

Continuity

By Greg Lam

Of course I remember where I was when it happened. We all do. We had just finished up a case. After wrapping up that night's criminals nice and tight for the authorities, we started to make our way back to the CoolRacer. Even though it's faster for me to make my way back to headquarters on my own steam, I usually like to ride with the others. As the newest team in the city, I feel that bonding with everyone is important.

My power, as you know, is speed. I'm not only superhumanly fast, but my perceptions are sped up as well to match. If it wasn't I'd have decapitated myself a long time ago. So I saw the thing coming in the split second before it hit. I didn't know if was dangerous in itself, but it looked powerful and fast as hell. As quick as I was, I could run a half dozen steps away from it before the energy wave engulfed me.

The next thing I knew, I was in a room with everyone else. And I mean everyone. Our whole team, the Nu Wave, Paradox, The Sentinels, Strike Forz, Black Hawk and White Lightning, Cosmic Man, Lady Blaze, The Grey Ghost, Hopper... You know, the whole shebang. Even the Powers Cosmic, who hadn't been seen on this planet for at least two years at that point. None of the other heroes knew what was going on either, by the look of things. We had just been teleported from whatever we were doing all at once to a strange location, which Professor Power determined was at least three miles underground. How he determined this was beyond me, but he's Professor Power.

It was total chaos for a while, until the big brains of the group got together and figured out that there were only three guys on the planet smart enough to pull off this stunt. One was Morbus The Superior, but The Sentinels swore he was still imprisoned in the stasis cell back at Sentinel Central. At least they hoped he was. Two was Cosmic Man, but he was there with us and told anyone who asked that he had nothing to do with it.

That left Prodigy, the boy genius of the superhero world. Since he's about the same age bracket as our group is, we once asked him if he wanted to join up, you know. He politely declined, as most of us thought he would He's so damned smart we'd just get in his way. Anyway, no sooner did Black Hawk started mentally calling out Prodigy did the boy wonder

make his entrance. And boy was it an entrance. Of all the teleporters in the superpowered world, the sound and lightshow that Prodigy's teleports makes is by far the most spectacular. I think he does it on purpose, for effect, but I've never asked him. But *Bam!* There he was in his trademark t-shirt and hi-tech sunglasses.

So what does the kid say to this assembly of the greatest powers walking the face of the earth?

"Sorry I'm late, guys. But I brought snacks. Who wants chocolate chip cookies? I made some with walnuts and some without. Have some punch, too."

"You made cookies?"

"Actually, not me, but him." He pointed across the room, where we saw another Prodigy, who looked exactly like the first one. This one was standing and politely offering cookies to everyone. I took one. It was damn good.

This did not make any of us any less confused.

"Do you mind telling us what's going on here, son?" said Cosmic Man in that authoritative voice that he does so well. "I was battling The Red Menace when you shanghaied me here."

Prodigy just waved him off.

"Just a sec, Cos. Let me just activate the slide show, and I'll explain anything."

"Slide show? You've brought us all here to show us a slide show?"

"Well, actually it's a series of five-dimensional data representations that will be beamed directly into your brains, but that's a mouthful to say. 'Slide show' should suffice. And don't worry about The Menace. Outside of this room, time has been frozen until we are done."

That's right, he froze time all over the world. Or he created a space outside of time, depending on how you look at it. I knew Prodigy was smart, but this was something else. He pressed a button on a remote control looking doohickey.

"Are you ready?"

It didn't actually matter whether we were ready or not, because as soon as he said it our brains were bombarded with information, images, sounds, motions and emotions. The only thing I could compare it to is that time that I was almost swallowed by the Data Beast during that whole InfoWars saga.

When you got used to the sensory overload, it felt like you were inside of a movie reel. Prodigy started talking.

"I'm sorry to bring you folks here under these circumstances. You will see, though, that it was the only way to reach you safely.

