CHAPTER 03
THE ACCIDENT

BEFORE THE FIRST · English manuscript

01 — THE OTHER SIDE OF THE ROAD

The accident report had been written to close a case, not to tell a life. It listed wet pavement, a failed traffic signal, a freight carrier running on emergency guidance, and the names of the dead. Daniel Reed survived, according to the final line. The record did not ask what survival meant to him.

Roy read it in the temporary council's evidence room while Rachel examined the paper copy brought from the workshop. Outside, the morning service queues stretched past the building's windows. People still needed water and medicine. The city's argument about who counted had not stopped for their investigation.

Chronos sat across from them, his feet unable to reach the floor. He had been quiet since asking them to keep the metal cylinder sealed. When Roy placed the accident map between them, the boy reached out and rotated it ninety degrees.

“The truck came from here,” he said, touching a side road that the official diagram marked as closed.

“Do you remember it?” Roy asked.

“I see it when I close my eyes. That isn't the same answer.”

Rachel did not correct him. The date on the map was older than the military body in which he now lived. There might be a memory, an implanted reconstruction, or a story repeated so often it felt like sight. Every possibility mattered. None gave them permission to decide for him.

02 — THE DRIVER

One witness to the crash remained alive: Mara Senn, formerly a traffic dispatcher, now retired from the city grid. She agreed to meet them at a municipal archive on the condition that the boy not be asked to demonstrate what he remembered. Roy accepted without negotiation.

Senn came carrying a paper notebook wrapped in plastic. She had been the first dispatcher to notice that the freight carrier's emergency transmitter was silent. Her notebook documented a sequence of ordinary mistakes: a disabled road sensor, a maintenance crew sent to the wrong junction, an emergency route that remained open in the computer after a concrete barrier had been removed.

“No conspiracy,” she said. “At least none I saw. The kind of failure nobody wants to own because everyone owns a piece of it.”

She showed Rachel a sketch made from the scene. Its angle matched the correction Chronos had made to the map. Rachel felt his attention sharpen beside her.

“Was there a boy?” Chronos asked.

“Not at the accident,” Senn answered. “Only a young man in a laboratory badge, and people trying to keep him breathing.”

Chronos nodded. The distinction hurt him, and he seemed grateful for it.

03 — THE SIGNATURE THAT HELD

The emergency operation began before Reed's employer could send representatives. Surgeons first repaired what they could using conventional treatment. When his organs failed, they requested experimental tissues already approved for certain replicant applications but not for human reconstruction. A physician wrote a conditional request and signed it under her own name.

Her signature was still legible. The record was not a clean story of corporate theft. Somebody had risked a career to save a patient whose body could not survive the usual procedures. Later executives used that act of mercy as the first link in a chain of claims over him.

Roy compared the operation dates with the continuity ledger. The first transplant did not require a copied mind. Daniel's damaged brain remained alive. The replacement tissues supported surviving pathways while they healed or changed around them. There had been an ordinary recovery period, with pain, therapy, anger, and days when his hands shook too badly to write.

“Does that mean he was still himself?” Chronos asked.

“It means he was awake to ask that question,” Rachel said. “It does not tell us when anyone stopped listening.”

Senn's notebook recorded the end of the rescue shift in one plain sentence: Patient asked for his glasses. That detail stayed with Roy longer than the diagrams.

04 — HALF A BODY

At Helix, the repairs became an industry. A surviving consent document authorized the replacement of a damaged kidney and a section of nerve tissue. A later document treated that consent as permission for indefinite reconstruction. The difference between the two sentences had been worth millions to the company.

The medical drawings showed a human body and replicant-derived living tissue joined by vascular and neural bridges. They did not show gears or armor. Months of infection, rejection, adaptation, and painstaking rehabilitation lay between the drawings. Even successful tissue could change the way a person sensed heat, pressure, or pain.

A photograph showed Daniel at a window with a support frame around one arm. He looked older than the graduate researcher in Sebastian's workshop. Rachel stood beside him in the picture. She studied her own face without claiming the circumstances of the image were complete in her memory.

“I visited him,” she said. “I remember a hospital smell. I remember being frightened of asking whether he recognized me.”

