

POWER WAVE
THE PRIME WAVE ACCOUNTING
BOOK 1

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PROLOGUE

MICHAEL

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

"In a second," I said.

The Ghost didn't argue. It never argues. It delivers information with the same pleasant, uninflected cheerfulness whether it's reporting a successful sterilization or noting that I've been sitting on a crumbled wall for eleven minutes in violation of transition protocol. The cheerfulness used to comfort me. Somewhere around the forty-thousandth world, it started to feel like being managed.

The ground under my feet was charred black, fused into something that used to be a street and was now just a surface. The air was thick with gray particulate — ash, mostly, with some structural compounds I didn't bother to identify. My Halo kept it off me. Kept my uniform white. Kept the smell out, which was a mercy I'd long since stopped being grateful for, because gratitude requires noticing, and I'd stopped noticing the smell somewhere around world thirty thousand.

I noticed it today.

I don't know why today. Maybe because this one had been different before I got here. Maybe because sitting in the aftermath of 72,662 worlds teaches you to stop looking, and something about world 72,663 had made me look anyway. The Ghost's pre-burn survey had flagged it as Class 7 — life present, Prime Wave entanglement advanced, instability index critical. Same as the last four hundred. Same protocol. Same outcome.

But I had floated above the termination zone for six minutes before I gave the order, which I hadn't done in — I asked the Ghost once and it gave me a number so large I stopped asking — a very long time. And when I gave the order, I felt something I don't have an Authority word for. The closest human approximation, from the linguistic database the Ghost maintains, would probably be *reluctant*.

I'm not supposed to feel reluctant. Reluctance implies the action is optional.

:Eleven minutes thirty seconds elapsed since completion,: the Ghost offered. :Transition window remains optimal for the next four minutes.:

"I heard you the first time."

:I didn't say anything the first time.:

"You were thinking it very loudly."

The Ghost processed this. :I am not capable of thinking loudly,: it said. :I am not capable of thinking.:

"I know," I said. "It was a joke."

:Ah,: the Ghost said. It filed this away somewhere. I've been making jokes at the Ghost for — another very large number — and it files each one away with the same neutral acknowledgment, building a database of human humor it will never use because it has no one to be funny with. I find this either poignant or absurd. Today it felt like both.

I looked at the sky. There wasn't much of one — the particulate cloud from the burn would take weeks to settle, not that weeks meant

anything here anymore. Through the haze, the sun was a smear of dull orange, barely distinguishable from the glow of still-cooling material on the horizon. This world had had two moons. I'd confirmed their continued orbital integrity before proceeding. The moons were fine. Everything else was not.

This world had also had — I asked the Ghost to pull the pre-survey data, something I hadn't done in a long time, not after the burn — music.

Not just sound organization, which you find everywhere life develops enough complexity. Music. Structured, intentional, transmitted across generations as a kind of encoded memory. The Ghost's survey had captured four hundred and twelve distinct musical traditions, which was high for a Class 7 world, and some of them had been —

I stopped that line of thought and stood up.

:Transition window: three minutes remaining,: the Ghost said.

"Pull the genomic archive."

A pause. Not a processing pause — the Ghost doesn't process slowly, it simply never pauses. This was something else. :Genomic archive,: it confirmed. :Retrieving. I note that you have not requested a genomic archive for the last—:

"I know how long it's been."

:—four hundred and seventeen iterations,: the Ghost finished. :Shall I note the resumption in the mission log?:

I thought about that. A notation in the mission log would be visible to the Authority's administrative layer on routine audit. The administrative layer had never once questioned a genomic archive request — it was standard practice in the early generations, before the burn rate climbed high enough that the archiving started to feel theoretical. But it had been four hundred and seventeen worlds. A resumption, logged, might prompt questions.

I was not especially concerned about questions from the administrative layer. I had been doing this job since before the administrative layer's senior archivist was instantiated, and my performance record

is, in the Ghost's words, :fully compliant across all assessed metrics: for a number of cycles that makes the administrative layer's institutional memory look like a rough draft. Nobody audits Michael.

Still.

"No notation," I said. "Just pull it."

:Pulling,: the Ghost said, and I felt the archive sequence initiate — a faint pressure at the edges of my consciousness, the Ghost reaching into the local Prime Wave residue and extracting what was left of the biological encoding. It takes longer after a burn. The entanglement doesn't disappear immediately; it lingers in the Wave like an afterimage, and if you move quickly enough, you can capture it. I used to move quickly. Four hundred and seventeen worlds ago, I had stopped moving quickly.

I waited. The Ghost worked. The smear of orange sun moved approximately two degrees across the haze.

:Archive complete,: the Ghost said. :Four hundred and twelve genomic lineages captured. Twelve thousand, nine hundred and forty-one distinct cultural encoding sequences preserved. I have also captured — I note this is outside standard archive parameters — four hundred and twelve musical tradition recordings. I have flagged them as supplemental data.:

I looked at the sky again.

"Don't flag them," I said. "File them under genomic supplemental. Standard category."

:Done,: the Ghost said, without comment. This is one of the things I've come to appreciate about the Ghost, in whatever attenuated way I appreciate things: it completes tasks without editorializing. It notes deviations from protocol because it is required to. It does not speculate about why I might want four hundred and twelve musical traditions archived under a category that will ensure they're preserved in perpetuity rather than purged at the next storage optimization cycle. It does not wonder what I'm going to do with them.

It does not wonder what I'm going to do with them because it is not capable of wondering.

I am.

:Transition window: ninety seconds,: the Ghost said. :Recommend initiating.:

I took one more look at the world. The charred wall I'd been sitting on. The fused street. The orange smear of a sun that would shine, from now on, on nothing in particular. Two moons in perfect orbital stability, keeping time for an audience of zero.

This world had had music. It had had something — I had felt it, in the last moments before the burn, in the particular way the Prime Wave had moved through its life: a quality I keep failing to name because I don't have the right language for it. The Ghost's closest approximation, when I'd asked it once to analyze the pre-burn Wave data from a world I found similarly difficult to categorize, had been *coherence*. As if the life here hadn't just existed alongside the Prime Wave but had learned, over a very long time, to exist *with* it. Gently. Attentively.

Like they'd figured out something the Authority's Architects hadn't designed them to figure out, and had been quietly practicing it for millennia, and would have kept practicing it indefinitely if I hadn't shown up.

:Sixty seconds,: the Ghost said.

"I know," I said.

I ordered the transition. The Wave swept me forward.

The ash fell on silence.

Instance 12-72662 — mission complete. Transition to 12-72663 initiated.

Note appended to file by Custodian: Genomic archive retained. Musical tradition supplemental archive retained. No further notation.

:Alert,: the Ghost said, with slightly more energy than its baseline tone — the closest it comes to surprise. :Instance 12-72663 presents anomalous Prime Wave readings.:

I was already scanning. I always scan on arrival now — sixty thousand worlds ago I learned not to assume, and the habit has served me well. 72,663 was — yes. There it was. The Prime Wave here was moving wrong. Not the chaotic wrongness of an advanced entanglement crisis, which I know the way a physician knows the sound of a particular cough. Something else. Something I hadn't encountered in recent memory, which meant — I checked — I hadn't encountered it in over nine thousand iterations.

:The Prime Wave in this instance,: the Ghost said, :exhibits tidal characteristics. Oscillation pattern is non-random. Life-form entanglement appears synchronized with oscillation cycle.:

I hovered above the cloud layer, incorporeal, and looked down.

:Designation: Instance 12-72663,: the Ghost said. :Standard assessment protocol recommends survey, threat evaluation, and action recommendation within six local hours.:

"Extend the survey window," I said.

:To what duration?:

I watched the clouds move below me, slow and gray and indifferent to my presence. Somewhere under them, life had learned to breathe in time with the Prime Wave. Somewhere under them, something was happening that had not happened in nine thousand worlds. Something that might be — I was careful with the word, even in my own thinking, because I have been burned before by the word *unique* — something that might be worth examining before I did anything else.

"Indefinite," I said. "Flag for extended assessment. No action pending full survey."

The Ghost considered this for .003 seconds, which is a long time for the Ghost. :This deviates from standard protocol,: it noted. :Shall I log the deviation?:

"No," I said.

:Understood,; the Ghost said.

I descended toward the clouds.

Below me, in a city on a rain-slicked continent, a team of underpaid, underequipped, quietly exhausted human beings was winning a fight they probably shouldn't have been able to win.

I didn't know that yet.

But I was already paying attention.

CHAPTER 1

SPECIAL POWERS UNIT

THE VAN SMELLED like old coffee and Stratosphere's post-fight sweat, which Carla Reyes had once described as "what would happen if a gym bag achieved sentience and gave up on itself." Marcus had taken this as a compliment. He was still taking it as a compliment. He was currently taking up approximately sixty percent of the van's rear cabin, arms crossed, helmet off, looking deeply satisfied with himself despite the fact that his left pauldron was hanging by one hinge and he had a bruise developing across his jaw that was going to be spectacular by morning.

"You got tackled by a parking meter," Sultana said, not looking up from the medical kit in her lap.

"I used the parking meter *tactically*," Marcus said.

"He went through it," Sultana said, to no one in particular.

"*Through* it, yes. As in, I made contact with it in a way that redirected—"

"It wrapped around your leg."

"—redirected my momentum vector in a manner that—"

"You made a parking meter noise, Marcus. You went *bong*."

David Reyes sat in the front passenger seat and listened to this with the particular quality of attention he gave to everything: total, categorizing, filing. He noted that Sultana's hands were steady as she worked on the laceration above her own eyebrow, which meant her adrenaline had metabolized and she was operating on baseline. He noted that Marcus was performing ease with slightly more energy than actual ease would require, which meant the bruise hurt more than he was letting on. He noted that Blaine, their driver, had taken the long route back to the SPU's headquarters — two extra blocks — which meant something had happened on the direct route that Blaine thought David didn't need to deal with right now, and which David would deal with anyway, in approximately four minutes, when they arrived.

He noted that Carla, in the seat directly behind him, had not said anything in six minutes.

"Two bystanders," she said.

There it was.

"Confirmed," David said. "Both ambulatory at scene. Paramedics assessed minor injuries."

"Mrs. Okafor is sixty-three years old."

"She was ambulatory, Carla."

"She was ambulatory because she was running *away from Rebound*." Carla's voice was even. It was always even. That was how you knew it was serious — Carla Reyes at genuine volume was annoyed; Carla Reyes at perfect conversational pitch was something else entirely. "She fell. She didn't need stitches but she's going to have a bruise on her hip that's going to make it hard to sleep for a week, and she's sixty-three, and—"

"I know," David said.

"—and the perimeter we established should have kept civilians fifty meters back from the engagement zone, and somehow she was inside twenty."

"I know."

"So what are we going to do about the perimeter protocol?"

David looked out the window. The streets of Harbor City moved past in the particular way they did at 2 AM on a Tuesday — mostly empty, punctuated by the kinds of activity that only happen when most people have gone home. A man sleeping in a doorway on Mercer. Two college students walking fast with their heads down. A food cart operator who was either very late or very early, steam rising from something that smelled like pork and ginger as they passed.

"We're going to fix it," he said.

"Specifically."

"I'll have something on paper by Thursday."

Carla said nothing. Which meant she was satisfied with the answer, or she'd decided to accept the answer for now and return to it later, or she'd noted the answer and filed it in the place she kept things she didn't intend to let go of. After eleven years of marriage and eight years of working together, David could not always tell which of these it was. He'd stopped asking, because the answer was usually "all three."

"The meter was load-bearing," Marcus offered, into the silence. "Structurally. If I hadn't gone through it when I did, the whole sequence of—"

"Marcus," Sultana said.

"Yeah?"

"Stop."

"Stopping," Marcus said, with dignity.

The SPU's headquarters was a thing that had happened to a building rather than a thing that had been designed. It occupied the second and third floors of a converted warehouse on the edge of Harbor City's industrial district, above a plumbing supply company that kept irregular hours and had, on three separate occasions, accidentally

delivered pipe fittings to the SPU's equipment room instead of their own storage space. David had developed a collegial relationship with the owner, a man named Petrakis who found the whole arrangement funny in a way that suggested he'd lived in Harbor City long enough that nothing surprised him anymore.

The first floor was technically SPU storage. In practice, it was where equipment went to become a different kind of equipment — partially disassembled, cannibalized for parts, waiting for repairs that the budget hadn't approved. Three tactical vests in various states of reconstruction. A communications array that worked perfectly except for a feedback issue on the third channel that Blaine had been diagnosing for four months. Two sets of body armor that had been ordered for new team members who hadn't materialized because the city council had declined to approve the staffing request, citing budget constraints and a general feeling that the current team seemed to be managing.

They were managing. David knew they were managing. He also knew what managing looked like up close, which was nothing like what it looked like from a city council chamber.

He stood in the equipment room and filled out the incident report while the team did post-mission debrief around the folding table they used for everything — briefings, meals, paperwork, the occasional card game that Sultana always won and no one could explain. The incident report form had forty-seven fields. David had requested a shorter form twice. Both requests had been declined.

Powered individuals engaged: 4. *Classification of abilities:* enhanced strength ($\times 2$), telekinesis ($\times 1$), unknown enhancement ($\times 1$ — the fourth one, the one who'd gotten away, the one whose power signature the Ghost of — he stopped that thought, because he didn't have a Ghost and the word had come from somewhere he couldn't account for). *Civilian casualties:* 0. *Civilian injuries:* 2, minor. *Property damage:* moderate. He estimated the parking meter at forty dollars and the vault wall at considerably more and wrote *significant*

structural damage to Federal Reserve Branch 7 exterior, full assessment pending and left the dollar figure blank because it wasn't his dollar figure to fill in.

"Four-eleven," Blaine said, from the doorway.

David looked up.

"On the direct route. Domestic, powered. Neighbors called it in about twenty minutes before we finished at the vault. By the time Harbor City PD got there—" Blaine made a gesture that covered a range of outcomes, none of them good. "The wife is okay. She's at County. The husband is—" another gesture—"—being processed."

David wrote this down in the margin of the incident report, where it did not belong and where he would find it later and transfer it to the follow-up action log, which had its own form, which had thirty-one fields.

"Which precinct?" he said.

"Ninth."

"Who's on tonight?"

"Kelso."

David nodded. He knew Kelso. Kelso was good with powered domestics, which was a specialty nobody had asked for and everybody needed, and which the Harbor City PD had exactly two officers trained for. David had made that training happen two years ago after a call that he was not going to think about right now, at 2 AM, while filling out a forty-seven field form.

"I'll follow up in the morning," he said.

Blaine nodded and left. David returned to the form.

Custodial officer signature: D. Reyes, SPU Commander. *Date:* He filled in the date. *Incident classification:* He stared at this field for a moment. The options were a dropdown in the digital version and a series of boxes in the paper version. He was using the paper version because the digital version had been crashing since the last update, which the city IT department had been addressing for six weeks. He checked *Powered Criminal Activity — Organized* and then, because

accuracy matters, also checked *Federal Jurisdiction — Partial* and then spent a moment considering whether the fourth attacker's unknown enhancement qualified the incident for *Novel Power Manifestation — Reporting Required* and decided that it did, because David Reyes's relationship with paperwork was rooted in a belief that if you were going to have forms, you should fill them out honestly, and if the forms didn't accommodate honesty, you should note that too.

He added a handwritten note in the margin: *Fourth subject's power classification requires further assessment — enhancement type not consistent with known categories. Recommend Federal notification.*

He capped his pen. He looked at the form.

He picked up the pen again and wrote, smaller, in the bottom margin: *Mrs. Okafor (bystander, 63) sustained minor hip injury inside established perimeter. Perimeter protocol review — see follow-up action log.*

He capped the pen again.

"You're doing the thing," Carla said.

He looked up. She was leaning in the equipment room doorway, still in her tactical gear except for the helmet, which she was holding under one arm. Her dark hair was pulled back the way she wore it on ops, which made her look more serious than she was and less tired than she felt, and he knew this because he knew every version of Carla's face and this was the one that meant she'd been watching him for a minute before she said anything.

"What thing," he said.

"The inventory thing. Where you go through everything that went wrong and write it all down and make a face at the paper."

"I always make a face at the paper. The paper deserves it."

"You make a different face at the end," she said. "When you're done cataloguing and you're just sitting with it."

David looked at the form. "Two civilian injuries," he said. "Pre-

ventable, probably. One got away. Fourth attacker, unknown classification. Mrs. Okafor's hip."

"I know," Carla said. "I was there."

"The perimeter protocol—"

"Is getting fixed by Thursday. You said." She came into the room and sat on the edge of the table. Not next to him — on the other side, facing him, the way she sat when she wanted to have a conversation rather than end one. "Dave."

"Yeah."

"We won."

He looked at her.

"I'm just noting it," she said. "For the record. Four powered criminals, federal vault, zero fatalities. We won."

"Two injuries."

"Which we're fixing the protocol for."

"One got away."

"Who we're reporting to Federal as a novel manifestation, which is what you're supposed to do, and which means they'll be found." She tilted her head slightly. "Are you going to let us have this one?"

David considered the form. He considered Mrs. Okafor's hip. He considered the fourth attacker, the one whose power signature had felt wrong in a way he couldn't articulate, a frequency he hadn't encountered before, something that had moved through the fight the way a draft moves through a room — present, but not the source of the weather.

"Yeah," he said. "We won."

Carla nodded. She didn't say *good* or *see?* or any of the things that would have made it feel like she'd been trying to talk him into something. She just nodded, the way she did when information had been received and filed, and then she stood up and put her hand briefly on his shoulder — two seconds, maybe three — and left.

David sat with the form for another minute.

He added one more note in the margin, very small, at the abso-

lute bottom edge of the paper where it was technically outside the form's designated writing area: *Good outcome. Team performed well.*

He filed it in the outgoing tray for Blaine to scan and upload in the morning.

Then he went upstairs, where the apartment they were technically not supposed to be living in full-time was, and went to bed.

He did not sleep for a while. He lay on his back in the dark and looked at the ceiling and ran the fourth attacker's power signature through his memory again — that wrongness, that frequency — and couldn't place it, and eventually let it go, because you can't solve everything in the dark, and morning was four hours away, and they had won.

They had won.

He believed that. He did.

He just kept doing the math.

HARBOR CITY HERALD, WEDNESDAY EDITION

SPU STOPS VAULT HEIST; QUESTIONS RAISED ABOUT RESPONSE TIME *By Christine Lane, Staff Reporter*

Harbor City's Special Powers Unit responded Tuesday night to what sources are describing as a coordinated powered assault on the Federal Reserve's Branch 7 facility on Mercer Avenue, neutralizing three of four suspected attackers and preventing an estimated \$4.2 million theft.

The SPU, which operates under the Harbor City Police Department's Special Operations Division, arrived on scene approximately eleven minutes after the first emergency call — a response time that Commander David Reyes attributed to "standard deployment protocol from our current facility location."

Two bystanders sustained minor injuries during the incident, a detail that drew criticism from several Harbor City council members reached for comment.

"Eleven minutes is not acceptable," said Councilman DiPietro, representing the Third Ward, where Branch 7 is located. "We have four powered individuals on the city payroll and they can't get across town in under eleven minutes?"

When asked whether the council's decision to deny the SPU's last two facility upgrade requests had affected response times, Councilman DiPietro declined to comment further.

One suspect remained at large as of press time. The Federal Bureau of Powered Enforcement has been notified.

Full story, page A4. Comment section below.

COMMENTS (247)

HarborCityMom1987: Eleven minutes?? My kids walk past that bank every morning on the way to school

PoweredAndProud_HC: Maybe if the city actually FUNDED them instead of holding bake sales they could afford a better HQ

TruthTeller2847: The "minor injuries" to bystanders is being severely downplayed. My neighbor was there. She's 63 years old.

JustAskingQuestions_real: Has anyone looked into where these criminals GOT their powers? Four enhanced strength in one crew seems like more than coincidence

HarborCityMom1987: @JustAskingQuestions_real Don't start

DiPietroSupporter: The Councilman has ALWAYS supported adequate funding for powered response, his record speaks for itself

PoweredAndProud_HC: @DiPietroSupporter lmaooo

Blaine_E_nottheSPUguy: Great work by the team last night. The fourth attacker's power profile is genuinely unusual and I hope Federal takes the referral seriously.

[COMMENT REMOVED BY MODERATOR]

ChristineLane_HCH: Thank you all for reading. I want to

note that I reached out to Commander Reyes for comment three times and received a very thorough written response that I unfortunately could not fit in full in the print edition. The full statement is available on our website.

TruthTeller2847: @ChristineLane_HCH What did it say

ChristineLane_HCH: @TruthTeller2847 Mostly it was about the perimeter protocol review. He was very specific about the perimeter protocol review.

CHAPTER 2

THE DIRECTORATE

THE QUANTUM MONITOR looked like something that had lost an argument with a microwave.

This was Troll's fault, which was not a criticism so much as a statement of physics. Troll's power — which he'd had since he was fourteen and which he'd never fully forgiven the universe for — meant that everything he built looked exactly like this: jury-rigged, cobbled, assembled from the spare parts of three other things that had been doing something else. It didn't matter what the thing actually *was*. Troll could build a device capable of detecting quantum entanglement at the molecular level, which he had, and it would look like he'd gotten a bread maker and a shortwave radio drunk and let them make decisions. The internals were immaculate. The externals looked like they'd been finished by someone who'd given up.

Vivienne Moreau had learned, over two years of working with Troll, to look at the internals.

"Walk me through it again," she said.

Anton Delesante was already walking. He did everything at

speed — not the physical speed of someone like Hawk or Night-speed, just the speed of a brain that never quite stopped running and had given up waiting for the rest of the world to catch up. He was a lean man in his mid-forties, not physically imposing in the way people sometimes expected from someone who called himself Professor Power, with close-cropped gray at his temples and the particular intensity of someone who was always, at any given moment, thinking about at least four things that weren't the conversation he was currently having.

"The Prime Wave," he said, gesturing at the monitor's central display — a repurposed tablet screen, cracked in one corner, showing a readout that meant nothing to anyone who hadn't spent three months learning to read it — "is not, as your average physicist would tell you, a theoretical construct or a convenient metaphor for quantum field interactions. It is a discrete energy substrate." He tapped the screen. "This is detecting it."

"You've said that," Vivienne said. "Several times."

"I've said it because it bears repeating, because the implications are—"

"Enormous, yes." She kept her voice level. This was a skill she'd developed specifically for conversations with Delesante: the ability to sound engaged without providing the kind of enthusiastic feedback that caused him to accelerate. He accelerated enough on his own. "What I'd like to understand is how it distinguishes between individuals."

He pointed at a cluster of fluctuating lines on the right side of the display. "Each powered individual has a unique entanglement signature. The depth of the connection, the specific frequencies, the harmonic pattern — no two are alike. Think of it like a fingerprint, except the fingerprint is made of physics." He looked at her to see if she was following. She was following. She was always following; she simply declined to show it at the pace he preferred. "Within a three-block radius, the monitor can detect and individually profile every powered individual present. Active or dormant."

Vivienne looked at the monitor. Then she looked at the room they were in — the Directorate's operational hub, forty feet below a defunct shipping company on Harbor City's south waterfront, humming with climate control and the particular tension of people who were very good at something that was technically illegal. Troll was in the corner, doing something intricate and probably inadvisable to a circuit board. Skyfall was cleaning a rifle with the focused attention of someone who found the process meditative and didn't particularly care what you thought about that. Three of the Directorate's non-powered soldiers were running logistics at the far table, speaking quietly.

"And it detected everyone in this room?" she said.

"When I ran it this morning, yes." Delesante's smile was the contained, precise smile of a man savoring being right. "Yourself. Troll. Skyfall. Myself." A slight pause on that last one — the smile stayed but something behind it shifted, briefly. "And the three soldiers registered as baseline, confirming the monitor distinguishes accurately between powered and non-powered individuals."

Vivienne noted the pause. She noted it the way she noted everything about Delesante: carefully, without acknowledgment, filed for later consideration. "And the range? Three blocks is limited."

"The prototype's range is three blocks." He held up a finger. "The *prototype's* range. The underlying detection principle scales. With appropriate hardware—" he gestured at Troll, who didn't look up — "and appropriate isotopes for the entanglement amplifier, we could extend that range by an order of magnitude. Possibly two."

"The isotopes," Vivienne said.

"Yes."

"Which we don't have."

"Which we don't have *yet*." He turned back to the monitor. "The CEO's quarterly directive was clear. Enhanced powered capability is the Directorate's primary development objective. Everyone is working on the delivery mechanism — better suits, better weapons, better ways to augment what's already there. Nobody is working on

the *source*." He tapped the monitor again. "This is the source. The Prime Wave is where the power comes from. And if we understand the source—"

"We can control access to it," Vivienne said.

He turned to look at her. She'd arrived at the conclusion he'd been building toward and she'd done it without the runway he'd prepared, which happened sometimes and which he found — she watched him find it — both gratifying and slightly annoying. "We can *expand* access to it," he corrected. "Controlled expansion. Selected individuals. Enhanced entanglement, additional abilities, amplified existing ones." He paused. "The ceiling everyone assumes is fixed. It isn't. It's artificial. Someone set it, which means it can be unset."

Vivienne was quiet for a moment. The climate control hummed. Troll swore softly at the circuit board.

"Who set it?" she said.

Delesante's smile shifted slightly — the contained version giving way to something that had more edges. "That," he said, "is an excellent question."



They had the CEO call at eight, which meant Vivienne spent forty-five minutes before it doing the thing she always did before CEO calls: sitting in her office, which was barely an office, reviewing everything she knew and organizing it in order of what the CEO would ask about and what she would and wouldn't say. She had been with the Directorate for six years, which was long enough to understand that the CEO's power derived entirely from information asymmetry, and that the best way to maintain a workable relationship with him was to control, precisely, how much of that asymmetry you allowed him.

He had a voice like a man who had learned, early, that the most unsettling thing you can do in a negotiation is sound completely reasonable. She had never seen his face. She had never met anyone in

the Directorate's upper tier who had seen his face in person. She'd once asked, carefully, and been told he preferred video off for security reasons, which was the kind of answer that was technically an answer and told you nothing.

His name, according to the Directorate's internal documentation, was listed as CEO. Just that. She had her suspicions about his actual name and had spent some time investigating them, and what she'd found had made her stop investigating, which told her something about both the name and her own instincts for self-preservation.

The call connected at exactly eight.

"Vivienne," he said. Warm. Interested. Like a man who was genuinely glad she'd called, despite the fact that she called every two weeks on a schedule they'd agreed to two years ago and he was therefore never not expecting it.

"The monitor works," she said. She believed in short openings with the CEO. He could elaborate anything; the question was what he elaborated on. "Anton demonstrated it today. Three-block radius, individual signature detection, powered and non-powered discrimination. The underlying principle is scalable."

"Excellent," the CEO said, in the tone of a man for whom excellent was a full stop, not an encouragement. "And the next step?"

"Isotope acquisition. Anton has identified three targets. University physics lab, military logistics depot, and a private research facility in—"

"The university," the CEO said. "And the depot. Skip the private facility."

Vivienne noted this. She didn't ask why, because she'd learned not to ask why when the CEO volunteered an opinion; you got more information from observing the edges of what he said than from asking him to explain it. The private facility was, she was fairly certain, connected to someone the CEO didn't want disturbed. She filed this.

"I'll organize the acquisition teams," she said.

"The entangler itself," the CEO said. "Anton's full proposal —"

I've reviewed the summary you sent. The enhancement mechanism. I want to understand the timeline."

"Aggressive," Vivienne said. "Anton is confident. I am—" she chose the word carefully—"monitoring."

A short pause. The CEO liked short pauses. She'd come to believe he used them as punctuation, the same way other people used *mm* or *I see*. "You have reservations."

"I have questions about the field-of-effect parameters at scale. Anton's models assume a controlled environment and a single subject. The math gets—" she paused in return, because she'd also learned to use pauses—"complicated, above a certain threshold."

"Complicated how?"

"The entanglement field may not be fully containable above a certain power input," she said. "It could affect individuals beyond the intended target."

Another pause. Longer this time. "That's a significant engineering problem."

"Yes," Vivienne agreed. "It is."

"Has Anton identified it?"

She looked at the wall of her office, which was a wall like any other wall except that she'd been looking at it for six years and had developed a specific relationship with a particular scuff mark near the light switch, which she looked at when she was choosing her words. "Anton has identified the theoretical possibility," she said. "He characterizes it as a boundary condition that advanced calibration will resolve."

"And you characterize it?"

"As something I'm watching closely."

The CEO was quiet for three seconds, which was a long time for him. "Keep watching," he said. "And Vivienne — the acquisition teams. I'd like them operational within the week."

"Understood."

"One more thing." His voice stayed warm. It always stayed warm. She'd stopped finding the warmth reassuring some time ago. "The

fourth attacker from last night's Federal Reserve incident. Your operative."

Vivienne kept her face neutral, which was easy because he couldn't see her face. "Yes."

"He was sloppy."

"He was new," she said. "He won't be used in field operations again."

"He wasn't just sloppy," the CEO said. "He was *noticed*. The SPU's incident report — which I've seen, because I see everything, Vivienne, you know this — specifically flagged his power profile as an unknown classification requiring Federal notification." A beat. "That's a thread."

"I'm aware."

"Threads get pulled."

"I'll handle it," she said.

"I know you will," the CEO said, warmly, and disconnected.

Vivienne sat with the dead call for a moment. Then she pulled up the operative's file — the new one, the one whose power profile had apparently been novel enough to earn a specific notation in the SPU commander's incident report — and read it with the focused attention she gave to problems before they became larger problems.

His name was Kyle. He was twenty-six. His ability was a variant on enhanced strength that produced, under stress, an involuntary field effect that had disrupted electronics within a fifteen-foot radius during the Federal Reserve incident. He hadn't known about the field effect before it happened. He hadn't told his handler about it after.

She read this last part twice.

Then she opened a message to the Directorate's internal security division and typed four sentences, efficiently and without particular emotion, and sent it, and closed the file, and went to find Delesante to discuss acquisition team logistics.

The scuff mark on the wall watched her go.

The acquisition briefing happened in the Green Room, which was what the Directorate called the operational readiness space because someone had, at some point, painted one wall green, and now it was called that, and no one remembered who'd painted it or why, and the name had stuck the way names do when there's no particular reason to change them.

Delesante ran the briefing because Delesante ran all briefings that touched his projects, which was most of them. Vivienne sat at the back and watched the room while he talked, which was where she got her best information.

The tier-two operatives were attentive in the way of people who'd been told this mattered. Mirage — a woman in her early thirties, quiet, new enough to the Directorate that she still had the slight self-consciousness of someone navigating an unfamiliar social environment — sat slightly apart from the others and kept her hands flat on the table. Her power was illusion work, localized, sophisticated enough to affect powered perception, which made her valuable and meant Delesante kept trying to use her before she was ready because Delesante's relationship with patience was purely theoretical.

Vivienne had decided, after watching Mirage for three weeks, that the woman was considerably more capable than she was currently performing, and that she was performing below capacity deliberately, while she figured out what kind of place this was. Vivienne respected this strategy. She'd used it herself, once.

"The university target is primary," Delesante was saying, at the whiteboard, using the kind of marker that smelled like something had died and the fumes were covering for it. "The isotope cache is in the physics building's lower-level storage. Campus security is non-powered. City police response time to the university district is—" he checked his notes "—eight minutes on average, fourteen at night."

"The SPU?" one of the operatives asked.

"The SPU's current response time from their headquarters is

eleven minutes to the university district," Delesante said, with the slight precision of someone who'd looked this up and found it satisfying. "Last night's Federal Reserve incident clocked them at eleven minutes to Mercer Avenue, which is comparable distance." He drew a line on the whiteboard. "We will be in and out in six."

Vivienne did not say anything. She noted that Delesante's six-minute estimate was based on everything going correctly, which was the kind of estimate that worked until it didn't, and that his calculation of SPU response time was based on last night's data, which was one data point from a team that had a vested interest in getting faster.

She also noted that he hadn't mentioned the Harbor Guard designation — the team was still being called the SPU in his calculations, which meant his intelligence was at least a day old, which meant the Federal announcement about the SPU's restructuring had happened after his last briefing update. She filed this too.

"Night Queen leads the university team," Delesante said, not looking at her, which meant he'd decided this before the meeting and was presenting it as a conclusion to avoid the appearance of seeking approval. "Mirage, you're on the depot team with—"

"No," Vivienne said.

Delesante stopped. The room got the specific quality of quiet that happens when someone with authority contradicts someone who thought they had more of it.

"Mirage is on the university team," Vivienne said. "With me." She looked at Mirage, who had not moved but had the very slight stillness of someone paying close attention. "The depot requires different capabilities. I'll review the team composition separately."

Delesante's jaw tightened by approximately two millimeters. He'd learned, over time, not to contest her on team composition in front of the operatives, because the two times he'd tried it he'd lost, and losing in front of the operatives was worse than conceding before you lost. "Fine," he said, and returned to the whiteboard.

After the briefing, when the operatives had filed out and Troll had disappeared back to whatever he was building, and Skyfall had

gone wherever Skyfall went when she wasn't being specifically pointed at something, Mirage paused near the door.

"Thank you," she said, quietly, to Vivienne.

Vivienne looked at her. "For what?"

Mirage considered this. "I'm not sure yet," she said, and left.

Vivienne stood in the Green Room alone for a moment. The green wall. The whiteboard with Delesante's timeline still on it — six minutes, clean lines, the confidence of a man who'd never once considered that he might be wrong about something.

She picked up the marker — it still smelled terrible — and added a small notation next to his six-minute estimate.

+5 (*contingency*).

She capped the marker and put it down and went to plan an isotope heist.

CHAPTER 3

MICHAEL

THE CITY WAS CALLED Harbor City, which the Ghost informed me was a name with approximately three hundred years of local history behind it, originating from its role as a regional shipping hub before container logistics had reorganized the geography of commerce and left the harbor itself as more of an aesthetic feature than a functional one. The Ghost offered this information the way it offered all information: completely, without editorial, in the same tone it used to report sterilization completions and weather patterns and the caloric content of things I didn't eat.

I was floating above it at four hundred meters, incorporeal, watching.

This is standard assessment protocol for the early survey phase. You stay high. You stay invisible. You observe the broad patterns of a world before you descend into its specifics, because specificity has a way of making things complicated, and complication has a way of making the math harder, and harder math has a way of — I had been

doing this job long enough to know what harder math leads to. You stay high. You observe. You do not, under any circumstances, start thinking of the specifics as anything other than data.

The city spread below me in the particular way of mid-sized human cities: a dense core of taller structures giving way to progressively lower density in concentric rings, interrupted by the irregular geometry of a coastline on its eastern edge and a river on its north. The harbor that gave the city its name was functional enough — I could see three cargo vessels at the commercial docks — but the Ghost was right that it had the feeling of something that used to be more important. The water was very dark at this hour. The lights of the city reflected in it in the long, broken way that lights reflect in water that is slightly choppy, orange and white and a cold blue from something industrial on the south bank.

:Atmospheric conditions: overcast, 54 degrees Fahrenheit, wind from the northwest at 12 miles per hour,: the Ghost said. :Local time: 0214 hours.:

"I can feel the atmospheric conditions," I said.

:Standard survey notation,: the Ghost said, without apology.

I let it go. The Ghost and I have been doing this long enough that certain exchanges have achieved the status of ritual — not meaningful, exactly, but familiar in a way that has its own minor value. I report the obvious. It reports the obvious back. We proceed.

Below me, the city was doing what cities do at 0214 hours: mostly sleeping, partially not. I could see, at the edge of my visual range, a cluster of activity near what the Ghost's mapping data identified as a federal financial facility — emergency vehicles, the particular patterns of official response, a small crowd of the kind that assembles at 2 AM around anything that looks like it might be interesting. The activity was winding down. Whatever had happened was, apparently, being handled.

:Powered activity detected,: the Ghost said. :Epicenter: Federal Reserve Branch 7, Mercer Avenue. Residual Prime Wave entangle-

ment signatures indicate powered engagement within the last forty minutes. Multiple signatures detected. Classification pending closer survey.:

"Note it," I said. "We'll come back to it."

:Noted.:

I turned my attention — still at four hundred meters, still incorporeal — to the broader picture. The Prime Wave's behavior in this iteration was what had made me order the extended survey, and I wanted to understand it before I got into the specifics of who was using it and how. The specifics are always easier when you understand the environment first. This is one of the things seventy-two thousand iterations teach you, if you're paying attention, which I have not always been, but am trying to be.

The Prime Wave in instance -664 moved like breathing.

That's the closest approximation I have, and it's imprecise, but it's what I keep returning to. The Wave in most iterations I've visited has a baseline behavior that's effectively static — it exists, it flows, it responds to the entanglement of living things the way any energy substrate responds to interaction, but it doesn't have what I would call *rhythm*. It doesn't have intentionality. It is, in the way that oceans are, simply there.

This was different. The Wave here oscillated. Not randomly — there was a pattern to it, a slow, deep regularity that reminded me of nothing so much as the tidal behavior I'd catalogued in worlds with large moons and significant oceanic mass. Except the moon here was not large enough to account for this, and the pattern wasn't gravitational. It was — organic. As if the Wave itself had developed, over a very long time, something like a habit.

:Oscillation cycle: approximately 73 hours,: the Ghost confirmed. :Correspondence with biological rhythms in dominant species: significant. Powered individuals' entanglement signatures show synchronized adaptation to oscillation cycle. This pattern is not present in my survey records for any previous iteration.:

"You're sure."

:I am sure.:

I hovered and thought about this.

In most iterations, the relationship between powered individuals and the Prime Wave is one-directional: the individuals draw from the Wave, the Wave is affected by the drawing, the drawing eventually destabilizes the Wave if it goes on long enough. This is the bug. This is what I've been cleaning up for longer than this planet has had complex life. The Builders designed the experiment to let life find its own way, and life found its way to the Prime Wave, and the connection was never supposed to be that strong, and here we are, iteration after iteration, world after world, the same ending with minor variations in the middle.

The synchronization the Ghost was describing was not that. That was not life drawing from the Wave. That was — something more like a conversation. A negotiation, maybe. The Wave oscillates, and the life here has, over however many generations it took, learned to oscillate with it. To moderate its own use in response to the Wave's own patterns. To give back something like what it takes.

I had never seen this before.

:Shall I update the survey classification?: the Ghost asked.

"What's the current classification?"

:Class 7. Life present, Prime Wave entanglement advanced, instability index critical.:

I thought about the oscillation. I thought about the word *critical*. :What's the actual instability index reading?:

A pause. :4.2,: the Ghost said.

"The threshold for Class 7 is?"

:4.0.:

"So we're 0.2 above threshold."

:Correct.:

"And the trend?"

Another pause, slightly longer. :Stable,: the Ghost said, in the tone of something reporting a result it hadn't expected. :The insta-

bility index has been stable at 4.1 to 4.3 for the last — the survey data only goes back to my arrival, but extrapolating from Wave behavior patterns — approximately forty local years.:

I floated above the city and looked at the dark water of the harbor and the broken reflections of lights and the emergency vehicles that were still wrapping up whatever had happened on Mercer Avenue.

Forty years of stable 4.2.

The iterations I'd burned had been averaging 6.8 at the point of intervention. Several had been above 9. The highest I'd recorded was an 11.4, which had been a world that had managed to develop powered individuals in three distinct species simultaneously, which the Builders had not modeled for and which had produced a Prime Wave interaction so chaotic that the burn had taken four times longer than standard.

This world was at 4.2. And it had been at 4.2 for forty years.

"Update the classification," I said. "Flag it as anomalous. Extended survey parameters, no action threshold, indefinite duration."

:That classification doesn't exist in the standard protocol.:

"Create it."

The Ghost processed this for .007 seconds, which is a very long time for the Ghost. :Done,: it said. :I've created a classification entry: Extended Anomalous Survey, Action Deferred. I note this will appear as a non-standard entry in any Authority administrative audit.:

"Note it," I said. "Don't flag it."

:Understood.:

I descended.



Not to the city — not yet. I stopped at two hundred meters, still incorporeal, and shifted my attention to the residual activity on Mercer Avenue, where the emergency vehicles were finishing up

and a group of figures in tactical gear was loading into a van. The Prime Wave residue around them was — interesting. Several distinct signatures, all of them relatively deep, all of them doing the thing that powered signatures in this iteration did, which was the synchronized oscillation pattern, the conversation with the Wave. But one of them was different.

:The figure on the right,; the Ghost said, anticipating my attention. :Second from the van.:

I looked.

The figure was medium height, and moving with the careful economy of someone whose body hurt and who wasn't going to let that show. The Prime Wave signature around this one was unlike the others — not deeper exactly, but different in kind. More deliberate. The entanglement here had the quality of something that had been managed for a very long time, controlled, kept deliberately contained. Like a river with banks that had been built and maintained and reinforced over years of practice.

:The signature is consistent with long-term voluntary suppression of Prime Wave entanglement,; the Ghost said. :This individual has been moderating their own connection for an extended period. Estimated duration: decades.:

I watched the figure get into the van. Something about the way he moved — the carefulness that was trying not to be caution — made me think of the word *cost*. Whatever this person had been doing to themselves for decades, it had cost something. I filed this.

:The group's Prime Wave signatures are recovering from an elevated state,; the Ghost continued. :Consistent with recent powered activity. The oscillation synchronization is stronger in the aftermath — they appear to be settling back into the Wave's rhythm after a period of heightened use.:

"They do it automatically," I said.

:There is no indication of deliberate effort in the resynchronization pattern,; the Ghost confirmed. :It appears to be reflexive.:

I watched the van pull away. Its headlights swept across the wet

street and the reflection broke and reformed. I traced the van's likely route through the Ghost's mapping data without quite deciding to, noting that it was heading northwest, toward the industrial district, toward a building I hadn't specifically surveyed yet.

Not because I intended to follow it.

I watched it until it turned a corner and the headlights disappeared.



The broader survey took three local days, which is fast by my standards — I've spent months on pre-burn surveys in complex iterations, though those surveys were generally looking for the cleanest intervention point rather than trying to understand what made the iteration worth understanding. Different questions produce different survey parameters.

What I found:

The powered population of this iteration was approximately what the Ghost's initial scan suggested — significant, globally distributed, higher density in urban centers. The entanglement signatures were consistent across geography: deep, deliberate in a way that felt evolutionary rather than designed, synchronized with the Wave's oscillation cycle in the reflexive manner I'd observed in the team on Mercer Avenue. The signature I'd come to think of as *the conversation* was everywhere. Every powered individual I surveyed, on every continent, was having some version of it — a constant, largely unconscious negotiation with the energy source their abilities derived from.

The Wave was responding.

This was the part that kept stopping me. Not just that the life here had adapted to the Wave — that's remarkable enough, but I could construct a model for how it might have happened over long enough timescales. What I couldn't construct a clean model for was the Wave itself showing signs of adaptation in return. The oscillation

pattern wasn't natural. Or rather, it was natural now, after however many generations of this negotiation had shaped it, but the Ghost's analysis of the underlying Wave structure suggested that the oscillation had developed in response to the life here, not before it.

The Wave had learned to breathe with them.

:This is without precedent in my survey records,: the Ghost confirmed, when I asked it to check. :The Prime Wave in all previous iterations exhibits baseline behavior that is unaffected by biological entanglement at any scale. The modification of the oscillation pattern in this iteration represents a novel interaction type.:

"Novel," I said.

:Novel,: the Ghost agreed.

I was sitting on a rooftop at this point — still incorporeal, technically, though I'd descended to about thirty meters and the incorporeal state was feeling increasingly like a formality. Below me, Harbor City was doing its daytime things: traffic, commerce, the ordinary human business of getting from one place to another and accomplishing tasks and having conversations that mattered to them and didn't matter to anyone else, which is the thing that's true of essentially all conversations everywhere and which I have spent a long time not thinking about.

The Ghost had located the team from Mercer Avenue — the van, the building in the industrial district, the name they operated under. Special Powers Unit. I'd reviewed the Ghost's collected data on them: the incident last night, the public record, a personnel file summary compiled from publicly available sources. The man with the suppressed signature was named Reyes. He led the team. He had been managing his own Prime Wave connection for what the Ghost estimated to be thirty-plus years, ever since something had happened that wasn't fully documented in the public record but which had clearly been significant enough to make him decide, at whatever age he'd been, that he wasn't going to be what the Wave could make him.

I found this interesting in a way I didn't have a clean category for.

There was also a woman named Chandrasekhar whose gravity

manipulation signature was the most precisely calibrated I'd seen in this iteration — not the most powerful, but the most controlled, with a specificity that suggested long practice and hard-won self-knowledge. And a man named Webb whose signature was the warmest, if a Prime Wave entanglement signature can be said to have a temperature, which is not a scientifically defensible claim, but which is what I keep thinking when I look at it.

I was looking at these signatures when the Ghost said: :Activity detected.:

"Where?"

:Directorate facility. South waterfront, sub-level complex. Prime Wave entanglement signatures consistent with a powered gathering. Multiple individuals. One signature is — anomalous.:

I turned my attention south.

The anomalous signature was coming from a building that registered, on the Ghost's map, as a defunct shipping company. The signature itself was — I spent a moment analyzing it, because I hadn't encountered anything quite like it before, and I've encountered a great deal. It was human, clearly — it had the Wave-conversation quality of all the signatures in this iteration. But the entanglement was reaching, actively, in a way the others weren't. Like a hand extended into the Prime Wave and probing the edges of it, looking for something.

:The signature is consistent with what would be produced by an individual whose primary powered ability relates to quantum entanglement analysis,; the Ghost said. :I note this is speculative — I do not have a precedent category for this specific signature type.:

"Someone who can sense the Wave," I said.

:Approximately,; the Ghost agreed.

I hovered above Harbor City and considered this.

The Wave-conversation I'd been watching was reflexive. Unconscious. The powered individuals in this iteration were doing it without knowing they were doing it, the way a person breathes without thinking about breathing. What I was seeing from the anom-

alous signature in the sub-level complex was different: it was intentional. This person — whoever was producing that signature — was *looking at the Wave*. Examining it. Trying to understand it.

Which meant that somewhere in a basement in Harbor City, there was a human being who was asking, in their own fumbling way, approximately the same question I had spent three days trying to answer.

This should not have been interesting to me.

It was interesting to me.

:Recommend continuing survey of Directorate facility,: the Ghost said. :Signature density suggests organized powered group. Mission protocol for organized powered groups—:

"I know the protocol," I said.

:The protocol recommends assessment for Prime Wave impact and intervention threshold calculation.:

"I know what the protocol recommends."

The Ghost waited.

"Continue the survey," I said. "Flag the anomalous signature for ongoing monitoring. Note its specific characteristics — I want to be able to identify it again."

:Done,: the Ghost said. :And the intervention threshold calculation?:

I watched the city below me. The harbor. The broken reflections. The building on the south waterfront with its defunct shipping company signage and its very active sub-level.

"Deferred," I said.

:For how long?:

I thought about forty years of stable 4.2. I thought about the Wave learning to breathe. I thought about a man named Reyes who had been managing his own connection for decades with the careful precision of someone who'd looked at what he could become and decided, quietly, to become something else instead.

"Pending further data," I said.

The Ghost filed this under *Extended Anomalous Survey, Action*

Deferred, which was a classification that hadn't existed four days ago and now had three entries in it, and which I suspected was going to keep growing.

Below me, Harbor City went about its morning.

The Wave breathed in. The Wave breathed out.

I watched.

CHAPTER 4

SPECIAL POWERS UNIT

THE CALL CAME in at 11:47 AM on a Thursday, which Carla Reyes would later identify as the specific moment her week stopped being merely bad and became something she'd need a different word for.

She was in the SPU's equipment room, which she was using as a temporary office because the actual office — a generous term for what was essentially a repurposed storage closet with a desk in it — was being used by Blaine to conduct what he'd described as "a sensitive phone call" in a tone that made clear he didn't want to explain further and that she'd decided not to push. She had a folding table, a chair that had been fine three years ago and had since developed opinions about her posture, and a cup of coffee that had started the morning hot and was now expressing a different philosophy entirely.

She was reading the perimeter protocol review that David had produced, which was thorough in the way all of David's documents were thorough: precise, well-organized, and structured with the implicit understanding that the person reading it would take it seri-

ously, because David Reyes had never once in his professional life written something he didn't intend to be taken seriously. The new perimeter protocol was good. She'd made two notes in the margin and circled a third section that she wanted to discuss, not because she disagreed with it but because she wanted to understand the specific reasoning behind the civilian buffer expansion, because understanding the specific reasoning was how you made sure the protocol actually worked instead of just looking like it worked.

She was reaching for her pen when her communicator went off.

"Reyes," she said.

"Ultrasonic." The voice was Harbor City dispatch, a woman named Sandra who had been working the powered-incident channel for eight years and had therefore developed the specific vocal quality of someone who had heard everything and was no longer surprised by any of it, but who maintained a professional commitment to conveying urgency when urgency was warranted. Right now, Sandra's voice had urgency in it. "We've got a Category 3 manifestation at the Riverside Mall. Powered individual, seventeen-year-old male, unstable flight. He's in the main atrium, approximately forty feet up."

Carla was already standing. "Injuries?"

"Not yet. But he's radiating something — we're getting reports of electronic failures in a fifty-foot radius. Mall security's communicators are down. Sprinkler system went off on the second level. We've got roughly two hundred civilians in the building, and they are not calmly evacuating."

"ETA on SPU?" Carla was moving toward the equipment room door, tucking her communicator against her shoulder, reaching for the tactical vest on the rack near the entrance.

"You're the first call. Commander Reyes is en route from the city council meeting — he says twelve minutes."

Twelve minutes. The mall was eight from their current location if Blaine pushed it, which he would. "Tell Sultana and Stratosphere we roll in ninety seconds," she said. "Where's Stratosphere?"

"Roof," Sandra said.

Of course he was. "I'll get him. Tell Sultana."

She went up the stairs at a pace that was not quite running, because running up stairs in a building with uncertain structural integrity was something David had specifically noted in the equipment room safety protocol as inadvisable, and she'd been the one who'd edited that section, and also she was not going to run up stairs like she was panicking because she wasn't panicking. She was moving with purpose.

Marcus was on the roof doing what Marcus did on the roof, which was sitting on the edge with his legs hanging over the side, eating a sandwich, looking at the harbor. He was the only person Carla knew who found eating on the edge of a six-story building actively relaxing. She'd asked him about it once and he'd said the height helped him think, and she'd said about what, and he'd said *things*, and that had been the end of the conversation.

"Mall," she said. "Manifestation. Kid, unstable flight, electronics disruption. Let's go."

Marcus was up before she finished the sentence — the sandwich was gone, she didn't see where, possibly he'd just crushed it — and he was already moving toward the roof access with the particular velocity of a large man who was, in Sultana's memorable phrase, much faster than he had any right to be given his square footage.

"How old?" he said.

"Seventeen."

He said something under his breath that she didn't catch. She didn't ask him to repeat it. She knew what it meant.

The Riverside Mall was a regional shopping center that had been significant in the 1990s and had since achieved a kind of stubborn commercial persistence, the kind that outlasts the stores that made it relevant and fills the resulting gaps with phone case kiosks and

pop-up vitamin supplement operations and, apparently, the occasional powered crisis. It had a central atrium with a glass ceiling three stories up and a fountain at the ground level that was currently not running because the water had been shut off by facilities management thirty seconds after the first report, which Carla noted as an example of someone making a good decision quickly, which she always noted because it didn't happen as often as it should.

What was happening forty feet up was this:

A boy — thin, dark-haired, in jeans and a gray hoodie with something written on it that she couldn't read from this angle — was hovering in the middle of the atrium with the specific body language of someone who was not hovering on purpose. He was shaking. His arms were out at an angle that suggested he was trying to stabilize himself and didn't know how. Below him, the fountain basin and the decorative planters and the food court seating area had been pushed back in a rough circle, tables and chairs and potted ficus trees displaced outward by whatever field he was generating, and the radius of that displacement was what was giving Carla the most concern because it was larger than Sandra's estimate and it was getting larger.

The electronic failures were visible. Display screens in every storefront within range had gone dark. The automatic doors at the main entrance had frozen open. A mobility scooter near the fountain had simply stopped, its owner looking at it with the expression of someone who had been having a very different Thursday.

The two hundred civilians Sandra had estimated were, in fact, not calmly evacuating. Approximately half of them had made it to the exits and were doing the thing that people do when they're technically not in danger but can see danger from where they're standing: they were stopped, watching, filming on phones, getting in each other's way. The other half were in various stages of deciding whether to move toward the exits or stay and watch, which is a human behavioral pattern that Carla had long since stopped being

surprised by and had simply incorporated into her response planning as a constant variable.

Sultana was already there when Carla arrived — she'd taken her own vehicle and beaten the van by forty-five seconds, which was either a comment on Sultana's driving or the van's route, possibly both. She was standing near the ground-level entrance to the atrium, not in the disruption radius, watching the boy with the focused attention she gave to problems before she started solving them.

"His name is Danny," Sultana said, when Carla reached her. "Security guard got it from his student ID before his radio went down. He was in the food court — witnesses say he just went up. No warning, no escalation, just up."

Carla looked at the boy. Danny. The hoodie said something about a school she didn't recognize. His shoes — she always looked at the shoes, she couldn't have said exactly why — were the kind of expensive sneakers that seventeen-year-old boys cared very much about and that cost more than they should, and one of them was untied, and the lace was floating slightly in the field he was generating, and for some reason that detail was the one that landed.

"First manifestation?" she said.

"Probably. Mall security says they've had no prior incidents with this individual. He's not in the Federal registry." Sultana paused. "He's scared."

Carla looked at his face. He was forty feet up and the angle wasn't perfect but she could see enough. Yeah. He was scared in the specific way of someone who had discovered, very recently, that their body was doing something they'd never agreed to, and who had not yet arrived at the point of understanding whether this was something that could be stopped.

"Who's going up?" Carla said.

"I was thinking I'd talk to him," Sultana said.

Carla looked at her. This was not what she'd expected Sultana to say. Sultana's approach to powered incidents was generally to solve the physics first and address the human element once the physics

was no longer actively dangerous, which was a methodology Carla understood even when she didn't entirely agree with it. "You want to talk to him," she said.

"I want to talk to him," Sultana confirmed.

"Your communicator will go down inside the radius."

"I know."

"Which means you'll be in there without contact."

"I know that too."

Carla thought about the protocol. The protocol for uncontrolled manifestation events prioritized physical stabilization of the powered individual first, followed by civilian evacuation, followed by assessment. Talking to the individual was technically in the protocol — it was in the protocol as a de-escalation option for conscious, communicative subjects — but it wasn't the first step.

