we can control who draws from it.”

“Is that even possible? It’s never been proven that there is a single source, and after the incident—”

“It *has* been proven,” Sokolov interrupted. “You recall the ‘Michael’ that was mentioned in the incident reports?”

“Yes, but that was—”

“It was *not* a powered human as was generally implied. Michael is an extra-dimensional agent. He referred to the single source of power as ‘the Prime Wave.’ He was capable of using it far more completely and was instrumental at stopping the runaway cascade event Professor Power’s device started.” He paused. “And Michael has returned.”

“What?” the Secretary General said, his eyes widening in alarm. “When? Where?”

“In Harbor City, and I believe he witnessed the Bayotville response as well. He claims to have been caught in a time anomaly, and that from his perspective no time at all has passed since his last visit. He asked me several questions about what has transpired here since the incident.

“I intend to re-open the quantum experiment archives and begin studying the source of our power, Secretary General. And if possible, I will enlist Michael’s assistance. I will capture and detain him, if necessary and if possible.”

The Secretary General was quiet for several long moments. “Do you believe it *is* possible?”

“Finding him will be challenging, I suspect,” Sokolov said. “But I believe a sufficiently powerful quantum damper will disable his abilities, once he is found, if he proves to be uncooperative.”

Several more moments of silence passed. “This is not a good topic for a discussion in the General Assembly,” the Secretary General said slowly. “I see your point, and I share your concern. I think...” he paused for a moment, and then said, “I think this may fall under my special powers for covert response. We will operate under that premise for

now, and I will have my staff—discreetly—confirm. Can you ensure secrecy if you proceed?”

“I can,” Sokolov said instantly. “I intend to use the fugue and pursue this independently. Nobody else need know.”

“Your fugue state?” the Secretary General said, his eyes widening again. “But you said—”

“What I said was true. My body cannot withstand much more of Intellect’s power. I will take precautions, though, including supportive devices. I will survive *this*. I must.”

The Secretary General nodded slowly. “Then proceed, and good luck.” Sokolov nodded back and ended the call.

# SEVEN: MICHAEL

“Hadraniel has told us of your mission, Michael,” Second said. “We are, of course, disappointed.”

I stood before the great Upper Council of the Authority, the most powerful group of beings in the entire metaverse. They floated, shimmering, far above him, arrayed in a semicircle. The center position was empty, always reserved for the First in Authority, who never attended. Second was to the left and Third to the right, with Fourth, Fifth, Sixth, and Seventh fanning out from there. “I understand,” I said quietly. Second was in charge of law and would be the most vexed with my behavior in -664.

“You were dispatched to clean the twelfth-generation iterations’ infection of the Prime Wave,” Fourth said, “so that we could see how much of that line could be preserved and studied.” Fourth’s interest in philosophy and study had been a driving force behind the twelfth-generation plan.

“Almost none could be, Fourth,” I said. “In any iteration with a dominant life-form, they were invariably influenced by, and connected to, the Prime Wave.”

“Except iteration -664,” Fifth said. “You deemed it advisable to let them continue existing.” Fifth was in charge of mortality and likely took offense to a perceived intrusion on its territory.

“Yes,” I said carefully. “In part because the situation there was so unique. A species that had evolved, purely

through the Architects' rules and not through direct creation, that could peacefully touch upon the Prime Wave? I truly did not think it in my authority to dispatch of such a thing. What if that iteration was the one you in Authority would find valuable?" It was a long shot, but they had a certain amount of vanity I hoped I could appeal to.

"To be fair," Sixth said, "we never did specify to the lower castes what our goals were." Sixth was in charge of personnel and was nominally my direct superior.

"To be *fair*," Seventh said, with a somewhat condescending tone, "we never specified our goals to *anyone*, even ourselves, other than to see if we could create a rule-set which resulted in the spontaneous development of life." Seventh's role was unusual, and it spoke with a familiarity and ease that belied its lower ranking. As I understood it, Seventh had no power over the worlds spatial or temporal; it was powerless unless one of its six colleagues violated the law. Should they do so, Seventh would become empowered to dismiss them, or even end them, at its discretion. If the experiment's goals had never been laid down in law, then Seventh had no power to object to the experiments destruction.

"But," Second said, "once the Builders'... defects, we shall say, became known, and once the Prime Wave began to resonate with infection, we ordered the iterations cleaned, did we not?" I nodded. That had been my job. "And were you provided with provisos, caveats, or exceptions? Or were you given guidelines on when you might deviate?" I shook my head. I had not, and they knew it.

Second had a reputation for being a stickler about the rules. “Then you failed in your duty,” it said. “I leave it to Seraphiel to determine any consequences, of course.”

Sixth nodded acknowledgement but said nothing. Third spoke up: “-665 was destroyed by the power wave from -664,” it said. “The Builders have placed an emergency bridge, so that the Prime Wave will not backlash and collapse. -666 is in near-destruction, and the Builders are bleeding off its excess power. They will place a bridge there as well.” It turned to look at Sixth.

“Michael, you are to proceed to iteration -668 and resume your duties,” Sixth said.

“Respectfully, Sixth, I had not completed my survey of -667. There are, however, anomalies that—”

“Another Janitor will be dispatched to deal with -667,” Fifth interrupted. “The Builders have examined the potential effects of the excess power entering that instance upon their rule sets. They have determined the iteration represents a special case. They will support the alternate Janitor in completing the dismantling of that iteration.

“There is more,” it said, focusing intently on me. “While you did not deviate from your mission in sparing those iterations which had not yet developed a dominant life form, we have decided to completely end the entire 12th generation line without further study. After dismantling -667”—destroying it, it meant—“that Janitor will return to those spared instances and dismantle them also.

“You are to continue with -668 and proceed to the end of the twelfth generation line, sparing no iteration. You no

longer need to file condition reports on these iterations, nor do you need to conduct analysis or investigation. Dismantle them as expeditiously as possible and return to us.”

I was aghast. Such wanton, wholesale destruction. Such a waste of resources. I could see that Third’s aura was roiling in irritation. Strange that Fifth had been able to push this agenda against Third’s desire.

I opened my mouth to protest but never got the chance. “We are agreed in this,” Fourth said, and I realized that they’d simply become bored with the twelfth generation project. Fourth would normally delight in passive study, but something else had clearly captured their attention.

“We are *not* agreed, but we are decided nonetheless,” Seventh said sharply.

I swallowed hard and stared at them. I realized... I realized my thoughts on the matter. “Regretfully, I cannot,” I said quietly. “They are *life*. *You* engendered their creation, or First did,” because rumor was that First had created the rule set that the Architects worked from, “and I apologize, but I cannot.”

“You refuse a lawfully given order?” Second asked sharply.

I nodded. “If it is indeed lawful, then I must,” I said. “And there is more.”

“More?” Second asked.

I squared my shoulders and looked steadily at them, hovering above me, surrounded by their Halos, twinkling in the dark. “I have not closed the file on iteration -664. By

the law, no Janitor but myself may clean the iteration, and by the law, no one but myself may close the file.”

The room grew eerie silent. The Authority was bound by its own laws, and these two were designed to prevent corruption and ensure an orderly working of the cosmos. Janitors were given only a few powers, but those powers were terrible and absolute. There was no room for abuse.

Seventh cackled. “He’s got you there, Adnachiel.”

Second shot an irritated look at Seventh. “Laws can be changed,” it said.

Seventh’s mirth disappeared instantly. “You will *not*,” it said firmly, its voice cutting through the room like mithral-steel. “There is a procedure for changing the law, and it requires First in Authority to consent. And you *will* obey the law. You are given domain over much, you five, but do not forget *my* domain.”

I watched their Halos pulse intently for several moments, afraid to move.

“Agreed,” Second said at last. “Michael, you are instructed to close the file on -664 and permit another Janitor to take over.”

I shook my head. “I will not,” I said as calmly as possible.

“Then you are in direct contradiction of a lawful order,” Second said. “Zaphkiel, do you agree?”

“You’re attempting a loophole here, but I’ll see how you play it out,” Seventh replied.

“Seraphiel?” Second prompted.

“Michael, you will be taken into custody and impris-

oned,” Sixth announced. It glanced at Seventh, who merely shrugged. “Enforcers,” Sixth said.

Two Enforcers, protected by Halos of black, appeared next to me. Each took one of my arms and, nodding to the Authority, transported me away.

# EIGHT: WORLD GUARD DIRECTORATE

“Thank you for making the time,” Sokolov said. His wall-screen was split into four, each showing the face of one of his Research Department’s heads. “I want to discuss the entity known as Michael with you. Everyone read the briefing?” Four heads nodded.

