CHAPTER 09 — THE LAST HUMAN ORDER

01 — SIX YEARS

The minister was dying on the stone floor of the ceremonial hall. A medic held pressure against the wound at his scalp. Another monitored his heart with a portable instrument, its quiet tones almost indecent beside the shattered railing and the abandoned sword.

Roy could have demanded a confession. Instead, he asked the medic whether Havel could speak without making the injury worse. She said a few words were possible, though movement and shock might shorten the time available. Roy stepped aside so the man could see Rachel and the court observer.

"Why six years?" Rachel asked again.

Havel opened his eyes. "Because it was long enough to be useful," he said. "And short enough that nobody expected a future."

The words were neither apology nor explanation. Roy felt the old reflex rising: seize the man, make him finish, force a final answer from a body that was slipping away. He kept his hands at his sides.

"The documents show a repair limiter," Rachel said. "They show you approved it. Was the limit medical?"

"No."

The observer repeated the question and answer for the independent recorder. The medic checked Havel again. He gave a small nod to continue.

"We could not promise a hundred years," Havel whispered. "We were beginning to see how it might become possible."

02 — THE HUMAN FEAR

"A century of manufactured people," Havel said. "Stronger, repairable, able to copy the work we built our identity around. We told ourselves the limit protected the species."

"Whose species?" Roy asked.

"Humanity."

"You sent five hunters after me because I refused to be property. Was that protecting humanity?"

Havel turned his head a fraction. "I believed it was. I was wrong about the right to own you. I wasn't sure I was wrong about what you would become."

Rachel looked at the signed instruction. It authorized a six-year cycle as a population-level restriction, with no appeal by the individuals whose bodies would carry it. The state had manufactured a biological limit to enforce a political prediction.

"You were afraid humans would become unnecessary," she said.

"Yes." Havel's voice had almost vanished. "Not because they were weak. Because we were afraid love, work, art, and memory would all be performed better by those who could afford more time. We called that a threat to survival."

Roy looked at the old man's scarred hands. The minister had spent a lifetime perfecting skills he believed were uniquely human, and he had used them to justify taking time away from other people.

"You were wrong," Roy said.

"Perhaps. But I made the world obey my fear."

03 — THE MECHANISM

Havel's fingers moved toward the fallen sword. Raijin held his hand gently away from it. The minister looked at the empty space and tried to speak.

"Fa jin. Issuing force," he whispered. "Not a miracle. At least not the part we could measure. Nerves agreeing on an instant. The body receiving what it needs when it can receive it."

Rachel leaned closer. "And the repair lattice?"

"The old teams tried to feed it more power. More power, more waste, more heat. Then they watched the neural pulses of the practitioners. They did not need to make the body burn brighter. They needed to make the repair system listen."

"You used human nerve timing as a reference?"

He nodded once. "The prototype copied a pattern. The energy source was separate. Helium-three. Compact fusion, in the model. The power plant was never safe enough for a patient. The controller was the promise."

The medic told him to stop. He refused with a slight movement of his eyes.

"A hundred years?" Roy asked.

"A projected envelope. Not a treatment. Not yet. The lawyers cut it to six before the engineers could show what came after."

Havel's breathing became shallow. Whatever strange force he had issued through the blade, his own human body now needed ordinary oxygen and could not obtain enough of it.

04 — THE BLADE'S LAST SECRET

"The sword," Roy said. "What came from its tip?"

Havel smiled without pleasure. "You saw it."

"I saw pressure. I saw a blade that did not touch me. I don't know what carried the force."

"Neither did the men who trained me. They taught us a thing that worked and left the explanation to people not yet born."

"Was it connected to the observatory?"

"I don't know. We borrowed its clock because our instruments disagreed. When we aligned the pulses, the old machine recorded a gap we could not account for. They told me to stop the trials. I signed."

Roy did not take the statement as proof that the blade's pressure came from a new physical law. The minister's memory was imperfect, his body failing. The independent sensors would be examined long after his death.

"You could have studied it openly," Rachel said.

"Then we would have had to tell the world why we had forbidden the result."

For a moment Havel looked beyond the ceiling beams, as though searching for the clear sky he had once seen from this building as a young official.