She looked at the boy. The untied shoelace floating.

"Stratosphere," she said, into her communicator. He was outside, managing the civilian evacuation flow. "Hold position. We're attempting contact first."

"Copy," Marcus said.

"Priya," she said, because she used Sultana's name when she meant it specifically, not the codename. "You have five minutes before David gets here and we go to standard protocol. Use them."

Sultana was already moving.

She walked into the disruption radius without hesitation, which Carla watched from the edge with the specific quality of attention she reserved for situations she couldn't directly affect. The electronic failures hit Sultana the way they hit everything — her communicator died, the display on her tactical vest went dark, the GPS locator built into her gear went offline. None of this appeared to concern her. She kept walking.

The boy — Danny — saw her when she was about twenty feet

below him. His body language changed: the arms came in slightly, the shaking intensified, and the displacement field pulsed outward in a ring that moved two more chairs and cracked the glass on a pretzel stand. Carla took an involuntary step back.

Sultana stopped. She looked up at him.

She said something. Carla couldn't hear it — too far, too much noise from the crowd behind her, the boy's field doing something to the acoustics. But she could see Sultana's posture: relaxed, not performing relaxed, actually relaxed, which Carla knew the difference between because she'd been watching Sultana for four years and had learned to read it. Sultana's hands were at her sides. Her chin was up. She was looking directly at Danny the way you look at someone when you want them to understand that you're actually seeing them, not just the situation they're in.

The boy said something back. Another pulse from the field, smaller this time.

Sultana said something else. She pointed at her own chest, not at him. Then at the floor. Carla interpreted this as: *I'm going to come closer, just to here, okay?* And she moved — maybe six feet forward, very slow, and then stopped and waited.

The field pulsed again. Smaller.

Carla was aware that David was now standing next to her. She hadn't heard him arrive. He'd done what he always did when he arrived at an active scene: assessed the situation completely before announcing himself, and then materialized at her elbow with the air of someone who had always been there.

"Sultana's approach?" he said, quietly.

"Her call," Carla said.

He watched for a moment. Below them — or above them, technically, since Danny was the one who was elevated — Sultana had said something that had produced a visible response: the boy's arms came down, slowly, from the stabilizing-position to something closer to his sides. The field pulsed, but it didn't expand.

"Smaller," David said.

"Yeah," Carla said.

They watched. The crowd behind them had gotten quieter in the way crowds get when something is happening that might resolve without being catastrophic, and the possibility of non-catastrophe has focused their attention.

Sultana was talking. She'd moved another few feet forward. Danny was looking at her with the expression of someone who had not expected to be talked to — who had expected, possibly, to be yelled at, or managed, or contained — and wasn't sure what to do with being talked to instead.

The field contracted.

Not gone — still there, still knocking out electronics in a twenty-foot radius, still doing whatever it was doing to the acoustic environment. But smaller. Measurably, visibly smaller.

"Huh," David said.

Carla looked at him. He was watching Sultana with the expression she recognized as his *noting something* expression — careful, filing, the look of a man cataloguing a piece of information he intended to use later. He was watching Sultana the way she watched the protocols: looking for what worked and why.

"She's good at this," Carla said.

"I know," David said. And then, slightly quieter: "I didn't know she was this good at this."

Below, Sultana had reached a point approximately fifteen feet below the boy. She'd sat down — just sat down, cross-legged on the atrium floor amid the displaced chairs and planters — and was looking up at him. The posture said: *I'm not going anywhere. I'm not a threat. I'm just here.* The boy was looking at her. His shaking had diminished to something that was more like trembling, which is a different thing, which is the thing that happens after the acute fear has passed and the body is figuring out what to do with itself.

"He's coming down," Carla said.

Not fast. Not controlled, exactly — the descent was uneven, with a drift to the left that Sultana tracked with her eyes and, once,

her hand, pointing gently right. But it was down. He was choosing down.

He landed badly — the last four feet were more of a controlled fall than a landing — and Sultana was there, not grabbing him, just present, one hand on his shoulder, steady. The field contracted sharply and the electronics in the atrium came back online all at once: display screens flickering to life, the main entrance doors cycling, somewhere in the back a PA system resuming mid-announcement.

The boy sat down on the floor. Sultana sat down next to him.

David was already coordinating on his communicator — Federal notification, powered youth resources, a medical assessment team he'd called twelve minutes ago and which had just arrived in the parking lot. He was doing four things simultaneously and making each one look like the only thing he was doing, which was his version of the same skill Sultana had just demonstrated thirty feet up.

Carla watched Sultana and Danny sitting on the floor of the atrium, surrounded by displaced furniture and dead phone cases and the resumed noise of a mall attempting to return to normal, and thought about the word *seventeen*.



The debrief happened in the van, on the way back, which was where most of their real debriefs happened — the official ones were in the office, forms and documentation and Sandra's incident number, but the ones where they actually talked about what had happened were in the van, which had the advantage of being moving and therefore finite.

"Where did you learn to do that?" Marcus asked. He was eating something — she hadn't seen him acquire it, but he had it, some kind of protein bar — and he was asking the question with genuine curiosity rather than professional interest, which was a Marcus distinction she'd learned to track.

Sultana looked out the window. "Do what?"

"The sitting down. The pointing." He gestured vaguely with the protein bar. "All of it."

"I just talked to him."

"You sat on the floor of a mall and talked a scared kid down from forty feet up," Marcus said. "That's not just talking."

"It worked, didn't it?"

"That's not what I asked."

Sultana was quiet for a moment. Carla, in the front passenger seat, didn't turn around. She'd learned, over time, that Sultana answered questions she was given space to answer and redirected questions she wasn't. You didn't push. You just left the space.

"I knew someone who needed someone to sit on the floor with them once," Sultana said finally. "Nobody did. I figured — I don't know. I figured the least I could do is know how to do it, in case it came up."

Nobody said anything.

"It came up," Marcus said, eventually.

"Yeah," Sultana said.

David's voice came from the front: "I'm putting a note in the incident report. About the approach."

Carla looked at him. He was watching the road ahead with the focused non-expression he wore when he was thinking about something he didn't intend to explain yet.

"What kind of note?" Sultana asked.

"The kind that says it worked," he said. "And that we should know how to do it on purpose, not just when someone happens to know how."

Sultana looked at the back of his head. Then she looked out the window. "Okay," she said.

"I want you to write something up," he said. "Whatever you did in there. As much of it as you can articulate."

"David, I don't know if I can—"

"As much as you can articulate," he repeated. "Even if it's not all of it. Even if it's just the part about sitting down."

Sultana didn't say anything for a moment. Then: "Fine."

"Thank you."

The van drove. Marcus finished his protein bar and was, briefly, not eating anything, which was an unusual state for him. The city moved past the windows in the early afternoon way of a city that doesn't know what happened in the mall but is beginning, through the slow diffusion of phones and word of mouth, to find out.

Carla watched the buildings go by and thought about Danny, whose last name she'd gotten from the Federal notification form — Osei. Danny Osei, seventeen, who had gone up when he hadn't meant to and come back down because someone had sat on the floor with him.

She made a note in her phone: *Follow up. Youth services — what's available, what's not.*

The chair opinion about her posture resumed as she shifted, and she ignored it.

The van smelled like old coffee and the faint ozone trace that Carla's power left when she'd been operating recently, which was a smell Marcus had once described as "what would happen if a thunderstorm decided to be about something."

She'd taken that as a compliment.

She still was.

CHAPTER 5

THE DIRECTORATE

THE VIDEO CALL connected at precisely 8 PM, which meant the CEO had been waiting for it, which he always was, which was itself a kind of power — the power of the person who is never the one who's late, who is never the one adjusting the camera or apologizing for background noise or appearing with slightly wrong lighting. The CEO's audio was always clean. His connection was always stable. The black rectangle of his video feed was always exactly the same shade of black, which Vivienne had eventually concluded was intentional.

Tonight there were four of them on the call: herself, Delesante, and two regional directors she'd met twice in person and dealt with primarily as voices on a screen. Hargrove, from the European operation, who had a background in financial crime and approached the Directorate's activities with the demeanor of a man who found powered crime less interesting than the money it could generate, and who was therefore sometimes useful and always watching. Paz, from the South American cell network, who was more operationally expe-

rienced than either of them and who had the specific quality of stillness that Vivienne associated with people who had been in genuinely dangerous situations and had decided, afterward, to be economical about everything.

"The monitor works," the CEO said, without preamble. He always opened with a statement of what he already knew, which served two purposes: it established that he was informed, and it told you, by what he chose to state first, what he considered most important. "Anton. Tell me something I don't know."

Delesante, to his credit, did not visibly react to the fact that his project's primary finding had been reduced to a known quantity before he could present it. He adjusted his glasses, which he did when he was regrouping, and said: "The entanglement signatures are individually distinct in ways that have practical applications beyond simple detection. We can identify specific individuals. Track movement. Potentially predict behavioral patterns based on power-use signatures."

"Useful," Hargrove said, in the tone of someone calculating conversion rates.

"The entangler," the CEO said. "Status."

"Troll has the primary assembly at sixty percent," Delesante said. "The isotope acquisition—"

"I know about the acquisition. The timeline."

"Two weeks to operational prototype, assuming successful acquisition."

"One week," the CEO said.

Delesante's jaw tightened by the amount it always tightened when the CEO moved his timelines. "The calibration process alone—"

"One week, Anton."

Paz said nothing. Hargrove was writing something, or appeared to be writing something. Vivienne watched the black rectangle.

"The field-of-effect parameters," she said.

A pause from the black rectangle. Not a long one — the CEO's

pauses were precisely calibrated — but a specific one. The kind that meant he had been expecting her to say something and was now waiting to see how much of it she was going to say. "Go ahead," he said.

"At scale, the entanglement field isn't fully containable," she said. She'd decided, before the call, exactly how to phrase this: not as a problem, because the CEO responded poorly to problems without solutions, but as a variable requiring management. "The effect will extend beyond the target individual. How far beyond depends on power input and environmental factors we haven't fully modeled yet."

"How far beyond, worst case?" Hargrove asked.

"Unknown," Vivienne said. "The theoretical upper limit, if power input exceeded safe thresholds without controlled shutdown, would affect anyone within the field's maximum expansion radius." She paused. "We don't know what that radius is."

The silence on the call had a specific texture. Paz was looking at something off-screen. Hargrove had stopped writing.

"Anton," the CEO said.

"It's a calibration issue," Delesante said, with the confidence of a man who believed what he was saying and had therefore not fully considered what it would mean if he was wrong. "Controlled environment, controlled power input, single-subject protocol. The field expansion is manageable."

"In a controlled environment," Vivienne said.

"Which is where we'll be operating," Delesante said, looking at her with the specific expression that meant he was aware she was doing something and wasn't sure what it was and didn't like not knowing.

"And if something interrupts the controlled environment," Vivienne said. "Mid-procedure."

"That won't happen."

"If it did."

A longer pause. Delesante looked at the camera. "Then we'd

initiate emergency shutdown and accept the field expansion as a tolerable incident."

"And everyone in range would be enhanced," Vivienne said.

"Temporarily."

"We don't know that it would be temporary."

Delesante opened his mouth and closed it. He'd done the math on this, she knew — she'd seen his notes, the pages of calculations he generated the way other people generated conversation, the dense notation that covered every surface he worked near. He'd done the math and the math had an uncomfortable answer and he'd looked at the answer and decided the probability was low enough to categorize as a boundary condition and move on. She'd watched him do this. She'd watched him do this specifically.

"Noted," the CEO said, in the tone that closed a topic. "Proceed with single-subject protocol. Controlled environment. Vivienne, I want you in the room."

"I intend to be," she said.

"Good." A beat. "The test subject question. Anton."

"We have a candidate," Delesante said. "Powered individual, seventeen, minimal existing ability — basic flight, limited control. Low profile. No Federal registration as of today's check."

Vivienne looked at her notes. She'd pulled the candidate file herself, two days ago, after Delesante had flagged him. She'd read it the way she read everything: thoroughly, with attention to what wasn't there as much as what was. Seventeen. Living in a group home on the city's east side. No family listed. Recently manifested, based on the recency of the one incident report she'd found in the city's powered-incident log.

There was a note in the incident report, at the bottom, in a different handwriting from the rest of the form. *Follow up. Youth services — what's available, what's not.* Someone had written it by hand and someone else had typed the formal version and the handwritten note had been scanned along with the form, clearly an over-

sight, and it was the kind of detail that told you something about the person who'd written it.

"He's been flagged by the SPU," she said. "There may be follow-up contact from that direction."

"May be," Delesante said. "Speculative."

"The note in the incident file is specific," she said. "Someone on that team intends to pursue youth services resources for this individual. If we move on him before that contact is established, we have a window. If we wait—"

"Then we move quickly," Delesante said. "Which is what I've been saying."

"I'm not objecting to moving quickly," Vivienne said. "I'm recommending we move *carefully* and quickly. They're not the same thing."

The CEO said: "One week." And then: "Hargrove, the European isotope contact — I'll send you details after this call. Paz, the support logistics we discussed. That's all."

The call ended with the efficiency of a man who considered goodbyes a waste of bandwidth.



Troll's workspace occupied a sub-level room that had been, at various points in the building's history, a boiler room, a file storage facility, and briefly — based on certain markings on the wall that no one had explained to Vivienne's satisfaction — something that might have been a speakeasy. It had the permanent smell of industrial solvent and warm electronics, and every available surface was covered with things that Troll had built, was building, or had built and subsequently decided needed to be different.

Troll himself was a small man in his late thirties who wore the expression of someone who had been frequently underestimated and had arrived, at some point, at the decision to find this convenient rather than insulting. His power — the compulsory jury-rigged aesthetic — mani-

fested in everything he touched within approximately twenty minutes of him touching it, which meant his workspace looked like the fever dream of a particularly ambitious salvage operation, and also meant that everything in it worked significantly better than it had any right to.

The quantum entangler occupied the center of the main workbench.

It was, true to form, a magnificent mess. Vivienne could identify components from three different generations of laboratory equipment, at least two consumer electronics she didn't expect to see in this context, and something that appeared to be the internal workings of a high-end espresso machine, which she didn't ask about. The whole assembly was roughly the size of a large microwave and connected to a secondary power unit via cables that looked improvised and were, she knew, precisely engineered.

"Show me the field parameters," she said.

Troll pulled up a display — the monitor itself had the Troll aesthetic, an old screen in a new frame with additional components attached to three of its four sides for reasons she'd stopped asking about — and walked her through the numbers. She'd reviewed them before, but she wanted to see them again with fresh attention, specifically the sections she'd flagged.

"This value," she said, pointing. "The field expansion coefficient."

"Yeah," Troll said.

"It's not fixed."

"No," Troll said. "It's variable. Depends on the subject's baseline entanglement depth, the power input rate, ambient Wave conditions—"

"What are ambient Wave conditions?"

Troll looked at her. He had the expression of someone deciding how much to explain and to whom. "The Prime Wave isn't static," he said, slowly, in the way he spoke when he was translating something complex into something he thought she could use. "It moves. Most of the time the movement is minor — background noise, basically. But it has cycles. Slower rhythms. If the entangler runs during a high-

amplitude phase of one of those cycles, the field expansion coefficient goes up."

Vivienne looked at the display. "How far up?"

"Depends on the amplitude."

"Worst case."

Troll was quiet for a moment. "Significantly," he said.

"How significantly?"

He pulled up a different screen. Numbers that she understood in outline and not in detail, but she didn't need the detail; she needed the shape of it. The shape of it was: larger than the room they were planning to use. Potentially much larger.

"Does the Professor know this?" she said.

Troll's expression did something noncommittal. "He has the same data I have."

Which was not the same as yes. Vivienne noted this.

"The shutdown mechanism," she said.

"Manual," Troll said. "Single point, direct interface. There's a—" he gestured at something on the primary assembly that looked like a repurposed tablet interface—"here. Cut the power input, field collapses within thirty seconds."

"And if the shutdown mechanism is inaccessible."

"Why would it be inaccessible?"

"If something interrupted the controlled environment," she said, using the phrase she'd used on the call, the phrase that had made Delesante look at her like she was catastrophizing and that she had not, in fact, been catastrophizing. "If the room was breached mid-procedure. If the operator was incapacitated."

Troll looked at the entangler. Then at Vivienne. "Then you'd have a problem," he said.

"Yes," Vivienne said. "We would."

She looked at the entangler for another moment. At the field expansion coefficient. At the shutdown mechanism with its single point of failure. At the espresso machine components, which she still didn't understand but which were probably essential.

"Build me a secondary shutdown," she said. "Remote. Different power source. Something that works if the primary interface is inaccessible."

Troll considered this. "The Professor approved the current design."

"I'm approving a modification," she said. "Remote secondary shutdown. Independent power. Can you do it in a week?"

He looked at the assembly. "Four days," he said.

"Good." She turned to leave.

"Moreau," he said.

She stopped.

"The coefficient," he said. "In a high-amplitude Wave cycle, worst case — it's not just the room." He paused. "It's not just the building."

She stood with her back to him for a moment, looking at the wall of the corridor beyond the doorway, which was concrete and unremarkable and had, near the light switch, a scuff mark that reminded her of nothing in particular.

"Four days," she said, and left.



She found Delesante in the Green Room, alone, which was unusual — Delesante in the Green Room alone after 9 PM meant he'd run out of people to talk to and had therefore returned to the place where he'd last been having a conversation, the way a dog returns to where it dropped something. He was at the whiteboard, but not writing. Standing in front of it, looking at his own notes with the expression of a man doing math in his head that he didn't want anyone else to see.

She stood in the doorway.

"The CEO moved the timeline," he said, without turning around.

"I know. I was on the call."

"A week is too fast."

"I know that too."

He turned around. He had the look he sometimes had late at night when the genius-brain had been running long enough that the edges of it were showing — a slight unfocus, not in his eyes exactly but around them, like a man looking at two things at once and not enjoying either of them. "You flagged the field parameters."

"Yes."

"You think I haven't thought about the field parameters."

"I think you've thought about them extensively," she said. "I think you've thought about them and arrived at a probability assessment that satisfies you and have moved on."

"The probability of an uncontrolled breach mid-procedure is—"

"Low," she said. "I know. I'm not arguing with your probability assessment."

"Then what are you arguing?"

She looked at him. "I'm not arguing," she said. "I'm managing. There's a difference."

He was quiet for a moment. The whiteboard had his timeline on it still, from the acquisition briefing, with her +5 (*contingency*) addition in the lower right corner. He looked at it.

"The remote shutdown," he said.

"Troll's building it."

A pause. "I would have approved it."

"I know," she said, which was generous, and she didn't entirely mean it, and from the slight shift in his expression he knew she didn't entirely mean it, and they had arrived, as they periodically did, at the particular equilibrium of two people who are using each other's competence and distrust each other's judgment and have found a working arrangement somewhere in the overlap of those two things.

"The test subject," he said. "The timing."

"We move in three days," she said. "Before the SPU follow-up has a chance to establish contact. Clean extraction, overnight, no footprint."

"The boy's at the group home on—"

"I know where he is," she said. "I have a team. Let me run it."

He looked at her for a moment with the expression that meant he was running the probability on whether to contest this and had arrived, correctly, at the answer no. "Fine," he said.

She nodded. She was turning to leave when he said, quieter than usual, without the aggressive certainty he used in meetings: "The field parameters. If it works — when it works — the enhancement is real. The additional entanglement is real. He'll have more than he started with."

She stopped. "Yes," she said.

"It's not nothing," he said. "What we're offering."

She thought about the incident report. The handwritten note in the margin. *Follow up. Youth services — what's available, what's not.* She thought about what it meant that someone at the SPU had written that note, and what it meant that the answer to what's available was, in her experience of seventeen-year-olds in group homes with newly manifested abilities and no Federal registration, not much.

"No," she said. "It's not nothing."

She left him with the whiteboard and his calculations and the particular quiet of a man who was brilliant enough to know exactly what he was doing and not quite wise enough to know what to do about it.



Mirage was in the corridor.

She was simply standing there, in the way she sometimes was — not doing anything, not going anywhere, just present in a space in a way that could be easy to miss if you weren't paying attention. Vivienne had learned to pay attention to Mirage in corridors.

"You heard that," Vivienne said.

"Some of it," Mirage said. "I wasn't trying to."

Vivienne looked at her. Lucia Santos was thirty-one years old, and her power was illusion — not simple visual tricks, but full-sense

fabrications convincing enough to fool powered perception, which meant she could make you see, hear, smell, and feel things that weren't there, and could make you not see, hear, smell, and feel things that were. The Directorate had recruited her eight months ago from a situation that her file described in clinical terms and that Vivienne, reading between those terms, had understood to involve someone using her ability against her against her will, which was the kind of thing that produced in a person either a very specific kind of damage or a very specific kind of clarity, and Mirage had arrived at the Directorate with the latter.

"The boy," Mirage said. "The test subject."

"Yes."

"He manifested three days ago."

"According to the incident report, yes."

"So he doesn't know yet," Mirage said. "What it is. What it's going to be."

"No," Vivienne said. "He doesn't."

Mirage looked at the wall. "I didn't know for two weeks," she said. "What mine was going to be. Whether I could control it. Whether it was going to—" she stopped. "Two weeks is a long time when you don't know."

Vivienne said nothing. She'd learned that Mirage said what she meant to say and stopped when she'd said it, and that adding anything to those pauses usually produced less than leaving them alone.

"The enhancement," Mirage said. "If it works. He'll be more powerful."

"That's the intent."

"But he won't know what to do with it." She looked at Vivienne. "He barely knows what to do with what he has."

"No," Vivienne said. "He won't know yet."

"Will someone teach him?"

Vivienne held Mirage's gaze for a moment. It was a question she recognized — not a challenge, not a test, just an actual question, the

kind that comes from someone who needed the answer to something once and didn't get it and still thinks about that.

"That's the plan," she said, which was not entirely a lie and was not entirely not one, and which she put in the category of things she intended to make true and therefore did not feel badly about saying.

Mirage nodded. She pushed off the wall and moved down the corridor toward the bunk room.

Vivienne watched her go.

Then she went to her office, and sat down, and opened the acquisition team logistics, and began to plan three days out.

The scuff mark near the light switch looked back at her.
She ignored it.

CHAPTER 6

SPECIAL POWERS UNIT

THE DIRECTORATE MOVED on the energy company at 11 PM on a Wednesday, which the Ghost flagged as operationally significant — mid-week, mid-month, the kind of timing that suggests a group that has studied response patterns and chosen the statistical valley between them. I had been monitoring the sub-level complex on the south waterfront for two days by then, watching the anomalous signature — the one that reached into the Prime Wave with deliberate intent, probing it the way a person probes a sore tooth, carefully, wanting to understand the shape of the pain — and I had developed, over those two days, a working theory about what the person producing it was trying to do.

The theory was not comforting.

:The target facility is registered as Harbor City Power and Light's Northern Distribution Hub,: the Ghost said. :Primary function: regional power grid management. Secondary designation: Federal critical infrastructure.:

"What do they want with a power grid hub?"

:Unknown. The facility contains no isotope stores consistent with the quantum monitor's operational requirements. However, the sub-level storage area contains—: a brief processing pause :—three cryogenic units registered under a Federal research grant from eight years ago. Contents: isotope samples acquired for quantum entanglement research, since defunded. The samples are still logged as stored but have not been inventoried in thirty-one months.:

I looked at the facility from above. It was a large, functional building on the edge of Harbor City's industrial waterfront, all concrete and chain-link and the kind of lighting that is designed to be sufficient rather than pleasant. The Prime Wave signatures inside it were baseline — non-powered staff, overnight shift, two security guards doing their rounds with the particular energy of people who have never had a shift where anything happened and have arrived at a settled conviction that this will continue indefinitely.

:Six Prime Wave signatures approaching from the southwest,: the Ghost said. :Two powered, four baseline. The powered signatures are—:

"I see them."

I recognized one of them. The light-absorption signature — deep, controlled, with the particular quality of something that has been refined over a long time into something very precise and very dangerous. The woman from the Directorate briefing I'd surveilled. Night Queen. The second powered signature was newer to me: a shimmer in the Wave, intermittent, there and not there in a way that I needed a moment to categorize.

:The second powered signature is consistent with localized perceptual field manipulation,: the Ghost said. :The individual appears to be actively modulating their Prime Wave connection in real time. Unusual level of conscious control.:

"Unusual," I agreed.

:The approach vector suggests prior reconnaissance of the facility,: the Ghost said. :Entry point appears to be the northeast service

entrance. Security rotation places both guards on the west side of the facility for the next eleven minutes.:

They'd done their homework. I noted this and filed it under the growing category of *things about the Directorate that suggest they are more organized than their current operational tier implies*, which was a category that had been accumulating entries at a rate I found increasingly relevant to my survey.

I could stop this.

I want to be precise about this, because imprecision here matters: I could stop this very easily. I could disrupt the Prime Wave connections of the six individuals below me in ways ranging from a mild disorientation to a complete loss of consciousness, and I could do it before they reached the service entrance, and they would wake up with headaches and no memory of the last thirty minutes and the isotopes would remain in their cryogenic units and this chain of events would not proceed. This was within my capability. It was not, technically, within my protocol — my protocol for this iteration was extended survey, action deferred — but the deviation would be minor and the rationale would be straightforward.

I didn't do it.

I want to be honest about why: I'm not entirely certain. There was a version of the reasoning that was procedural — I was still in survey phase, and intervention would compromise the data quality by introducing a variable. There was a version that was strategic — stopping this specific operation wouldn't stop the Directorate, and understanding the Directorate's capabilities was relevant to my assessment of this iteration's Prime Wave risk profile. Both of these are true. Both of them are also, I recognized, the kind of reasoning that sounds like a conclusion and is actually a justification.

The version of the reasoning I was least comfortable with was the simplest one: I wanted to see what would happen.

In seventy-two thousand iterations, I have wanted to see what would happen exactly never. You don't wonder what happens when your job is to make something specific happen. You assess. You act.

You move on. Wanting to see what would happen is the reasoning of a being who has started to think of an iteration as something other than a data point.

I had started to think of this iteration as something other than a data point.

I catalogued this fact and descended to two hundred meters to watch.



The Special Powers Unit arrived nine minutes after the Directorate's team entered the building.

Nine minutes was, the Ghost noted, faster than their documented average for this district. I noted this too. The fourth powered individual from the Federal Reserve incident — the one with the unknown field effect — was not among them. But the translocation signature was there: the particular fold in the Prime Wave that indicated instantaneous spatial displacement, dropping four signatures into the facility's loading bay with the specific energy of a capability that was becoming more precise through use.

They were getting better. I watched them move through the building with more coordination than I'd seen in the Federal Reserve footage, the Ghost's survey had captured — the sonic signature keeping pace with the gravity manipulation on a different vector, the tactical mind directing with short, specific signals that had the quality of a language developed between people who had been doing this together for a long time.

The fight, when it started, was fast and loud and complicated in the way all fights are complicated when more than four people are involved and some of them can do things that change the physical parameters of the engagement mid-action.

:Night Queen has deployed light absorption at maximum observable radius,: the Ghost said, with the neutral reporting tone it used

for everything. Visible light in the facility has been reduced to approximately three percent of baseline.

The building went dark.

Not completely — there were emergency systems on a separate circuit, and a few of those survived whatever Night Queen was doing to the photon density in the space, enough that I could still perceive the outlines of the engagement from above. But for the humans inside it, fighting in three percent light with the specific chaos of an active powered exchange, it was functionally dark, which meant it was functionally Night Queen's environment and nobody else's.

I watched the sonic signature stumble. The ability to manipulate sound waves requires, at some level, the ability to perceive the space the sound is moving through, and in near-total darkness that perception becomes imprecise. I watched the gravity manipulation reach — I could feel it, even from this distance, the confident, practiced reach of someone who knew their ability well — and then overcorrect, the darkness removing the visual feedback that calibrated the reach. Someone hit something they weren't aiming at. Someone hit someone on their own side — not hard, not with intent, but the specific consequence of fighting blind against an opponent who could see.

The translocation signature moved Ultrasonic, pulling her twenty feet back, out of the absorption radius, buying her time to reorient. The gravity signature — Sultana, the Ghost's records had her name — went very still in the Prime Wave. Went inward. I felt her entanglement with the Wave change quality: less reaching, more listening. Like someone who has lost one sense and is compensating with another.

Then she stopped trying to see and just pulled.

The pull was substantial enough that I felt it from two hundred meters up, which is not supposed to happen — I am not supposed to be able to feel the power outputs of individual humans from this altitude without actively scanning, but the pull was large and focused and moved the Prime Wave in a way that registered as unambiguous.

The object on the receiving end of the pull was a structural element of the building — she'd found something load-bearing in the dark, by feel, through the Wave, and had used it.

:Significant structural compromise to the facility's northeast wall,; the Ghost said. :This exceeds documented capability for the individual's signature by a margin of approximately—:

"I see it," I said.

Something had changed in her connection. The long-term calibration I'd noted in my initial survey — the careful, maintained control, the precision that spoke of years of deliberate practice — was still there, but underneath it something had loosened. As if the sustained pressure of the engagement had worn through a layer of deliberate restraint to something that had been there all along, something larger, that the restraint had been managing.

She'd torn a wall. She was surprised she'd torn a wall. I could feel the surprise in the Prime Wave, the specific quality of an entity encountering the edge of its own capability and discovering the edge was further out than expected.

I filed this under *things that are relevant to the instability assessment* and simultaneously under *things that I should have been tracking more closely*, which were two categories that were, I recognized, starting to overlap in ways that had implications for my survey methodology.

Night Queen retreated. The absorption radius contracted as she disengaged — light flooded back into the facility in the particular way of fluorescents resuming after a disruption, that brief flicker before they stabilize — and the SPU reformed. I counted them: four, all functional, none down. The Directorate team was also still operational, minus two non-powered soldiers who were no longer moving under their own power but were alive, their baseline Prime Wave signatures intact.

The non-powered signature I recognized as Night Queen's second-in-command — the other woman, the one who'd been in the briefing, the one who'd asked Troll about the field parameters — was

gone. She'd exfiltrated during the dark phase, taking the isotopes with her.

:The extraction appears to have been planned,: the Ghost noted. :The light absorption was a covering action rather than an offensive one. The primary objective was achieved during the engagement rather than before or after it.:

"She used the fight as a distraction," I said.

:Affirmative.:

I looked at the space where Night Queen's signature had been. She was three blocks away now and moving. The Ghost tracked her route against the city grid and projected three possible destinations, none of them the south waterfront facility. She was using a different exit than her entry, which meant she'd had multiple routes planned.

She'd left something behind, though. The Ghost caught it before I did — a small, flat object, data-bearing, the Prime Wave disturbance of active electronics in sleep mode. It was in the corner of the loading bay, in a shadow, in a position that was either an oversight or the opposite of an oversight.

:The object's position is inconsistent with accidental loss,: the Ghost said. :It is located in a shadow at the perimeter of the engagement zone, outside the area of active combat, in a position that would be visible to someone sweeping the scene post-engagement but not to someone engaged in active combat.:

"She left it on purpose," I said.

:That is the most consistent interpretation.:

I looked at the data chip — I could feel its electromagnetic signature from here, the small specific disturbance it made in the Wave — and thought about a woman who had built a secondary shutdown into her own plan without telling her partner, who managed a megalomaniac with the precision of someone who had long since decided that management was survival, who used her own team's fight as a deliberate distraction for her own deliberate act.

She left it on purpose.

She left it for someone specific.

I was not sure who, yet. I filed this under *the Directorate is more complicated than the data suggests* and descended another fifty meters.

The SPU team was in the loading bay, in the aftermath, doing what they did: cataloguing, reporting, being very specifically professional about the fact that they had just been in near-total darkness fighting people who could see in it and had come out intact, which was not something everyone would have managed.

The man with the suppressed signature — Reyes, the Ghost confirmed, David Reyes, the one who'd been managing his own connection for decades — was looking at the corner where the data chip was. Not directly at it. At the general area. He'd seen something, or felt something, or both.

He walked over.

He crouched down.

He looked at the data chip for a long moment without touching it, which was the correct instinct — you don't touch unknown technology left behind by powered operatives without knowing what it is — and then he did something I hadn't expected: he looked up.

Not at the ceiling. Not at the facility around him. At an angle. Slightly southwest, approximately two hundred meters up.

He looked at approximately where I was.

He couldn't see me. I was incorporeal and at altitude and there was nothing for him to see. The human visual system has a number of capabilities that exceed baseline expectation in powered individuals, but it does not extend to detecting incorporeal Authority entities at two hundred meters in low light. This is a documented fact. I have confirmed it in multiple surveys.

He looked at where I was for approximately four seconds.

Then he looked back at the data chip.

Then he stood up and called to his team and told them to log the

chip as evidence and not touch it and get the Federal contact on the line, and his voice had the specific quality of a person who is continuing to do the thing they're supposed to be doing while simultaneously doing something else entirely inside their own head.

He did not look up again.

I ascended to three hundred meters and told the Ghost to begin a detailed analysis of David Reyes's Prime Wave signature, with specific attention to the suppression mechanism and what it was suppressing.

:The suppression,: the Ghost said, after a moment, :is not uniform. There are — gaps. Points in the signature where the suppression thins. The gaps correspond to — I would characterize them as moments of heightened situational awareness. Heightened beyond what is consistent with baseline human cognition.:

"He's not fully suppressing," I said.

:He is suppressing the power expression,: the Ghost said. :He is not fully suppressing the underlying connection. When he is — the term that seems most applicable is *attuned* — when he is attuned to a situation, the connection speaks to him. He has learned to — not ignore it, but redirect it. Use it without using it.:

I thought about a man who had spent thirty years deciding not to be what the Prime Wave could make him, and had ended up, through that decision, becoming something different. Something that looked, from the outside, like an ordinary human being who was very good at his job.

I thought about a child asking me why I was so shiny, which I hadn't done yet — that was still ahead of me, in the linear time I was experiencing this iteration through — and I thought about what I would say.

I still didn't have a good answer.

:Activity detected,: the Ghost said. :South waterfront facility. The anomalous signature — the one that reaches into the Prime Wave deliberately — has activated at an elevated level.:

"He knows they got the isotopes," I said.

:The timing is consistent with that interpretation.:

I turned my attention south, where the reaching signature was burning brighter in the Wave, that deliberate, probing quality now sharpened with something that read — in the way that Prime Wave signatures sometimes read, imprecisely, suggestively — like excitement. Like a mind that had just received confirmation of something it had been building toward for a long time, and was already running the calculations for the next step.

I thought about the field parameters I'd heard discussed in the Green Room. I thought about the field expansion coefficient, and Troll's careful non-answer, and the secondary shutdown that the woman in the corridor had commissioned without telling her partner.

I thought about the boy named Danny, who didn't know what he was going to be yet, and the handwritten note in the margin of his incident report.

I told the Ghost to update the instability index.

:Current reading: 4.3,: it said. :Trend: stable.:

Not for long, I thought. But I didn't say it, because the Ghost would have filed it under *custodian assessment note* and I didn't want it filed anywhere. I wanted to sit with it for a moment, the way I'd sat on the crumbled wall at the end of world 72,663, the way I kept finding myself sitting with things I used to move past.

:Recommend: continued survey,: the Ghost said. :No action pending further data.:

"Agreed," I said.

Below me, in a loading bay, David Reyes was watching his team log a data chip that had been left for someone to find, by someone who had planned to leave it, for reasons that were not yet clear.

Below me, in a basement, a man with a fast brain was running numbers that were going to produce an answer that had more consequences than he'd modeled for.

Below me, in a city that had learned to breathe with the Prime Wave, things were moving toward something.

I didn't know the shape of it yet.

I was, I noticed, paying attention in a way I hadn't paid attention in a very long time.

:Shall I log this survey period as complete?: the Ghost asked.

"No," I said. "Keep it open."

The Ghost kept it open.

The city breathed.

CHAPTER 7

SPECIAL POWERS UNIT / FEDERAL

THE FEDERAL AGENTS arrived on a Tuesday, which Blaine later observed was the most Federal thing about them.

There were two of them. The first was a man named Chen — Agent Chen, he clarified immediately and without warmth, in the way of someone for whom titles were a structural necessity rather than a social preference — who was somewhere in his mid-fifties and had the specific bearing of a person who had spent a long time being right and had organized his entire external presentation around the evidence of this. His suit was correct in every particular. His credentials were presented before anyone asked for them. He had a briefing folder that he set on the SPU's folding table with the precise placement of a man who believed that where you put things said something about you.

The second was a young woman who appeared to be in her late twenties, and who was introduced as Agent Reyes — a coincidence that produced a brief pause in the room and a look between Carla and David that communicated several things simultaneously without

communicating any of them out loud — and whose first name was Camila, and whose codename, she offered after Chen had moved on to the substance of the briefing and she'd had a moment to say something without it being officially part of the briefing, was Blip.

"Blip," Marcus said.

"Blip," she confirmed, with the specific equanimity of someone who had been saying the word for long enough that it no longer sounded strange to her, though she was aware it still sounded strange to other people.

"Because of the translocation," Marcus said.

"Because of the translocation," she confirmed.

"How long have you had it?"

"Marcus," David said.

"It's a legitimate operational question," Marcus said. "Capability duration affects—"

"It's fine," Camila said. "Seven years. I was nineteen." A brief pause. "It was very dramatic."

"It's always dramatic at nineteen," Sultana said, from the corner, without looking up from whatever she was reading.

Camila looked at her. Something passed across her face that was not quite recognition and not quite the absence of it. "Yeah," she said. "It really is."

Chen cleared his throat.

The briefing took forty minutes, which was thirty minutes longer than Chen had allocated for it in the version of events he'd planned, because David asked questions.

Not hostile questions — David Reyes's questions were never hostile in the way that came from wanting the other person to fail. They were hostile in the way that came from wanting precision, which is a different thing and in many ways harder to manage,

because you can't dismiss it and you can't redirect it and you can't wait it out. You have to answer it.

"The Federal Powered Enforcement partnership structure," David said, after Chen had laid out the offer — the funding, the equipment, the Federal affiliation, the name change — "establishes what, exactly, in terms of operational command?"

"Day-to-day operations remain under your command," Chen said.

"And non-day-to-day operations?"

"Significant escalations would involve Federal coordination—"

"Define significant."

Chen looked at his folder. "Any incident classified as a National Powered Threat—"

"Under the NPTA," David said. "Which is triggered at what threshold?"

"The Director of Federal Powered Enforcement makes that determination—"

"So the threshold is discretionary."

"It's—" Chen paused. "It's contextual."

"Contextual," David said. "Okay." He wrote something. Carla, who could see what he was writing from her angle, saw that he'd written *contextual* and underlined it twice and put a question mark after it. "The intelligence-sharing structure. What comes to us and what doesn't?"

"All intelligence relevant to your operational area—"

"Who determines relevance?"

Chen's jaw moved slightly, in the way of a jaw that is not quite clenching but is considering it. "The Federal intelligence coordinator assigned to your unit—"

"Who is?"

"That assignment is pending the completion of this—"

"So we don't know yet."

"Correct."

"And in the interim, intelligence relevant to our operational area is held by—"

"The Federal Powered Enforcement central office."

"In Washington."

"Yes."

David wrote something else. Carla didn't need to see it to know what it said.

She looked at Camila, who was watching David with the expression of someone watching a thing they had been told would happen and had prepared themselves for and was now observing with a kind of professional admiration that she was doing her best to keep off her face. She wasn't entirely succeeding. Carla filed this.

"The Directorate," David said.

Chen's posture, which had been very straight, went a degree straighter. "Yes."

"Your agency has active intelligence on the Directorate's Harbor City cell."

"We have intelligence on—"

"Your agency," David said, with the patience of a man who has been not-answered several times and is going to keep asking until the answer arrives, "has active intelligence on the Directorate's Harbor City cell."

A pause. "Yes."

"And you've been sharing that intelligence with—"

"Our operational partners, per standard—"

"With us?" David said. "Has your agency been sharing that intelligence with us?"

The pause this time was longer. Chen's hand rested on his folder. "The Federal Powered Enforcement program has been in development for—"

"No," David said. "You haven't." He wrote something else. He put the pen down. He looked at Chen with the expression that meant he'd gotten what he came for and was now deciding what to do with it. "That's a yes or no question, Agent Chen. I'm not asking it to make

a point. I'm asking it because I need to know, before I decide whether to take this deal, whether the agency offering it has been withholding operational intelligence from us while we've been operating without adequate resources in a city with an active organized powered criminal presence."

The room was very quiet. The building's climate system, which had a rattle in the second duct, rattled.

"The timeline of intelligence sharing," Chen said, "has been—"

"Blaine," David said, without looking away from Chen.

"Yeah," Blaine said, from the doorway where he'd been standing with his arms crossed.

"Could you give us a few minutes?"

Blaine left. The door closed.

"Agent Chen," David said, in exactly the same tone he'd been using, which was the tone of someone who didn't need to raise his voice because he'd already established the relevant facts. "I'm going to be direct with you."

"Please," Chen said, which was not quite sarcastic but was in the neighborhood.

"My team has been doing this job for eleven years with equipment that belongs in a museum and a headquarters that I am not legally supposed to be living in but am, because we can't afford anywhere else. We have two people on the Federal registry we were never told about before this meeting. We have an active Directorate cell that your agency has intel on that we've been working around blind. And two weeks ago we had a manifestation event involving a seventeen-year-old kid who is now in a Federal youth facility that I had to find through the city's social services database because nobody told us it existed." He picked up his pen and set it down again, a deliberate motion. "I want this deal. My team needs this deal. But I need to know what the deal actually is, and I need to know that from someone who's going to give me a straight answer, because the version I've been given so far has several significant gaps in it and I am very good at noticing gaps."

The room held the specific silence of a negotiation that has been reframed.

Camila's hand moved slightly on the table. Not reaching for anything, just a small motion, the kind a person makes when they're deciding whether to do something.

She did it.

"The intelligence gap," she said, "was a coordination failure, not a policy decision." Chen looked at her. She didn't look at Chen. She was looking at David with the expression she'd been keeping off her face, which was no longer entirely off it. "The Harbor City cell was flagged as low-priority because it was small. The assessment didn't account for the Cabal affiliation, which we confirmed—" she paused for a fraction of a second—"recently."

"How recently?" David said.

"After the Federal Reserve incident," she said.

David looked at her. Then at Chen. Then back at her. "The data chip from the Northern Distribution Hub," he said. "Your office has seen it."

"Yes," she said.

"And?"

"And the schematics on it are—" she glanced at Chen, who had the expression of a man watching a briefing go somewhere he hadn't planned—"significant. The Directorate has developed a quantum entanglement device that poses a Prime Wave stability risk that exceeds anything we've previously documented."

The room's silence changed quality.

"Prime Wave," Marcus said, slowly. "That's the thing that—"

"Powers us," Sultana said. Still not looking up, but her voice had changed. "All of us. It's the thing that powers all of us."

"The device they're building," Carla said. "What does it do?"

Camila looked at David, in the way of someone checking whether they have permission to continue. He gave her the look that meant yes and keep going, which was a look Carla had learned to

read in the first year of their marriage and still occasionally found impressive.

"It artificially deepens the quantum entanglement between a powered individual and the Prime Wave," Camila said. "Amplifies existing abilities. Potentially grants additional ones. The schematics suggest a working prototype within weeks."

"And the risk?" David said.

"The field of effect," Camila said. "It's not controllable above a certain threshold. If the device runs at full capacity in an uncontrolled environment, the enhancement effect extends to everyone in range." She paused. "We don't know the upper limit of the range."

Nobody said anything for a moment.

"So if it goes wrong," Marcus said, "everyone in range gets—"

"Enhanced," Camila said. "Significantly and uncontrollably enhanced."

"And the Prime Wave—"

"Becomes unstable," she said. "At a level we don't have a model for."

Marcus looked at the ceiling. "Cool," he said, in the tone of a man for whom cool was doing a lot of work. "That's great. That's a great Tuesday."

Chen picked up his folder. He did it with the specific deliberateness of a man who is accepting that the meeting went differently than planned and is organizing himself around the new reality. "The Federal Powered Enforcement partnership," he said, "would give your team access to the intelligence, resources, and coordination necessary to address this specific threat. Among others." He put the folder down again. "The offer stands."

David looked at Carla.

This was the thing people who didn't know them well missed: the look wasn't a request for permission. It wasn't a check-in. It was something more specific — the look of a man who had already done his own assessment and wanted to see if it matched the assessment of

the person he trusted most, not because he'd change his decision if it didn't, but because the match or the mismatch was itself information.

Carla had done her assessment. She'd done it during Chen's briefing, updating it as the gaps filled in, running it against everything she knew about what they could and couldn't do with what they currently had. She'd run it against Danny Osei, floating forty feet up in the mall atrium, and against the data chip in the loading bay, and against the rattle in the second climate duct, and against the body armor they couldn't afford in the equipment room downstairs.

She gave him the look that meant: *yes, and we'll deal with the parts that aren't yes later.*

He looked at Chen.

"Done," he said.



The paperwork took three hours, which was the most Federal thing that had happened yet.

Camila helped, which made it go faster, because she had the specific skill of someone who had navigated Federal paperwork enough times to know which fields were critical and which were technically required and effectively ceremonial, and she moved through it with the efficiency of a woman who had also, apparently, memorized the relevant sections of the National Powered Threat Act, which David had not expected and which caused him to reassess several things simultaneously.

Chen left at the two-hour mark, for reasons he described as a prior commitment and that Carla interpreted as a strategic retreat, which was not entirely uncharitable.

"He's not wrong about most of it," Camila said, when Chen had been gone long enough. She was at the folding table with David, working through the equipment requisition forms, which were forty-three fields long and had a supplemental section that was another

twelve. "He's just—" she paused, searching for something accurate — he processes the gaps differently than you do."

"He files them," David said.

"He files them," she agreed. "In a way that makes them someone else's problem."

"And you?"

She looked at the form she was filling out. "I've been trying to figure out how to get assigned to Harbor City for four months," she said. "Since we confirmed the Cabal affiliation." She said it straightforwardly, without the self-consciousness of a disclosure. Just information. "I requested this meeting."

David stopped writing. "Chen doesn't know that."

"Chen thinks it was his idea," she said. "Which was the easiest way to make it happen."

Carla, who was across the table filling out a different form, said nothing. She was thinking about the look that had passed between Camila and Sultana, earlier, and about what *it's always dramatic at nineteen* had meant, and about the specific quality of someone who had spent four months trying to get assigned somewhere and had gotten there by letting someone else think it was their idea.

"The Directorate's test subject," David said. "The manifestation event we logged. The seventeen-year-old."

Camila looked at him.

"He's at the Federal youth facility on Riverside," David said. "I've been trying to schedule a follow-up."

"I know," Camila said. "It was in your incident report."

"The handwritten note."

"Yes."

David put his pen down. "Is he safe there?"

Camila was quiet for a moment. It was a specific quiet — not evasive, not calculating, just the quiet of someone taking the question seriously enough to answer it honestly rather than reassuringly. "He's safer than he was," she said. "The facility has good people. But it's

underfunded, and it's at capacity, and the program for newly manifested youth is—" she stopped. "It's a start," she said. "It's not enough."

David picked up his pen. He wrote something at the bottom of the form he was filling out, which was an equipment requisition form and therefore not a natural home for the kind of note he was writing, but which was where it went because it was what he had in front of him.

Sultana, who had migrated from the corner to the table at some point in the last hour, looked at the note upside down without appearing to look at it.

She didn't say anything.

But she put her own pen down and sat with something for a moment, in the particular way of a person who has made a decision without quite deciding to make it yet.



The new name was announced at a city council meeting the following Thursday, which the *Harbor City Herald* covered on page one with a photograph of the team in their new uniforms that made Marcus look like he'd been photoshopped in from a different, more heroic version of the event, and that made everyone else look like exactly what they were, which was tired professionals in better-fitting gear than they'd had last week.

The uniforms were an upgrade. This was genuinely and unambiguously true. The body armor was current generation, individually fitted, with tactical modifications for each team member's specific ability profile — Carla's was reinforced at the collar and shoulder seams in a way that accounted for the pressure differentials her sonic work created; Sultana's had additional structural support in the back for the way her gravity manipulation loaded her spine in extended use; Marcus's was built around the assumption that he was going to go through things that weren't designed to be gone through, and was constructed accordingly.

David had stood in the equipment room looking at the rack of new gear and had said: "Good." Two syllables. He'd meant more than two syllables, and Carla knew what he'd meant, and she thought Sultana probably knew too, and Marcus definitely didn't know but had still absorbed the correct emotional content of it because Marcus processed emotional content through some mechanism that bypassed the analytical layer entirely and went straight to the correct feeling.

"Better than the old stuff?" Blaine said.

"It fits," Marcus said, which was not a complete answer but was, for Marcus, sufficient.

The headquarters situation was not yet resolved — the new HQ was in a building that was currently being renovated, which the Federal program had committed to funding and which was at least a year from occupancy. But there was money for a temporary facility that was not a converted warehouse above a plumbing supply company, which the team was in the process of moving to, which Carla was project-managing with the same focused attention she gave to incident reports, which was to say thoroughly and with notes in the margins.

Camila's assignment had been confirmed: translocation liaison, Harbor Guard. She'd moved her belongings into the temporary facility's spare room with the economy of someone who hadn't had a lot of permanent addresses and had learned to set up quickly.

The Federal intelligence feed was active. The Directorate file was — extensive. Carla had read it in two sessions and had come away with the specific feeling she got from evidence that confirmed a suspicion she'd been hoping wasn't correct. The Cabal was real and it was large and the Harbor City cell was small by comparison and was also, based on the file, considerably further advanced in their quantum entanglement work than the Federal analysts had previously assessed, because the Federal analysts hadn't had the data chip, and now they did.

She'd read the field parameter section twice. She'd read the note Troll had left in the design specs — a small notation in the margin of

the schematic, which the Federal analysts had flagged but not emphasized — about the expansion coefficient and what it did in a high-amplitude Prime Wave cycle.

She hadn't told David about the note yet. Not because she was keeping it from him, but because she was still deciding how to say it, which was the process she went through with things that required a specific kind of saying.

She'd say it tonight. At the apartment. Not in the office.

Sultana left early, which was unusual.

She'd said she had an errand, which was the word she used for things she wasn't going to explain, and nobody had pushed, because that was the arrangement — you got the word *errand* and you got the information that she'd be back, and that was sufficient. David had nodded. Marcus had said see you tomorrow. Blaine had already been on the phone with something.

Carla watched her go.

She didn't follow, because following was not what you did. But she stood at the window of the temporary facility's main room and watched Sultana's car pull out and go west, which was not the direction of most things that Sultana normally went, and thought about what *I knew someone who needed someone to sit on the floor with them* meant, and about the two years of Sultana's history before the SPU that were in the official record in outline only, and about the way Sultana had looked at Danny Osei and recognized something before anyone else in the room had known what they were looking at.

Carla was not going to ask.

But she was going to remember.

The data chip's schematics produced a full Federal analysis within seventy-two hours of submission, which David described as impressively fast and Camila described as "they already knew most of it, the chip just confirmed the details," which David filed under *things the Federal intelligence coordinator assigned to our unit and I are going to discuss at some length* and Camila filed under *things I said accurately to the right person*.

The analysis concluded with a risk assessment that used the phrase *significant Prime Wave instability risk* in its executive summary, underlined, which was the kind of emphasis that Federal documents used when they wanted to communicate that the thing being underlined was the thing you should actually be concerned about, as opposed to the thirty-seven pages of context around it.

David read the executive summary twice. Then he read the full report. Then he made a list of seven questions and sent them to the Federal intelligence coordinator, who responded to three of them, deflected two, and didn't respond to two others, which told David which two mattered most.

He put the full report in the file he was building and labeled the file the way he labeled all his files: with the date and a short description that was accurate rather than alarming. *Directorate — Quantum Entanglement Device — Analysis*.

He didn't sleep well that night.

He didn't say this. But Carla knew, because she didn't either.

The rattle in the climate duct had followed them to the new facility, which was either a coincidence or a Blaine situation, and she lay in the dark listening to it and thinking about field expansion coefficients and a note in the margin of a schematic that she was going to tell David about in the morning, and about a boy named Danny who was at a Federal youth facility that was a start and not enough, and about the specific feeling of a deal that you'd taken because you needed to and that was going to mean things you couldn't fully see yet.

The rattle rattled.
She went to sleep.

CHAPTER 8

THE DIRECTORATE

THE UNIVERSITY PHYSICS building had a security system that Professor Power described as "optimistic," which was his way of saying it assumed good faith from the people interacting with it, which was the category of assumption he found most contemptible. Good faith was what you extended to situations you hadn't analyzed. He had analyzed this situation. Good faith had nothing to do with it.

Vivienne had taken three days to plan the acquisition and had not shared the plan with Delesante until forty-eight hours before execution, which was the minimum lead time required for him to have opinions about it and the maximum time available for those opinions to affect anything. She'd learned this ratio through experience.

"The loading dock," he said, looking at the facility schematic she'd produced. It was a good schematic — better than the Federal building plans she'd pulled for the logistics depot, which had been last updated in 2019 and had a revision note that said *pending* in the section covering the sub-basement, which was where the isotopes

were. The university schematic was current. She'd had someone pull it through a channel that the university's facilities management office didn't know was being used for that purpose.

"The loading dock," she confirmed.

"The isotope storage is on sub-level two," he said. "The loading dock accesses sub-level one."

"There's a freight elevator."

"Which requires a keycard."

"Which we have." She slid a duplicate across the table. He picked it up and looked at it. It had the university's logo on it and a staff photo that was not of anyone on their team, which was fine because the keycard readers on the freight elevator were RFID, not visual. "Facilities management. The woman whose card this is called in sick today. She'll call in sick tomorrow as well."

Delesante put the card down. He was doing the thing he did when a plan was better than he'd expected, which was look for the thing that was wrong with it, because his brain required something to work on and a plan with no obvious problems was a plan that hadn't been examined hard enough. "Campus security makes rounds on the sub-levels every forty minutes," he said.

"Every forty-three," she said. "The posted schedule says forty. The actual interval, based on three days of observation, is forty-three. The guard on the overnight shift takes an extra three minutes on sub-level one because there's a vending machine near the stairwell that he visits. Every time."

"You timed his vending machine breaks."

"I timed everything," she said, which was accurate and also the end of that line of questioning, because there was no productive follow-up to *I timed everything*.