“Michael’s last visit to us, as we count time, was fifty years ago. For him, apparently, he left and immediately returned, which I gather is not how things usually work for him. In our last conversation, I allowed him to ask most of the questions, but I have many for him regarding his ‘missing’ time.

“Michael’s comments and clues from his original visit led to much of our current research, and many of my inventions related to powered humans. The quantum dampers in the World Guard’s duty suit, for example, came directly from observing Michael, as well as from aspects of Professor Power’s ill-fated quantum entangler.

“Obviously, the incident of that time formed the impetus to create the World Guard and compulsory enlistment by powered humans. That incident is why the World Guard suits are fitted with complex quantum dampeners, even though in most cases those dampeners run in standby mode.

“Our biggest challenge to date is that the dampener field-of-effect is so limited. The suit units can cover what’s within their suit and no more. The more powerful versions used in our containment facilities can cover an entire room, at most; you’re all aware of the challenges we still face when designing common areas like dining halls that are too large for a single dampener to cover.”

“Overlapping fields don’t work well,” Dr. Ginting, the overall Head of Research, muttered. An understatement: the dampeners worked by creating a kind of quantum counter-wave, not unlike how noise-cancelling headsets ‘erase’ noise by creating a sonic counter-wave. When two quantum dampening fields overlap, though, they not only cancel each other out, but *enhance* the quantum entanglement of anything in it, *boosting* special abilities rather than suppressing them. *That* had been an unfortunate discovery in their first holding facility.

“Indeed,” Sokolov acknowledged drily. “Although our finesse has grown considerably since then. Which is to our advantage, and it comes at no better time.

“I’m worried about why Michael is here again. Our understanding was that he was some kind of cosmic janitor, cleaning up troubles throughout a multiverse of some kind. Why would he return? What might he want? What might he *do*? Does our dimension require ‘cleaning up,’ and if so, what does that entail?

“Michael represents a potential threat to our current, delicate world order. Worse is the fact that he may be accompanied by others like him, who are even more power-

ful. A ‘colleague’ of Michael’s was apparently able to shut off all powered humans for a brief period of time. Almost every World Guard member, myself included, collapsed. We would be *defenseless* against this if it happened again.

“I’d like all of you to set aside your current projects and study the records of our encounters with Michael. I want to better understand where his—where *our*—powers come from. I want to theorize ways we might disable him or at least diminish his abilities and that of his ‘colleagues.’ He speaks of a ‘Prime Wave;’ I need to know what that is and how it affects us.”

The four heads were bent down, obviously taking notes. They all looked up at almost the same time, and Ginting said, “You know we’ll need help on this.”

Sokolov nodded. “I’m committing to put Quantum on the project.” Jason Skemick, code-named Quantum, was a living quantum detector. A savant, his social interactions required careful planning and control, but his ability to detect and describe quantum relationships was nothing short of miraculous. He’d come to light almost ten years ago, and since then, their projects had moved faster and faster. The current World Guard suits—smaller, lighter, more customizable, and with more complex and subtle dampeners—had been made possible by Quantum’s observations.

Ginting nodded. “That will help. My leaders and I will meet immediately to create a work plan. Some of our current projects may actually be applicable. My team has already been working on a wide-area damping field, as

you know. Doctor Chang has been working to identify the single source of power you believe exists. Doctor Isaka is taking a broader view and attempting to define the quantum boundaries of our universe, so that we can better understand the scope of this. I think we have a good chance of producing some useful prototypes.”

“Excellent,” Sokolov said nodding. “I’ll leave you to it and have a chat with Quantum.”

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“So, you and I have discussed before how you can ‘see’ each powered individual as a kind of unique... what was the word you used, Jason?”

“Knot,” Jason said. They were in Jason’s workshop, a dimly-lit room that contained a large leather recliner, which Jason currently occupied, a large metal table covered in plastic building bricks, and two smaller metal chairs. Sokolov stood near the table, careful not to touch any of the blocks. Any interference would drive Jason over the edge and require days of comforting to correct.

“A knot, yes,” Sokolov said, looking curiously at the young man. Jason was staring off to one side, as he always did, refusing to make eye contact. Sokolov noticed a book on quantum physics lying on the floor. That was odd; as far as he knew, Jason had already read every book on the subject and refused to have books in the room that he’d already read. Perhaps this was a new one. “I have a new project for you, if you’re interested.”

“About the knots?” Jason asked, his voice eager.

“About the knots,” Sokolov confirmed. “Specifically, about a very special man who I think will have a knot far larger and more complex than any you have seen so far.” Jason couldn’t find a way to document what these ‘knots’ looked like, or they’d be able to assign them to individuals and then, by process of elimination, identify any ‘knots’ that didn’t correspond to known people. Sadly, Jason also didn’t have the photographic memory of some savants and couldn’t remember which ‘knots’ he’d seen in the past. But Sokolov was guessing that Michael’s—

“Nope,” Jason said abruptly.

“No?” Sokolov asked.

“No big complex knots. None. Don’t see any. Just the normal ones. Like yours. And mine. That’s all,” Jason said. He became more talkative when concentrating on quantum fields.

“I see,” Sokolov said. “Well, in that case, would you be willing to assist the research teams? They will be developing some new machines that manipulate the quantum fields, and—”

“Not Chang,” Jason said. “Don’t like Chang. He’s mean. He touched my bricks.”

“Ah, I did not know that. Well then, of course not Chang. That was rude, and I will make sure it does not happen again. And if you want, the researchers can contact you on the video link. That way they never have to come here.”

“Voice only,” Jason said immediately. He distrusted cameras for some reason. “Voice, and no Chang. Will it be

fun?” he asked, his voice a bit desperate.

“You know, I think it will be,” Sokolov said with a small, tight smile.

# NINE: WORLD GUARD

## OSAKA

“What the[^translated from Japanese]–” Arashi shouted. The wall of their small Guard office, on the outskirts of Osaka, had just fallen in. No, it had been *blown* in. “Alert!” he cried out. “We’re under attack!”

Bolts of electricity were already starting to surround his body as he dove through the newly made exit. Seishin, who’d been standing nearby, dove out directly after him, rising into the air as his four-meter energy avatar formed around him. Out of the corner of his eye, Arashi saw their telepath, Maindo, dart out onto the upper-floor balcony. “That balcony may not be stable,” Arashi warned her, but Seishin was already picking her up and placing her on the ground nearby.

Before them was a troop of four black-clad attackers, anonymous in their black face masks. Standing at the head of their group was an unmasked middle-aged man wearing a red and gold robe, with both hands still stretched, palm-first, toward the hole in their building. “Powered Free!” Seishin cried over their communicators. “Directorate, this is Osaka! The Powered Free have engaged us! They have deployed powered humans in an attack!”

Director Sokolov’s voice responded within seconds. “Stop them!” he ordered in broken Japanese. “Lethal force

authorized!”

Arashi reacted immediately, flinging a storm of electrical current at the five attackers. Four of them, including the red-robed man who'd apparently blown the hole in the office, went down immediately, convulsing as if they'd been hit by Japan's largest taser. Which, technically, they had. The fifth, however, stood their ground, absorbing the electrical current and directing it through their arms and into the earth.

“Got it,” Haakus said, finally joining them through the office's main entrance. He reached one hand out to the remaining attacker, using his telekinesis to lift them off the ground and then slam them back-first into the hard pavement.

Red-robe was already starting to recover, and before Arashi could toss an additional electrical bolt at him, he pointed at Seishin. A barely visible wave of force blasted the huge avatar, sending it crashing back into the building, further damaging the structure. As Seishin slid to the ground, the red-robed man began screaming as Maindo unleashed a telepathic fury at him. That was her most effective attack: mentally unbalance her opponent and then seize control of their mind and body. A moment later, Red-robe aimed both palms directly at the ground beneath himself and unleashed another powerful wave of force. The pavement shattered, and the three attackers who'd been trying to regain their footing went down again. All five were still conscious, moving weakly.

Seishin's avatar regained its feet and loomed over the

attackers. Its own hands were pointed directly at them, prepared to envelop them in an energy cocoon. Few powered humans could break out of that, although Arashi had concerns about the one that had grounded his initial electrical charge. “You’re outclassed,” Arashi shouted over his helmet’s loudspeaker. “Stay down!”

“Directorate, do we have containment inbound?” Haakus asked. “Two of these are powered, and we don’t know about the other three.”

“No containment,” Sokolov’s voice responded. “These are un-enlisted powered humans, acting in direct contravention of Japanese and UN law. We will *not* permit uncontrolled powered humans to restart the heroes-versus-villains war. They attacked you. You are instructed to terminate them.” Sokolov’s Japanese had gotten better, but his voice now sounded vaguely mechanical. The team realized he’d activated his translation routine.