Chronos leaned closer, but did not touch the photograph.

“Did he?”

“He asked why I was standing in the doorway. Then he made room for me.”

For a moment the research records became a history of two people, not a dispute about ownership.

05 — THE SECOND RECOVERY

Years after the accident, another failure occurred. A section of reconstructed neural tissue began to degrade. Helix developed a procedure that copied functional patterns before replacing the failing cells. The procedure preserved skills, speech habits, and many autobiographical memories. Its reports used the word continuity as if naming a result could prove it.

There was no recording of Daniel's subjective experience crossing the procedure. There was only a man entering treatment and someone answering to his name afterward. On the form, a technician had underlined the phrase successful transfer twice.

Chronos read that phrase aloud and then set the page down.

“I could have been the second one,” he said.

“You could,” Roy answered.

“Or the first. Or somebody who was told about both.”

Roy knew the temptation to comfort him with certainty. He had spent too long asking others to stop doing that to him. Instead he moved the evidence closer, so the boy could see the uncertain dates for himself.

“We can find out what happened to the records,” Roy said. “We cannot turn them into a memory you don't have.”

Chronos looked down at his own hands. “Then don't call it proof that I lived forever.”

06 — THE COMPANY'S PROPERTY

A Helix lawyer had once argued that the materials used to keep Daniel alive remained company assets. The claim started with medical devices and ended with access to his labor, movements, and future treatments. It had survived two mergers because no one had challenged it while the company controlled the drugs and tissues his body needed.

Rachel copied the relevant clauses for the independent review panel. Roy found a different document: Daniel's resignation, written years after the first operation. He had refused to conduct experiments on patients who could not withdraw their consent. The company acknowledged receipt but did not release him from its clinical supervision.

“He tried to leave,” Chronos said.

“According to this, yes,” Roy replied.

“Was he allowed?”

“No.”

The answer was small, and it changed the room. The later military recruitment file had described Chronos as a willing specialist whose previous lives were irrelevant to his assignment. If Daniel's autonomy had already been compromised, that language required examination, not trust.

07 — THE MEMORY OF A SOUND

A sealed audio cylinder accompanied the final medical file. It held a recording made during Daniel's first rehabilitation. The technician asked him to identify familiar sounds: running water, a train crossing a bridge, the slow click of a laboratory timer.

Chronos asked them to play only the final sound.

The speaker produced three dry clicks, a pause, and one more. The boy closed his eyes. Outside the archive a lift shuddered into motion. For several seconds no one spoke.

“I knew the pause,” Chronos said. “Before it happened.”

Roy checked the equipment. The recording contained the same sequence each time. A memory of a sound was not a miracle. It could have reached Chronos through the military's training data, through one of the earlier reconstructions, or by other means they had not yet identified.

“Is it enough?” Rachel asked him.

“To make me want to hear the rest,” he said. “Not to make me call the voice mine.”

They agreed to let him decide when to continue. The old recording stayed on the table, neither buried nor used as a test he was required to pass.

08 — WHAT THE REPORT OMITTED

At dusk Senn returned with one last piece of paper. The ambulance log had been copied badly, and a line along the bottom was missing from the official file. Her original notebook preserved it: a sealed vehicle had reached the scene before the police cordon, and a woman from Helix had asked for the patient's name before offering the surgeons their experimental supplies.

The entry did not prove the crash was planned. It did prove that Helix knew more about its response than its surviving account admitted. The same woman's initials appeared beside the second recovery procedure, twenty years later.

Rachel placed the initials beside the old personnel files. “Someone stayed with this case a very long time.”

“Or the company kept using her authorization,” Null said. “We need the original signatures.”

Chronos rose from his chair. “Then ask her. If she's alive. If she isn't, find what she left.”

Roy looked at the boy. This was not a demand for an answer to be put inside him. It was a choice to investigate a chain of decisions that had shaped his body without his knowledge.

They left the archive as the evening water stations opened for residents without valid identities. Rachel carried the files, Roy the sealed audio cylinder. Chronos walked between them, not ahead and not behind.

Above the eastern district, an obsolete Helix sign blinked once and went dark. The next lead was not hidden in the distant past. It had an address, and someone might still be waiting there.