CHAPTER 02
DANIEL REED

BEFORE THE FIRST · English manuscript

01 — THE DOOR BELOW

The service elevator beneath the former Tyrell complex had no floor numbers. Its buttons had been replaced by a single brass keyhole, polished by hands that should have died decades ago.

Roy waited beside the doors with Rachel, Null, and Chronos. The boy wore an ordinary raincoat, too large at the shoulders. He had asked to come after reading the part of the termination record that belonged to him. Roy had told him that asking did not obligate him to finish the journey.

“Will you stop if I say stop?” Chronos asked.

“All of us,” Roy replied.

Null turned the key. The elevator descended with a sound like an old ship settling into water. The shaft extended below the modern building's foundation, through a level that had been sealed when the laboratories were sold, and farther still into a narrow chamber lined with white ceramic tiles.

The first door was open. A second stood behind it, covered by a steel grille. On the grille someone had painted a small circle interrupted at its lowest point. The symbol matched the Covenant record; that alone proved nothing about who had painted it.

A lamp flickered on over the door.

“I know this place,” Chronos whispered.

Rachel watched him. “Do you remember coming here?”

“No. I know which lamp will go out next.”

The second lamp failed. Roy felt the temperature drop, though the instruments reported no change. Null raised a hand to halt the group.

There was no evidence yet that the boy had predicted anything impossible. The lamps could have been failing for years. But the timing frightened him, and Roy would not treat that fear as a demonstration.

“Do we go back?” Roy asked.

Chronos looked at the grille. “Not yet.”

02 — A WORKSHOP FOR TWO

Behind the grille lay a workshop scarcely large enough for two people. Its benches were low, its drawers labeled in a precise hand. A cracked aquarium stood beneath the window of an artificial day lamp. There was no fish inside, only a small wooden house, a wire ladder, and a mechanism that had once made the painted sun rise every twelve minutes.

Rachel touched the edge of a desk without opening its drawers.

“Sebastian made things like this,” she said. “Sometimes he gave his inventions names. Sometimes he apologized to them when they broke.”

On the opposite wall hung a photograph of three researchers standing before an incubator. The central figure was J. F. Sebastian. Beside him stood a young assistant wearing round spectacles. A third person had been cut away, leaving an irregular white margin.

“Daniel Reed,” Rachel said, identifying the assistant from the personnel image recovered the night before.

Chronos examined the picture. “He doesn't look like me.”

“No,” she said.

“Did you like him?”

“I remember being comfortable in a room with him. I can't tell you what that memory proves.”

Roy found a paper notebook wedged behind the aquarium. The first pages contained ordinary instructions for maintaining cultures in artificial growth media. Later pages were filled with calculations about damaged nerve pathways, tissue rejection, and the cost of replacing a living cell without interrupting the process around it.

Under one equation someone had written: REPAIR IS NOT THE SAME AS REPLACEMENT.

A second line had been added in darker ink: THAT DOES NOT MEAN THE PATIENT MUST REFUSE REPAIR.

The two statements did not contradict each other. Roy wondered how many years it had taken their author to understand that.

03 — THE NAME IN THE LEDGER

Null located the original maintenance ledger in a drawer protected from humidity. The paper identified Daniel Reed as a junior specialist assigned to Sebastian's group. His authorized work concerned genetic stability, engineered organ growth, and the repair of neural tissue. His departure from Tyrell preceded the transport accident by several years.

He had transferred to Helix Replicant Systems, an enormous manufacturer whose plants had since been absorbed by competitors. The merger records described thousands of patents and almost no people. Yet the signatures on the laboratory forms had survived because the equipment required physical certification.

“Why leave?” Roy asked.

Rachel read a letter addressed to Reed but never posted. Sebastian's handwriting wandered across the page.

You cannot spend your life asking permission to save a patient, he had written. I hope they let you build something useful. I hope they also let you decide when not to build it.