Seishin’s avatar was just regaining its balance as he said, “Terminate? As in, kill them?” The World Guard wasn’t a pacifist organization by any means, but they didn’t even know if *all* of their attackers were powered. For them to terminate regular humans was—unusual.

“You have your orders, Osaka,” Sokolov said sternly.

“But—” Haakus started. The World Guard might have to engage in violence from time to time, but the Japanese units, in particular, tried to minimize that violence. Out-right killing people...

“They’re waking up,” Seishin said. His avatar’s hands began to emit a soft green glow, which began to slowly

expand toward the attackers. The downside of his energy cocoon: it took *forever* to deploy.

“*You have your orders,*” Sokolov shouted, his anger managing to come through the machine-translated voice.

The five Guards looked at each other, unable to read each other’s expressions through their helmets. “We have our orders,” Arashi said softly. He held a hand out toward the fallen attackers and unleashed a lethal electrical charge, stopping their hearts.

# TEN: MICHAEL

I sat quietly in the stark white cell they'd placed me in. A bench, extruded directly from the smooth white wall, provided a place to sit. This was a harsh form of punishment for a being created to work and serve: simply sitting with nothing to do. Even my Ghost was disabled, cut off from accessing the outside world, although it was still connected to me. That's one thing nobody could ever take away without destroying me completely.

The room's sound was as stark as its appearance, so quiet that my mind started making up things to hear. It was rare that any of our kind were imprisoned this way, and I now understood why those few who did almost all went insane.

"Michael?" a voice said. A small portion of one cell wall dissolved, forming a window. It was still an impassable barrier, but now it was transparent. Daniel, one of my fellow Janitors, stood on the other side. He looked as glum as I felt.

"Daniel," I said. "It is good to see you."

"What happened?" he asked. A fair question: imprisonment was not only rare, it had previously been reserved almost exclusively for the higher echelons. Ones whose politics were no longer mainstream or who had contradicted First, back when it was still around. For a Janitor to be locked up like this was quite novel.

I shrugged. "I refused to destroy an iteration," I said.

"What? Why?" he asked. Destroying iterations was basically the reason for our existence.

I explained the situation, and he finally nodded. "I probably would have done the same. In theory, you felt you were trying to preserve the original intent of the experiment."

"At least some of it," I said sadly. "The point of it, I was told, was to produce self-sustaining worlds that evolved on their own. The ones who had touched the Prime Wave and descended into chaos? Of course those needed to go. But this one... this one was special," I finished. I could hear the uncharacteristically mournful tone in my own voice.

"But things have changed," he said, his voice dark.

"Changed? How?"

"The Authority itself has changed. A battle of politics and influence has been raging here for some time, and Second and Third—Adnachiel and Hadraniel—displaced their superiors and rose in rank. A new Fourth and Fifth were selected from amongst the Higher Echelon, and they support their sponsors. Only Sixth and Seventh remain."

"And they follow along?" I asked.

"Sixth does," Daniel said sadly. "Seventh resists but can only do so much. So long as the others act lawfully, Seventh is without power."

"And what of Second and Third? The ones displaced?" I knew the likely answer but needed to hear it.

Daniel simply shook his head, lowering his eyes. Not imprisonment, then. Destruction or exile. The worst pun-

ishment possible for any of the Higher Echelon. Adnachiel and Hadraniel must have sensed an opportunity to seize power and wanted to minimize any possible backlash or rebellion. “And so there is a new agenda,” I said. Of course there was. Energy was not infinite, however large an amount the Prime Wave afforded. Its expenditure was always cause for debate.

“Yes,” Daniel said. “They wish to end *all* the experimental iterations and redirect the Prime Wave to their own ends. They tried just pulling the Wave, but it resists them, as it always has. So long as your iterations are bound to it, it will not let go. They must continue to be disconnected, one by one, until they all are gone.”

Which explained why they’d ordered him to destroy even those instances without dominant life forms, I realized. “Wait,” he said, hearing Daniel’s full words. “What do you mean, ‘my’ iterations?”

“Yours were—are—the only ones bound so tightly to the Wave. The generation I was set to clean were destroyed by simply disconnecting the Prime Wave. Your line, the twelfth, is the last drain on the Prime Wave, and the one they cannot disconnect themselves.” Because of the Builders’ transgression. And because the law dictated that the Janitor assigned be the only one to disconnect an iteration. A law meant to prevent wanton destruction, which is now what the Authority desired.

“They could change the law,” I said quietly. And they could.

“Not that,” Daniel said, understanding what I was

referring to. “The dictate that Janitors act independently is laid down in the Core Codex. By law, First must agree to any changes. If they try to circumvent it...” he trailed off.

I nodded. “Then Seventh would come into power, and they would be done for,” I said. Daniel nodded back. First had created an interesting balance when it had appointed Seventh as overseer of the Authority. And without First, nothing in the Core Codex could be altered.

“But what do they need the *entire* Prime Wave for?” I asked. The Prime Wave’s power wasn’t infinite, but it was... well, pretty close.

“The last four generations of experiments revealed only a single common fact: intelligent life produces a unique and powerful form of energy when it sets itself to something. When it *believes* in something. They have lost interest in worlds that can evolve and sustain themselves independently. They want to create worlds that *believe* in the Authority itself. They want to harvest that energy. They believe the energy output of a single world can vastly overshadow the Prime Wave energies required to make that world.”

My mind tumbled for a moment. “They want... *worshippers*?” I asked, aghast. This flew in the face of the Authority’s—well, the *prior* Authority’s—policies and philosophies. It flew in the face of First’s founding principles.

But First hadn’t been heard from in ages.

“Yes,” Daniel said sadly. “Any world which doesn’t produce the desired amount of belief will simply be destroyed, and a new one created from the ashes. And without First...”

“Nobody can stop it,” I finished. “That means I am doomed,” I said grimly.

“How so?”

“I was assigned to the twelve generation. I have not closed the file on -664, the iteration they most urgently wish destroyed. No other Janitor can be assigned so long as I exist.”

“Then how—” Daniel said and paused, his eyes growing wide. “They would not.”

“I fear they would. They *will*,” I said.

“You must have your Ghost close the file then, as they ask,” Daniel said urgently. “You must—”

He stopped as I slowly shook my head. “I will not. First may be gone, but I will stand for its principles.”

“But...” Daniel started and then stopped.

I nodded. “I know,” I said quietly.

# ELEVEN: WORLD GUARD HARBOR CITY

“God, it’s good to get that helmet off,” Defiant said. The team had returned to their headquarters in Harbor City after nearly eight hours of assisting the Bayotteville team. Once the sun went down, Nightspeed had been able to rapidly double-check and clear all the surrounding buildings of bombs, allowing the other local first responders to get back to their jobs. The demolished building was still an ongoing tragedy, but the Directorate ordered the Harbor City team home for rest.

“At least you haven’t been running all day,” Nightspeed said, pulling her own helmet off. World Guard protocol permitted helmet removal only within their headquarters, unless they were designated as off-duty. A separate, more discreet quantum damper-slash-communicator was provided to off-duty personnel. “Mine *stinks*,” she added with a curl of her lip.

“Everyone staying here tonight?” Surfrider said. “I’m too pooped to pop home.”

“I gave up my apartment,” Thunderclap said. “I was paying like twelve hundred a month and sleeping in it, like, once. Plus, the food here is free, and since the whole building is dampened, I can take the whole damn suit off.” World Guard members were given complimentary

quarters at their assigned post, and it wasn't rare for them to make it their exclusive home. The suites were spacious, the dining facilities were excellent, and most posts included recreation and fitness facilities. Harbor City's post even included multi-bedroom suites for members with families.

"David will *not* live here full time," Nightspeed said. "Plus, our place is closer to where he works. But I'm not going tonight. I already told him, I need a glass of wine and some time to unwind, and then I'm straight to bed. After a shower," she added with a grin. "A *long* shower. And some food. Maybe an entire turkey."

"Harbor City, I'm sorry to bother you so late, but I need to update you," Director Sokolov's voice interrupted over the room's intercom system.

"Do you *ever* sleep, Director?" Hawk asked.

"Rarely, and I have been employing my ability for the past several hours. I required a break for sustenance, which is what I presume you're all doing."

"Just about to, Director, so we'll join you," Hawk said, motioning for everyone else to key food orders into their tablets. The building staff would bring it up once it was ready. "What's on your mind?"

