CHAPTER 02 — THE HUMAN GUARDS

01 — AN UNEXPECTED CATEGORY

Roy's diagnostic system produced three competing explanations for the injury beneath his sternum. One proposed a corrupted impact sensor. Another proposed electromagnetic interference. The third, which the system flagged as least probable, proposed that a human being had delivered a precisely timed mechanical impulse through contact.

Imani preferred the third explanation. "Least probable is not the same as impossible," she told him through the secure medical channel.

The first error had been his assumption that a smaller body must deliver a smaller threat. The second was his readiness to disable whatever he could not understand with electronics. His wrist unit had remained armed during Raijin's strike, a bright and useless answer to the wrong question.

Fujin stood between Roy and the stairs. He did not look pleased with what had happened. Havel watched from the upper door, calm enough to be mistaken for indifferent.

"You sent five manufactured hunters after me," Roy said. "Were these two standing beside you all that time?"

"They were," Havel replied.

"Then why send replicants?"

"Because replicants obeyed a command written into a contract. These men kept asking whether my commands were worthy of them."

"And this one has decided to strike someone holding a lawful inspection order?"

Raijin's expression tightened. Fujin answered instead. "It was a warning. A poor one. There is an independent witness downstairs. We will not hide what occurred."

Roy realized that the distinction mattered. It also did not make his chest hurt less.

02 — THE DOOR AND THE LAW

Rachel stepped toward the stairs and held up the inspection order. "The document covers the sealed archive. The biological records are in that archive. Let us finish."

"The sealed material has been moved," Havel said.

"When?"

"Before the charter. Before I lost the name the state had given me."

"Then you had better tell the advocate," Rachel replied.

The former minister looked at Roy as if asking whether he still believed documents could save anyone from men with stronger hands. Roy said nothing. He had begun to suspect Havel wanted a fight because a fight

would allow him to avoid a question.

The advocate's voice arrived on Rachel's open line. She ordered everyone to remain in the accessible part of the building while an independent warrant was considered. A young officer appeared at the door, uncomfortable with the idea of detaining a former minister whose public identity did not exist.

"I'm not asking you to detain him," Rachel said. "I'm asking you to preserve the evidence and record the obstruction."

Fujin listened, then stepped aside from the table. Raijin did not move until Havel gave a faint nod.

The table contained a partial inventory: human nervous tissue, synthetic repair media, controlled helium samples, and a file marked SIX-YEAR CONTINUITY / HUMAN PRIORITY. Next to it were several shipping manifests with the destination erased.

Roy photographed nothing. He let the civilian observer make the copy under the court's instructions. The temptation to take what Havel concealed was immense. The cost of doing so would have been handing Havel an argument that the investigation itself could not be trusted.

03 — A TEST IN THE COURTYARD

The inspection ended with the upper rooms sealed. The advocate requested an emergency extension of the order. Havel agreed to remain at the annex until the hearing, but not to surrender his personal papers. The witnesses recorded the agreement and the time.

In the courtyard outside, Fujin approached Roy beneath a leaking awning.

"Your machines put you in danger," he said.

"That sounds like a threat."

"It's an observation. You see the beginning of a movement, then you guess the rest. A trained human can change what the movement means after it begins."

Roy turned the page of his clinic diagram. "You were not wearing a power source. Neither was he."

"Correct."

"I have instruments that measure force."

"And you measured a force you cannot yet name."

Fujin pointed at a shallow puddle between them. "When you strike the water, you see the splash. But you can also send a wave under the surface without making a splash where you touched it."

"Water isn't a spine."

"No," Fujin said. "And a person isn't a machine assembled from a list of replaceable parts, even when a person has replaced many of them."

His words were not a rejection of Roy's humanity. They were a description of a skill Roy's catalogues had flattened into superstition.

"I could teach you to observe," Fujin said.

"Then why are you protecting a man who refused to answer for a death limit?"

"Because if I stop standing here, Raijin will try to solve the question without words. And I have seen what happens when the minister reaches for his sword."

04 — A CHILD'S QUESTION

Back at the temporary residence, Chronos listened to the recording of the courtyard conversation. The boy did not ask to see the violence. He asked why the two men were willing to guard a person whose identity had been erased.

"Perhaps they promised him protection before the erasure," Roy answered.

"Is a promise still good after its reason goes away?"

Rachel turned from her notes. "A promise to protect a life can survive. A promise to help someone injure other people should not."

Chronos considered that distinction for a long moment. He had once been commanded as a hunter, in a body built for obedience. His first independent refusal had nearly destroyed him. He understood how a promise could become a chain if no one were permitted to examine it.

"Did you use the thing that stops other replicants?" he asked Roy.

"I nearly did."

"Would it have stopped them?"

