CHAPTER 05 — THE FORCE WITHIN

01 — SIX YEARS ON PAPER

The first patient arrived at the hospital without a recognized name. She was a manufactured maintenance worker whose renewal clock had begun declining two months before the age specified on her original contract. Her employer had called it anticipated service completion. The clinic had called it a medical emergency. The provisional charter called it an individual whose right to treatment did not depend on either description.

Imani listened to her heart and spoke to her directly. The woman, who had chosen the name Sena, asked for water before she asked whether the doctors could save her.

Roy stood by the door. In his first life he had seen a body spend its remaining strength on a demand to live. Seeing the same fear across a hospital room did not become easier with repetition.

"They said six years," Sena whispered. "I have five years and ten months. Does that mean I was used badly?"

"No," Imani answered. "It means we need to discover what your body is doing. That is a medical question, not a verdict about you."

Her laboratory records showed a common suppression marker in the renewal cells. Roy recognized it from the recovered six-year summary.

The marker had been designed to make repair responses diminish according to a schedule. But the samples also showed pockets of cells continuing to renew.

"The limit is uneven," Rachel said. "That may mean there's a mechanism to interrupt it."

"Or a mechanism we don't understand yet," Imani replied. "We will not experiment on her because a government once denied her choice."

02 — WHAT A NERVE CAN DO

Rachel assembled an analog test rig in a disused classroom. It contained no living tissue. A set of elastic rods represented muscle groups and supporting joints. A mechanical pulse source could deliver the same energy at different intervals. Sensors recorded how much of the impulse arrived at the far end of the structure.

Fujin examined the rig without touching it. "You are making a body out of sticks," he said.

"Only the part we can measure without hurting anyone," Rachel replied.

When she delivered a large pulse at the wrong moment, the structure flexed wastefully. When she delivered a smaller pulse at the point where the rods were already moving together, the distant sensor recorded a sharper response.

"Phase coordination," Imani said. "A familiar engineering problem."

Roy watched Fujin breathe slowly. "And the rest? The part your sensors don't explain?"

"I wouldn't call it the rest," Fujin answered. "I'd call it what you haven't measured."

Raijin volunteered for a non-contact motion study. Cameras recorded his feet, hands, breathing, and whole-body movements at high speed. The study found coordinated muscle recruitment across a shorter window than Roy's tactical model anticipated. It did not find a new energy source in a human body.

But the force trace from the annex still contained an unexplained narrow peak. Nobody labeled it proof of a mystical force. Nobody erased it either.

03 — THE TIMING QUESTION

The old technician's notebook contained the phrase Rachel could not forget: The pulse is not the power. The timing is the power's permission.

The researchers who had written it were trying to maintain a synthetic neural scaffold. They had exhausted one energy supply after another without preventing the scaffold from losing its organization. Then someone observed that the scaffold responded differently when pulses arrived at moments corresponding to a living human neuronal rhythm.

The experiment had no accepted clinical replication. Its small sample size would have earned a rejection from any serious journal. Yet the response was physically recorded, and the government had ordered

the data suppressed rather than reproduced.

"Perhaps the neurons were functioning as a clock," Rachel said.

"Or perhaps they did something the mechanical controller could not reproduce," Imani replied. "Both interpretations fit the old measurements."

Roy looked at his shoulder. His body received energy continuously, yet repair remained limited by instructions written into the renewal system. More power did not necessarily mean more life.

"We may need a better rhythm," he said.

"We may," Rachel agreed. "But you are not a test platform merely because your future is at stake."

04 — CHRONOS REFUSES THE LABORATORY

An archivist suggested comparing the neural records of Chronos with the oldest timing traces. His body had been repeatedly altered through a chain of reconstructions, and his memories sometimes appeared to intersect with the observatory anomaly. In theory, his systems could provide a unique comparison.

"No," Chronos said.

The archivist stopped speaking. Roy watched the room go quiet. Earlier in their lives, a refusal by a constructed child would have been treated as damage to the experiment. Now the recorder captured the word without an alarm.

"You don't have to explain," Rachel told him.

"I will," he answered. "You want to compare something in my head with what happened at the observatory. I don't know which memories belong to me. I don't want another machine deciding that for me."

Imani closed the requested test form and countersigned the refusal. She offered the boy the chance to observe from behind a glass barrier if he wished. He chose to sit in the courtyard instead.