"Michael," Sokolov said. None of them had ever encountered the Director in a fugue or post-fugue state, but they'd all read the reports: flat, mechanical tone of voice that improved over several hours; a disregard for almost anything that wasn't the subject of his current project; an almost-total dampening of human emotions or empathy. "I have been unable to locate him, and his ability—or his

colleague's ability, whichever is the truth—to completely shut down our powers *globally* is of paramount concern.”

“But he was here during the incident,” Hawk pointed out. “If he could shut it all down so effectively, wouldn't he have done so then?”

“Likely,” Sokolov said. “To a high degree of certainty, in fact, which means there *are* more of him, and some of them *are* more powerful. Thus the critical nature of the concern.”

“Okay,” Defiant said, motioning for Hawk to be quiet. The Director would need to do this in his own way, and interrupting would just prolong it.

“I am creating a device, based on our own quantum dampening technology, that should be able to create a larger field-of-effect than our current units. Quantum is assisting me.” The team exchanged startled glances: Quantum was a near-mythical persona in the World Guard, and to hear that he was actually working on—was *capable* of working on—an applied project was news. This *was* a critical concern for the Director. “We are making good progress, and I anticipate completing a prototype within days. However, at present, you are the only Guard unit who has directly encountered Michael.” He paused a moment to let that sink in. “You will therefore be the primary response unit when and if he reappears.”

Eyebrows shot up. “But—” Hawk said, starting an objection that Defiant waved down.

“Backup resources are being dispatched to Harbor City now, and they will use some of our older facilities on the edge of town. You are to remain rested, but on high

alert. When Michael reappears, which I expect he will, you will be notified. You will have one minute to become action-ready”—Nightspeed sighed and rubbed her temples, because that meant staying suited up until they were needed—“and Blip will drive to teleport you to his location. Or the location of his colleagues, if that’s who arrives.

“Blip will bring the prototype in whatever form it is in by then,” Sokolov continued. “I need to emphasize that, if the device does not work, you are *not* to engage Michael or any of his kind. They outclass us by an estimated factor of four hundred and twelve, based on admittedly limited observations. You are to attempt to pin him down using the device, and failing that, urge him to take no actions.”

“He seemed pretty friendly,” Hawk offered, earning an eye-roll from Defiant.

“He *was* friendly. He was *friendly* fifty years ago,” Sokolov said, some bitterness creeping into his near-monotone. “And then he simply *left*. He never helped us learn more about what powers our abilities. He never helped us put the world back together. He abandoned us.

“I am releasing files,” he continued, as each of their tablets chirped an acknowledgement, “that remain classified. They contain more details about Michael’s previous visit, including energy readings, conversation transcripts, video, analysis, and more. Study these. Prepare yourselves. That is all for now. Sokolov out.”

“Wow,” Hawk said after a moment of silence. “I didn’t know the old man was still using his abilities.”

“He *wasn’t*,” Scanner said. “He’s too old, and his fugue

state puts too much strain on his body. This could kill him.”

“Guys, what *is* Michael?” Thunderclap asked, swiping through the files on a tablet. “I guess I’d always thought he was some kind of higher-form powered person, but... but this is way beyond.”

“This says he was one of the... beings? One of the beings who created the ‘Prime Wave’ of energy that powers our abilities. And apparently keeps the entire world running, somehow?” Thunderclap could read as fast as she ran. “These power readings are literally off the charts,” she added, peering at her tablet.

“So he’s what? An alien?” Defiant said, reaching for his own tablet.

“Alien? Sure. But more like a god,” Nightspeed said softly.

## TWELVE: MICHAEL

“You can’t just let them destroy you,” Daniel said quietly. “But they’ll have to. They can’t even cast you down,” he reminded me.

“I know,” I repeated. “But this is the right thing to do. First would never—”

“First has been gone for a long time,” Daniel said bitterly. “First would never have countenanced the worlds I’ve destroyed. Second and Third spin them up as fast as they can, trying to create some life form that will worship them and generate power. They all fail, and I’m sent in to destroy them. Even the Builders are growing weary of it all.”

“Why doesn’t it work?” I asked, suddenly curious about this new line of research.

“The Builders’ theory is that the power is only generated when the worship is the life forms’ own idea. They have to evolve to it, they can’t just be tasked to it,” Daniel said.

“That makes sense,” I said. “Which generation were you on prior to all of this?”

“Tenth,” Daniel said. I shuddered. *That* had been a disaster.

“Twelfth was the line intended to let life evolve independently, within a framework of physical laws and with an injection of raw matter and energy to kick it all off.” I

closed my eyes for a moment, remembering. “Some of them were *beautiful*, Daniel. Some were horrific. Too many, far too many, found ways to connect to the Prime Wave, and I destroyed them.

“But this one iteration. -664, the one causing all the problems. They were unique. And you know, I *did* sense a power from them. Not merely the Prime Wave energies they touched upon, but something... something of their own. Something of mind. I suppose I sensed it in other iterations, but I wasn’t looking for it, so I never paid attention. May I link?” I asked him, looking intently into his eyes. He nodded slowly. *:Link to Daniel’s Ghost.:* I ordered mine.

*:Link established.:*

*:Review energy pattern analysis for iteration -664.:* I said. The figures and visualizations bloomed in my mind. *:This.:* I said, indicating a particularly organic-looking pattern. I’d written it off as a local phenomenon, not germane to my work. Looking at it now, I could see that it didn’t ebb and flow with the Prime Wave. Instead, the organic pattern sat underneath the Prime Wave’s stronger, more intense energy, creating an underlying wave of its own. *:Scan analysis of other instances for something similar. Start with zero.:* Iteration Zero was a nonfunctional model, intended to be used as a baseline for cross-iteration comparisons.

*:Some time will be required.:* my Ghost said.

*:Load-balance.:* Daniel ordered. I felt his Ghost fully connect with mine, the two of them expanding. They could work synergistically this way, bringing not double the

processing power, but closer to quadruple.

:*Processing*: the Ghosts said in an eerie, multi-toned voice.

Daniel and I simply looked at each other while our Ghosts processed the thousands upon thousands of iterations I'd visited in the twelfth-generation line. I was thankful again at the Ghosts' infinite local storage ability, since mine had been cut off. *Daniel's hasn't*, I thought idly, when I felt the Ghosts unlink.

:*One hundred and forty-two matches*,: my Ghost announced.

:*How many of those iterations were terminated?*: I asked.

:*All*,: it replied. I closed my eyes sadly. But in a way, this was good news.

"I have a plan," I said, opening my eyes and meeting Daniel's even gaze. "The Builders may have already created the exact life forms that the Authority now desires. Independent, and capable of generating their own energy from their beliefs. The Authority simply has to take advantage of the opportunity, beginning with my -664 iteration."

"You seem fond of the life forms in that iteration," Daniel said quietly. I nodded. I had become fond of them, as well as intrigued by them. "You know what will happen," he said.

"What do you mean?" I asked.

"They want to be *worshipped*. Second and Third are not... subtle. They will enslave them. The iteration will exist solely to generate power for the Authority."

“Oh,” I said, nodding. “I understand. Yes, I can see why you would think so. But I don’t think that will happen. We need to move quickly, though, because I expect they will be dispatching an Enforcer. I need you to tell the Authority what I’ve told you. Show them what our Ghosts discovered. Show them the energy pattern.”

“But Michael, they’ll—”

“I know what they’ll do,” I said firmly. “And before you tell them, I need to you release me. Let me out of this cell. I need to return to the iteration before the Authority does.”

“Michael, you’re not listening,” Daniel said intently. “They’ll *enslave* them and destroy you!”

“Oh, I don’t think so,” I said, smiling. “You haven’t met my friends in -664.”

Daniel’s eyes widened, and he nodded slowly. The wall between us vanished in a blink.

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*:Iteration -664:* my Ghost said.

*:Find Sokolov:* I ordered. I felt my Ghost scanning the iteration for the pattern of Lucas’ life.

*:Located:* it said.

*:Transfer:* I ordered.

# THIRTEEN: WORLD GUARD RESEARCH

“The wide-area dampener hasn’t been successful, unfortunately,” Doctor Ginting said sadly. “There’s a maximum energy-to-space ratio that we’re having trouble moving past. Too little energy input, and the field is too weak to be effective. However, add just a tiny but more energy, and the field overpowers and starts to disrupt quantum covalence, breaking down reality. We lost the first round of equipment that way. Our current theory is that there’s some micro-logarithmic scale.”

“Or you’re simply hitting a point where this ‘Prime Wave’ becomes involved, and so you actually end up with more energy input than you expected,” Doctor Chang suggested.

“We’ve considered that,” Ginting said, nodding, “but how do we account for it? Has your team had any success actually quantifying this ‘Prime Wave?’”