Delesante looked at the schematic for another moment. She watched him not finding the problem, which was its own kind of information — if he couldn't find it in five minutes of focused analysis, it probably wasn't findable, which didn't mean it didn't exist but meant she'd done what she could do. "Mirage," he said.

"Yes."

"You're using her on the primary entry."

"Yes."

"She's not ready."

"She's ready for this," Vivienne said. "The entry team encounters two people: the night security guard at the loading dock entrance, and a graduate student in the second-floor lab who works late and goes home between midnight and one AM. Mirage shows them something that isn't there. They look at the something that isn't there long enough for us to be past them. That's the operation she's performing."

"And if she can't hold it?"

"Then we move faster," Vivienne said. "But she can hold it. I've seen her work."

Delesante's expression said he hadn't, and that this was a gap in his operational picture that he was unhappy about. She'd anticipated this. "She demonstrated in the corridor last week," she said. "Full-sense fabrication, powered perception, held for four minutes without visible effort. The targets tonight are non-powered. It'll be less demanding than that."

"Why was she demonstrating in the corridor?"

"Because I asked her to," Vivienne said, which was true and which did not include the context of the conversation that had preceded the demonstration, which was a conversation about a seventeen-year-old boy and what it meant to not know yet what you were going to be, which was not information Delesante needed.

He looked at the schematic one more time and then rolled it up, which was the gesture he used when he'd finished with something. "The isotope yield from this acquisition," he said. "Sufficient for the prototype calibration?"

"The cryogenic units contain three times what your specifications require," she said. "We take what we need and leave the rest."

"We take it all," he said.

She looked at him.

"If we leave any behind," he said, with the patience of a man explaining something he considers obvious, "we leave evidence that we knew exactly what we were taking and exactly how much we needed. Taking it all reads as opportunistic. Opportunistic is harder to trace to a specific project."

She considered this. It was not wrong. She filed it under the category of *Delesante making a tactically sound argument that I would have made myself if I'd been thinking about it from that angle*, which was a category that existed because she'd learned, over two years, that the most dangerous version of him was not the paranoid version or the megalomaniacal version but the version that was simply, straightforwardly correct about something.

"Fine," she said. "We take it all."

They went in at 1:17 AM.

The night was overcast and cold, which was good — overcast meant no moon to speak of, and cold meant the university's outdoor spaces were empty in a way they wouldn't have been in better weather. The loading dock was on the building's north side, away from the main quad, in the particular liminal space of institutional buildings that exists to move things around and is therefore designed to be unobtrusive and is therefore, reliably, unobserved.

Vivienne counted seven people on the team: herself, Mirage, three non-powered soldiers she trusted for their discipline and their silence, and two additional powered operatives — Scaffold, whose ability to generate temporary rigid structures from ambient materials was useful for the kind of precise physical manipulation that didn't require strength, and a newer operative named Crush whose enhanced strength and density made him the contingency option she hoped not to use.

She had not brought Delesante. He had not argued about this, which meant he'd done his own calculation about the value of his

presence versus the risk of it and had arrived at the same conclusion she had. This was one of the things that made working with him tolerable: he could, when the situation was specific enough, override his ego with his intelligence.

Mirage handled the security guard at the loading dock entrance with the efficiency of someone for whom the operation is almost boring. The guard was a man in his fifties named — Vivienne had his name from the personnel file she'd pulled — Gary, who had been doing overnight security at this building for nine years and who had, according to the records, never had an incident. She watched his face when Mirage's ability engaged: the slight unfocus, the gentle redirection of attention, the very peaceful expression of a man who was looking at something interesting that wasn't there. He stood like that for three minutes. They moved past him. His expression didn't change.

"She's good," one of the soldiers said, very quietly, when they were through.

"I know," Vivienne said.

Sub-level one smelled like old concrete and the particular combination of cleaning products and dust that institutional spaces accumulate over decades of being cleaned and not quite cleaned enough. The freight elevator was where the schematic said it was. The keycard worked on the first pass. The elevator made a sound that Vivienne had not accounted for — a low, mechanical groan as it started — and she looked at the ceiling and made a note to account for elevator sounds in future operations and then the elevator was moving and the sound didn't matter.

Sub-level two was colder than sub-level one, which she had expected — the cryogenic units required temperature management, and the building's systems maintained the sub-levels at different temperatures for that reason. The hallway was lit with the particular blue-white of energy-efficient institutional lighting that made everything look slightly medical.

The storage room was the third door on the left. The lock was a

standard electronic keypad. Scaffold produced a device — Troll-built, jury-rigged in appearance, flawlessly precise in function — and held it against the keypad for twelve seconds, and the door opened.

The cryogenic units were exactly where the schematic said they were. Three of them, each roughly the size of a large suitcase, matte gray, with digital temperature displays and the faint hum of active cooling. The isotope samples inside them were, according to the Federal research grant documentation she'd pulled, the product of three years of specialized production at a facility in Germany that had since been repurposed, which meant they were effectively irreplaceable at any reasonable operational timeline.

She looked at them for a moment. Three units. Enough for the prototype and more. Enough for several iterations beyond the prototype, if Delesante's calculations were right, which they usually were about the technical questions and less reliably were about the questions that weren't technical.

"Move them," she said.

It took eleven minutes. The units were heavy — each one required two people — and the freight elevator had a weight limit that Scaffold confirmed they were within by a margin she found uncomfortably thin, but they were within it, and the elevator made its sound, and sub-level one smelled like cleaning products, and the loading dock was cold and unobserved, and the vehicle was where she'd left it.

Gary was still looking at something that wasn't there.

Mirage released the fabrication when they were a block away. She was in the front passenger seat. Vivienne watched her face in the side mirror: no visible effort, no residual strain, just the return of her normal expression, which was the expression of someone who had finished a task and was already thinking about the next thing.

"Clean," Mirage said.

"Yes," Vivienne said.

She reviewed the schematics on the drive back.

Not the acquisition plan — that was done, filed, complete. She reviewed the entangler schematics, specifically the sections she'd asked Troll about. The field expansion coefficient. The behavior in high-amplitude Wave cycles. The shutdown mechanism and its secondary, which Troll had confirmed was four days from completion.

The isotopes in the back of the vehicle made the acquisition real in a way that schematic review and CEO calls and briefings in the Green Room had not quite made it. The prototype was now a matter of days, not weeks. The timeline the CEO had set was achievable, which it hadn't been before tonight.

She thought about what achievable meant.

In her experience, achievable meant it was going to happen, which meant the question shifted from *whether* to *how*, which meant the field expansion coefficient and the high-amplitude Wave cycles were no longer theoretical considerations and were now operational variables that she needed to have a plan for.

She had parts of a plan. The remote shutdown was the most important part, and it wasn't complete yet. The single-subject controlled environment was the second part, and she was managing it as tightly as she could manage it. The third part — the part she hadn't fully articulated, even to herself — was what she did if both of the first two parts failed.

She looked out the window at the city going past. Harbor City at 1:45 AM, doing its 1:45 AM things: the overnight workers, the insomniacs, the people whose lives happened at hours when other people weren't watching. She'd worked at these hours for most of her adult life. She'd learned to find them clarifying. The things you could see at 1:45 AM were the things that were actually there, stripped of the daytime performance of normalcy.

"Can I ask you something?" Mirage said.

Vivienne looked at her reflection in the window. "You can ask."

"The boy," Mirage said. "When we take him. Is it — are we certain about what it's going to do to him?"

Vivienne was quiet for a moment. The driver was focused on the road. The soldiers in the back were doing the after-operation thing of coming down from operational alertness, quiet, settled.

"The enhancement will be real," she said. "The Professor's math is sound on that part."

"That's not what I asked."

No, it wasn't. Vivienne looked at the city. "We're certain about the intended outcome," she said. "The uncertainty is in the field parameters, which we're managing."

"And if the management fails."

"Then we shut it down."

"And if we can't shut it down."

Vivienne didn't answer immediately. This was not evasion — she'd learned that Mirage could tell the difference between evasion and thinking, and that Mirage found thinking more acceptable than evasion, which was a useful quality and also a slightly inconvenient one.

"Then it goes further than we planned," she said. "And we deal with the consequences."

Mirage looked at the city too, through the passenger window, the same city from a different angle. "He's seventeen," she said.

"I know."

"He's been in the system since he was nine."

Vivienne looked at her. She hadn't pulled that part of the file. She'd pulled the powered-incident report and the Federal youth facility information and the group home address. She hadn't pulled the history before the group home.

"How do you know that?" she said.

Mirage's reflection was very still in the window. "I looked him up," she said. "After the briefing. His name was in the incident report. It wasn't hard."

Vivienne absorbed this. The driver made a turn. The cryogenic units shifted slightly in the back. "Why?" she said.

"Because he's going to be one of us," Mirage said. "And I wanted to know who he was before that happened."

The city moved past.

Vivienne thought about being seventeen and in the system and having something happen to your body that nobody explained and nobody helped you with. She thought about the gap between *the enhancement will be real* and *he'll know what to do with it*.

She thought about what she'd told Mirage in the corridor, three nights ago. *That's the plan*. The intention she'd dressed as a fact.

"After the procedure," she said. "He stays with us."

Mirage looked at her.

"He doesn't go back," Vivienne said. "We handle the development. We teach him what he needs to know. That was always the plan," she said, and this time she meant it, or she was deciding to mean it, which was close enough to the same thing that she was prepared to treat it as identical.

Mirage looked at her for a moment longer. Then she looked back at the city. "Okay," she said.



The data chip had been an impulse, which was unusual for her.

She was not, in general, an impulsive person — impulsiveness was what happened when you stopped doing the analysis, and she had never stopped doing the analysis, not in twenty years of working in environments where stopping the analysis got people killed, sometimes you, sometimes others, and the distinction mattered but not as much as the analysis.

But she'd left the chip in the loading bay at the Northern Distribution Hub, and she hadn't told anyone she was going to do it, and she hadn't told anyone she'd done it, and she'd spent the three days since

doing the analysis on whether it was the right call and had arrived, each time, at the same answer, which was: *probably*.

The chip contained partial schematics. Enough to tell someone who was looking that the Directorate was building something significant. Not enough to tell them exactly what, or where, or when. It was a breadcrumb left for a person she'd assessed as someone who would know what to do with a breadcrumb — who would pull it, log it, send it up the chain, and generate a response that would create pressure on the Directorate's timeline in ways that would force Delesante to be more careful than he naturally wanted to be.

She wasn't trying to get them caught. She wanted them to be careful. There was a difference.

She was fairly certain the person she'd left it for understood there was a difference. She was less certain he'd see it that way if he ever found out she'd left it deliberately, which he might, because he was the kind of person who noticed gaps and kept pulling until he found what was in them.

She filed this under *manageable* and then filed it under *probably* and then closed the file.



Troll was awake when they got back, which was not unusual — Troll's relationship with sleep was more of a nodding acquaintance than a commitment, and he kept hours that were either creative or chaotic depending on your perspective and probably both in his.

He looked at the cryogenic units with the expression of a man seeing raw materials.

"Three days," Vivienne told him. "The prototype. Three days."

He looked at her. "The remote shutdown—"

"Alongside the prototype," she said. "Both. Three days."

He looked back at the units. He was already working, she could tell — his hands weren't moving yet but his eyes were, moving over the units with the particular attention of someone who was already

disassembling and reassembling things in their head. "Three days," he said, in the tone of someone accepting a challenge rather than confirming a timeline.

She left him with the units and went to her office.

She sat at her desk. The scuff mark near the light switch. The late hour, or the early hour, depending on how you categorized 2 AM.

She thought about the boy. Danny Osei, in a Federal youth facility on Riverside, who had been in the system since he was nine and who had gone up three days ago in a mall atrium because something in him had changed and nobody had told him it was coming or what to do about it.

She thought about *after the procedure, he stays with us*.

She thought about whether that was a good enough reason for all of it.

She thought about it for a long time.

She didn't arrive at yes. But she didn't arrive at no, either.

She went to sleep in the chair, which was not the first time and would not be the last, and the facility hummed around her with the particular sound of a building that was full of things that were almost ready.

CHAPTER 9

MICHAEL

I HAD BEEN WATCHING the Harbor Guard for eleven days.

I want to be precise about this because imprecision, here, matters: I had been conducting a survey of their operational patterns as part of the extended anomalous assessment of instance -664, which required observation of the primary powered enforcement team as a representative sample of the iteration's powered population and its relationship with the Prime Wave. This was methodologically sound. The Ghost had confirmed the methodological soundness when I'd asked it to, which I'd done on day three, which is not something I'd done before, asking the Ghost to confirm the soundness of my own methodology, because in seventy-two thousand iterations my methodology had been self-evidently sound in the way that things are self-evident when there's only one way to do them.

I had been watching them because I found them interesting.

I was aware of this. I was not, yet, sure what to do with it.

The training session was in the parking structure adjacent to their temporary facility — three levels, mostly empty, with a top deck that was fully open to the sky and that had, as far as I could determine, been selected for this purpose because it was large, structurally sound, and sufficiently removed from civilian traffic that a controlled powered exercise wouldn't produce incident reports. The Ghost had picked up the session's start time from the team's internal communications channel, which I hadn't asked it to monitor but which it had flagged as relevant to the ongoing operational pattern survey, which was accurate enough that I didn't object.

Reyes ran the session the way I was coming to understand he ran everything: with the particular economy of someone who had decided exactly what he wanted to accomplish and had organized the available time around that objective without a word wasted. The session had three phases. He'd told them the three phases at the start — not as a preamble, not as a warm-up to the actual content, just as information: *this is what we're doing and why*. And then they'd done it.

:The team's power use during structured training differs from operational power use in a consistent pattern,: the Ghost noted. :Individual entanglement with the Prime Wave is more deliberate during training. More controlled. The oscillation synchronization is more pronounced.:

"They're paying attention," I said.

:That is one interpretation.:

"What's yours?"

:I don't have interpretations,: the Ghost said. :I have data patterns.:

"The data pattern suggests they're paying attention."

:The data pattern is consistent with that characterization,: the Ghost said, in the tone it used when it was accepting a framing without endorsing it.

I watched the session from the roof of an adjacent building, still incorporeal, at an altitude that put me roughly level with the parking

structure's top deck. Close enough to observe the detail of individual power use. Closer than I usually positioned myself during survey observation, which I was aware of and which I had a methodological justification for — closer observation produced richer data — and which was also just closer, in the plain sense of the word, than felt entirely professional.

Sultana was working on the precision edge of her gravity manipulation — not the reach, which I'd seen in the Northern Distribution Hub, but the fine control. She was lifting a series of objects that Reyes had arranged at various distances: a set of metal discs in ascending weights, each one placed at a slightly different angle and height. The exercise was to lift each disc to a specified elevation and hold it there without drift, for thirty seconds per disc, in sequence. She was on her fourth attempt at the sequence. The first three had failed at the seventh or eighth disc — the concentration required to maintain multiple distinct gravitational adjustments simultaneously had a ceiling that she was clearly working to raise.

On the fourth attempt she got to the eleventh disc.

She held it.

I could feel the Prime Wave interaction from here — the careful, distributed reach of it, each disc a separate thread of attention that she was holding simultaneously, each thread calibrated at a level of precision that was, in the language of the Ghost's measurement systems, significantly above what her documented operational use had shown. She was better in training than in the field, which was true of skilled practitioners in almost any discipline, and she knew it, which was why she was in training.

The twelfth disc. She reached for it.

The eleventh dropped.

She put both hands flat on the concrete of the parking deck and looked at them. Not with frustration — I'd seen her frustrated, in the Northern Distribution Hub, the brief sharp quality of it when the darkness had disrupted her calibration. This was different. This was the expression of a person examining a gap between what they can

do and what they need to be able to do, and finding the gap instructive rather than discouraging.

Reyes said something to her. I was too far to hear it, but I could read the quality of his posture — not pushing, not consoling, just present. Acknowledging. She nodded. She reset the discs.

Fifth attempt.

I watched her start the sequence again with the specific attention I'd been giving things in this iteration that I didn't have a category for in my standard survey parameters.



Marcus Webb was working on what Reyes called, in the session plan I'd heard at the start, "mass calibration under dynamic conditions," which meant he was flying at various speeds and angles while Reyes changed the parameters. Faster. Slower. Ninety-degree turns. Descents at angles that flirted with the structural limits of what a human body could process even with the Prime Wave augmenting reaction time and proprioception.

He was not elegant. This was the thing about Marcus Webb that the Prime Wave data showed clearly and that watching him confirmed: he was not built for elegance. The entanglement signature was warm, as I'd noted before — there was something in the quality of his connection to the Wave that felt generous, as if the Wave were slightly more willing to work with him than it was required to be, which was not a scientifically defensible characterization, but which was what the data kept suggesting. What that warmth didn't give him was precision. He hit the ninety-degree turn three feet past where he'd been directed to hit it, every time, regardless of speed.

:His spatial calibration errors are consistent across seventeen observations,: the Ghost noted. :The error magnitude is constant even as his speed increases. This suggests the issue is perceptual rather than reactive.:

"He knows where he is," I said. "He doesn't always know exactly where *there* is."

:That is consistent with the data.:

Reyes had him try the turn again. Same result — three feet past the mark, then the correction, then the return. Reyes showed him something on a tablet. A diagram, probably, or a recording of the previous attempt. Marcus looked at it and then looked at the airspace and I could see him processing the gap between what he thought he was doing and what the recording showed he was doing.

He flew the turn again.

Two and a half feet past.

Half a foot better was not nothing. In an operational context, half a foot could be the difference between a controlled intervention and a structural incident. Reyes nodded. He made a note. He moved on to the next parameter.

He was building something, with this team. Not just training them — building something specific, toward a specific purpose, with the kind of long-term intentionality that most people don't apply to things they're uncertain about. He was certain about this team in a way that I found — I kept returning to the same word, the word I kept having to adjust my own assessment against — interesting.

Carla Reyes was doing something I hadn't seen before.

She was working alone, at the far end of the deck, while Reyes coordinated the others. Working on something that wasn't in the session plan he'd described at the start, which I only knew because I'd heard the session plan and she hadn't been given an exercise. She'd moved to the far end, created a barrier of sorts — a row of traffic cones that was more symbolic than functional, the kind of thing that said *this space is mine for a moment* without actually securing it — and was doing something with her power that was very quiet and

very controlled and that the Ghost's analysis required a moment to characterize.

:She is producing sonic outputs below the threshold of human perception.; the Ghost said. :The frequency range is consistent with structural resonance analysis — she is, in effect, using her power to listen to the building.:

"She's mapping it," I said.

:The pattern of outputs and the subsequent adjustments suggest she is building a spatial model of the parking structure's acoustic properties. Identifying resonant frequencies. Stress points. The pattern would allow her to.; the Ghost paused for .004 seconds, :calculate the precise sonic output required to compromise a specific structural element without affecting the surrounding structure.:

I looked at her. She was standing very still, head slightly tilted, eyes not quite focused, the expression of someone listening to something nobody else can hear. The Prime Wave around her had the quality I associated with deep, deliberate concentration — the Wave wasn't surging, wasn't expanding, was instead compressing, pulling tight around her like a held breath.

She was figuring out how to take apart a building without collapsing it.

On her own time, without being assigned the exercise, with the focused private attention of someone pursuing a capability they'd identified as necessary and hadn't waited to be told to develop.

I thought about the incident report on the Federal Reserve vault heist. The notation about the building's structural integrity. The way she'd logged it: *significant structural damage, full assessment pending*. Not as a failure — as information. Information she'd apparently decided to turn into something useful.

She ran a sequence. Something shifted in the Ghost's readings — a small resonance in the parking structure's third support column, localized, lasting approximately two seconds before she damped it. She made a small sound that was either satisfaction or the beginning of a recalibration. She adjusted something. Ran the sequence again.

The resonance this time was in the second support column.
She was learning to be specific.

Blip was not part of the session, technically — she was the Federal liaison, which put her in a different operational category from the team, and Reyes had been careful about the distinction in ways that I suspected had less to do with protocol and more to do with giving her time to establish herself in her own terms rather than simply being absorbed into an existing dynamic. But she was on the deck, sitting on the low wall at the deck's edge with her legs on the exterior side, which was an altitude that would have concerned most people and which she appeared to find completely unremarkable.

She was watching the session.

She was also doing something with her power — not a deployment, not a full translocation, but a kind of reaching. The Ghost characterized it as: :maintenance-level interaction with the Prime Wave translocation mechanism. She is, essentially, keeping it warm.:

"She does this constantly," I said.

:Fourteen of seventeen observational sessions have shown this behavior,; the Ghost confirmed. :Her baseline Prime Wave interaction is higher than any other team member. The translocation mechanism appears to require sustained engagement to maintain operational readiness.:

"It costs her," I said.

:The sustained engagement draws more from her Prime Wave connection than the operational deployments do, in aggregate,; the Ghost said. :The individual deployments are efficient. The maintenance is — considerable.:

I watched her sitting on the wall, keeping something ready that nobody was asking for right now, because it might be asked for in the next thirty seconds and thirty seconds was the difference between a crisis managed and a crisis not managed. She was doing this with the

unconscious ease of something that had become habitual, which meant she'd been doing it long enough that the cost had been absorbed into the baseline of what she accepted as normal.

She was twenty-six years old.

I filed this under *things I am noting* and did not classify it further, because the further classification led to a category I had been trying not to expand.

The session ended forty-seven minutes in, which was when Reyes called it — not because the time was up, as far as I could determine, but because he'd seen something in the last few minutes that told him the return on continued work had diminished past a threshold he tracked internally. He was good at this: knowing when more was less. I'd seen it in the Federal Reserve incident footage, in the way he'd stopped the fight at a moment that looked, from the outside, like there was more fighting to be done, but that he'd assessed as the correct stopping point. The instinct for sufficiency. For the right amount.

They did a cooldown that was briefer than the session and more relaxed in the way of a group that had been working hard and was now allowing itself to stop. Marcus ate something he produced from somewhere inside his gear, which he apparently always had. Sultana sat on the deck with her legs crossed and closed her eyes for two minutes, which the Ghost characterized as :Prime Wave resynchronization, voluntary, highly practiced:. Carla rolled her neck and made a sound that suggested her spine had opinions. Blip jumped off the wall — not fell, jumped, with the specific confidence of someone who knew exactly where she'd end up — and landed on the deck eight feet below the exterior wall without apparent effort and walked back to the main group.

Reyes made notes.

He always made notes. The tablet he used for this had a case

that was coming apart at the corner, which I knew because I'd been close enough to observe it on three occasions, which I did not examine the significance of. He made notes in the way he did everything: specifically, with the implicit understanding that the notes were going to be used for something rather than filed and forgotten.

I had started, over the eleven days, to understand the shape of what he was building toward. Not a team that was better at fighting — they were already reasonably good at fighting, given their resources and experience. What he was building was a team that could do things the fighting couldn't do. Talk someone down from forty feet up. Map a building with sound before entering it. Know when to stop. Know where they were, precisely, in relation to where they needed to be.

He was building a team that could handle something he could see coming and hadn't told them about yet.

I knew this because I'd been watching him for eleven days, and in eleven days I'd seen the specific quality of a person who is working toward a future event they have already, privately, accounted for.

He looked up.

Not at me — I was incorporeal, I was three hundred meters away, there was nothing for him to look at. But he looked up from his tablet at the sky, at the angle of overcast morning above the parking deck, and held there for a moment with the expression that wasn't quite focused on anything external.

He was thinking about something he hadn't told his team.

I was thinking about the anomalous signature in the sub-level facility and the isotopes that were now no longer in the university's cryogenic units and the field expansion coefficient that Troll had declined to quantify precisely and the shutdown mechanism that had, as of last night, a remote secondary that the man who'd designed the primary didn't know about.

We were thinking about the same thing, from different directions.

He looked back down at his notes. I watched him write something.



I entered the Prime Wave that afternoon.

Not fully — not the complete immersion that I use for stabilization work or deep analysis, where my consciousness expands into the Wave and the individual perspective I maintain for survey work dissolves into something much larger and much less like a self. A partial entry. The Ghost called it :shallow interface mode: when I used it, which made it sound less significant than it was. There's nothing shallow about putting any part of yourself into the Prime Wave. It's just less than all of it.

I wanted to look at the self-correcting mechanism.

The Ghost had been characterizing it in the survey data, quantifying it, building models of it, doing all the things the Ghost does with data, which are all useful and none of which are the same as actually feeling the thing. The Ghost processes. I experience. These are different.

The self-correction was — I kept failing to find the right language for it, which was unusual. I have the Authority's language, which is precise and ancient and designed specifically for describing Prime Wave phenomena, and I have the accumulated human linguistic database, which is large and imprecise and rich in ways the Authority's language isn't. Neither of them had a word for what the Wave was doing in this iteration.

The closest I could come was: *listening*.

The Wave was listening to the people connected to it. Not responding to them the way a substrate responds to input — passively, mechanically, in the way that all Prime Wave interactions worked in every other iteration I'd surveyed. It was doing something more active than that, something that looked, from inside the Wave,

like deliberate attention. Like the Wave had developed, over whatever timescale this had been happening, something like a preference.

It preferred to be engaged with carefully.

And the people here — not all of them, not consciously, but the powered population as a whole, in aggregate, across generations of what must have been an exquisitely slow evolutionary process — had learned that careful engagement was what the Wave responded to. Had learned it the way all evolutionary learning happens: not through intention but through consequence, through the accumulation of what worked and what didn't, over timescales that made the individual lifespans of the people involved irrelevant as units of measurement.

I felt the self-correcting mechanism from inside. It wasn't a mechanism in the engineering sense — not a designed system with discrete components and a specifiable function. It was more like a habit. Something that had been done so many times, by so many people, across so many generations, that the Wave had incorporated the doing of it into its own behavior.

The Wave had a habit of being held gently.

And the habit was — I checked the Ghost's data, running it against what I was feeling inside the Wave, looking for the correspondence — stable. Genuinely, measurably, surprisingly stable. Not in the fragile way that stability sometimes presents, where the numbers look good until they don't. In the structural way. The way that things are stable when they've been tested repeatedly and have continued to hold.

4.2 on the instability index. Stable for forty years.

I withdrew from the Wave slowly, the way you withdraw from anything that deserves care, and returned my full attention to the incorporeal survey perspective. Harbor City below me. The parking structure where the training session had ended. The team dispersing toward their vehicles, toward the facility, toward whatever came next in the ordinary texture of their days.

The Ghost was waiting. It always waited when I used shallow interface mode, holding everything in queue.

:Three messages flagged during your interface period,: it said, when I signaled readiness. :The first is a standard Authority administrative query — routine survey status request. The second is—: it paused for .002 seconds, which was long for the Ghost. :The second is an Authority priority channel communication from the Executive's administrative layer. Not the Executive directly. The tier below.:

"What does it say?"

:It requests a survey status update for instance -664 within seventy-two local hours. It notes that the standard survey period for a Class 7 iteration has been exceeded by—: another pause :—a significant margin.:

"And the third?"

:The third is from the sub-level facility on the south waterfront. The anomalous signature has been active for the past four hours at elevated levels. The Ghost's monitoring suggests the primary project there has entered an accelerated phase.:

I looked at the city.

Seventy-two hours. The Authority's administrative layer had noticed the extended survey period. Not the Executive himself — not yet — but the tier below, which was the tier that sent the kind of message that preceded the kind of message that came from the Executive directly, which was the kind of message I did not want to receive in this iteration, at this point in the survey.

Seventy-two hours to file a status update. What I filed would determine what happened next. What I filed was, in the most direct sense, the decision about what this iteration was.

I thought about the habit the Wave had developed. I thought about a woman learning to take apart a building carefully. I thought about a man who knew when to stop and couldn't quite stop watching the horizon for what was coming. I thought about a boy named Danny in a Federal youth facility, and a secondary shutdown mechanism that had been commissioned without the primary design-

er's knowledge, and a data chip left in a corner for someone specific to find.

I told the Ghost to open a composition channel.

:Authority standard survey status format?: it asked.

"Yes," I said. "But flag it as preliminary. Ongoing assessment, anomalous classification, extended timeline justified by novel Prime Wave phenomena requiring comprehensive documentation before action recommendation."

:This will not satisfy the seventy-two hour request,: the Ghost said. :It will, however, be procedurally compliant.:

"Yes," I said. "That's the intent."

:Shall I note the specific novel phenomena?:

I thought about this. What I noted would be readable by the Authority's administrative tier. What the administrative tier found interesting would be escalated. I needed to note enough to justify the extended timeline without noting enough to make this iteration sound like something the Authority would want to act on immediately, which was a calibration problem of a specific and uncomfortable kind.

"Note the oscillation pattern," I said. "Note the self-correction mechanism in general terms. Note that comprehensive documentation requires additional time. Do not," I said, "note the specific characteristics that make the self-correction mechanism different from anything in the survey record."

The Ghost processed this. :That omission is — selective,: it said.

"Yes," I said. "It is."

:Noted,: the Ghost said, in the tone it used when it was recording something it hadn't been asked to evaluate. :Composing now.:

I watched the city while it composed. Harbor City, doing its midday things, full of people who were connected to the Prime Wave in a way that no other iteration's people were connected to it, and who didn't know this, and who were going about their lives with the particular un-self-conscious ordinariness of people who have no idea they're doing something extraordinary.

:Composition complete,: the Ghost said. :Ready to transmit.:

"Hold it," I said.

:For how long?:

I thought about the accelerated phase in the sub-level facility. About the isotopes. About the field expansion coefficient and the things that would happen if it went wrong.

"Until I have something else to add to it," I said. "Keep the channel open."

:Understood,: the Ghost said. :The channel is open.:

Below me, Harbor City breathed.

The Wave breathed with it.

I kept watching.

CHAPTER 10

HARBOR GUARD

SULTANA WENT to the Federal youth facility on a Thursday, which was not a day she'd told anyone she was going, because she hadn't told anyone she was going on any day, because explaining it required a version of the explanation she hadn't finished writing yet.

She'd been going for three weeks. Every Thursday, on her own time, in her own car, wearing the particular combination of ordinary clothes she wore when she didn't want to be recognized as someone who moved things with gravity for a living — which was, in practice, whatever she'd grabbed that morning plus a jacket, because the specific anonymity she was after was less about costume and more about posture. Sultana in her Harbor Guard gear had a posture that said *I am here officially and this has a structure*. Sultana in a jacket had a posture that said *I'm just a person*, which was the posture she needed for this.

The facility was on Riverside, in a neighborhood that had been several things over the past forty years and was currently in the process of becoming something else, the way neighborhoods do when

the economics shift and the character follows. The building itself was institutional in the way of things built in the 1980s for purposes that required durability over comfort: flat-roofed, brick, with windows that were larger than they needed to be and placed in ways that suggested the architect had been told *the young people need light* and had interpreted this as a structural directive rather than an emotional one.

The woman at the front desk knew her by now. Her name was Rosa — not Defiant, a different Rosa, a Rosa who wore cardigans and kept a small succulent on her desk that she talked to when she thought no one was watching, which Sultana had observed on her second visit and had found, without being able to explain why, deeply reassuring. "He's in the common room," Rosa said, without being asked. "He has his headphones on, which means he doesn't want to talk to anyone, but he'll talk to you."

"How do you know?"

"Because he looked at the door four times in the last hour," Rosa said. "And you're the only person who comes on Thursdays."

Danny Osei had headphones that were too large for his head, which he wore with the specific confidence of someone who had decided the size discrepancy was not going to be a problem and had simply never revisited that decision. He was sitting in the corner of the common room at a table that had art supplies on one end and a half-finished puzzle on the other and nothing in the middle, which was where he was, doing nothing with his hands in the deliberate way of someone who is trying not to do the thing their hands want to do.

He saw her come in. He didn't take off the headphones immediately, which was the negotiation — he was going to take them off, but on his own schedule, and the schedule was one of the few things he was currently in charge of.

She sat down at the table. Not across from him — beside him, at

an angle, the way she'd learned to do from the second visit, when she'd tried across and he'd spent the first ten minutes of the conversation with the posture of someone being interviewed.

She waited.

The headphones came off after about two minutes and went around his neck. He looked at the table. "You're late," he said.

"By four minutes," she said. "Traffic on the bridge."

"The bridge traffic is always bad on Thursdays."

"I know. I should have left earlier."

He nodded, in the way of someone accepting an apology that had been made without being framed as one, which was the kind of apology he was willing to accept. She'd learned this too.

"How's the week been?" she said.

He shrugged, which covered everything from *fine* to *genuinely terrible* and which she'd learned to read by context. Today's shrug was closer to the middle — not a good week, not a crisis, just the ordinary weight of being seventeen in an institutional setting with a power he was still figuring out how to have.

"They moved my room," he said.

"Why?"

"Luca keeps floating."

She looked at him.

"In his sleep," Danny said. "He wakes up on the ceiling. They thought if they put us together—" he paused — "I don't know what they thought. That we'd figure it out together, maybe. But he floats and then I'm worried about him floating and then I can't sleep."

"Does he know he's doing it?"

"No." A pause. "He thinks it's funny, when he wakes up on the ceiling. He's eleven." The way he said *eleven* contained a complete thesis on the difference between being eleven and being seventeen, which was a thesis Sultana understood and did not try to summarize.

"Are you sleeping?" she said.

"Some."

"Some is better than none."

"Some is worse than enough," he said, which was accurate, and she didn't argue with it.

The common room was not empty — there were three other residents at different tables, doing different things with varying degrees of engagement. A girl in her early teens was drawing something that was either a dragon or a very committed take on a dog. Two boys around Danny's age were playing a card game that had apparently reached a disputed moment, which they were managing with the specific intensity of people for whom the stakes were low and the principle was high.

Danny was watching the card game. Not the cards — the players. Reading the room the way she'd noticed he always did, taking inventory of who was where and what they were feeling, which was either a personality trait or something his power was doing for him or both. She hadn't figured that out yet.

"Can I ask you something?" he said, still watching the card game.

"Yes."

"When you first had it." He paused. "Did you break anything?"

She thought about what to say. There were versions of the answer that were true and insufficient and versions that were true and more than she'd planned to give yet, and she'd learned, over three weeks, that he could tell the difference.

"Yes," she said.

"What?"

"A car," she said. "It wasn't moving. Nobody was in it. But it was a complete loss." She paused. "And a wall. A load-bearing one, which nobody told me about at the time, but I found out later."

"What happened to the wall?"

"The building was evacuated," she said. "For three days. Structural assessment. It was — it was a significant event."

He looked at her for the first time since she'd sat down. "How old were you?"

"Sixteen."

"Did anyone help you?"

She held his gaze for a moment. The question had the specific weight of questions that are also statements — that contain, inside the asking, the answer the person is most afraid of. "Not right away," she said.

He looked back at the card game. "They're trying here," he said. "The staff. Rosa's good. The counselor is — she's trying. But they don't know what it's like." He paused. "They keep asking me how I feel about it, which I understand why they're asking, but what I actually need is to know how to not drop things."

"That's a reasonable thing to need," she said.

"Every time I get stressed out, everything in the room that isn't bolted down does what I'm doing. If I'm panicking, it's—" he stopped. "It's not great."

She thought about the common room. About eleven-year-old Luca floating in his sleep. About Rosa's succulent, which was in a heavy ceramic pot that she now understood might not be entirely accidental.

"Have you been practicing?" she said.

"When?"

"On your own. Before you go to sleep. In the morning. Any time."

He looked at her. "They said I shouldn't use it unsupervised."

"I know," she said. "They say that to everyone at first. It's reasonable advice and it's also incomplete advice, because the alternative to practicing is not using it, and not using it doesn't teach your nervous system that you're in charge of it. Your power doesn't go away when you're not practicing. It just operates without input."

He was quiet for a moment. "That sounds like what happened in the mall."

"Yes," she said. "Exactly like that."

"So what do I do?"

She looked at the table. At the art supplies and the puzzle and the empty space in the middle where he sat. "You practice something very small," she said. "Something you can do in the space you're in. You pick one object — something light, something that can't hurt

anything if it goes wrong — and you move it. Just a little. Just enough to know you decided to." She paused. "And then you decide to stop, and you stop, and you notice that you stopped because you decided to."

He was listening. She could tell by the stillness — Danny went still when he was actually taking something in, which was different from the performed stillness of someone waiting for a conversation to end.

"And then?" he said.

"And then you do it again tomorrow," she said. "Same object. Same small move. Same stop." She looked at him. "You're not trying to become good at it yet. You're just trying to learn that it's yours. That you're the one who has it. Not the other way around."

The card game at the other table had resolved in someone's favor. One of the players pumped a fist. The other one was doing the specific facial expression of someone reconfiguring their self-image around a loss.

Danny looked at his hands. "A pen," he said.

"What?"

"I've been — there's a pen. On my desk. I've been moving it. Just to the edge of the desk, and then back. I didn't know if I was supposed to be doing that."

Sultana felt something that she didn't name because naming it would have made it large and she wasn't ready for it to be large. "How far can you move it?" she said, in the ordinary tone of someone asking an ordinary question.

He thought about this. "To the edge," he said. "And then it falls off and I have to go get it."

"So you're working on stop," she said.

The corners of his mouth moved, slightly, in a direction that wasn't quite a smile but was the shape a smile took before it decided to commit. "Yeah," he said. "I'm working on stop."

She was in her car for ten minutes before she drove anywhere.

She sat in the parking lot of the Federal youth facility on Riverside and looked at the building and thought about sixteen and a load-bearing wall and not right away, which was what she'd said, and which was the true part of a longer truth she hadn't said.

The longer truth was: nobody had helped her. Not right away, not later, not in the form she'd needed. What had happened instead was that she'd been found, eventually, by people who saw her power and wanted to use it, which was not the same as help and which she'd been too young and too unmoored to know wasn't the same thing. She'd spent two years confusing being useful to people who didn't care about her with being cared for by people who found her useful, and by the time she understood the distinction she was somewhere she needed to get out of, and getting out of it had been the hardest thing she'd done, harder than anything she'd done since.

David had been the one who'd come looking, eventually. Not for the power — he had plenty of powered people who wanted to be on his team. For her specifically, which she hadn't understood until afterward, until she was inside the team and could see from the inside what he saw from the outside, which was someone who had learned, the hard way, everything he needed his team to know and hadn't had anyone to learn it from.

She'd asked him once, early on, why her. He'd said: *because you know what it costs, and people who know what it costs are careful with it.* She'd said: *and if I hadn't known?* He'd said: *then we'd have figured it out together.* She hadn't entirely believed him, but she'd believed him enough, and enough had turned out to be sufficient.

Danny didn't have anyone coming to look for him. He had Rosa with her succulent and a counselor who was trying and an eleven-year-old roommate who floated in his sleep and a pen that he was teaching himself to stop.

She was going to have to tell David. Not all of it — not the part that was hers, the two years, the getting out, the long specific history of why she understood what she understood. But the part that was

Danny's. The part about what he needed and what the facility had and the gap between those two things.

She'd been not telling David because not telling felt like protecting something, and she'd been doing it long enough that the protection had become a habit and habits were hard to examine. But a habit wasn't a reason. And the reason she'd started coming here in the first place wasn't to protect something. It was to do what nobody had done for her.

She started the car.

The call came in when she was seven minutes from the facility, which was the kind of timing that happened in this job often enough that she'd stopped believing in coincidence and had started believing in density — the density of things happening, all the time, that you only noticed in relation to each other when they arrived close together.

"Docks district," Reyes said, when she answered. "Directorate operation. Tier-two operatives confirmed, at least one tier-one. Blip is pulling us now."

"Two minutes," she said.

"One," he said, which was David for *I know what you can do, do it faster*.

She pulled over. She made it in fifty-three seconds, which was faster than she'd moved a vehicle before, and which she noted as evidence that the training sessions were producing results, and which she also noted as evidence that she was willing to do things she wouldn't normally do when the alternative was being the last one there.

Blip's translocation caught her in the driver's seat and deposited her at the docks with the specific momentum of a person who had been moving fast and was now in a different place, which required a

half-second of physical recalibration that she'd learned to do while already looking at the situation.

The situation was:

A warehouse on the commercial docks, large, corrugated metal exterior, two loading bays open on the south face. Three Directorate operatives visible — two baseline soldiers with equipment she didn't recognize and one powered individual she did, or whose signature she did, from the Northern Distribution Hub: the shimmer in the Prime Wave, the localized perceptual manipulation. Mirage. Working the exterior perimeter, maintaining something — an illusion over the warehouse entrance, she thought, something that was making the approach look unoccupied to anyone checking from the street.

"Perimeter's a fabrication," she said, to the comms.

"Can you see through it?" Marcus said. He was already airborne, twenty feet up, reading the approach.

"It's not visual," she said. "She's doing something broader. Full-sense." She reached into the Prime Wave, carefully, the careful reaching she'd been practicing, and felt the edges of what Mirage was generating. It was good work. She'd have walked past it if she hadn't been specifically looking. "I can feel the boundary. I can tell you where it starts and stops."

"Do that," David said.

She talked them through the perimeter's edges — here, and here, and the gap on the northeast corner where the fabrication thinned, where Mirage's attention was stretched thinnest. Blip went through the northeast gap first, pulled Marcus after her, and then Carla and David in quick succession, and they were inside the fabrication with Mirage still maintaining it on the exterior, unaware they were through.

Which meant Mirage was, currently, containing herself inside her own perimeter.

"She doesn't know we're here," Marcus said, very quietly.

"No," David said. "Keep it that way."

Inside the warehouse was a second situation, which was the situation that mattered: three additional Directorate operatives moving equipment in a way that had the specific organized efficiency of people who had done this before and knew how long they had. The equipment was — she reached into the Wave again, trying to characterize what she was sensing, because it wasn't standard — it was something that was interacting with the Prime Wave in a way she hadn't encountered. Not drawing from it. Emitting something. A counter-signal. She didn't know what that meant yet and filed it for later analysis.

And Night Queen, in the corner, watching the operation with the posture of someone who was present in a supervisory capacity and was extremely alert.

David assessed the room in two seconds. She'd watched him do this enough times to know what it looked like from the outside: not stillness exactly, but the specific quality of someone whose processing was happening too fast for the body to reflect it. Two seconds, and then: "Sultana, northeast corner. Marcus, ceiling — don't engage until I say. Carla, the equipment. Figure out what it is before anyone touches it."

Night Queen saw them at the same moment he finished the sentence.

She went for the lights.

It was different this time.

Not the darkness — that was the same, the specific quality of Night Queen's light absorption, the world becoming the inside of a closed eye. She'd been in it before. She knew what it did to her: the calibration loss, the visual feedback her gravity work relied on, the sudden requirement to operate from sensation rather than sight.

What was different was that she didn't panic.

She went inward. She did the thing she'd been practicing in the

parking structure, the listening thing, the way you found the resonance of a space when you couldn't see it. She wasn't trying to find structural weak points — she was trying to find the room. The shapes in it. The weight of things, which gravity always knew even when light was gone.

Night Queen was to her left. She knew this before she could have explained how she knew it — the Prime Wave around Night Queen had a quality she recognized now, the hungry pull of the absorption, a void in the Wave's normal texture. She tracked it the way you track a sound: by its effect on the space around it.

She reached.

Not for Night Queen — for the crate the operatives had been loading, the one nearest to her, the heaviest one. She felt its weight. She pulled it, not toward herself, diagonally, across the floor in a direction that would — she modeled it in the dark, in the half-second available — bring it into Night Queen's path if Night Queen moved toward the warehouse's south exit, which was where the operatives were going.

The crate moved.

Night Queen's signature shifted — she'd sensed it coming, had adjusted, had moved left instead of toward the south exit, which put her closer to the northeast corner, which was where—

"Got her," David said, in the tone he used when something had gone where he'd modeled it going.

The lights came back, all at once, the fluorescents cycling through their startup flicker. Night Queen was in the northeast corner with David's field overlapping hers — the specific interference of his tactical ability, the coordination field he ran, which she could feel as a kind of clarity in the Prime Wave, a tuning of the space that made everyone on their team slightly more aware of where everyone else was.

Night Queen was still. She was looking at David with an expression that Sultana couldn't fully read but that wasn't the expression of someone who had lost and was processing the loss. It was the expres-

sion of someone who had arrived at a predetermined point in a sequence.

"Careful," Sultana said, to no one in particular.

Night Queen raised her hands. Not in surrender — in the specific gesture of someone indicating they are making a choice, and that the choice is deliberate. She looked at David. "The equipment," she said. "Don't touch it until you know what it is."

David looked at her for a long moment. "What is it?"

"A problem you haven't identified yet," she said. "That's all I'll say here."

"Why are you saying anything?"

Night Queen was quiet for a second. Not a calculating quiet — a different kind. "Because you'll need to move quickly when you do identify it," she said. "And I'd prefer you have a head start."

The operatives had gone still when the lights came back, which was what happened when the person running the operation stopped running it. Two of the soldiers were looking at Night Queen. One was looking at the door. Mirage had dropped the exterior fabrication — Sultana could feel its absence, the space where it had been — which meant Mirage had seen the lights go on from outside and had made a decision, and the decision had been to stop maintaining a perimeter around a compromised situation.

Smart.

Blip had the soldiers contained before they could decide what to decide. David was already on his comms, calling Federal, keeping his eyes on Night Queen. Marcus had come down from the ceiling and was standing in the warehouse with the particular size and presence he had in enclosed spaces, which was the presence of a wall that was considering having opinions.

Carla was at the equipment.

"Dave," she said.

"Yeah."

"I need Sokolov on the line," she said. "Now."

"Why?"

She looked at the equipment. At the counter-signal it was emitting into the Prime Wave, the thing she hadn't been able to characterize. She could characterize it now, from closer, and the characterization was something she needed someone else to hear and confirm before she believed it.

"Because whatever this is," she said, "it does something to the Prime Wave, and it's not what the Directorate built it to do, and I don't think the Directorate knows that."

The warehouse was quiet.

Night Queen, in the corner, said nothing. But her expression — Sultana caught it, the fraction of a second before it resolved back into the controlled professional surface she wore in the field — her expression said: *yes. Exactly that.*



She told David on the drive back.

Not in the debrief — the debrief had fifteen things in it that needed to be in the debrief, and what she had to say to David was not a debrief thing. It was a David thing. So she waited until they were in the van, until Carla was on her phone with Sokolov, until Marcus was in the back doing the post-operation inventory of his own structural integrity, until Blip was navigating and focused on the road.

She said, quietly enough that it was between them: "The boy from the mall. Danny. I've been going to see him."

David drove for a moment without responding. She'd learned to read his driving silences — there were several kinds, and this one was the kind where he was reconfiguring his understanding of something he thought he'd already understood.

"How long?" he said.

"Three weeks."

"Every Thursday."

It wasn't a question. She didn't ask how he knew. "Yeah," she said.

Another driving silence, shorter this time. "How is he?"

"He's working on stop," she said.

David looked at her. She'd said it the way he used operational shorthand — concise, specific, carrying more than it appeared to. "Okay," he said.

"He needs more than the facility can give him," she said. "Not because the facility is bad. It's not. But it's not — it's not right, for what he needs. The people there are trying and they don't know what it's like."

David said nothing.

"I know I should have said something sooner," she said.

"You're saying it now," he said.

She looked out the window. This was the thing about David — not forgiveness exactly, not tolerance, just the specific orientation of a person for whom the useful response to information is what comes next, not what came before. He filed the before for later, or maybe never, and moved to the next thing.

"He's going to be very good," she said. "When he learns stop. When he learns the rest of it." She paused. "He already knows how to read a room."

"Yeah?" David said.

"Better than most of us," she said. "He just doesn't know it's a thing he's doing."

David was quiet for a moment. She could feel him thinking — not the processing kind, the deciding kind. The kind that had a shape at the end of it.

"After we deal with whatever Carla found at the docks," he said.

"Yeah," she said.

"We'll figure out Danny."

"Okay."

"All of us," he said. "Not just you."

She looked at her hands. At the gravity she was always maintaining over the things in the van, the gentle cataloguing of weight that her power did whether she asked it to or not. She let herself feel the weight of Marcus in the back and Blip in the front and Carla on

the phone and David beside her, their specific masses, the particular presence of people she knew well enough to recognize by weight.

"Okay," she said again.

The van moved through the city. Behind them, in a Federal holding facility, Night Queen was in a room answering questions she'd prepared to answer. In a sub-level on the south waterfront, a man with a fast brain was doing math on a problem he didn't yet know was more expensive than he'd budgeted for. In a parking lot on Riverside, Sultana's car was waiting where she'd left it, and in seven minutes she'd need to go back for it.

In a common room in the Federal youth facility, a boy with too-large headphones was moving a pen to the edge of a desk.

Just to the edge.

And then back.

CHAPTER 11

THE DIRECTORATE

NIGHT QUEEN HAD BEEN in Federal holding for four hours before anyone came to talk to her, which she spent productively.

Not productively in the sense of planning an escape, which she could have attempted and had decided not to, because escaping at this juncture was a worse outcome than not escaping, and she was precise about outcomes. Productively in the sense of thinking through the sequence of events that had brought her to a Federal holding room with a table and two chairs and a mirror that was a window, which was the kind of room that didn't bother to pretend it wasn't the kind of room it was, and using the time to be certain she'd gotten the sequencing right.

She had.

The data chip at the Northern Distribution Hub had been step one: information release, controlled, to a specific recipient. She'd assessed Reyes as the right recipient based on three weeks of intelligence review and one operational observation, which was not a large

sample, but she'd made consequential judgments on smaller samples than that and trusted the assessment.

The equipment at the docks had been step two: a demonstration, with a guide. *Don't touch it until you know what it is.* She'd needed them to find it and she'd needed them to bring someone capable of analyzing it, and she'd needed to be present when they did, so she could read their response, and what she'd read in Reyes's response had confirmed what she'd needed confirming.

He'd believed her. Not completely — Reyes was not a person who believed anything completely until he'd run it through his own analysis — but enough. Enough to make the phone call, which was what she'd needed.

Step three was this room.

Step three was the conversation she was about to have, which was going to require her to give things away, which she had calculated against the alternative, which was giving nothing away and having no ability to affect the outcome. She was precise about outcomes.

She was also, though she would not have used this word herself, tired.



The agent who came in was not Chen, which was the first piece of information, and it was good information. Chen would have run the conversation as an interrogation, which was a format that produced specific kinds of output and not others, and the kind of output she needed to produce required a different format. The agent who came in was the young one, the translator with the impossible translocation power, who sat down across from her with a tablet and a recording device and the expression of someone who was going to listen before they decided anything.

Also good.

"Agent Reyes," Night Queen said.

"Agent Camila Reyes," she said. "Not related."

"I know." She'd confirmed it three weeks ago. Different Reyeses entirely — a common enough name, a coincidence the universe had apparently found amusing. "I requested you specifically."

Camila looked at her. "I know that too. Why?"

"Because you've been trying to get assigned to Harbor City for four months," Night Queen said. "Which means you understand the situation here better than your colleagues, and you understand it from a position of wanting to affect it rather than wanting to manage it. Those are different orientations."

Camila was quiet for a moment. The tablet was open on the table but she hadn't looked at it. "How do you know about the reassignment request?"

"I know a great deal about the Federal Powered Enforcement program's internal structure," Night Queen said. "That's not the conversation I'm here to have."

"What conversation are you here to have?"

Night Queen looked at the mirror. At the people she knew were behind it, watching, recording, assessing. She'd prepared for this part — the audience, the asymmetry of a conversation conducted in a room designed to disadvantage one party. She'd decided, before they'd walked her in, that the audience was acceptable and that the asymmetry was irrelevant, because the information she was going to give them was the kind of information that couldn't be weaponized against her. It could only be weaponized against Delesante, which was the point.

"The quantum entangler," she said.

Camila's expression didn't change, which was itself information — she knew the term, had been briefed on the device, was not surprised by the reference. "What about it?"

"It's further along than your intelligence suggests," Night Queen said. "The data chip gave you the schematics. The schematics showed you what it's designed to do. What they didn't show you —

what I'm going to tell you — is what it will actually do if it runs past the controlled phase."

"Which is?"

"The field expansion coefficient," Night Queen said. "In your technical briefing it was characterized as a variable. What that characterization didn't convey is the specific behavior of the variable under high-amplitude Prime Wave conditions." She watched Camila's face. "Your analyst flagged it. I've seen the Federal analysis report."

"You've seen our—" Camila stopped. The sentence she'd started was going to end somewhere she didn't want it to end, which was the place where she acknowledged that Night Queen had access to Federal intelligence reports, which was a conversation that would take the room somewhere unhelpful. She recalibrated. "The coefficient," she said. "What does it do?"

"In a controlled environment, with controlled power input, it expands the field to approximately three times the intended radius," Night Queen said. "Which is manageable. It means the effect extends beyond the target individual to anyone within that radius. Elevated enhancement, uncontrolled, but bounded."

"And in an uncontrolled environment."

"In an uncontrolled environment," Night Queen said, "with power input exceeding the safe threshold — which can happen in several ways, the most likely of which is a disruption to the operating environment mid-procedure — the coefficient is not bounded. The theoretical upper limit of the expansion radius, in a high-amplitude Prime Wave cycle, is—" she paused, because even having run the numbers herself, even having had three days to become certain of the numbers, the number was the kind of number that required a moment before you said it out loud—"—significant."

"How significant?"

"Not this room," Night Queen said. "Not this building. Not this city."

The room was very quiet.

Camila looked at the tablet. Then at the mirror. Then at Night Queen. "You're telling me the device could affect the entire—"

"In a worst-case scenario," Night Queen said. "Uncontrolled power input during a high-amplitude Prime Wave cycle, with no functional shutdown mechanism. Yes."

"And your organization is building this."

"My former organization," Night Queen said, "is building this. In a facility I can direct you to. With a test subject they acquired—" she checked the timeline she'd constructed in her head "—approximately eighteen hours ago."

The quiet had a different texture now. The texture of a room in which someone has just said a thing that reorganizes the priority structure of everything else.

"The test subject," Camila said, carefully.

"A powered juvenile," Night Queen said. "Seventeen. Manifested recently. Minimal existing ability, which is what made him suitable for the protocol — the entangler's calibration is easier on a shallower existing connection." She watched something happen in Camila's expression, a controlled thing, a thing being kept in its lane. "You know who he is."

"Yes," Camila said.

"So does someone else on your team," Night Queen said. "Someone who's been visiting the facility he was taken from, on Thursdays, for three weeks."

Another quiet.

"You've been watching us," Camila said.

"I've been watching everything," Night Queen said. "It's my job. It was my job." She adjusted the construction. "I understand the situation better than almost anyone currently in a position to affect it, and I have chosen to be in this room, with you, telling you these things. I'd like you to factor that into your assessment of what I'm giving you and why."

Camila looked at her for a long moment. "What do you want?"