"The first thing you should know is that for the past 7 months, you haven't been dealing with me but a construct I devised that contains my knowledge and abilities."

As he talked, we saw an image of the construct's creation. Not just an image, though. Diagrams, construction specs, information. At that moment I felt like I could build one of those things if I wanted to. This Prodigy-Vision thing was amazing.

"What?! We've been dealing with a goddamn clone all this time? What woulda happened if we needed you?"

"This 'clone' has saved the world twice and the universe once during its tenure. It's one of my coolest projects. It's so real that it believes that its real, heart and soul, until I'm there with him. It's every bit as capable as I am, don't you worry. May I continue?"

"The reason I've been using the this construct is that I've been busy researching another problem. You see, I have come to some uncomfortable conclusions about the nature of our universe. Maybe it's bugged some of you, too. The extent of the predominance and importance of us superpowered and heroic beings is really weird if you think about it a lot. I've estimated that in the past year, more than 90% of all significant world events has involved at least one of the beings in this room."

"Prodigy, isn't that just us doing our jobs?"

"Yeah, and bully for you, but in a world with a population of 5 billion, the sheer weight of numbers makes it wildly improbable that the couple of dozen people in this room could possibly be involved in so many earth shattering adventures. And the fact that we've survived all of these adventures is just insane. There has been an average of 3.72 world-threatening and .76 universe-threatening crises per year since 1973, and we've managed to avert them all with little change to the status quo. What are the odds to that? We are all in life and death situations almost daily, and yet few of us actually ever die."

"So what are you telling us? There's something wrong with all this?"

"In a word, yup. Some time ago I came to the conclusion that this universe was not running on its own steam but was being controlled by some outside intelligence."

"You think there is a God?"

"Not God. Not the way you're thinking. I have concluded that we are all inside of a fictional universe, one made to showcase powerful, heroic beings in continual action slash crisis situations on a regular basis. We are not free beings, ladies and gentlemen. We are characters. Fictions"

"We're characters in a book?"

"Actually, with the sheer number of us and the density of events, I've theorized a related series of serialized monthly titles. Most likely comic books, given our propensity for outlandish costumes. That would correspond to the visual flair of the genre. That is why I have sequestered myself here in this secret location for all this time. I needed to escape the attentions of the creators in order to be able to explore this question without the distraction of crimefighting."

A blanket of silence came over the room. I'm fairly new at this superhero gig, but it was apparent that even in spite of the veterans' experience with heavy and weird events, this was unprecedented.

"Maybe... Maybe you've made a mistake, Prodigy. You've made a lot of assumptions-"

"Really, Lady Blaze? How else can you explain our existence? Does it make sense to you? So many powerful beings, each drawn to the career of independent, largely unpaid crimefighting? Cool Breeze, with your prodigious speed, you could make a million dollars a day delivering corporate packages instantly. Cloudburst, your weather manipulation powers could end world hunger within a couple of years. Why are you spending your time chasing two bit criminals? Not because it's logical, but because it's dramatically interesting. Why do supervillains spend inordinate amounts of time and money for relatively petty schemes? Take a look at this chart."

With a wave of his hands, up popped two curves on a grid.

"See, this shows another troubling aspect, the fact that the talents we have are such that we are inevitably led to the careers of either superheroing or supervillainy. In a normal, random distribution of power acquisition we would expect there to be only a few really powerful guys or girls or beings and many more with smaller amounts of power and talent which would not be useful in crimefighting, as illustrated in this bell graph. The second curve is what we have on our

world. Look at this abrupt cutoff at the point where powers would not be useful for a life of adventure, but for more mundane tasks. See, things like this don't make sense unless you look at this world like a fiction."

At this point I had to speak my piece.

"Hey, big brain. So if all this is true, so what? We're all still who we are, whether we were born this way or written this way? What can we actually do about this?"

"Well Cool Breeze, I thought that since we had all dedicated our lives for the betterment of the world that we deserved to know this about our world. And also I wanted to offer you an alternative. I've devised a way to escape the Continuity."