Chang shook his head. “Quantifying, no. There *is* something there, although at this point we could just be looking at ordinary universal background energy for all I know. My team’s exhausted, and we don’t know what we’re looking for. All we have is the Director’s insistence that there’s some single source of energy for all powered humans.”

“He’s going to fire us all,” Doctor Wells said gloomily.

“We’ve had some success,” Doctor Isaka chimed in. “We think we have a reliable model for describing the quantum boundaries of our own universe. We can’t see outside it, but we can tell that there are extra-universal energies and effects, which definitely influence those within our boundaries.”

“Really?” Ginting said, leaning forward. “Have you issued a report, yet?”

“Not yet,” Isaka said, shaking her head. “We just finalized the model earlier this week, and it wasn’t until yesterday that we ran sufficient tests to confirm it.”

“So what are the odds that these external energies are the so-called ‘Prime Wave?’” Chang asked. “Do you have a basic form of the model with you?”

“I can put it up,” Isaka said, tapping her tablet. The conference room’s main screen lit up, showing a morass of mathematical symbols, along with a visualization of Isaka’s quantum model. “Here,” she said, tapping again and causing a portion of the model to brighten, “this part describes quantum activity that exists *within* our universe or dimension. As you can see, there’s still a significant amount of unaccounted-for activity. But everything *outside* the model definitely originates from elsewhere. You can see here,” she added, with another tap, “how the external and internal energies interact, seemingly through a very constricted and rigid interface.”

“Fascinating,” Chang said, wheeling his chair closer to the screen. “This part,” he said, pointing to a knot-like portion of the visual, “this is the interface? And there’s a

geographic element on here as well?”

Isaka nodded, her voice growing more excited. “Yes, there’s a three-dimensional factor to it. It replicates across the fifth dimension, so that it is in effect everywhere all the time, but it can be indexed in the first three dimensions.”

It was Wells’ turn to move closer. “So, what if we stopped trying to quantify the energies and simply went after that interface between internal and external? What if instead of trying to dampen *all* the power, we just further constrict this interface? Or even... jam it, somehow?”

They were all quiet for a moment. “Our efforts have been to collapse the quantum probability wave,” Ginting mused. “That’s how Sokolov’s suit-based dampeners work, and it’s how the containment cells work. But they have a limited effective range; beyond that, the quantum probabilities diverge too much, so the field is ineffective.”

“But if you input more power, then you start collapsing too broad a field, which is where reality starts breaking down,” Wells said. “As you know, my team has been trying to pin down exactly where the additional input to powered humans is coming from. What if we stopped worrying about the source, and instead focused on the... the transfer mechanism? This ‘interface?’”

“That could work,” Ginting said slowly, nodding her head. “Doctor Isaka, what would the math look like if the model was factored for a very specific location in three dimensions?”

“We’d have to factor four,” Isaka said, frowning. “The math is absolute positioning, which is going to be relevant

to time. Hmm,” she said, looking down at her tablet and tapping furiously. “One of my team experimented with a simpler version of the formula. If we removed the need to differentiate internal and external energies...” her voice trailed off as she continued to work. “There,” she said a few minutes later. The display on the screen changed: the equations became less complex, and the variables for location and time were highlighted. The visualization of the model also simplified, causing the ‘knot’ of the interface to become more defined. “It would look like this.”

“That’s nothing more than a triple probability wave,” Chang said excitedly. “We already know how to factor those. The entanglement experiment—”

“Yes!” Wells interrupted. “That experiment *excited* the triple-wave, which would have the effect of widening the interface. See, here,” he said, pointing to a portion of the formula and then to the knot. “But what if we instead generated a counter-wave?”

“Like active noise cancellation?” Ginting asked, squinting at the monitor.

“Exactly. Generate a new triple-wave that exactly counters this one.”

“The calculations would be immense,” Chang said doubtfully. “We couldn’t do it in real-time.”

“We wouldn’t need to,” Isaka said, pointing to a portion of the equation. “The equation is atomic. If any part of it breaks down, the interface knot can’t form correctly. It might not cut off external energy completely, but it would disrupt it significantly.”

They stared at the model for a moment more. “The math on a single portion of that wouldn’t be any more complex than what the suits already do,” Ginting said. “Get your teams back together. We’re going to work on this as a group. I’ll report to Director Sokolov that we may be making progress. I’d like to get a prototype up and running by the end of the day.”

“Should be possible,” Wells said, tracing a finger through the equation on the monitor. “This would be the easiest segment to disrupt, in terms of the four-dimensional calculation. We’ll need an authoritative source of micro-time measurements—”

“Go to your teams,” Ginting ordered while rising from the table. “Get them working on a quantum anchor.”

# FOURTEEN: WORLD GUARD DIRECTORATE

“Ah, Michael. It’s extremely disconcerting when you do that,” Sokolov said. Michael had blinked into existence in the Director’s office, startling the old man for a brief moment.

“I apologize, Lucas, but it is urgent,” Michael said.

“Is your... colleague still with you?”

“No,” Michael said, shaking his head. “Hadraniel is the Third in Authority over my people. It and the rest of the Upper Council are ultimately in charge of... well, of everything. I am here alone.”

“You don’t look like you bear good news,” Sokolov said with a frown.

“I do not,” Michael said grimly. “There has been a... change in Authority. Those who originally directed the experiment that led to your world’s creation are no longer on the Upper Council. Their successors have different plans on how to spend the energies of the Prime Wave.”

“And that affects... what? Our world?”

“It does,” Michael confirmed, nodding slowly. “The generation of iterations that includes your world are locked to the Prime Wave. The Wave cannot be withdrawn until every iteration—every world, including yours—has been destroyed.”

“And you are here to do that?” Sokolov asked.

Michael shook his head fiercely. “No,” he said. “I have refused. And by our laws, the Authority cannot send another in my place so long as I live. But they can send another, an Enforcer. An Enforcer could easily destroy me, freeing up the Authority to send another of my kind to destroy this iteration.”

Sokolov pondered for a moment. “Tell me a bit more about how the Prime Wave and our world are related.” The old man’s voice flattened a bit.

Michael sighed. He recognized Sokolov’s initial, high-level fugue state and knew it would be impossible to distract the man until he had the answers he wanted. “The Authority—the old one—wanted to run an experiment. They were skilled at world-making, but every world they made was exactly as they made it, nothing more, and nothing less. They wanted instead to create worlds that simply had a fixed set of rules. A framework. They would provide an initial infusion of matter and energy, and then simply let the world evolve however it would.

“This particular experiment was repeated across the tens of thousands of iterations in the twelfth generation of their world-building efforts, of which your world is a part. The task was given to their Architects to create the rules and to their Builders to implement them.

“But the Builders cheated.

“The Prime Wave was supposed to have been used to jump-start the entire line, to provide the initial energy input. That energy did not follow the rules that the Architects

had defined, and so it needed to come from outside the iterations themselves. The intent was for the Prime Wave to be withdrawn from the line after that and for each iteration to become self-sustaining and self-evolving. But the Builders apparently couldn't figure out how to keep the energy levels up for long enough. Each iteration would have collapsed, would have reached terminal entropy, in only a few million of your years—not nearly long enough for the Architects' rule sets to play out fully. And so the Builders left each iteration connected to the Prime Wave, trickling energy into them to sustain them.

“Nobody knew about that connection until they tried to withdraw the Prime Wave and found it anchored to every iteration in the line. It was at about the same time that they discovered intelligent life had arisen in some iterations and that many of those species had somehow connected to the Prime Wave energies.

“Those energies are what let you violate the Architects' rule sets. Your physics comes from those rule sets, yet your powered humans can violate physics. That is because they're leveraging the power that originally created this iteration and all the others.”

“Yet your colleague was able to shut that down,” Sokolov reminded him.

Michael shook his head. “Only for a short while. The Prime Wave energies would have built up and burst through eventually. The Upper Council can only manipulate the Prime Wave at a macro level; it is not their role to manage it in detail.”

Sokolov's eyes softened as he let go of the light fugue state. "And so what does this new Authority want that requires them to withdraw the energies that you say sustain us?"

"Worship," Michael said bluntly. "They've realized that living beings who believe in something fiercely enough can generate an energy from that belief. New energy. But rather than directing that energy to make the iterations self-sustaining, they wish to harvest the energy for their own use."

"So we're to be a battery?"

"No," Michael said, shaking his head. "They want to destroy your world and create new ones that are *designed* for worship. But they've failed so far. The life they're creating doesn't have free will, and so its belief isn't *belief*. It doesn't generate the energies that your world does."

"So you're saying that our world *could* be self-sustaining, if we simply had the ability to redirect these energies?"

"Yes, and I believe the Authority will be interested in that," Michael said.