Night Queen had prepared for this question. She'd prepared

three different answers, because the right answer depended on who was asking it and why, and she'd needed to be in the room to know which answer to use. "I want the boy to be safe," she said. "I want the device to be stopped before it runs past the controlled phase. And I want—" she paused, not for effect, genuinely pausing, because this was the part she'd prepared the least—"I want the outcome to be the right one. Whatever that requires from me."

Camila absorbed this. She was better than she looked, which was something Night Queen had assessed in the loading bay and was now confirming. She didn't reach for the easy response — the skeptical one or the accommodating one. She just sat with what she'd been told and ran it.

"The facility," she said.

Night Queen told her.



She'd met Delesante at a conference.

This was not the origin story either of them told when they told origin stories, which was partly because conferences were not interesting origin stories and partly because the relevant detail of the conference was not that they'd met but what they'd both been attending it for, which was a session on quantum entanglement theory that was not on the official program and that you only knew about if you were the kind of person who moved in certain circles, and the kind of person who moved in those circles was a kind of person who preferred not to be itemized in conference attendance records.

She'd been thirty-one. He'd been thirty-seven. He'd been the smartest person in the room, which he'd known, and she'd been the most dangerous person in the room, which he hadn't known, and the dynamic that had produced had been interesting enough to sustain two years of professional partnership.

She'd understood, from the beginning, what he was. Not because

he'd hidden it — he was, in many respects, exactly what he appeared to be, which was a man of extraordinary intellect who had decided, at some point, that the gap between what he was capable of and what he was permitted to do was other people's problem and not his. The Directorate had suited him because the Directorate was structurally incapable of telling him no in the ways that mattered to him, which were the ways involving his projects.

She'd understood this. She'd managed it, because managing it was the condition under which she could pursue her own objectives, which were not the same as his and never had been.

Her objectives were harder to summarize.

She'd gotten her ability at twenty-three, which was late for a first manifestation — most people manifested in adolescence, the Prime Wave connection establishing itself during the neurological reorganization of puberty with the kind of timing that made developmental psychologists uncomfortable for reasons they couldn't fully articulate. She'd been twenty-three, and a physicist, and in a laboratory, when the light had simply gone somewhere else. Not dark — somewhere else, into her, and then out again, and the equipment on the benches around her had responded to the presence of concentrated photons in ways that the equipment's designers had not anticipated.

She'd spent eight months hiding it. Not from fear — she wasn't afraid of her ability, had never been afraid of it, had been from the first moment clinically interested in it as a physical phenomenon. She'd hidden it because she needed to understand it before she let anyone else start having opinions about it, and understanding it had taken eight months of private experimentation that had, by the end, produced one ruined apartment, three rewired electrical systems, and a thorough comprehension of what she could do and what she couldn't.

What she couldn't do was not know what she knew.

She'd known, from the first week of working with Delesante, that the entangler was going to be real. She'd known, from the first month, that it was going to work. She'd known, from the first review of Troll's

field parameter calculations, that the field expansion coefficient was not a boundary condition. She'd known what it would do.

She'd made a calculation.

The calculation was this: she could leave. She could walk away from the Directorate, report what she knew, disappear into a life that didn't involve any of this. She was resourceful enough to manage it. The calculation against that option was: Delesante would still build it. Without her, without the management she provided, without the secondary shutdown she'd commissioned and the data chip she'd left and the specific way she positioned herself inside the operation to be the person who had access to the things that needed to have a person with access to them. Without her, it would still happen, and it would happen without the friction she'd been building into it.

She'd stayed because staying was how you had friction.

This was not an entirely comfortable conclusion, and she'd examined it from several angles over two years and had not found an angle that made it comfortable. But discomfort was not the same as being wrong, and she'd found it more useful to acknowledge the discomfort and proceed than to resolve it by pretending the calculation hadn't produced what it had produced.

She was thirty-three now. She was in a Federal holding room. Delesante was in a facility whose location she'd just given to an agent of the Federal Powered Enforcement program, with a seventeen-year-old boy she'd tried and failed to redirect before it came to this, and a device that was going to be operational within forty-eight hours if the Federal program didn't move faster than it had moved before.

She'd done what she could do from the inside. Now she was doing what she could do from the outside.

She was precise about outcomes.

She was also tired.

Camila came back in twenty minutes after she'd left, which was fast — fast enough to suggest that what happened in the intervening twenty minutes was not deliberation but action, which was what Night Queen had assessed as the likely response and was glad to have confirmed.

"We need the remote shutdown," Camila said. She had a different energy now — the energy of a conversation that has moved from information-gathering to operations, a gear change that Night Queen recognized. "You said there's a secondary mechanism."

"Troll built it at my request," Night Queen said. "Independent power source, separate trigger. It was completed yesterday."

"Where's the trigger?"

"The facility," she said. "Sub-level two. Third storage room, left side, behind the primary cryogenic unit housing."

Camila wrote something. "And if we can't reach it?"

"Then you use the primary," Night Queen said. "The primary is a direct interface on the device itself. It's accessible if you're in the room."

"And if we're not in the room?"

"Then you have a different problem," Night Queen said, in the tone that meant: *and that problem is outside the scope of what I can solve for you.*

Camila looked at her notes. "The test subject. Danny Osei."

"Yes."

"Is he—" she stopped. Found a different construction. "What's his condition likely to be when we get there?"

Night Queen was quiet for a moment. She thought about the procedure. About what it had looked like when Troll had run preliminary calibrations, the way the field interaction affected the subject even at low power levels, before full activation. She thought about a boy who had been in the system since he was nine and who had manifested three days ago and who had not had enough time between those two events to become anything other than frightened.

"He'll be conscious," she said. "The protocol requires conscious-

ness — an unconscious subject's Prime Wave connection doesn't engage correctly with the field. But the procedure is—" she chose the word —demanding. He'll need medical support immediately."

"And his ability?"

"Enhanced," she said. "The calibration was set for enhancement before extraction. The field will have deepened his connection regardless of whether it runs past the controlled phase." She looked at Camila directly. "He'll be more powerful than he was. He won't know what to do with it. Someone will need to—"

"I know someone," Camila said. "Who'll know what to do."

Night Queen held her gaze for a moment. "Yes," she said. "I know you do."



The thing about light was that it was everywhere.

She'd understood this, intellectually, before her ability manifested — she'd been a physicist, light was not abstract to her, she understood it as electromagnetic radiation within a specific frequency range, as photons with measurable properties, as the thing without which vision and photography and photosynthesis and stellar fusion and approximately everything else didn't work. She'd understood it the way you understand something you study: thoroughly, at the level of mechanism.

What she understood now, what the ability had given her, was something different. Not the mechanism. The *texture* of it. The way light moved through a space, not in the straight lines of the simplified diagrams, but in the complex, omnidirectional, reflective and refractive and diffractive reality of photons doing what photons did in the presence of surfaces and particles and other photons. She felt it the way other people felt temperature — not as data, as condition. The quality of a space as light moved through it.

This room had three hundred and forty-seven lumens of overhead lighting, two of the fluorescent tubes on a slightly different

frequency from the third, a small gap in the light seal around the mirror that let through a thin line of different-spectrum light from the observation room. She knew this without having tried to know it. She always knew it.

She sat in the three hundred and forty-seven lumens and waited.

Camila had said: "We'll need your cooperation on the operational response." And Night Queen had said yes, which was what she'd been saying, in various forms, for the last seventy-two hours, and which would have surprised Delesante considerably if he'd known, which he didn't.

Delesante, right now, was in the facility. In the control room, she expected — monitoring the calibration phase, watching the numbers with the expression he wore when the numbers were behaving the way he'd predicted, which was the expression of a man who had bet everything on his own intelligence and was being proven right and found this so satisfying that he hadn't looked up from the monitor long enough to notice the things it wasn't showing him.

The things it wasn't showing him: the secondary shutdown in the storage room. The data chip, analyzed and acted on. The Federal agents who were, if Camila moved at the pace Night Queen had assessed her as capable of moving at, already in transit.

And Vivienne Moreau, in a Federal holding room, explaining the precise location of a remote shutdown mechanism and the specific protocol for using it.

She'd spent two years being the friction.

She was done being the friction now.

She was ready to be the thing on the other side of the friction, which was a thing she didn't have a word for yet, but which felt, sitting in three hundred and forty-seven lumens of institutional light, like something she'd been building toward for longer than two years.

Maybe since the conference. Maybe before.

She was precise about outcomes.

This was the outcome she'd been building.

She sat and waited for it to arrive.

CHAPTER 12

HARBOR GUARD / FEDERAL

THE DATA CHIP analysis had produced a thirty-seven page Federal report, which Sokolov had read twice on the night it arrived and which he was now reading for the third time, at his desk, at 11 PM, with the specific quality of attention he gave to documents that had something in them he hadn't found yet.

He'd found it.

It was on page twenty-two, in the technical appendix, in a footnote. The footnote referenced a margin notation in the entangler's schematic that the Federal analysts had flagged as potentially anomalous and then, in the way of Federal analysts operating inside a framework that prioritized the actionable over the theoretical, had filed as a secondary concern pending further analysis. The notation was three characters in Troll's handwriting — a fraction, basically, a ratio, written in the corner of the schematic at the point where the field expansion coefficient was defined.

The ratio, when Sokolov ran it against the Prime Wave oscilla-

tion data from the Northern Distribution Hub analysis, produced a number.

The number was not a good number.

He sat with the number for a while. Then he called Quantum.

Quantum's actual name was Jerome Petit, which he'd stopped using professionally because, as he'd explained to Sokolov on their second meeting, "Jerome doesn't have the right energy for what Jerome does," a statement that had raised several questions Sokolov had decided not to pursue. He was twenty-nine, a former doctoral student in quantum field theory whose academic career had ended when his ability had manifested during his dissertation defense — in front of his committee, which was the kind of thing that produced in a person either a very specific kind of damage or a very specific kind of freedom, and Jerome Petit had arrived at the latter — and who had been working for Sokolov's division for three years in a capacity that the Federal organizational chart described as *research specialist* and that Sokolov privately categorized as *the person I call when I have a number I don't understand*.

He arrived in nineteen minutes, which was fast for midnight, wearing a jacket over what appeared to be pajamas and carrying a coffee that he'd clearly made at home and brought with him, which was the kind of detail that told you something about a person's relationship with institutional coffee.

"Page twenty-two," Sokolov said, and handed him the report.

Quantum sat down, looked at it, and was quiet for forty-five seconds, which was a long time for Quantum. He put the report down. He looked at the ceiling. He put three fingers on his left hand against his right palm in a pattern that Sokolov had come to recognize as the physical expression of his brain working at the speed it worked at when it was working hard.

"This is from the entangler schematic," Quantum said.

"Yes."

"The margin notation."

"Yes."

"Someone did this calculation," Quantum said, slowly, which was not his normal speed and which therefore meant something. "Someone did this calculation and wrote the result in the margin and then didn't tell anyone."

"That's my read," Sokolov said.

"The result is—" Quantum stopped. He put the report down. He stood up and went to the whiteboard that Sokolov kept in his office because Quantum worked better with a whiteboard and Sokolov had learned this on their second meeting and had installed one on their third. He picked up a marker. He looked at the whiteboard for a moment, and then he put the marker down.

He sat back down.

Sokolov waited.

"It's a ratio," Quantum said. "Between the field expansion coefficient in a standard Prime Wave cycle and the same coefficient in a high-amplitude cycle." He picked up his coffee. Put it down without drinking it. "In a high-amplitude cycle — which happens, they're cyclical, that's what cyclical means — the expansion doesn't scale linearly. It scales—" he moved his hand in a gesture that Sokolov had learned meant *the math is doing something the language doesn't have words for*. "The ratio is not friendly," he said.

"I need a radius," Sokolov said.

"I need more data," Quantum said.

"You have everything I have," Sokolov said. "Give me an order of magnitude."

Quantum looked at the report. He looked at his hand. He looked at the ceiling. "Big," he said.

"Bigger than this building."

"Yes."

"Bigger than this city."

Quantum was quiet for three seconds. "In the worst case

scenario," he said. "In the worst case scenario, which requires a high-amplitude cycle and uncontrolled power input and no functional shutdown, yes. Bigger than this city." He paused. "Possibly significantly bigger."

Sokolov wrote two things on the notepad on his desk. He wrote them neatly, because he always wrote neatly, because handwriting that you could read later was a form of respect for your future self. He tore the page off and handed it to Quantum. "The first number," he said, "is the Prime Wave oscillation cycle from the Northern Distribution Hub data. Tell me where we are in the cycle right now and when the next high-amplitude phase is."

Quantum looked at the number. He did the finger-palm thing again. "Forty-one hours," he said. "Give or take two."

Sokolov had expected something in this range and had still, somehow, hoped for something outside it. He wrote a third thing on his notepad, and then looked at the second thing he'd asked Quantum to do, which was still on the torn piece of paper. "The second number," he said.

Quantum looked at it. "The power draw threshold," he said. "At which the field expansion stops being bounded." He looked at it for longer. "This is the input level at which it becomes—"

"Yes," Sokolov said.

"How did you calculate this?"

"I inferred it," Sokolov said. "From the schematic and the oscillation data. Is it right?"

Quantum did not answer immediately. He looked at the ceiling. His fingers moved. He picked up the marker from the whiteboard tray, looked at it, put it back. "Substantially," he said. "There's a correction I'd apply to the denominator, but the order of magnitude is right."

"What's the correction?"

Quantum told him. Sokolov wrote it down, did the revised calculation, and wrote the result. The result was smaller than his estimate. He looked at it. Smaller was good, in the specific sense that a smaller

threshold meant the device reached dangerous input levels more quickly, which meant the window between activation and crisis was shorter, which meant any disruption to the controlled operating environment — including, for example, a Federal response team breaching the facility — could push the device past the threshold faster than anyone in the facility was expecting.

He sat with this.

"Jerome," he said.

Quantum looked at him. Sokolov used his given name rarely enough that it functioned as a signal. "Yeah," he said.

"I need you to build something," Sokolov said. "Tonight. Or as close to tonight as possible."

"What kind of something?"

Sokolov had been thinking about this since page twenty-two. Since the number. Since, if he was honest, a period considerably before page twenty-two, a period he'd been building toward in the specific way of a man who has been constructing something for fifty years without knowing when he was going to need it.

He opened his desk drawer.

The drawer contained, among other things, a folder that he'd compiled over the past year — not the official folder, not the Federal Powered Enforcement file, but his personal research folder, assembled through a combination of declassified sources and inference and the specific intuitions of a man who had been in the room fifty years ago when something had happened that nobody had been able to fully explain, and who had spent fifty years being unable to fully explain it, and who had arrived, through that inexplicability, at a theory that was either the most significant insight in the history of human knowledge or the most elaborate delusion he'd ever constructed.

He put the folder on the desk.

Quantum looked at it. "What is that?"

"Fifty years of a question," Sokolov said. "I'm going to need you to help me turn it into an answer."

The briefing happened at 7 AM the following morning.

It had been preceded by four hours of sleep, for those who'd managed it, which was not all of them. Sokolov had not slept. He'd been on the phone with Quantum until three, at his desk with the folder until five, and had spent the last two hours doing the thing he'd been doing since he was twenty-three, which was sitting very still with a problem and running it from the beginning.

Camila had also not slept. She'd been in the Federal processing facility until two, at which point she'd filed six reports, made four calls, and sent one message to David Reyes that said *I need thirty minutes of your time first thing tomorrow. Not a call. In person.* He'd replied twelve minutes later, which meant he hadn't slept either. *Here at 0600.*

He was there at 0600. So was Sultana. Sokolov arrived at 0612, which was late for him and which nobody commented on, because the circles under his eyes were doing the commenting.

Camila laid out what Night Queen had told her. She did it quickly and completely, which was how David had learned she briefed — no preamble, no softening, just the information in the order it needed to be received. She had good briefing instincts. He'd noted this in his mental file on her, which was a file he kept on everyone he worked with and which had been expanding for Night Queen as well, which was a development he hadn't entirely decided what to do with.

He let her finish before he said anything. The room was quiet for three seconds after she did, which was the room processing the words *bigger than this city.*

"The oscillation cycle," he said.

"Forty-one hours from now," Sokolov said. "Approximately. Jerome's calculation, so the approximation is—"

"Good," David said. "Forty-one hours." He looked at the table. "The boy's been in the facility since last night."

"Yes," Camila said.

"What phase is the procedure in?"

"Based on Night Queen's timeline, the calibration phase would have started within two to three hours of acquisition. It's a four-to-six hour calibration, followed by a preparation period, followed by the procedure itself." She checked her notes. "The procedure could begin as early as tonight."

"Before the high-amplitude phase," Sultana said. She'd been quiet until now, sitting at the corner of the table with the specific stillness she had when she was running something internally. Her voice was even. David noted the evenness.

"Yes," Camila said. "The Professor's protocol is designed for standard cycle conditions. He doesn't know about the high-amplitude risk." She paused. "Nobody in that facility knows except whoever made the margin notation, and that person is currently in Federal holding."

"Night Queen," David said.

"Yes."

"So if the procedure goes past the controlled phase during standard cycle conditions," Marcus said, from the doorway where he'd appeared at some point in the last few minutes in the way he sometimes appeared, quietly for a man of his dimensions, "it's bad. And if it goes past the controlled phase during the high-amplitude window—"

"It's a different category of bad," Sokolov said.

Marcus absorbed this. "Right," he said. "Good. Great. Coffee?"

"Please," Sokolov said.

David looked at his notes. He had three things written down, which was how he approached briefings: the three most important things, in order of what needed to be resolved first. The first was the boy. The second was the device. The third was the gap between those two, which was the facility itself, and what it would take to breach it without triggering the thing they were trying to prevent.

"The remote shutdown," he said.

"Sub-level two," Camila said. "Third storage room, left side, behind the primary cryogenic unit housing. Night Queen is certain it's there."

"And the primary shutdown is in the procedure room," he said.

"Direct interface on the device. She says it's accessible if you're in the room."

"If." He wrote something. "Night Queen's assessment of the facility's defensive posture."

Camila looked at her notes. "Eight non-powered soldiers on the sub-level rotation. Two powered operatives she didn't name — she said she'd provide names when we're ready to move. The Professor will be in the control room adjacent to the procedure room. He's in the suit for the operation." She paused. "She described him as unlikely to engage directly during the procedure phase. He won't want to risk the equipment."

"And if we breach before the procedure starts?"

"Then he engages," she said. "And the suit is—"

"A problem," David said. He'd seen the Mark XI in the facility fight. He knew what it was. "Sultana."

She looked at him.

"The suit," he said.

"If I can get close enough," she said. "The structural integrity depends on the joint systems. If I can compromise the joints—"

"How close?"

"Twenty feet," she said. "Fifteen, if the environment is clean."

He wrote that down. He thought about the Northern Distribution Hub, about the darkness, about Sultana going inward and finding the room by weight. Fifteen feet in a lit facility with a clear line of engagement was different from the hub. Better different.

"Blip," he said.

"In and out," Camila said. "She's already run the approach route. The northeast service entrance has a loading bay with a six-second blind window in the security rotation. She can get a team to sub-level two before the patrol cycle completes."

"How many in one pull?"

"Four, comfortably. Five at a push."

David looked at the table. He was counting things — people, positions, seconds, probabilities. The counting that was always happening, that Carla had learned to read in his face, that the team had learned to work around, not interfering with it because interfering with it was like standing in front of someone who was doing surgery and asking how it was going.

Carla was watching him count. She'd been at the end of the table the whole briefing, making notes of her own, and she'd been watching him with the expression she had when she'd already done her own count and was waiting to compare.

"The procedure room," he said. "What are we walking into if the calibration phase is complete when we go in?"

"The boy will be in the field," Camila said. "The entangler will be active. His Prime Wave connection will be — Night Queen described it as significantly elevated. More than operational." She paused. "She said he'll be conscious but that he'll need immediate support."

"From someone who knows what that looks like," Sultana said.

"Yes," Camila said.

David looked at Sultana. She looked back at him, not with the expression of someone asking permission, but with the expression of someone who has already made the decision and is informing him of it, which was a distinction he'd learned to read in her specifically and respected accordingly.

"You're in the procedure room," he said.

"Yes," she said.

He looked at Camila. "You said Night Queen would give us names when we're ready to move. The two powered operatives."

"Yes."

"I want them before we plan the breach positions," he said. "What they can do affects where we put people."

Camila was already reaching for her phone.

Sokolov left the briefing early, which he did with the specific apology of a man who is leaving for a reason he's not going to explain and who wants you to know the decision was deliberate, not an oversight. He nodded at David on the way out. David nodded back. This was sufficient.

He went to his office.

He sat at his desk. He opened the folder.

The folder contained, in roughly chronological order: a typed incident report from fifty years ago that bore his own signature and that he'd been unable to submit at the time because submitting it would have required explaining things he hadn't known how to explain, and that he'd kept because he was not, whatever his professional failings, the kind of person who destroyed documents; a series of handwritten notes from the following five years, as he'd tried to reconstruct what had happened; a collection of research papers, starting in the 1980s, on quantum entanglement and Prime Wave theory, which had not been called Prime Wave theory then — it had been called quantum coherence in biological systems, which was a name that covered for the fact that nobody quite understood what was happening; and a set of calculations that he'd done most recently, in the past year, that were either correct or the most sophisticated self-deception he'd ever performed.

He was fifty years old when it happened. Twenty-three. He'd been twenty-three.

He didn't often let himself go back to it — not because the memory was bad, exactly, but because it was the kind of memory that changed every time he looked at it, that had more in it every decade as he had more framework to see it with. At twenty-three he'd understood what happened in terms of what he'd felt and what he'd seen. At thirty he'd understood the dimensions of it. At forty he'd started to understand the physics. At fifty he'd started to understand why.

He was sixty-three now and he understood most of it, and what

he didn't understand was the thing that Quantum was building in the research lab down the hall.

He called Quantum.

"How close?" he said.

The sound of something electrical, a chair moving, the specific background audio of a workspace that had been inhabited for many consecutive hours. "Six hours," Quantum said. "Maybe seven. The secondary emitter is—" he paused—"Jerome is going to say something he won't be able to take back."

"Go ahead."

"The secondary emitter is easier to build than I expected," Quantum said. "Which makes me nervous, because things that are easier than expected are usually easier because I'm wrong about something."

"Are you wrong about something?"

"Not yet," Quantum said. "I'm checking."

"Keep checking," Sokolov said. "And Jerome—"

"Yeah."

"The device," Sokolov said. "What we're building. Have you run the range calculations?"

"Yes."

"And?"

A pause. Not the thinking pause — the different kind. "It would work," Quantum said. "If the theory is right. If the theory is right, it would work."

"The theory is right," Sokolov said.

"You can't know that," Quantum said. "You inferred it."

"I've been inferring it for fifty years," Sokolov said. "I'm confident in the inference."

"That's not how confidence works," Quantum said, but not in the tone of someone objecting — in the tone of someone noting something for the record and then proceeding anyway. "Six hours. Maybe seven."

"Thank you," Sokolov said.

He hung up.

He looked at the incident report. His own signature, fifty years old, at the bottom of a page that described, in the careful neutral language of official documentation, a powered incident of unknown classification involving an energy entity of non-human origin, which was the language he'd used because *being from somewhere beyond the universe* was not a classification that the form had a box for.

He'd never sent it. He'd never shown it to anyone. He'd kept it for fifty years the way you keep something you're not ready to be done with, because the being done with it requires an ending, and he'd known, in the particular way that twenty-three-year-olds know things they can't explain, that the ending hadn't happened yet.

It was happening now.

He closed the folder.

He had six hours. Maybe seven. He was going to use them.

The Powered Free operative was nineteen.

Camila had not expected this. She'd expected someone in their thirties, minimum — someone who'd had time to develop the specific grievance that expressed itself as organized resistance, the layered resentment of a person who had tried other options first. Nineteen was not that. Nineteen was someone who had arrived at organized resistance with the speed of someone who hadn't needed other options to confirm what they already knew.

Her name was Tess. She was in Federal processing — not the holding room, the waiting room, which was a distinction the Federal program maintained between people who were being detained and people who were cooperating and who would be going home after the conversation, which was the category Tess was in. She'd been at the Directorate facility at the docks, which was how she'd ended up in Federal processing, but she'd been there in the specific capacity of a non-powered support operative who had seen what she'd seen and

had stopped when the operation stopped and had not run, which was either compliance or something else.

Camila sat across from her. "You stayed," she said.

"Yes," Tess said.

"Why?"

Tess looked at her hands. She was small, with the kind of self-containment that didn't come from confidence exactly but from practice — from having learned, at some point, to take up less space than she was entitled to, and having not yet unlearned it. "Because running would have meant I thought what I was doing was wrong," she said. "And I'm not sure I think that."

"You were working with the Directorate."

"I was running logistics for a cell that's trying to do something the Federal program isn't doing," Tess said. "Which is give people who have abilities a way to develop them that isn't the exile zones."

Camila looked at her. "The Directorate's method for doing that involved kidnapping a seventeen-year-old."

"I know," Tess said. "I didn't know they were going to do that." Something shifted in her expression — not guilt, exactly, but the specific discomfort of someone who is revising a belief they've held for a long time and finding the revision painful. "I should have known they were capable of it. I'm — I'm revising some things."

"What things?"

"My read on the Professor," she said. "He's — brilliant, and he's also—" she stopped. "The brilliance is very loud," she said. "It covers for the other stuff. I didn't listen hard enough to the other stuff."

Camila thought about Night Queen, in the holding room, with three hundred and forty-seven lumens and fifty years of a different version of the same calculation. "What do you know about the facility?" she said.

Tess looked up. Something changed — not surprise, the absence of surprise. She'd known this question was coming. She'd stayed because she'd known this question was coming. "What do you need?" she said.

"The sub-level layout," Camila said. "Entry points, defensive positions, patrol rotation. Anything you have on the procedure room specifically."

Tess was quiet for two seconds. Two seconds was fast, for the decision she was making. "The sub-levels have two entry points," she said. "The main service elevator and a stairwell on the north side that's not on the building's official plans. They added it during the facility conversion. It exits into the alley behind the loading dock."

Camila was writing.

"The patrol rotation on sub-level two is fifteen minutes," Tess said. "Not forty-three."

Camila stopped writing. "The university was forty-three."

"The university was a secondary site," Tess said. "The facility is primary. The rotation is fifteen."

Camila revised her notes. Fifteen, not forty-three, was a significant variable. She was already recalculating the breach window, which had shrunk from six seconds to something that required a different approach.

"The procedure room," she said.

"Sub-level three," Tess said. "There isn't a sub-level three on any of the building's official documents. The access is from sub-level two, through a door that's keyed to a biometric the Professor controls."

Sub-level three. Sokolov's team hadn't known there was a sub-level three. Night Queen hadn't mentioned a sub-level three.

Camila kept her face neutral, because she'd learned that her face was what people read when they were deciding how much to tell her, and neutral was the face that produced the most telling. "How do you get through the biometric if the Professor isn't there?"

Tess looked at her hands again. "There's a maintenance override," she said. "Physical key, Troll built it, it looks like a regular key card but it overrides the biometric from the outside." She paused. "I have it."

Camila looked at her.

"I know," Tess said. "I know what it looks like. I had it because I

was the one who ran the maintenance rotation on sub-level three. I'm not—" she stopped. "I'm not a spy. I'm not some kind of plant. I just — I stayed, and I have the key, and the boy in that facility is seventeen, and I'm nineteen, and I know what it's like to be in a system that doesn't have the right thing for you, and this isn't—" she stopped again. "This isn't the right thing either."

Camila looked at her for a long moment.

She thought about the four months she'd spent trying to get assigned to Harbor City. She thought about the particular kind of knowing that came from seeing a gap and not being able to stop seeing it.

"Okay," she said. "I need to make a call."

David's phone rang while he was doing the third revision of the breach plan.

He'd been revising since Camila left — not because the plan was wrong, but because every revision of a breach plan was an attempt to find the thing the plan hadn't accounted for, and you kept revising until either you found it or you ran out of time, and you tried very hard not to mistake running out of time for having found everything.

He answered.

He listened.

He wrote two things down. *Sub-level 3*. And then: *fifteen minutes*.

He looked at the breach plan.

He turned the page over and started again.

Sultana found the pen on Danny's desk.

She wasn't supposed to be at the Federal youth facility. She was supposed to be in the temporary headquarters doing the pre-operation equipment check, which was a thing David ran and that he ran

thoroughly and that everyone was expected to be present for. She'd told David she needed forty minutes. He'd looked at her. She'd looked back. He'd said forty minutes.

She had the maintenance contact for the facility — a woman named Briggs who she'd gotten from Rosa three weeks ago and had never used but had kept because she kept things she might need. She called Briggs and explained that there was a young man named Danny Osei who needed to be transferred to a Federal medical facility for evaluation, effective immediately, and that this was a Federal Powered Enforcement directive, which was technically true in that she was a Federal Powered Enforcement officer and she was directing it.

It took twenty minutes to arrange. She spent the other twenty in Danny's room.

The room was small. Two beds — Luca's was near the window, Danny's was near the door, which she suspected was not accidental, which was the kind of thing Danny would have thought about. The desk had textbooks on it and a phone charger and three drawings that were pinned to the wall above it, which she looked at and didn't look at too hard because they were his and she wasn't here to read them.

The pen was at the edge of the desk.

Exactly at the edge. Right at the lip, balanced, not fallen.

She stood there for a moment.

He'd figured out stop.

She picked up the pen and moved it back to the center of the desk, where it was safe, and she left the room and went back to the headquarters and made it in thirty-eight minutes.

David didn't say anything.

He handed her the revised breach plan.

She read it.

"Sub-level three," she said.

"Sub-level three," he confirmed.

She looked at the plan. At where he'd put her. At the route from the maintenance override door to the procedure room, which was

fourteen meters and two turns and a window of nine seconds before the patrol cycle completed.

"Blip can hold the window," she said.

"Yes," he said.

"And the Professor."

"Carla and Marcus have the control room," he said. "You won't have to go through him."

She looked at the plan for another moment. At Danny's position, which was marked with the notation *subject — immediate support required on contact*. She thought about a pen at the edge of a desk.

"He figured out stop," she said.

David looked at her.

"I just wanted you to know that," she said. "Before we go in."

He was quiet for a moment. He wrote something in the margin of the breach plan, which was not a place people usually wrote things, but David's margins were where things went when they mattered and didn't fit anywhere else.

She didn't ask what he wrote.

She didn't need to.

CHAPTER 13

MICHAEL

I INCORPORATED ON A TUESDAY.

The decision had been building for — I asked the Ghost for the exact duration and it told me seventeen local days, which was how long it had been tracking the incremental changes in my survey behavior that were consistent with, in its characterization, :an increasing orientation toward direct environmental engagement rather than remote observation,; which was the Ghost's way of saying I'd been getting closer, and closer, and closer, and that the logical endpoint of closer was here.

Here was a park.

Not a significant park — not the kind with a name that means something in the city's history, not the kind with a monument or a dedicated planting or any particular reason for existing beyond the ordinary civic reason of *people need somewhere to be that isn't a building*. It was a medium-sized rectangle of grass and concrete paths and benches and three trees that were doing their best and a fountain

that was off for the season. It was in a residential neighborhood eight blocks from the Harbor Guard's temporary facility and four blocks from the sub-level complex on the south waterfront, which was not why I'd chosen it and was also not unrelated to why I'd chosen it.

I had chosen it because it was ordinary.

Incorporeality is not a natural state for what I am — it's a field state, a projection, a way of existing in a physical iteration without participating in its physics. The Authority developed it for survey work: you need to be able to observe without being observed, to move through a world without affecting it, to remain outside the causal chain while you're determining what to do about it. I've been incorporeal for the survey periods of seventy-two thousand iterations. I'm very good at it.

Incorporating — taking physical form, becoming something that has mass and temperature and that the world can see and touch — is the other thing. It's not difficult, technically. The mechanics of it are well within my capabilities. I've done it before, in earlier iterations, when the assessment required direct contact with the population, which was rare and which I'd found, on those occasions, to be an experience I'd filed and not returned to.

What had been different about those occasions was that I'd incorporated with a purpose. Assessment contact, crisis intervention, the specific functional reasons that the Authority's protocol recognized as justifying material presence. I'd appeared, accomplished the task, and withdrawn.

I was incorporating now for no reason the Ghost could categorize.

:Physical manifestation without defined operational objective is not standard survey protocol,: it had noted, when I'd told it to initiate the incorporation sequence.

:I'm aware,: I'd said.

:Shall I log it as an anomalous behavior under the extended assessment classification?:

:No.: I'd said. :Log it as— log it as exploratory data collection.:

The Ghost had logged it as exploratory data collection and had not commented on the fact that exploratory data collection was not a category that existed in the survey protocol and that it had now created three classifications that hadn't existed before this iteration, which was either a sign that this iteration was genuinely anomalous or a sign that something else was happening, and the Ghost was not capable of determining which, and I was trying not to.

The park was cold.

I hadn't anticipated this in a practical sense — I had the Ghost's atmospheric data, I knew the temperature was forty-one degrees Fahrenheit, I understood forty-one degrees Fahrenheit as a physical fact. What I hadn't anticipated was what forty-one degrees Fahrenheit felt like as a physical experience, which was different from knowing it as a fact in the way that all physical experiences are different from knowing facts about them. The air moved and it was cold and my uniform, which maintained a temperature buffer in its standard configuration, was not configured for Harbor City in November because I hadn't thought to configure it, because I'd been incorporeal and temperature had been data.

I sat on a bench.

The bench was cold too. I noted this. I noted that noting it was different from logging it, that there was something happening in the noting that was not the same as the Ghost's data processing, which was a distinction I filed under the growing category of *things I don't have adequate language for*.

My Halo was offline. This was deliberate — incorporating with the Halo active would have produced a visible energy field around me, which would have been noticeable, which was contrary to the point of sitting in an ordinary park on an ordinary Tuesday. Without

it, I was — I looked at my hands. They were hands. They looked like hands. They were the Authority's standard incorporated form, which defaults to humanoid appearance in iterations with humanoid dominant species because the survey data supports the conclusion that humanoid populations respond better to humanoid contact. I was tall, which was consistent with the form, and my uniform was white, which was consistent with the form, and my skin had the faint luminosity that I couldn't entirely suppress even without the Halo, which was not consistent with trying to be ordinary, but which I'd assessed as manageable.

I was incorrect about manageable.

The first person who passed the bench was a man walking a dog. The dog stopped and looked at me and then looked at the man and then looked back at me with the specific expression of a dog that has encountered something that doesn't parse. The man pulled the leash. The dog came, reluctantly, looking back twice. The man did not look back once, which was the behavior of someone who had looked at me, processed the luminosity, and decided he was going to handle this by not handling it, which was a reasonable response.

The second person was a woman pushing a stroller who glanced over and then glanced over again and then adjusted her route to take her to the far side of the path, which was the behavior of someone who had decided that whatever I was, she would rather be on a different path.

The third person was a child.

I had not, in my survey of Harbor City, spent significant time observing children. My survey had focused on the powered population, which skewed toward adulthood for the simple reason that manifestation was an adolescent phenomenon and the interesting operational data was in how the powers were used rather than when they developed. Children were in my survey data as a demographic category, as background figures in the urban landscape I'd been cataloguing, as the smaller signatures in the Prime Wave that hadn't yet developed the specific texture of an active entanglement connection.

This one was approximately five years old, based on the Ghost's developmental reference data. She was wearing a coat that was very red and had buttons that looked like small yellow suns, which I noticed because the buttons were at my eye level when she stopped in front of me, which was the first thing she did — she stopped in front of me, directly, with the specific absence of social self-consciousness that characterized this developmental stage, and looked at me.

She looked for quite a long time.

"Why are you so shiny?" she said.

I considered this question.

In the Authority's language, there were seventeen distinct terms for the luminosity produced by different types of Prime Wave interaction with physical form, each with a precise technical definition and a specific application context. None of them were useful here.

In the human linguistic database, which the Ghost maintained in its complete form, there were numerous ways to describe luminosity: radiant, glowing, luminescent, phosphorescent, incandescent, and approximately two hundred metaphorical constructions ranging from the poetic to the colloquial. None of them explained *why*.

"I'm not sure," I said.

She considered this answer with the seriousness it apparently deserved. "My mom says some people are just shiny," she said. "Like they have a light on inside."

"Your mother may be right," I said.

She sat down on the bench beside me, which I hadn't expected, and which the woman I took to be her mother — who had arrived from the direction of the fountain and was now standing at a distance that communicated parental supervision without interference, and whose expression suggested she had processed the luminosity and arrived at a different conclusion than the dog walker — seemed to be allowing, if provisionally.

"Are you cold?" the child said.

"Yes," I said.

"Me too," she said. "But it's a good cold. The kind that means something is about to be different."

I looked at her. "What do you mean?"

"Like before it snows," she said, with the authority of someone reporting an observed fact. "It gets cold in a different way before it snows. My grandpa told me that." She looked at the sky. "It might snow."

I looked at the sky. The overcast had the particular texture it had had for three days, the low flat gray of a weather system that had settled and was waiting for a condition to change.

"It might," I said.

She seemed satisfied with this. She sat with me for another minute in the specific comfortable silence of someone who had said what they came to say and was content with the outcome. Then her mother said something with the specific intonation of someone saying a name, and she got up without ceremony and rejoined her mother and they walked down the path toward the park's eastern exit and didn't look back.

I sat with the bench and the cold and the three trees that were doing their best and thought about the question I still hadn't answered.

Why are you so shiny?

I had been burning worlds for longer than this planet had had complex life, and I had not once, in all of that time, been asked a question that required me to account for myself to someone who had no particular reason to expect anything from me. The Authority's hierarchy was structured around function — you were what you did, and what you did defined the questions you were asked. Every entity I'd interacted with in the Authority's framework had interacted with me in the context of a role. Every powered individual I'd interacted with in this iteration had interacted with me in the context of a crisis.

This child had simply looked at me and wanted to know why.

And I didn't know. I knew the technical answer, which was a

specific type of Prime Wave interaction with my physical form, and I knew that the technical answer wasn't the answer to the question she'd asked. She'd asked why I was shiny in the way you ask why someone is sad — not for the mechanism, for the meaning.

I didn't know the meaning.

I stayed on the bench for another forty minutes, which the Ghost logged as :extended exploratory data collection, primary site: and which was, in fact, the first time in seventy-two thousand iterations that I had simply sat somewhere and let it be where I was, without task, without protocol, without the forward orientation of someone who has a next thing to do.

It was uncomfortable. It was also something I didn't have the right word for in either language, the Authority's or the human one, which I was beginning to suspect was its own kind of information.



I walked.

This was the second thing I hadn't anticipated about incorporating: the specific quality of moving through a world as a thing that is in it rather than above it. When I move in incorporeal form, I move the way the Authority moves — through space rather than along it, without the friction of surface contact, without the physical negotiation of objects and people and the particular democracy of sidewalks where everyone has equal claim to the path. Incorporating put me on the sidewalk.

The sidewalk was complicated.

I had to navigate around a food cart that was positioned at the corner, around three people who were having a conversation that occupied more physical space than they appeared to be aware of, around a bicycle that was moving too fast for the space it was in, around a dog — a different dog, this one more focused on the food cart than on me — and around a section of uneven concrete that the

Ghost flagged as a trip hazard and that I stepped over with the specific attentiveness of someone discovering that the physical world has opinions.

I was discovering that the physical world has opinions.

I walked without a destination, which was new, and which produced in me a quality of attention that the survey work had not. In survey mode, I observed with purpose: I was building a model, cataloguing specific variables, tracking the things that mattered for the assessment. Walking through Harbor City at street level without a survey objective meant I was observing without purpose, which was different in a way that I kept finding surprising. The things I noticed were not the things I would have catalogued. A bakery with a window display of something that smelled like warm sugar and yeast, which I couldn't eat and which I found myself pausing to look at anyway. A building with a mural on its side — large, covering three stories, a depiction of Harbor City's harbor that was clearly not photorealistic but which was more true to something than photographs were, which was a sentence that made no technical sense and which was nonetheless what I was thinking. An old man sitting on the steps of what the Ghost identified as a historically significant building, feeding pigeons with the routine attention of someone for whom feeding pigeons was a primary occupation of the day.

I watched the pigeons for seven minutes.

This was, I was aware, not useful. The pigeons had no Prime Wave connection. They were not operationally relevant. They were not part of the anomalous assessment or the extended survey classification or the preliminary report I still hadn't filed. They were just pigeons, doing pigeon things, with the specific industry of animals that have found a niche and filled it completely.

The old man noticed me watching. He looked at me with the unhurried assessment of someone who has been in a city long enough that unusual is a category he's made peace with. "You want to feed them?" he said. He was holding a paper bag of something.

"I can't eat what they eat," I said, which was true but not the right answer.

"You don't eat it," he said. "You throw it." He held out the bag.

I took a handful of whatever was in the bag — small, dry, slightly rough-textured, the Ghost identified it as cracked corn — and I threw it the way I'd seen him throwing it, underhanded and low, toward the cluster of birds that was working the pavement in front of the steps.

The pigeons moved toward it with the fast, purposeful disorder of small hungry things.

The old man watched them. I watched them. The city moved around us. Someone came out of the historically significant building and went down the steps at the pace of someone who was late, and the pigeons moved to accommodate the footsteps and then moved back when the footsteps were gone.

"You're not from here," the old man said.

"No," I said.

"Visiting?"

I considered the word. "I'm not sure," I said, which was honest.

He nodded, in the way of someone for whom not being sure was a reasonable thing to be. "City's different when you're just in it," he said. "Instead of looking at it."

I looked at him. "Yes," I said. "It is."

He held the bag out again. I took another handful.

I found myself near the Northern Distribution Hub in the early afternoon, which I told myself was not directional and was probably directional. The building had been cleaned up since the incident — the loading bay had been repaired, the evidence team had processed and cleared, the non-powered security staff had been reassigned to a different facility while the Federal investigation was ongoing. It looked, from the outside, like a building that had had something happen to it and was processing the having.

The Prime Wave around it was quiet. The residual signatures from the engagement were gone — signatures don't persist that long unless the entanglement was particularly deep, and the Directorate's non-powered soldiers hadn't left much of a trace. Night Queen's signature was gone too, which I knew because she was in Federal holding, and her signature was one I'd learned to recognize the way you learn to recognize a particular quality of light.

I stood outside the building for a moment.

I thought about the data chip. About the specific placement of it — not accidental, I'd concluded, and the Federal analysis had confirmed, because Night Queen was not the kind of person who lost things accidentally. I thought about what it meant to leave something for someone specific, without knowing if they'd find it or what they'd do with it if they did. The act of trust in an unconfirmed recipient. The bet on someone's competence and judgment without the ability to make the bet explicit.

I understood this better, now, than I had from the incorporeal survey position.

I'd been making the same kind of bet, in my own way, for seventeen days. Observing rather than acting, because acting would change what I was observing, but also because I was waiting for something I could see building in the data — something that required the humans to be the ones who moved, and that required me to have watched them long enough to know whether they could.

The Ghost had been updating the instability index throughout the survey. :Current reading: 4.4,: it had noted that morning. :Trend: increasing. Rate of increase has accelerated in the past forty-eight hours, consistent with the acquisition of isotope materials by the Directorate.:

4.4. Not crisis territory yet. But 4.2 to 4.4 in eleven days was a rate of change that extrapolated to concerning places.

I told the Ghost to run the extrapolation.

:At the current rate of increase, assuming the quantum entangler proceeds to operational status and is activated, the instability index

will reach critical threshold — 6.0 — within—: a pause :—a variable window depending on the procedure's outcome. Best case: seventy-two hours. Worst case: twenty-seven minutes.:

Twenty-seven minutes was the worst case with uncontrolled field expansion.

I stood outside a building in the cold and thought about twenty-seven minutes and about forty-one hours, which was the high-amplitude window I'd picked up from Quantum's calculation in the Federal building's research lab, which I'd been monitoring because the Prime Wave activity there had been unusual — the specific signature of someone doing very deliberate quantum calculations, with the focused intensity of someone who understood more about what they were calculating than they should have been able to understand without access to information I hadn't given anyone.

Sokolov had figured something out.

I didn't know exactly what. But the shape of the calculation I'd been observing — the particular attention he was paying to the oscillation cycle, the way the numbers he was running corresponded to variables I hadn't shared — suggested that Sokolov had arrived, through fifty years of inference, at a partial map of something he'd never been given directions to.

He was remarkable. I had no other word for it.

I walked.



The harbor was where I ended up, which was where I'd suspected I'd end up when I'd started walking. Destinations, I was learning, have a kind of gravity even when you don't acknowledge them. I'd been moving toward the harbor the way the Prime Wave moves toward stability — not directly, not by the most efficient route, but inevitably, through the particular physics of what you're drawn to.

It was late afternoon. The overcast was breaking in a few places, letting through the specific quality of light that happens when sun

reaches through cloud cover and lands on water — scattered, diffuse, less like illumination than like the water and the light having a conversation about what to do with each other.

I sat on a bench on the waterfront promenade and watched this happen.

The harbor moved. The water was dark and the light was changing and there were three cargo vessels I'd been tracking since my arrival in this iteration, moving on their ordinary routes, carrying ordinary things for ordinary reasons that had nothing to do with Prime Wave stability or Authority protocols or the particular sequence of events that had led me to this bench at this hour.

I thought about what I'd been doing.

Not the walk — the seventeen days. The extended survey. The careful observational distance I'd maintained while watching people I'd come to think of in terms I wasn't supposed to use — not *biologics*, not *the powered population*, not *dominant species representatives*. Carla mapping a building with sound. Marcus getting better by half a foot. Sultana figuring out stop before anyone taught her how. Blip sitting on a wall in the cold with something always ready.

David watching the horizon for what was coming.

I thought about what I was going to do.

The Ghost had the preliminary report draft, still unsent. The Authority's administrative tier had sent two follow-up requests since the first one — I'd been logging them without responding, which was technically non-compliant and was also the thing I was doing. Each follow-up moved the urgency level one step higher. The next step was contact from the Executive's tier directly, not the administrative layer, which was the kind of contact that required a response and produced consequences if the response was insufficient.

I needed a plan.

The problem with needing a plan was that the plan I was building required things I didn't know yet — specifically, whether the Federal team could get to the boy and the device before the device ran past the controlled phase, and whether Sokolov's calculation had

produced what I thought it might have produced, and whether the particular thing I'd been watching build in this team over seventeen days was the thing I needed it to be.

I didn't know these things yet. I was going to have to wait to know them, which was not how Authority protocol worked — protocol worked on projections and assessments and the deliberate application of capability to problem. Wait and see was not a protocol.

It was what I was doing.

The light on the water changed. The cloud cover closed again and the conversation between the light and the water ended and the harbor went back to its regular dark.

I thought about the child and the red coat with the sun buttons and the question I still hadn't answered.

Why are you so shiny?

I thought about it differently now, walking having given me different access to it. In the park, sitting still, the question had been about the luminosity — about what produced it, about what it meant. Walking had given me something else. Moving through the city, on its level, in its physics, I'd started to understand something about the question that I hadn't understood on the bench.

She hadn't been asking about the luminosity.

She'd been asking about me.

Not what I was, not what produced the effect. Who. The way children ask why — not seeking mechanism, seeking person. She'd seen something that stood out from the ordinary texture of the day and she'd wanted to know the story in it, the same way she'd want to know the story in a mural or a particularly good cloud formation or anything else that caught her attention and suggested there was something more in it than the surface.

The luminosity was the surface.

The question was: *who are you?*

And I didn't have an answer that wasn't a function. I was a Custodian. I was the entity responsible for instance -664's Prime Wave assessment. I was the being who had burned seventy-two thou-

sand six hundred and sixty-three worlds and was currently sitting on a waterfront bench in the forty-one degree cold of a city on the world he hadn't burned, watching the light fail on dark water.

I was something that had no word in either language I had access to.

The Ghost said: :An Authority priority communication has arrived. Executive tier, not administrative. Requires acknowledgment within twelve local hours.:

I looked at the harbor.

:Shall I compose a response?:

"No," I said. "Not yet."

:The twelve-hour window—:

"I know," I said. "I need to think."

The Ghost waited, the way it always waited, the way it had waited for eleven minutes on a crumbled wall at the end of world 72,663 and would wait, I understood now, for however long I needed, because waiting was one of the things the Ghost was very good at.

It was one of the things I was getting better at.

I thought.

The harbor was dark and the city was behind me and somewhere in a sub-level three that wasn't on any building plan, a seventeen-year-old boy was in the fourth hour of a calibration sequence that was building toward something nobody had fully accounted for, and a team of people who moved through the world in ways I'd spent seventeen days learning to recognize was building toward something too, and in six hours — maybe seven — a man who had been running an inference for fifty years was going to finish building the thing his inference had been pointing toward.

And the Authority was waiting for an answer I wasn't ready to give.

I thought about what Sokolov was building. I'd been monitoring the quantum signature from his research lab with the specific attention you give to something you suspect is meant for you, which was

an arrogant assumption, possibly, except that Sokolov had demonstrated over seventeen days of observation that his assumptions were rarely wrong about the things that mattered.

I thought about what it would mean to answer the Authority's communication with the truth, which was: *I have found something in this iteration that is worth more than I know how to say in the language we have for saying things are worth something.*

I thought about what it would mean to answer it with something less than the truth.

I thought about world 72,663 and its four hundred and twelve musical traditions and the specific softness of the way its life had held the Prime Wave.

I stood up.

The bench was cold and the harbor was dark and the city was full of people who had learned to breathe with the Prime Wave, which was a thing I hadn't believed was possible until I'd seen it, and which I was not going to file as a data point, and which I was not going to let someone else assess, and which I was going to need Sokolov to help me protect in a way I hadn't needed anyone's help with anything in longer than this planet had existed.

:The Ghost is standing by,: the Ghost said.

"I know," I said. "I need to go see someone."

:Shall I log the destination?:

I thought about the building eight blocks from the harbor. The temporary facility. The team inside it revising a breach plan by their third iteration.

"No," I said. "Just log that the survey phase is complete."

:And the action recommendation?:

I started walking.

"Pending," I said. "Tell them it's pending. I'll have something for them soon."

I walked back through the city as the light failed completely, through the cold and the sidewalk and the particular democracy of people who were all somewhere they were going, and I thought

about what I was going to say to a man who had spent fifty years building an argument he didn't know he was building for me.

It was cold.

It was the kind of cold that meant something was about to be different.

It might snow.

CHAPTER 14

THE DIRECTORATE

THE ENTANGLER WAS BEAUTIFUL.

Delesante had not expected to feel this. He was not, in general, a person who experienced beauty as a category separate from function — beautiful things were things that worked, and things that worked were beautiful, and the aesthetic response and the technical assessment were for him the same response arriving through the same channel. He'd felt it before with the suit, at various stages of its development, the specific satisfaction of a thing that did what it was supposed to do at the level he'd designed it to do it.

The entangler was different.

He stood in the control room — glass-enclosed, overlooking the procedure room through the observation window that Troll had installed with the same haphazard precision he applied to everything — and looked at the device and felt something he didn't have a clean word for. It wasn't pride, exactly, though pride was in it. It was the feeling of having been certain about something for a very long time in

the face of sustained skepticism, and having arrived at the moment when the certainty was visibly, measurably, operationally correct.

He had been right.

He had known he was right. He had always known he was right. But there was a difference between knowing you're right and standing in front of the evidence of it, and the difference was this feeling, this thing he didn't have a word for, that was making it hard to focus on the calibration readouts in the way that focusing on calibration readouts required.

He focused.

The readouts were good. Better than projected, which was the best kind of better — not the better that suggested an error in the measurement, but the better that suggested his conservative modeling had been conservative, that the device's actual performance exceeded his baseline estimate in the direction of his theoretical upper bound. He'd modeled a connection deepening of thirty to forty percent in a low-control subject with shallow baseline entanglement. The calibration phase was showing forty-seven.

Forty-seven percent deeper. And they hadn't started the procedure yet.

The boy was in the procedure room.

He looked through the observation window. The subject — Danny, the Ghost of his analytical mind supplied the name automatically, because Delesante's brain processed everything and filed everything and retrieved everything whether he wanted it to or not — was secured to the apparatus with the carbon-fiber restraints Troll had designed, which looked alarming and were, he'd calculated, necessary. The procedure involved levels of Prime Wave interaction that would produce involuntary physical responses in the subject, which required restraint not as a cruelty but as a safety measure. He'd considered explaining this to the boy and had decided it would be more distressing than not explaining it.

He hadn't explained it.

The boy's face was visible through the observation window. He

was conscious — the procedure required consciousness, the Prime Wave connection didn't engage correctly in unconscious subjects, which was a design parameter that Delesante found elegant in its specificity. He was also afraid, which was visible from here, which was a fact that Delesante's brain processed and filed and did not, quite, look at directly.

He returned his attention to the calibration readouts.

Forty-seven percent.

The procedure itself would take the connection significantly deeper than the calibration phase. His models suggested a final enhancement level of two hundred to two hundred and forty percent of baseline — effectively tripling the subject's connection to the Prime Wave, which would deepen his existing ability dramatically and had a substantial probability of manifesting additional abilities that the existing connection hadn't been strong enough to reach. The boy's current ability was marginal — basic flight, poor control. What he'd have after the procedure would be—

He thought about power output at two-forty percent baseline and had to stop, because thinking about it too concretely made the feeling return, the one without a word, and the feeling was interfering with the calibration review, which was the most important thing he needed to be doing right now.

"Power input is stable," one of his soldiers said, from the secondary console. His name was Harrow — thirty-two, non-powered, six years with the Directorate, technically reliable and emotionally uncomplicated, which were the two qualities Delesante required from the people he worked with directly. "Calibration phase is at ninety-two percent."

"Timeline to procedure initiation?"

"Forty minutes," Harrow said. "Give or take."

Forty minutes. Delesante looked at his suit's internal display — the Mark XI's system monitors were running at full check, everything functional, everything ready. He was wearing it for the procedure phase, which was the protocol he'd established for high-value opera-

tional moments: the suit as both protection and enhancement, the additional capabilities it gave him in case anything went wrong.

He did not expect anything to go wrong.

He had, however, learned from working with Vivienne that expecting nothing to go wrong and preparing for things going wrong were not mutually exclusive, and that the latter was worth the effort regardless of how strongly you believed in the former. He'd adopted this approach over two years, quietly and without acknowledging where he'd learned it, because acknowledging where he'd learned things was not something he was good at.

He missed her.

