CHAPTER 04
HALF HUMAN

BEFORE THE FIRST · English manuscript

01 — THE WEIGHT OF A HAND

Daniel Reed had once counted the years by birthdays. After the accident, the doctors counted them by graft revisions. The first time he lifted a glass without spilling, there had been three people in the room, each watching a different display. The glass weighed less than the medical instruments recording the achievement. He remembered being angry that nobody looked at his face.

Chronos read the account sitting beside Roy at the independent archive. He was wearing the same borrowed coat he had worn during the investigation of the crash. Its sleeves covered his hands. Beside the testimony lay a diagram of Daniel's reconstructed arm, where living human muscle joined laboratory-grown replicant tissue through a bridge of nerves.

“Did it hurt?” he asked.

“The records say it did,” Rachel answered. “They also say he learned to use it.”

“Records can say anything.”

“Yes,” she said. “That's why we're reading the testimony he gave when he could still say no.”

Daniel's own words were less orderly than the surgery reports: Sometimes I can feel the spoon before I touch it. Sometimes I cannot feel the cup after it burns me. Please stop asking whether the arm is superior. I would like to eat breakfast.

Roy watched Chronos read the sentence a second time. The child did not look shocked. He looked relieved to encounter a voice that had been annoyed, frightened, and ordinary.

02 — THE FIRST BOUNDARY

The archive contained two descriptions of Daniel's postoperative body. One was a clinical inventory: preserved human tissue, repaired organs, replicant-derived vascular grafts, synthetic neural scaffolds. The other was a contract prepared by Helix Biologics. It divided those same tissues into licensed materials and proprietary procedures. On the clinical pages Daniel was a patient. On the contract he was becoming a place where the company stored its property.

Adrian examined the contract under a lamp. “They didn't claim to own Daniel,” he said. “They claimed the right to withdraw support from anything they supplied.”

“What difference did that make?” Roy asked.

“Almost none, if he couldn't survive withdrawal.”

Rachel placed beside it an older instruction written in Sebastian's hand. It concerned a damaged laboratory animal whose implanted cells had been kept alive after the procedure ended. The instruction was simple: A successful repair does not confer ownership of the repaired subject.

“Was he writing about Daniel?” Chronos asked.

“Years before the accident,” Rachel said. “That is what makes it useful. It wasn't written to win this argument.”

Roy remembered the provisional charter. The city had learned to write rights around a person whose official identity was uncertain. Daniel had lived inside the older version of the same trap: a body could need a device without becoming its manufacturer's possession.

03 — A STRANGER IN THE MIRROR

Rehabilitation photographs had survived on physical film, spared by a cost-cutting decision that nobody later thought to reverse. Daniel appeared in them at uneven intervals. His hair thinned. Scars faded and returned in different places. He was always older than the young researcher in the Tyrell group photograph, and always recognizably that man.

Until the fourth series.

Here the proportions of his face had changed. The clinical caption called it corrective reconstruction. The date fell eighteen years after the accident. Chronos stared at the image of a middle-aged Daniel looking at himself in a hospital mirror.

“I remember a mirror,” he said. “It was on the other side of a white room.”

“Is that this room?” Rachel asked.

“I don't know.”

His answer mattered more than a confident guess would have. He had been trained by MBU-09 to produce classifications on demand. Now he was allowed to leave a question open.

A note beneath the photograph, in Daniel's handwriting, stated: The face belongs to me only in the sense that I have to live with it. It is not the face my mother knew. It is not a counterfeit, either.

Roy thought of his own reconstructed body. The city demanded a single word: original or copy. Daniel's sentence refused the choice without offering an easy substitute.

04 — WHAT FIFTY PERCENT MEANT

A chart from the early treatment team carried the number fifty in a thick red circle. It had been copied into later corporate presentations as if half of Daniel were human and the other half manufactured, divided by a neat line. Rachel turned the page over. On the reverse the physician had explained that the figure described a planning estimate, not a measurement of personhood. The brain was not a jar that could be weighed against a leg; tissues exchanged signals across boundaries that moved with every operation.

“People like simple numbers,” Vector said over a secured audio channel. He was helping the council audit the old military procurement system, not taking part in their decisions. “They can build commands around them.”

“They can also build excuses,” Roy replied.

Chronos leaned forward. “Then don't say I'm half human.”

Rachel looked at him. “What would you say?”

“I don't know yet. But a fraction is not a name.”

They agreed to preserve the original medical estimates and the doctor's qualification together. Removing the number would make the record less honest. Printing it without the qualification would repeat the injury Daniel had described.