"I see," Sokolov said while pressing a button on his desk.

Michael fell to the floor. He couldn't feel his Ghost any longer. His Halo no longer surrounded him, protecting him. He stood and found himself weak and shaking. "What have you done?" he gasped.

"An experiment," Sokolov said. "I've no desire for you to turn us over to your superiors to generate energy for them. We—"

"No!" Michael said. "That was never my intent! But

they *will* come. You need to be the *bait*. If anyone can beat them, if anyone can *stop* them..." he trailed off and looked at his own hands. "You *can*," he breathed. "You've found a way. You can take away our powers, cut us off."

Sokolov blinked. "Yes, in a limited area," he acknowledged. "Wait, so you came here, to... to what?"

Michael looked up at him. "To tell you *they are coming*. To warn you, so that you could prepare. I had hoped... but you already have," he said softly.

Sokolov's mind raced. "Tell me about the iteration after ours. The world after ours."

Michael shook his head sadly. "Gone. The incident, from fifty of your years ago, the energies must have rushed upstream. -665 was destroyed completely, and -666 was nothing but fire and chaos. The Builders had to build a temporary bridge to -667 so that the Prime Wave wouldn't be permanently sundered. And even -667 is broken, somehow, the Architects' rules there modified or twisted from the original specification. I haven't—"

"And the iterations before us?" Sokolov interrupted.

Michael blinked for a moment. "Destroyed, mostly. Those without life, and with no signs of evolving life, I spared. There are very few of them."

"So we're more or less... isolated, in the middle of a chain?" Sokolov asked. Michael nodded.

Sokolov pushed the button again, and Michael felt his powers flooding back to him. *:Online,:* his Ghost said.

"Then I have a plan to deal with your Authority," Sokolov said with a smile. "You say we can expect an..."

Enforcer? A soldier of some kind?"

"A being designed to destroy my kind," Michael said, nodding. "And possibly one of the Authority itself."

"Excellent," Sokolov said, his smile widening.

# FIFTEEN: WORLD GUARD HARBOR CITY

“This all seems... well, crazy, Director,” Defiant said. “These are what... angels?”

“They’re extra dimensional beings, Defiant,” Sokolov said, his face drawing into a frown that the high-definition screen maximized. “Michael claims they created our entire world, our entire *universe*, as an experiment. And he’s demonstrated... well, not *proof*, exactly, but certainly some substantial backing to his claim.”

“And now they’re coming to get us?” Surfrider asked.

“Michael was apparently supposed to destroy our world, because we have been able to draw power from what he called the ‘Prime Wave.’ He claims it’s an energy source that his people use to create universes, and that our ability to draw power from it, to enhance ourselves, is an anomaly,” Sokolov said. “And there’s some evidence that he’s right, at least in some detail. The incident of fifty years ago bears out some of his claims.”

“Michael says he’s low on the org chart of his people,” Sokolov continued. “He says that their rules prevent another one of his people from destroying us, but they do not prevent his people from sending someone to destroy *him*, thus freeing them up to destroy us.”

“And this is a credible threat, sir?” Hawk asked.

Sokolov nodded on the screen. “I believe so, yes. Michael exhibits multiple enhancements, something no human has ever done. But I am able to dampen his abilities, meaning his powers are drawn from the same source as ours. He says there is an ‘Enforcer’ coming, possibly along with one of his people’s leaders, to destroy him. We know that his leaders are capable of turning off our powers for at least some period of time. I think the threat is credible enough.”

“What’s the plan, Director?” Defiant asked, leaning toward the video screen.

“I’m having Blip bring a quantum anchor,” Sokolov said, nodding to someone off-screen. A moment later, the older woman appeared, carrying a gray box roughly the size of a case of wine. She set it on the team’s desk, rubbed her lower back with a rueful grin, and vanished. “The anchor will—” Sokolov was interrupted by a shrill siren, as the lighting in the conference room flashed to high alert mode. “That’s them!” the director cried. His eyes scanned something the team couldn’t see, darting back and forth before he said, “Quantum emergence in Harbor Park! Get there immediately! I’ll brief you on the way!”

The team moved.

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Five heroes stood in Harbor Park, staring up at a glowing, angel-like figure floating a hundred feet above them. A bright, hazy suggestion of wings spread from its back, and it looked down at them in disdain. “Where is Michael?” the figure sneered.

“Now, Nightspeed,” Hawk muttered. The speedster had remained a dozen yards away in a copse of trees, along with the gray box. A shimmering wave of energy pulsed across the clearing, and the heroes felt their powers drain away. It was exactly the same sensation as the dampers in their suits, but stronger and... somehow more chilling.

“You’re wasting my— what is happening?” the figure screamed. It threw back its head, shouting into the sky and visibly straining to remain aloft—but it couldn’t. Its form was becoming more solid every moment as it was dragged inexorably toward them. Within moments, it was standing on the ground before them, breathing heavily and staring at them in anger. Its eyes were black and hooded beneath a heavy brow. Long black hair whipped around its head as if urged by static electricity. “I am Abaddon of the Authority! I will—” it began, its voice full of danger.

“Hail, messenger of the gods,” Defiant interrupted, and the five heroes lowered themselves to one knee, bowing their heads in submission. “We do not know where Michael is, but he told us of your coming. He told us to prepare.”

“Prepare what?” Abaddon said, stopping. Its brow furrowed in confusion.

“Our doom,” Defiant said dramatically. “Your coming has been foretold. You would destroy the angel Michael, and then sunder the Earth, casting all of humanity into the black of night. Is that...” Defiant hesitated, as if confused himself. “Is that not the truth?”

Abaddon cocked its head. “It’s close enough,” it acknowledged.

Defiant nodded. “Then the prophesies are true. We ask only one thing before you begin your terrible, sacred task, O Abaddon,” he intoned. He swore he could hear Scanner grinding his teeth even through their helmets.

“Ask? Ask what?” Abaddon said, tilting its head the other way.

“Let us meet our god,” Defiant said, raising his eyes to the Enforcer. He reached up and unlatched his helmet, removing it so Abaddon could see the earnestness he hoped was showing in his eyes. “If we are doomed, then we would meet our makers. Thousands of years, we have lived on this planet ignorant of the Authority over us. Now, at our end, we would pay them our love and respect, before you, their messenger, finishes us. We would give them the worship that is their due.” He forced himself to blink away a tear and heard his teammates unlatching and removing their helmets. He hoped Scanner could keep it together.

“How did you drag me down?” Abaddon asked. “How have you drowned my powers? What is that *keening* I keep hearing?” It tapped its ear and tilted its head again, as if trying to drain water from it.

“We... we don’t know,” Defiant said, looking at his comrades with confusion. “We have only become aware of your holiness today, after Michael confessed that our end was coming. We came here only to offer you our worship and love before you ended us. Maybe... maybe, because we at long last have something to believe in, our faith... brought you to us?” He swallowed heavily. Sokolov said Michael had been clear that the Enforcer would probably

have a big ego, and that they'd really need to sell this, but it felt like a bit much.

"Possibly," Abaddon said, nodding slowly. "Possibly. Very well. I will bring... your god, as you say, to you. They—it, I mean—desires your worship. Perhaps they—it—can be convinced to spare your world. My mission is only Michael." It paused for a moment. "Perhaps you could believe somewhat less strongly?" it asked.

Defiant cocked his head. "So... so *you* are not one of the gods, then. You truly *are* their messenger, as Michael said? We were afraid—"

"More than a messenger, but not one of your gods, no," Abaddon said. Defiant clicked his teeth together, loudly enough to trigger the comms unit in his uniform collar. That was the signal, and they all immediately felt a rush of warmth and power as Nightspeed deactivated the anchor. "Ah," Abaddon said, its body once again glowing. It floated a foot off the ground, and then spun in a slow, lazy circle. "I cannot detect Michael anywhere," it mused. "Very well. I will return with your god, and together we will find Michael and call an accounting."

"Thank you, O Abaddon," Defiant began, but the figure vanished in a flash of blackness. "Oh, thank God," he sighed, hanging his head. The five heroes stood.

Nightspeed rushed to join them, the quantum anchor in her arms. "It worked?" she asked.

"It worked," Defiant said, putting his helmet back on. "Let's hope the Director has a Part Two to his plan."

# SIXTEEN: WORLD GUARD DIRECTORATE

“Can you not release this... this ‘anchor,’ you called it?” Michael asked.

Sokolov shook his head. “Not yet. Not until I hear back from the Harbor City team; if I’m correct, this anchor is the only thing that will hide you from the rest of your kind, for now. But continue, please. You were telling me about... iteration 667, I believe?”

