CHAPTER 05

THE NEXT GENERATION

01 — THE DISTANCE BETWEEN THEM

The automatic doors opened in front of Captain Deren. A gust of cold air lifted the corner of a poster advertising the hospital's evening clinic.

Roy remained where he was. The grey-coated man followed Deren inside, his hands visible, his coat unfastened. He wore no insignia Roy recognized. At the base of his neck was a narrow mark that might have been left by surgery.

Deren stopped a few steps from Roy.

"I've received further instructions. You're required to come with us."

"You received my answer earlier."

"The nature of the order has changed."

Rachel moved forward. She had the council's acknowledgement of the emergency hearing open on her terminal. Deren looked at the document but did not take the device when she offered it to him.

"We're aware of the proceedings," he said. "I've been instructed to continue."

A nurse came through the opposite doors pushing a trolley. Sergeant Sato asked one of her soldiers to make room. The trolley passed between the two groups, its wheels making a small irregular sound on the tiles.

Roy waited until the nurse was gone.

"Not here."

Deren glanced at the treatment wing. He had been given custody of a target, not authority over the hospital. He asked Roy whether he would walk outside with him.

Roy agreed to leave the entrance hall. He did not agree to enter a vehicle.

Imani appeared at the end of the corridor with the legal advocate. When she saw that Roy had removed his brace, she started toward him, but Rachel intercepted her and explained what was happening. Imani looked past Rachel at the man in the grey coat.

"If you take him, you'll be interrupting treatment."

The stranger turned his head.

"Is movement contraindicated?"

Imani stared at him. It was the first question anyone from the army had asked her about a specific medical condition.

"Violent movement is."

He acknowledged the answer with a slight inclination of his head.

Roy wondered whether the man had understood the distinction between moving a patient and acquiring him. He wondered whether it would affect what happened next.

Outside, the sky had darkened. Rainwater was already collecting along the edge of the courtyard.

02 — ANOTHER KIND OF SOLDIER

The courtyard had been built for ambulances. A covered passage connected the hospital to an older administrative building, and at the far end a delivery vehicle stood beside an empty loading bay.

Roy walked beneath the canopy. Rachel followed him until Sato asked her to remain near the doors. Roy turned at once.

"She comes with me."

Deren shook his head. "There is no order relating to her."

"Then there's no reason to stop her."

For a moment Sato looked uncertain. The captain instructed her to let Rachel pass. The grey-coated man had already placed himself between Roy and the transport vehicle, although Roy had not seen him cross the intervening space.

"What did they call you?" Roy asked.

The man gave him a service designation: M-04.

"That's a number."

"It identifies me."

"I didn't ask how they identify you."

The man looked at Roy without apparent irritation. His face was neither especially young nor old. There was a faint imperfection in the surface of one front tooth. In another place he might have been a man waiting for a bus.

"You are delaying the operation," he said.

Roy remembered a time when he might have answered in the same manner. The recollection was more disturbing than the stranger's speed.

He asked Deren for the last time whether he would be free to leave the annex. Deren said that the conditions of custody were not within his authority to change.

Rachel stepped closer to Roy. "We've recorded your refusal."

The rain grew heavier. From inside the hospital a telephone rang, and someone answered it. The ordinary life of the building continued on the other side of the glass.

Deren instructed M-04 to escort Roy to the transport.

M-04 extended his hand toward Roy's uninjured arm.

Roy took a step backward.

The stranger's hand moved with him. There was no threatening gesture, no change in expression, and no pause in which Roy could reconsider the meaning of the instruction.

He had expected the hand to arrive from a particular direction. It did not.

By the time he registered the contact, his left wrist was already held.

03 — BEFORE THE RESPONSE

Roy tried to withdraw his hand. The pressure against his wrist increased just enough to prevent him from doing so. He shifted his weight and turned, expecting the stranger's shoulder to follow. Instead, the stranger remained upright while Roy's balance moved beyond the point at which he could comfortably recover it.

Roy felt the injury beneath his right shoulder flare.

"Release him," Rachel said.

Deren ordered the escort to stop. M-04 released Roy immediately.

Roy stepped back and caught the edge of a concrete column with his left hand. He had not been struck. There would be little evidence of what had just happened except the pain in his shoulder and the sudden awareness that his body had failed to do what he expected of it.

He looked at the stranger. Nothing suggested that M-04 had exerted himself.

Roy had fought faster opponents. He had dealt with machines capable of moving before a human observer could appreciate the danger. He had also fought Havel, whose movements had challenged his understanding of the relationship between distance and force.

This was different. He recognized M-04's movements. They belonged to a body shaped like his own. It was the time available to him between recognition and response that had changed.

"Is that all you've been instructed to do?" Roy asked.

M-04 waited for Deren to answer.

The captain told Roy that further resistance could result in injury. He offered to have the military medical staff examine him before departure.

"I already have a physician."

Deren's expression hardened, though his voice remained quiet. "I cannot leave without resolving this."

