CHAPTER 06 — THE FIRST WITNESS

Expanded English reconstruction; not a recovered verbatim original

01 — A Broken Team

The Minister received increasingly unreliable reports: Null had refused destructive entry, Vector’s command authority was gone, Shade had dropped off the network, and Goliath was only just recovering. Chronos held the nominal command but would not answer. The Minister ordered Goliath back into service. He wanted compliance more urgently than he wanted an explanation.

The Minister watched five active statuses become a collection of failures. Null had rejected an unsafe order, Vector had lost official authority, Shade's communications had gone dark, and Chronos would not answer. Goliath alone was returning from reconstruction. The Minister took no interest in the philosophical implications of that change; he wanted a compliant weapon. Yet the old chain of command was already dissolving. Every operative had now encountered something that an instruction could not completely define.

The command center had begun to resemble an organization trying to hold its own pieces together. Every operative had been selected because the Ministry believed a particular strength could be made obedient. Yet once the operation required choices beyond their stated missions, those strengths became reasons to question the order. Null understood the hydraulic danger better than the Minister. Vector understood what collateral fire meant better than the Minister. Shade understood how a person might be treated as invisible and therefore disposable. Goliath, still on a repair bench,

understood what it meant to be given a body designed for one function and discover that function did not explain his life. The Minister called these failures of discipline. He never considered that they might be the first evidence that the team could exercise judgment.

02 — The Rebuilt Frame

Goliath's replacement load-bearing structure used independent redundant joints and smaller, tougher transfer assemblies. The new body answered the exact weakness Roy had exploited. Yet the giant remembered something his engineers had not analyzed: Roy had spared him. The coming rematch would decide whether recovery meant stronger muscles or a different use of choice.

Goliath tested his rebuilt legs against reinforced machinery. Independent load transfer paths prevented a single small joint from carrying the vulnerability Roy had exploited. The improvement fascinated him because it proved the problem had been engineering rather than destiny. His new body could learn from defeat. What he did not yet know was whether its owner could learn the harder lesson: the choice not to fight when a fight was no longer justified.

03 — An Old Memory Stick

Rachel sealed FIRST WITNESS in a protective container. Mara could not authenticate it remotely. Only a period Tyrell reader could test the original rights profile without endangering the protected contents. Roy knew someone had kept that medium through years of government changes. He was determined not to let it become another forgotten label in a destroyed laboratory.

Rachel placed the Memory Stick in a sealed case. The old medium seemed absurd among modern diagnostic panels, but that very obsolescence had preserved its authentication structure. Its contents were not safely accessible from ordinary networks. Adrian's physical MagicGate reader could verify the original rights profile without exposing it to contemporary governmental indexing. Roy demanded that they travel with both caution and speed. If the archive contained a witness, delay would only allow the Ministry another opportunity to erase it.

The little storage card lay in the evidence case like an object from a museum. Roy had expected the explanation of his lost eleven years to be hidden in his own nervous system, perhaps in a command that could unlock forgotten memory. Instead it had arrived on external media manufactured for an obsolete world. The thought comforted him slightly. Evidence did not have to be identical to experience. Someone might have preserved proof of an act without planting that proof inside the person most harmed by it. Rachel warned him that authentication was not the same as truth, but without authentication any government official could dismiss the file as fabrication. Adrian was therefore not simply a useful technician. He was a necessary link between testimony and the ability to prove that it had been preserved unchanged.

04 — A Sniper Without a Gun

Vector stared at a rifle that no longer accepted his identity. Shade proposed a strategy that required no live ammunition: telling the hired security personnel what the Ministry actually intended to do to Roy. For an operative built around perfect shots, the notion of withholding one became its own kind of discipline.

The abandoned maintenance rail line crossed portions of the city that no longer appeared in popular navigation systems. Rachel brought medical supplies, an independent power source, and the protected storage medium. Roy inspected a collapse near the southern end. It would stop a standard train, but the smaller service trolley could approach, and two people could pass on foot. The plan relied on old steel, a modest battery, and maps that were more honest about what they did not know than the Ministry's confident projections.

05 — Southbound

Roy and Rachel left through the obsolete freight network in a battery-powered service car. Rachel warned that his regulator could not survive a contest of maximum force. Roy said he had no intention of fighting an armored giant on the giant’s terms. They rode beneath the city while ordinary commuters above remained unaware of the political battle beneath their water supply.

Vector sat beside a rifle whose firing system no longer accepted him as its owner. Shade suggested that this was an opportunity rather than a punishment. For years he had used prediction to make other people's decisions final. Without that weapon he was required to notice the orders he had previously treated as data. A signal from Null warned of movement toward the southern access routes. Both agents understood that the government would follow. They considered how to obstruct that pursuit without becoming executioners in another uniform.

Vector stared at the unusable rifle with a peculiar sense of relief. In the space between receiving a command and carrying it out, he had always considered himself an instrument. His calculations were extraordinary and his doubts carefully excluded. Shade suggested a different use for his

knowledge of surveillance and communications: protecting the people the Ministry was about to ambush. The idea was technically uncomplicated, which made it difficult to dismiss. He could identify a convoy and expose its intended route without firing a shot. For a man who had spent a career narrowing futures to the point of impact, leaving the future open was an unfamiliar form of work.