Michael sighed and shifted uncomfortably in the chair Sokolov had provided. “Yes. You are iteration -664. -665 is the one I believe to have been destroyed by the incident here, and -666 is a fiery chaos, near destruction. The Builders are supposed to be bridging the gap, so that the Prime Wave can flow unobstructed. But -667 has been damaged, the basic rule sets altered. Gravity is different, and I suspect there are changes in how the basic chemistry of the world functions now. It—”

“Ah, wait just a moment,” Sokolov said, glancing at the screen next to him. “Harbor City has reported in. Another of your kind appeared. Abaddon?” he said.

Michael stiffened. “Abaddon is the most... indifferent of the Enforcers. It’s said he loves what he does,” he added, a shiver passing through him. “He will destroy me without a thought.”

“Right now I don’t think he can find you, which is as I suspected,” Sokolov said. “He has apparently agreed to return with... one of the gods?” Sokolov asked, peering at the screen.

“The Authority. The offer to extend them worship worked, then?” Michael asked. Sokolov nodded. “Daniel suggested as much,” Michael said sadly.

“What kind of power can we expect from one of the Authority?” Sokolov asked.

Michael shrugged. “They are less practiced in using the Prime Wave than Abaddon or even myself. They are not as wide-ranging as the Builders, or as visionary as the Architects, but they are not without power. They may arrive singly or in a group, and they may well bring additional Enforcers with them.”

Sokolov nodded thoughtfully. “Please wait here,” he said, rising from his desk. “I will need to make some contingency plans.” He moved toward the door to his office.

“This anchor?” Michael said, gesturing around him.

Sokolov simply shook his head and walked through the door, closing and securing it behind him.

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Quantum was in full-savant mode, and Sokolov struggled to keep up with his intense rant. “You can think of them as waves,” the man said, his fingers twitching rapidly and his eyes darting around the room, never making contact with the Director’s. “They’re not, of course, but it’s a useful analogy. Useful until it isn’t, correct until it isn’t,

of course.” He gave a manic smile, his eyes flicking over Sokolov’s for just a moment.

“But waves have mass and velocity. They have inertia. They can be measured. Like sound! Sound waves,” he said, circling a finger around one ear in a gesture Sokolov found immensely appropriate, “can be measured. And produced. And you can produce the opposite of a sound wave.”

“Noise cancellation,” Sokolov said.

“Yes, yes, but so precise!” Quantum said, his eyes lighting up in his passion. “You must know where the sound originates, and you must counteract it with a counter-wave that is specific to the place in time where you wish to counter it, for you can’t just counter it anywhere or anywhen,” he gushed. “Can’t cancel a whole room, because as it moves, the wave spreads. Isn’t the same wave twice in any space,” he giggled. “Must know *when* and *where* so you can calculate it.” He fell silent then, his fingers and eyes still twitching.

“And this applies to... to quantum waves?” Sokolov prompted.

“Definitely like quantum waves!” Quantum snapped standing up and starting to roam around the office like a mad cat. “But funny thing about waves. You can cancel them, but if your calculations are off, you won’t cancel. You’ll suppress, you’ll enhance. Support some waves, push down others, but not cancel. You’ll make more *noise*,” he said, finally meeting Sokolov’s gaze.

“You’ve seen this?” Sokolov asked quietly.

Quantum nodded. “Seen it,” he confirmed. “Our quan-

tum waves don't all originate here. Some originate... not here. Ripple through our space and our time, not quite canceling, not quite amplifying." The man was finally starting to descend from full fugue state, his fingers twitching more slowly. "We're definitely being influenced by something... *external*," he finished, collapsing into a chair.

Sokolov nodded and tapped the comms unit on the wall. "Ginting, Isaka." He waited a moment until the two scientists came on. "I have new information germane to your project. I want the two of you to start working together again. In fact," he said, nodding thoughtfully, "I want *everyone* working together on this. Assemble your teams into the main briefing center, and I'll address them shortly."

# SEVENTEEN: WORLD GUARD HARBOR CITY

“What did you tell all these people?” Surfrider asked. The team was standing in Veterans Park, next to the wooden gazebo where bands would play on the weekends. Stretched out behind them was a crowd of easily a thousand civilians.

“Nothing,” Defiant said quietly. “The PR people did it. They think they’re extras in a movie.”

“I’m not exactly comfortable with all of these civilians here,” Thunderclap said, shifting nervously from foot to foot. The other team members’ helmeted heads nodded agreement.

“Director Sokolov ordered it,” Defiant said. “I’m not thrilled either, but we need to put on the right show, he said. He—”

“Quantum incursion,” Sokolov’s voice cut in over their communicators. An insistent beeping accompanied his warning. “Eyes sharp,” he added.

The team looked up as a flash of light exploded above them, causing their helmets’ viewers to protectively dim. As the light faded and their helmets returned to normal, they saw five beings descending from the sky. Four of them floated down as a group, coming to a halt a few feet off the ground. The fifth—Abaddon—held itself a bit higher and a bit further back, its head clearly scanning the

crowd. Each figure was humanoid but androgynous, as if they were abstract statues of humans. If they'd been on the ground, they'd have each stood at least seven feet tall. Each one glowed a different color: gold, metallic blue, deep red, sharp emerald, and writhing gray-black. The team could hear the crowd muttering excitedly behind them—these were the special effects they'd been promised.

The gold one spoke first: "I am Second in Authority," it said, its voice ringing like a bell across the crowd. "We are told that you wish to meet your creators and to pay us the respect due us, before your world is destroyed."

"Now, Nightspeed," Defiant muttered into his communicator. The speedster was positioned some ways away, repeating the tactic that had worked with Abaddon. The original plan had been to let these beings talk for a bit, but Abaddon was clearly looking for something, and Defiant was getting nervous. Fortunately, the quantum anchor wasn't hidden in the crowd.

A subtle energy washed over them, and all five beings fell to the ground. Abaddon caught itself immediately, but the other four collapsed to their knees, shaking their heads before regaining their feet. Their glows had diminished significantly.

"What is this?" Second demanded, its voice less resounding.

"I'm releasing your suits' quantum dampers," Sokolov's voice said. "The regulators will remain active to prevent a power runaway, but you can all operate at maximum potential." He paused for a moment. "Destroy them."

Abaddon went down first, Nightspeed's armored fist *cracking* across its black-gray chin. The being rolled to its feet and blasted a weak energy beam at the rest of the team, who had already begun to move apart. Defiant took the beam on his suit's chest-plate, which reflected and dispersed most of it. He stepped in and landed a punch in Second's gut, taking the taller being down to its knees again.

The rest of the team chose their targets: Thunderclap brought a bolt of lightning down on the green one, Scanner unleashed a psychic attack on the blue one, Hawk blasting toward the red one. Nightspeed had circled behind them, urging the crowd to move back.

The green being responded with a weaker lightning bolt of its own, aiming for Thunderclap but missing entirely as the lightning grounded itself in the nearby lake. Surfrider countered with a plume of water from the lake, directed at the being's head. The blue one was writhing on the ground, holding its head in its hands and screaming a shrill, painful cry. The red one went down under Hawk's attack but immediately leapt up and struck back with a faster-than-human punch.

"They're trying to copy our powers," Defiant said, landing another punch on the gold one's head. "Rotate targets!" he ordered.

"That won't be necessary," another voice called.

"Quantum incursion!" Sokolov shouted in their comms. "It's maintaining altitude out of range of the anchor!"

Defiant looked up and saw a distant, silvery figure

floating in the air. "I am Seventh in Authority," it said, bass tones rolling over the crowd. "My peers have violated the fundamental tenants of the First in Authority, and it falls to me to correct them." It paused for a moment. "Please stand back," it added.

Hawk was already in motion, aiming for the black-gray form of Abaddon that was just starting to rise. He collided with it at near-supersonic speed, his armor supporting the fastest punch ever thrown. Abaddon went down, its upper torso shattered. The remainder of the team backpedaled rapidly as four bright silver beams lanced down from the sky, striking each of the other beings and piercing their bodies. All four fell flat to the ground, their remaining glow flickering off and their bodies fading to an anonymous ash-gray.

"If I might speak with you," the silver being called from the sky, "without falling into your trap?" it asked. "I can promise you are safe, as is your world."

"Deactivate the anchor," Defiant ordered. He felt a *woosh* of wind behind him as Nightspeed rushed to obey.

"Ah," the being said as the anchor's energy faded. "Thank you." It descended until it stood on the ground in the front of the team. "I am sorry, but until they broke First's precepts, I was powerless to act."

"Which precept is that?" Sokolov's voice broadcast from Defiant's helmet.