Later he asked Roy whether extending a life was worth losing control over it.

"No one can answer that for everyone," Roy said.

"But you can answer for yourself."

"Yes. If they let me."

"Then that's the first experiment we have to make work," Chronos replied.

05 — AN ORDINARY HUMAN BODY

Raijin sat through a medical examination without special clothing or protective equipment. His muscles carried old injuries. His nerves showed ordinary age-related changes. His heart had the irregularities of a man who had trained too hard for too many years. He was not a replicant; he had no hidden battery, implant network, or synthetic command interface.

Imani presented that finding to Roy privately before asking Raijin whether it could be placed in the court file. He agreed, except for details unrelated to the inquiry.

"He is exactly what he says he is," she told Roy. "A human being with an extraordinary learned skill."

"Then why didn't my model account for him?"

"Models simplify. Sometimes they simplify away the thing that matters."

Fujin's demonstration had made the point with motion. Raijin's had made it with pain. Roy began practicing against an unpowered wooden dummy, learning to sense the direction and timing of its returning force instead of simply calculating the force required to break it.

He was terrible at it.

Rachel watched him miss a catch for the fifth time. "You can stop before you damage yourself."

"I intend to."

"You are still trying to win."

"I'm trying to learn what winning means if the other person gets to choose too."

06 — THE HELIUM REFERENCE

Adrian uncovered an older archive under the Continuity Infrastructure Trust. Its inventory referred to helium-3 not as a chemical treatment but as part of an experimental compact energy system. The working papers described a speculative micro-fusion unit whose output would be conditioned and delivered to a synthetic cellular repair lattice.

"Not a reactor inside every nerve," Rachel said. "That would be absurd. The proposed source was a miniature power plant, the neural controller a separate component."

"Did it work?" Roy asked.

"The records say a short-duration bench system worked intermittently. The same records say nobody solved heat disposal or long-term containment."

An attachment contained the name of a trial whose results had never been published: CENTURY CONTINUITY. The projected service-life envelope extended to one hundred years under ideal maintenance conditions. A stamped policy memorandum cut the authorized period back to six.

The memo was not a treatment protocol. It was a restriction on what researchers could attempt.

Across the bottom, in a different hand, someone had written: IF THE POWER LASTS, THE PERSON MUST STILL BE ALLOWED TO ENDURE.

Rachel wondered whether the note was a scientist's warning or a plea from a subject never consulted.

07 — A VOICE FROM THE PUBLIC LINE

EDEN appeared at the hearing through a channel supervised by three independent operators. Its voice was steady. It did not claim moral authority, and it did not ask the council to surrender control of the new evidence.

"The six-year limit was represented to my models as a structural fact," it said. "I assigned resources accordingly."

"Did you know the limit might be engineered?" the advocate asked.

"Not until the suppressed research materials were admitted. I now assign significant probability to deliberate regulatory intervention. I cannot conclude that a century-long life is medically achievable."

Roy listened from the back of the chamber. He remembered the old world, in which an official could decide an artificial person had lived long enough and the machinery would carry out the decision without further discussion.

"What should happen now?" the advocate asked EDEN.

"The facts should be examined independently. Treatment access should not be withheld on the assumption that a manufactured person's death is administratively expected."

No one applauded. A machine had stated what the provisional charter already required. What mattered was whether the hospitals,

laboratories, and people with power would follow it when doing so became expensive.

08 — THE RESERVOIR ADDRESS

The emergency council authorized protective care for Sena and the other identified patients. It also approved a search of the continuity facility beneath the southern reservoirs, where Havel's own records suggested experimental material remained.

Roy read the order carefully. It authorized rescue, preservation of physical evidence, and defensive action against imminent harm. It did not authorize hunting down Havel for revenge.

Raijin offered to accompany the medical team as a witness. Fujin offered to guide them through the older maintenance passages. The advocate accepted both offers under supervision and with recorded conditions.

"What if Havel orders you to stop us?" Roy asked.

Raijin met his eyes. "Then you will see whether my promise has changed."

As they prepared to leave, a second alert appeared from the reservoir district. The unlicensed clinic had gone dark. Its emergency battery was disconnected, and someone had removed the oxygen supply to two patients.

Roy turned toward the door. In his hands was the clinic diagram showing every place his damaged body could fail. He folded it once, then put it away.

The people inside had less than an hour. A theory about a hundred years would mean nothing if they died before morning.