"No."

"Then the tool told you something false?"

"The tool told me what it could do. I assumed everyone was made the same way."

Chronos wrote that answer into his paper record. Under it he added a line of his own: A PERSON CAN BE DANGEROUS WITHOUT BEING A MACHINE.

05 — THE EIGHTEENTH FRAME

Imani brought the observatory photographs to the clinic and synchronized their mechanical exposure marks with the annex's inventory dates. Most were unrelated. Then she found one frame whose three-column mark matched a shipment of helium-bearing experimental material.

The date was eleven years before Roy's return.

"That number again," he said.

"Numbers recur in a large archive," Imani warned. "But this isn't only a number. The same laboratory technician signed the instrument log and the shipping receipt."

The technician had died before the six-year regulations became public. His last technical note contained a peculiar sentence: The pulse is not the power. The timing is the power's permission.

Roy read it aloud. He remembered Raijin's almost weightless touch and the internal failure that followed.

"Those are separate subjects," Imani said quickly. "Do not turn resemblance into a conclusion."

Rachel asked for the technician's raw laboratory notebook. It had been deposited in a private records trust and was scheduled for destruction because the owner's legal identity could not be verified. The new charter gave the archivists a mechanism to object, but only a short period to act.

"Then we act within the period," Rachel said.

The paperwork would take hours. The minister could move faster.

06 — THE THING RAJIN FEARED

Raijin visited the water station at dawn, alone. He approached Roy with his hands visible. The regular customers watched him without knowing the story of the annex.

"I struck you without permission," he said. "That was wrong."

Roy did not soften. "It was assault."

"Yes. I will testify to it."

"Why did you come?"

"Because the minister is preparing to leave. He believes the documents will be taken and read in public. He is afraid of the question you

asked."

"Which question?"

"Why six years."

Roy studied him. "What are you afraid of?"

Raijin turned his eyes toward a queue of people waiting for water, humans and manufactured persons interspersed without the old dividers.

"I was taught that if the machines lived longer than us, they would inherit everything. I believed that. Then I watched a manufactured man carry water for people who could not carry it themselves. I haven't decided what I believe now."

"And you still work for Havel."

"Until he asks me to kill you. I don't know yet whether I will be brave enough to refuse before he asks."

07 — THE UNCLAIMED STORAGE

The private records trust occupied the basement of a former insurance building. Its director accepted the preservation order reluctantly. He presented paper inventories, each bearing two signatures from people who no longer existed in any official database.

Rachel found the technician's notebook inside a box marked obsolete industrial chemistry. The writing shifted between precise measurements and fearful annotations. It described a research

program combining neural timing observations with a long-duration energy source. One margin mentioned helium-3 and a miniature containment system; another warned that the equipment never approached stable clinical operation.

Nothing in the notebook proved that a human martial artist could generate nuclear energy. Roy had become too careful to ask an instrument to confirm an answer already preferred.

But the notebook recorded a controlled experiment in which a synthetic repair lattice, previously exhausted after repeated cycles, resumed activity when fed an external pulse timed to a living neuronal pattern.

Beneath it, in red ink, was a policy note: DEMONSTRATION SUPPRESSED. NO EXTENSION OF AUTHORIZED SIX-YEAR SERVICE LIFE.

The signature was Havel's.

Rachel asked the director to preserve the notebook in three separate copies. He said the trust could do it, but the legal ownership was contested. Adrian began arranging a public court deposit rather than a private transfer.

For the first time, Roy saw a practical relationship between the fight he had survived and the life that had been rationed out to him. He did not mistake it for proof. He could no longer treat it as coincidence.

08 — TWO MEN WAITING

At dusk, Fujin and Raijin stood outside the annex with their backs to the old doors. A court vehicle arrived to serve the new inspection order. The driver carried no weapon; the observer beside her held a portable seal.

Inside, Havel had already cleared his desk.

"You will let them inspect," Fujin said.

"I have surrendered too much," the former minister answered.

"You surrendered what you were caught holding."

Havel studied the two men. "I never asked either of you to worship me. I asked you to stop what will happen when my last restraint is removed."

"The last restraint is not a person you can strike," Fujin said.

"No," Havel replied. "It is an idea. And ideas are always easier to stop while they still have a body."

He opened a cabinet lined with old cedar. Within lay a sword in a plain scabbard, unadorned except for a narrow dark band near the guard. Its blade had never been registered as an electronic weapon.

Raijin looked away. Fujin did not.

"If you draw that against Roy," Fujin said, "you will not be protecting anyone."

Havel closed the cabinet.

"Then teach him to understand the hand before he meets the blade."

Outside, the observer knocked again. For a moment the two guards seemed less like warriors than men standing at the end of a duty they no longer knew how to keep.