CHAPTER 01
THE FIFTH SIGNATURE

BEFORE THE FIRST · English manuscript

01 — THE REPORT THAT COULD NOT BE TRUE

The public inquiry had been granted a room without a network connection and three locks whose keys belonged to three different people. Roy had come to appreciate the inconvenience. A door that took time to open gave everyone a chance to ask why it ought to be opened.

The record arrived in a gray evidence case, carried by the former minister Daniel Havel. No guards walked beside him. An independent advocate watched him set the case on the table and sign the custody sheet. The man had lost his official identity, but not the habit of putting his signature where it could do damage.

“An MBU-09 termination audit,” Havel said. “The order was issued before the charter vote.”

Roy did not touch the case. Across the table, Rachel checked the serial numbers against a paper ledger. Beside her sat Vector, whose expression sharpened at the mention of the unit's name. Chronos was upstairs helping a technician replace a shattered weather sensor. He had refused the hearing, saying he was tired of being counted.

“Who ordered it?” Roy asked.

“I signed the authorization. I was told the units had turned against their assigned mission.”

“They refused to kill me,” Roy said.

“I know the difference now.”

Havel opened the case. Five entries appeared on the audit sheet, one for each hunter: Goliath, Shade, Vector, Null, Chronos. The first four reported command rejection followed by inconclusive shutdown. The fifth was different.

CHRONOS — TERMINATION COMPLETE.

EXECUTION CONFIRMED. NEURAL CONTINUITY: ZERO.

Roy remembered the boy eating breakfast that morning. He remembered Chronos holding a cup between both hands, explaining that the rain had sounded a little late against the window.

“Then this is wrong,” Rachel said.

Vector studied the imprint. “The signature is real. That doesn't make the conclusion real.”

02 — A SECOND CLOCK

The council had learned how easily an authentic document could tell a false story. They laid the audit under three lamps, photographed the seal on physical film, and compared its time standard with independent plant records. None of those actions made the dead return. They made it more difficult for a living witness to be erased by a convenient file.

There were two timestamps on Chronos's entry. The first marked the release of the termination command. The second marked confirmation from the receiving unit itself, thirteen seconds later. Both bore a time code older than the government's recent command infrastructure.

“This is a legacy clock,” Vector said. “Its timing protocol was discontinued before MBU-09 was assembled.”

“Forgery?” asked Havel.

“Or an old mechanism connected to a new one. We cannot choose between them because one possibility feels less frightening.”

Null joined by an isolated speaker. He had traced no outgoing packet from Chronos during the recorded interval. An isolated receiver could have accepted the command; no ordinary return route accounted for its confirmation.

Roy listened to them build a set of unanswered questions. After years of being labeled an exception, he recognized the temptation to solve a person as though the person were a defective instrument.

“Where is he?” he asked.

“Roof level,” Rachel said.

“Then we ask him what he knows before we decide what happened to him.”

03 — THE BOY ON THE ROOF

Chronos was kneeling beside an open weather station when Roy reached the roof. The storm had passed east. Above the low buildings, the first clear strip of sky reflected in pools left by the rain.

“I know about the document,” the boy said without turning.

“Did anyone tell you?”

“No.” He adjusted a calibration screw. “You all became quiet at once.”

Roy sat on the wet ledge, leaving room between them. Chronos had the face and hands of someone much younger than the people who had built him. Roy had never known whether the apparent age meant anything to the person within it.

“Do you remember a shutdown?”

“I remember a room with no windows. The sound went away first.”

“What happened after?”

“I woke up where you found me.”

“Anything in between?”

Chronos tightened the screw until it clicked. “Sometimes I dream of a woman calling me Daniel. Sometimes I think I have only heard the name in another person's dream.”

Roy did not ask him to explain it. The boy had offered something private without being ordered to produce evidence.

“If someone tells you your life is impossible,” Roy said, “you don't have to prove them wrong before breakfast.”

Chronos gave a small smile. “That sounds like Rachel.”

“I've learned a few things.”

The repaired sensor woke. A line of measurements advanced across the screen, and for one instant every number froze. Chronos watched the display, his hand motionless. When the values resumed, Roy saw the boy had gone pale.

“That happened before,” Chronos whispered. “In the other room.”

04 — THE OLD PHOTOGRAPH

Adrian Tyrell had brought a packet of recovered personnel files to the municipal archive. He had expected them to concern contracts. Instead, one envelope bore the emblem of a research division that had closed long before EDEN existed.

The image inside showed J. F. Sebastian standing beside a younger man in a laboratory coat. The man's name had been written on the back in faded ink: DANIEL REED. A technical note described Reed as a specialist in synthetic neural tissue and replicant organ integration.

Rachel looked at the photograph and stopped breathing for a moment she later could not measure.

“I knew him,” she said.

Adrian glanced toward her. “You remember the laboratory?”

“A workbench with an adjustable lamp. He kept his notes on paper because he didn't trust the recording system. He always asked before touching a device someone else had been working on.”

“Are you certain?”

“I'm certain I possess the memory.” Rachel lowered the photograph. “You know better than to ask me whether that makes it history.”

