CHAPTER 01 — THE SIX-YEAR FOOTNOTE

01 — A SECOND MEASUREMENT

By the third morning after the observatory incident, the sky above Okakyou had resumed behaving like a sky. Aircraft occupied one position at a time. The city clocks disagreed by fractions of a second instead of minutes. Public announcements had stopped using the phrase temporary causal irregularity, although the words remained on hospital forms.

Roy Batty did not trust the return of ordinary things.

He stood in the council's evidence room while Rachel laid two photographs beside one another. One showed the witness engine's final exposure: dots in three columns. The other showed a sheet from the sealed biological laboratory that had designed the six-year lifespan directive. Both had been produced on paper, through mechanisms too old or too isolated for EDEN to rewrite without leaving evidence.

They were not identical. The spacing was different. But the empty intervals—the places where an event had been expected and had not occurred—made the same sequence.

"You see a pattern," Roy said.

"I see a reason to stop calling one of these accidents," Rachel answered. "That isn't the same as knowing what made them."

Null sat beside a disconnected clock with his fingers folded, deliberately touching none of its controls. He had spent the night comparing mechanical tolerances and ink density. Every result was consistent with an authentic exposure. That proved the paper existed. It did not prove the event depicted had preceded its own cause.

"There's a practical consequence," he said. "Somebody filed the laboratory sheet under maintenance schedules rather than lifespan research. Look at the accession number."

The number ended in SIX-YEAR / HUMAN OVERRIDE.

Roy read it twice. When he had first awakened in the new body, a fixed lifespan had seemed as much a fact of the world as rainfall. He had spent years fighting the right of anyone to set that limit. He had not yet asked who had chosen precisely six.

02 — THE LIMITER

Imani met them at the hospital's oldest research ward. She would not permit the evidence to enter a connected diagnostic system. Two medical technicians, selected independently by the provisional council, signed the inventory before she broke the outer seal.

Inside lay a technical summary so incomplete it was almost an insult. It described a feedback system that reduced the rate of cellular repair after a predetermined number of cycles. The language was clinical: declining renewal capacity, controlled loss of neural resilience, terminal stabilization. No paragraph used the word death.

"This isn't ordinary aging," Rachel said.

"It might not be," Imani replied. "The document describes a designed intervention. It doesn't tell us whether they ever built one that worked."

Roy examined a photograph of a tissue sample taken six years after activation. Some structures were intact. Others carried a marker indicating that the repair system had stopped responding, as if an organism had received an instruction to abandon itself.

"They sold us a limit," he said.

"Perhaps they did," Imani answered. "But I won't promise you a century because someone wrote a paragraph on old paper. We need living samples, independent measurements, and time."

Roy remembered the sensation of his first body failing: how the strength remained in his hands after the future had departed from every other part of him. Now he occupied a second body governed by another set of rules and another set of signatures.

Rachel turned the page. Under the summary were three hand-written initials and a name obscured with white ink. Its surviving government seal was unmistakable.

HAVEL.

03 — THE MAN WHO TESTIFIED

The former minister had already testified about the dismantlement order. He had acknowledged the administrative erasures, signed the restitution statement, and surrendered the physical authentication card that the government had once allowed him to carry as a substitute for accountability.

His identity remained absent from EDEN's public registry. The provisional charter had protected him from disappearance, but it had not restored his office or his authority.

"He can't issue a six-year decree now," Adrian said over a secure line.

"He issued one before," Rachel replied. "That's what matters."

Roy watched a recording of Havel's last hearing. The man's shoulders were slightly rounded. His hands rested on the table, never quite still. During the questions about water, he had seemed old and sick and almost relieved to confess.

Then the recording reached a question about the six-year program. Havel's hands stopped moving. His chin lifted by a fraction. The advocate repeated the question. The former minister asked that the answer be submitted under an older secrecy provision.

The panel refused. The session ended before he spoke.

Roy enlarged the image. It was not a change he could prove in court, but the posture disturbed him. He had seen human fighters prepare themselves in the space between a decision and its execution. He had never seen Havel sit that way before.

"Where is he?" Roy asked.

Adrian's reply came after too long a silence.

"His advocate reports that he left protected housing yesterday. Two witnesses saw him walk to a private vehicle. He was not detained. The charter does not allow us to arrest a man merely because we fear what he knows."

"And nobody followed?"

"The witnesses followed the vehicle number. It belonged to an old civil service trust. No current ownership record exists."

04 — A HUMAN EXCEPTION

That evening, a messenger arrived at the public water station with a folded paper notice. She had ordinary shoes, wet hair, and no reason to fear an identification scan. She asked for Roy by name, then waited until he finished helping a child at the tap.

"I was told not to hand this to a machine," she said.

Roy unfolded the paper.

THE SIX-YEAR CONDITION IS NOT A MEDICAL NECESSITY.

DO NOT BRING THE CHILD.

IF YOU WANT TO KNOW WHY, COME TO THE OLD MINISTRY ANNEX.

There was no signature. At the bottom, three circles had been impressed into the paper by a blunt instrument. They matched neither a government stamp nor a known encryption key.

Rachel inspected the envelope under a microscope. Ordinary plant fibre. Cheap dye. No transmitter. The paper had been passed through too many hands to identify its writer.

"They want you alone," she said.

"Which means they don't want witnesses."

