CHAPTER 03

CLASSIFIED EXISTENCE

01 — THE MAN IN THE GREY COAT

The physician had been instructed to measure the interval between the application of a stimulus and the beginning of a voluntary response. The man in the grey coat had been instructed to wait until he understood what was being asked of him.

For the third time that evening, the instruments recorded a response before the physician expected one.

"Did you anticipate the signal?" she asked.

"No."

She examined the recording. The first movement had occurred after the signal, but much earlier than it had in the previous generation of equipment trials. She checked the reference instrument against a separate clock.

There was no discrepancy.

The man sat up. He had removed his coat for the examination. A narrow mark at the base of his neck resembled an old surgical scar; the rest of his body offered no obvious indication that he had been manufactured.

"May I leave?"

"I haven't finished."

He lay down again without complaint.

An army captain entered the laboratory and offered the physician a revised examination schedule. She looked at the last page, then at the man on the bench.

"This includes an assessment of sustained physical output. We haven't established a recovery period for the previous evaluation."

"The recovery period has been changed."

"By whom?"

The captain indicated the authorization at the bottom of the page. General Venn's office had approved the change.

The physician asked the man whether he was experiencing pain. He told her that he was not. She asked him whether he wanted the procedure to continue.

He looked toward the captain.

"I have received my instructions."

"That isn't what I asked."

For a moment neither of the two men answered. A ventilation fan slowed above the examination table, and the physician became aware of how little noise the man had made since entering the room.

She entered his answer exactly as he had given it.

The captain returned the schedule to its envelope. Before leaving, he told her that the record would be reviewed for relevance to the evaluation.

She wondered how much of the man sitting before her would be considered relevant.

02 — THE ACCEPTANCE RECORD

In the hospital, Rachel had spent the first hour of the following morning attempting to locate the original military acceptance record. The public archive continued to refuse access, but the reference number appeared in a list of obsolete contracts held by the city's procurement office.

The list contained no descriptions of the equipment. It did, however, identify the authority that had accepted delivery.

Adrian Tyrell leaned over her shoulder.

"That's not the name of a research institute."

"It was attached to the army's medical service. The office closed a long time ago."

He read the entry again. The contract concerned the supply of a material whose specifications resembled those in Havel's research notes. Its recipient had been authorized to retain technical modifications made after delivery. Those modifications were not listed in the civilian archive.

Rachel printed the entry and placed it beside the photocopy they had recovered the previous day.

The dates established only that someone had obtained military access to the material before the public cancellation of the original longevity project. They could not establish what had been done with it.

"So the cancellation meant less than we thought," she said.

"For this particular material, perhaps. We still don't know whether the work continued."

Roy was sitting near the window, attempting to button the sleeve over his brace. The fabric caught on a fastening, and he pulled it free with his left hand.

"Havel told me why they didn't want us to live a hundred years. He didn't say they were afraid of the technology itself."

Adrian drew a line between the two entries on the printout.

"A government can prohibit a technology in one place and fund it in another. That doesn't mean both places are doing the same thing."

Roy looked at the paper.

"Then somebody got to decide who was allowed to have a future."

Rachel filed the printout under its source and date. She made no change to the conclusion of their experiment.

At the bottom of the old contract, beneath the issuing authority, was a reference to a separate category of delivery.

The category consisted of a single letter.

They could find no definition of it.

03 — A DIFFERENT STANDARD

The reconstructed street beneath the military annex had no residents. Its shop windows were made of replaceable panels, and the doors led to rooms with no plumbing. It had been designed so that an exercise could be repeated under controlled conditions.

Captain Deren watched from the observation gallery while six members of his unit completed their morning assessment. They had trained together for seven years. Two had served in districts where the civilian authorities had lost control of the roads. All were human.

The army had spent considerable time and money teaching them to remain useful when communications failed, when the conditions they expected changed, and when the orders they received were incomplete. Deren took pride in the last of those abilities.

A door opened below the gallery. The man in the grey coat entered the reconstructed street wearing an ordinary training uniform.

Deren had never been told his name.

"Is he joining us?" a sergeant asked.

"He's being assessed separately. We observe."

The first exercise involved the recovery of a weighted object from a room in which the floor had been deliberately destabilized. Deren expected the man to wait while a warning indicator cleared. Instead, the man crossed the room, caught the object as the supporting frame began to fall, and returned with it before the indicator had changed.