Roy thought of the soldiers standing near the entrance. They were not participating in the confrontation, but they were watching in a way he remembered from his first life. They were waiting for someone to make a decision that would be theirs to carry out.

M-04 approached again.

This time Roy moved first. He put his uninjured hand against the stranger's chest and drove forward, using more of his body than Imani had advised him to use in any exercise.

For an instant the stranger yielded.

Roy believed he had created enough space to withdraw.

Then his feet left the ground. He landed against the low wall behind him, hard enough to feel the vibration in his teeth. M-04 stood a short distance away, one hand still raised.

Roy could not remember seeing him move it.

04 — THE MEASURE OF THE DIFFERENCE

Rachel ran to Roy. He was sitting against the wall with his head lowered. When she touched his neck, he opened his eyes.

"Can you breathe?"

He nodded and took a shallow breath. It hurt, but the pain did not appear to be coming from the same place as the injury to his shoulder.

M-04 turned toward Deren.

"The subject is conscious. The operation can continue."

Sato watched the stranger. She had seen him in the reconstructed street, where the falling frame had seemed to belong to a slower world than the one he inhabited. The hospital courtyard was not a reconstructed street. There was blood on the lower edge of Roy's sleeve, and the woman kneeling beside him was not part of an exercise.

Deren told M-04 to maintain his position and called for medical assistance.

Inside the hospital, Adrian Tyrell had heard about the confrontation from a member of staff. He reached the entrance with Imani as two orderlies emerged carrying equipment.

Imani knelt beside Rachel. She checked Roy's injured shoulder, asked him to move his fingers, then asked him to remain still. He tried to stand while she was speaking.

"That wasn't a suggestion," she said.

He sat down again.

Adrian looked at M-04. The stranger's chest rose and fell at a rate Adrian would have expected from someone standing at rest. There was no way of establishing his actual physical output by watching him, but Adrian suspected that he had seen very little of what the man was capable of.

The research group's problem had been how to preserve the integrity of artificial tissue under repeated stress. Nobody in the group had proposed that greater physical performance, by itself, constituted progress toward longer life.

Yet somewhere in the military establishment, another institution had apparently solved problems Adrian had only begun to formulate.

He did not know what it had sacrificed in doing so.

Roy looked at him.

"Can they do that with everybody they make?"

"I don't know."

"He wasn't trying."

Adrian followed his gaze. M-04 had not taken his eyes off the captain.

"That is something we should remember," Adrian said.

He did not tell Roy that it was something they should attempt to reproduce.

05 — THE ORDER TO REMAIN

A hospital ambulance arrived in the courtyard while Imani was still examining Roy. Its driver found the usual approach obstructed by an army vehicle and sounded the horn.

Sato went to speak to him. A second soldier looked toward Deren for instructions. The captain authorized the transport to be moved and asked his liaison officer to keep the entrance clear.

The officer objected that the acquisition vehicle had been positioned in accordance with the operational plan.

"The hospital is still operating," Deren replied.

The ambulance carried a woman who was having difficulty breathing. The driver and a nurse brought her past the group without looking at Roy. Imani finished securing a temporary dressing and left to attend the new arrival, promising to return as soon as another physician was available.

Rachel helped Roy to his feet. He could walk, but the pain made each step less certain than the previous one.

M-04 moved toward them.

"The subject is leaving the designated area."

"He's going to receive treatment," Rachel said.

Deren raised his hand. "Remain where you are."

The stranger stopped. His attention did not shift toward the ambulance, the hospital or the people emerging beneath the canopy. He waited.

For a second, Roy was angry at him. He wanted the man to decide something without being instructed to decide it. He wanted him to look at the people he was preventing from leaving and recognize that there was no legitimate reason to hold them there.

But Roy did not know what M-04 had been taught, what would happen to him if he disobeyed, or whether he considered himself to have a choice.

He knew how easy it was to judge someone after acquiring a freedom that person had never possessed.

He spoke to the stranger.

"Do you know why they want me?"

M-04 answered without looking at him.

"My instructions concern your acquisition."

"That's what they want you to do. Not why they want it done."

There was no reply.

A few meters away, the liaison officer was making a call to the Secretariat. Roy heard his own name followed by the words medical delay.

Rachel took his hand.

"You don't have to find out everything today."

He let her guide him toward the hospital.

06 — A LESS USEFUL RECORD

General Venn received the first account of the encounter from the civilian director, who had obtained it from his liaison officer. The account described Roy as physically resistant and the classified personnel as capable of completing the acquisition without further assistance.

A second account arrived from Captain Deren three minutes later. It described an injury sustained during the attempted escort and a temporary medical suspension. It also requested clarification of the army's responsibilities in relation to the patients using the hospital.

Venn placed the two documents side by side.

"Did either of you authorize a test of his physical capacity?"

The director shook his head.

"Then why does your report contain an assessment of it?"

