A DIFFERENT PATH

01 — THE ADDRESS ON THE LETTER

The address belonged to a clinic that was no longer supposed to exist. Helix had closed its public offices twenty-three years earlier, yet someone still paid the electricity bill for the building on Mercer Street. A narrow blue light showed through the frosted windows when Roy, Rachel, and Chronos arrived shortly after sunrise.

The building was not fortified. A delivery rider leaned against the wall eating breakfast. Across the street, a vendor opened a stall beneath a leaking awning. Roy found the lack of defenses more troubling than a line of armed guards. It meant the people inside believed they had other means of keeping intruders away.

Chronos carried the sealed treatment chronology beneath his coat. He had insisted upon bringing it himself. The independent review panel had granted the three of them permission to examine the former patient records on condition that none of the names be made public without consent.

A woman in a plain gray uniform opened the door before they knocked. She looked from Rachel to Roy and finally to the boy.

“I was told the patient might come,” she said.

“What patient?” Chronos asked.

The woman studied him for a moment. “That's what I was hoping you could tell me.”

She introduced herself as Mara Senn, not as a doctor or a company representative but as the caretaker of the last independent Helix medical repository. She had been a junior records clerk when Daniel Reed was alive in his first reconstructed body. The years had bent her shoulders, but her eyes remained sharp.

“There was a name on the old appointment card,” she said. “Daniel Reed. Nobody ever crossed it out.”

Chronos did not reach for the card. “I haven't said that's my name.”

“Then I won't use it for you.”

She stepped aside. He entered because he chose to.

02 — BEFORE THE ACCIDENT

The first thing Mara showed them was not a medical file. It was an ordinary resignation letter, dated years before the accident and addressed to the Tyrell Corporation. Its paper had yellowed at the fold, and the ink had faded around the signature. Daniel Reed had asked to be released from a research assignment

conducted under J. F. Sebastian.

Rachel recognized Sebastian's annotation in the margin: GOOD HANDS. ASKS TOO MANY QUESTIONS. DON'T LOSE HIM.

She touched the paper lightly. “He wrote that about people he trusted.”

“Then why did Daniel leave?” Roy asked.

Mara opened the accompanying memorandum. Tyrell's laboratories had begun treating the planned life span of a replicant as a contractual requirement rather than a biological limitation. Daniel's research involved the instability of engineered organs after repeated regeneration. He argued that a treatment capable of extending a subject's life should not be locked away to protect a product cycle.

“It wasn't a heroic resignation,” Mara said. “He applied to another company, negotiated a salary, complained about his office, and left. Most of the people involved forgot the argument.”

The competing firm, Helix Biologics, promised him an independent medical division. Its proposal used words he wanted to believe: patient access, continuity of care, regenerative independence. The promises were real enough to attract him. Whether the board ever intended to honor them was another matter.

“Did Sebastian try to stop him?” Chronos asked.

“No,” Rachel said. “He wrote a recommendation.”

Mara produced a second page. There, in Sebastian's quick uneven handwriting, was a sentence Daniel had underlined years later: LET HIM FIND OUT WHAT KIND OF SCIENTIST HE WANTS TO BE.

Chronos read it twice. “That's different from telling him what he was.”

Roy watched Rachel fold her hands. The young assistant she remembered had been granted the freedom to leave. Much later, after a car struck him on a wet road, another company had claimed that keeping him alive entitled it to keep him.

03 — THE DOOR THAT STAYED OPEN

Helix had not been founded as a prison. The early photographs showed shared workshops, open examination rooms, and patients teaching engineers how their new limbs failed during ordinary tasks. Daniel appeared in one image balancing a tray of cups with both hands, smiling because the demonstration had finally made a committee listen.

Then the photographs changed. The corridors grew narrower. The doors acquired biometric readers. The patient advisory board disappeared from the minutes, replaced by a permanent office of product security.

Mara unlocked the repository's inner room with a brass key. “Security still expects a network credential,” she said. “This lock doesn't answer to the network.”

Inside stood a workbench covered with hand-labeled glass slides. A sealed cabinet held prototypes of living neural interfaces, each stored in fluid that had been replaced by human hands rather than an automated pump. Here the company had once tried to make a replacement organ compatible with tissue grown by rival manufacturers.

