CHAPTER 08 — BEYOND THE BLADE

01 — THE INTERRUPTION IN TIME

The clock on the ceremonial hall's rear wall had paused for a fraction of a second. The independent witness recorder, running on a separate mechanical drive, had not. Null confirmed the discrepancy over the secure channel. He would not call it a rupture in time. An unstable mechanism could produce an irregular tick. But the halt had coincided with Havel's longest unseen strike.

Roy had no time to solve the question. Havel advanced around the pillar, sword held low. The old man seemed to have forgotten the spectators, the appeal, the court, and the archive. Only the contest remained, and it frightened Roy more than the blade itself.

The minister slashed toward Roy's damaged leg. Roy stepped back. The steel missed. A concentrated pulse ran across the stone floor and struck the support beneath his knee. He lost balance and fell against the pillar.

"You can measure that," Havel said, breathing hard. "But can you understand it?"

"I can understand a man who won't stop hurting someone," Roy answered.

He kept the words calm. Rage would have made his next movement faster and less accurate. He needed accuracy more than speed.

02 — WHAT THE SWORD CARRIED

Rachel ordered a second recording from the observation balcony. The camera's mechanical shutter showed the blade moving through air with no visible projectile. The acoustic sensor registered a short pressure peak, and the floor vibration sensor detected a corresponding impulse. No electromagnetic burst preceded it. No chemical discharge was found at the blade.

"Something is being transferred," she told Null. "We don't know how far or through what medium."

"Then stop calling it the sword," Null replied. "The sword may be marking the direction of a different event."

Roy heard them. He watched Havel's feet rather than the edge. The minister's heel settled, his breath held briefly, and the muscles along his ribs contracted in a sequence that resembled the short strikes Raijin had demonstrated. The motion continued through shoulder, wrist, and blade in one narrow interval.

A new impulse moved out from the tip.

Roy turned aside before the event reached him. The pressure cut a thin line through a hanging ceremonial banner. Behind the banner, an old wooden panel shuddered but remained whole.

"Your whole body is the weapon," Roy said.

"It always was," Havel answered. "The blade only teaches the air where to listen."

Roy did not know whether the statement was a description, a metaphor, or an old man's belief that happened to coincide with an unaccounted physical effect.

03 — THE COST OF CONTROL

Havel's next attack failed halfway through. His hand trembled, his breathing caught, and he had to take a second step before recovering the stance. The strain had become visible. Human skill did not exempt the body from human limits.

Roy could have rushed him then. Even at seventy percent, he possessed enough strength to fracture an unprotected arm. The minister would likely lose the sword. He might also die immediately, leaving the witnesses with a corpse and the six-year secret still incomplete.

Roy moved sideways instead and forced Havel to turn. The older man recovered quickly. The blade passed near Roy's neck; the pressure disturbance struck the railing behind him. The metal hummed without being touched.

"You are afraid to use your strength," Havel said.

"I'm afraid to use it without choosing what happens afterward."

"That hesitation is why humanity loses."

"No. It's why people get another day to disagree with us."

Havel stepped in, applied a short empty-handed strike beneath Roy's left arm, and returned the sword to guard before Roy could respond. Roy's balance system flickered. He had found the man inside the blade but not a safe way to contain him.

04 — THE OLD LESSON

Fujin's words returned to Roy: Look for what I am protecting.

Havel had been protecting a belief. He could not tolerate the possibility that manufactured persons might outlive humans because he imagined longevity as a transfer of ownership. Every movement of his sword was an attempt to demonstrate that humanity retained a final, irreplaceable advantage.

Roy asked himself what Havel was protecting physically. Not the balcony. Not the witnesses. The minister consistently kept the damaged containment cabinet behind his left shoulder. Roy followed the line of sight and saw a narrow drawer built into the wall. A sheet of old paper protruded beneath its seal.

"You brought the records here," Roy said.

Havel's eyes moved before his feet did. The glance lasted less than a second. It was enough.

Roy stepped toward the drawer. Havel intercepted him with a flat cut, sending a shallow pressure line across Roy's coat. Roy raised his left forearm, absorbed the smaller impulse, and continued toward the wall. He was not trying to steal the records. He was drawing Havel into a place where the sword's reach was limited.

"You would burn it," Roy said. "Even now."