He explained that a direct encounter had offered information that had previously been available only through observation.

"Useful information," he added.

Venn asked for the original recording. It arrived without sound. She watched Roy move away from the stranger, saw the first attempt to restrain him, and then saw the second encounter. Several people passed through the frame before the recording ended.

The director highlighted the interval between Roy's approach and his fall.

"Our estimates were conservative."

Venn replayed the recording from the beginning. She had approved the acquisition of a man whom her government considered dangerous. The recording showed a man whose body was already impaired attempting to resist an order he regarded as illegitimate.

It did not invalidate the government's assessment. It did, however, make several of the assumptions behind the briefing look less secure.

"Where are the other two classified personnel?"

"With the joint force. They have not yet been required."

She asked the director to leave her office and called Deren directly.

The captain explained that Roy had returned inside under medical supervision. The hospital had refused access to its treatment rooms without an applicable warrant. His personnel were holding their position.

Venn approved the temporary suspension until the physician had issued an assessment. She instructed Deren to preserve his original report and not replace it with the version circulating within the Secretariat.

When the call ended, she returned to the recording.

The director had said their estimates were conservative. She wondered whether they had ever conducted an equivalent assessment of the people issuing the orders.

07 — THE PART THAT COULD NOT BE MEASURED

By the time the examination was complete, the emergency hearing had begun. Rachel received a message from the advocate advising that the council was considering an interim ruling. The military had not withdrawn its challenge to the council's authority.

Roy was lying on an examination bed. Imani had found no evidence of a new fracture, but the tissues surrounding his existing injury had been subjected to further stress. She warned him that the recovery estimates they had discussed that morning could no longer be treated as reliable.

He asked her whether his output had fallen.

"We haven't measured it. And we're not going to measure it this afternoon."

Adrian arrived with a portable terminal. He had reviewed a short recording from the hospital's entrance camera. Its rate of capture was too low to establish precise reaction times. It provided no reliable evidence about what kind of tissue or neural architecture the stranger possessed.

Roy asked to see it anyway.

He watched himself attempt to withdraw from M-04's grip. He watched the second encounter and saw how small the other man's movement had been compared with his own.

In another recording, Havel had lowered a sword after a movement Roy could scarcely understand. Since that confrontation, Roy had tried to recover the sensation of an action beginning before his conscious mind had finished considering it.

He had wanted to turn the experience into an ability.

The stranger had given him a new reason to question that ambition.

"Could it be the same principle?" he asked Adrian.

"Possibly. We have no measurements from inside his body."

"Havel was human. That man isn't."

Adrian sat down.

"And that may be the most important difference. We don't know what was changed to make him capable of this."

He proposed that their next approved study should focus on the way Roy's existing structures distributed strain rather than attempt to increase his maximum output. It would be a small experiment. It might produce no improvement at all.

Roy looked at the recording again.

"I thought I knew what the next generation would look like."

Rachel sat beside him.

"Perhaps he isn't what comes next. Perhaps he's what they chose to make next."

Roy turned off the screen.

08 — THE VEHICLE THAT DID NOT LEAVE

At dusk, the council granted a temporary suspension of the acquisition order pending an independent review. Its advocate delivered the ruling to the Defense Secretariat and to Captain Deren at the hospital.

Deren acknowledged receipt. The Secretariat informed him that the ruling was not recognized as binding. His instructions remained in effect, subject to the medical suspension approved by General Venn.

Neither side could move the other.

Outside, Sato arranged for her personnel to change shifts. The two classified replicants who had remained inside the military transport emerged for the first time. One was a woman. The other was a man whose left hand remained inside the pocket of his grey coat.

M-04 spoke briefly to them. Then all three stood beneath the canopy, looking toward different parts of the hospital grounds.

From an upstairs window Roy watched them. He had believed the man he encountered was the most dangerous person in the courtyard. Now he understood that he had no basis for deciding which of the three was the most dangerous. Nor did he know whether they represented the best personnel the army could provide.

Rachel joined him. The research archive was still under the hospital's custody seal, and Adrian had agreed to limit the group's work to procedures for which consent and equipment remained available. The next morning's experimental schedule had already been revised.

"They're not leaving," Roy said.

"Neither are we. Not until Imani says you're able to travel."

He wanted to object, but found that he was relieved by her answer. For now, the room was warm. The lights were functioning. A woman in the corridor was laughing at something her visitor had said.

He had spent so much of his life thinking of survival as the work his body performed when everything else failed. He began to understand how much of that work had always been performed by other people.

Below the window, a vehicle started its engine. It moved a few meters and stopped beneath a streetlight. Another took its former position.

Roy waited for the three strangers to return to their transport. They did not.

On the glass, his reflection was barely visible against the illuminated courtyard. He could see Rachel standing behind him and the bandage that had darkened at the edge of his sleeve.

He had survived his first encounter with the next generation.

It had not cost the next generation anything.

END OF CHAPTER 05.