“Daniel wrote these instructions?” Chronos asked.

“Yes. He designed a protocol that could be understood outside Helix.”

“That would threaten their business,” Roy said.

“It did.”

Mara handed him an unsigned internal note. The directors had ordered all external compatibility tests stopped. A month later the company's medical division was folded into a military procurement program.

Chronos looked around the room. He had expected a secret more complicated than a locked door and a missing committee. The records offered something worse: a series of ordinary decisions made by people who could have chosen differently.

“Why keep this room?” he asked.

“Because the doors in the new wing stopped opening for people who couldn't pay,” Mara answered. “Somebody had to leave one unlocked.”

04 — A SIGNATURE WITHOUT A BODY

At noon an alarm sounded in the corridor. Not a siren, only a dry mechanical bell attached to a pressure sensor. Mara went pale.

“They've found the repository,” she said.

Two contractors in civilian coats entered the lobby. Their credentials identified them as representatives of a company that had inherited Helix's medical patents. They carried a preservation order authorizing them to collect every original document associated with an unnamed continuity subject.

Roy read the order and saw that the patient's name had been replaced by an inventory number. “You have a claim to the records,” he said, “not to the person they describe.”

One contractor raised his hand toward the control panel. Null, monitoring from an isolated vehicle outside, warned Rachel that the panel had just received a remote shutdown request. The entrance doors locked. A refrigeration unit began to warm.

“Destroying evidence is a curious form of preservation,” Rachel said.

The contractor did not deny it. “Those materials are unstable. Only licensed personnel can maintain them.”

Mara pointed at the handwritten maintenance logs. “I've kept them stable for thirty-one years.”

Roy could have forced the doors. Instead he asked Null to record every change to the refrigeration system and called the independent panel's emergency clerk. It took four minutes for the clerk to issue an order preventing removal or destruction of the materials. The four minutes felt longer than a fight.

The contractors retreated when a municipal witness arrived carrying a physical evidence seal. Their departure did not make the room safe. It proved that the company had been willing to let its own records decay rather than surrender control of them.

Chronos stood beside the warming cabinet, one hand against its glass. “They don't even know what they're trying to kill,” he said.

“Maybe they do,” Roy replied. “That's why we need the originals.”

05 — THE PATIENT’S TERMS

With the refrigeration restored, Mara showed them a document that had never appeared in the corporate chronology. Daniel had written it during his first years of rehabilitation, after discovering that each new operation required him to sign an increasingly broad research authorization.

I AGREE TO TREATMENT, the first line stated. I DO NOT AGREE TO OWNERSHIP.

The remaining pages were less memorable and more precise. Daniel wanted independent medical review, access to the specifications of any tissue installed in his body, and the right to refuse procedures without losing routine care. He wanted copies of his own records. Most of all, he wanted the company to stop describing future versions of him as equipment it had yet to deliver.

A stamped refusal followed the document. The board had considered his request incompatible with its security obligations.

“Was this before he chose to leave Helix?” Rachel asked.

“Long before,” Mara answered. “He kept trying to negotiate.”

Chronos lifted his gaze. “If he was so clever, why didn't he build another body somewhere else?”

“Because he was sick,” Mara said. “Because knowing how an organ works doesn't mean you have a factory. Because a brilliant person can still be frightened and tired.”

The boy looked down at his small hands. Roy understood the temptation to make Daniel a genius who had planned his own centuries of survival. It would be easier than admitting how many of his choices had been made under threat.

“Did he ever get his records?” Chronos asked.

Mara smiled without amusement. “A few pages. He brought them here.”

On the final sheet Daniel had written by hand: IF ANOTHER PERSON READS THIS IN MY NAME, ASK THEM WHAT THEY WANT. DO NOT TELL THEM WHAT I WANTED.

Chronos folded the sheet and asked Mara if he could make a copy. He did not ask to keep the original.

06 — THE SECOND RESIGNATION

Daniel's first resignation had taken him from Tyrell to Helix. His second had taken him nowhere. It was addressed to the head of Helix medical research and dated after the company had transferred most of its staff into a defense program.