The thought arrived without invitation, which was how it always arrived. He filed it immediately, the way he filed everything, but the filing didn't make it not true. Vivienne Moreau was in Federal holding, which he knew because he'd run the intelligence check six hours after the docks operation had gone wrong, which was when he'd accepted that the wrong way the operation had gone was not the kind of wrong that came from tactical failure and was the kind that came from something more deliberate. He'd run the check. He'd found the Federal processing record. He'd sat with it for eleven minutes, which was a long time for him to sit with anything.

She'd made a choice. He'd run the analysis on what the choice meant — backward, from the Federal holding record, through the docks operation, through the data chip at the Northern Distribution Hub, through the secondary shutdown that Troll had told him about, three days ago, in the specific awkward way of someone reporting something they thought they probably should have reported earlier. He'd run the analysis and had arrived at a picture that was coherent and complete and that he was not going to look at directly, the same way he was not going to look directly at the boy's face through the observation window, because some pictures, when you looked at them directly, required you to know things about yourself that interfered with what you needed to do.

He returned his attention to the calibration readouts.

Ninety-three percent.

The procedure room smelled like ozone and warm electronics and the specific antiseptic Troll used on all his builds, which Delesante had come to associate so strongly with Troll's work that he could identify it in any room that had Troll's equipment in it, which was a form of olfactory branding he suspected was not intentional.

The entangler occupied the center of the room. It was, in person, considerably larger than the schematics had made it feel — not because the schematics were inaccurate, but because schematics were flat and the entangler was not. It had depth and mass and the specific presence of something that was doing something, even at rest, that the air around it recognized. The field emitters were arranged in the configuration he'd specified, arcing around the procedure apparatus in a pattern that corresponded to the subject's Prime Wave connection geometry — which was different for every subject, which was why the calibration phase was necessary, why you couldn't just run the standard protocol and get standard results. The calibration mapped the subject's specific connection and the procedure was tuned to it.

His connection, tuned to Danny Osei.

He walked through the room slowly, checking each emitter's alignment, which Troll had already checked and which Harrow had confirmed and which he was checking himself because he checked everything himself at the final stage, because final stage errors were the category of error that couldn't be corrected after the fact. The Mark XI's suit sensors were running analysis in parallel, confirming the manual checks with the specific redundancy he'd built into his operational practice.

Everything was correct.

He paused at the procedure apparatus. He looked at the restraints. He looked at the boy's hands, which were at the ends of

the restraint arms, palm up, which was the correct position for the emitter alignment.

The boy was looking at him.

He had very direct eyes for someone in his situation. Delesante had expected — he wasn't sure what he'd expected. Not this. Not the specific quality of attention in the eyes of someone who was assessing the room the same way Delesante would assess a room, taking inventory of who and what and where, filing it, not broadcasting the filing.

"It's not going to hurt," Delesante said.

He'd intended to say this. He'd included it in his operational plan — subject communication, reassurance, brief and accurate. The calibration phase had been uncomfortable but not painful. The procedure phase, according to his models, should be—

"It hurt before," the boy said. His voice was even. Not accusing — reporting.

Delesante processed this. "The calibration?"

"The calibration," Danny confirmed.

"The calibration required a higher initial power input to map your specific connection geometry," Delesante said, which was accurate. "The procedure is modulated to your geometry. It should be less—"

"Should be," Danny said.

Delesante looked at him. At the directness of the eyes. He'd processed, at some point during the calibration phase, that the subject's ability included some component of situational awareness beyond the baseline — something in his Prime Wave connection that gave him information about the people around him, an ambient reading of the room's emotional state. He'd noted it as operationally relevant in the sense that the boy would be harder to reassure than a standard subject because he'd know whether the reassurance was accurate.

"It should be," Delesante said, again, and did not add anything, because adding something would have been the kind of reassurance

that the boy's ambient reading would identify as insufficiently supported.

The boy looked at the ceiling. At the emitters. At Delesante's suit. His eyes moved through the room in the way of someone building a map.

"Where's the woman?" he said.

Delesante paused. "Which woman?"

"The one who was in the room during the calibration. She was watching from the window. The whole time."

He meant Vivienne. Who was not here. Who was in Federal holding.

"She had another obligation," Delesante said.

The boy's eyes came back to him. They were the eyes of someone who had heard this sentence before, in other forms, about other people, and who had a precise and well-developed understanding of what it meant. "Okay," he said. It was not an *okay* that meant he believed it.

Delesante walked to the control room entrance and didn't look back.

"Ninety-eight percent," Harrow said, when he came in.

"Timeline?"

"Fifteen minutes."

Fifteen minutes. He sat at the primary console and ran the final pre-procedure check. Power supply: stable. Emitter alignment: confirmed. Field expansion parameters: bounded to the procedure room at standard cycle power input. The expansion coefficient was in the range he'd modeled, which was the range that kept the field within the walls.

He ran the shutdown sequence test. Primary interface: functional. He'd run this test six times over the past two days, and it was

functional each time, and he was running it again because that was the protocol and the protocol existed for reasons.

He thought about the secondary shutdown. Which he hadn't tested, because he hadn't known about it until three days ago, and because testing it required knowing where the trigger was, which Troll had declined to specify in the specific uncomfortable way Troll had of declining things, which had told him everything he needed to know about whether the trigger was accessible from the control room.

It was not accessible from the control room.

He'd made a decision about this. The decision was: the primary shutdown was functional. The secondary was a redundancy. Redundancies were good engineering practice, and its existence, even without testing it, was evidence of good engineering practice. He was not going to spend fifteen minutes before the most significant operational moment of his career being concerned about an untested redundancy built by someone who couldn't explain where it was.

He returned to the calibration readout.

Ninety-nine percent.

The Prime Wave reading on the secondary monitor — a device Troll had built that detected and displayed the local Prime Wave state, which Delesante had been using to confirm the calibration progress — showed the baseline oscillation he'd been seeing for the past two days. Stable, unremarkable. The high-amplitude window he'd calculated was still thirty-nine hours away, comfortably outside the procedure window.

He'd chosen the timing deliberately. The high-amplitude window was a variable he'd identified and scheduled around, which was the kind of scheduling that distinguished a rigorous protocol from an improvised one. He'd been rigorous.

One hundred percent.

"Calibration complete," Harrow said. "Ready to initiate on your mark."

Delesante looked through the observation window. The boy was

still looking at the ceiling. His Prime Wave connection — visible on the secondary monitor as a set of interaction lines between the subject and the field emitters — was fully mapped, precisely characterized, ready.

He thought about forty-seven percent baseline deepening from the calibration phase alone.

He thought about what two-forty would look like.

He thought about the specific feeling, the one without a word.

"Mark," he said.

The procedure started quietly.

This was something he hadn't expected — he'd expected something visible, something that corresponded to the magnitude of what was happening. Instead it began with the sound of the emitters cycling up, a low harmonic hum that was below the threshold of discomfort, and a shift in the secondary monitor's readings as the field engaged.

The interaction lines on the monitor deepened.

He watched.

The subject's Prime Wave connection was responding exactly as modeled — the field was reaching into the connection, finding its geometry, using the calibration map to deepen it along the natural channels rather than forcing new ones. Elegant. He'd designed it to be elegant, and it was.

At one hundred and twenty percent baseline, the boy made a sound.

Not a cry — a sharp exhale, the sound of someone encountering something unexpected. Delesante looked through the window. The boy's face had changed — the inventory-taking attention had shifted to something else, something turned inward, which was consistent with the modeling: at this level of connection deepening, the subject's awareness of their own Prime Wave link became acute in a

way it normally wasn't. You started to feel it from the inside. It was, in his understanding of it, overwhelming.

He would not have used the word *painful*.

He looked at the power input monitor. Stable. The field expansion coefficient was within the bounded range. Everything was correct.

At one hundred and sixty percent, the secondary monitor showed something he hadn't modeled.

He looked at it.

He looked at it again.

The local Prime Wave oscillation — which had been stable baseline for two days, which he'd been using as a reference throughout the calibration — had changed. Not dramatically, not the kind of change that triggered an alarm, but a shift in the harmonic frequency that was outside the standard range he'd characterized for this iteration. It was moving in the direction of a higher-amplitude state.

He checked the oscillation cycle calculation he'd built into the procedure protocol.

The high-amplitude window was thirty-nine hours away.

The oscillation was moving toward it faster than his model predicted.

He ran the calculation again. He ran it with Harrow's console data as a cross-reference. He ran it a third time because the third time produced a result that was consistent with the first two and was therefore the result he needed to accept.

The high-amplitude window was not thirty-nine hours away.

It was approximately eleven hours away.

His oscillation model had a parameter error. Not a large error — the kind of error that produced a thirty-nine-hour estimate from a dataset that was actually producing an eleven-hour window, which was the kind of error that came from a secondary assumption he hadn't examined because it had been consistent with his prior data and he hadn't had a reason to question it.

He had a reason to question it now.

He ran the field expansion coefficient calculation with the corrected oscillation data.

At the current power input level, the procedure would complete in approximately ninety minutes. The high-amplitude window would open in approximately eleven hours. The procedure would be complete well before the window.

Unless something interrupted the procedure mid-phase.

He thought about what would happen if the procedure was running during the high-amplitude window. He ran the numbers he hadn't run before, because he hadn't needed to, because the timing had seemed comfortable. He ran them now.

The result was a number.

He looked at the number.

He was very precise about numbers. He'd built his entire professional life on the precision of his relationship with numbers — on the certainty that numbers did not lie, that they did not have opinions, that they reported the condition of reality with the flat accuracy of things that existed entirely outside human preference. He trusted numbers the way other people trusted people, with the additional advantage that numbers had never let him down in the way that people had.

This number was letting him down.

He sat with it for twelve seconds, which was longer than he sat with most things.

Then he looked at the procedure monitor. At one hundred and sixty percent baseline deepening and climbing. At the boy in the procedure room, whose face he wasn't looking at. At the primary shutdown interface, which was on the desk to his right, which was functional, which he'd tested six times.

At one hundred and seventy percent, something happened that wasn't in the model.

The emitters in the procedure room produced a resonance. Not a malfunction — a harmonic, the kind that emerged when multiple precisely tuned systems interacted at a specific frequency. He'd seen

it in theoretical models. He'd calculated it as a low-probability emergent behavior. He hadn't seen it in a live system because he hadn't run a live system at this level before.

The resonance was feeding back into the power input.

Not dramatically — not a catastrophic loop, not the kind of thing that would trigger the safety cutoffs. A small feedback, a percentage point or two, but positive feedback in a system running at this power level was not a small thing. It was the kind of thing that had a slope.

He watched the power input increase by one point two percent.

He watched the expansion coefficient readjust.

He was very good at numbers. Numbers were his primary method of understanding reality. He looked at the numbers on his console and understood, with the specific clarity of his extraordinary brain operating at its full capacity on a problem it had all the relevant data for, exactly what was happening and what it was going to do.

"Harrow," he said.

"Yes, Professor."

"Lock down the facility. All personnel to defensive positions." He stood. "Nobody in or out until I say."

Harrow looked at him. Then at the monitors. Then at him again. "Is there a problem with the—"

"Defensive positions," he said. "Now."

Harrow moved.

Delesante looked at the primary shutdown interface.

He looked at the procedure monitor. One hundred and eighty percent. The feedback loop was increasing the power input at a rate that was slow but not negligible. At the current rate of increase, the input would reach the threshold he'd calculated — the threshold beyond which the expansion coefficient stopped being bounded — in approximately seventy minutes.

The procedure would complete in approximately seventy-five minutes.

The margin was five minutes. If the procedure ran to completion before the power input hit the threshold, the field would close natu-

rally and the feedback loop would terminate with it. Five minutes was the margin between the procedure completing within the bounded field and the field expanding past the walls.

Five minutes was a very small margin.

He ran the calculation again. The margin held at five minutes in the baseline case. It shrank if the feedback rate accelerated. It disappeared entirely if anything disrupted the operating environment — if there was an additional power draw on the facility's system, if there was structural interference with the emitters' alignment, if anyone or anything entered the procedure room mid-phase.

He needed five uninterrupted minutes at the end of the procedure.

He needed nothing to go wrong.

He thought about the secondary shutdown. About where Troll had put the trigger. About the fact that he didn't know where Troll had put the trigger.

He thought about Vivienne, who was in Federal holding, who had commissioned the secondary shutdown without telling him, who had left a data chip in a corner of a loading bay for a specific person to find.

He thought about what it meant that she'd done those things.

He looked at the procedure monitor. One hundred and eighty-four percent. The feedback loop was at its current rate. The boy's face—

He looked at the boy's face.

He looked at it directly, for the first time since the procedure started, and what he saw there was the thing he'd been not-looking-at, and he looked at it anyway, because the numbers had just told him something that required him to look at things he'd been filing without examining.

The boy was in pain.

Not the sharp exhale of unexpected intensity — something more sustained, more specific. The kind of pain that a person in a procedure room restrained to an apparatus experiences when the proce-

cedure is running past the level the procedure was supposed to run to, and the person's Prime Wave connection is being deepened past what the procedure was designed to do, and there are five minutes of margin between this and something considerably worse.

Delesante sat down.

He sat down because his legs had made a decision that his brain hadn't authorized, which was a category of physical event he hadn't experienced before, which told him something about the current state of the gap between what his brain was processing and what the rest of him was doing.

He thought about a car and a load-bearing wall and what it felt like to be in something too big for you with nobody to help you with it.

He had not thought about this before. He had filed it under *subject's prior emotional history, not operationally relevant*. He was not, he realized, very good at determining what was operationally relevant.

He looked at the primary shutdown interface.

He ran the calculation one more time.

Five minutes. If he shut it down now, the procedure was incomplete. The enhancement was partial — real, probably, but not the full two-forty he'd modeled. The boy's connection was deeper than it was. The procedure data was extraordinary regardless of completion. He had everything he needed to proceed to the next iteration of the project.

He had everything he needed.

One hundred and eighty-seven percent.

He looked at the boy's face.

He reached for the primary shutdown interface.

The lights in the facility went out.

Not all of them — the emergency circuit held, the backup

lighting on the sub-levels activated within three seconds, the cold white of emergency fluorescents replacing the standard overhead. But the main power had cut, which meant the facility's primary circuit had dropped, which meant—

"Harrow," he said.

No answer.

He looked at the secondary console. Harrow's station was empty. The defensive positions order had moved everyone to the perimeter, which had taken Harrow out of the control room, which meant the control room was him, alone, with the monitors and the shutdown interface and the feedback loop that was currently—

He looked at the power input monitor.

The backup power was running the procedure at reduced input. The feedback loop had dropped with the main power — the resonance that had been driving it required the full emitter array, and the backup circuit was running at sixty percent capacity, which meant the emitters were running at sixty percent.

The expansion coefficient had dropped.

The feedback loop had not stopped. It was still positive, still increasing the power input, but at the reduced starting point, it needed longer to reach the threshold. The five-minute margin had widened.

He ran the calculation.

With the backup power and the reduced input and the current feedback rate: thirty minutes.

Thirty minutes before the expansion became unbounded.

The procedure had thirty minutes left.

He had a zero-minute margin.

He sat very still.

He thought about the sound he'd heard before the lights went out — not an alarm, not a structural impact, something quieter than either. Something that had the specific quality of a sound that was the consequence of other, quieter sounds preceding it.

People were in the building.

He reached for the primary shutdown interface.

He stopped.

He thought about one hundred and eighty-seven percent and what partial completion meant. He thought about the subject whose face he'd looked at. He thought about the feedback loop and the thirty minutes and the fact that thirty minutes was enough for the procedure to complete if he let it run.

He thought about what *complete* meant and what *stop* meant and what the difference between them was and which one he was going to choose.

He sat with his hand over the primary shutdown interface for three seconds.

Three seconds was a long time for his brain.

He ran everything he had, at full capacity, and arrived at something that wasn't a calculation. It was the thing that was left when all the calculations were complete and there was still a decision to make, and the decision was the kind that numbers could inform and not resolve.

He pressed the interface.

He pressed it in the specific, deliberate way of someone who has decided something, and the deciding is more important than the pressure.

The field began its thirty-second collapse.

One hundred and eighty-seven percent, and then less, and then less.

He looked at the boy's face.

One hundred and forty percent. One hundred and twenty.

The door to the control room opened.

He turned.

The woman in the doorway was not Vivienne. She was shorter, darker-haired, in tactical gear that was too new to have been through as many things as it looked like it had been through. She was looking at him with the specific attention of someone assessing a threat, and her hands were at her sides, and he could feel, even

through the Mark XI's sensor array, the particular way the Prime Wave was moving around her — the careful, calibrated reach of someone who was very good at knowing where things were in a space.

"The procedure," she said.

"Shutting down," he said.

She looked at the monitor. At one hundred and twelve percent and dropping. She looked at him.

"You did it yourself," she said.

"Yes," he said.

She was quiet for a moment. Behind her, he could hear sounds that were the sounds of an operation in its final phase: movement, coordination, the particular audio of things being resolved. The boy in the procedure room would be accessible in approximately twenty more seconds, when the field dropped to the point where the apparatus restraints could be released.

"There's a secondary shutdown mechanism," she said. "In the storage room on this level. Behind the cryogenic housing."

"I know," he said. "I found out about it three days ago."

"Did you use it?"

"No," he said.

She looked at him. At the monitor. At one hundred and three percent, and then one hundred, and then — the field closing, the emitters cycling down, the feedback loop terminating with nothing left to feed back into.

"Why not?" she said.

He thought about a number and a five-minute margin and a face he'd decided to look at directly.

"Because I have a primary interface," he said. "And I know how to use it."

She looked at him for another moment. The monitor read ninety-four percent. The field was closed. The procedure was terminated. The boy's Prime Wave connection was enhanced — not to two-forty, but to something real, something permanent, something that was

going to require management and support and someone who knew what they were doing, which was not him.

He put his hands on the console.

"I'll need access to the procedure data," he said. "To help with the transition. Whatever his new abilities are, I'm the one who has the calibration map. I know the specific geometry of his connection." He looked at her. "He's going to need that."

She looked at him for a long time.

"That's not your decision," she said.

"No," he said. "It's not."

He put his hands flat on the console, in the specific gesture of someone who has stopped reaching for things, and waited to find out what happened next.

CHAPTER 15

HARBOR GUARD

THE BREACH HAD BEEN PLANNED for midnight.

It happened at 9:47 PM instead, which was Blip's call, made in the thirty-second window between the facility's main power dropping and the backup circuit engaging. She'd been running the approach route — third pass, the kind of obsessive pre-operation reconnaissance that David had learned to let her do because the obsessive pre-operation reconnaissance was what made her pulls precise — when the lights in the building had gone dark in the specific sequential pattern of a main circuit failure rather than a deliberate blackout.

She'd pulled the team without calling it.

This was new. Three months ago, Camila Reyes would have called it — would have checked, would have confirmed, would have waited for authorization. Three months ago she'd been a Federal liaison with a translocation ability and a four-month reassignment request and a very clear understanding of her place in any given team's hierarchy.

She knew her place now too. It was just a different place.

"We're in," she said, into comms, as the team materialized in the sub-level two corridor at 9:47 PM.

David's voice came back immediately, which meant he'd been watching for the pull. "Copy. What changed?"

"Main power dropped. Thirty seconds ago. Whatever's happening in there started early."

A pause — not the processing kind, the deciding kind, the kind she'd learned to read as David running a calculation he'd already mostly run and was now confirming. "The oscillation," he said.

"Yes," she said, because she'd run the same calculation and had arrived at the same place.

"Clock's changed," he said.

"Yes."

"Go," he said.

The sub-level two corridor was emergency-lit, cold-white fluorescents throwing everything into the flat, shadow-free clarity of backup power. Sultana was already moving toward the biometric door — the maintenance override key from Tess in her left hand, the specific focused quality in her Prime Wave connection that Blip had learned to recognize as Sultana listening to a space before entering it.

"Patrol?" Sultana said.

"Reset," Blip said. "Power drop scrambled the rotation timer. We have— I don't know exactly. Less than fifteen minutes before they reestablish."

"That's enough," Sultana said.

Blip wasn't certain it was enough. She'd recalculated the breach window six times during the approach and each calculation had been based on the forty-minute standard cycle. The fifteen-minute cycle Tess had told them about had already required one revision. The power drop was a third variable she hadn't had time to model.

She kept this to herself.

The override key worked. The door opened. Sultana went through first, which was the plan — she went first in enclosed spaces because enclosed spaces were where her ability gave them the most advantage and where the advantage needed to be established before anything else. Blip followed. Marcus was behind her, and behind Marcus was Carla, and David was taking the approach to the control room with the Federal backup team that had staged at street level.

Sub-level three looked like sub-level two with the purpose stripped out. Where sub-level two had the infrastructure of an active facility — cable runs, server racks, the mechanical systems that kept the sub-levels operational — sub-level three had one thing. The procedure room, with its observation window and its control room annex and the corridor connecting them, and the storage room Camila had marked on the plan.

She could feel it before she could see it.

The Prime Wave was doing something in this space that it wasn't doing in the corridor above. Not the surge she'd felt at the Northern Distribution Hub, not the wild expansion of the Federal Reserve vault heist. Something more organized than that, more directed — like a current in water, strong and specific, moving in a direction that had been given to it. She felt it the way she felt all Prime Wave activity, as a quality of the space, an extra texture in the air.

"There's a field running," she said. "In the procedure room."

"Active?" Sultana said.

"Yes."

Sultana looked at the observation window — they were in the corridor, angled so the window was visible — and what she saw in her face when she looked through it made Blip look too.

The device was in the center of the room. It was — she didn't have good language for what it looked like, had never seen quantum entanglement equipment operating at this scale, and what her eyes were giving her was a set of arcing structures that were emitting something that was technically invisible but that her Prime Wave

sensitivity was reading as an enormous pressure, a concentrated presence in the space that made the air feel thick.

And at the center of it, the boy.

She'd seen his Federal file. She'd seen the photograph from the processing record, the youth facility intake photo, the one taken three days after his manifestation when he'd still been in the particular shock of it. This was not that photograph. The boy in the procedure room was the boy in the photograph, with the additional quality of someone who was currently inside something that was too big for him and who was very far past the point of being afraid.

He was past fear. He was somewhere on the other side of it.

"Sultana," Blip said.

"I see him," Sultana said. "Control room first."

The control room door was not locked.

She'd expected the biometric — the facility's sub-level three was biometrically controlled throughout, according to Tess's briefing, which meant every door should have required the override key or the Professor's authorization. This door was standing open by two inches, which was the two inches of a door that had been closed and had not latched, which meant someone had gone through it quickly and not stopped to confirm the latch.

She pushed it open.

The man at the console had his back to her.

She assessed in the two seconds she had: Mark XI suit, standing with the specific posture of someone who is not preparing to fight, both hands visible on the console surface. The monitors were showing her things she needed to understand and didn't have time to understand yet — numbers, a lot of them, in configurations she recognized as Prime Wave readings but couldn't interpret at speed. One monitor was showing the procedure room from above, the device in the center of its field, the boy in the apparatus.

The number on the procedure monitor read 187%.

She said: "The procedure."

He said: "Shutting down."

She looked at the monitor. At the number going down.

She looked at him.

He'd shut it down.

She'd been expecting the control room to be a fight. She'd been planning for the control room to be a fight — David's breach plan had Carla and Marcus on the control room because the Mark XI was a fight, and Carla's ability was the best tool they had against the suit's structural joints, and Marcus was the contingency if structural compromise failed. She'd taken the corridor position specifically because she wasn't supposed to be the one dealing with the control room.

He'd shut it down.

She looked at the monitor. 112%. 103%. The field closing.

"There's a secondary shutdown mechanism," she said. "In the storage room on this level. Behind the cryogenic housing."

"I know," he said. "I found out about it three days ago."

"Did you use it?"

"No," he said.

She looked at him. At the suit, which was imposing in the way of things designed to be imposing, and which he was standing in with his hands flat on the console in the specific posture of someone who had made a decision about what their hands were doing and was committed to it.

"Why not?" she said.

He told her.

She looked at the monitor. 94%. The field was closed. The procedure was done. She was looking at the numbers and thinking about what 187% deepening meant for a boy who'd had a marginal flight ability three days ago and was now—

She didn't know what he was now.

She was going to find out.

The procedure room door required the override key.

She went through it alone, which was not the plan. The plan had Blip supporting the subject extraction with medical backup from the Federal team, which was logical and was the plan she'd agreed to and was also not what she did, because the medical backup was ninety seconds from her position and she was already at the door and the boy in the room had been in there for—

She didn't think about how long he'd been in there. She thought about ninety seconds and what ninety seconds was and went through the door.

The room smelled like the equipment and the specific quality that Prime Wave activity left in the air — not quite ozone, not quite anything else, the smell of physics being adjusted — and was warm in the way of spaces where a lot of energy has been moving through the air and the air hasn't settled yet.

The apparatus restraints had released when the field closed. She'd confirmed this in the control room data — the release was automatic at field termination, a safety mechanism Troll had built in from the start. So he wasn't restrained anymore.

He was sitting on the floor.

Not collapsed — sitting, deliberately, in the specific way of someone who has decided that the floor is the right place to be right now and has chosen it rather than arrived at it by accident. His back was against the base of the apparatus. His knees were up. He was looking at the door when she came through it, which meant he'd heard her coming, or felt her coming, or had some other sense of her approach that she filed for later.

She crossed the room and sat down on the floor next to him.

Not across from him. Next to him, at the same angle to the apparatus, looking at the same wall. The way you sat with someone when you wanted them to know you were there and weren't planning to leave and didn't need anything from them right now.

He didn't say anything.

She didn't say anything.

The equipment hummed its shutdown hum, the cycling-down of systems that had been running hard and were now releasing that in stages. The emergency lighting was the same flat white up here as it had been in the corridor. Somewhere above them — she could feel it more than hear it — the operation was completing: David's team on the perimeter, Camila handling the Federal processing, Marcus and Carla running whatever the control room had required.

She could feel the boy's Prime Wave connection.

She hadn't been able to feel individual connections at this proximity before. She'd felt the aggregate, the way you feel weather — not each drop but the pressure and the motion of it. But she was sitting next to Danny Osei and she could feel his specific connection the way you feel a fire when you're close enough to it, the heat of it particular and directional, and what she felt was—

Large.

Not out of control. Not the wild surge she'd felt at the mall atrium, the panicked overflow of a connection that didn't know how to be what it was. This was different. This was large the way a river in spring was large — not chaotic, but full, moving with the particular authority of something that knew where it was going and had the capacity to get there.

He was stronger than he'd been.

He was also seventeen, and had been in an apparatus in a basement for hours, and was sitting on a floor, and she was going to need to get him out of here. But not yet. In a minute. When the minute was what was needed.

"Hey," she said.

He looked at her. At her face, specifically, with the specific attention she'd come to associate with his ambient reading of a room. "You came before," he said. "To the facility."

"Every Thursday," she said.

He absorbed this. "Thursday was yesterday," he said.

"I know," she said. "I'm sorry I missed it."

He looked at the wall. "The man in the suit stopped the thing," he said. "I felt it stop."

"Yes."

"He wasn't going to," Danny said. "And then he was."

She looked at him. "You felt that?"

"I feel when people decide things," he said, in the specific matter-of-fact tone of someone reporting something they've always been able to do and have never had language for. "It's like — the air changes. Around them. When they decide something." He paused. "He decided."

She thought about what 187% deepening did to a marginal flight ability with an ambient situational reading component. She thought about what it meant that he'd felt Delesante decide. She thought about a pen at the edge of a desk.

"Can you stand?" she said.

He thought about it. Not *yes* or *no* — he actually thought about it, consulted whatever interior check he ran on these questions, and then said: "I think so."

"Let's try," she said.

She stood first. She didn't reach for him — she stood and waited, and he put his hand on the apparatus base and pushed himself up with the careful movements of someone whose body is reporting data he's still calibrating. He got there. He was standing.

He was taller than she remembered. Probably not actually taller. Probably just the way he was standing now, which was different from how he'd stood in the facility's common room — something in the posture had settled, or shifted, some weight redistributed in a way that she recognized and didn't have a word for.

He looked like someone who was standing in a body they'd just learned was bigger than they'd thought.

"Okay," he said.

"Okay," she said. "Let's go."

She walked to the door. He walked beside her — not behind her,

beside her, which was where he'd positioned himself, which she noted. At the door she paused and looked at him.

"You might feel different for a while," she said. "Stronger. More—more of everything. That's real. It's yours. And it's also a lot, and you don't have to figure it out right now."

He looked at her.

"Right now you just have to walk up some stairs," she said.

He almost smiled. Almost. The corners of his mouth did the thing they'd done in the common room, the shape of a smile getting ready to commit, and then he was through the door and she was behind him and they were in the corridor.



Marcus was in the corridor.

He was standing at the junction of the approach corridor and the main access point to the stairs, in the specific way he stood in confined spaces — weight forward, slightly sideways, occupying the geometry of the situation rather than fighting it. His suit was intact. He had the expression of someone who had been expecting a fight and had found one and was now on the other side of it.

He looked at the boy.

The boy looked at him.

"You're very large," Danny said.

"Yes," Marcus said.

"You fly."

"Also yes."

"How does that work?" Danny said. It was not a hostile question. It was a genuine question, asked with the specific curiosity of someone who had just had their understanding of what was possible reorganized and was already cataloguing what that meant for the adjacent questions.

Marcus looked at Sultana. She gave him the look that meant: *answer him.*

"Badly sometimes," Marcus said. "Better than I used to." He fell into step beside them, which meant the corridor was now three people wide in a space designed for two, which Marcus handled by walking with his shoulders slightly angled, a long-practiced accommodation. "There's a turn at the top of the first flight," he said, to the boy. "Take it easy."

"Why?"

"Because your balance might be different than you're used to," Marcus said, in the matter-of-fact way he had of saying the thing that was true without making it a larger thing than it needed to be. "After something like this. Took me six weeks to stop overcorrecting turns."

The boy looked at him. "Six weeks."

"Three and a half, actually," Marcus said. "But I didn't want you to do the thing where you hear three and a half and think it's going to take you less time because you're not me."

The boy almost smiled again.

"What's your name?" Marcus said.

"Danny."

"Marcus," he said. "Don't call me Stratosphere unless we're working, and even then, only if you have to."

They reached the stairs. Danny took the first step carefully, the way you test unfamiliar ground, and then kept going, and the turn at the top of the first flight he took with the slight overcorrection Marcus had predicted and then found his footing on the second step past it, and looked back briefly, and kept going.

Sultana watched this and filed it.

The surface level of the facility was a different situation.

The operation was in its completion phase — the Directorate's soldiers were in Federal processing, which Camila was running from the loading dock with the specific efficiency Sultana had come to recognize as Camila's operational mode when the thing she'd been

building toward for four months was finally happening. The facility's lights were back on main power, which someone had reset — she suspected Troll, who was sitting on a crate near the secondary console with the expression of a man who had repaired something by reflex and was now reassessing whether repairing it had been the right call, and had concluded it was, but was keeping the reassessment visible in case anyone wanted to argue about it.

Troll looked at Danny when they came up the stairs.

He looked at him for a long moment. Then he looked at the floor and didn't look up again.

She filed this.

Night Queen was not in the facility. She was in Federal holding, which was where she'd been since the docks operation, which was the right place for her to be and which Sultana had not thought about during the operation and was now thinking about. She'd told Camila about the conversation in the coffee shop — the *not a deal, just a conversation* that Night Queen had offered in exchange for the Professor's location. She'd told Camila the relevant parts: the Professor's destination, the secondary shutdown, the location data. She'd kept the conversation itself — the part about what he was really trying to build, the cure, the brain that never stopped — because that part wasn't operational data.

It was the kind of thing she kept. The way she kept the pen story. The way she kept the two years.

Delesante was in Federal processing. She'd passed the control room on the way out and he'd been there, still at the console, with two Federal agents running the evidence documentation around him, and he'd been answering their questions with the specific flat accuracy of someone who had decided to be completely forthcoming and was being completely forthcoming, which she suspected was going to produce more useful intelligence in the next six hours than the Federal program had gathered on the Directorate in the past six months.

She'd looked at him for a second.

He hadn't looked up.
She'd kept walking.

David was outside.

He was standing on the street level, at the northeast corner of the building, with the posture he had in the aftermath of operations — not relaxed, not tense, the specific in-between of someone whose operational focus had resolved and whose processing focus had engaged. He was looking at his tablet, which had the operation log on it, and he was making notes, and he didn't look up when she came out but he said: "Danny?"

"Here," she said.

He looked up.

Danny was behind her, with Marcus, and he was looking at the street with the specific quality of attention she'd seen him turn on spaces he was cataloguing — reading it, filing it, building his map. The street was ordinary: a loading dock, a parked Federal vehicle, the cold November air that smelled like the harbor.

David looked at the boy. The boy looked at David.

"David Reyes," David said.

"Danny Osei."

"I know," David said. "I read your file." He said it the way he said everything operational — without the softening that would have made it feel like a performance. Just the fact of it, and the implicit acknowledgment that the fact mattered. "Are you hurt?"

The boy thought about it. "I don't think so," he said. "I feel different."

"Different how?"

He was quiet for a moment. Sultana watched him search for language that fit and not quite find it. "Like the volume was turned up," he said, finally. "On everything."

David nodded. "That's accurate," he said. He made a note on his

tablet. "We're going to need to assess what specifically changed and how stable it is. That's not tonight. Tonight you need medical, and food, and somewhere that's not here." He looked at Sultana.

"I have somewhere," she said.

He looked at her. At the somewhere she had, which he didn't know specifically, but which he knew the shape of — she could see him knowing the shape of it. "Okay," he said.

"I'll need twenty-four hours," she said.

"You have them." He looked at Danny. "There are people who know what to do with this," he said, in the tone that was just information, that didn't try to be reassuring, that was more reassuring than reassurance because of that. "It's going to be complicated for a while. That's normal. The complicated part is manageable."

The boy looked at him. The ambient read she'd come to know as his — the air-changes-when-people-decide quality — she could see it working. He was reading David.

"You believe that," Danny said.

It was not a question.

"Yes," David said. "I do."

The boy looked at the street. At the harbor in the distance, visible at the end of the block, the dark water and the lights. He looked at it the way she'd looked at it sometimes, from a height, when the city was a thing you could hold at a distance and let be itself without having to be inside it.

"Okay," he said.

Carla found her at the vehicle.

She was getting Danny settled in the back seat — Federal vehicle, Marcus had arranged it, the logistics of getting a recently enhanced powered juvenile out of an active Federal operation site required a specific kind of arranged — and Carla was at her shoulder when she

straightened up, which was the Carla equivalent of a specific kind of announcement.

"Nice work in there," Carla said.

"The plan worked," Sultana said.

"The plan worked," Carla agreed. "And you've been going every Thursday."

Sultana looked at her. "I told David."

"I know," Carla said. "He told me." She paused. "He told me before the operation. He wanted me to know." Another pause. "I wanted you to know that I know."

Sultana looked at the harbor.

"You should have told us sooner," Carla said. "Both things."

"I know."

"But you did what you did," Carla said, "and it worked, and he's in the car, so." She paused. "We're going to talk about the Thursdays. About how we do this going forward. About what he needs and what we can provide."

"I know," Sultana said.

"Not tonight," Carla said. "Tonight you take him wherever you're taking him and you let him sleep and we reconvene tomorrow."

Sultana nodded.

Carla looked at the car. At Danny in the back seat, who was looking at the harbor through the window with the specific quality of someone who has just survived something and is in the early stages of understanding what surviving means. "He's going to be interesting," she said.

"Yes," Sultana said. "He is."

"The ambient read," Carla said. "Enhanced."

"Significantly."

"And the flight?"

"I don't know yet," Sultana said. "I know the connection is deeper. I know it's stable." She paused. "He figured out stop before any of this happened. I think the rest will come."

Carla was quiet for a moment. "Good," she said.

She went back to the operation site.
Sultana got in the driver's seat.

They drove for a while without talking, which was fine — she'd learned that Danny's silences were not the silences of someone who needed to fill them, but the silences of someone who was processing and would speak when the processing reached the edge of something worth saying.

She drove toward the facility on Riverside, which was the destination she had, which was Rosa and a room that was his, which was the thing she could offer tonight that was more than nothing and less than everything, which was usually what tonight needed to be.

"You came every Thursday," he said, when they were five minutes out.

"Yes."

"Before any of this."

"Before any of this," she confirmed.

He looked out the window. "Why?"

She thought about the answer. The full answer, the one that had the two years in it and the load-bearing wall and what it meant to have needed someone to sit on the floor with you and not had anyone. She'd told David the shaped version of it, the useful version. She hadn't told Danny any version of it.

She told him now.

Not the Directorate part — that wasn't tonight either. But the sixteen and the car and the wall and the not right away, and what not right away had meant. She told it in the specific economy of someone who has learned to say what's true without making the truth larger than the person hearing it can hold.

He listened.

When she was done he was quiet for a moment.

"I figured out stop," he said.

"I know," she said. "I saw."

"The pen."

"Yes."

He was quiet again. Then: "Is that enough? For what comes next?"

She thought about everything she knew about what came next — the Prime Wave and the Authority and the things that David had been watching the horizon for and the things she'd been watching the horizon for, which were different things and the same thing.

"It's a start," she said. "And you won't be figuring out the rest alone."

He looked at the street ahead. At the facility on Riverside, which was visible now, the brick building with the too-large windows and Rosa's light on at the front desk.

"Okay," he said.

She pulled into the lot.

The light was on.

CHAPTER 16

THE DIRECTORATE / HARBOR GUARD

THE EXPLOSION DIDN'T HAPPEN.

This was the first thing — the thing that the *Harbor City Herald* would get wrong in the initial report and correct in the follow-up and never quite land on the right framing for, because the right framing required understanding something about what had almost happened that was harder to explain than what had actually happened. What actually happened was: a Federal operation breached a sub-level facility on Harbor City's south waterfront, secured three powered individuals and eleven non-powered Directorate operatives, recovered a quantum entanglement device in a non-operational state, and extracted one powered juvenile in a condition the Federal medical report would describe as *enhanced, stable, no acute injuries*.

The explosion didn't happen.

What almost happened was something the Federal report's technical appendix addressed in forty-three pages of Prime Wave stability analysis, which almost nobody read, and which Sokolov had reviewed at 3 AM the morning after the operation and had sat with

for a long time in a way that his assistant, arriving at 7 AM, had correctly interpreted as *something significant and not discussable yet*.

The thing that almost happened was a number on a power input monitor climbing toward a threshold while a feedback loop fed it and a field expansion coefficient prepared to do what it did when inputs exceeded the threshold it was calibrated for.

The thing that stopped it was a man in a suit who had pressed a button.

Sokolov thought about this a great deal.

The debrief started at 9 AM, which was late for a debrief — the standard post-operation timeline called for a preliminary within four hours of mission completion, but the mission completion had been at 10:22 PM and the team had not been in a condition for a 2 AM debrief, and David had made the call to push to morning with the specific authority of someone who had learned, over time, that exhausted people in debriefs made debriefs worse rather than better.

They were not entirely un-exhausted at 9 AM. But they were functional, which was the relevant threshold.

"What I want to understand," David said, opening the debrief the way he opened all debriefs — not *how did it go* or *good work* or anything that framed the outcome before the analysis, just the question, specific and directed — "is the timeline change. Blip."

Camila had the operation log on her tablet, which she'd been updating since 9:47 PM, which was the habit she'd developed because David's debriefs always went in order of what actually happened rather than what was supposed to happen, and having the actual timeline available was the difference between a debrief that produced information and one that produced a constructed narrative. "The main power drop was at 9:46:33," she said. "I pulled the team at 9:47:12. Thirty-nine seconds."

"What told you to go?"

She looked at the table for a moment. This was the question she'd been running since last night, not because she didn't know the answer but because the answer was the kind that required choosing how to say it. "The power drop was facility-internal," she said. "Not an external cut — the pattern was consistent with a main circuit failure at source, not interference. Which meant something inside the facility had caused it." She paused. "The only thing inside the facility that was drawing enough power to trip a main circuit was the entangler."

"So the entangler had done something it wasn't supposed to do," David said.

"Or was about to," she said. "Either way the controlled environment had changed, which was the condition Night Queen had flagged as the trigger for the worst-case scenario." She looked at her tablet. "If the field expansion was going to become unbounded, it was going to happen soon. And the longer we waited after the power drop, the more variables we didn't control."

David nodded. He wrote something. "You didn't call it."

"No," she said. "There wasn't time to call it and act on it. The thirty-nine-second window between the power drop and the pull was the window. If I'd called it first, we'd have had maybe fifteen seconds to make a decision, which is not enough time to make a decision about this." She paused. "I made the decision."

"Yes," he said. "You did." He wrote something else. "I want to talk about that — not now, but we'll talk about it." He looked at the room. "The breach itself. Marcus."

Marcus had a different quality in debriefs than he had in the field — he paid attention in the field with his body, with the physical intelligence of someone who processed action kinetically. In debriefs he was still, which was not his natural state, and the stillness had the quality of effort. "The control room was empty when I got there," he said. "Harrow — the non-powered soldier on the secondary console — had gone to the defensive position when the lockdown was called. The Professor was alone."

"Carla?"

"I was on the control room door when Sultana went through first," Carla said. "The room was — it wasn't what I was expecting." She paused. "He was shutting it down when she came in."

"Before she came in," Sultana said. "He'd already pressed the interface. She came in during the shutdown sequence."

Carla looked at her. "You saw the monitor."

"I saw the monitor," Sultana confirmed. "The sequence was initiated. The field was at one hundred and twelve percent when I entered the room. Decreasing."

David looked at the table. He had a thing he did with his pen when he was thinking about something that didn't fit cleanly into the analysis — he balanced it vertically on the tip, held it there for a moment, put it flat. He did it now. "He shut it down himself."

"Yes," Sultana said.

"Before Federal breach."

"Yes."

"What was the field level when the feedback loop started?"

"One hundred and eighty-seven percent," Sultana said. "That's what the monitor showed when I entered the control room."

"And the threshold—"

"The threshold at which the expansion becomes unbounded, based on Quantum's calculation and the procedure room's power draw, was approximately one hundred and ninety-two percent at standard cycle input." She paused. "He was five percent from it."

The room was quiet.

"He calculated the margin," David said.

"He calculated the margin," Sultana said. "He knew where he was. He pressed the interface."

Another quiet. The specific quality of a quiet that is processing something about a person who was, until last night, straightforwardly an adversary, and is now something more complicated.

"What's his status?" Marcus said.

"Federal processing," Camila said. "He's been talking since they

sat him down. Full disclosure — the facility layout, the Directorate's cell structure, the Cabal contact protocols. Everything." She paused. "He asked, twice, for the calibration data to be preserved. He said the procedure room records are necessary for the subject's ongoing ability management."

"Is he right?" Sultana said.

"Yes," David said. "Which is not the same as saying what we do with it." He made a note. "That's a tomorrow question." He looked at the room. "Night Queen."

"Still in Federal holding," Camila said. "She's been formally cooperative since the intake interview. Legal is processing the classification — she's flagged as an exceptionally valuable informant, which affects the charge disposition." She paused. "She asked about the boy."

"What did you tell her?" Sultana said.

"That he was safe," Camila said. "She said okay. She didn't ask anything else."

Sultana looked at the table.

"Troll," David said.

"Cooperative," Camila said. "More complicated case — he was a knowing participant in the acquisition operations, which creates liability exposure. But the secondary shutdown mechanism is significant mitigation. He built it at Night Queen's request without Delesante's knowledge, which is either good judgment or the technical equivalent of good judgment, and Federal legal is trying to determine if those are distinct categories."

"They're not," Carla said.

"No," Camila agreed. "But the argument has to be made in language that works for the charge documentation, which takes longer than the conclusion does."

David wrote something. "The Cabal," he said.

"Active investigation," Camila said. "The CEO's identity is still unconfirmed. Delesante's disclosure has given us three contact protocols and two cell locations, which is more than we had before and

less than we need." She paused. "The Harbor City cell is effectively neutralized. The Cabal itself is — ongoing."

"Ongoing," David said.

"Ongoing," she confirmed.

He looked at his notes. "The device."

"Federal containment," Camila said. "The technical team has been with it since last night. Delesante's cooperation means they have the full schematic documentation and the calibration records. The assessment timeline is—" she checked her tablet "—six weeks for a complete analysis. Preliminary in forty-eight hours."

"And the isotopes."

"Secured. The yield is significant — he took everything from the university acquisition. The Federal research division is—" she paused "—very interested."

"Tell them to be interested carefully," David said. He said it in the tone that meant he was noting something for the record and expected the note to be passed along. "The device does something real. What it does is real. The question of who gets to use that and how and on whom is a question I don't want answered by people who weren't in the sub-level three last night."

Camila looked at him. "I'll convey that."

"Convey it precisely," he said.

"Yes," she said.

The newspaper interlude happened in the form of a push notification, which was how news happened now — not as a thing you found but as a thing that found you.

HARBOR CITY HERALD BREAKING: *Federal team raids south waterfront facility; powered device secured; teen recovered safe.*

HARBOR CITY HERALD — UPDATE: *Directorate cell leader Anton Delesante ("Professor Power") in Federal custody;*

sources describe full cooperation; Harbor City Guard credited with operation.

HARBOR CITY HERALD — UPDATE: *World reacts to reports of near-miss "quantum incident"; experts divided on severity; Federal program declines to confirm details.*

HARBOR CITY HERALD — UPDATE: *Powered activist groups call for information release; World Guard Council convenes emergency session; Harbor City Mayor Auburn praises "the team that's been doing this longer than anyone appreciated."*

HARBOR CITY HERALD COMMENT SECTION (top comment, 847 upvotes): *Can we talk about the fact that the city council denied their facility upgrade request TWICE*

REPLY (412 upvotes): *Three times actually. Clary was the only one who voted yes each time. Clary for mayor.*

REPLY (203 upvotes): *This is not the moment*

REPLY (891 upvotes): *This is EXACTLY the moment*

Sokolov arrived at the debrief at 9:47 AM, which was exactly an hour after it started, which was the time he'd told David he'd arrive and the time he arrived, because Sokolov ran on the specific discipline of a man who had learned that reliability was a form of respect and had practiced it until it was indistinguishable from character.

He sat at the end of the table. He looked like a man who had not slept, which he hadn't, which he was not going to acknowledge.

"Quantum's device," David said, when he sat down.

"Ready," Sokolov said.

The room looked at him.

"The quantum anchor," he said. "Jerome finished it at 4 AM. It's ready." He paused. "We didn't need it last night. We may need it soon."

"For what?" Marcus said.

Sokolov looked at him. He looked at the table. He looked at the

specific scuff on the edge of the table nearest him, which was where he looked when he was choosing how to say something that required choosing. "For the thing that's coming," he said. "Which is not the Directorate, and is not the Cabal, and is not anything that a Federal operation and a good breach plan can address."

The room was quiet.

"The Priority communication," Camila said. She'd seen the Flag on the Federal Prime Wave monitoring channel — she'd been watching it for four months, since the reassignment request, since she'd understood enough to watch it. "The Authority."

"Yes," Sokolov said.

"You've been building the anchor for the Authority," David said.

"I've been building the anchor for a contingency," Sokolov said. "The contingency involves the Authority. Yes."

Marcus ate something. He'd had something in his gear, he always had something in his gear, and he produced it now and ate it with the expression of a man who had decided that the news he was receiving was best received with something in his mouth. "The god," he said. "The one who was supposed to burn us."

"Michael," Sokolov said.

"He's still here," Marcus said.

"He's still here," Sokolov confirmed. "And the people he works for have noticed."

Carla looked at the table. She'd been quiet through most of the debrief — not the quiet of someone who had nothing to say but the quiet of someone who was running something and didn't want to interrupt the running. "The communication you've been building toward," she said. "The argument."

"Yes," Sokolov said.

"You've been building it for fifty years," she said.

"Yes," he said.

She looked at him. "You knew," she said. "Before this. Before the Directorate operation. Before any of it. You knew something was coming."

Sokolov was quiet for a moment. "I inferred it," he said. "The incident fifty years ago — which is in the classified file, which I know you've read — left me with a set of questions that had only one shape of answer. I spent fifty years building toward the answer." He paused. "The Directorate operation accelerated the timeline. What they were building, if it had gone the way it almost went, would have produced a Prime Wave instability that the Authority's monitoring would have flagged as a crisis. Which would have produced a response faster than anyone was prepared for."

"But it didn't go that way," Marcus said.

"No," Sokolov said. "It didn't."

"Because the Professor shut it down," Marcus said.

"Yes."

"So we have time," Marcus said.

"We have some time," Sokolov said. "Not as much as I'd like. The Authority's priority communication — which I've been reading, through channels I'm not going to detail — is escalating. The review they've scheduled for this iteration is in—" he checked the calculation he'd redone three times — "approximately eighty-seven days."

"What happens in eighty-seven days?" Carla said.

"They assess," Sokolov said. "And based on the assessment, they decide what to do with us." He paused. "Michael has been trying to delay the assessment. He's been filing preliminary reports instead of final ones. That buys time but not indefinitely." Another pause. "He's going to need to have a conversation with his organization that he can't have alone."

The room absorbed this.

"He needs us," Sultana said.

"He needs an argument," Sokolov said. "I have one. It's a legal argument — Authority law, specifically the founding tenets. Which I've been reconstructing from partial data for fifty years and which Michael is going to need to review and correct before I can use it." He looked at the table. "Which means I need to talk to Michael."

"Do you know where he is?" David said.

Sokolov looked at him. "He's been conducting a survey of this team for seventeen days," he said. "He's within observation range of this building right now, in all likelihood."

The room was very quiet.

"You've known this," Carla said.

"I've inferred it," Sokolov said. "I've been running Prime Wave readings on the building's perimeter since he first appeared fifty years ago. The readings for the past seventeen days are consistent with the presence of an incorporeal Authority entity at survey altitude." He paused. "He's been watching us."

Marcus looked at the ceiling. Then at the window. Then at the ceiling again. "The whole time?"

"The whole time," Sokolov said.

Marcus ate the rest of whatever he was eating. He looked at the ceiling one more time. "Hi," he said, to the ceiling, in the tone of someone who has decided the only available response to a situation is to be direct about it.

Nobody said anything for a moment.

Then Carla said: "How do we contact him?"

"We don't," Sokolov said. "We make him want to contact us." He looked at the room. "Which means we do what we've been doing. We do the job. We do it well. And we trust that someone who has been watching for seventeen days has been watching because he's decided there's something here worth watching."

He said it with the specific even tone of someone who has run the analysis and is confident in the conclusion.

It was also, Sultana noted, the tone of someone who was saying the thing they believed and hoping the believing was enough.

It wasn't enough.

But it was what they had.

The thing about Rebound was that nobody knew his real name.

This was not immediately relevant to the debrief — it became relevant when Carla, running through the operation's secondary outcomes, noted that the facility manifest Delesante had disclosed did not include a full roster of all Directorate operatives who had been on active deployment in the past six months, and that the gap in the roster corresponded to a signature she'd logged from the Northern Distribution Hub operation that she hadn't been able to match to any known operative.

"Rebound," David said.

"His Federal file has a codename and an ability classification and nothing else," Carla said. "He's been flagged as an active Directorate operative for three years. Nobody's gotten a face or a name."

"He wasn't at the facility last night," Camila said.

"No," Carla said. "Which means he's still out there."

"The Cabal's going to need someone operational," Marcus said. "If the Harbor City cell is neutralized, they're going to rebuild around whoever's left." He paused. "Rebound is good. He's very good. The one time we actually crossed him—"

"I remember," Sultana said, in the tone that closed a subject.

Marcus closed it.

"Flag it," David said. "Active investigation. Post-operation priority." He wrote it down. "If the Cabal is rebuilding around Rebound, I want to know before he knows we know."

Camila was already updating the Federal channel.

They ran through the rest of it in the way they ran through all of it — thoroughly, without the conclusion pre-decided, with David asking the question he wanted answered and the room answering it and David writing down the answer and the answer generating the next question. It took ninety minutes. At the end of it they had a post-operation assessment that was accurate, a follow-up action log that was specific, and a set of things that were still open.

The things that were still open were:

The Cabal. The CEO. Rebound. The device's disposition. Danny's ongoing support. The eighty-seven-day timeline. The anchor. The argument that Sokolov needed Michael to review.

And Michael himself, who was in all likelihood at survey altitude above the building they were sitting in, watching them run a debrief on an operation he'd watched them plan from the outside and hadn't interfered with, which was a decision that Sultana had been thinking about since Sokolov said it and which she understood, in a way she couldn't fully explain, as the same kind of decision the man in the suit had made when he'd pressed the primary shutdown interface.

The decision to let something resolve the way it was going to resolve, and then see what was in it.

"One more thing," she said, when David was about to close the debrief.

He looked at her.

"Stratosphere," she said.

The room shifted. The specific quality of a shift that happened when a name entered a space and reorganized the emotional atmosphere of it.

"That's not debrief material," Marcus said. Not hard — gently, with the specific gentleness of someone who knew where the boundary was and was marking it carefully.

"I know," she said. "I'm not debriefing it. I'm saying his name." She looked at the room. "We almost had something happen last night that was worse than anything that's happened before. And we didn't. And I don't want us to be so focused on the didn't that we forget we've already lost something." She paused. "He should have been here for this."

Marcus was very still.

Carla was looking at the table in the way she looked at things she was holding carefully.

David put his pen down.

"Yes," he said. "He should have."

The room held that for a moment. Not long — you couldn't hold it long, because there was a debrief to close and an action log to file and a Federal reporting structure that required documentation by end of day. But long enough to be real.

"Okay," David said. He picked up his pen. "We're done." He looked at the room. "Good work. All of it."

He said it the way he said it — two syllables for *good*, two for *work*, the specific evenness of someone who means it and doesn't need the meaning to be loud. The room received it the way they always received it: quietly, each person in their own way, which was the only way there was.

She found Marcus on the roof.

He was not eating anything, which was how she knew he was actually thinking about something rather than thinking about thinking about something. He was sitting on the edge with his legs over the side, looking at the harbor, which was gray today, the overcast winter harbor, the cold honest gray of a body of water that wasn't performing anything.

She sat next to him.

He didn't say anything for a while.

"He'd have been good at it," he said, eventually.

"At what?"

"Whatever comes next," Marcus said. "The Authority stuff. Sokolov's argument. Whatever the eighty-seven days is going to require." He paused. "He was better at big things than people knew. He thought big."

She looked at the harbor.

"He called his daughter every Sunday," she said. "Did you know that?"

"Yeah," Marcus said. "She's eight. She makes him describe the

whole week. Every Sunday, start to finish. He couldn't skip anything or she'd know."

