CHAPTER 08

AN UNEQUAL BATTLE

01 — THE TERMS OF SURRENDER

The officer beneath the covered walkway asked Roy to raise his hands. He spoke slowly and repeated the instruction when Roy failed to obey. Behind him, rain fell through the unfinished roof, striking the plastic sheets that covered the abandoned medical equipment.

Rachel explained that Roy could not raise his right arm above his shoulder without aggravating an injury. The officer consulted someone through his communications device. He then told Roy to keep both hands where they could be seen.

"And her?" Roy asked.

"She is not the subject of this order."

The woman in the grey coat had reached the end of the corridor. She stopped there, leaving the officer to speak.

Roy remembered the weight of M-04's hand on his wrist. He had been able to resist for scarcely a moment before the stranger had decided the matter for him. He had no reason to expect that the woman would be less capable.

"Where are you taking me?"

"A military medical facility."

"For how long?"

The officer said that the duration of the transfer was not a matter he was authorized to discuss.

A hospital employee emerged from an examination room carrying a box of disposable instruments. She saw the soldiers, apologized and started to return to the room. The officer told her to remain inside until called. She disappeared without asking what had happened.

Rachel took the folded medical record from her coat.

"His attending physician hasn't approved a transfer. You have a copy of her objection."

"That isn't the order I'm acting under."

Roy looked at the paper in her hand. Throughout the day people had been making records, submitting objections and requesting explanations. He had been grateful to them. He was still grateful. But there was now a man standing twenty feet away whose responsibility began at the point where all those efforts had failed.

The officer asked Rachel to move away from him.

She did not move.

Roy could see the road beyond the hospital fence. Somewhere on the other side of it, people were eating dinner, waiting for deliveries or returning home from work. He could see the light in a third-floor apartment. A figure passed behind its curtains.

The officer repeated his instruction.

Roy lowered his left hand.

"No."

02 — THE WOMAN IN GREY

The woman's first movement was so slight that Roy mistook it for a change in posture. He saw her approach only when the space between them had almost disappeared.

She reached for his left arm. He moved to keep it out of her grasp, turning his body as he had done against Havel. For an instant he thought the movement had succeeded. Then her hand was on his forearm, and the direction in which his body was traveling no longer belonged entirely to him.

He struck the wall with his back.

The impact disturbed the dressing beneath his coat. His right shoulder sent a sensation down his arm that was so intense he could no longer tell where the injury ended. The woman released him before he fell.

"Remain standing," she said.

Roy heard Rachel call to the officer. He could not make out the words. The woman was watching his hands, apparently waiting to see whether she would be required to take hold of him again.

He had studied the force Havel had generated with movements of almost astonishing economy. He understood a little more about the relationship between impulse, balance and the transmission of force than he had understood a week ago. What he had not acquired was the ability to reproduce it reliably.

Nevertheless, when the woman approached again, he tried.

For a fraction of a second, the movement felt right. His feet were placed beneath him; his left arm seemed to follow rather than lead the impulse. Against an ordinary opponent, the blow might have been enough to create a moment in which he could leave.

The woman turned aside.

His hand met nothing. Her hand met his chest.

He went down on one knee, caught himself and remained there, breathing through his teeth. She had not struck him with anything resembling her full strength. He was beginning to recognize the difference between an opponent who was trying to win and one who had never considered the outcome uncertain.

Rachel stepped between them.

"Look at his arm."

The woman did. Blood had appeared on the fabric near Roy's elbow. She spoke into her communications device and requested medical personnel.

Roy looked up at her. "Do you know what they'll do to me?"

She studied him for several seconds.

"I have been instructed to deliver you."

It was neither an affirmation nor a denial. She seemed to believe that she had answered the question.

There had been a time when Roy would have understood the distinction between them as the difference between someone who obeyed and someone who refused. Now he wondered whether the distinction had ever been that simple.

03 — OUTSIDE THE EXERCISE

In the administration building, Colonel Vale watched the recording from the diagnostic wing. A second image showed the road beyond the hospital. Several civilian vehicles had been diverted to an adjoining district, and the municipal traffic service was requesting permission to reopen an intersection.