The frame struck the floor behind him.

Nobody in the gallery spoke.

Deren watched the replay. There was no dramatic movement, no apparent effort to demonstrate strength. The man had simply reached the object at a point in the sequence that Deren's own body could not have reached.

One of the younger soldiers asked whether the army intended to replace them.

"If that were the intention," Deren said, "they wouldn't have brought us here to watch."

He hoped the remark was true.

An official beside the monitor made a note of the result. The next exercise was cancelled without explanation. The man returned the weighted object to its stand and waited for someone to tell him where to go.

Deren noticed that no one had congratulated him.

04 — A NAME WITHOUT AN ADDRESS

At the provisional council, the court observer who had attended Havel's postmortem found another envelope waiting on her desk. She recognized the handwriting of a clerk from the government medical facility. There was no covering letter.

Inside was a copy of a transport authorization concerning a deceased person whose body had passed through the facility several months earlier. The authorization referred to a service designation rather than a name. It had been signed by an army physician and countersigned by an office that no longer existed in the public directory.

The independent registry showed no corresponding death.

The observer submitted an inquiry to the civil registration office. The reply stated that the designation did not identify a citizen within its jurisdiction. When she asked which authority was responsible for registering the death, the system referred her back to the issuing department.

She called Imani at the hospital.

"Have you ever received a patient whose identity cannot be established by the ordinary registry?"

"Of course. We treat the patient first."

"What happens if a government department says the person wasn't a patient?"

Imani asked her to explain.

By the time Rachel arrived at the council building, the observer had placed a copy of the document in independent custody. Its authenticity still needed to be established. The clerk who had supplied it had not answered two attempts to make contact.

Rachel studied the receiving institution. The destination was the same medical annex to which a recent request for Roy's examination records had been directed.

"This doesn't tell us who died," she said.

"No."

"Or whether the person was manufactured."

"No. But it tells us that a body was transferred through a system that won't acknowledge a death."

Rachel thought of Sena's fear when the inventory inspector arrived at the hospital. The woman had a name, a bed, a doctor and a right to refuse a procedure. Each of these things had required someone to insist upon it.

She asked the observer to keep the clerk's handwriting out of the public copy.

Somebody had already taken a considerable risk by sending the envelope.

05 — NO CIVILIAN EQUIVALENT

General Venn received the results of the evening's medical assessment and the morning exercise just before noon. The report included a comparison with several generations of publicly documented replicants. Roy's current estimated capacity appeared on a separate page.

She did not mistake the figures for a prediction of a fight. The results had been obtained under different conditions, and much of the information about Roy was incomplete. Nonetheless, the comparison was sufficient to change the assumptions on which the acquisition assessment had been based.

"How many personnel can be made available?" she asked the civilian director.

"The medical service is reviewing availability. There are commitments elsewhere."

"I am asking about trained personnel, not units in storage."

The director explained that the classification of the program did not permit him to disclose its full strength to the meeting.

Venn closed the report.

"Then don't give me a number. Tell me whether I can plan on more than the one man I have seen."

"Yes."

Captain Deren was called into the room. He described the exercise without referring to the man as a weapon. When the director asked whether his human soldiers would be able to operate alongside him, Deren said that they could not answer the question until they understood the conditions under which his orders would change.

"He has a chain of command," the director replied.

"So do we. I need to know whether it's the same one."

Venn approved a joint assessment. She did not authorize contact with Roy.

After Deren left, she asked for the medical records of the personnel proposed for deployment. The director offered a certificate of fitness instead.

"What is their expected service life?"

"That is a separate classification."

For the first time during the meeting, Venn looked directly at him rather than at the file.

"If I'm responsible for bringing them back, their condition is my responsibility."

The director agreed to provide a supplementary assessment before deployment.

He did not answer her question.

06 — THE EMPTY BED

Roy had agreed to accompany Imani to a treatment room for a routine examination of his injured shoulder. He was able to move his right arm farther than he had the previous evening, but there was still pain when he tried to carry weight.

Imani recorded the improvement and reminded him that it was not permission to use the arm without restriction.

"You keep telling me what not to do."

"You keep giving me reasons."