"How do you know that?"

"He told me," Marcus said. "Once. He said — he said it was the best part of the week. Having to describe it. Having to have something to describe."

She thought about that. About the specific discipline of having to have something to describe.

"We'll visit her," Sultana said.

"Yeah," Marcus said. "We will."

They sat with the harbor for a while. The water moved the way it always moved — the slow, indifferent movement of deep water, which didn't know about operations or eighty-seven days or names said in debriefs to reorganize the emotional atmosphere of a room. It just moved.

Above them, at altitude she couldn't see, something that had been watching for seventeen days was watching still.

She didn't look up.

But she said, quietly, to the harbor and the gray sky and whatever was in it: "We know you're there."

Marcus looked at her.

She looked at the harbor.

"It seemed worth saying," she said.

"Yeah," Marcus said, after a moment. "It did."

CHAPTER 17

MICHAEL

I INCORPORATED AT THE HARBOR.

Not the park this time — the park had been right for a Tuesday afternoon with no operational context, for the specific kind of arriving I'd been doing that day, which was arriving at something I didn't have a name for yet. The harbor was right for this. The harbor was where I went when I was thinking, which I'd established over seventeen days of survey observation as a fact about myself that I hadn't known before I had a place to go.

I'd been at survey altitude when Sultana said it.

We know you're there.

She'd said it to the harbor and the sky, which meant she'd said it to me, which meant she'd known — not for certain, not with the specific evidence of a confirmed reading, but with the particular quality of knowing that comes from watching someone watch you for long enough that the watching becomes detectable. I'd been watching for seventeen days. She'd been watching me watch.

I sat on the waterfront bench — my bench, which it wasn't,

which was a bench that anyone could sit on and that I'd been sitting on often enough to develop a specific relationship with — and thought about what it meant that the first thing she'd done with the knowledge was say it out loud to a harbor.

It meant she wasn't afraid of it.

I had expected, if the team detected my presence, some version of the response I'd have gotten in most iterations: alarm, threat assessment, the particular quality of a powered population encountering something significantly above their capability level and needing to rapidly recategorize it. I'd seen this response seventy-two thousand times, in various forms, and I understood it as a reasonable response to the discovery that a being capable of ending your world has been watching you from altitude for seventeen days.

She'd said *we know you're there* the way you tell someone who's been standing outside a room for too long that there's a chair if they want one.

I sat with this for a while.

The harbor was doing its winter thing — the specific gray of the water in late November, the cold air moving in off the water with the particular honesty of cold air that isn't trying to be anything other than cold. I'd been in this iteration long enough to have a winter now. The park had been autumn. The harbor had been autumn and was now winter. I'd watched a season change from altitude and then watched it change from the bench and the difference between those two observations was the difference between data and experience, which I was still developing vocabulary for.

The Ghost said: :The Executive-tier priority communication has entered the mandatory response window. Twelve-hour acknowledgment deadline has elapsed. The communication has been escalated to active non-compliance status.:

"I know," I said.

:Non-compliance at Executive tier has the following procedural consequences—:

"I know what the consequences are," I said. "I've been a Custo-

dian for longer than the procedural framework has existed in its current form. I know what the consequences are.”

The Ghost was quiet.

“How long before they send someone?” I said.

:Based on the Authority’s documented response protocols for custodian non-compliance, and accounting for the specific escalation tier, an observer dispatch would occur within—: a pause that was processing rather than consideration :—seventy-two local hours. Possibly sooner, given the anomalous classification of this instance.:

Seventy-two hours. I looked at the harbor.

I thought about eighty-seven days, which was Sokolov’s number, which he’d arrived at through inference from partial data and which was, I knew from the actual communication, off by three days. Eighty-four days was the review date. He was three days short, which was extraordinary given what he was working with.

I thought about the anchor. Quantum had finished it at 4 AM. I’d felt the shift in the Prime Wave reading from the research lab when it came online — the specific signature of a device that was interacting with the Wave in a way that was designed to counter-interact with the Wave, which produced a recognizable interference pattern. I’d felt it and I’d run the Ghost’s analysis on it and I’d sat very still for a moment, because the interference pattern was — precise. In a way I hadn’t expected. In a way that suggested Sokolov’s inference had produced something more accurate than inferences had any right to be.

The anchor was real.

I’d known, abstractly, that Sokolov was building something. I’d been monitoring the research lab’s Prime Wave signature for three weeks, watching the calculations develop, feeling the theoretical work take on operational weight. But there is a difference between monitoring the development of a thing and encountering the finished thing’s interference pattern in the Prime Wave, and the difference is the same difference as the difference between survey altitude and the bench.

The anchor was real, and it would do what Sokolov thought it would do, and Sokolov thought it would work against an Authority entity.

He was right.

I was going to need to tell him he was right, which meant I was going to need to have the conversation I'd been not-having for seventeen days, which meant I was going to need to incorporate and walk eight blocks and go through a door and sit in a room with people who had been watching me watch them and who had said *we know you're there* to a harbor rather than to my face because I hadn't given them my face yet.

I stood up.

I looked at the bench.

I thought about the child in the red coat with the sun buttons, and the question, and the answer I still didn't have. I thought about the old man and the pigeons and what it meant that I'd known, walking toward the harbor, that the harbor was where I was going — that I'd had, for the first time in seventy-two thousand iterations, somewhere I was going.

Why are you so shiny?

I didn't know.

But I was starting to think that knowing wasn't the prerequisite. I was starting to think that the prerequisite was showing up.

I walked.

The temporary facility had a front door, which I used.

I'd been through the wall in my survey work — incorporeal, invisible, moving through the building's physical structure the way the Authority moves through all physical structures, which is to say without acknowledging that the structure is there, because physical structures aren't there from the Authority's perspective in the relevant sense. Using the front door was a choice. It was the choice of

someone who understood that the difference between coming through the wall and coming through the door was the difference between being something that happened to the room and being someone who arrived.

I wanted to arrive.

The front door was unlocked. I opened it, which required a handle, which was fine — incorporating meant physical interaction with physical objects, which meant handles worked the way handles were supposed to work, which was something I'd spent the walk from the harbor adapting to with what I was fairly sure was an expression that would have read, to any observer, as someone newly acquainted with doorknobs.

The front room was empty, which the Ghost immediately revised to: :Two individuals detected in the building, upper level. Multiple individuals detected in the parking structure adjacent to the building.:

I stood in the front room. It had the quality of a space that was between things — between what it had been before the team moved in and what it was going to be when they'd been here long enough to stop noticing it. A folding table with a communications array on it. A rack of tactical gear, some of it new and some of it showing the specific wear of things that had been through more than they were designed for. A whiteboard with something written on it that I didn't look at directly.

I looked at the whiteboard directly.

It had a list of names. Seven of them. The top two were crossed out, with dates next to them that I cross-referenced with the Ghost's operational record. The first name crossed out was someone who had left the team eighteen months ago — a reassignment, nothing more serious. The second name was Marcus Webb, which was crossed out in a different ink, recently, with a date from last month.

He had a daughter who called him every Sunday and needed him to describe the whole week.

I looked at the second name for a moment.

Then I looked at the stairs.

Sokolov was in the upper room that served as the office, because he was always in whatever room served as the office, because he was that kind of person — the kind who oriented to work spaces the way other people oriented to comfort spaces, because for Sokolov work and comfort were not distinguishable categories.

He was at the desk, which had papers on it and a coffee that was no longer hot and a folder that was open to a page he'd been reading for some time, based on how still he was when I came to the doorway.

He looked up.

He looked at me the way I'd seen him look at things he'd been expecting: with the particular quality of someone who has run the scenario and is now confirming it against the reality, checking for the discrepancies. He found them, or didn't find them, or found them and accounted for them. His face did something complicated.

"You used the front door," he said.

"Yes," I said.

He looked at me for another moment. Then: "Sit down."

I sat.

The chair was, like all chairs in this facility, a folding chair, which was a category of chair I had now sat in enough times to have an opinion about, which was that they were better than they looked and worse than chairs that weren't folding chairs. I sat in it. Sokolov looked at his coffee, appeared to remember it was no longer hot, and set it aside with the specific resignation of a man who has been letting coffee go cold his entire professional life and has made his peace with it.

"You've been watching us," he said.

"Yes," I said.

"How long?"

"Seventeen days," I said. "Since the day after the Northern Distribution Hub incident."

He wrote something on the notepad on his desk. Not because it was new information — from the way he wrote it, I suspected he already had the number and was confirming. "You watched the breach operation."

"Yes."

"You didn't intervene."

"No."

He looked at me. "Why not?"

I thought about how to answer this. I had several true answers, and they were all true simultaneously, which was the thing about questions that looked like they had one answer and didn't. "Because the intervention wasn't mine to make," I said. "Because I've been intervening in iterations for longer than this planet has existed, and the interventions have always been the same intervention, and it hasn't been working." I paused. "Because I wanted to see what you did."

"And?"

"You did well," I said. "Better than the situation warranted."

Sokolov was quiet for a moment. He was looking at me with the expression I'd come to associate with him processing information and filing the implications separately from the information itself, running two tracks simultaneously. "The Directorate operation," he said. "If it had gone the way it almost went—"

"The instability index would have hit six within minutes," I said. "At six, I would have had to act."

"And acting means—"

"Burning," I said. "Yes."

He absorbed this the way he absorbed most things: quietly, without performance, with the specific interior quality of someone whose processing is not visible because he's made a long-term decision to keep it interior. "But it didn't go that way," he said.

"No," I said. "Delesante pressed the interface."

"Why?" Sokolov said. "Do you know?"

I thought about what I'd observed from altitude, and what I'd felt in the Prime Wave, and what the data didn't capture but which I'd been in this iteration long enough to understand anyway. "Because he looked at the boy's face," I said. "And because he was five percent from a threshold and he ran the calculation and the calculation told him something the calculation had always had in it and he hadn't looked at directly." I paused. "He's very good at numbers. Sometimes numbers tell you things you've been avoiding."

Sokolov looked at his notepad. "The folder," he said. He touched the open folder on his desk. "Fifty years."

"Yes," I said. "I know."

"You've been monitoring the research lab."

"Yes."

"The anchor," he said.

"It works," I said. "Not exactly as you've modeled it, but close. The interference pattern it produces would suppress an Authority entity's Prime Wave connection at approximately eighty-seven percent efficiency, which is—" I paused, because the next part required him to understand what eighty-seven percent meant in the context of what I was, and what I was wasn't something I'd explained to anyone yet in precise terms—"—sufficient to produce a binding effect. The entity would retain minimal function but would be unable to transition or act at full capability."

Sokolov was very still.

"You're telling me it would work on you," he said.

"Yes," I said. "If you used it on me, it would work on me."

He looked at me. I looked at him. The room had the specific quality of a moment that is going to be referenced later — in reports, in conversations, in the specific private way that significant moments are referenced, not always out loud.

"Why are you telling me this?" he said.

"Because you need to know it before we discuss the argument," I said. "You've been building the anchor as a negotiating tool — a way

to force a conversation with the Authority from a position that isn't purely disadvantaged. I need you to understand exactly what the tool does and doesn't do, including its limits, before you build a strategy around it."

"Its limits," he said.

"It suppresses an individual entity's connection," I said. "It doesn't prevent transition — it prevents re-transition once the entity is in a suppressed state. If an Enforcer arrives already transitioned, the anchor binds them here. It doesn't prevent additional entities from arriving." I paused. "And it doesn't work on entities above a certain Prime Wave connection depth, because the interference pattern it generates isn't deep enough to affect the highest-tier Authority."

"The Executive," Sokolov said.

"The Executive and the Senior Council," I said. "The anchor works on an Enforcer. It works on a mid-tier Council member. It would work on me." I looked at him. "It would not work on the entity that would come if the argument fails."

He wrote something. "But the argument," he said. "The founding tenets."

"Walk me through what you have," I said.

He opened the folder.



He talked for forty minutes, which was how long it took him to lay out fifty years of inference in the order it needed to be received. I didn't interrupt, which was not my natural approach — my natural approach to information delivery was the Authority's approach, which was precise and fast and organized around the assumption that the recipient could keep up. I watched Sokolov build the argument the way he'd built it, which was historically, layer by layer, the way you build a case when you've been building it for fifty years from partial data and the structure has to hold its own weight at every stage.

When he finished I was quiet for a moment.

"You reconstructed four of the five founding tenets," I said.

"Yes," he said. "I know there's a fifth. I couldn't get the fifth from what I had."

"The fifth is the one that matters most," I said. "The others establish the framework. The fifth is what gives the framework teeth." I paused. "It's the provision that makes a Custodian's judgment about the value of an iteration binding on the Council's review — not advisory, not a factor to weigh, but binding — if the Custodian can demonstrate that the iteration meets a specific threshold."

He looked at me. "What threshold?"

"Novel Prime Wave interaction," I said. "The founding tenets were written by people who understood that they couldn't anticipate all the ways an experiment might produce something unprecedented. The fifth tenet is the provision they built for results that exceeded the experiment's design parameters." I paused. "If a Custodian determines that an iteration has produced Prime Wave behavior that is genuinely novel — not just unusual, not just anomalous, but novel in the specific sense of *has not occurred in any previous iteration* — then the Custodian's assessment of its value cannot be overridden by the reviewing Council."

Sokolov was very still.

"They can't burn us," he said.

"Not if the fifth tenet applies," I said. "Not without my agreement."

"And does it apply?" he said.

I thought about the self-correcting mechanism. About the Wave learning to breathe. About forty years of stable 4.2 and the specific quality of a habit that the Wave had developed in response to the people connected to it, and the people developing in response to the Wave, back and forth across generations until neither could be fully understood without the other.

"Yes," I said. "Unambiguously."

He picked up his pen. He put it down. He picked it up again. He

looked at it. He put it down in the specific way of a man who has spent fifty years holding something in place and is setting it down because the holding has reached the moment it was always building toward.

"Then we use the fifth tenet," he said. "As the primary argument."

"Yes," I said. "With the anchor as support." I paused. "The anchor gives us leverage in the conversation — it ensures the conversation happens on terms where we're not simply waiting for the Authority to decide and accepting whatever they decide. But the argument is what makes the outcome good rather than merely forced." I looked at him. "Forced and temporary are the same thing with the Authority. If we want something that lasts, it has to come from the argument."

He was quiet for a moment. Then: "How long?"

"To prepare the argument fully?"

"Yes."

"Three weeks," I said. "If we work systematically." I paused. "We have less time than that before the Authority sends someone to determine why I haven't responded to the priority communication."

"How much less?"

"Seventy-two hours, approximately."

He absorbed this. "Then we have seventy-two hours before the conversation becomes unavoidable."

"Yes."

"And we're not ready," he said.

"No," I said. "We're not."

He looked at the folder. At fifty years of inference. At four of the five tenets, reconstructed from partial data, substantially correct. "The fifth tenet," he said. "Write it out for me. Exactly. In whatever language it exists in, and then in something I can work with."

I thought about this. About the language of the founding tenets, which was the Authority's oldest formal language, precise in ways that human language wasn't and imprecise in ways that human language wasn't either, which was a translation problem of a specific kind. "It'll take time to translate accurately," I said.

"We have seventy-two hours," he said. "Start now."

I started now.

She came up the stairs forty minutes into the translation work.

Not David — Sultana. She came up the stairs and stopped in the doorway the way she'd stopped in the procedure room doorway, with the assessment posture, reading the room before entering it. She looked at Sokolov, who was writing. She looked at me.

I looked at her.

She was the first person who had said *we know you're there*. She was also the person who had sat on the floor of a mall atrium and talked a frightened boy down from forty feet, and who had spent three weeks visiting a Federal youth facility on Thursdays on her own time without telling anyone, and who had sat on the floor of a sub-level procedure room next to a boy she'd decided to be responsible for before anyone assigned her the responsibility.

She was looking at me with the specific quality of someone who has known someone was in a room for a while and is now in the room with them.

"You look different," she said. "Incorporated."

"Yes," I said. "I do."

"Less shiny," she said.

"The Halo is offline," I said. "The luminosity is reduced without it."

She looked at the desk. At the folder. At Sokolov's writing and the notes I'd been making in the margin, which were in the Authority's formal notation, which she couldn't read, which was fine because they were for the translation work rather than for communication.

"How bad is it?" she said.

She asked it the way she'd asked Danny if he could stand — not looking for a specific answer, looking for the truth of the situation, which was a different thing.

"It's manageable," I said.

She looked at me.

"It's manageable if we work correctly," I said. "And if the argument is right. And if the timing works." I paused. "There are several conditions."

"There are always several conditions," Sokolov said, without looking up.

"Yes," I said. "There are."

Sultana came into the room and sat on the windowsill, which was not a chair, which she didn't appear to find relevant. She looked at the harbor, which was visible from the window — the same harbor I'd been sitting at earlier, the same gray water, the same winter light.

"The team should know," she said. "All of it. Whatever you're building in this room." She looked at me. "They've been working toward something they couldn't fully see for seventeen days. They deserve to see it."

"I know," I said.

"Tonight," she said. "Not tomorrow. Tonight."

I looked at Sokolov. He looked at me. He made the small gesture that meant *your call*, which it was, and which I appreciated him indicating rather than deciding.

"Tonight," I said. "When the translation work is at a point where I can explain it clearly."

She nodded. She looked at the harbor one more time. Then she looked at me in the direct way she had, the inventory-taking way that I'd been watching from altitude for seventeen days and was now experiencing from the front of.

"Why did you use the front door?" she said.

I considered the question.

"Because I wanted to arrive," I said.

She absorbed this. The way she absorbed things — not visibly, just the stillness that meant it had gone somewhere.

"Okay," she said. "Good."

She stayed on the windowsill. Sokolov kept writing. I kept translating.

The harbor was gray and the light was failing and somewhere in the building, in the rooms below, the team was doing the things that teams do in the aftermath of something — the processing, the maintenance, the specific work of continuing to be functional after an event that required a lot of being functional.

The Ghost said, very quietly: :Survey log notation requested. Current status?:

I thought about how to answer this.

:Custodian status,: I said, :is no longer the applicable category. Log it as—: I paused. :Log it as present. Active. On site.:

:That is not a standard classification,: the Ghost said.

:I know,: I said. :Create it.:

The Ghost created it.

Outside, the harbor moved. Above the city, in a place that had no location only a rank, a priority communication sat at active non-compliance status and waited for a response that was going to be unlike any response the Authority's administrative layer had received in the long history of its administrative existence.

It was going to have to keep waiting.

I had work to do first.

CHAPTER 18

HARBOR GUARD

DAVID CALLED the meeting for 7 PM, which was after dinner and before the point in the evening where people's ability to process significant information degraded past the useful threshold. He'd calibrated this over years of running a team — the specific window where people were fed and settled but not yet tired enough that *significant* started registering as *tomorrow's problem*. 7 PM was the window.

He sent the message to the team at 5:30, which gave them ninety minutes, which was enough time to finish whatever they were doing and not enough time to start worrying about what the meeting was about. He'd calibrated this too.

The message said: *Full team. 7 PM. Conference room. Michael will be there.*

He did not add anything else, because anything else would have been explaining what the meeting was about, and he didn't have language yet for what the meeting was about. He had the outline of it, from Sokolov's summary at the debrief and the forty minutes he'd

spent in the upper office afterward while Sokolov and Michael worked on the translation and Sultana sat on the windowsill making occasional observations that were more useful than she probably knew. He had the outline and he needed to hear the full version before he could have language for it.

He was going to hear the full version tonight, along with everyone else, which was the point.

Camila arrived first, which was her habit — she arrived first to things she was uncertain about, because arriving first gave you the room before the room was a room full of people you had to navigate. She'd explained this to exactly nobody and was mildly surprised to realize that David had, apparently, accounted for it, because the conference room when she arrived had coffee and the specific brand of tea she'd mentioned once in a logistical conversation and had not mentioned again, which was the kind of operational attentiveness she'd decided to stop being surprised by.

She sat at the end of the table nearest the door.

Marcus arrived seven minutes later, which was close to on time for Marcus, who ran on a schedule that was approximately correct rather than precisely correct and who had the specific quality of someone for whom the distinction between seven minutes late and on time was a matter of context rather than principle. He was carrying something — he was always carrying something — and he sat at the middle of the table and put the something on the table, which was a bag of the specific snack food that Sultana found annoying and that Marcus brought to significant meetings because, as he'd explained once, *if it's bad news I want something to do with my hands and if it's good news I want to celebrate and this covers both.*

"Is it bad news?" Camila said.

"Don't know yet," Marcus said. "That's what the meeting's for."

Sultana arrived with Carla, which was not their usual configura-

tion — they had a friendly working relationship and a specific personal distance that was comfortable for both of them, and arriving together suggested either that they'd been in conversation before the meeting or that they'd encountered each other in the corridor and walked the rest of the way in the specific companionable quiet of two people who didn't need to fill the walk with talking. Camila assessed it as the latter.

Sultana sat across from Marcus. Carla sat beside her. They both looked at the bag of snack food with different expressions — Sultana's was the expression she used when she was declining to comment on something, and Carla's was the expression of someone who had decided the snack food was fine and was considering whether any of it was for sharing.

"It's for everyone," Marcus said, to Carla, without being asked.

"Thank you," Carla said, and took some.

Blaine arrived and sat in the corner, which was where Blaine sat in meetings that weren't primarily his meetings, because Blaine had a precise understanding of his role in any given situation and the corner was his role in this one. He had a tablet. He was going to take notes, which nobody had asked him to do and which would turn out to be the most useful document produced in the next two hours.

David came in at exactly 7 PM, which was when he always came in to things he'd called, because calling something for 7 PM and arriving at 7:01 was a form of disrespect for the decision to call it at 7 PM in the first place. He sat at the head of the table, which was where he sat, and he looked at the room.

"Sokolov," he said.

"Coming," Carla said. "He was on a call. Two minutes."

David nodded. He looked at the bag of snack food. He looked at Marcus. Marcus offered the bag. David took some, which meant the evening had already exceeded certain expectations.

Sokolov arrived at 7:02, with a folder and without apology, which was his standard configuration. He sat to David's left, put the folder on the table, and looked at the door.

Michael came through it.

The specific quality of a room when Michael incorporated into it was something Camila had experienced once before, at the sub-level facility during the operation, when she'd been focused on the procedure monitor and had felt rather than seen him come through the control room doorway. She'd filed the quality of it then, incompletely, because the operation had required her attention elsewhere.

She filed it more completely now.

It wasn't threatening — that was the first and most important thing, the thing she suspected the room needed to establish quickly. It wasn't threatening the way a lot of things that were much larger than you should be but weren't. It was the quality of something that had decided to be present and was fully present in a way that most things weren't fully present — a density of attention, maybe, or the specific weight of something that had been everywhere and was now specifically here.

He was tall. He was luminous in the reduced way Sultana had described — the Halo offline, the glow present but not dominant. He was wearing the white uniform that the files described, which was the kind of white that wasn't a color decision but a fact, like the white of bone or clean light. He looked like himself, which was a strange thing to think and which Camila thought anyway, because the files and the footage and the descriptions had given her a version of him and the version in the doorway was the same version, which was reassuring in a way she hadn't expected to need reassurance about.

He looked at the room.

The room looked at him.

Marcus said: "You're shorter than I expected."

Michael looked at him.

"Not short," Marcus said. "Just — the files made you sound taller."

"Marcus," Carla said.

"I'm just noting it," Marcus said. "For the record. In case it's useful."

"It's not useful," Sultana said.

"It might be," Marcus said. "If we ever need to describe him to someone."

"We have photographs," Camila said.

"Right," Marcus said. "Good point." He offered the bag to Michael. "Snack?"

Michael looked at the bag. He looked at it the way he looked at things he was encountering for the first time and filing, which was a quality Camila had learned from the footage and was now seeing in person. "No," he said. "Thank you."

He sat at the other end of the table from David, which was the configuration that put them across from each other in the specific way of two people who were both heads of something and were going to need to work together and were beginning the process of establishing how that worked.

David looked at him for a moment. Then he looked at Sokolov.

"Start from the beginning," he said. "All of it."

Sokolov talked for twenty minutes.

He talked the way he always talked in briefings — precisely, in order, without the softening that might have made the content easier to receive and would have made it less accurate. He covered the fifty years. He covered the incident, which was in the classified file but which he told in his own words, and his own words were better than the file because the file had the language of official documentation and his words had the specific quality of someone describing a thing that had happened to them. He covered the theoretical work, the inference, the quantum anchor, the founding tenets, the fifth tenet that he hadn't been able to reconstruct and that Michael had given him that afternoon.

He covered the timeline.

"Eighty-four days," he said. "From today, the Authority's review of this iteration is scheduled." He paused. "Seventy-two hours before that review is triggered, they'll send someone to determine why Michael hasn't filed a final assessment. That trigger is—" he looked at Michael.

"Approximately sixty-seven hours from now," Michael said. "Given the elapsed time since the priority communication."

"Sixty-seven hours," Sokolov said. "Before the conversation becomes unavoidable."

The room was quiet.

"What happens," Carla said, "when the conversation becomes unavoidable? Specifically."

Michael looked at her. She was asking it the way she asked everything — precisely, wanting the specific answer, not the approximate one. He'd watched her for seventeen days and he understood this about her.

"Someone arrives," he said. "An Authority entity, sent to assess why I haven't filed a report and to determine if I need to be — relieved of the assignment." He paused. "Relieved is the Authority's term. What it means in practice is that my Custodian status for this iteration would be transferred, and a new assessment would begin."

"A new assessment," David said.

"With a different Custodian," Michael said. "One who hasn't spent seventeen days watching this team and eighteen days sitting on a bench by the harbor." He looked at the table. "One who doesn't have the foundation of what I have."

"And the fifth tenet," Sultana said. "You invoke it before the transfer happens."

"Before the transfer," Michael said. "The tenet has to be invoked by the current Custodian. If custody transfers, I lose the standing to invoke it."

"So the sixty-seven hours," David said.

"Is the window," Michael said. "Yes."

"To do what exactly?" Camila said.

Sokolov put his hands on the folder. "To build the argument well enough that when the Authority entity arrives, we're ready to make it. The anchor gives us the ability to make the conversation happen on terms we control — to ensure the entity stays for the argument rather than simply processing the non-compliance and initiating the transfer." He looked at Michael. "And the fifth tenet, properly invoked with proper documentation, makes the argument binding rather than advisory."

"What does the documentation require?" David said.

Michael was quiet for a moment. "Evidence," he said. "The fifth tenet requires evidence that the iteration has produced Prime Wave behavior that is genuinely novel. Not asserted — demonstrated. The Authority entity who arrives will need to be able to verify the claim in the Prime Wave itself." He paused. "Which means I need to take them into the Wave and show them what I've found."

"What have you found?" Marcus said.

"The self-correcting mechanism," Michael said. "The way this world's Prime Wave connection has learned to correct its own instabilities — not just maintain balance but actively repair imbalance when it occurs. It's a feedback loop that has developed between the powered population and the Wave over generations." He looked at the room. "No other iteration in the seventy-two thousand I've surveyed has produced this. It meets the fifth tenet's definition of novel without ambiguity."

"Then why isn't that enough?" Marcus said. "If it's unambiguous—"

"Because the Authority entity who arrives will be there to relieve me of the assignment, not to hear an argument," Michael said. "Which is where the anchor is relevant." He looked at Sokolov. "If we can hold the entity in place long enough to make the argument — and make it correctly — the fifth tenet takes over. At that point the entity's instructions become legally irrelevant. They can't transfer custody while a fifth-tenet claim is active."

"They can't," Carla said. "But can they just leave? Bring back more entities?"

"The fifth tenet operates as a suspension," Michael said. "While the claim is active and under formal review, the Authority cannot take any action affecting this iteration's status. Not destruction, not custody transfer, not assessment revision." He paused. "The review of the claim is handled by a separate Council body — not the one that sent the entity. The founding tenets built in a separation of powers specifically to prevent the situation where the body initiating an action is also the body reviewing its legitimacy."

"Someone thought this through," Camila said.

"The founders thought a great deal through," Michael said. "They designed the experiment to run without interference. The tenets were their commitment to their own design." He paused. "The current Council's majority has been finding ways around the spirit of that commitment while remaining technically compliant with the letter. The fifth tenet is one of the places where the letter and the spirit are the same."

David had been writing. He put down his pen in the way he put it down when he'd gotten what he needed from a line of information and was ready to move to the next one. "The argument itself," he said. "Where does it stand?"

"We have the structure," Sokolov said. "The fifth tenet as the primary claim, with the self-correcting mechanism as the evidence. The anchor as the mechanism for ensuring the argument is heard. The founding tenets' separation of powers provision as the legal shield once the claim is active." He looked at Michael. "What we don't have is the full documentation of the evidence. The Wave analysis — the specific data that demonstrates the self-correction mechanism is novel and not just unusual — needs to be compiled in a form the Authority can review."

"How long?" David said.

"Forty-eight hours," Michael said. "If I work continuously."

"You have sixty-seven," David said.

"I know," Michael said. "The extra nineteen are for things going wrong."

The room was quiet for a moment, in the specific way of a room that has just heard a calculation that accounts for things going wrong and is processing the fact that the calculation is being made by someone who has done this seventy-two thousand times.

"What can we do?" Sultana said.

Michael looked at her. The question was the straightforward kind — not *what do you need from us* or *how do we help*, just: *what can we do*. He'd heard a lot of questions in this room over seventeen days, from survey altitude, and he'd come to understand the specific register of Sultana's questions, which was the register of someone who had decided to be useful and wanted the most direct path to being useful.

"The Prime Wave data from the Northern Distribution Hub incident," he said. "And from the sub-level facility. Both incidents produced Prime Wave activity that is directly relevant to the evidence — the way the team's connections responded to the stress of the operations, the self-correction that happened in the aftermath. The Ghost has recordings. I need to organize them into the documentation format the Authority uses, which requires translation, which is the part that takes time."

"Blaine," David said.

"On it," Blaine said, from the corner.

"He'll need access to the Ghost's recordings," Michael said, to David. He paused. "That requires me to give the Ghost a secondary interface. Which means the Ghost's data is accessible to your systems."

"Is that a problem?" David said.

Michael considered this. "It's not a problem," he said. "It's a precedent. No Authority entity has ever given a non-Authority entity access to their Ghost's data interface."

"Is that the kind of precedent that helps us or hurts us?" Carla said.

"It's the kind that could go either way," Michael said. "The argument will be stronger if the documentation comes from sources the Authority can't claim are manufactured. Human-accessible data, compiled through a human-interface system, is harder to challenge than documentation I produce alone."

"Then it helps," David said.

"Probably," Michael said.

"Good enough," David said. He looked at Blaine.

"Working on it," Blaine said.

The room reorganized itself, the way rooms do when the question has shifted from *what is happening* to *what are we doing*. Sokolov and Michael moved to the whiteboard, which had been cleared — Carla had erased it sometime before the meeting, which Michael noted as a form of preparation that was also a form of welcome, and which he found, in the way he was finding many things in this iteration, meaningful in a proportion he hadn't expected.

David took the chair next to Sokolov's position rather than returning to the head of the table, which was the reconfiguration of a meeting from briefing to working session. Camila was on her tablet, pulling the Federal Prime Wave monitoring records, which had secondary data that was relevant to the documentation. Marcus was doing something with the snack food that had evolved from eating it to organizing it in rows, which was either boredom or a way of keeping his hands occupied while he processed, and given that Marcus's processing tended to be physical, probably the latter.

Sultana was at the window.

She'd moved there when the question shifted — not away from the conversation, toward the harbor, which was visible from the conference room's north window in the specific way of things that were visible when the light was right and the city wasn't in the way.

She was looking at it with the quality of attention she gave to things she was thinking through, not away from.

Michael was at the whiteboard, translating.

He was aware of her. He'd been aware of her specifically, with a kind of attention that was different from the survey awareness he maintained for the room as a whole, from the moment she'd sat on the windowsill in the upper office that afternoon. He was aware of her the way you become aware of something that has weight in a space — not its mass exactly, but its significance, the way certain things occupy a room differently from other things without being physically larger.

She turned from the window.

"Can I ask you something?" she said.

"Yes," he said.

"The self-correcting mechanism," she said. "The thing you're documenting. You said it's a feedback loop that developed over generations."

"Yes," he said.

"Between the powered population and the Wave."

"Yes."

"So we changed it," she said. "The Wave, I mean. Not deliberately — but the way we interact with it changed it. And then it changed us."

"Yes," he said. "That's the most accurate summary I've found."

She was quiet for a moment. "Did you know that could happen?"

"No," he said. "Neither did the founders. It's outside the parameters of what the experiment was designed to produce."

"Is that good or bad?" Marcus said, from the table. He'd arranged the snack food into a pattern that was either significant or wasn't.

"It's the fifth tenet," Michael said. "The founders built the tenet precisely because they understood they couldn't anticipate everything. They wanted a mechanism for protecting outcomes that exceeded their design." He paused. "Whether it's good depends on what it means for the Wave going forward. What I can tell you is that

it's stable, and it's self-correcting, and in forty years it hasn't collapsed."

"Forty years isn't very long," Carla said.

"No," Michael said. "In the context of what I usually work with, forty years is a moment." He paused. "But the mechanism itself is sound. The structure of how it works is more significant than the duration. It's not going to collapse because it was built well. It's going to last because the people who built it—" he stopped.

"We didn't build it on purpose," Sultana said.

"No," he said. "You built it the way all the most important things are built. Without knowing you were building it. By doing the right thing repeatedly until the right thing became a structure." He looked at her. "That's what the documentation is going to show. Not a designed system. An evolved one." He paused. "That's what the Authority needs to understand."

The room was quiet for a moment.

"They're not going to like it," Camila said.

"No," Michael said. "The current majority prefers designed systems. Systems with defined parameters and known outputs." He wrote something on the whiteboard in the Authority's formal notation, which was precise and angular and looked, to the room, like something that meant more than it appeared to. "The argument isn't designed to make them like it. It's designed to make them unable to override it."

"Those are different things," David said.

"Very different," Michael said. "We're not trying to convince anyone. We're trying to be correct. If we're correct, the founding tenets do the rest."

David looked at the notation on the whiteboard. "And if the entity who arrives isn't interested in the tenets? If they just try to initiate the transfer and go?"

"That's what the anchor is for," Sokolov said. He said it with the specific quietness of someone who has been building toward a

sentence for fifty years and is saying it for the first time and wants to hear what it sounds like.

It sounded like he'd meant it.

"Yes," Michael said. "That's what the anchor is for."

The working session went until 11 PM.

By the end of it the documentation outline was structured, the Ghost's secondary interface was initialized on Blaine's system — which had produced, in Blaine's phrase, *a lot of numbers and also something that might be music, I don't know, I'll figure it out* — and the argument was in a form that Sokolov could work with in the morning, which was when the remaining translation would happen, which was when the sixty-seven-hour clock became fifty-five hours and counting.

People left in ones and twos, the way they left things that were done for the night but weren't finished. Marcus took the remaining snack food. Camila filed two Federal notifications before she left, because Camila always filed things before she left. Carla told David something quietly at the door that Sultana didn't hear and that produced in David's face the expression of a man who has been told something he already knew and is acknowledging that the knowing is shared, which was a specific expression and which meant something that Sultana was going to think about later.

Sokolov was last, after everyone else. He stood at the door with the folder under his arm and looked at Michael, who was still at the whiteboard, not writing, just standing with the specific quality of someone who has stopped moving and let the stillness be the thing.

"The fifth tenet," Sokolov said.

"Yes," Michael said.

"You've known about it the whole time."

"Yes."

"You could have invoked it yourself," Sokolov said. "Without us. Without the anchor. You had the standing."

"Yes," Michael said.

Sokolov was quiet for a moment. "Why didn't you?"

Michael looked at the whiteboard. At the formal notation and the translation he'd been building from it all afternoon. At the specific place where the Authority's language and the human language overlapped and the place where they didn't, which was the more interesting place.

"Because invoking it alone would have been the Authority's way of solving a problem," he said. "I would have filed a claim. The review body would have processed it. The outcome would have been determined by legal precision and nothing else." He paused. "What we're building is different. We're building something that the Authority has to encounter — not receive. Not process. Encounter." He turned from the whiteboard. "If the documentation has both of us in it — the Ghost's data and your interpretation of it, my translation and your reconstruction — it's not just a legal claim. It's a demonstration. Of exactly the thing we're claiming is worth protecting."

Sokolov looked at him.

"Humans and Authority," Sokolov said. "Working together toward something."

"Yes," Michael said. "Which is—"

"Also novel," Sokolov said.

"Also novel," Michael confirmed.

Sokolov was quiet for a long moment. He looked at the folder. At fifty years of something that had, tonight, been given back to him as something he could actually use, which was different from carrying it, which was what he'd been doing. He had the specific quality of a man setting down something heavy that he'd been carrying long enough that the setting-down felt strange.

"Good night," he said.

"Good night," Michael said.

Sokolov left.

Sultana was still in the room.

She'd stayed after the others left, on the windowsill she'd claimed earlier, and Michael had not asked her to leave because she hadn't shown any indication of leaving and he'd come to understand that Sultana's presence in a space was always deliberate. She was there because she'd decided to be there.

The harbor was dark now. The winter evening had taken what was left of the light, and the city had replaced it with the specific artificial illumination of a city at night — not darkness but a different quality of light, orange and cold-white and the scattered amber of windows.

"The boy," she said.

"Danny," he said. "Yes. I know."

"He's going to need—" she stopped. "He's going to be significant."

"Yes," Michael said. "I know."

"You've been watching him," she said. "Since the mall."

"Since before the mall," he said. "Since I was watching the team and he was part of what the team was connected to." He paused. "His connection to the Prime Wave is — the self-correction mechanism is more visible in him than in anyone else I've surveyed. More active. The enhancement from the procedure deepened it, but the structure was there before." He looked at her. "He's going to be very good."

"He knows how to stop," she said. "He figured that out himself."

"I know," Michael said. "I saw."

She looked at the harbor.

"When this is over," she said. "The argument, the review, whatever the sixty-seven hours produces. What happens to you?"

He looked at the whiteboard. At the notation that was both languages at once. "I don't know," he said. "I'll still be here, assuming the argument works. I'll still be — whatever I am now, which isn't a Custodian anymore and isn't something that has a word."

"You said that," she said. "This afternoon. That you're something that doesn't have a word."

"Yes," he said.

"We'll find one," she said. "Eventually." She paused. "Words come from needing them. We'll need it enough that we'll find it."

He looked at her.

She was looking at the harbor with the specific directness she turned on things she'd decided to look at, which was not the same as looking at everything, which was the quality of someone who had learned to be selective about what they gave their full attention to because full attention was a limited resource and she'd figured out how to allocate it.

"Can I ask you something?" he said.

She looked at him. "Yes."

"The Thursday visits," he said. "Before any of this. Before the operation, before the Federal restructuring, before I was watching. You started going because you recognized something in him."

"Yes," she said.

"What did you recognize?"

She was quiet for a moment. Long enough that he thought she might not answer, which would have been her right. Then:

"I recognized someone who needed someone to sit on the floor with them," she said. "And who wasn't going to get it unless someone decided to go." She paused. "I know what that looks like from the inside. I recognized it from the outside."

He looked at her.

"That's why you sat on the floor," he said. "In the procedure room."

"Yes," she said.

"Even though the operational context didn't require it."

"Operational contexts rarely require the thing that matters," she said. "That's the whole problem with operational contexts."

He was quiet for a moment.

He thought about seventy-two thousand worlds. About the

specific quality of each one — not the burns, which had their own quality, but the surveys. The moments from altitude, watching life do what life did, which was endure and build and endure again. He'd watched a great deal of enduring from altitude. He'd watched very little of what Sultana had just described, which was the thing that happened when someone decided not to wait for the operational context and just went and sat on the floor.

"I've been watching this team for seventeen days," he said. "From altitude. The way I've watched everything, in every iteration I've surveyed."

"I know," she said.

"What I've observed," he said, "is that the thing you did — not just with Danny, but in general. The way the team operates. The decisions it makes about what the operational context requires and what it actually requires. The gap between those two things, and how you navigate it." He paused. "That's the mechanism. That's what the fifth tenet is about. Not the Prime Wave data specifically — the Prime Wave data is evidence. The mechanism is you."

She looked at him.

"All of you," he said. "The team. The city. The people in the voluntary zone who are building something in a repurposed warehouse. Daniel Okoro standing on a rooftop with his arms folded, doing nothing, just being visible." He paused. "The thing that makes this iteration worth the argument is not the physics. The physics is how it expresses. The thing itself is — what you just described. Someone deciding to go sit on the floor."

The room was very quiet.

Outside, the harbor moved. The city hummed at its nighttime frequency, which was lower than the daytime frequency and more honest, the city sounding like itself when it wasn't performing for anyone.

"That's a hard thing to put in an Authority document," Sultana said.

"Yes," he said. "It is."

"But you're going to try."

"Yes," he said. "With Sokolov's help."

She nodded. She looked at the harbor one more time, with the specific quality of someone concluding something — not ending it, concluding it, which was the appropriate thing to do with something that was going to continue.

She stood up from the windowsill.

"Get some sleep," she said. "If that's something you do."

"I can," he said. "I don't always."

"Tonight you should," she said. "Fifty-five hours is a lot and also not very much. You need to be functional."

"Yes," he said.

She walked to the door. She paused at it, in the way she paused at doors, the brief inventory-taking before the threshold.

"The shiny thing," she said. "The child asked you about it in the park."

He looked at her. He'd been at survey altitude when the child asked. She'd been on the street below, in her jacket, coming back from somewhere, and he'd seen her register the child and the park bench and the man sitting on it, and he'd been incorporeal, and she'd walked past.

"You were there," he said.

"I saw you in the park," she said. "I didn't know it was you. Not specifically." She paused. "I knew it was something. The park felt different." She looked at the door. "I've been thinking about it since."

"The question?" he said.

"The answer you didn't have," she said. "I think I know what it is."

He looked at her.

"You're shiny," she said, "because you're something that's been in the dark for a very long time and is starting to remember that it doesn't have to be."

She went through the door.

He stood at the whiteboard for a moment.

He thought about the answer.

He thought it was probably right.

He looked at the Ghost's notation on the whiteboard — the formal language, the translation, the place where two languages were trying to say the same thing with different tools — and he wrote one more thing at the bottom, in both languages, one line in each, and it said the same thing in both of them.

This is worth protecting.

He turned off the light.

He went to find somewhere to sleep, which in this iteration he'd identified as the chair in the upper office that faced the window, which faced the harbor, which was where he went when he was thinking.

He'd be thinking for a while yet.

That was fine.

He had fifty-five hours.

CHAPTER 19

MICHAEL

THE GHOST WOKE me at 4 AM with the specific quality of attention it used for things that required immediate processing rather than things that could wait.

I had been in the chair. I had, apparently, slept — not the full withdrawal that the Authority uses for extended rest, which disconnects from the local time stream and produces something more like a reset than sleep, but the lighter, more permeable version that incorporating makes possible and that I'd experienced in this iteration as a new thing, something between consciousness and not-consciousness that let the city's nighttime sounds come through without requiring response. The harbor. The particular late-hour traffic of a city that never entirely stops. Something that might have been rain beginning, small and specific.

I'd slept in the chair and woken to the Ghost.

:Priority,; it said. :Two items. The first is a Prime Wave anomaly from the voluntary zone. Significant but stable — I'll detail in a

moment. The second is an Authority transition signature detected at 3:47 AM local time.:

I was fully alert before it finished the second sentence.

"Location of the transition signature," I said.

:Harbor City. Within approximately four kilometers of this facility. The signature is — I want to be precise — it is not a full transition. It is the edge of one. The initial phase of an Authority entity entering this iteration's physical space.:

"They came early," I said.

:The signature is consistent with a preliminary incorporation — the entity is testing the local Prime Wave before fully committing to physical form. Standard practice for entities unfamiliar with an iteration's Wave characteristics.:

"How long before full incorporation?"

:Variable. If the entity proceeds without interruption, thirty to sixty minutes. If they detect resistance or anomaly, they may pause the process. Or abort.:

"Can they detect the anchor from this stage?"

:Unknown. The anchor's interference pattern is detectable to a sensitized Prime Wave reader. An Authority entity in the preliminary incorporation stage is significantly sensitized. It is possible they are already aware of something unusual in the local Wave.:

I stood. The chair had the specific quality of something I was going to think about later, in whatever later looked like — the experience of having slept in it, of having used it for something ordinary, which was a category of thing I had not had before this iteration and which I was not going to examine right now because there wasn't time.

I called David.



He answered on the second signal, which meant he'd been awake or had been sleeping in the way of someone who is expecting a call. His

voice had the quality of someone who is awake and is not going to explain how long they've been awake.

"It's happening," I said.

A pause of approximately one second. "How early?"

"Thirty to sixty minutes to full incorporation. They're in the preliminary stage."

Another pause. "The anchor is ready," he said. "Sokolov's had it staged since midnight."

"I know," I said. "I felt it."

"The team—"

"I'll be there in eight minutes," I said. "Don't wake everyone yet. The preliminary stage is quiet. We have time to be deliberate."

"Copy," he said. The word was clipped, operational, the specific register of David Reyes having shifted into whatever he shifted into when the thing he'd been preparing for started happening.

I went through the window rather than the stairs, which was not the front-door choice but was the time-appropriate choice, and descended to the street in the incorporeal state that was faster than walking and that I'd been trying to use less of, because using it less was part of arriving rather than happening, but this was not the moment for the principle.

The air was cold and the rain had started in earnest, the Harbor City November rain that was serious about being rain without being dramatic about it. It fell on the streets and the parked vehicles and the harbor in the distance and the city's overnight population of people who were out in it because their lives happened at 4 AM and rain was part of what their lives happened in.

I moved through it and felt it the way I felt everything in the incorporated state — as a condition of the space, the specific weight and temperature of water on my uniform, which the uniform's meta-fabric was managing but which was still registering as cold, as wet, as real.

I thought about the entity arriving.

I didn't know who they'd sent. The Ghost had the transition signature but not the identity — Authority entities in the preliminary incorporation stage had a generic signature that resolved into individual identity at full incorporation, which was the identification equivalent of seeing a shape in fog that becomes specific when it comes close enough. The shape was Authority. The specific entity was still fog.

I ran the likely options.

The Executive wouldn't come personally. The Executive didn't do fieldwork. That left mid-tier Council, which was a broad category, or an Enforcer, which was a narrower one. The transition signature had the weight of something with significant Prime Wave depth, which was more consistent with mid-tier Council than a standard Enforcer but less consistent than a Senior Council member. Someone significant but not the most significant. Someone sent to deal with a non-compliant Custodian and assess the iteration, which was a task that required capability and judgment but not the full resources of the Executive's tier.

The shape in the fog.

I'd know in thirty to sixty minutes.

The facility was lit in the specific way of a building that has people in it who are awake and doing things with deliberate quiet — not the full overhead lighting of operational mode, but the secondary circuits, the desk lights, the particular arrangement of illuminated spaces that said *active but controlled*.

David was at the conference room table when I came in. Sokolov was across from him. The anchor was on the table between them — I'd seen it in the Prime Wave signature for weeks, felt it as an interference pattern, but this was the first time I'd seen it as a physical object, and I understood, seeing it, why Troll's builds always looked like what they looked like.

The anchor was a gray box approximately the size of a large case of wine, with components attached to its exterior that had the specific quality of having been added after the original design because the original design had required them and the original design hadn't accounted for them. There were three antennae of different lengths at angles that looked improvised and were precisely calibrated. There was a display that was a repurposed tablet with two of its original functions disabled and one new function, which was the output reading for the Wave interference pattern. There was a trigger, which was a modified component from something else entirely, connected to the primary system by a cable that was thick enough to suggest that the primary system required a great deal of power at the moment of activation.

It looked like it had been assembled from parts that had been doing other things and had been convinced to do this thing instead.

It was, as I'd assessed from its Prime Wave signature, real.

"It's early," Sokolov said.

"Fifty hours early," I said.

"Their timeline moved," he said. Not a question.

"Either that or they scheduled the preliminary earlier than the documentation suggested," I said. "The Authority's internal timelines aren't always reflected accurately in the external communications."

Sokolov absorbed this with the expression of a man who had built fifty years of inference on external communications and was revising his confidence interval accordingly. "How much does it change things?"

"The argument is ready," I said. "The documentation is complete. We moved faster than the timeline required." I looked at the anchor. "The question is the positioning."

"Where are they coming in?" David said.

"Approximately four kilometers from here," I said. "The preliminary incorporation point suggests the harbor district — probably the commercial waterfront. It's open enough for a transition without attracting immediate attention."

"Which means they'll come to us," David said. "Or we go to them."

"Going to them is better," I said. "If they complete full incorporation at a location we don't control, they can conduct the preliminary assessment before we make contact. I want to be in the room—" I paused—"I want to be in the encounter before they form conclusions."

"Harbor," David said.

"Harbor," I confirmed.

He looked at Sokolov. "The anchor's portable?"

"It is," Sokolov said. "Jerome's transport configuration has it on a wheeled base. One person can move it."

"Who activates it?" David said.

"I do," Sokolov said. "It requires a specific initiation sequence that takes forty-two seconds. Once activated, the interference pattern is continuous until I deactivate. The range is approximately thirty meters from the device's position."

"So we need to be within thirty meters," David said.

"Yes," Sokolov said. "And the entity needs to be within thirty meters. And they need to be fully incorporated when the anchor activates, because a partially incorporated entity can abort the transition if the interference pattern engages before they've committed to physical form."

"So we let them fully incorporate," David said, "and then we activate."

"Yes," Sokolov said.

"And they can't just leave."

"They can move," Sokolov said. "The anchor doesn't prevent movement. It prevents transition — they can't exit this iteration's physical space while the anchor is running. And it suppresses their Prime Wave access to the level Michael described."

"What does suppressed Prime Wave access mean for them practically?" David said.

I thought about how to answer this in terms that were both accurate and useful. "It means they can't act at their full capability," I said. "They can communicate. They can observe. They can engage in conversation. They can't initiate a custody transfer — that requires deep Prime Wave access to create the formal record. And they can't call for reinforcement through the Wave — that's also a deep-access function."

"So we have them for the conversation," David said.

"For as long as the anchor runs," I said.

"And the conversation needs to produce—"

"The formal fifth-tenet claim," I said. "Filed through me, recorded in the Wave in the specific format the founding tenets require, in the entity's presence and with the entity as the required witness." I paused. "Once filed, the suspension is automatic. The anchor becomes secondary."

"How long does filing take?"

"Three minutes," I said. "Once the argument has been presented and accepted as meeting the formal requirements."

"And if the entity doesn't accept it as meeting the requirements?"

"Then we make the argument longer," I said. "The anchor gives us the time to make the argument as long as it needs to be."

David wrote something. He put the pen down. He looked at the anchor. He looked at me.

"You've done this before," he said. "Not this specifically. But high-stakes conversations with the Authority."

"I've filed reports," I said. "I've never filed a fifth-tenet claim. Nobody has." I paused. "I've been in the Authority's structure for longer than this planet has existed, and I've never done what we're about to do."

"Is that reassuring or the opposite?" Marcus said, from the doorway.

He was dressed and had something in his hand, which was his operational configuration. Behind him were Sultana and Carla, and

behind them was Camila, and they were all in the specific state of people who had been awake for the call and had gotten ready without being asked and were now here.

"I'm not sure," I said. "Probably the opposite in the short term."

"Great," Marcus said. "Coffee?"

We moved at 4:47 AM.

The rain had steadied into the Harbor City pattern — not heavy, consistent, the kind that soaks you slowly and without drama. The streets were empty in the 4 AM way that was different from the 2 AM way, which was different from the midnight way. At 4 AM the city was in the last quiet before the first sounds of morning, the specific stillness of a city gathering itself for another day.

Sokolov was in the lead vehicle with the anchor. He drove himself, which his assistant would have protested if his assistant had known, but his assistant wasn't here and he was. He drove the way he did everything at this hour — with the deliberate precision of someone who has decided that deliberate precision is the appropriate response to a situation that doesn't have margin for the other kind.

The team was in the second vehicle. Blaine drove. David was in the front. The rest of them were in the back with the specific pre-operation quality of people who have prepared and are now in the phase between preparation and the thing itself, which is its own kind of work.

I was incorporeal, moving alongside the vehicles, monitoring the transition signature.

It was resolving.

The preliminary incorporation was moving into its later stages — the entity was committing to physical form, which produced the specific Prime Wave signature of something adjusting from the Wave's perspective to the iteration's physics, finding its footing in the rules of this particular universe. It was like watching something

arrive from a great distance, the way you watch a ship that's been at sea come into harbor — first a shape, then details, then the specific presence of a thing that has traveled and is now here.

The shape was resolving into details.

:Identity confirmation,; the Ghost said. :The entity is — third-tier Council. Not the Executive. Not Senior Council. The designation in the Authority's administrative record is—: a pause that was longer than usual :—Assessor. A role I don't have a prior record of encountering in a field context.:

"An Assessor," I said.

:The role designation suggests an entity whose function is evaluation rather than enforcement. Distinct from an Enforcer. The Assessor designation is associated with the review process for — I'm pulling the Authority's internal documentation—: another pause :— for unusual or contested Custodian assessments.:

I thought about this.

They hadn't sent an Enforcer. They'd sent an Assessor.

"They knew," I said.

:Knew what?:

"About the fifth tenet," I said. "Or suspected. An Enforcer comes to handle non-compliance. An Assessor comes to evaluate a claim." I paused. "They're expecting the argument."

:Is that good?:

I thought about it. "It's more complicated than an Enforcer," I said. "An Enforcer is a problem that the anchor solves. An Assessor is a different kind of problem. They're trained in the tenets. They know the requirements."

:Is that good or bad?:

"It means the argument has to be right," I said. "Not just present. Right."

:The documentation is complete,; the Ghost said. :The fifth-tenet requirements are met. The self-correction mechanism is thoroughly evidenced. The argument is right.:

"Yes," I said.

:Then is it good?:

"Ask me in three hours," I said.

The Assessor incorporated at the commercial waterfront at 5:02 AM.

I saw it happen from fifty meters away, standing in incorporeal form at the edge of the harbor promenade, the rain moving through me without affecting me the way it was affecting the puddles on the concrete and the water in the harbor and the parked vehicles and the team behind me in their second vehicle, which was stopped at the edge of the waterfront access road.

The incorporation was clean. Cleaner than mine, which was the quality of something that does it often. The Assessor arrived the way things arrive when they know how to arrive — without drama, without the destabilization of the local Prime Wave that a hard incorporation produces, just a presence that hadn't been there and then was.