That afternoon, a volunteer from the newly established patient review council asked permission to cite the file. Chronos read the request himself and said yes to the physician's note, no to the clinical images. The volunteer wrote both answers down.

05 — THE TREATMENT THAT NEVER ENDED

Daniel had been discharged from the hospital. Helix had never entirely discharged him from treatment. Each new graft required a drug adjusted to his changing biology, a calibration available only at company facilities, or a replacement component whose specifications were deliberately unpublished.

An old letter from Daniel requested enough information to obtain emergency care elsewhere. Helix's answer praised his resilience and declined to release proprietary design data.

Roy put the letters side by side. Their politeness made the threat harder to notice, not smaller.

“Did he ever leave?” Chronos asked.

“He left his job,” Adrian said. “He left buildings. But he carried the company's permission structure inside his body.”

Rachel found the first genuine breach in that structure. A pair of laboratory technicians had copied repair protocols to a paper binder and smuggled it to an independent clinic. Neither had tried to steal Daniel's records. They had tried to make certain that one missed payment would not kill him.

Their names had been struck from the payroll the next morning. Daniel had later arranged anonymous support for their families.

“He wasn't a passive experiment,” Rachel said.

“No,” Roy agreed. “And he wasn't free merely because he learned to survive.”

06 — AN OLD FRIEND'S VOICE

The most difficult record was not a surgery. It was a short audio message Rachel had sent years after Daniel's accident, when the research company had stopped answering her inquiries. The recording was damaged, and Adrian could recover only a few phrases. She had asked whether Daniel still wanted visitors. She had said that remembering someone did not entitle her to their time. At the end she had laughed at something he had written back, though his reply was missing.

Rachel listened once and then asked Adrian to stop.

“I don't remember sending it,” she said.

Chronos did not rush to rescue her from the admission.

“I remember your voice,” he said at last. “Not this message. Just the way you used to pause before you disagreed with someone.”

Rachel turned toward him. “And I remember a young man who always moved the conversation toward the person everyone else forgot.”

“Was that Daniel?”

“It may have been. I won't make you perform him to prove it.”

Outside, the rain pressed against the archive windows. Roy realized that the past had begun to feel less like a mystery they would solve and more like a relationship they would need to treat carefully.

07 — THE BODY THE ARMY RECEIVED

A final folder carried the transition from Helix's medical program to the military program that eventually called its subject CHRONOS. It did not contain a dramatic transfer order. It contained a chain of amendments. A research partnership became a security contract; a continuity case became an evaluation asset; the name Daniel Reed was moved from the primary subject field to a historical annotation.

“That's where they erased him,” Roy said.

“Not entirely,” Null replied from the disconnected terminal. “They kept him where an auditor would be least likely to look.”

The army had wanted the expertise preserved in the continuity records: a specialist who could understand living machine tissue, detect its failure, and enter confined infrastructure that older combat frames could not reach. The child-sized body came later. So did the call sign CHRONOS.

The file also showed that the military's control hardware was installed separately from the biological reconstruction systems. That separation explained how the authorities could certify the destruction of a military unit while remaining ignorant of earlier medical records. It did not explain why the boy was standing beside Roy today.

Chronos traced the name printed beneath the earliest photograph: DANIEL REED.

“Don't change it back,” he said.

Roy waited.

“Not yet. Daniel was real. But I'm here, too.”

08 — A CHOICE NOT TO MEASURE

The group left the archive before nightfall. At the service entrance, a worker was repairing a damaged ramp and asked if someone could hold a heavy panel. Roy helped lift it without using his full available output. Chronos held the bolts and passed them one by one. No one asked where his body came from.

When the repair was done, the worker offered them tea. Chronos accepted and waited for it to cool. He tasted it with the careful uncertainty of someone whose senses might have been calibrated by engineers and still belonged to him when he used them.

“Did you find out if you're Daniel?” Roy asked as they walked back toward the river.

“I found out people kept deciding what he was worth,” Chronos said. “And he kept telling them what he wanted.”

“That doesn't answer it.”

“No. You said not every question needs a verdict before I can live.”

A message arrived from the independent panel. Helix's surviving successor had agreed to release a single sealed treatment chronology under supervision. It covered the years between Daniel's last documented human recovery and the first military designation of CHRONOS. No one had yet opened it.

Chronos asked Roy to bring Rachel when they did. He did not ask for the file to be opened without him.

Across the river, evening lamps came on along the repaired public taps. Somewhere beyond the city's records there remained an older message claiming an origin before the first. Tonight, Roy let that immense claim wait. Beside him walked someone with a smaller and more urgent question: what had happened to Daniel Reed, and who had been allowed to decide what survived?

Chronos carried the sealed request in his own hands.