There was affection in the letter, and a warning. It explained neither the later accident nor the boy in the room.

A receipt beneath it showed that Reed had visited the workshop after leaving Tyrell. He had returned a specialized tissue sample and borrowed a test instrument. The signature on the receipt was unsteady, but the date was ordinary.

Chronos sat at the workbench. “I remember the sound of that instrument.”

“Are you sure?” Rachel asked.

“No. I remember someone telling me that I remember it. I don't know where the first memory begins.”

Roy closed the ledger. “You don't have to decide tonight.”

“I know. I keep thinking that if I don't decide, someone else will.”

04 — THE ROAD THAT BROKE

The accident had taken place outside Helix's eastern biotechnical plant during an electrical grid failure. A commuter vehicle struck an automated freight carrier. Three passengers died at the scene. Reed was taken to an emergency surgical unit with severe injury to the spinal cord, portions of the brain, and the organs that kept his surviving tissue alive.

He was not half human and half replicant before the collision. No one had built him for the purpose of testing a theory. The records described a man facing death and physicians attempting to preserve him.

The first operation used engineered organs derived from replicant research. Later treatment bridged damaged neural pathways with living artificial tissue. It was not a metallic skeleton under a human face. It was a body whose biological components had come from different origins and had to learn to function together.

The admission record contained one signed statement of consent. Subsequent changes were more troubling. One form had been signed during heavy sedation. Another authorized a procedure for which the patient had not yet regained the capacity to answer. A final note read: CONTINUITY PRESUMED IN THE INTEREST OF SURVIVAL.

Rachel laid the forms in separate folders.

“Some of this saved his life,” she said. “Some of it may have taken choices away from him.”

“The doctors didn't have time,” Null replied.

“Perhaps. That is something to examine, not a permanent permission to use the same reasoning decades later.”

Chronos stared at an illustration of the original spinal reconstruction. “Does it say he was grateful?”

“No,” Roy answered. “It says he survived the operation.”

For the first time since they entered the workshop, Chronos looked relieved. No one was asking him to be thankful for everything that had followed.

05 — A VISITOR FROM HELIX

Their examination triggered a silent alarm, not through a network but through a mechanical pressure switch embedded in the cabinet. A warning bell sounded in the corridor. Beyond the entrance, heavy shutters began closing over the elevator shaft.

Null moved to stop them. “This circuit is local. No external command.”

“Can you hold the doors?” Roy asked.

“For a minute. Less if the backup weight drops.”

Roy stepped beneath the first shutter and braced it with a hydraulic service bar. His reinforced body could have held it at full output once. Now he measured the force against a capacity he could no longer afford to

waste. The bar bowed.

An old projection activated across the workshop wall. It showed a woman in a Helix laboratory coat, her recorded face clouded by damaged pixels.

“If this station is opened under coercion,” the recording said, “the custody mechanism will seal all records pending an independent witness.”

“We have witnesses,” Rachel replied, though the recording could not hear her.

The system waited for two physical attestations. It required a signatory who had known Reed before the accident and a person whose independent standing was not derived from Helix or Tyrell.

Rachel looked at Roy. “It was designed to prevent a company from claiming the patient on its own authority.”

“And now it's trapping us,” he said.

Chronos crossed to the desk, found a fountain pen, and placed it between them. “You don't need my name on the form?”

“No,” Rachel said. “You need to be allowed to refuse the form.”

Rachel signed as a witness to the historical identity. Roy signed as a witness to the current person's right to review the record. The shutters stopped. Null removed his hand from the emergency lever.

The recording resumed: “No transfer of ownership has been certified.”

For a moment nobody spoke. In the old corporate world, that sentence had required an entire machinery of safeguards to survive.

06 — THE LIVES BETWEEN

The final cabinet held a narrow set of treatment summaries spanning more than four decades. They documented successive reconstructions and biological replacements. Each new chart referred to the patient by the name of a former chart, and each carried qualifications about what had been retained, repaired, or copied.