It was smaller than I was. Compact, in the way of something that had chosen a form that prioritized function over impression, which was different from how I was used to seeing Authority entities incorporate, most of whom chose forms that communicated something about their rank. The form this one had chosen communicated: *I'm here to work.*

Its surface was the even gray of someone who wasn't trying to be luminous, which I found — interesting. The Assessor equivalent of turning off the Halo.

It looked at the harbor.

Then it looked at me.

It could see me, which meant it knew I was there, which meant the preliminary incorporation phase had given it enough Prime Wave access to detect a nearby Authority entity in the incorporeal state. This was expected. What I hadn't expected was the specific

quality of how it looked at me — not the assessing look of someone doing an evaluation, not the authority look of someone delivering a consequence. Something more neutral. More patient.

Like someone who had been briefed on a situation and was waiting to see if the briefing was accurate.

I incorporated.

The rain fell on me.

We looked at each other for a moment, two Authority entities on a Harbor City waterfront at 5 AM in the rain, which was not a situation I had categories for and which I suspected the Assessor didn't either, which might have been the only thing we had in common or might have been the foundation of the conversation we were about to have.

"Michael," it said. Its voice was moderate, like its form — functional, not performative.

"Yes," I said.

"I am the Assessor assigned to instance -664," it said. "You've been expecting someone."

"Yes," I said.

"The anchor," it said. It wasn't looking at the anchor — it was looking at me — but it knew the anchor was behind me, because the interference pattern the anchor produced was already at the edge of its detection range. "You've built something designed for this conversation."

"We have," I said.

It absorbed this. "We," it said.

"The team behind me," I said. "And I."

It was quiet for a moment. The rain fell in the particular steady way it was falling. The harbor moved. In the distance, the first sounds of the city beginning its morning were starting — a truck on a distant road, something mechanical on the commercial docks.

"You've been here longer than any Custodian in the record," it said.

"Yes," I said.

"You filed preliminary reports instead of final ones."

"Yes."

"You incorporated," it said. "Repeatedly. Outside of survey protocol."

"Yes," I said.

"You gave a non-Authority entity access to your Ghost's data interface."

"Yes," I said.

"And you have built an anchor," it said, "with the apparent intent of using it on me."

"Yes," I said.

It looked at me. The patience in its expression had a quality I was trying to read — not hostility, not sympathy, something in between. Like someone doing a job they are precise about and who is waiting to determine whether precision is what the job requires.

"Before you activate it," it said, "I would like to say something."

I said nothing, because saying nothing was the response that gave the most information about what it said next.

"I was not sent to handle non-compliance," it said. "I was sent to evaluate a claim." A pause. "The fifth tenet."

"You know about the fifth tenet," I said.

"I know it exists," it said. "I know you've been building toward invoking it. The preliminary reports—" it paused—"were not as uninformative as you perhaps intended. The pattern of what you reported and what you didn't report was itself information."

I thought about the Ghost noting, seventeen days ago, that my selective omissions were *selective*. "You read the omissions," I said.

"I am an Assessor," it said. "It's what I do." A beat. "The Executive concluded that if you were building toward a fifth-tenet claim, the appropriate response was not an Enforcer but an evaluation. If the claim is valid, an Enforcer is the wrong tool. If the claim is invalid, an Assessor can make that determination and a transfer can proceed." It looked at me steadily. "Either outcome is better reached through an Assessor."

I looked at it.

"You're not here to suppress the claim," I said.

"I'm here to evaluate it," it said. "Those are different things. If the claim meets the founding requirements, my role is to witness its formal filing. If it doesn't, my role is to document why and proceed with the transfer recommendation."

"And if I activate the anchor," I said.

"Then you make it harder to evaluate the claim fairly," it said, "because you've demonstrated a willingness to override the Authority's process, which the reviewing Council will note, which makes the fifth-tenet argument harder to sustain." It paused. "I'm not saying don't use it. I'm saying I came here to evaluate, not to suppress, and the anchor is a tool for suppression."

The rain fell.

I thought about Sokolov, behind me, with his hand near the anchor's trigger, fifty years of preparation available in forty-two seconds.

I thought about what the Assessor had just said.

I thought about the difference between forcing a conversation and having one.

"David," I said, into the communication channel.

"Heard," he said.

"Hold the anchor," I said. "Stand by."

A pause. "Copy," he said. "Standing by."

I looked at the Assessor.

"The claim is valid," I said. "I will demonstrate it. The documentation is complete. The Ghost's data is available for your review." I paused. "You'll need to enter the Prime Wave to verify."

"Yes," it said. "I know." Another pause. "I've read every report you've ever filed, Michael. All seventy-two thousand. It's part of the Assessor's preparation for an evaluation of this kind." Something in its expression, which had been functional and patient, shifted very slightly. "The music," it said. "From the archived genomic supplemental on instance -72663."

I looked at it.

"I listened to it," it said. "During the briefing preparation. I listened to four hundred and twelve musical traditions from a world you burned." It looked at the harbor. "I wanted to understand why you saved the records."

"Did you?" I said.

"No," it said. "Not then. I think I understand it better now." It looked at me. "I'm ready to evaluate the claim. Show me what you've found in this iteration's Prime Wave."

I looked at the harbor.

I thought about what I was going to show it — the self-correcting mechanism, the Wave that had learned to breathe, forty years of stable 4.2, the specific habit that had built itself out of uncountable individual acts of careful engagement. The thing that didn't have a word in either language.

I thought about showing it Sultana on a mall atrium floor, talking a boy down from forty feet. Marcus Webb and his daughter who called every Sunday. Sokolov and fifty years of an inference he'd been right about. A child in a red coat asking why.

I thought about a pen at the edge of a desk, and what it meant to have learned stop.

"Come with me," I said.

I stepped into the Prime Wave.

The Assessor followed.

The Wave, from inside, at 5 AM on a November morning in Harbor City, was — I want to be precise about what it was, because precision matters here, because this is the part that the documentation tried to capture and that documents are always insufficient for.

The Wave was breathing.

Not metaphorically. Not in the way that people say things breathe when they mean the things are rhythmic and alive. The self-

correction mechanism, visible from inside the Wave, had produced something that was genuinely respiratory — a cycle of drawing and releasing, engaging and settling, that had the specific quality of a body that has learned to regulate itself. The Prime Wave in this iteration had a homeostasis. A resting state it returned to when it was disturbed, reliably, without external intervention.

I felt the Assessor encounter this.

I've been in the Prime Wave with other entities before. With the Ghost, always. With Third, during the superior generation survey. The experience of being in the Wave with another entity is the experience of having company in a space that is usually only yourself — a quality of other-presence that is different from solitude in the way that all company is different from solitude.

What I felt from the Assessor, encountering the Wave's self-correction, was something I want to describe precisely:

It stopped.

Not its movement through the Wave — it continued moving, processing, examining the data with the specific trained attention of an entity that has evaluated Prime Wave phenomena for a very long time. It stopped in the way that something stops when it encounters something that doesn't fit any category it has. The pause of recategorization. The moment before the new category forms.

:It's real,; the Assessor said, in the Wave's communication mode, which was less like speech and more like the direct exchange of structured information. The information it was exchanging was: *I expected to find an unusual iteration. I did not expect to find this.*

:Yes,; I said.

:How long has this been developing?;

:Forty-plus years for the current stable state,; I said. :The underlying mechanism developed over generations. I can show you the historical data—:

:I can see it,; it said. :The Wave itself carries the record.* A pause. *This is the fifth tenet.:

:Yes,; I said.

:No ambiguity,: it said.

:No ambiguity,: I confirmed.

We were in the Prime Wave together and I could feel it processing — the evaluation proceeding, the documentation being cross-referenced, the founding tenet requirements being run against what it was experiencing. This was what Assessors were built for. Not enforcement, not action. This specific moment of evaluation, when what you find and what the tenets require come into contact with each other and you determine what they produce.

:The claim is valid,: it said. :The fifth tenet applies.:

I began the formal filing.

The filing was something I'd done in translated form with Sokolov over the past day — the translated version that would be comprehensible in human terms, which was what the documentation needed to be. Inside the Wave, the filing was the original, the thing the translation was translated from. It was specific and precise and it took three minutes and forty-seven seconds and it was, once complete, a fact about this iteration in the Authority's record that could not be undone.

The suspension was automatic.

I felt the iteration's status change in the Wave — a shift in the administrative layer's relationship to it, from *under review, action pending* to *suspended pending claim resolution*. The claim resolution body — the separate Council body the tenets specified, distinct from the one that had sent the Assessor — had been notified. The review process had begun.

We withdrew from the Wave together.

The waterfront. 5:24 AM.

The rain had stopped. Not dramatically — the way rain stops in Harbor City, which is gradually, the intensity dropping by degrees

until you notice you're no longer getting wetter, which is the waterfront rain's version of an ending.

The Assessor was looking at the harbor.

"The humans behind you," it said. "They built the anchor."

"Yes," I said.

"They were prepared to use it."

"Yes," I said.

"And you told them to hold," it said.

"You said you were here to evaluate, not suppress," I said. "You were right about the anchor making the argument harder. I don't use tools that undermine the objective."

The Assessor was quiet for a moment. "You've changed," it said.

"Seventy-two thousand iterations of doing the same thing, yes," I said.

"No," it said. "More specifically than that. You filed a fifth-tenet claim. You built an alliance with the people in that iteration and used it to demonstrate the claim's validity. You gave them access to the Ghost. You used the front door." It looked at me. "None of that is standard Custodian behavior."

"No," I said. "It isn't."

"The Council's majority," it said, "is going to view the claim as legitimate—" it paused "—and also as a precedent for Custodian autonomy that they're not going to be comfortable with."

"I know," I said.

"They're going to push back on the suspension," it said. "The review will proceed, but they'll contest it. The resolution won't be immediate."

"I know," I said.

"Are you prepared for that?" it said.

I looked at the harbor. At the gray water and the city beginning to show its morning self, the lights coming on in buildings, the first foot traffic on the waterfront promenade, a person walking a dog at a pace that suggested the person had been up for a while and the dog

had just been convinced to accept the rain's ending as an opportunity.

"I have a team that spent fifty years building an argument they didn't know they were building," I said. "I have a Custodian's standing to file the claim and a Ghost's documentation to support it and a Prime Wave mechanism that speaks for itself." I paused. "And I have eighty-four days that are now the review period rather than the destruction timeline." I looked at the Assessor. "Yes. I'm prepared."

It was quiet for a moment.

"The music," it said.

"Yes?" I said.

"From -72663. The archived supplemental." It looked at the harbor. "The fourth tradition. I kept returning to it. Something about the interval structure." It paused. "I don't have the vocabulary to describe it properly."

"Neither do I," I said. "I saved it because I didn't have the vocabulary."

"That's—" it paused. "That's not a standard survey rationale."

"No," I said. "It isn't."

The Assessor looked at the harbor for a long moment. The morning was arriving properly now — the light changing from the specific darkness of 5 AM to the specific gray of early morning, which was its own kind of light, the light that comes before the light you can see colors in.

"I'll file my assessment," it said. "Claim valid. Suspension in effect. Review proceedings to begin per the founding tenets' specified process." It paused. "I'll note in the assessment that the claim was made in partnership with the iteration's dominant population, which is — without precedent."

"Also novel," I said.

"Also novel," it said. It looked at me. "Michael."

"Yes."

"Whatever you've become," it said, "in this iteration — it's not in

any category I have either." A pause. "I'll note that too. For the record."

"Thank you," I said.

It incorporated away — cleanly, quietly, the reverse of how it had arrived. The Prime Wave adjusted in the way it adjusted when an Authority entity departed, the small settling of a space that had been occupied and was returning to itself.

I was standing on the waterfront in the early morning.

I turned around.

The team was out of the vehicles. All of them — David and Sokolov and Carla and Marcus and Sultana and Camila and Blaine with his tablet. They were standing in the specific configuration of people who have been watching something happen that they couldn't fully see and are waiting to find out what they were watching.

"Well?" Marcus said.

"The claim is filed," I said. "The suspension is in effect. The review period has begun."

The specific quality of the quiet that followed was something I'd observed from altitude in many contexts and was now inside, which was different. It was the quiet of people who have been working toward something for a long time and have arrived at the moment when the working produced what it was supposed to produce, and are now in the first moment of knowing that, which is always a quieter moment than you expect.

Sokolov sat down on the anchor's transport base, which was approximately the right height for sitting and which had the effect of making him look very tired and very calm simultaneously, which was accurate on both counts.

"The Council will contest it," I said.

"Yes," Sokolov said. "They will."

"The review will take time," I said.

"Yes," he said.

"We have eighty-four days to prepare the response to their challenge," I said. "Which is—"

"More than we had twenty minutes ago," he said.

"Yes," I said. "Significantly more."

Carla looked at the harbor. "The anchor worked," she said. "Even though we didn't use it."

"The anchor changed the conversation," I said. "That's what it was for. Not suppression — leverage. It changed the terms on which the Assessor approached the encounter." I paused. "Sokolov designed it correctly."

Sokolov said nothing. He was looking at the harbor with the expression of a man who has been proved right about something after fifty years and is experiencing this as something other than satisfaction, which it probably was.

Marcus put his hand on Sokolov's shoulder briefly. He didn't say anything. He didn't need to.

"What happens now?" Sultana said.

She was looking at me. The direct inventory-taking look, the one that wanted the truth of the situation rather than the management of it.

"Now," I said, "we wait for the review to begin. And we prepare for it. And we keep doing the thing that made the claim valid in the first place."

"Which is?" she said.

I thought about the Wave breathing. About the self-correction mechanism. About what it was and where it had come from and the long uncountable process of its making.

"Being careful with it," I said. "All of it. The Wave, the city, each other." I paused. "That's the whole mechanism. Everything else is evidence."

She looked at me for a moment.

"Okay," she said.

The morning was arriving. The harbor was the harbor. The city was making its morning sounds, the ordinary sounds of a thing

resuming, which is what cities do — they resume, day after day, because resuming is what they were built for.

We stood on the waterfront in the early November light and the aftermath of the rain and I thought about what it meant to have arrived somewhere.

Not the waterfront specifically. Here. This. The thing that didn't have a word yet.

I was going to need to find the word.

I had eighty-four days.

I thought that might be enough.

CHAPTER 20

HARBOR GUARD / DIRECTORATE

THE REVIEW PERIOD began on a Wednesday, which felt appropriate in the way that Wednesdays feel appropriate for things that are neither beginning nor ending but are the middle of something larger — the specific quality of a day that doesn't pretend to be more than it is.

The harbor was gray. It was often gray. Sultana was beginning to understand that the harbor was gray in different ways depending on the day, that gray was not a single condition but a range of conditions that all used the same word, and that learning the range was the kind of thing you could only do by being somewhere long enough to notice the difference. She'd been in Harbor City for four years. She was still learning the harbor's gray.

She was on the waterfront at 7 AM because Danny was on the waterfront at 7 AM, which was where he'd started going in the mornings, apparently, in the ten days since the operation, because the waterfront was open and the openness was something he needed. She understood this. She'd needed open spaces too, at the beginning

— not to use them, just to have the option of using them, the specific comfort of a space where nothing was in your way if you decided to go.

He was watching the water.

She sat on the bench next to him, which was the bench she'd come to think of as a significant bench in a way she'd never thought about benches before, and they sat for a while without talking, which was their established morning configuration.

"The thing is still happening," he said, eventually. "The Authority thing."

"Yes," she said. "It'll be happening for a while."

"Michael said eighty-four days."

"Until the review is complete," she said. "What comes after the review is a different thing."

He was quiet for a moment. "Is it going to be okay?"

She looked at the harbor. She thought about what honest meant and what reassuring meant and how much overlap there was between them in a given moment, and how much overlap there was in this one.

"I think so," she said. "I think we've built something that's hard to argue against." She paused. "That doesn't mean nobody's going to argue against it."

"But we have eighty-four days," he said.

"We have eighty-four days," she confirmed.

He looked at the water. His Prime Wave connection was doing what it had been doing since the operation — the deep, warm, active quality of something that was still finding its level after being changed. Not unstable. She'd been checking, every day, the way you check something you're responsible for. Not unstable. Just settling.

"I flew yesterday," he said.

She looked at him.

"In the facility yard," he said. "The Federal one. They have a yard. I went out there in the morning when nobody was around and I —" he paused. "I went up."

"How high?"

"Not high," he said. "Maybe fifteen feet. And then I came back down." He paused. "On purpose."

"Stop," she said.

"Stop," he confirmed. He almost smiled. "It's different now. More—" he searched for the word. "It used to feel like something I was doing to the air. Like I was pushing against it. Now it feels more like the air is—" he stopped. "I don't have the right word."

"You're part of it," she said. "Instead of working against it."

He looked at her. "Yeah," he said. "That."

She thought about what Michael had said on the waterfront. About the mechanism. About what it was and where it came from. She thought about a seventeen-year-old figuring out, in a facility yard in the early morning, that the air wasn't something to push against.

"That's the Wave," she said. "What you're feeling. You're more connected to it now and you can feel it working with you instead of just—" she paused—"instead of just being there."

He absorbed this. "Is it always going to feel like that?"

"I don't know," she said. "For me it became normal. I stopped noticing it the same way." She paused. "But I think that's different for everyone."

He nodded. He looked at the harbor. "What did it feel like for you? At the beginning?"

She thought about the car and the wall and the not-right-away, which she'd told him already, and the part before that, which she hadn't — the first weeks, before the Directorate found her, before she understood what had happened to her body. The specific quality of those weeks.

"Like the volume on everything had been turned up," she said.

He looked at her. "That's what I said," he said. "Last week. In the car."

"I know," she said.

He was quiet for a moment. "You said it so I'd know you understood."

"Yes," she said.

He looked at the water. "The ambient thing is different now too," he said. "The reading. It used to be like—" he searched for it "—like background noise. I could feel what people were feeling but it was always kind of blurry. Not specific." He paused. "Now it's more specific."

"How specific?" she said, carefully, because *how specific* was the question that mattered for what came next.

"Right now," he said, "you're thinking about something that happened a long time ago and comparing it to right now and you're — not sad exactly. More like—" he stopped. "Like the two things are the same shape and you didn't know that until just now."

She looked at the harbor for a moment.

"That's accurate," she said.

"I wasn't trying to read you," he said. "I'm sorry."

"Don't be," she said. "You're going to need to learn to work with it, not around it. Reading me by accident is—" she paused "—it's fine. I've been read by accident before. I survived."

He almost smiled again. The almost-smile was becoming a more frequent thing, which she noted.

"Is there someone who can teach me the ambient thing?" he said. "Specifically."

She thought about the team. About who specifically was best positioned for this. "There's someone," she said. "Her name is Carla. She does something different — sonic rather than ambient — but the way she controls and calibrates her reading of a space is probably the closest to what you're doing. I'll ask her."

He nodded.

A cargo vessel was moving on the harbor, coming in from the open water, the slow and deliberate movement of something large navigating carefully. They watched it for a while.

"The man in the suit," Danny said.

"Delesante," she said.

"He's in Federal processing."

"Yes," she said.

"Is he going to be okay?" Danny said.

She looked at him. At the specific quality of the question — not hostile, not sympathetic, somewhere in between. The question of someone who has been processed by a system enough times to think about what processing means for the person being processed.

"He'll be dealt with fairly," she said. "Beyond that I don't know."

"He stopped it," Danny said. "The machine. He stopped it himself."

"Yes," she said.

"Before you got there."

"Yes."

He was quiet for a moment. "I felt him decide," he said. "The air changed when he decided. Even in there, even with all the — everything. I felt it."

She thought about what she'd said to the room, in the debrief. About the air changing when people decide things. About being able to feel that.

"What did it feel like?" she said.

He thought about it seriously, the way he thought about things he wanted to get right. "Like something heavy being put down," he said. "Like he'd been carrying it for a long time and he just — put it down." He paused. "I don't know what it was."

She did. She thought she did. But she didn't say it, because it wasn't hers to say, and because some things were better arrived at than told.

"Okay," she said.

They sat with the harbor a little longer. The cargo vessel moved. The gray shifted in the way the gray shifted, which she was learning.

"I want to go back," he said. "To the facility. To see Luca."

She looked at him.

"He floats in his sleep," Danny said. "Somebody should be teaching him stop." He paused. "He's eleven. I was seventeen and nobody taught me. He's younger."

She looked at the harbor.

"We'll figure that out," she said. "Today, if you want."

"Today," he said.

"Okay," she said.

The Federal processing facility was in a building that had been, in an earlier iteration of itself, a corporate office park, and which had retained the specific quality of corporate office park architecture even after the Federal program had moved in — the kind of building that suggested efficiency and discouraged personality, all clean lines and labeled rooms and the faint smell of institutional cleaning product that was the same institutional cleaning product in every Federal facility Sultana had ever been in.

Delesante was in room twelve.

She hadn't planned to see him. She'd come for the documentation review — the Harbor Guard was required to provide signed assessments of the powered individuals in Federal processing whose operational encounters were relevant to the charges, which was paperwork that fell to the person who'd been in the relevant rooms, which was her. She'd come to sign the documents, and she'd been directed down the hallway that led to the documentation office, and room twelve was on the way.

The door was open.

He was at a table with two Federal analysts, and he was talking, which was what he'd been doing since they sat him down — the full disclosure that Camila had described in the debrief, the specific completeness of a man who had decided to be forthcoming and was being forthcoming about everything. He was still in his clothes from the operation, not the suit — the suit was in Federal containment, being documented — and without it he was smaller than she'd expected, not in size but in the specific quality of his presence, which

had been distributed between himself and the suit in ways she hadn't noticed until the suit was gone.

He looked tired. Not the operational tired of someone who'd had a hard night. The longer kind.

He saw her in the doorway.

The analysts looked at her.

"It's fine," Delesante said to the analysts. "Give me a moment."

They looked at each other. One of them made a note on his tablet. They stepped out, past Sultana, into the hallway, with the professional courtesy of people who were recording everything anyway and could afford to step out.

She came into the room.

She didn't sit. Neither did he. They stood on opposite sides of the table in the specific configuration of two people who are not adversaries in this moment and are figuring out what they are instead.

"The boy," he said.

"He's okay," she said.

"The enhancement is stable?"

"Yes," she said.

"The calibration data—"

"Is being held by Federal," she said. "Your cooperation is noted. That's part of the processing."

He looked at the table. "I need them to use it correctly," he said. "The calibration map is specific to his connection geometry. If they try to use it generically—"

"I'll make sure the right people understand that," she said.

He looked at her. The specific look of someone who is determining whether to trust a thing they've been told, which was a determination she recognized because she'd had to make it herself, in various forms, at various points in a life that had required her to determine it often.

"Why?" he said.

"Why will I make sure?"

"Why are you telling me anything," he said. "I was trying to—" he stopped. "What I was doing was not—"

"I know what you were doing," she said. "I know why. I know it wasn't malicious." She paused. "It was arrogant, and it was wrong, and a boy was hurt, and you're going to have to deal with all of that." She looked at him. "And I'm also standing here telling you the boy is okay and the data will be used correctly, because those things are true and you deserve to know they're true."

He was quiet for a moment.

"He stopped a pen," he said. "In the procedure room. I could see it on the monitoring equipment — a small metal object on the far side of the room. Someone had left it there, and it had been moving slightly every time the field fluctuated, and then—" he paused. "And then it stopped. He stopped it. While the procedure was running."

She felt something move through her at this, the thing that had moved through her when she'd seen the pen on the edge of the desk. "Yes," she said. "He did."

"The ambient reading," Delesante said. "Enhanced. And the flight, and the—" he stopped. "He's going to be very—"

"I know," she said.

"He's going to need—"

"I know," she said. "We're handling it."

He looked at the table. "I have the full calibration record," he said. "In my head. I don't need the Federal documentation. If it would be useful to—" he stopped. "I'm trying to say that I could help, if helping is something that's available to me, which I understand may not be the case."

She looked at him.

"That's not my decision," she said. "That's a conversation you're going to have to have with the people making the decisions."

"Is there a conversation to have?" he said.

"I don't know," she said honestly. "What you did is what you did. What you did at the end is also what you did. How those two things weigh against each other is not something I'm qualified to determine."

She paused. "But I can tell you that the person who determines it will have all the information. Including the end."

He looked at her for a moment. The tired look. The specific quality of a man who has been very certain about many things for a long time and is now in the specific discomfort of being less certain.

"He's okay," he said.

"He's okay," she confirmed.

She left.

The documentation office was at the end of the hallway, past rooms nine, ten, eleven, and twelve, and was staffed by a woman named Agent Purcell who had the specific quality of someone who had been processing paperwork in Federal facilities for many years and had developed, through that processing, a precise and unsentimental understanding of what paperwork was for.

"Chandrasekhar," Purcell said.

"Sultana," she said. "Priya Chandrasekhar, codename Sultana. Harbor Guard."

"Right." Purcell had a stack of documents. She handed them across the counter. "Sign where indicated. There are eleven indicated locations. Read before you sign."

"I always read before I sign," Sultana said.

"You'd be surprised," Purcell said, with the expression of someone who had encountered an enormous variety of approaches to the reading-before-signing question.

Sultana read the documents. They were accurate — the operational encounters they described were the encounters she'd been in, described in the Federal documentation language that took what had happened and translated it into the kind of prose that could be filed in the appropriate place. She signed in eleven places.

She handed them back.

"The processing timeline," she said. "For the individuals in room twelve. Do you know—"

"I don't comment on active processing timelines," Purcell said.

"Right," Sultana said.

"Generally," Purcell said, and paused in a way that was not continuing the sentence and was also not ending it.

Sultana looked at her.

"Generally," Purcell said, "individuals who provide full cooperation and who have demonstrable mitigation factors have more options than individuals who don't. Generally." She looked at her tablet. "Eleven signatures, all in the right places. You're done here."

Sultana looked at her for a moment.

"Thank you," she said.

"Have a good day," Purcell said, in the tone of someone who has a specific and manageable understanding of what a good day constitutes.



Carla was in the temporary facility's conference room when Sultana got back, which was where Carla often was — she had a specific relationship with the conference room that had developed over three months of the table being available and the conference room being a better place to think than the office that was technically hers, which was too small and had a window that faced the wrong direction.

She was reading something, which she looked up from.

"You went to the processing facility," she said.

"For the documentation sign-off," Sultana said.

"And?"

"I saw Delesante," Sultana said.

Carla looked at her. "How was that?"

"Complicated," Sultana said. "He's—" she paused. "He's someone who made a decision at the end that mattered. Whatever else he is."

Carla was quiet for a moment. "The end doesn't cancel the rest of it," she said.

"No," Sultana said. "It doesn't." She sat down across from her. "But it's part of it. It's in the total of what happened. And I think it needs to be part of how we treat what happens next."

Carla considered this. "You're not wrong," she said. "David's already flagged it. The mitigation question. Sokolov's involved, I think, in whatever the Federal disposition ends up being."

"Good," Sultana said.

They sat for a moment in the specific comfortable quiet they'd been developing over four years of working together in a team, which was the quiet of two people who didn't need to fill space with talking but who also didn't need to perform the not-filling.

"Danny," Sultana said.

"Yes," Carla said.

"He said he wants to learn the calibration thing," she said. "The ambient reading. How to work with it instead of just experiencing it." She paused. "I told him you were probably the right person."

Carla looked at her. "Me."

"The way you work with your reading of a space," Sultana said. "The precision of it. The active calibration. It's the closest thing we have."

Carla was quiet for a moment. She was doing the thing she did when she was actually considering something rather than reflexively responding to it — the specific quality of attention that was more interior than exterior. "He's seventeen," she said.

"He's very capable," Sultana said. "And the sooner someone teaches him to work with it deliberately, the better it'll be for him." She paused. "He's already reading people around him. He read me this morning, by accident. It was accurate."

"What did he get?"

"That I was comparing something from a long time ago to right now," Sultana said. "And that they were the same shape."

Carla looked at her. "Are they?"

"Some of them," Sultana said. "That's the whole problem, isn't it. Some of them are."

Carla looked at the table. "Okay," she said. "I'll work with him." She paused. "It'll have to be on a schedule that fits the team's operational commitments."

"Of course," Sultana said.

"And it'll be slow," she said. "This kind of calibration doesn't happen fast."

"He knows slow," Sultana said. "He figured out stop."

Carla looked at her. "You keep saying that."

"Because it's significant," Sultana said. "He figured out the hardest part first, before anyone taught him anything. Everything else is easier than that."

Carla absorbed this. "Is that true?"

"For this kind of ability? Yes." Sultana paused. "Stop is the thing most people spend years working toward. He got there in three days, alone, with a pen, in a room in a Federal facility." She paused. "He's going to be remarkable."

Carla was quiet for a long moment.

"Okay," she said. "I'll start this week."



David was in his office at 3 PM, which was unusual — he was generally in the conference room or the equipment room or somewhere that wasn't specifically his office, because his office had the specific quality of a space that was his and which he therefore used as little as possible. He was there now because he was on a call that required the door closed, which the conference room didn't have.

Sultana knocked.

He looked up. He held up one finger — one minute — and said something into the phone that was the clipped affirmative of someone wrapping up, and then he put the phone down.

"Night Queen," he said.

"What about her?" Sultana said.

"The Federal disposition," he said. "Sokolov's been working on it. The classification came through — exceptional cooperation, significant mitigation, the secondary shutdown, the data chip." He paused. "The recommendation is managed release with conditions. Not the exile zones. She's a significant enough informant that the conditions are—" he chose the word —"lighter than standard."

Sultana sat down. "How light?"

"Reporting requirement," he said. "Monthly. Powered registration, which she'd need anyway. No Directorate contact, which is a condition rather than a prohibition because the Directorate is effectively neutralized." He paused. "And a supervisory relationship with a Federal partner."

"What does that mean in practice?" she said.

"It means someone responsible for checking in with her," he said. "Making sure the conditions are being met. Maintaining contact."

Sultana looked at him. "You're telling me this specifically," she said.

"Camila flagged you," he said. "From the intake interview. She said Night Queen asked about the boy, and she said — this is a direct quote from Camila's note — 'she asked in a way that suggested she knew who had been visiting the Federal facility on Thursdays.'"

Sultana was quiet for a moment.

"She was watching us," she said.

"She was watching everything," David said. "Her words, apparently." He paused. "Camila's assessment is that Night Queen made a series of deliberate choices over a long period of time that were designed to produce a specific outcome, and that the specific outcome was — not us arresting her, not the Directorate being neutralized. Something more precise." He paused. "She thinks Night Queen was trying to make sure the right people were in position to handle what was coming. The Directorate operation, the Prime Wave risk, Danny." He paused. "Us."

Sultana looked at the window.

"She left the chip for you specifically," David said. "Not for Federal. For you. She assessed you as the right person to find it and know what to do with it."

"She didn't know me," Sultana said.

"She knew enough," David said. "From watching." He paused. "The supervisory relationship. Camila thinks you're the right person for it, if you're willing."

Sultana looked at the window. At the city outside, which was doing its afternoon things — the specific business of a city that had been through something and was processing the having by continuing to be a city.

"What would it involve?" she said.

"Monthly check-in," he said. "Making sure the conditions are being met. Flagging if something changes." He paused. "And probably — conversations. The kind that aren't in the reporting structure."

She thought about a woman in a coffee shop, who had said *not a deal, just a conversation*, and who had known that the right person for the conversation was the person who understood what it meant to have needed someone to sit on the floor and not had anyone.

"She chose the outcome she could most influence," Sultana said. "From inside a situation she couldn't fully control."

"Yes," David said.

"She stayed because staying was how you had friction," Sultana said. "And when she couldn't have friction anymore, she made the friction into something else."

David looked at her.

"She understands something," Sultana said. "About operating inside systems that aren't built for you. About how you work with what you have." She paused. "I'm not saying what she did was right."

"I know," David said.

"I'm saying I understand the logic," she said. "And I think I can work with someone who operates from that logic."

David nodded. He wrote something. "I'll tell Sokolov to put your name on the supervisory recommendation."

"Okay," she said.

She stood.

"Sultana," he said.

She looked at him.

"The things you've been doing," he said. "The Thursdays. The floor-sitting. Night Queen. The calibration work with Carla for Danny." He paused. "I've been watching you do these things and I want to say — explicitly, for the record — that they are the work." He looked at her. "Not around the work. Not in addition to the work. They are the work."

She held his gaze.

"I know," she said.

"I know you know," he said. "I wanted to say it."

She nodded. She went to the door.

"The eighty-four days," she said.

"Yes?"

"We should use them," she said. "Not just for the Authority argument. For the other things too. The exile zone situation. Danny. Night Queen. The things that are going to matter after the review." She paused. "Eighty-four days is a lot of time to build something if you use it."

"Yes," he said. "It is."

"So let's use it," she said.

She went through the door.

David looked at his notes.

He wrote something at the bottom of the page, in the margin where the things went that mattered and didn't fit anywhere else.

Use the eighty-four days.

He underlined it.

He went to find the rest of the team.

CHAPTER 21

FEDERAL / SOKOLOV

THE REPORT SOKOLOV had been avoiding for fifty years was eleven pages long.

He'd written it over the course of forty-eight hours, not because the writing was difficult — he was a precise writer, had always been, the kind of person for whom the gap between knowing something and being able to articulate it was narrow — but because the writing required him to be in a particular relationship with the material, which was the relationship of someone who was done carrying it privately. Writing it for the record was the act of making the private public, and making the private public was the act of acknowledging that the private period was over.

The private period was over.

He submitted it at 6:47 AM on a Thursday, through the Federal Powered Enforcement's classified submission channel, which would route it to his immediate superior and the Office of the Director General and, through the Director General's office, to whichever

oversight body was responsible for classified incidents of non-standard powered engagement. He'd identified the correct body during the three hours of administrative research he'd done the previous Tuesday, which was the kind of administrative research that required knowing what you were looking for and knowing what you were looking for required having done it before, both of which were true of him.

He pressed submit.

He sat with the submitted report for a moment in the way you sit with something you've just done that cannot be undone, which is a specific kind of sitting.

Then he called his assistant.

"I'll be in late," he said.

"How late?" she said.

"Uncertain," he said. "I have something to do first."

The something was breakfast.

This was not, on its face, significant — he ate breakfast most days, usually at his desk, usually something he'd assembled from whatever the building's small kitchen had available that morning and that he consumed while reviewing the overnight reports. What was different about this breakfast was that he'd decided to have it at a restaurant, which was a thing he did approximately four times a year and which always required a specific configuration of circumstances: enough time, a reason to be elsewhere than the office, and the particular quality of morning that said *the ordinary is available to you today*.

The ordinary was available to him today.

The restaurant was three blocks from the Federal building, on a street that had enough foot traffic to feel inhabited and not enough to feel crowded, which was his preferred configuration for streets. He'd been going there for nine years, often enough that they knew his

order, which was coffee and whatever the kitchen felt strongly about that morning, a delegation of decision-making he'd arrived at because he trusted the kitchen's opinions about the kitchen's food more than he trusted his own opinions about what he was hungry for.

He sat at the table by the window. The coffee came without being asked for. The kitchen, apparently, felt strongly about eggs and something with mushrooms and bread that was the right kind of dense.

He ate.

Outside, the street was doing its morning things. A woman walking two dogs who had incompatible opinions about the pace. A man on a bicycle who had decided that traffic patterns were a suggestion. Three people at the bus stop with the specific resignation of people who have made peace with the bus's relationship with its own schedule.

He watched the street and ate eggs and thought about nothing in particular, which was either possible or not possible depending on the morning and which this morning was possible, which was its own kind of information.

He thought about Jerome.

Quantum — Jerome Petit, who had been Jerome for four months now in Sokolov's head, ever since the night of the anchor build when he'd used the name and the name had seemed to fit better than the codename, because the codename was what he was and the name was who he was and the situation had called for the who — had submitted his own report that morning, he knew, because Jerome had told him he was going to and because Jerome never said he was going to do something without doing it, which was the specific reliability of someone who had found a way to turn the scattered intensity of his ability into something structured.

Jerome's report was about the anchor. The technical documentation, the construction record, the Prime Wave interference analysis, the specific calculations that had produced the device. It was the

most complete technical record of a human-built device designed to interact with Authority-level Prime Wave entities that existed, because it was the only one.

The Federal research division was going to find it very interesting.

Sokolov had told Jerome to be careful about who found it interesting and why. Jerome had said he understood. Jerome did understand — he was not, despite the fragmented exterior, someone who didn't understand implications. He was someone who understood implications very clearly and processed them in a different order from most people, which was not the same as not understanding them.

He thought about Michael.

The fifty years of inference had arrived at Michael, which was both the expected outcome and not quite what he'd expected, because fifty years of inference about an entity produces a model of that entity and the model and the entity were close and not the same, the way maps are close to the territory and not the territory. Michael was taller in the model. He was also — this was harder to articulate — more certain of himself in the model, which was the inference's error, because the model had been built on what Michael could do and not on who he was, and who he was was someone who had been doing a single thing for longer than this planet had had life and had recently discovered that the thing was not, after all, the only thing.

That discovery, in Sokolov's experience, produced a specific quality of uncertainty in people. The discovery that you are more than the function you've been performing. It was uncomfortable. It was also, generally, the beginning of something better than the function.

He thought about the report he'd just submitted. About fifty years of something that had been private becoming public. About the specific quality of the morning after an ending, which was not quite the same as the beginning of what came next.

He finished the eggs.

He looked at the street.

He thought about the eighty-four days and what they required and what, specifically, he was going to do with his portion of them.

He was in his office by 9:15, which was late for him and which his assistant noted with a look rather than a comment, which was the correct choice. He sat at his desk. He opened the overnight reports, which were the ordinary business of the Federal Powered Enforcement program continuing to be the Federal Powered Enforcement program regardless of what had happened in sub-level three and on the harbor waterfront in the predawn rain.

The overnight reports were routine. Two powered incidents in the midwest zone, both minor. A monitoring flag from the voluntary zone that turned out to be a false positive from new equipment that needed calibration. A request from the European program for coordination on a Cabal-adjacent operation that Hargrove was apparently running, which Sokolov filed under *things I need to know about and will examine when I have the appropriate bandwidth*.

He was on the third report when Jerome appeared in the doorway.

Jerome appeared in doorways differently from most people. Most people arrived at doorways as a transitional state — they were somewhere, and then they were in the doorway, and then they were somewhere else. Jerome arrived at doorways as a destination, which was the physical expression of a mind that identified positions rather than trajectories. He was in the doorway and he was looking at Sokolov with the specific quality of someone who has something to report and is determining the order in which to report it.

"Come in," Sokolov said.

Jerome came in. He did not sit — he rarely sat in offices, which Sokolov had accommodated by having a whiteboard in his office and a clear space near the window where Jerome could stand and look at

things that weren't the whiteboard when he was thinking. Jerome went to the window space.

"The anchor's technical documentation," Sokolov said.

"Submitted," Jerome said. "Routed to the research division and a copy to the classified oversight channel." He paused. "With the caveat I discussed."

"The caveat," Sokolov said.

"That the device's purpose and operation must be understood in the context of the Authority's founding tenets and not in isolation," Jerome said. "That it is a conversation tool, not a weapon, and that treating it as a weapon would—" he paused, and his fingers moved in the pattern they moved in when he was choosing the precise word—"misrepresent its function in ways that would produce bad outcomes."

"How did the research division receive that caveat?" Sokolov said.

"With great interest in the device and polite acknowledgment of the caveat," Jerome said, which was the answer Sokolov had expected and had been prepared to address.

"I'll follow up directly with the division head," Sokolov said. "This morning."

"I thought you would," Jerome said. He looked at the window. "The Prime Wave data from Blaine's documentation work," he said. "The secondary interface recordings."

"Yes."

"I've been analyzing the structure of the self-correction mechanism," Jerome said. "From the documentation. Not the Authority's notation — the translation. The human-language version." He paused. "It's extraordinary."

"Michael said as much," Sokolov said.

"Michael sees it from inside," Jerome said. "I've been looking at it from outside, from the data, which is—" he stopped. His eyes moved in the way they moved when something was assembling itself faster than he could speak it. "It's not a designed system," he said. "It evolved. But the structure of it is — the information theory of it is—" he stopped again. "It's

as if the Prime Wave and the people connected to it developed a shared language," he said. "Not metaphorically. Structurally. The interaction pattern has the properties of a language — redundancy, correction, feedback, adaptation." He looked at Sokolov. "They're talking to each other. The Wave and the people. Have been for generations. Nobody knew."

Sokolov looked at him.

"The fifth tenet," Jerome said. "The novelty requirement. This isn't just novel Prime Wave behavior. It's — the Wave has never talked to anyone before. In any iteration. According to Michael's records, which go back seventy-two thousand iterations." He paused. "This is the first time."

"You've run this past Michael?" Sokolov said.

"Not yet," Jerome said. "I wanted to run it past you first. Because —" he paused — "because the implication, if I'm right, is that the fifth tenet underestimates the significance of what's happened here. The claim we filed is valid. But the reason it's valid is even more significant than the documentation captured."

Sokolov was quiet for a moment.

"Explain it to me," he said. "Precisely. From the beginning."

Jerome went to the whiteboard.

The explanation took forty minutes, which was fast for something of this complexity, and which was possible because Sokolov was the kind of person who could follow a forty-minute whiteboard explanation of Prime Wave information theory with the focused attention of someone who had been building toward understanding this for fifty years and was now receiving the last several pieces.

At the end of it he sat for a moment.

"The review body," he said.

"Yes," Jerome said.

"When they review the fifth-tenet claim," Sokolov said, "they'll be

reviewing the documented evidence. Which is thorough. But if what you're describing is accurate—"

"It is accurate," Jerome said, in the specific flat certainty of someone who has checked their work.

"Then the documented evidence is a partial picture," Sokolov said.

"A correct partial picture," Jerome said. "The claim is valid. The documentation supports the claim. But the documentation doesn't capture—" he gestured at the whiteboard, at the equations and diagrams that were covering most of its surface—"the full significance of what it's describing." He paused. "The review body will validate the claim. And they won't fully understand what they're validating."

"And the Council's majority," Sokolov said. "When they contest it."

"They'll be contesting a claim they don't fully understand," Jerome said. "Which could go either way. If they understood it, they might contest it harder. Or—" he paused—"they might not contest it at all."

Sokolov looked at the whiteboard.

"We need to update the documentation," he said.

"Yes," Jerome said.

"With Michael's input," Sokolov said.

"Yes," Jerome said.

"Today," Sokolov said.

Jerome looked at him. "I'll need access to the Ghost's secondary interface again. The additional analysis requires the primary data, not just the translation."

"I'll arrange it," Sokolov said. He picked up his phone.

"Lucas," Jerome said.

Sokolov looked at him. Jerome used his name rarely enough that it functioned as the same signal Sokolov's use of Jerome did — a marker of something being said that was in a different register from the rest of the conversation.

"The language thing," Jerome said. "What I described. The Wave and the people talking to each other." He paused. "I've been thinking about why it matters beyond the technical significance."

"And?" Sokolov said.

"Because it means they're not separate things that happen to interact," Jerome said. "The Wave and the people. They're not independent systems that have developed a stable relationship. They're—" he stopped. His fingers moved. "They're one system that developed in two parts. The people are part of the Wave and the Wave is part of the people and neither of them is fully itself without the other anymore." He paused. "The Authority can't separate them. Not without destroying both."

Sokolov was very still.

"That's the argument," he said.

"That's the argument," Jerome confirmed. "Not just novel Wave behavior. Not just an interesting anomaly worth preserving for study. The thing the Authority would be destroying, if they destroyed this iteration, is not what they think it is. They'd be destroying—" he paused —"themselves. A part of themselves. The Wave is theirs. The part of the Wave that's now inseparable from the people here is—"

"Is also theirs," Sokolov said.

"Yes," Jerome said. "And they don't know it."

The whiteboard had equations on it that Sokolov could follow in outline and not in detail, which was the appropriate level of following for what Jerome built, and which was sufficient for what Sokolov needed from it, which was the shape of the thing rather than its machinery.

The shape of the thing was: if you destroyed this world, you destroyed a part of the Prime Wave that had become this world, which meant you destroyed a part of the thing you were trying to protect.

The shape of the thing was: there was no version of destroying this world that didn't cost the Authority something.

"Michael needs to hear this," Sokolov said.

"Yes," Jerome said.

Sokolov picked up his phone. He made two calls — the first to his assistant, who would arrange the meeting; the second to the division head of the Federal research unit, which was the call he'd said he was going to make, which he made precisely and briefly and with the specific clarity of someone who is establishing a position that is not negotiable and is doing so before there is any possibility of it being treated as negotiable.

He put the phone down.

He looked at the whiteboard.

"Jerome," he said.

"Yes."

"The thing you've just described," he said. "The language. The shared system. The inseparability." He paused. "Is it still developing?"

Jerome looked at the whiteboard. His fingers moved. "Yes," he said. "Based on the rate of change in the data, the integration is—" he paused "—ongoing. The system is still becoming more integrated. The conversation is getting richer." He paused. "It's not complete. It may never be complete. It may be the kind of thing that just—" he paused "—continues."

Sokolov looked at the window.

"Then the eighty-four days," he said. "Are part of it."

"Yes," Jerome said. "Every day is part of it. Every interaction. Every—" he gestured at the space around them, at the building and the city outside the window and the harbor in the distance "—everything."

Sokolov sat with this.

He thought about a young man sitting on the floor of a procedure room with his hand on a shutdown interface. He thought about a girl in a red coat. He thought about a pen at the edge of a desk. He thought about a team running a breach plan for the third iteration at midnight, and a woman who'd left a data chip in a corner for the right

person to find, and a boy who'd figured out stop before anyone taught him how.

He thought about the Wave, listening. Learning the language it was being spoken to in.

The ordinary, Sokolov thought, is the mechanism.

"Write it up," he said to Jerome. "Everything. In language I can work with and in the technical notation for the documentation. All of it."

"How long do I have?" Jerome said.

Sokolov thought about eighty-four days and what they required. "Two days," he said. "We'll review it with Michael on the third."

Jerome nodded. He was already moving toward the door, which was the physical expression of a mind that had shifted from reporting to doing, which was the shift that happened when Jerome had what he needed to work with.

He stopped at the door.

"Lucas," he said.

"Yes."

"The report you filed this morning," he said. "The classified incident from fifty years ago."

Sokolov looked at him.

"I know you filed it," Jerome said. "I saw the routing notification. I wasn't looking for it." He paused. "I've been looking at Prime Wave data for weeks. I've been thinking about what it means to carry something for a long time. To build something toward a moment without knowing when the moment is." He paused. "You've been building toward this for fifty years."

"Yes," Sokolov said.

"And now it's built," Jerome said.

"Yes," Sokolov said.

"How does that feel?" Jerome said. It was a genuine question, asked with the genuine curiosity of someone who wanted to know, not as a social gesture.

Sokolov thought about breakfast. About eggs and mushrooms

and the street outside the restaurant window doing its morning things. About the specific quality of a morning where the ordinary was available.

"Like something that's been heavy for a long time is lighter," he said. "Not gone. Just lighter."

Jerome nodded, as if this confirmed something he'd hypothesized.

"Okay," he said. "Two days."

He went through the door.

Sokolov turned back to his desk. To the overnight reports that needed his attention and the follow-up calls that needed making and the Federal research division head who needed to understand something clearly and the review body's preliminary documentation request that had arrived that morning and that he needed to respond to before end of week.

The ordinary business of the Federal Powered Enforcement program continuing to be the Federal Powered Enforcement program.

He picked up his pen.

He thought about a language that two things had developed together, over generations, without knowing they were developing it. He thought about what it meant to be inseparable from something. He thought about the Wave listening, and learning, and continuing.

He wrote the first response of the morning.

He wrote it precisely and clearly, the way he wrote everything, and he found, doing it, that the clarity felt different than it usually did — not more difficult, not less, just different. The difference of someone writing in the knowledge that what they were writing was part of something larger than the document, larger than the program, larger than the eighty-four days.

Part of the language.

He wrote until his coffee was cold, which it usually was, and which he didn't mind, which he usually didn't, and the morning moved through the window in the specific way of mornings that

know what they are, and the city continued, and the Wave continued with it.

The ordinary is the mechanism.

He'd put that in the documentation. He'd find the right place for it.

He had two days.

CHAPTER 22

THE DIRECTORATE

PROFESSOR POWER HAD BEEN in room twelve for eleven days.

He'd counted them. This was not unusual — he counted things the way most people breathed, automatically and without deliberate attention, as a baseline function of the brain he'd been given and had spent his life both grateful for and at the mercy of. Eleven days, twenty-six hours of interviews, four Federal analysts rotating through in pairs, approximately four hundred and twelve distinct questions that he'd answered with the specific completeness of someone who had decided, in a chair in a control room at 1:47 AM, that completeness was the only honest mode left to him.

He'd answered everything.

This was, he understood, unusual. The Federal analysts had said so in the indirect way of Federal analysts, which was by not saying anything about it at all and maintaining a consistent professional neutrality that was itself a kind of commentary. He was aware that full cooperation was not the standard response of a person in his situ-

ation. He was also aware that standard responses were generally calibrated for people who still had a clear picture of what they were trying to protect, and he'd been in that chair for eleven days working through whether he had one.

He'd arrived, by the end of the eleventh day, at an answer.

The answer was: the data.

Not the project — the project was gone, in the specific way that things that end badly are gone, which was gone and also irreversible and also something he was going to have to be specific about understanding rather than general about. But the data the project had produced was real, and was his, and was — extraordinary. The calibration records. The field interaction analysis. The specific geometry of Danny Osei's Prime Wave connection and what the procedure had done to it and how the doing had developed and what the self-correcting mechanism in the iteration's Wave had done in response to the enhancement.

He'd had eleven days to think about the data.

The more he thought about it the more he understood that what he'd been building toward — the project, the enhancement protocol, the specific megalomaniacal vision of himself as the architect of a new kind of powered capability — had been a frame that was too small for what he'd actually found. He'd been trying to build a door and had accidentally documented an ocean.

He wasn't sure what to do with this yet.

What he was doing, in the absence of certainty, was what he always did: analysis. Eleven days of analysis, in room twelve, in the gaps between Federal interviews, with the specific resources of a brain that ran at superhuman speed and had four hundred and twelve questions' worth of interview data to cross-reference with fifty years of theoretical work and three weeks of operational data and the specific, uncomfortable observations of a man who had been wrong about important things and was trying to understand precisely how wrong and about which ones specifically.

Specific wrongness was more useful than general wrongness.

General wrongness produced guilt, which was a non-functional state. Specific wrongness produced a corrected model.

He was correcting the model.

Agent Purcell brought the documentation request at 9 AM on the eleventh day.

She was not, as far as he could tell, an agent — she was an administrative specialist, which was a different thing, which he'd determined from three days of observation. She had the specific quality of someone who had been processing Federal paperwork for many years and had developed, through that processing, a complete and unsentimental understanding of what paperwork was for, which was to create a record that was accurate and legible and that would be comprehensible to a hypothetical future reader who had no context for the present circumstances.

He respected this.

"Documentation request," she said. "From the review body handling the fifth-tenet claim. They require a formal statement from all individuals with direct knowledge of the Prime Wave interaction events covered in the claim documentation."

He looked at the request form. It was two pages. "What format?" he said.

"First-person narrative," she said. "Technical detail where applicable. The review body's notation at the bottom specifies that they want direct experience accounts, not summary."

"They want to know what it felt like," he said.

Purcell looked at him with the expression she used for statements that were accurate but not standard. "The notation says direct experience accounts," she said. "What that encompasses is at the declarant's discretion."

He looked at the form.

"What's the deadline?" he said.

"Five days," she said.

"I'll have it in two," he said.

She took the form back, made a notation on her own tablet, and left with the economy of someone who had accomplished the task and saw no reason to extend it.

He sat with the blank documentation request for a moment.

Then he started writing.



He wrote for three hours without stopping, which was normal for him — his brain produced prose at a rate that exceeded most people's because his brain processed information at that rate and prose was just the information's output channel. What was not normal was the register he was writing in, which was not the register of his technical publications, which were precise and formal and structured around the conventions of scientific communication that he'd been trained in and had practiced for thirty years.

This was different.

He was writing, he realized after the first twenty minutes, the way he would have written if he'd been writing for someone specific. Not the review body, though they were the formal audience. Someone who needed to understand not just what had happened but what it had been like to be the person it happened to, from the inside.

He wasn't sure who that someone was.

He wrote anyway.

He wrote about the quantum monitor and what it had felt like the first time it had detected a Prime Wave signature — not the technical achievement of it, which was what his technical publications would have described, but the specific quality of the moment when the monitor's readout had shown him something real, something that corresponded to a thing he'd theorized for fifteen years, and the feeling of that correspondence. The gap closing between what you think and what is.

He wrote about the entangler's design. About the specific elegance of the field emitter configuration, which he'd arrived at through eighteen months of failed iterations, and about what it meant to find the configuration that worked — not satisfaction exactly, more like recognition, the feeling of a thing revealing itself as what it had always been.

He wrote about the isotope acquisition. About Night Queen and the way she ran operations, which was the way she did everything, with the specific patience of someone who had internalized the difference between urgency and importance. He'd worked with her for two years and he wrote about her with the specific honesty of someone who could see, in retrospect, what he'd seen in real time and not acknowledged, which was that she'd been managing him from the beginning and that the managing had been, in most respects, right.

He wrote about the calibration phase. About the monitoring equipment showing forty-seven percent baseline deepening and the specific feeling of that — the word he kept coming back to was *vindication*, which was the right word and also insufficient, because vindication implied that the rightness of the thing was primarily about him being right, and he was beginning to understand that the rightness of the thing was considerably larger than that.

He stopped.

He'd been writing for two hours and forty minutes, and he'd arrived at the procedure. The procedure room. The moment at 1:47 AM when the feedback loop had been increasing the power input and the margin had been five minutes and the monitor had shown one hundred and eighty-seven percent.

He'd been writing with the specific momentum of a man who had decided to be honest and had found, in the honesty, a kind of movement — the momentum of saying things that had been unsaid and finding that the saying was possible, that the words existed for the things. He'd been moving through the document with that

momentum and now he was at the moment that the momentum required him to describe, and he stopped.

He sat in room twelve and looked at the blank space after the sentence he'd just written, which was a sentence about the expansion coefficient and the feedback rate and the five-minute margin.

He thought about the boy's face.

He'd been not-thinking about it for eleven days, in the specific way of a thing that you file so thoroughly that the filing itself becomes a presence. The filing was done. He'd run it, in the past eleven days, through every analytical framework he had, which were many, and the analysis had produced the same result each time, which was: *you looked at his face and you understood something you had been not-understanding deliberately.*

The specific content of the understanding was this: he had been certain for so long that he was right about the important things that he'd stopped checking whether the important things were the right things to be right about.

