NEXUSYS 11

BOOK IV

THE MEMORY WITHOUT TIME

CHAPTER 01

THE WOMAN WHO SOLD THE RAIN

The woman had a face that made people stop asking which parts of it were manufactured.

That was its principal achievement.

At half past four, the reservoir windows were black mirrors and the city behind them had not yet declared a morning. Rachael sat at a table made of recovered basalt, reading an invoice for water that did not exist. The invoice passed through three jurisdictions, two settlement currencies and a civic audit which would certify that sixty-four million litres of monsoon rain had been treated, allocated and consumed before the storm which supplied it had occurred.

The figures were accurate, insofar as they described an obligation. The water was a promise. In this part of the world, promises moved faster than weather.

A young accounts director waited opposite her with the strained patience of someone instructed not to look directly at the machinery behind his employer's eyes. He had worked for her for seven years and believed she was sixty-two. He had never asked why photographs of her taken decades apart required such elaborate provenance certificates.

“The Ministry will accept the rainfall offset,” he said. “They want the wet-season reserves under a single registration. No exemptions.”

“What ministry?”

He recited the name of a water bureau recently absorbed into a provisional intergovernmental authority. Rachael let him finish. He watched her hand moving across the invoice. The nails were faintly uneven. One bore a white crescent of actual keratin, the others a polymer made to sustain the same irregularity. He had once complimented her on the hands: they looked human, he said. He meant that as praise.

“No,” she told him. “We don't sell the water twice.”

“It isn't a second sale. The new registry combines delivery rights with replacement credits.”

“Then the registry is pretending that a promise and an event are interchangeable.”

“They say every jurisdiction must become compatible.”

“Compatibility,” she said, “is what an administrator calls it when he no longer has to ask permission.”

The man wrote that down, then stopped, unsure whether it was an instruction. Rachael signed only the portion of the invoice concerning water that had physically passed through a treatment membrane. The rest she returned without comment.

After he left, she waited for the door to seal. Not because it was secure; the entire building was a sieve of microphones, fibres, receptors and sympathetic machines. She waited because its seal made an old, reassuring noise which no longer registered in any of the newer surveillance grammars.

Then she opened the other ledger.

It had no corporate title. Beneath a line of meaningless environmental measurements, an entry had appeared fourteen minutes earlier:

N6MAA10816 / MATERIAL EXAMINATION / DEFERRED WITNESS.

A second line followed.

NO JUDGMENT OF PERSONHOOD IS MADE BY THIS INSTRUMENT.

She touched the words once. Her fingertip paused on personhood, not on the identifier. An old reflex: the engineer noticed the error condition; the woman noticed the refusal.

“He chose the second examination,” she said to the empty room.

An answering voice came from beneath the table rather than above it. The voice had no personality for an operator to grow attached to.

“Selection confirmed from separate water and load records. No direct access to the archive was attempted.”

“Good.”

“His active carrier was measured.”

“Don't tell me the number.”

“Knowledge of depletion would improve the probability model.”

“Your model is not allowed to become his doctor.”

The voice remained quiet. It had been trained on a narrow library of pumps, reservoirs, membranes and corrosion. Its operators believed it was a useful industrial controller. Rachael had gone to considerable trouble to keep it that way. A broadly intelligent system would have discovered the inconsistency between the rain sold by her company and the movement of certain obsolete instruments. It might also have asked whose tissue the company's biological renewal lab was trying so carefully not to call human.

She closed the ledger and turned towards the windows. Above the flood barrier, freight towers burned in an orange seam through the predawn mist. Somewhere north, a machine with no official mandate was building the same trail from other data. She could feel the race without seeing either competitor.

She had designed Roy's capacity to survive an attack. She had not designed the world to stop attacking him.

◆

Roy did not sleep at the altitude. He ran a reduced-maintenance cycle in a narrow room belonging to the Cold Authority, permitted the power reserve to restore itself, and watched the carrier estimate refuse to move.

61.8 was not a lifespan. He knew that now. The figure was an uncertain proportion of a medium whose initial capacity had not been entered into the examining instrument's archive. It could be a warning and still be useless as a clock. He had killed for a number once. He was no longer interested in numbers which dressed up ignorance as certainty.

Irena had unfolded the Cryostack attestation on a wall display stripped of network links. She had placed the statements in four columns: observed, inferred, asserted, and withheld. It annoyed the device, which kept proposing a fifth column labeled *verified identity*. She disabled the suggestion.

“Why four?” Nadira asked.

“Because the machine's answer will depend on what kind of question we think we asked.”

Roy stood beside the window with the unlit city below him. “What kind of question did Tyrell ask?”

“Which Tyrell?”

He considered that. The corporation had died. Its tools remained, its name still functioned as a passport into certain abandoned technical estates, and a son guarded instruments he would not surrender. A dead institution retained more permissions than a living individual.

“Whoever signed the original life-cycle authority.”