Vale instructed his assistant to give the municipal service an estimate. The estimate was not to constitute a commitment.

Deren stood beside the table. On another screen, the hospital's medical officer was explaining that Roy's injuries made the use of force especially dangerous. Vale's physician listened and asked for the location of the original diagnostic images.

"They already have them," Deren said.

The physician looked at him. "I don't."

Deren supplied the reference number.

The acquisition force had been authorized to use lethal force if recovery became impossible and the target presented a sufficiently serious threat. The wording gave the officer on the ground a measure of discretion. Deren had read it before the operation began. He had also read a second instruction, which emphasized the importance of recovering viable biological material.

He could not see how both instructions would remain compatible if the operation continued for much longer.

Vale asked for an update on the second classified team. An assistant confirmed that its members were in position. The colonel acknowledged the report and returned his attention to the hospital map.

Deren had spent much of his career watching officers attempt to make an operation go according to plan. Vale's people seemed less concerned with the success of a particular action. If one action failed, there was another in progress or ready to begin. The plan did not depend on a single confrontation.

"We have him in the building," Deren said. "Why not allow Imani to treat him there?"

"Because we have orders to remove him."

"The injury could make that impossible."

Vale turned away from the screen.

"Then we will deal with that possibility when it arises."

For a moment Deren considered asking what was meant by dealing with it. He did not. The answer was likely to be contained in an instruction he had already read.

On the ground floor, Sergeant Sato helped an orderly take a stretcher through the reception area. An unconscious patient occupied it. The orderly asked her to make sure the oxygen cylinder did not strike the doorframe as they passed.

She held the cylinder until they were clear of the door. When she returned to the corridor, an announcement informed everyone that the diagnostic wing had been temporarily placed under military control.

The orderly glanced back at her.

"Isn't the rest of it already?"

04 — THE SECOND MEASURE

Roy could hear the rain more clearly from the floor. Water was traveling beneath the damaged roof and pooling near the wheel of an examination table. He watched a paper label detach itself from the table leg and float away.

The woman in grey was waiting for the medical personnel. The officer had ordered Rachel to stand against the opposite wall. She had refused to do so until Roy was able to get up.

He attempted to stand. His left leg supported him, but a sudden weakness spread through his right side. He sat back against the wall.

Rachel crouched beside him.

"Don't try again yet."

He knew that the restrictions on his output had not disappeared because he wanted them to disappear. What the people in the laboratory had learned had not made him stronger. It had made some of the reasons for his weakness easier to understand.

He looked past Rachel and saw M-04 approaching along the walkway.

There were soldiers behind him. One carried a case of medical equipment. The other two were looking beyond Roy, at the doorways leading to the closed clinics.

M-04 spoke briefly with the woman. He then approached Roy and asked whether he could stand without assistance.

"You could tell me what happens if I refuse."

"The transfer will proceed."

Roy closed his eyes. In the courtyard he had been stopped by one man. Now there were two whose physical abilities he could not match, several soldiers he had scarcely looked at, and further personnel whose presence he could infer only from the sounds outside.

He had imagined the army as a great number of opponents. That had been a mistake. The army was something that could act in several places while he was still deciding what to do in one.

Rachel asked the medical soldier whether he could examine Roy before moving him. The man opened his case. He appeared genuinely concerned by the condition of the dressing, but said he had been requested to prepare Roy for transport.

"Prepare him or treat him?"

The man hesitated.

A crack sounded from somewhere inside the diagnostic building. Part of the temporary ceiling sagged. Water poured through it, followed by fragments of plaster. The lights went out in the room nearest the covered walkway, came on again, and went out a second time.

There was a cry from beyond the partition.

A hospital employee had been struck by a falling section of material. The officer turned toward the sound. The medical soldier grabbed his case and went to find her.

Roy saw the woman in grey look toward the injured employee. He could not tell whether she was waiting for an instruction or making a decision of her own.

Then she went into the room.