The earliest described continuity of the surviving biological person. The later reports did not. They described reconstructed memories, inherited habits, and the uncertain persistence of subjective experience. At least one intermediate patient had recorded a refusal of further reconstruction. The documentation ended at the refusal and resumed years later under a designation, not a name.

“Did they disobey him?” Chronos asked.

“We don't know,” Rachel said. “We cannot assume they obeyed either.”

There was no clean line in the evidence between patient and successor. There was also no proof that the boy possessed the same uninterrupted awareness as the research assistant in the photograph.

“I wanted this to be simpler,” Chronos said.

“So did I,” Roy replied.

“You think I'm Daniel Reed?”

“I think the people who built your body used records tied to Daniel Reed. I think you have memories you did not ask for and questions you should be able to ask.”

“That's not an answer.”

“No. It's what I can say without deciding your life for you.”

Chronos rested his hands on the closed cabinet. He looked very young, but the gesture suggested long practice in keeping his fingers still while difficult news was delivered.

“Then I want to keep the records,” he said. “I don't want to release them yet.”

07 — THE MAN WHO WAS THERE

Rachel asked permission before showing Chronos the letter Sebastian had never sent. He read it twice. When he reached the warning about deciding when not to build, he turned the paper over as though an explanation might be written on its back.

“I remember being angry with him,” he said.

“What about?” Rachel asked.

“I don't know. I remember an argument about a door. One of us said it should never lock from the outside.”

Rachel looked at the workshop entrance. The shutter's emergency control was on the inside, within reach of anyone trapped there. Sebastian's original workshop had been made for small, vulnerable creatures that needed a way out.

“I remember that argument,” she said quietly. “I was there.”

Chronos raised his eyes.

“I can tell you what happened,” Rachel continued, “but I won't use my memory to make you accept mine as yours.”

He asked her to tell it anyway. She spoke about two young researchers repairing a faulty latch and Sebastian insisting that the smallest inhabitant of the workshop should be able to leave without asking a larger one for permission. Daniel had complained that the design would make the building less secure. Sebastian had answered that security which could not be left was another name for a cage.

Chronos laughed once. He did not say he remembered. The sound was enough.

Roy listened from the doorway. The story did not prove that Daniel and Chronos were one life. It proved that someone had once defended a small freedom in this room, and that the argument still mattered.

08 — THE RECORD UNDER THE FLOOR

When the independent archive received their sealed copies, it found that the workshop's oldest inventory did not account for the weight of the floor beneath the incubator. A hidden mechanical drawer lay under the tiles. Null opened it with a tool rather than a remote command.

Inside was a small metal cylinder bearing the broken-circle mark. A paper strip wrapped around it contained a hand-written date earlier than the military's formation and far later than Reed's first operation.

Rachel checked the ink and paper. She could verify their composition, not the truth of what they said.

The strip read: THE FIFTH RETURN WAS NOT AUTHORISED BY US.

Roy felt Chronos beside him.

“Does that mean someone brought me back?” the boy asked.

“It means someone wrote those words,” Roy said. “We still have to find out who and why.”

A faint vibration passed through the floor. Outside, the rain struck the sealed shafts in uneven rhythms. Chronos watched the metal cylinder without reaching for it.

“Can it stay closed?” he asked.

“Yes.”

“Then leave it closed until I decide.”

Roy placed the cylinder in an evidence container and marked the seal in front of Rachel and Null. He did not open it. The choice cost them an answer, perhaps an important one. For the first time that night, Roy understood the cost as part of the investigation rather than an obstacle to it.

They rode the elevator up at dawn. The city was running its water pumps under the provisional charter. In a public square, workers were replacing an old identity scanner with a service terminal that accepted appeals. Nothing in the city's appearance acknowledged that a child's history might reach farther back than the institution which had named him.

Chronos kept Sebastian's unsent letter folded in his pocket. He had not chosen a name. He had chosen a door he could open himself.