CHAPTER 07

THE SPECIAL FORCES

01 — THE OTHER SIDE OF THE WINDOW

The aircraft were no longer visible when Imani finished explaining the consequences of leaving the hospital. Roy had understood the consequences before she began. What he had not understood was how many ordinary things would become difficult without medical assistance.

She handed Rachel a record of his injuries and the treatment he had received. There was no new authorization in it, no document granting them passage through the city. It was information that might be useful to another physician.

"If you find someone to look after you," Imani told Roy, "give them that before you tell them how well you're feeling."

He promised to do so.

Adrian Tyrell was waiting in the corridor. Lin had remained downstairs to complete the inventory of the research materials. The samples belonged in the hospital, and the instruments would be of little use to anyone wherever Roy and Rachel were going.

Adrian gave Rachel a copy of the observations they had made that afternoon.

"There's nothing in there that you should attempt on your own."

"I know."

"I meant him."

Roy accepted the warning without protest. He had spent much of the day learning what happened when he asked a damaged body to behave like an undamaged one. He did not need another demonstration.

At the end of the corridor an orderly was trying to move an old man from one chair into another. The second chair had been brought from a different ward and was too narrow. The orderly apologized, went away and returned with a third.

Roy watched the old man settle into it.

A week earlier, Havel's death would have seemed to him the end of a particular struggle. He had imagined an interval during which they might be allowed to think about the future. Instead, the number of people involved in deciding whether he could leave a building had increased.

Rachel received a message from the council's advocate. The independent review had been postponed. The advocate had been given no new date. A government representative had questioned the council's jurisdiction over the proposed transfer.

"They still haven't withdrawn the suspension," she said.

Adrian looked out at the courtyard.

"They may not consider that necessary anymore."

From somewhere below them came the noise of doors closing. It was followed by a voice over the hospital's public address system, asking members of staff to remain available for instructions.

No reason was given.

02 — A CHANGE OF COMMAND

Captain Deren first saw the newcomers in the administration building. Their uniforms differed from those worn by the personnel who had accompanied him to the hospital. They carried less identification, and the officer who introduced himself to Deren did not ask to be shown around the premises.

His name was Colonel Vale. He had been assigned operational command of the district under a joint directive from the Defense Secretariat and the military staff.

He placed a document on the table.

Deren read the first page, then the second. His personnel were to continue their duties under the new command. The three classified replicants would remain available for the acquisition. Responsibility for the hospital's security was to be transferred immediately.

"What happened to the medical suspension?" Deren asked.

Vale said that the military physician was already examining the records.

"And the council's suspension?"

"I don't have an instruction concerning the council."

Deren turned to the last page. General Venn's name appeared on an authorization for the deployment of additional forces. The section relating to the hospital had been approved separately.

"Did the general authorize this transfer of command?"

"The joint staff did."

Vale did not appear offended by the questions. He waited while Deren contacted the general's office. The call was acknowledged by an assistant, who informed him that Venn was attending an emergency briefing and could not speak to him.

Sergeant Sato stood beside the door. Through the glass she could see a group of soldiers carrying equipment into a room formerly used for the storage of office supplies. They had brought their own communications personnel, medical staff and interpreters. One of them had stopped to help a hospital employee move a cabinet out of the way.

The ordinariness of the gesture made her more uneasy than the aircraft had.

When the call ended, Vale asked Deren to introduce him to the classified personnel.

M-04 arrived with the other two. They listened as the colonel explained the change in their assignment. None of them asked why it had been made. When he dismissed them, they left in the same order in which they had entered.

"Are they being transferred to your unit?" Deren asked.

"No."

"Then who commands them?"

Vale gathered the pages from the table.

"For the duration of this operation, I do."

03 — THE PEOPLE WITH NO INSIGNIA

A hospital official accompanied Vale through the treatment wing while an assistant recorded the number of occupied rooms. The official repeatedly explained that some of the patients could not be moved. Vale responded by asking for a list of the equipment that would be required if the electricity failed.

He was neither impatient nor reassuring. He had arrived with people whose work did not depend on his being able to do everything himself.

In the entrance hall, a young soldier removed his helmet to speak to a nurse. He looked scarcely old enough to have completed his education. The nurse asked whether he was a replicant.

"No, ma'am."

She apologized. He shook his head and asked her to continue explaining where the children were being treated.

A short distance away, the woman who had arrived in the classified transport stood listening to another member of the unit. She wore the same grey coat as before. The soldier addressed her by a service designation. She answered him in an ordinary voice.

Sato watched the two of them walk in opposite directions. The classified personnel had seemed isolated during the earlier deployment, as though the rest of the army had been instructed not to inquire into their presence. Among the new arrivals, they attracted little attention.

She found Deren near the former reception desk and told him what she had seen.

"They've worked with them before," she said.

"Some of them may have."

"Nobody's asking what they are."