"The what?"

"The Continuity. That's the word I came up with to describe the force that orders our lives in a consistent, dramatic manner. Pretty cool, huh? For us, it's a force of nature kinda like gravity. It's the force that makes events in one month make dramatic sense in subsequent months, although there are certainly exceptions"

"Like that Universe in Chaos thing a few years back?"

"Exactly. Right now the Coninuity has been weakening as it tends to do periodically. The machine I've made will break through the weakened fiction boundary and deposit us in the world outside of the Continuity. That is, if you want to go. My deal is that I've lived my life to find out the truth about things, and I don't want to stay here when it's just a lie. But for the way out you only get a one way ticket. If you leave, you can't get back. And it seems that some of us might want to stay here, even with the choice of leaving. Isn't that right, Cosmic Man?"

We all turned to Cosmic Man. When we saw the expression on his face, any lingering doubt that we had this wasn't true melted away. Cos was about as smart as Prodigy, and he's been around forever. Hiding his emotions is not one of his powers, though. We could tell that he already knew what Prodigy outlined.

"I figured that a guy as smart as you would have discovered the truth by now. And with your level of power, you could have devised a way to escape Continuity if you wanted to. But you haven't."

"No, Prodigy. I'm needed here. We're all needed here. No matter what lies beyond the veil, this world needs its heroes. Maybe that's just the way I'm written, but it's what I am."

"Yeah, and it's very noble of you. And this world does need it's heroes, which is why anyone who wants to leave will be replaced by a construct, like the one that replaced me. "

Suddenly, we became aware of an army of superheroes standing across from us, like a giant mirror. There was one for each of us.

"These constructs contain your memories and personalities and wield your powers. They're so convincing they won't even know that they're not real. The world won't know any difference."

Black Hawk was the one to speak up and say what we all were thinking.

"Hold up, now. Hold up. Say that all this is right. Say that big brain here has it all figured and we can get our butts over to the other side. What's to say that it's any better than what it's like here? What are the chances that their world can't be more messed up as ours?"

"By my calculations, 37%."

"What?"

"There's a 37% chance that the world beyond is measurably worse than ours, using a variety of measurement criteria and computer simulations."

"Oh."

Everyone cast their eyes about the room, unable to think of what was left to say.

"So when do we decide?"

"You already have."

"What?"

"While I've been talking, my machines have been scanning your thoughtwaves, measuring your reactions to these revelations. By now, it has calculated out which of you would really want to leave in your heart, and which of you would want to stay. The transference loop has now been activated. Some of us will be pushed through the Fiction Boundary and be replaced in this world by our replica constructs. The others will be transported back. None of you will know the difference which is which. Not even me."

"What? But can't we even say goodbye?"

"I'm sorry. But the window for this is very narrow, and time is running-"

The same glow started to come from his machine. I wanted to run again, but there wasn't any exit to this room. I hid in a corner until the glow spread out enough to engulf us all again.

We all found ourselves back where we started. Looking at a clock, we discovered that not a moment had passed in real time. I guess that everybody else was the same. We went to the CoolRacer and went back home in silence. Mastodon even cried on the way home.

So from what I understood, I don't even know if I'm really me anymore or a replica of me. I don't feel fake but maybe that's just how I was programmed to be. We asked Cosmic Man but he told us there was no way to tell. And Prodigy, or the Prodigy construct, isn't talking.

I ask myself every day if I really wanted to go or not, but it's not a question that has a resolution. Maybe the real me is really in the real world, having a real good time. I search my friends for signs of change, as I'm sure they're doing for me. But everything has changed. We go through the motions, catching the bad guys and saving the day. But it's not the same as it was. How can it be? I know Prodigy is like the smartest person who ever lived, but maybe he made a mistake this time. We know the truth now, but I don't know if any of us can say if we're better off.

The End