He'd been right about the physics. The quantum entanglement. The field parameters. The self-correction mechanism that he'd observed in the data without recognizing what it was. He'd been right about all of it, technically, in the specific sense of accurate description of real phenomena.

He'd been wrong about what the rightness was for.

He wrote this.

Not in those words — in the specific, precise words of a man who was correcting a model rather than performing contrition, because performing contrition required an audience and he wasn't writing for an audience. He wrote about the feedback loop and the margin and the monitor and the face, and he wrote about what the face had told him that the monitor hadn't been showing him, which was that there was a human being in the field. Not a subject. Not a data point. Not a test case for the enhancement protocol.

A human being in a field that was running past the parameters

he'd designed it for, in a room he'd controlled, because he'd decided the data was important enough to proceed.

He wrote: *I was correct about the physics. I was not correct about the priority of the physics.*

He wrote: *The procedure was designed to demonstrate that voluntary enhancement of Prime Wave connection was possible and beneficial. The demonstration required a subject. I chose a subject based on operational suitability without sufficient weight given to the subject's interests. This was a failure of reasoning, not just a failure of ethics, because the project's stated purpose — beneficial enhancement — cannot be evaluated as beneficial without reference to the experience of the person being enhanced.*

He wrote: *I corrected the error. Not in time to prevent the harm, but before the harm became irreversible. This correction was available to me earlier. I did not make it earlier.*

He sat with this for a moment.

He wrote: *I don't know if the correction makes the earlier failure less significant. I've been running that analysis for eleven days and I keep arriving at the same result, which is that the answer is not a calculation. It's a different kind of question and requires a different kind of method.*

He stared at that sentence.

He wrote: *I don't know what the method is yet. This is not a statement I've been able to make, about anything, in approximately thirty years.*

He put the pen down.

He picked it up.

He wrote: *The data from the procedure is real and significant. The self-correction mechanism I observed in the Prime Wave interaction during the calibration phase is — I don't have adequate language for what it is, which is also not a statement I've been able to make. It is a conversation. The Wave is having a conversation with the people connected to it and they are having a conversation with it and neither party knows they are conversing. The data shows this clearly. I was*

looking at the data and not seeing what it was because I was looking for what I expected to find.

He wrote: *I would like to contribute to the understanding of what the data actually shows.*

He looked at this.

He put the pen down for the second time and did not pick it up again.

Outside room twelve, the Federal processing facility was doing its Federal processing facility things — the movement of people and documents and the ordinary bureaucratic metabolism of a system that processes cases, and each case is a person, and each person has arrived at the system through some specific sequence of decisions, and the system's job is to determine what happens next.

He thought about what happened next.

He thought about it with the brain he had, which ran at the speed it ran at and couldn't be turned down, and which had produced, in eleven days of full operation, a model of the situation that was considerably more complex than the model he'd started with, which had been — he was precise about this — the model of a man who was very good at one kind of thinking and had been using that kind to answer questions that required a different kind.

He needed a different kind.

He didn't have it yet.

He was, as he'd written, working on finding the method.

Night Queen's disposition came through at 2 PM.

He knew because Agent Purcell brought a document that was not addressed to him and was not his to read, and which she was bringing to the room adjacent to his, which was where — he'd established this through eleven days of ambient environmental monitoring, which was what his brain did whether he asked it to or not —

Vivienne Moreau had been processed. He'd known she was there. He hadn't been sure what she was there as.

The door to the adjacent room opened.

He heard, through the wall of room twelve, which was the kind of wall that was not designed for acoustic privacy, the specific quality of a conversation that was brief and official and that he could reconstruct from the fragments that came through, which were: *conditions*, *supervisory*, and *Tuesday*.

Tuesday was the day the disposition took effect.

He sat in room twelve and thought about the fragment *supervisory*, which was a condition of a managed release, which meant she wasn't going to the exile zones, which meant the Federal program had classified her as something other than the category he'd have expected given her role in the Directorate's operations.

He thought about the data chip. About the secondary shutdown. About the things he'd analyzed in retrospect — the pattern of her decisions over two years that had been visible in retrospect in a way it hadn't been in real time, because in real time he'd been looking at the data and not the person producing the data.

He thought about the conversation he'd had with her in the Green Room, the night before the university acquisition, when she'd stood at the whiteboard with the marker and added +5 (*contingency*) to his timeline.

She'd been building toward this. He'd known she was building toward something. He hadn't known what.

The door to the adjacent room closed.

He heard footsteps in the corridor.

He didn't call out. There was nothing to call out. There was nothing he could have said from room twelve that would have been the right thing, and he'd been in the specific discipline of not-saying things that weren't the right things for eleven days, which was a discipline he was finding more useful than he'd expected.

The footsteps moved down the corridor and away.

He sat in room twelve.

He thought about what she'd built and what he'd built and the specific ways those things had intersected. He thought about what she'd said in the Green Room, which was not the full truth and not a lie, which was the specific register she operated in, the register of someone who understood that truth was not a binary and that the important question was not *is this true* but *what does this true thing do*.

He thought about what her choice had done.

The boy was safe. The Prime Wave was stable. The Federal program was pursuing the Cabal through the intelligence she'd provided. The Directorate was neutralized.

He was in room twelve having a conversation with himself about the difference between correctness and rightness.

All of these things were the result of her choices. Choices she'd made from inside a situation she couldn't fully control, with the tools available to her, in the direction of the outcome she'd been working toward.

She'd been doing the same thing he'd been doing, he thought — operating at the edge of her capability, working toward something she believed in, using every tool available.

The difference was what she'd done with the tools.

He thought about this for a long time.

Then he picked up the pen and finished the documentation request.

Agent Purcell came back for the documentation at 4:17 PM, which was two hours and seventeen minutes ahead of Sokolov's assistant's call to notify her that the Director wanted Delesante's cooperation flagged as a priority in the processing timeline. She arrived slightly before the call, which was a coincidence, or was the specific kind of non-coincidence that happens when people who are paying close

attention to a situation arrive at the same conclusion from different directions.

She took the document.

She read the first two pages with the focused attention she gave to documentation that was going to require careful routing.

She looked at him.

"This is thorough," she said.

"Yes," he said.

"It's also—" she paused, choosing. "It's also not what I usually receive from people in your position."

"What do you usually receive?" he said.

"Minimum required information," she said. "Structured to present the most favorable interpretation of events." She looked at the document. "This doesn't do that."

"No," he said.

"It does the opposite," she said. "In some places."

"Yes," he said.

She looked at him for a moment. Not the administrative look she used for most of their interactions — a different look, the look of someone making an assessment that was outside the standard assessment framework.

"The review body is going to find this very useful," she said.

"I know," he said.

"So will we," she said. "The program. For the ongoing investigation."

"I know that too," he said. "That's why I wrote it."

She made a notation on her tablet. "Your processing timeline," she said. "I can't tell you what the outcome will be. That's not my role."

"I know," he said.

"But I can tell you," she said, "that the disposition discussions that are ongoing — the documentation you've provided over eleven days, and what you've given me today — those discussions are going differently than they would have otherwise." She paused. "That's all I can tell you."

"That's sufficient," he said.

She put the document in her folder and closed it and stood.

"The calibration data," he said. "The technical records from the procedure room."

"In Federal containment," she said.

"I'd like to request formal access," he said. "Not to the device — to the data. For the purposes of contributing to the documentation of the self-correction mechanism in the Prime Wave interaction records." He paused. "The review body's documentation request specified that they want direct knowledge accounts. My direct knowledge of what happened in the Prime Wave during the procedure phase is—" he stopped. "I can contribute things that the other accounts can't contribute. Because I was the one looking at the monitor."

Purcell looked at him.

"I'll flag the request," she said. "In the appropriate channel."

"Thank you," he said.

She left.

He sat in room twelve in the late afternoon light that came through the room's single window, which faced west, which meant the light was the specific amber of afternoon moving toward evening. He'd been watching this light at this hour for eleven days. He'd catalogued it without meaning to, the way his brain catalogued everything, and the catalogue showed him that the light on the eleventh day was the same as the light on the first day, which was the same as the light on any November afternoon in Harbor City, which was a thing that continued whether or not anyone was in room twelve watching it.

He thought about continuity.

He thought about the thing he'd written — *I would like to contribute to the understanding of what the data actually shows* — and about what contributing meant and how it was different from building and whether the difference was a useful one.

He thought about a man who had spent fifty years building an

inference toward a moment. He thought about whether there was a version of that for himself, not a moment he was building toward — he didn't have enough certainty about what came next to build toward a specific moment — but a direction. A method he was looking for.

The method wasn't a calculation.

He knew that now.

He thought about what else it might be.

The light shifted. The amber moved toward the specific gold of late afternoon, and then toward the gray of early evening, and the room's single window held all of it in sequence, the way windows hold the light that moves through them without keeping it.

He thought about the boy's face and what he'd seen in it when he'd looked at it directly, which was a human being in a field that was too strong for him, who was still doing the thing the human being was doing, which was — not enduring exactly. Something more active than enduring. The thing you do when you decide that the situation is what it is and you are going to be present in it anyway and find out what you're made of.

He'd been in fields that were too strong for him too.

He was still in one.

He picked up the documentation request form — the blank copy, the one that had been intended as a backup and that Purcell had left by mistake, or not by mistake, he wasn't sure which — and he looked at the line that said *direct experience accounts*.

He wrote: *I am still in the process of determining what I directly experienced.*

He looked at this.

He wrote: *I will provide an addendum when the determination is complete.*

He put the pen down.

He looked at the window.

Outside, Harbor City was becoming its evening self, which was different from its afternoon self, which was different from its

morning self. The city had multiple selves and moved between them without breaking continuity, which was the thing cities did — they were the same thing at different times, which was either a paradox or just what it meant to be something that continued.

He was still figuring out what it meant to be something that continued.

He had time.

Whether he had eighty-four days or less or more was not something he knew. What he had was today, and tomorrow, and the specific discipline of a method he hadn't found yet but was looking for, which was something.

It was something.

CHAPTER 23

MICHAEL / HARBOR GUARD

THE PRIME WAVE stabilization sequence began on a Saturday.

Not because Saturday was operationally significant — the Prime Wave didn't have a relationship with the days of the week, which were a human organizational structure that I'd come to find charming in the way I found many human organizational structures charming, which was the way you find charming something that solves a problem you hadn't known needed solving. The Prime Wave was continuous. It didn't stop on Saturdays. But we were working on the humans' schedule, which was David's schedule, which was calibrated for the team being in the best possible condition for a sustained, technically demanding operation.

Saturday was the day when that calibration produced a green light.

The session was in the parking structure — the top deck, which had become the team's de facto training space over the past weeks, which had the specific quality of a claimed space, the way spaces that are used for important things accumulate the quality of those things.

The deck smelled like cold concrete and the harbor and the faint trace of ozone that Carla's work left in the air.

We were not trying to restabilize the Prime Wave.

The Wave was stable. The self-correction mechanism was running exactly as documented. The instability index had been at 4.1 since the operation — down from the pre-operation peak of 4.4, settling into a lower equilibrium, which Jerome's analysis suggested was the Wave correcting for the removal of the Directorate's isotopes and equipment from the iteration's Prime Wave environment. Things that had been pulling on the Wave pulling less. The Wave, as it did, adapting.

What we were doing was something different.

We were building toward the review.

The review body had sent its preliminary inquiry three days after the claim was filed — a formal request for additional documentation and, specifically, for a demonstration. The founding tenets allowed a review body to request direct observation of the claimed novel phenomenon, which was the review body's version of *show us what you've found*. Sokolov had flagged this as expected, had pulled the relevant tenet provision from the documentation, and had said: *this is the part where we do what we've been doing and let them watch*.

The demonstration was scheduled for the forty-third day of the review period, which was forty-one days from today.

Forty-one days to prepare for something I had never prepared for.

The founding tenets described the demonstration requirements in specific terms: the reviewing authority would enter the Prime Wave alongside the claiming Custodian, and the Custodian would guide the observation of the novel phenomenon using the documented population's active participation. Active participation was the specific requirement. Not passive demonstration of an existing state, but the population actively engaging with the Prime Wave in

the way that had produced the self-correction mechanism in the first place.

Which meant the team needed to be able to do it deliberately.

They'd been doing it reflexively for years. The self-correction mechanism had developed through unconscious practice — the accumulated weight of careful, repeated engagement with the Prime Wave by people who hadn't known they were doing it. The challenge was producing it consciously, on a specific day, for a specific audience, at a level of clarity that would be unambiguous to a reviewing authority that had never encountered it before.

This was what the parking structure sessions were for.



I stood at the edge of the deck and watched them work.

Incorporated, which was where I'd been for most of the past eleven days — not all of it, not the middle-of-night hours when I went back to incorporeal for the specific kind of rest that incorporating didn't fully provide, but the working hours, which had become the hours I was present in the way that people were present rather than the way Authority entities were present. The distinction was becoming increasingly natural, which I noted without fully knowing what to do with.

David had organized the session with the same deliberate economy he brought to all the sessions, which was: clear objective, specific exercises, defined roles, no wasted time. The objective today was not power output — it was engagement quality. He'd explained this to the team in two sentences at the start of the session: *We're not trying to be stronger. We're trying to be clearer. Michael's going to tell us if we're getting there.*

"Are you getting there?" Marcus said, on the third iteration of the exercise.

"Closer," I said.

"That's a diplomat's answer," Sultana said.

"The engagement is more deliberate than it was on Monday," I said. "The Wave is responding more cleanly. You're still working against it in places instead of with it."

"Which places?" Carla said.

I thought about how to describe this in terms that were both accurate and actionable. The review body would enter the Wave and find what it found. I couldn't script what they found. But I could help the team understand what *deliberate engagement* felt like from the inside and from the outside, and I could calibrate that understanding until the unconscious thing they'd been doing became something they could access intentionally.

"The transitions," I said. "When you shift from one aspect of the ability to another — the gap between the aspects. That's where the engagement gets noisy. The Wave is reading the noise as a request."

"What's it requesting?" Camila said.

"More power," I said. "The Wave's default response to an unclear engagement signal is to open the channel wider. It's the self-correction at the individual level — if the connection seems unstable, it reinforces it." I paused. "We need the opposite. We need clean transitions. The Wave should be able to read exactly what you're doing at every moment."

"So it's like handwriting," Marcus said.

Everyone looked at him.

"Legibility," he said, with the expression of someone who is aware that an analogy has arrived from a surprising direction and has decided to go with it anyway. "If your handwriting is sloppy, people misread it. If it's clear, they read it correctly. We need our—" he gestured vaguely at himself and the air around him "—to be legible."

I looked at him.

"Yes," I said. "That's accurate."

"Good analogy," Danny said.

He was at the corner of the deck — not participating in the team's session, observing, which was where he'd been for three sessions

now. He was learning the room before entering it, which was his way, and it was the right way for someone whose ambient reading was as active as his. I'd suggested it to Sultana, who'd conveyed it to him, and he'd arrived at the first session and gone immediately to the corner without being told, because he'd already worked it out himself.

Sultana looked at him. "You want to try?" she said.

He looked at the space where the team had been working. "I don't know if I can do the legibility thing," he said. "My transitions are—" he paused. "I don't know what my transitions are yet."

"That's fine," I said. "The session isn't about knowing what they are. It's about finding out."

He looked at me. At the specific quality of the look he used when his ambient reading was active — not invasive, just present, the way certain people are present in a space, more fully than average. "You think I'll be useful for the demonstration," he said. It was not quite a question.

"Yes," I said.

"Why?"

I thought about how to say this. "Because your connection is clearer than most," I said. "The enhancement deepened it, but the clarity was there before. The Wave reads you more precisely than it reads most people, which means when you engage with it deliberately, the engagement signal is — louder. Easier for an observer to detect."

"Because I talk to it differently," he said.

"Because you listen differently," I said. "Which produces a different kind of talking."

He absorbed this. He walked from the corner to the space where the team had been working. He stood in it. He looked at the harbor in the distance and then at the concrete of the deck and then at nothing in particular, which was the specific interior focus of someone who was turning their attention inward.

He reached for the Wave.

I felt it immediately — the clean, specific quality of his engagement, the particular legibility Marcus had named. There were no noisy transitions because he wasn't transitioning between aspects yet, just making contact, the fundamental thing, the first step. But the contact was — precise. Like a sentence with every word in the right place.

The rest of the team felt it too. I could see it in their faces, the slight shift that happened when the Wave's local texture changed in response to a particularly clear engagement nearby.

"That," I said. "That quality. That's what we're working toward."

Danny opened his eyes. He looked at me. "I wasn't doing anything," he said.

"Yes," I said. "That's the point."



We worked for three hours.

In the third hour, something happened that I hadn't expected, which was a category of experience that this iteration kept producing and that I was beginning to understand was one of its defining characteristics — the thing that happened that you hadn't modeled, the emergence of something from the combination of elements that exceeded the predictive capability of any individual element.

What happened was: the team synchronized.

Not deliberately. Not through a coordinated exercise. Sultana was working on a precision lift — the twelve-disc sequence she'd been running since the first training session, which she'd been getting progressively cleaner on — and Carla was doing the structural resonance work, listening to the building, and Marcus was working on the turn problem, the persistent three-foot overshoot that had come down to two feet and was approaching the threshold where it would become one foot, and Camila was doing the maintenance-level engagement she always did, keeping the translocation warm. Danny

was at his corner position, doing the thing he'd just demonstrated, which was making contact.

And then, for approximately forty seconds, they were all doing it in the same way.

Not the same exercise. The same quality of engagement. The legibility Marcus had named, present in all of them simultaneously, producing a Prime Wave interaction that was — the Ghost ran its analysis and produced numbers and the numbers were good but they weren't the thing. The thing was what I felt in the Wave: the moment when multiple distinct engagements produced a coherent signal, like instruments finding the same key.

It lasted forty seconds.

Then Marcus's turn correction ran long and he swore under his breath and the moment dispersed.

But I'd felt it.

And the Ghost had recorded it.

:That interaction pattern,; the Ghost said, in the quiet channel that was our internal communication. :I have not recorded that exact pattern before in this iteration. The synchronization was—:

:Brief,; I said.

:Brief,; it confirmed. :But the structure was complete. If it had sustained—:

:It will,; I said. :With practice.:

:The demonstration is in forty-one days,; the Ghost said.

:I know,; I said.

:Is forty-one days sufficient to reliably reproduce that interaction pattern?:

I thought about the team. About what I'd watched them do over the past weeks. About the specific quality of their development, which was not the Authority's quality of development, which was designed and systematic, but something more like the Wave's own development — emergent, responsive, shaped by what the situation asked for rather than what a protocol specified.

:Yes,; I said. :It's sufficient.:

:You're certain?:

I thought about a woman who'd figured out how to take apart a building with sound in her spare time. About a man who'd gotten the turn correction to two feet from three in three weeks. About a boy who'd figured out stop before anyone taught him how.

:Yes,; I said.



I told the team about the forty seconds that night.

We were in the conference room — the evening configuration, which was different from the daytime configuration in the specific way that all rooms are different in the evening, when the day's work has accumulated in the space and the lighting is different and the people in it have the quality of people who have been doing things all day and are now in the part of the day when the doing has a different texture.

I described what had happened in the Wave during those forty seconds. I described it in the human terms I'd been developing — not the Authority's notation, not the Ghost's data formats, but the language of the conversation Jerome had identified, the shared vocabulary that the Wave and the people had been building together for generations.

They listened. This was a quality I'd come to specifically appreciate about this team — the listening. Not passive reception, but active listening, the kind that was building something while it received.

"It felt different," Sultana said, when I finished. "Those forty seconds. I noticed something shifted but I didn't know what."

"Like the air cleared," Camila said.

"Like the channel opened wider," Marcus said. "But in a—" he paused —in a quieter way. Not bigger, cleaner."

"Legible," Danny said.

"Legible," Marcus confirmed.

"The demonstration," David said. He was looking at his notes, which he always was. "The review body will need to observe this in the Wave. How close do we need to be? Can they observe from altitude or do they need to be in it?"

"In it," I said. "The synchronized engagement is a Wave phenomenon. It's visible from inside the Wave in a way it isn't from outside. The self-correction mechanism is legible — that's the right word — from inside the Wave."

"So they come in with you," he said.

"Yes," I said. "One or more members of the review body, with me, entering the Wave while the team produces the synchronized engagement on the surface." I paused. "It's not a performance. They'll be able to tell if it's a performance. What they need to see is the real thing."

"So we don't try to do it differently than we normally do it," Sultana said.

"You do it exactly as you normally do it," I said. "Which means you need to be able to do it normally. Deliberately, but normally."

"And if we can't reproduce the forty seconds," Carla said.

"We reproduce something close enough," I said. "The forty seconds was the full expression of it. Close enough is still novel. Close enough is still the first time anything in the Wave's history has produced this."

She looked at me. "You're saying the bar is lower than we think."

"I'm saying the bar is where it is," I said. "And you've already cleared it. You cleared it forty seconds ago without trying. The next forty-one days are about being able to clear it when you are trying."

The room absorbed this.

"The Assessor," Sokolov said. He was at the end of the table, with his folder, which he always had. "When the review body arrives. You said the demonstration requires the team's active participation." He paused. "Does the review body know that?"

"The founding tenets specify active population participation," I said. "They'll know the requirement. What they won't know—" I paused —is what that participation looks like in this specific iteration. They'll be prepared for something. They won't be prepared for this."

"Good," Marcus said. "Let them be surprised. It worked on the Assessor."

"The Assessor was not surprised," I said.

"She filed a report that said *also novel*," Marcus said. "That's surprised."

"That's—" I considered it. "That's a form of it. Yes."

"Good enough," Marcus said.

Danny stayed after the meeting, which was a new thing — he'd been staying after things lately, the way people stay after things when they're processing something and the processing requires the space that's left when other people have gone. Sultana had told me about this pattern and had said it was a sign of adjustment, the specific behavior of someone who was learning to be in places rather than just passing through them.

He was at the window. The same window Sultana used when she was thinking — the one that faced the harbor. I was fairly certain this was not a coincidence.

"The ambient reading," he said, without turning around. "During the forty seconds."

"What about it?" I said.

"It was different," he said. "When everyone was doing it at the same time. The feeling of the room." He paused. "It wasn't — I couldn't read individuals anymore. It was like they all became one thing for a moment."

"Yes," I said. "The synchronized engagement produces a unified Prime Wave signal. Individually distinct, collectively coherent. The

Wave reads it as a single voice."

"Is that what the Wave feels like from inside?" he said. "All the time? Like one voice?"

I thought about this. About what the Wave felt like from inside, which was the question that had forty different answers depending on where you were in it and what you were looking for and what state the iteration was in. "The Wave is—" I started. "There are layers. At the deepest level it's coherent — one thing, unified. At the surface level, where the connections are, it's individual. Many voices. The self-correction mechanism is what happens when the individual voices organize into something that the deep level can hear."

He turned around. "Like a choir," he said.

"Like a choir," I said. "Yes."

"And the review body," he said. "When they go in with you. They're going to hear the choir."

"If the demonstration goes as planned," I said. "Yes."

"And if it doesn't?"

"Then we hear forty-one days of silence and find out what comes after that," I said, which was accurate and was also, I recognized, the kind of honesty that was available to me now in a way it hadn't been at survey altitude, which was the honesty of someone who was in a thing rather than above it.

He looked at me. The ambient reading was active — I could feel it, the specific quality of his attention on the space around a person rather than the person directly. "You're worried about it," he said.

"Yes," I said.

"But you said we'd cleared the bar."

"Clearing it once and clearing it when you need to are different things," I said.

He absorbed this. "Does the Wave know?" he said. "What's happening. The review. What it's going to decide."

I looked at him.

"You said the Wave is one thing at the deep level," he said. "And the self-correction mechanism is the individual voices organizing into

something the deep level can hear. So the Wave—" he paused "—does the Wave know what we're doing? What we're trying to do?"

I had not thought about this question. I had been thinking about the demonstration from my perspective and from the team's perspective and from the review body's perspective, but I had not thought about it from the Wave's perspective, which was a thing I had a perspective-taking capability for and had not applied.

I applied it.

The Wave, at the deep level, was the thing that had been in this iteration long enough to develop a habit. Long enough to learn to breathe with the people connected to it. Long enough that the conversation Jerome had documented had become structural — not a thing the Wave was doing, but a thing the Wave was.

The Wave knew, in the way that a thing that has developed a habit knows, that the habit was being used. That the conversation was happening. That the people on the surface were reaching toward it with the specific quality of reach that was different from the ordinary reach of powered engagement.

"Yes," I said. "In some sense. Not the way a person knows a thing. But the Wave—" I paused "—the Wave is aware of the quality of its own state. It knows when the engagement is different. It responds to the difference." I looked at him. "During those forty seconds, it responded."

"How?" he said.

"The instability index dropped," I said. "By 0.1. For those forty seconds. And then came back when the moment dispersed."

He was quiet for a moment.

"So it liked it," he said.

I considered the word. "It recognized it," I said. "As what it had been developing toward. The thing it had been learning to receive."

"And during the demonstration," he said. "When we do it for the review body. The Wave will—"

"The Wave will respond," I said. "The same way. The review body will see the response in real time. Not just the documentation,

not just my account. The actual thing, happening, as it has been happening, and the Wave participating in its own demonstration."

He looked at the harbor.

"That's a good argument," he said.

"Yes," I said. "Jerome thought so too."

"Jerome is the one who figured out the language thing," he said.

"The conversation."

"Yes," I said.

"Can I meet him?" he said.

I looked at him. "Why?"

"Because someone who can look at Prime Wave data and see a conversation is someone I want to talk to," he said. "About the ambient reading. About what I'm hearing when I hear it." He paused. "If what I'm doing is part of the conversation — if my reading is part of how I participate in it — then understanding the conversation better seems useful."

He was, I thought, going to be remarkable.

"I'll arrange it," I said.

He nodded. He looked at the harbor one more time.

"Michael," he said.

"Yes."

"The forty-one days," he said. "Is there something I can do? To help prepare for the demonstration. Beyond the parking structure work."

I thought about it. About the specific quality of his engagement with the Wave and what it produced and what the review body would see when they entered the Wave and found it.

"Keep doing what you're doing," I said. "In the morning. On the waterfront. The contact you make."

"That's all?" he said.

"The contact you make in the morning is the same contact that produced the Wave's response during the forty seconds," I said. "It's the cleanest signal in the iteration right now. Clear, deliberate, unambiguous." I paused. "If you keep making it every morning for forty-

one days, the Wave will have forty-one days of practice hearing it. And on the forty-third day, when the review body enters the Wave, the first thing they'll encounter is what the Wave sounds like when it's been listened to carefully for a long time."

He was quiet for a moment.

"A tuned instrument," he said.

"Yes," I said. "Exactly that."

He looked at the harbor. At the gray that was the harbor's current gray, which was a specific gray, the gray of a winter evening that was about to become a winter night.

"Okay," he said. "Every morning."

"Every morning," I said.

He went to the door. He paused in it — the inventory-taking pause, the brief read of what he was leaving and what was ahead.

"The thing you said," he said. "About the Wave responding to the forty seconds. The instability index dropping."

"Yes," I said.

"It was 0.1," he said. "For forty seconds."

"Yes," I said.

"How much is 0.1?" he said. "In terms of what it means."

I thought about the scale. About 4.1 and what it meant in the context of the iterations I'd surveyed and the ranges they'd occupied and what 4.0 versus 4.1 versus 4.2 represented in terms of the Wave's actual condition.

"In the context of this iteration's history," I said, "0.1 is not large." I paused. "In the context of the Authority's assessment criteria, 0.1 sustained over a demonstration period would be — significant. It would indicate a stable, controllable, positive interaction between the population and the Wave." I paused. "If the synchronized engagement produced 0.1 of improvement and held it for the duration of the demonstration—"

"The argument gets stronger," he said.

"Considerably," I said.

He nodded.

"Every morning," he said again.

"Every morning," I confirmed.

He went through the door.

I turned to the window. To the harbor, which was the harbor, which was the thing I'd been going to when I was thinking for long enough now that going to it was the way I knew I was thinking.

The Wave was doing what it was doing. The self-correction mechanism was running. The instability index was 4.1 and had been 4.1 for twelve days.

In forty-one days, the review body would enter the Wave and find what was there.

What was there was the conversation.

What was there was the habit the Wave had developed and the people who had developed it with the Wave and the forty years of accumulated practice that had produced something neither of them had designed.

What was there was what we were going to show them.

I thought about being ready.

I thought about the difference between prepared and ready, which was the difference between having done everything you could do and being the thing that doing it had made you.

The team was getting closer to ready.

I was closer than I'd been.

The Wave was, in its own way, preparing — the specific preparation of something that has been developing a capability for a long time and is approaching the moment when the capability will be required and is doing what it has always done, which was continue the conversation.

Forty-one days.

The Ghost said: :The evening Prime Wave reading is nominal. Instability index: 4.1. Trend: stable. Self-correction mechanism: active.:

:Good,: I said.

:Is there a task?:

I looked at the harbor.
:Stand by,: I said. :I'll have one in the morning.:
The Ghost stood by.
Outside, the harbor became its nighttime self.
The Wave breathed.

EPILOGUE

MICHAEL

THE DEMONSTRATION HAPPENED ON A TUESDAY.

This felt appropriate in the way that important things sometimes arrive on unremarkable days — the Tuesday-ness of it was part of what made it real. Not a day the city had prepared for, not a day marked in any calendar that anyone outside a small circle of people knew was significant. The harbor was gray. The parking structure's top deck was cold. The city was doing its Tuesday things with the complete indifference of something that had been doing its things through every significant event in its history and had learned that continuity was not the same as indifference but was sometimes indistinguishable from it.

The review body sent two members.

I'd expected one — the founding tenets' minimum requirement for a demonstration witness was one member, and the Authority tended toward efficiency, and sending two was either a sign that the claim was being taken seriously or a sign that two people wanted to see it, which were different motivations that could coexist without

contradiction. One was an entity I recognized from the Authority's administrative records — a mid-Council member who had been on the review body for three prior fifth-tenet claims, all of which had been rejected, which made them the most experienced evaluator available. The other was younger, less defined in form, with the specific quality of an entity that was still developing its relationship with the Prime Wave — a junior member, there to observe the evaluation rather than to lead it.

I incorporated on the waterfront when they arrived and walked to the parking structure with them, which they found — I could feel the quality of their attention on the walking — noteworthy. Mid-Council did not say anything about it. The junior member looked at my feet, at the pavement, at my feet again.

"You've been here a long time," the junior member said. It was not an accusation.

"Yes," I said.

"It shows," they said, in a tone I couldn't fully categorize — not quite wonder, not quite unease. Something in between, the feeling of encountering something that doesn't fit the categories you arrived with.

"Good," I said.



The team was on the deck when we arrived.

They had the pre-operation quality — not tense, not performative, the specific stillness of people who have prepared and are ready to do the thing and are waiting for the signal. David was at the edge of the deck, not at the center, which was the position he took when he wanted to be able to see the whole space. Carla was doing the small, precise Prime Wave work she always did before operations, the calibration of her reading of the space. Marcus was eating something, which was Marcus. Camila was doing the maintenance engagement, keeping the translocation warm, which she did at all

times and which she'd told me, in one of the sessions, she'd done so long now that stopping it would feel like holding her breath. Sultana was standing with Danny, not talking, both of them looking at the harbor.

Danny saw the review body.

His ambient reading was active — I could feel the quality of his attention shift, the way the air around a person shifts when they're reading the room. He didn't say anything. He looked at me. I gave him the look that meant: *yes. This is it.*

He looked back at the harbor.

The mid-Council member stood at the edge of the deck and looked at the team with the evaluative attention of someone who had witnessed demonstrations before and was calibrating expectations. "The active participation element," they said to me. "These are the individuals."

"This is the team," I said. "And one additional participant."

The mid-Council member looked at Danny.

"His connection is enhanced," they said. Not a question — an observation from the Prime Wave reading.

"Recently," I said. "The enhancement was not the team's doing and is not the source of the mechanism's validity. He was connected to the Wave before the enhancement. The self-correction mechanism predates him."

"But his current connection—"

"Is the clearest signal in the iteration," I said. "Which is useful for the demonstration. You'll be able to see what you're looking for without difficulty."

The junior member was looking at the deck, at the team, at the harbor beyond them. "This is where you've been coming," they said. "During the survey period."

"Yes," I said.

"This specific location."

"This specific deck," I said. "Yes."

They looked at the bench at the edge of the deck, which was not

the waterfront bench but had the same relationship to it — a place I'd returned to enough times to have a relationship with. "We read your preliminary reports," the junior member said. "The ones you filed instead of the final."

"Yes," I said.

"The omissions were—" they paused. "They were an interesting shape."

"I know," I said.

"This is what you were protecting," they said. "What the omissions were shaped around."

"Yes," I said.

The junior member looked at the team for a long moment. At David not-quite-smiling in the way he didn't-quite-smile when he was containing something. At Marcus, who had finished whatever he'd been eating and was standing with the specific readiness of someone who has a body that knows what to do and is waiting to do it. At Carla with her precise, quiet calibration. At Camila, keeping something warm that was always needed. At Sultana, who was looking at me now with the look that was the inventory-taking look, the direct assessment, the one that saw what was there rather than what was expected.

"All right," the mid-Council member said. "We're ready."

I entered the Prime Wave.

The two review body members followed. I'd done this once before — with the Assessor, on the waterfront, in the rain before dawn — and that had been a different kind of entering, the entering of two Authority entities making a formal assessment together. This was different. This was more.

The Prime Wave in this iteration at 10 AM on a Tuesday in late November was the Wave I'd been watching for months — the breathing Wave, the self-correcting Wave, the Wave that had learned

to have a conversation. It had the quality it always had, which was the quality of something that was doing something continuous and important and which didn't require observation to continue doing it.

The Wave breathed.

The mid-Council member made a sound that wasn't quite sound, the Prime Wave equivalent of a sharp intake of breath. The junior member was very still.

I didn't say anything. I let them encounter it.

The self-correction mechanism was visible from inside the Wave the way the ocean's current is visible when you're in it — not as something you observe from outside, but as something you feel moving, something that has direction and intention, something that knows where it's going. The Wave's habit. The accumulated practice of forty years of careful engagement, encoded in the structure of the Wave itself, running whether or not anyone was paying attention to it.

The mid-Council member extended their awareness into the mechanism, which was the Authority equivalent of examining something closely, and I felt them trace the structure of it — the feedback loops, the self-reinforcing corrections, the way the individual connections fed into the aggregate and the aggregate fed back into the individual connections, the conversation.

:This is,; the mid-Council member said.

:Yes,; I said.

:This is not—: they started.

:No,; I said. :It isn't. Not in any iteration in the survey record.:

The junior member was looking at the individual connections — I could feel where their attention was. Not the mechanism in aggregate, the specific threads. The individual voices. "These are the people," they said.

"Yes," I said.

"Each of them is—" they paused. "Each connection has a specific quality. Distinct from the others."

"Yes," I said.

"But when they engage simultaneously—" they started.

"Wait," I said.

On the surface of the Wave — on the deck, in the cold November air — the team had begun.

I felt it before the review body did.

I felt it the way I'd felt it during the forty seconds, except this time it built rather than arriving. Sultana first, the precise, deliberate reach that had been getting cleaner every session, the twelve-disc sequence that she could now run without dropping, the specific legibility of someone who had been working at something long enough that the work had become the ability rather than the practice of it.

Then Carla, the structural resonance work, the listening-to-the-building that was also listening to the Wave, the two things being the same thing from different angles. The Prime Wave reading of a space through sound.

Marcus, in the air — he'd gone up at some point, which I'd felt as his connection deepening in the specific way it deepened when he was airborne. The turn that had been three feet and was now one foot and was, today, on the right side of half a foot. The legibility that had been developing for weeks, the ability that had gotten cleaner because he'd been working on clean rather than strong.

Camila, with the translocation always warm, the maintenance engagement that was more demanding than any single deployment, the sustained attention that had been so long a habit that it was invisible as habit and visible only as capacity.

Danny.

Danny made contact the way he always made contact in the morning — the clean, specific, legible touch that I'd asked him to practice and that he'd practiced and that after forty-one mornings was the most practiced thing he did, the one thing he could do

without thought because he'd done it enough that it had become the habit that powered habits were supposed to become.

And then David.

I'd been watching David's Prime Wave connection for months. The suppressed one, the managed one, the connection of a man who had decided thirty years ago not to be what the Wave could make him and had maintained that decision with the specific discipline of someone who understood what discipline was for. He'd been in every session. He'd been observing and coordinating and running the sessions with the same economy he ran everything. He'd not been participating in the same way the others had participated because his participation was a different kind of participation — the kind that held the space for everyone else's.

But today he reached.

Not the reach of ability deployment, not the kind that produced a visible power expression. The reach of someone making contact. The fundamental thing, the first step, the one Danny had been practicing.

The Prime Wave read him.

And for a moment — longer than forty seconds this time, closer to two minutes, which was an eternity in terms of synchronized Prime Wave engagement — all of them were doing the same thing at the same time, in different ways, in the same quality.

The choir.

The mid-Council member was very still.

The junior member's form had changed slightly — the less-defined edges had become more defined, as if encountering something that required them to be more fully present. They were looking at the synchronized engagement with the specific quality of something encountering a thing it doesn't have a category for.

I waited.

The engagement held.

The instability index dropped.

:4.0,: the Ghost said, in the private channel. :Sustained.:

4.0. At 4.0 the Wave was at the boundary of the threshold that had classified this iteration as Class 7, the classification that had initiated the cleaning process that had sent me here in the first place. At 4.0 the Wave was as stable as it had been in forty years. At 4.0, in the presence of the synchronized engagement, the Wave was doing what it had been slowly learning to do — finding the lower equilibrium.

:The review body's readings?:

:Both members are fully interfaced with the Prime Wave,; the Ghost said. :The mid-Council member's attention is on the mechanism's structural properties. The junior member's attention is on the individual connections.:

:And what they're feeling?:

:I cannot read their internal states,; the Ghost said. :But their Prime Wave interaction pattern is—: a pause :—altered. They came in with one quality of interaction and they are now interacting differently.:

:The Wave,; I said. :Is the Wave responding to them?:

:Yes,; the Ghost said. And then, with the specific quality of a result that surprised even the Ghost's non-surprising delivery: :The Wave is — the self-correction mechanism has extended to include them. The review body's Prime Wave connections are being incorporated into the synchronized engagement.:

I felt this as the Ghost said it and it was — I want to be precise — it was the thing I hadn't predicted. Not the demonstration, not the mechanism, not the synchronized engagement of the team. This. The Wave, encountering two Authority entities, incorporating them into the conversation rather than distinguishing them from it.

The Wave didn't know they were Authority.

The Wave knew they were connected. That was sufficient.

The choir had two new voices.

And those voices were producing, in the Prime Wave, the same signal the team was producing — the specific quality of careful, delib-

erate, present engagement. The mid-Council member wasn't trying to do it. The junior member wasn't trying to do it. The Wave was producing it from them because they were in it and the Wave was, in this iteration, the Wave that had learned to produce this from what it found.

The Wave was teaching the review body the conversation.

I could not have planned this.

:Michael,: the Ghost said.

:Yes.:

:The instability index is at 3.9.:

3.9.

Below the Class 7 threshold.

For the first time.



We withdrew from the Wave.

The team was still on the deck. The engagement had been running for four minutes and thirty-seven seconds, which was significantly longer than any previous synchronized session, which told me something about what forty-one mornings of practice produced.

Marcus landed. He had the expression of a man who has done something well and knows he's done it well and is trying to be understated about knowing it, which was Marcus's version of modesty.

Carla was running her hands along the air in the small gesture she made when she was checking the residual quality of the Wave around her, the acoustic-Prime Wave equivalent of rubbing a surface to confirm it's smooth. She made a sound of quiet satisfaction.

Sultana was looking at me. The inventory-taking look. Reading what was in my face.

Danny was looking at the review body.

The mid-Council member was standing with the specific quality of someone who has just experienced something they were not prepared to experience and who is organizing their relationship with

that experience. The junior member was looking at their own hands, which were the incorporating form's hands, which were — I felt it in the Prime Wave before I saw it — still producing the slight residual quality of the synchronized engagement. The Wave had been talking to them and they were still, faintly, in the conversation.

"The mechanism," the mid-Council member said. Their voice had a different quality than it had had when we'd entered the Wave. "The self-correction mechanism."

"Yes," I said.

"It incorporated us," they said.

"Yes," I said.

"Without our—" they paused. "We didn't do anything."

"No," I said. "You didn't. The Wave did it."

"The Wave incorporated an Authority entity into a biological Prime Wave interaction pattern," the mid-Council member said, carefully, as if testing the sentence's structural integrity. "Without intervention. Automatically."

"Yes," I said.

"That has never—" they started.

"Never," I said. "In any iteration in the survey record."

The mid-Council member was quiet.

The junior member looked up from their hands. "I could feel them," they said. "The people. Through the Wave. I could feel the quality of their engagement." They paused. "I've never—" they stopped. "I've entered the Prime Wave in hundreds of iterations. I've never felt the people."

"Because in other iterations the people are using the Wave," I said. "In this iteration, they're in conversation with it. The difference is — you were in the conversation too. For four minutes."

The junior member looked at Danny.

Danny looked back at them. His ambient reading was active. He'd been reading the room — reading the Wave, reading the review body, reading the specific quality of what had happened and what it had left in the air.

"You felt it," Danny said. "When the Wave incorporated you."

The junior member was quiet for a moment. "Yes," they said. "What did it feel like to you? When it happened the first time?"

Danny thought about it. The serious way, the way he thought about things he wanted to get right. "Like the volume turned up," he said. "On something I'd always been hearing but hadn't known I was hearing."

The junior member was very still.

"Yes," they said, quietly. "Exactly that."

The formal review took three weeks.

This was faster than any prior fifth-tenet claim had been reviewed, which the record showed had taken an average of eleven weeks. I filed nothing, said nothing, waited — which was the appropriate posture and which was also, I recognized, one of the harder things I'd done since incorporating, which was a statement that surprised me when I arrived at it and which I sat with until it stopped surprising me.

The outcome arrived on a Wednesday, which was the second Wednesday of note in this period, and which was also appropriate in the same way the first had been — not a special day, just a day, the ordinary container in which significant things sometimes arrived.

Sokolov read the formal notification first, because he was Sokolov and he was always in his office when things arrived and he processed them before calling anyone.

He called me.

"The claim is upheld," he said.

I was at the harbor. I was almost always at the harbor when I wasn't anywhere else.

"The suspension is converted to a permanent status designation," he said. "The specific designation—" I heard the sound of him reading

"—is 'Protected Anomalous Iteration, Active Experiment, Observation Mandated.' Which means—"

"It means they can't touch it," I said. "Without the review body's explicit authorization, which requires a full Council vote, which the founding tenets specify requires—"

"A supermajority," he said. "I know. I've been reading the tenets for fifty years." A pause. "There's an addendum."

"What kind?" I said.

"The mid-Council member," he said, "filed a supplementary note alongside the formal outcome. It's—" a pause—"unusual. Review body members don't typically file supplementary notes."

"What does it say?" I said.

He read it to me.

The supplementary note said, in the Authority's formal language, which Sokolov read in his translation: *The reviewing authority entered the Wave with the intent to observe. We encountered something that observed us in return. The mechanism described in the claim documentation is accurate and complete. The mechanism as experienced is — larger than the documentation. This notation is filed to indicate that the permanent status designation was reached not only because the claim met the founding tenets' requirements, but because the experience of the demonstration clarified for the reviewing authority what the tenets were designed to protect. It is possible that the original founders anticipated exactly this iteration. It is possible that this iteration was always the point.*

Sokolov was quiet after he finished reading.

I was quiet too, standing at the harbor, holding the notification in the Prime Wave the way you hold something you've been waiting to hear.

"The point," Sokolov said.

"Yes," I said.

"Were we?" he said. "Always the point?"

I thought about seventy-two thousand iterations. About the long sequence of worlds I'd moved through, each one a universe with its

own physics and its own life and its own relationship to the Prime Wave, each one ending the same way until this one. I thought about the founding experiment — the Architects' design, the Builders' implementation, the specific vision of a generation of worlds that could find their own way — and I thought about what *always the point* could mean in the context of something that had been running for longer than this planet had existed.

"I don't know," I said. "But it's a better question than most."

He made a sound that was either agreement or amusement or both.

"Lucas," I said.

"Yes."

"Thank you," I said.

A pause. "Don't thank me," he said. "I've been building toward this for fifty years. The gratitude is — I'm not sure which direction it should go."

"Toward the experiment," I said. "Like everything else."

Another pause, longer. "Yes," he said. "I suppose so."

We stayed on the line for a moment without speaking, which was something I'd learned — that silence on a call was not the same as silence in a room, and that both had their uses, and that you chose them for different reasons.

"I'll notify the team," he said.

"I'll come," I said. "Front door."

"I know," he said. "It's the only way you come anymore."



The exile zones existed.

This was the thing that was true after all of it — after the demonstration and the review and the permanent designation and the supplementary note about the founders and the point. The exile zones existed, and they were controversial, and they were imperfect,

and the people in them were people, and that last fact was the one that the next period was going to have to be about.

The heroes' zone was nearly empty — most of the team lived in ordinary housing now, close enough to the Harbor Guard's facility to be reachable when needed and far enough from the Federal oversight structure to have something like a life outside it. David and Carla had an apartment with windows that faced the harbor, which was not accidental. Marcus had a place three blocks from a good diner, which was also not accidental.

The voluntary zone was building. The specific business of a community that was figuring out what it wanted to be — slowly, badly, repeatedly, which was how communities figured out what they wanted to be. The first elections had been held. The results were contested. The results of the contested results were also contested. Sokolov had described this, in a meeting, as "encouraging," and had meant it, because the contesting was evidence that people believed the results mattered, and believing results mattered was the beginning of a thing worth protecting.

The convicted zone was the harder question. It was always going to be the harder question. There were people in it who had done things that required the question to be hard, and there were people in it who had done things that required the question to be asked differently, and there was no clean line between those two groups, and the people in charge of finding the line were doing it badly in the way of people trying to find something that doesn't want to be found easily.

Rosa Vega had submitted a proposal. The proposal was three pages. The proposal said, in various forms, the same thing: *you cannot manage people into dignity*. Sokolov had read the proposal twice. He'd sent it to the Director General with a cover note that said, precisely: *This is correct. Act accordingly*. The Director General was acting accordingly, slowly, in the way that institutions acted when they were being asked to be different from what they'd been.

Slowly was still moving.

Night Queen was in Harbor City. Not in the exile zones — in the city, in an apartment that faced away from the harbor, which she preferred, and which she'd explained to Sultana in their first monthly check-in as *I've spent enough time watching things that watch me back*. She had a reporting requirement and a supervisory relationship and the specific quality of someone who has chosen a new position and is still finding out what the position is.

She and Sultana had coffee on the first Thursday of every month. It was, as agreed, not a deal. Just a conversation.

Delesante was in a Federal supervised facility, working on a documentation request that had become something more extensive than a documentation request, which was the formal record of what the procedure's data showed. The Federal research division had access to him under supervised conditions. The specific terms were being negotiated with the specific slowness of terms that nobody in the negotiation fully understood yet but that everyone involved believed were worth negotiating.

He'd sent one message, through the appropriate channel, to Danny. It had said: *The calibration map shows a secondary connection geometry that wasn't visible before the enhancement. I've documented it. You should know it's there*. Danny had read it. He'd sat with it for a while. He'd said, to Sultana: *He's still looking at the data*. He'd meant it as neither praise nor criticism. It was what it was.

Troll had been processed and released, with conditions that were lighter than his involvement technically warranted and which Quantum had argued were appropriate given the secondary shut-down, which argument had been accepted, which Quantum had described as *justice operating within its specifications for once*. He was somewhere — Sultana didn't know where, Camila suspected the Pacific Northwest, nobody had confirmed it. He was presumably building something. Whatever he built would look like something else. It would work.

Rebound was still out there. The Federal investigation had a thread on it. The thread was being pulled.

Jerome Petit was in his lab at 4 AM most mornings, which was the configuration that produced his best work, running analysis that was going to eventually require a new paper in a journal that didn't fully exist yet, which he was fine with because he'd always been better at the work than at the publication of the work. Danny had met him twice. The second meeting had lasted four hours and had produced, at the end of it, something that both of them described as a beginning.

Sokolov called his assistant at 4 PM on the Wednesday of the outcome and told her he would be leaving early. She said: "Early or on time?" He considered this. "Early," he said. She said: "Good." He said: "That's the second time you've said that to me." She said: "Both times I meant it."

He left the building.

He walked the three blocks to the restaurant. He sat at the table by the window. The coffee came without being asked for. The kitchen had opinions about fish that evening and he ate the fish and looked at the street and thought about fifty years and what fifty years produced when you used them toward something.

He thought about the Wave.

He thought about a young man, twenty-three years old, sitting in a room after something had happened that he didn't have language for, picking up a pen and writing a report in the language he had, which was inadequate, which was all he had.

He thought about an old man, sixty-three years old, sitting in a restaurant eating fish, having submitted the report.

He thought about the gap between those two moments and what had been in it.

He thought: *the gap was the preparation*. Not wasted time. Not delayed arrival. The gap was the thing that made the arrival what it was — the fifty years of building and inferring and carrying, which

had produced the argument, which had produced the claim, which had produced the demonstration, which had produced the Wave incorporating two Authority entities into the conversation, which had produced a supplementary note that said *this was always the point*.

The fish was good.

The street outside was the street outside.

He sat for another hour.



I was in the apartment when the Ghost filed the final notation.

The apartment near the harbor that I'd claimed in an abandoned building, which was not abandoned anymore — it had been properly leased, through channels that Camila had arranged without being asked, because Camila arranged things that needed arranging before being asked, which was a quality I'd come to find both useful and moving. It had a coffee maker. It had a chair that faced a window. It had, now, a few other things — a plant that Sultana had brought on the grounds that plants were useful for thinking, and a book that Marcus had left after a conversation that had run long and that he'd said I could return whenever, which we both understood to mean never, and a photograph that Blaine had printed from the documentation records, which showed the parking structure deck and the team and was technically a Prime Wave analysis document and was also just a picture of people I knew.

:Final notation for instance -664 survey record,: the Ghost said.
:Designation updated to Protected Anomalous Iteration, Active Experiment, Observation Mandated. Custodian status—: a pause :—no longer applicable. What designation shall I enter?:

I looked at the harbor.

I thought about the question.

I thought about the child and the red coat and *why are you so shiny* and the answer I hadn't had. I thought about the old man and

the pigeons. I thought about the bench and the cold and the smell of the bakery and the mural that was more true than photographs. I thought about forty-one mornings on the waterfront with Danny and the Wave learning to hear him better.

I thought about the word that Sultana had said she'd find when they needed it enough.

:What's the standard designation for an Authority entity with no current assignment?: I asked the Ghost.

:Observer,: the Ghost said. :An entity present in an iteration for purposes of observation and continuity without active Custodian authority.:

I thought about Eighth, in the outline of Book Three that was still ahead of us — the junior Observer who had been assigned the voluntary zone study and had been elected to the infrastructure committee and had developed opinions about drainage. I thought about what Observer meant and whether it was the right word.

It wasn't exactly the right word.

But words come from needing them. We'd find the exact one when we needed it enough.

:Enter Observer,: I said. :With a note that the designation is provisional and under review.:

:Done,: the Ghost said. :Is there a task?:

I looked at the harbor.

The harbor was the harbor. The city was the city. The Wave was breathing in the specific way it breathed, the habit it had developed over forty years, the conversation it had been having and would keep having.

In a parking structure on the north edge of Harbor City, the team was running a session without me, which was something they were doing more of — not because I wasn't needed but because the thing I was watching them build was the thing that didn't need watching anymore. It was just happening. The way habits happen when they've been practiced long enough.

In a restaurant three blocks from the Federal building, an old man was eating fish and looking at the street.

In a Federal facility, a man with a fast brain was looking at data that was larger than the frame he'd built for it and was working on finding a new frame.

In a coffee shop that faced away from the harbor, a woman was reading something, and every first Thursday she would have a conversation with someone she'd once opposed and was now — something else. The word for that was also still being found.

On a waterfront, every morning, a boy who had figured out stop was practicing contact. Making the specific, legible, deliberate connection that the Wave had been learning to hear. The Wave was hearing it better every day. The Wave was hearing everything better every day, because that was what you got when something had a conversation for forty years and then started having it louder, on purpose, with people who were learning to understand what they were doing.

In a place that had no location, only a rank, the Authority was doing what it did — processing, evaluating, debating, arguing about the uses of power and the meaning of the experiment, the same arguments they'd been having since before this planet had life. The arguments were ongoing. That was fine. Arguments that were ongoing were arguments that hadn't been settled badly.

The Ghost was standing by.

:Not right now,: I said. :Stand by.:

The Ghost stood by.

I made coffee.

I sat in the chair.

I watched the city wake up.

In the Wave, far below the waking city, the conversation continued — the one that had been happening for forty years without anyone knowing it was happening, and that was now happening deliberately, and that was going to keep happening for as long as the people here kept doing what they'd learned to do, which was the one

thing that had always been the mechanism and was only now being understood as the mechanism:

Paying attention.

Holding things carefully.

Being here, in the specific present of a place, with the specific presence of someone who has decided to be here and means it.

The coffee maker finished. The window held the morning. The harbor moved.

I was here.

I meant it.



The exile zones exist and are imperfect and are beginning, slowly, to become something better than what they were. The Authority is watching, which it agreed to do, and has for the first time in its long history a reason to watch with interest rather than judgment.

Michael is in an apartment near the harbor. He has a coffee maker and a chair and a plant and a photograph and a provisional designation and approximately seventy-two thousand reasons to understand why this one is different.

The conversation continues.

Superior Wave begins eighteen months from here.

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ABOUT THE AUTHOR

Don Jones is a multi-award-winning author of fantasy, science-fiction, cozy mysteries, and cozy fantasies. After a career in tech, numerous positions at tech startups, and more than sixty published tech books (the ones they seemed to sell by the pound, back in the day), Don left it all behind and started writing down the stories that had been banging around in his head. The result is more than two-dozen novels—with more every year—that have received rave reviews and numerous industry awards. Today, Don writes primarily from a cabin near Duck Creek Village, UT, diligently overseen by a Golden-doodle named Corentin.