05 — NO VICTORY TO REPORT

The employee was conscious. Her ankle was caught beneath a panel that had come down from the ceiling. Two soldiers attempted to lift it while the medical man spoke to her. The woman in grey moved toward the part of the panel they could not raise.

Rachel stood beside Roy. Neither spoke.

He pulled himself upright with his left arm. M-04 stepped toward him, and Roy knew that he would not be able to withstand another impact like the one he had received in the courtyard.

Somewhere in the building a warning began to sound. The voice announcing the restriction on movement was replaced by one asking staff in the affected rooms to leave the area. An orderly appeared pushing a patient in a chair. He stopped when he saw the soldiers.

Rachel called him over.

"Is there another way out of here?"

The orderly pointed toward the rear doors. He said that the passage beyond them had been opened to allow the contractors to bring machinery into the building. He did not know whether it was still open.

The officer told Rachel that she was not permitted to interfere with the operation. She asked him to help the orderly move the patient instead.

Roy stepped away from the wall.

M-04 caught him.

The pain was immediate. Roy could not remember preparing to strike. He remembered the intention and, afterward, the sensation of his arm being held in a position in which movement was impossible.

"Stop resisting," M-04 said.

Roy looked into his face. The man's expression had not changed. There was something intolerable about being defeated by someone who did not appear to have entered into a struggle.

Then the patient in the chair began to scream. The collapse had dislodged a second piece of the ceiling, and the orderly was trying to pull the chair away from it. M-04 turned his head.

Roy felt the pressure on his arm lessen. He did not attempt another blow. He was no longer interested in demonstrating that he was capable of one.

Rachel caught his coat and pulled him toward the doors. He went with her.

Behind them the orderly shouted for assistance. There was another heavy sound. Roy looked back once and saw M-04 standing beneath a section of the failed ceiling, holding it clear while the orderly moved the patient.

The sight remained with him after Rachel had drawn him through the doors.

He had not overcome the man. The man had simply been required to do something else.

06 — THE ROAD BEYOND THE WALL

The passage beyond the rear doors was almost entirely dark. Roy and Rachel followed it to the place where the hospital's old boundary wall had been removed to make room for the renovation. On the other side stood an unfinished service building and several empty vehicles belonging to the contractors.

Rachel helped Roy sit on a low concrete step. She opened his coat and examined the dressing. She could not tell how much damage had been done beneath it. She knew enough to understand that the bleeding was not the only thing that mattered.

"Can you feel your fingers?"

He moved them slowly. Two responded less readily than the others.

She secured the dressing as Imani had shown her. When she finished, she remained kneeling in front of him, her hands resting on her thighs.

Roy looked at the road. A military vehicle passed the opening between the buildings. He waited for it to disappear, but another came into view from the opposite direction.

"We can't stay here."

Rachel nodded.

They crossed the remaining construction ground with considerable difficulty. The rain concealed very little. Lights from the elevated road shone across the wet surfaces, and from time to time a moving light appeared between the distant buildings.

At the far end of the service building they found a group of people waiting under a narrow shelter. They had been directed away from the hospital entrance and were trying to establish whether they could return. One man held a bag of food he had intended to deliver to his mother. A woman was speaking into a telephone, telling someone that she would be late.

Nobody asked Roy why he was limping.

Rachel asked the man with the bag whether there was a place nearby where they could sit out of the rain. He pointed toward a public concourse beyond the construction ground. There were shops there, he said, though he doubted that any of them would still be open.

They thanked him and joined the people walking in that direction.

Above them an aircraft traveled from one end of the district to the other. Roy felt Rachel's hand tighten around his.

He had spent years thinking about the things that a body such as his made possible. Now it was difficult for him to keep pace with an elderly man who was holding an umbrella in one hand and a shopping bag in the other.

The man stopped to let them pass.

Roy thanked him, too.

07 — AN OPERATION WITHOUT AN END

Vale received the report concerning the collapsed ceiling while an assistant was completing the paperwork for the transfer. The location of the target was no longer confirmed.