06 — The Second Fight

Goliath stood across the rails. He allowed Rachel to withdraw behind a safety partition before challenging Roy. His new frame did not collapse under the old joint attack. The giant caught Roy in a crushing grip. Roy did not force the hand open. He rotated with the load and released an exposed wrist maintenance latch, temporarily interrupting the actuator’s linkage.

Roy and Rachel rode below the city while the streets above maintained the ordinary appearance of peace. Rachel tried to explain why she had accompanied him instead of staying at the plant. The archive was too connected to her past for her to delegate its interpretation. Roy told her that whatever secrets the records contained, he did not need someone else to decide whether he could bear the truth. When the rail trolley stopped, the darkness ahead resolved into the impossible bulk of Goliath waiting on the tracks.

07 — The Choice Not Taken

Roy landed free and could have attacked Goliath’s spine. He stepped back. The giant asked why. Roy replied that Goliath had fixed his earlier weakness and deserved to be treated as an opponent who could learn. The Ministry ordered another attack and authorized harm to Rachel. Goliath destroyed his communicator instead. He moved aside, letting them pass.

The second fight differed from the first in every important detail. Goliath's revised joints resisted familiar redirections. Roy's replacement regulator would not support the old brutal acceleration. Both combatants were forced to adjust. When the giant finally trapped Roy against his armored hand, Roy stopped opposing the grip and sought the service latch beneath the wrist casing. He released a maintenance connector rather than destroying the hand. The fingers opened. A defeated strategy had become a new form of restraint.

Roy's second duel with Goliath was noisier and more dangerous than the first. The new lower body could absorb redirections that once would have buckled it, while Roy's replacement regulator imposed a ceiling on every attempt to outrun the giant. It forced him to listen to the machine before committing to contact. When he finally reached the small maintenance release under the wrist, Goliath's grip opened and Roy landed awkwardly on the track. The giant could have renewed the fight. Instead he looked at the man who had spared him twice. He realized Roy had measured the improvements and respected them. No Ministry controller had included that possibility in the combat models. Respect was not a parameter Goliath knew how to answer with violence.

08 — Orders Without Ownership

Goliath remained standing, astonished by how little his body changed when he disobeyed. Vector, Shade, and Null had reached similar decisions by different paths. The Minister tried to revive ancestral compliance controls; the old registry now required witness authorization beyond executive rank. The fifth operative remained unreachable.

Goliath heard the Minister authorize harm to Rachel if she interfered. He looked from the woman in the trolley to the man in front of him. He

understood with unexpected clarity that following the order would force the fight into a different moral world. Roy was no longer an opponent demonstrating technique; he would become a protector fighting for someone's life. Goliath crushed his communicator and stepped aside. It was not that he had lost the ability to attack. He had discovered the ability to decline.

09 — Adrian’s Workshop

Adrian Tyrell opened the door of a workshop filled with physical readers, mechanical locks, and obsolete authentication modules. He recognized Roy, then the FIRST WITNESS medium. He sealed the doors and began an isolated MagicGate session. The archive authenticated. Its first recording showed the white room, C-05, and Rachel objecting to a continuity procedure conducted without demonstrated consent.

The Minister's subsequent attempt to restore the old obedience protocols encountered a requirement no executive override could satisfy: witness authorization. He demanded the FIRST WITNESS from a system that would not explain whether the witness was a credential, a record, or a person. Discovering that Roy was traveling toward Adrian Tyrell sharpened the fear behind his orders. What seemed to the public a hunt for dangerous property had become a race to secure a historical account of who had authorized a revival.

Adrian's workshop smelled of solder, archival paper, and tools that had survived their manufacturers. He recognized the Memory Stick's authentication profile but did not pretend its existence proved the contents were honest. The device could verify that the data had not changed under the protected rights structure. It could not tell them what the recorded person's life meant. When the image of a Roy-shaped man appeared, Adrian

checked the session data twice. Rachel became silent. Roy watched the man's face, paying less attention to the resemblance than to his posture before the camera. The face belonged to a person who expected interference. When he warned the next Roy not to trust the first supplied memory, the warning seemed directed at someone who might never remember having been warned.

10 — A Man With Roy’s Face

A second clip showed an earlier responsive continuity instance. He looked into the camera and said he remembered dying but did not remember consenting to return. He warned any future Roy not to trust the first memory supplied to him. The footage ended. Another record waited behind C-05 authorization. Roy understood that someone had lived in the gap he could not recollect, and that their wishes could not simply be assigned to him. — END OF CHAPTER —

Adrian welcomed Roy with the skepticism of a man who knew both the potential and the limitations of physical proof. He inserted the media into an original reader and permitted the rights profile to authenticate. A white room appeared, followed by testimony from a man with Roy's face who remembered dying but not consenting to another life. He warned any future Roy not to trust the first memories offered to him. The file ended before its implications could be resolved. A second witness record remained sealed behind C-05's authority.