"I would keep it from becoming a blueprint for our replacement."

05 — THE HUMAN CHOICE

Raijin's voice came from the doorway. "Minister. It is finished."

Havel did not look at him. "You swore to stand beside me."

"I swore to protect your life. I will not help you take his."

"Then you have forgotten what he is."

"No," Raijin answered. "I have learned that it was never my right to decide what his life was worth."

Fujin stepped beside the witness bench. He did not approach the combatants. His presence blocked the passage to the medical staff so neither could be forced into the line of attack.

Havel's expression changed. For the first time, the minister looked older than his opponent had imagined. The two men who had carried his authority in their hands were no longer willing to lend him those hands.

"You both think I am cruel," Havel said.

"We think you are choosing harm," Fujin replied. "You still have time to choose otherwise."

Havel lifted the sword. The air around the tip seemed to thicken, though Roy knew perception could mislead. The clock behind them skipped another beat.

"No," the minister said. "I have run out of time."

06 — THE SHORT DISTANCE

Roy stepped inside the next cut at the moment Havel's heel settled. The blade's unseen impulse crossed behind him, striking a stone plaque. Roy felt the edge of the pressure pass his shoulder like a cold wire. He seized the minister's wrist with his left hand, careful not to torque it beyond the range of an ordinary restraint.

Havel's free palm touched Roy's chest.

The impact arrived from an impossibly short distance. A concentrated pressure propagated through Roy's sternum and into the damaged support beneath his right shoulder. His vision flashed white. For a moment he could hear nothing but the failing rhythm of his own systems.

The minister could have withdrawn. Instead he forced the palm forward again, committing his weight. Roy remembered Fujin's lesson at the flood gate. He stopped resisting the direction of the force and turned around it. Havel's own momentum carried his body past the point where he could safely recover his stance.

Roy brought the sword wrist against the wooden railing. The blade fell with a metallic sound. Havel tried to reclaim it, and Roy prevented him, not by striking but by stepping into the space where the older

man's balance had already gone.

For half a breath, it was over.

Then Havel drew a short blade from the fold of his garment.

07 — THE LAST OLD TECHNIQUE

The short blade was a traditional training weapon sharpened to a lethal edge. Havel held it close to his forearm, using the unfamiliar angle to attack the narrow opening beneath Roy's left shoulder. It was an older method, compact and practical, less theatrical than the long sword.

Roy's tactical catalogues offered dozens of responses. Most would break the human wrist. One would destroy the elbow. The fastest would kill.

He chose the slowest response with a chance of keeping both men alive. He caught the minister's forearm at the elbow, moved his own damaged shoulder out of the line, and placed his hip between Havel and the fallen sword.

Havel struck again with his free hand. Roy's limiter cut in, and the support beneath his chest failed. As he fell, he pulled Havel away from the broken railing rather than toward it.

They landed together on the stone floor. The short blade skidded into the shadow under the bench.

The minister's head struck the edge of the raised platform. It was a small movement after so much violence. It produced a terrible silence.

Roy released the arm immediately. Blood spread beneath Havel's hair. The old man remained conscious, but his breathing had changed. His chest rose with effort and failed to complete the movement.

"Medic," Roy said. "Now."

08 — THE PRICE OF THE ANSWER

The medics rushed forward. Havel tried to push them away. Raijin knelt beside him and held the man's hand without permitting him to sit up. The witness recorder continued running. No one removed the dying minister's sword from the evidence field until the officer had marked its position.

"You could have killed him sooner," Raijin told Roy quietly.

"I know."

"You tried not to."

"It wasn't enough."

The medic examined Havel's pupils and neck. "He needs emergency surgery. We may not have time to reach the hospital."

Havel raised two fingers. He pointed toward the sealed drawer in the wall. Rachel looked to the observer, who authorized a protective opening because the records might otherwise be destroyed by the failing building systems.

Inside were copies of the century-continuity research, a list of suppressed trials, and a signed executive instruction marked SIX

YEARS / HUMAN PRIORITY.

Havel watched Rachel lift the paper. His face showed pain and something resembling relief, but Roy refused to decide which mattered more.

"Ask me," the minister whispered.

Rachel knelt beside him. "Why did you make it six years?"

Havel closed his eyes. His answer would take what remained of his breath.