The report from the classified personnel was unusually brief. During an interruption caused by a structural failure, two civilian casualties had required assistance. The target had left the immediate area. M-04 had resumed his assignment after the medical team arrived.

Vale requested the names of the officers who had been present. He also requested the record of the structural failure. He did not ask how long M-04 had spent supporting the ceiling.

Deren heard the report from the other side of the table. He asked whether the injured employee had been transferred to a ward.

"Yes," an assistant told him. "She's being treated."

The colonel received a call from the joint staff. His description of the situation contained no reference to the employee or the patient who had been in the chair. He explained that the acquisition had been interrupted and was continuing beyond the original site.

When the call ended, Deren suggested that the hospital should be allowed to resume its normal work.

Vale agreed that military personnel could be withdrawn from areas no longer required for the operation. He did not agree to restore the hospital's independent control of the premises.

Sergeant Sato came to the administration building shortly afterward. Her sleeves were wet, and one knee of her uniform was covered in dust. She had helped the medical team move the injured employee.

She asked Deren whether anyone had seen Roy leave the grounds.

"We don't know where he is."

"Does that mean it's over here?"

Deren showed her the new instruction. The district operation had been extended. Other transport authorities and public institutions would receive notices concerning the target.

Sato read the first paragraph. Her expression changed when she reached the part concerning civilian assistance.

"That could include half the hospital."

"I know."

In the old diagnostic building, M-04 stood beside an opening in the failed ceiling while a hospital maintenance worker finished examining the damage. The woman in grey had left with the medical team. An officer approached and informed him of his next assignment.

M-04 acknowledged it.

The maintenance worker asked whether he had been injured. The replicant said that he had not. The man thanked him for what he had done, then returned to his examination of the building.

M-04 waited until the worker had finished speaking. Then he followed the officer outside.

08 — THE PRICE OF ANOTHER HOUR

The public concourse was colder than the hospital. Half of its shops were closed, and the heating in the pedestrian area had been turned off for the night. A cleaning machine moved between the empty tables of a small restaurant.

Roy sat on a bench beneath a screen displaying the departure times of buses. Every few minutes a new notice appeared. Services to the northern district had been suspended or redirected. Passengers were advised to consult the transport authority before continuing their journeys.

Rachel returned from a shop with water and a packet of simple dressings. She had paid more for them than she would have expected to pay anywhere else in the city.

She sat down beside him and placed the packet between them.

"We need to find somewhere you can rest."

Roy drank a little water. His left hand was trembling again.

He told her what he had seen in the diagnostic building. She listened until he had finished.

"He could have held me," Roy said. "Even with the ceiling coming down."

"Maybe."

"He didn't."

Rachel looked at the people waiting beneath the departure screen. "He had a choice between two things. We don't know why he chose the other one."

Roy considered that. He had no intention of turning what had happened into a story about his own victory. The classified replicants had demonstrated repeatedly that they were capable of stopping him. Nothing he had done that evening had established any reason to believe otherwise.

He asked whether Rachel still had the copies of the research observations.

She touched the inside of her coat. "Yes."

He was relieved. He was also aware that keeping those records with them meant keeping another reason for the government to find them.

The departure screen changed again. Several routes were removed from the list. The man seated at the next bench swore softly and began walking toward the exit.

Rachel watched him go. She said that they could no longer assume that a place they had been able to enter that morning would be accessible to them tomorrow.

Roy thought of the bed he had left, of Imani's warning, and of Adrian returning to the laboratory. He wished that the work they had begun could have purchased something more than the prospect of another experiment.

"We didn't lose the research," Rachel told him.

"No."

"We haven't lost everything."

For a moment he rested his head against the wall behind the bench. He could have fallen asleep there if the noise of the aircraft had not reached him through the glass roof.

Rachel took his hand.

They had left the hospital together. He understood now how little that fact guaranteed. It was possible that they would have to make decisions during the next few hours that neither of them would have considered that morning.

He looked at the door through which the last passengers were leaving.

They had gained another hour.

He did not know how many more the army would allow them.

END OF CHAPTER 08.