Deren studied the revised personnel list. Several entries referred to units that were unfamiliar to him. Others consisted of numbers rather than names. He had no way of knowing how many of the soldiers in the district were human, nor whether the three people in grey coats represented the full complement of classified personnel.

Sato asked if he intended to find out.

"I'd like to know what we're responsible for before someone holds us responsible for it."

A message arrived on his terminal. His remaining command functions had been incorporated into the district operation. The acknowledgement required his signature.

He read the message until the screen dimmed.

Outside the hospital, a second transport had parked behind the vehicle that had brought M-04. Its occupants did not enter the building. Two remained standing near the doors while a third sat inside, watching the rain accumulate on the glass.

04 — A DESTINATION WITHOUT AN ADDRESS

Rachel and Roy reached the administration corridor shortly after seven. Adrian had arranged to meet them there, but the hospital had stopped issuing new transfer documents until its legal officer could establish who was entitled to approve them.

They found a clerk surrounded by folders. She had been instructed not to release the records of any patient named in a military request. Roy's name was the only one on the list.

Rachel asked whether the restriction applied to copies already in a patient's possession. The clerk said that nobody had told her.

"You don't have to decide that for us," Rachel replied.

The clerk looked relieved. She had been asked to interpret several government orders that day and had been given no opportunity to speak to the people who had written them.

Roy sat down near the wall. His shoulder had begun to ache again. Imani's instructions had been to avoid prolonged standing, and he was determined not to waste strength on a display of independence that nobody had requested.

A woman came out of the legal office holding a travel authorization. She asked the clerk where she could find the driver assigned to her husband's transfer. The clerk made a telephone call. When she finished, the woman thanked her and went to wait beside the elevator.

Rachel looked down at the medical record she was carrying.

They had no driver. They had no confirmed destination. If they remained in the hospital until all their questions had been answered, someone else would eventually determine both.

Adrian appeared at the end of the corridor. He had spoken to a physician at another institution, who was willing to examine Roy but could not guarantee admission under the current restrictions. The physician's hospital had received the same notice concerning the district operation.

"I don't want you to give me the name," Roy said.

Adrian understood. He put away his terminal.

For several seconds they stood without speaking. There had been a time when Adrian's ability to obtain access to a laboratory or a government archive would have seemed to Roy an extraordinary form of power. Now the scientist could not even establish whether a patient was free to travel between two hospitals.

"The work downstairs can continue," Adrian said to Rachel. "Not all of it, but enough for us to learn something."

She nodded. It was the nearest thing to good news they had heard that evening.

Then the legal officer came through the door and asked to speak to Roy.

05 — THE TRANSFER OF CUSTODY

The legal officer introduced himself as Mercer. He had spent the afternoon trying to determine whether the hospital could be compelled to release a patient into military custody without the consent of his physician.

He had brought a copy of the government's latest instruction. The military physician had concluded that Roy was sufficiently stable to be transferred. The instruction did not require the hospital's agreement with that assessment. It authorized the acquisition force to take custody of him at twenty hundred hours.

Mercer apologized for having to deliver the information.

"Did the physician examine him?" Rachel asked.

"He examined the records."

"Then he assessed a person he has never seen."

Mercer had submitted that objection. He had also requested that the council's suspension be recognized until the independent review could take place. Neither request had received a substantive reply.

Roy asked what would happen if the hospital refused to release him.

Mercer looked toward the occupied offices. "I don't think they intend to ask us to release you."

There were twenty-three minutes remaining before the time stated in the instruction.

Roy stood. He felt Rachel's hand against his back as he did so, and for a moment resented the fact that he was grateful for it. Then he looked at her and the feeling passed.

Mercer explained that the hospital had not declared him discharged. Whatever happened next, the original medical record would continue to describe him as a patient. He seemed to consider that fact important enough to repeat.

"They can change who is holding you. They cannot make our record say that you agreed."

Roy thanked him.

Adrian accompanied them as far as the junction between the administration building and the wards. From there, the route to the research wing led in the opposite direction.

Rachel gave him the last inventory receipt. He folded it and put it inside his jacket. There was no exchange of promises concerning when they would see each other again.

Roy noticed that Adrian was about to offer his hand and had thought better of it because of the injury.

He extended his left hand instead.

They shook hands.

Then Roy and Rachel continued along the corridor while Adrian returned to the laboratory.

06 — THE SECOND ENCOUNTER

The first person Roy recognized at the western entrance was M-04.

The man stood beneath a light that had been flickering since the previous evening. Beyond him, on the other side of the glass, several soldiers were talking quietly. They stopped when they saw Roy.

M-04 told him that the entrance was closed.

"I'm not going to the annex," Roy said.

"I have not been instructed to take you there yet."

Rachel asked whether they were free to leave by another entrance.

The man looked at her. "You are."

Roy could hear somebody moving behind them. He turned his head and saw the woman in the grey coat approaching from the administration corridor. A human officer accompanied her. Neither appeared to be in a hurry.