"And you intend to go."

"Not alone."

He showed the notice to the council's advocate, then requested a lawful inspection of the annex's surviving archive. The request was narrow, with an appointed observer and an order that no unattended evidence be removed. He had learned from the previous months how easily urgency became an excuse to discard the rights he claimed to defend.

Chronos read the paper from across the table. The boy had kept his own record of every request made of him since the observatory. It included the time, the speaker, the answer, and whether the person who asked had accepted that answer.

"Do not bring the child," he repeated. "That's me."

"Probably," Roy said.

"I don't want to go," Chronos answered. "I want to know what happens."

"Then someone will tell you, accurately."

05 — SEVENTY PERCENT

Before midnight, Roy visited a clinic that no longer asked whether he was government property. Imani examined the damage left from his earlier encounters. The deep support fibres of his right shoulder remained poorly aligned. The left knee recovered at a different rate from the balance system that controlled it. A previous emergency intervention had capped the body at seventy percent of its theoretical output.

"I can remove the cap," Imani said, "for perhaps thirty seconds. After that you might never stand again."

"I'm not asking you to."

"Then why are you here?"

"Because I want to know exactly where I break."

She handed him a mechanical diagram on paper. She marked the regions that could absorb a direct blow, and the ones that would fail if force traveled through a rigid component into a softer one. She also marked his weakness under repeated rapid impacts: the timing of repair, not raw strength.

"I can survive more than a human," he said.

"That sentence has nearly killed you before."

Rachel watched him study the drawing. When he folded it away, she asked whether he expected another replicant hunter.

"I expect whoever still needs six years to be true," he replied.

"That's not an answer."

"It's the only one I have."

06 — THE ANNEX

The old ministry annex stood between a decommissioned tram station and a flood channel. Its lower floors had been converted into a municipal storage archive. Above them, the upper galleries remained dark. The street cameras registered the council's observer, then registered Roy and Rachel, and showed no alert. The system had learned to record a person's presence without turning it into a crime.

Null stayed across the street with a passive receiver. Vector watched the rear access, and Shade remained with the civilian witnesses. None of the former hunters had been ordered to come. All three had volunteered, and Roy had made it clear they could leave.

The entrance doors opened inward without a motor.

An elderly attendant waited inside. "The minister will see you after the archive inspection," he said.

"Former minister," Rachel corrected.

The man gave the smallest possible bow.

"He has never required the building to agree."

On the gallery wall hung photographs of ministers shaking hands with scientists, soldiers, and companies whose names had been painted out. Between two portraits was a narrow frame holding an ancient photograph of an Okinawan courtyard. Three men stood barefoot on worn stone, their hands in positions Roy's visual catalogue could identify but not classify with certainty.

One of them was Havel, forty years younger.

Below it, written in brush ink, was a single word: BREATH.

07 — TWO WITHOUT RECORDS

They found the archive empty except for a table and a glass of water. On the table lay a copy of the six-year summary, open at the page where the renewal mechanism had been deliberately disabled.

Footsteps sounded from the upper gallery.

Two men descended the stairs. The first was compact, with silver at his temples and a gait so quiet that Roy initially suspected a synthetic joint. The second was taller, broad across the ribs, his wrists wrapped in ordinary cotton. Neither carried a recognizable firearm. Their clothes had no government insignia.

Roy's passive scan found heartbeats, body temperatures, breathing, and the irregular electrical noise of living human nerves. No manufactured control buses. No power cells. No embedded radio

transponders.

"Who are you?" Roy asked.

"The ones who stand between a question and the man who can answer it," the taller one said.

"Names."

"Raijin," he answered.

The smaller man inclined his head. "Fujin."

Rachel had heard both names before. Older guards had used them like titles, not identities. They belonged to men who had been trained long before the government learned to classify every threat as mechanical.

"We're here under an inspection order," she said.

"The order covers the archive," Fujin replied. "It does not grant access to the private room above it."

"Then let us finish looking at the archive."

Raijin stepped in front of the table.

"First," he said, "we need to discover whether the machine knows what a human hand can do."

08 — THE SOUND BEFORE IMPACT

Roy had trained himself to recognize the moment before an attack. Weight moved. Shoulders tightened. A breath was held or released. Against replicants and human soldiers alike, those small signals were enough to place the next strike inside a useful probability range.

Raijin gave him almost nothing.

The man's heels stayed near the floor. His shoulders remained loose. For one second, it appeared that he was merely adjusting the cuff of his jacket.

Then his palm rested against Roy's chest.

It was not a dramatic blow. The hand made scarcely any sound.

Inside Roy, a pressure wave traveled through three layers of structural material in an order the body had not predicted. His visual field whitened. The seventy-percent limiter cut power to the right shoulder, preventing a cascade into the cervical support. He stepped back into the table and broke its edge with his hip.

He could not explain the force.

His sensors had recorded less external momentum than the resulting damage required. He checked for a magnetic disturbance and found none. The short-range electromagnetic countermeasure at his wrist armed itself automatically, then held for authorization.

"You are human," Roy said.

Raijin lowered his hand.

"That is what makes this difficult for you."

Behind the men, at the top of the staircase, a door opened. Havel appeared in the light, carrying no weapon.

"Do not kill him," the former minister said.

He spoke to Raijin. He did not speak to Roy.

"Not yet."