The file placed Reed at Tyrell's facilities as Sebastian's junior research assistant. Several years later he had left for a competing replicant manufacturer. The personnel trail stopped shortly afterward, with a transport accident listed in a medical appendix.

Rachel read the date twice. Something about the arrangement of the numbers made her hands tremble.

“Chronos said someone called him Daniel,” Roy told her.

She stared at the young man's face. It was not the boy's face. There was no simple resemblance to supply an answer. Yet she remembered an expression, the wary patience of someone waiting for her to finish a question before speaking.

“That cannot be enough,” she said.

“No,” Roy replied. “It can be enough to investigate.”

05 — AN UNFINISHED RESCUE

The accident report was not hidden. It had simply been filed under a corporate name that no longer existed. A commuter vehicle had collided with a freight carrier during a power failure. Reed survived the initial impact. By the time rescuers reached him, several organs and parts of his nervous system had suffered irreversible damage by the standards of the day.

The hospital had obtained emergency permission to use experimental replicant-derived tissue. The procedure saved his life. What it did not establish was where treatment ended and redesign began.

There were surgical diagrams, consent amendments, and a series of dates separated by decades. Later operations replaced earlier implants. The surviving human tissue became less and less distinguishable in function from the engineered systems supporting it. At some point, a record stopped saying PATIENT and began saying CONTINUITY PARTICIPANT.

Rachel closed the file.

“Someone may have lived through all of this,” she said. “Or several people may have inherited the story of a man who did.”

Roy had spent enough of his life trying to answer that question for himself. “Either way, none of them became property because the hospital saved the first one.”

A second envelope held an unsigned request: DO NOT ASSIGN MY ORIGINAL NAME TO A FUTURE BODY WITHOUT CONSENT.

Neither Roy nor Rachel said the boy's military name aloud.

06 — A NAME GIVEN BY THE MILITARY

The oldest surviving military assessment made no claim to have invented Daniel Reed. It described a candidate with unusually deep accumulated technical memory, multiple reconstruction events, and a body selected for infiltration and low resource consumption. The candidate's civilian identity was restricted from ordinary unit records.

Designation: CHRONOS.

The name was a convenience to the military, not a title bestowed by history. Whoever authorized it had considered Reed's long succession of medical records an operational advantage. A small body that could cross maintenance passages unnoticed was more valuable to the program than a scientist's former life.

Vector read the report beside Roy.

“We knew him as Chronos,” he said. “We didn't know the name Daniel Reed. He never owed us that information.”

“He doesn't owe us an explanation now,” Roy said.

“But the people who put the switch inside him owe him one.”

For the first time that day, Roy felt something simpler than confusion. Anger could not answer the question of whether the boy's memories belonged to one uninterrupted life. It could answer the question of whether anyone had possessed the right to end that life by remote command.

07 — THE QUESTION HE WAS ALLOWED TO REFUSE

At dusk Rachel found Chronos in the workshop. She placed the photograph on the table, face down, and waited until he looked up.

“I think I knew someone whose name was Daniel Reed,” she said. “I have a photograph. You may look at it, or not.”

Chronos watched her for a long time. “Was he kind?”

“He could be impatient. He hated being interrupted when he was repairing delicate things.”

“That sounds ordinary.”

“It was.”

The boy turned the photograph over. His fingers came to rest beside Sebastian's sleeve. Nothing extraordinary happened. No flash of recovered memory, no hidden code unspooling across his eyes. He studied an unfamiliar adult face in silence.

“I remember the lamp,” he said at last. “But maybe you told me about it just now.”

“I didn't.”

He held her gaze. “Then I don't know what it means.”

“Neither do I.”

Rachel took a seat rather than reaching for him. The choice seemed to ease something in his shoulders. When he asked to keep a copy of the photograph, she said yes.

“You don't have to call me Daniel,” he added.

“I wasn't going to.”

08 — THIRTEEN SECONDS

The independent archive sealed the evidence before midnight. Havel's authorization would be reviewed; the medical records would remain protected until the person they might describe could decide what to release. The provisional charter had been built for precisely such inconvenient distinctions.

Roy returned to the first audit sheet. The fifth entry no longer appeared to him as a declaration about a machine. It was a claim about a person, written by an institution that had been allowed to confuse permission with power.

“Can we find the source of the return signal?” he asked Null.

“Not on the ordinary network. The confirmation originated through a physical channel older than the unit's command system. I can locate the junction, not what used it.”

“Where?”

“Beneath the former Tyrell laboratories.”

Roy looked toward the rain-dark windows. A few blocks away, Chronos was carrying his copied photograph back to his room. The city had already begun inventing explanations for the boy. Some would call him a survivor, others a replica, others evidence that no one had ever died at all.

He knew none of those words could replace the boy's own choice.

“Do not open it tonight,” Roy said. “Preserve the route. Ask Chronos whether he wants to come.”

Null acknowledged. The lights in the archive dimmed as the independent systems entered their night cycle.

On the back of the termination record, a mark that had been hidden beneath the binding came into view. It was the broken circle from the old Covenant archive. Beneath it, in handwriting rather than machine print, were three words:

ASK WHO RETURNED.

Roy did not mistake them for an answer.