A few days earlier Roy would have concentrated on the two people whose physical abilities he had reason to fear. Now he found himself looking at the officer, the soldiers outside and the figures passing the windows beyond them. None of them needed to defeat him individually.

He asked M-04 what would happen at eight.

"I will receive an instruction."

"You already know what it will be."

M-04 did not answer.

Roy took a step toward the door. The man moved between him and the glass. Roy had attempted to see the beginning of the movement. He had seen the man's position change instead.

This time he did not try to strike him.

He stopped before they touched.

Rachel stood close enough to him to feel the tension in his arm. He had been anticipating an impact that never came. His injured shoulder tightened beneath its support, and the pain spread across his chest.

"Not here," she said quietly.

M-04 looked at Roy's shoulder. There was no visible satisfaction in his expression. He told them that they could return to the ward until further instructions had been issued.

The woman stepped aside to let them pass. Roy walked past her without looking at her hands.

They did not go back to the ward.

07 — THE ORDER AT EIGHT

General Venn received Deren's report while the emergency briefing was still in progress. She read it beneath the table, listening to a civilian official describe the need for unified control of the northern district.

The report included Mercer's objection and the recommendation of the hospital physician. The proposed military destination had been certified as suitable by a separate authority. No one had established whether the apparatus there could safely support Roy's particular injuries.

Venn asked the chairman to clarify who had approved the resumption of the acquisition.

He told her that the operational directive had been adopted before the briefing. The classified personnel and special forces would act under a joint command. His answer did not address her question about the patient.

"I suspended the acquisition for medical reasons," she said.

"The medical reasons have been reviewed."

She asked for the physician's findings. The chairman promised that they would be circulated.

At the hospital, Deren watched the time change on his terminal. An instruction became active. The search for Roy was authorized to proceed inside the building.

Sato stood beside him in the courtyard. The rain had become heavier. She could see the lights of a vehicle reflected in a puddle near the entrance.

Vale's command had assigned her squad to assist with patients affected by the operation. She was relieved to have a task that did not require her to take hold of Roy again. Her relief lasted until she saw the first people being brought out of the reception area.

One of them was a woman who had come to collect her daughter. She wanted to know whether the army intended to close the hospital. Sato told her that the hospital was still operating.

"Then why can't I go in?"

Sato had been given an instruction concerning unauthorized access. It did not contain an answer to the woman's question.

In the administration building, Vale received confirmation that the target was not in his assigned room. He requested an updated civilian status report before authorizing the next phase. His assistant informed him that the hospital's legal officer objected to the search.

Vale directed that the objection be recorded.

The search continued.

08 — THE FIRST GROUND LOST

Roy and Rachel were near the old diagnostic building when the public address system announced that movement between the hospital's departments was being restricted. Patients were asked to remain where they were until further instructions were issued.

They had reached a part of the complex where some of the clinics had been closed for renovation. Workers had left sheets of material over the examination tables. The lights above several doors were off.

Through a window Roy could see people gathering beneath the covered walkway. Some were hospital employees. Others appeared to have been visiting patients. A soldier was attempting to direct them toward the main building, and the crowd was moving slowly.

Rachel stopped beside him.

He could still turn back. He could walk toward the soldiers, wait for M-04 to arrive and allow them to take him wherever they had decided he belonged. For the first time, the possibility seemed almost physically attractive. It offered an end to movement, an end to the pain in his shoulder and the necessity of asking Rachel to remain beside him while he struggled to keep walking.

He told her what he had been thinking.

"Would you be permitted to leave afterward?" she asked.

He said nothing.

They continued toward the far side of the complex. The sound of the rain grew louder where a portion of the roof had been removed. Roy waited for Rachel to cross a flooded section of the floor, then followed her. He could feel the muscles beneath his support beginning to tremble.

Outside, the road beyond the hospital was illuminated by the headlights of military vehicles. He had expected to be able to see gaps between them. What he saw instead were more lights in the distance, extending into streets that had been open that morning.

Rachel looked in the opposite direction. People were still moving through the hospital grounds. An ambulance waited at an intersection, its lights flashing, apparently unable to proceed.

She took Roy's hand.

A voice called to them from behind. Roy recognized neither the voice nor the person who emerged beneath the covered walkway. The officer told them to stop. More figures appeared at the other end of the building.

One wore a grey coat.

Roy looked toward the road again. The city was so close that he could hear a vehicle traveling on an elevated section beyond the hospital wall. He had spent the evening trying to reach it. Now he understood that reaching it would not necessarily mean that he had escaped.

He released Rachel's hand and stepped in front of her.

She said his name.

He did not answer at once. The people approaching them were not moving like the men who had pursued him in the past. He could not find a single person whose defeat would change what was happening.

He had survived the encounter with M-04. He had mistaken that survival for a measurement of the danger he faced.

The hospital was behind him. The army was ahead.

For the first time since the aircraft had arrived, he understood the size of the place in which they had been trapped.

END OF CHAPTER 07.