While she adjusted the brace, he noticed an empty bed in the adjoining room. A cardboard box sat beneath it containing the belongings of a patient who had been discharged that morning. An attendant would take the box to the patient's new accommodation later in the day.

Roy remembered the files in which people had disappeared while the objects associated with them remained perfectly accounted for.

He asked Imani what would happen if the Defense Secretariat presented an order for his transfer.

"We'd demand to know its legal basis."

"And if they brought soldiers?"

She stopped adjusting the fastening.

"I don't have soldiers."

He appreciated that she had not offered him a promise she could not keep.

Rachel arrived a few minutes later with the observer's documents. She explained what they knew about the body transferred through the military annex and what remained uncertain. Roy asked whether the dead person had been one of the early replicants.

There was no way to tell.

"Maybe we'll find someone who's still alive," he said.

"If we do, we'll have to ask whether they actually want to be found."

He considered that. He had spent much of his second life wanting answers from people who might have reasons for keeping them hidden.

When Imani had finished, he stood and put on his coat. In the corridor, he passed Sena walking without assistance. She stopped to ask whether he was feeling better.

He told her that he was.

For the moment, that was true.

07 — A CLOSED SESSION

The independent council convened a closed session late in the afternoon to establish jurisdiction over the death identified in the transport authorization. The medical facility verified the serial number of the document but declined to provide a name or clinical record. Its representative claimed that the absence of a civilian death certificate was lawful under the relevant military exemption.

The observer asked to see that exemption.

The representative said it could not be examined in an ordinary civilian proceeding.

Rachel had attended on behalf of the research group because the recovered longevity documents contained a reference to the same institution. She placed the two records before the council and asked whether the exemption also covered the manufacture of persons.

The representative consulted a legal adviser. Their conversation lasted less than a minute.

"Personnel produced under a defense authorization do not enter the civilian manufacturing register," he said.

The room was quiet.

The council's advocate asked him to clarify whether he was referring to replicants intended for military service.

"Yes."

Rachel did not immediately ask another question. She wanted the word to remain in the record without being qualified or explained away.

The advocate asked whether the six-year restriction applied to those personnel.

This time the representative declined to answer.

EDEN entered the refusal in the proceedings. The recording was placed under the council's evidence seal, with a restricted copy authorized for the observer. The legal status of the deceased person remained unresolved; the new information had established the existence of a military category, not the identity of the individual in the document.

Outside the meeting room, Rachel stood beside the window while the advocate arranged another hearing. Far below, an ordinary city bus stopped beside a government building and released its passengers into the rain.

There were people in Okakyou who could not be counted by reviewing the city's records. Now she knew that some of them had been kept out of those records by design.

She wondered how many knew they were absent.

08 — THE AUTHORIZED PERSONNEL

That evening, Roy and Rachel were sitting in a small restaurant across from the hospital when she told him what had been admitted in the council chamber.

He listened without interrupting. When she had finished, he looked down at the reflection of a ceiling light in his unfinished coffee.

"So there are others."

"Yes. We don't know how many."

"And we don't know how long they live."

"No."

Roy had been built for war once. He remembered the certainty with which orders had been presented to him and the difficulty of imagining a life beyond them. He did not need to know the specifications of the government's new personnel to recognize what their existence might mean.

"They may never have been given the choice we had," he said.

Rachel moved her cup aside.

"We should not assume they want what we want, either."

Outside, a military transport passed the restaurant. A man in a grey coat was visible through one of its windows. Roy turned his head only after the vehicle had gone by. There was no reason to follow it and no way to know who had been inside.

Across the city, Captain Deren entered a briefing room. The man who had completed the morning exercise sat on one side of the table. Two other people in identical grey coats had taken seats beside him. To Deren, they looked like officers waiting for a meeting to begin.

A file lay open in front of each of them. All three files contained the same photograph.

Roy Batty was walking out of the northern water station, carrying a container in his left hand. The image had been taken from a recording made before the announcement of the minister's death.

Deren opened his own file. Its first page identified the operation as an assessment. The second described the possible transition to an acquisition mission. The final page was unsigned.

One of the grey-coated officers asked whether the person in the photograph was aware of the proceedings.

"Not of these proceedings," Deren replied.

The officer closed the file.

Nobody asked what would happen if Roy refused to accompany them.

The unsigned page would determine that.

END OF CHAPTER 03