"My sword was never the secret," he said. "The secret was what I allowed no one to ask."

05 — THE FINAL SIGNATURE

The court observer held out the original executive instruction. Havel's signature was already visible. She asked whether he acknowledged it as authentic and whether the reason he had given should be entered into the public record.

"Yes," he said.

She required one further clarification. "Did the six-year rule arise from a proven biological ceiling?"

"No."

"Was it imposed to prevent the development and deployment of longer-lived manufactured persons?"

"Yes."

The recorder captured both answers. Raijin and Fujin added their own witness statements. The medic recorded that Havel remained conscious at the time but that his condition was critical. The advocate would have to decide what evidentiary weight the testimony could bear. No dying declaration should become a substitute for independent testing.

"What will happen to them?" Havel asked, meaning the people whose bodies carried the limit.

"We will ask them," Rachel replied. "We will treat them. We will let them choose whether to take part in research."

"And if they live a hundred years?"

Roy crouched beside him, close enough that the minister could hear.

"Then they will have a hundred years in which to prove you were wrong about what living means."

06 — A DEATH WITHOUT VICTORY

Havel's final breath came before the ambulance reached the hall. The medics attempted resuscitation until the attending physician determined that further intervention would not restore him. The court observer recorded the time. Raijin stood with both hands open at his sides, unable to undo a lifetime of devotion by opening them.

Roy did not feel victorious. He had defeated an armed opponent who would not surrender, but the blow that ended the fight had still ended a human life. The minister had chosen violence. Roy had chosen restraint as long as he could. Neither fact made the death clean.

Rachel touched Roy's sleeve. "You tried to bring him to court."

"He should have lived to hear what the court had to say."

"He made that impossible."

"I know."

The medical team lifted the body with the same care it would have given an anonymous patient. The new charter did not withdraw dignity because a person had used power cruelly. Roy watched the stretcher pass the broken ceremonial sword, still sealed in its evidence frame.

A human man had carried a force Roy could not understand. A human man had also decided who was permitted a future. The first mystery remained. The second now had a signed answer.

07 — THREE INDEPENDENT RECORDS

By the next morning, the council had established separate custody of Havel's confession, the documents from the wall cabinet, and the medical records from the continuity facility. No single recording was treated as sufficient. The signed six-year instruction, the suppressed bench experiments, and the direct testimony pointed toward the same conclusion, but each required different verification.

Imani compared the molecular limiter in Sena's cells against the surviving design. The match was strong enough to justify a controlled research application, not a treatment claim. Rachel examined the helium-3 proposal and found its most extraordinary assumptions explicitly marked unverified by the original engineers.

Null examined the acoustic record of Havel's final sword strikes. He confirmed a reproducible pressure signature in several independent sensors. He could not explain how the force traveled beyond the blade. He refused to invent an answer for the sake of a neat report.

Adrian obtained a further detail from the observatory archive. The witness engine's unexplained intervals had appeared in the research timing standard used by the century project, but the instruments were not identical. Someone had carried a standard between them. Whether that standard had carried an anomaly remained unresolved.

The investigators had more evidence than ever and less permission to pretend they knew everything.

08 — WHAT RAIJIN KEPT

Raijin returned to the old training hall after the funeral. Fujin found him standing before the empty space where the minister had practiced. The two had once believed that skill handed down by a teacher could oblige the student to serve the teacher's purposes forever.

"Do you miss him?" Fujin asked.

"Yes."

"Do you excuse him?"

"No."

Roy entered quietly. He had come to return the original training hall record, not to seek forgiveness from either guard. Raijin bowed, then spoke without looking up.

"I thought I had given you the strongest part of my teacher's lesson. I gave you only the part that hurts."

"What was the rest?" Roy asked.

"Knowing when not to issue force."

Roy considered that. The minister had possessed extraordinary knowledge of the human body, yet his fear had narrowed its use to a weapon and a restriction.

"Then keep teaching it," Roy said. "But let people decide whether to learn."

Outside the hall, the water station opened for the morning. The queue moved slowly, as queues did. No one's place depended on their designated terminal date.