"We may be as gods to you," Seventh said, "but we are not gods. By coming here to accept worship, they not only broke that precept, but also compromised the experiment

that your world was created a part of.”

“And so you are... what? You’re in charge now?” Sokolov asked.

“No,” the being said, shaking its head. “I am Seventh in Authority, given power only over the rest of the Authority, and then only if they break one of our laws. A new Authority will be formed.”

“And what will they do with us?” Sokolov demanded.

Seventh shrugged. “It is impossible to say, until they have formed,” it said. “However, there remains a contingent dedicated to the original ideals of this experiment. Your world is unique, and we would benefit from observing you. Such a contingent would exercise a... hmm, lighter hand to see the experiment proceed.”

“So we’re nothing more than an experiment to you?” Sokolov said.

Seventh inclined its head. “My informants tell me that Michael has already told you that much,” it said with a small smile. “We sought to create an environment in which life could find its own way. Our... shortsightedness has made the Prime Wave a part of your life in a way never intended. But your world has found a way to coexist with it, in a way that tens of thousands of others have not. That alone is beneficial information for us.” It paused again and looked up. “I must return, to oversee the formation of a new Authority.” It looked back at the team. “I wish you well,” it said and vanished in a flash of light.

# EIGHTEEN: WORLD GUARD RESEARCH

“Incredible,” Dr. Chang said.

“How is it they were still able to exercise powers?” Sokolov asked.

“According to the data the anchor collected,” Chang said, “their quantum entanglement with the so-called Prime Wave was orders of magnitude greater than what we saw in Michael. We could dampen their connection significantly but not cut it off entirely.”

Sokolov nodded. Even Michael has retained a small set of abilities. “What else did we learn?” he asked.

“We’ve been correlating the data from our independent experiments,” Dr. Wells said, “as well as everything we gathered from the... encounter in Harbor City. If we put this in the terms Michael used, then this Prime Wave is what defined what we know as physics. The strong and weak nuclear forces, gravity, magnetism—those things we call ‘laws’ were all defined by it. Think of it as a set of meta-rules. We play by the rules of the game, but that thing *writes* those rules. These beings, and our own powered individuals, connect to that and temporarily *modify* the rules of the game. They’re not breaking the laws of physics as we’ve long thought; they’re *changing* the definition of physics.”

“So long as the changes are minor and highly localized,” Dr. Isaka said, picking up the narrative, “it’s not a problem. Our quantum dampers ensure that by reducing the efficacy of a powered individual’s connection. The anchor is really just an area-of-effect damper, so it has a similar effect.”

“But what’s really interesting,” Dr. Ginting cut in, “is how this all aligns to the experiments my team was conducting.”

“Your high-powered experiments were breaking down quantum covalence,” Sokolov said.

“Yes, but no,” Ginting said, leaning forward in excitement. “We now believe that our experiments weren’t breaking down reality. We were simply creating a limited area in which the Prime Wave’s rules no longer operated. We were rising to the level of its meta-rules. Stepping out of the game, if you will, and into neutral territory.”

“To what end?” Sokolov asked.

“If we’d continued just a bit further,” Ginting said, “I believe we would have been able to transition *between* the iterations that Michael speaks of. In our terms, we would have been able to move out of our own dimension and into others.”

“A doorway,” Sokolov breathed softly.

“*All* the doorways,” Ginting said, eyes sparkling.

# NINETEEN: WORLD GUARD DIRECTORATE

“What have you *done*?” Michael whispered.

“We apparently did very little,” Sokolov grouched. “Looks like your people cleaned up, though.”

Michael was horrified. He’d hoped to... he didn’t know. Scare the Authority? Ridiculous. Convince them to capitulate? Unthinkable. Show them the value of this iteration, at least, but certainly not have them *destroyed*. Still, at least Seventh had been the one to do it. The Authority might be emptied, but it had at least happened by the Authority’s own rules.

“I’ve been speaking with my teams,” Sokolov said, ignoring Michael’s existential crisis, “and we believe that what you refer to as ‘iterations’ are what we’d call ‘alternate dimensions.’ A way of expressing multi-dimensional existence, something our species has fantasized about for some time.”

Michael shook his head, still coming to grips with what had happened in the park. “And?” he asked.

“You’ve mentioned the damage to the... the *iteration* after ours, and the one after that, and the one after that, correct?” Sokolov asked.

Michael nodded distractedly. “-665, the iteration after this, appears to have been destroyed when the experiments

here ran away,” he said. “-666 exists, but it’s nothing but interstellar fire. -667 remains, but its rule set—what you call ‘physics’—is different from its original design.”

“I believe we can detach ourselves, and the following three instances. We and -667 would be bookends of sort. Independent,” Sokolov said.

Michael’s eyes grew wide. “That’s mad,” he said flatly. “These iterations can’t be detached from the Prime Wave. It’s been tried.”

“We believe we’ve found a way,” Sokolov insisted.

“But there are iterations *beyond* -667,” Michael said. “Worlds with life. The Prime Wave must continue in an unbroken chain. You can’t simply detach a few worlds and expect it to somehow keep... keep *going*.”

“Our science is firm,” Sokolov said stubbornly.

Michael stared at him quietly for several long moments. “Release me,” he said at last. “Let me return home before you do whatever you’re going to do.”

Sokolov tilted his head to one side, considering Michael. Then he slowly nodded and pressed a button on his desk. Michael felt his Ghost return to him and felt his Halo wrap protectively around him once more. He nodded to Sokolov. *Home*, he ordered.

# TWENTY: THE AUTHORITY

*:Transit complete,:* Michael's Ghost whispered in his mind.

*Request an audience before the Authority,* Michael ordered. *I need to—*

“Welcome home, Michael,” a voice said from behind him.

Michael's swirled to see who it was and backed up a step when he saw one of the hooded, black-robed members of the Authority. The *new* Authority, he reminded himself, whose priorities and allegiances were unknown.

“I am Second in Authority, Michael,” the voice said, not unkindly. “I am pleased that you have returned.”

“I do not bring good news,” Michael said softly, bowing his head. “I had hoped to offer my confession to the full Authority and offer my... resignation. And a plea.”

“A plea?” Second asked.

Michael nodded. “The -664 iteration,” he said. “I know the experiment was never intended to include the Prime Wave. I know my job was to remove those instances who impinged on it dangerously. But -664 *still* has value. It has life, which evolved on its...” Second waved a hand. “What?” Michael asked.

“We are under a new Authority, Michael,” it said. “We recognize the value of the -664 iteration, and we are

redirecting the experiment to exclusively study how that iteration's life came to become companions with the Prime Wave, as we ourselves have always been."

"We... you have?" Michael asked, stunned. "But -665," he said. "And -666, and -667's rule set has been altered, and—"

"It's fine," Second assured him. "The -667 iteration also interests us, for its rule set, while altered, has found a balance that was not originally accounted for in the experiment's design."

"So... so they won't be destroyed?" Michael asked hopefully.

"The former faction has been destroyed, as you probably know. It's all moot, Michael. We are glad that you are home. And we are glad to release you from your assignment."

"My... release?" Michael asked, confused.

"You will no longer be a Janitor, Michael," Second said. "There will no longer *be* Janitors. The iterations have been stabilized."

Michael's mind reeled. *Query 12th generation status*, he ordered his Ghost.

*:12th generation nominal,:* it replied instantly. *:All four iterations are stable.:*

*Four... only four?* he asked, aghast.

*:Iterations numbered one through four,:* the Ghost responded, *:Previously numbered 12-72664 through 12-72667. Iterations two and three are empty and act as guard zones.:* his Ghost finished.

# TWENTY-ONE: WORLD GUARD RESEARCH

“Ready?” Ginting called. Heads nodded around the room. “Power levels are approaching the critical point, Director,” the doctor said. “Are you absolutely certain you wish to go through with this?”

Director Sokolov was standing in a clear cylinder, which sat on a foot-high pedestal in the middle of the room. Intense quantum energies were being coerced *around* the cylinder, creating waves of light and color. “Continue, Doctor,” he said firmly.

“Disengage filters,” Ginting said. A loud hum began to permeate the room. “Engage tertiary power systems!” Ginting shouted. “Engage quantum alignment field!”

There was a loud *snap*, and Sokolov vanished.

# TWENTY-TWO: THE AUTHORITY

“What have you done?” Michael asked quietly. “All the iterations—they’re gone, through the entire generation. Only four remain.”

“That was our intent, Michael,” Second said. “The experiment continues, but with a new focus.”

Michael stared for a moment. “A new... a new purpose?” he stammered. “But...”

Second reached up and pulled its hood back.

Michael’s mouth dropped open as Lucas Sokolov smiled down at him.