He had discovered that patients whose memory tests were inconclusive were being entered into a category called continuing assets. The classification let Helix bill its military partner for maintenance on bodies no longer attached to a person with recognized legal standing. The people remained in treatment; their consent did not travel with their records.

Daniel refused to participate.

The reply informed him that his resignation had been accepted but that his clinical dependencies made independent residence medically inadvisable. He could leave the laboratory. He could not obtain the supplies required to survive without returning to a Helix facility.

“That's why he ended up in the military contract,” Roy said.

“That's how the file tells it,” Rachel answered. “But we still don't know whether he ever agreed to become a soldier.”

Mara reached beneath the desk and brought out a recording device. “He left this when he learned the transfer was coming.”

She played a voice, tired but steady, reading a list of items to be sent to independent physicians. Nothing in it sounded like a legendary mind awaiting immortality. He stumbled over a serial number, corrected himself, and asked that the nurses who had helped him not be punished.

Near the end, he added: If you hear my voice on another machine, don't assume I put it there.

Chronos asked Mara to stop the recording. He sat alone for several minutes, then asked to hear that final sentence again.

“I don't remember saying it,” he said.

“You don't have to,” Rachel replied.

“But it sounds like something I might say now.”

“That matters,” she said. “It just doesn't settle everything.”

07 — WHAT HE LEFT BEHIND

The old clinic contained no perfect map of Daniel's later bodies. Several transfer years were missing. One container labeled biological substrate was empty. Another held a fragment of an early neural interface, its

contacts corroded beyond repair. The gap between this room and the military's earliest CHRONOS file remained wide enough to hide a dozen decisions.

Mara admitted that she had once been instructed to destroy the patient ledgers. She had refused, then spent decades afraid that refusal would be discovered. “I used to think saving the papers was the same as helping him,” she said. “It wasn't enough.”

“No,” Chronos said gently. “But it gave us something to ask about.”

The independent panel ordered that the room be transferred to a public trust. The equipment stayed where it was until a medical team could verify that moving it would not ruin what remained. There would be hearings, witnesses, and appeals. The process would be inconvenient. That was the point.

Roy went outside to call Adrian. Rachel remained behind to speak with Mara about Sebastian. Chronos stood by the desk holding the copy of Daniel's handwritten terms.

A name had been scratched into the underside of the desk: D. REED. Below it, in smaller letters, someone had added: COME BACK WHEN YOU CAN CHOOSE.

He ran his finger along the indentation but did not treat it as a prophecy. The handwriting was old. It might have been Daniel's. It might have belonged to one of the patients who had watched him leave.

For the first time that morning, Chronos seemed less intent on asking whether he had been Daniel. He was beginning to ask what he would do with the things Daniel had left unfinished.

08 — AN UNCLAIMED FUTURE

By evening the contractors' injunction had been suspended. The independent panel's seal covered the clinic door. Rainwater ran along the curb past the same vendor who had been opening his stall when the group arrived. He sold Chronos a paper bag of hot bread without asking for proof of identity.

“We came looking for the reason Daniel left Tyrell,” Roy said as they walked toward the river. “We found two resignations and no release.”

“He chose the second company,” Chronos said. “Not everything that happened afterward.”

Rachel nodded. “That's the difference.”

In the vehicle, Null transmitted a short note. The corporate transfer amendments they had recovered pointed to a military intake facility beneath the former western rail terminal. That facility was where the government had first tested the separate control hardware later installed in MBU-09. The location was real and still carried power, though no public agency claimed to operate it.

Roy looked at the boy in the seat beside him. “We can stop here. The rest of that file is yours to decide about.”

Chronos held his copy of Daniel's terms against his knees. “I want to see the place,” he said. “Not because I owe the dead man anything. Because somebody used him to make decisions about me.”

“Then we'll go,” Rachel said.

Outside, the city was repairing the damage left by its former rulers one valve and one appeal at a time. The river lamps came on. In the distance a freight train crossed the western viaduct, moving toward the old terminal.

Chronos watched its lights disappear. He did not call himself Daniel Reed. He did not refuse the name, either.

He put the letter in his pocket, and for the first time treated the years ahead as something that had not yet been assigned to him.