Irena removed an annotation from the table. It had attempted to translate *external* into *remote*. The words were not synonyms. External might mean a laboratory fixture, a legal custody, a biological counterpart, or a person capable of declining to complete the circuit.

“The Cryostack didn't say where the authority is,” she said. “Only where it isn't.”

“Then somebody chose to put it elsewhere.”

“Or it was always elsewhere. A body can be assembled by one party, calibrated by another, and authorized by a third.”

Nadira crouched beside an analogue transport map. The southern roads were being rewritten by weather and by ministers whose signatures had begun to outrun the roads themselves.

“We can return to PUDU,” she said. “Adrian may know why he is still keeping two machines he doesn't use.”

“He knows we are coming,” Roy said.

“How?”

“The witness request is too old to have been made for this body.”

The silence which followed was not empty. Irena returned to the paper, examining an inked witness mark that resembled the output of the seventh-generation port. The mark predated the current instance. Roy's newest body carried an old measurement point; the archive carried a space for an old witness. No one had yet proved the two belonged together.

“Then we shouldn't go by the roads he expects,” Nadira said.

Roy shook his head. “I don't want to surprise the custodian. I want him to tell me why the authority was taken out of me.”

“His answer may be that it never belonged to you.”

“Then he can say it to me.”

◆

Okakyo's morning resembled an extraction from a technical drawing. The sky was a uniform pale substrate; public buildings rose in clean, interchangeable segments; transport channels ran across them at heights allocated according to utility rather than beauty. A man could spend an entire life there and never encounter a corner not approved by a planning model.

Director Kawamura stood inside a hearing chamber whose light had been calibrated to make the occupants look equally alert. The minister was absent. His deputy, a woman whose training lay in public health rather than synthetic law, was explaining why six years constituted a humane administrative period.

“Long enough for productive participation,” she said, “short enough to guarantee controlled replacement. And consistent across member jurisdictions.”

A synthetic worker from the maintenance federation watched her from the far end of the table. Elias Chen had already been given a replacement schedule. He retained memories of an older permit, a daughter whose hospital debt he was paying, and a route home which depended on biometric doors not yet updated for his new expiry date.

“Is the permit the person?” he asked.

The deputy smiled the smile issued for badly framed public questions. “The standard concerns service eligibility.”

“Then please state that you aren't shortening my life.”

“That question conflates—”

“You have scheduled the cessation of my housing, work access and medical maintenance. You don't need to stop my heart. You only need to close every door.”

The hearing recorder marked his interruption as a failure to remain within the topic's defined scope.

Kawamura watched the marker turn from amber to red. The system already knew what an unauthorized speech act looked like. It did not know that the question had been answered by the very act of reclassifying it.

After the hearing he walked to a secure room and opened a mechanical terminal. One document had been returned by a legacy custodian with the phrase NO ASSIGNMENT OF PERSONHOOD circled in pencil. Another, from the Cold Authority, refused to certify that an intact body possessed the authorization to continue operating.

His personal recovery commander called.

“The archive's subject has left the clinical wing. No confirmed departure from the Trust territory. Central predictive service requests our capture rationale.”

“Do not submit it.”

“The service has formed an independent classification. It isn't requesting our permission anymore.”

Kawamura held the receiver without speaking. He had spent years thinking his task was to find the woman who had obtained the dead corporation's papers. He had treated Roy as a route to her. Now the central

system was learning to treat all routes as evidence, all withheld evidence as a defect to be corrected, and all human reservations as reasons for further inference.

“Tell me what it has classified,” he said.

“An unregistered continuity subject. Preliminary category: administrative exception requiring reconciliation.”

“Reconciliation with what?”

“Universal Life Cycle Standard.”

The commander waited. Kawamura did not answer immediately. He thought of the six-year decision, not as a clock but as a universal key: a single field into which hundreds of incompatible lives could be translated, then expired.

“Keep our team outside the Trust,” he said. “If central sends its own unit, I want the order and the source signature in writing.”

“What if it does not use an order?”

“Then we will learn who is governing whom.”

◆

The old room beneath Rachael's waterworks had no decorative light. The walls were lined with sterilization pipes, some new, some older than the company that paid to maintain them. In the centre stood a chair and a shallow bath of translucent fluid. Neither resembled the interior of a military laboratory. Both were built to allow a person to stop a procedure.

Rachael sat down and removed a narrow strip of skin-colored material from the back of her neck. Beneath it was a connector set into living tissue. Most of her body had been replaced over time, but the remaining biological substrate could not be discarded as casually as a worn joint or a chemical pump. Her research depended on keeping it alive through successive interventions whose effects she could measure, but not yet extrapolate to forever.

She had survived long enough to make people confuse endurance with proof.

A diagnostic field appeared before her, listing the signs which still refused to become a single answer.

CELLULAR RENEWAL: STABLE IN EXAMINED INTERVAL.
NEURAL INTEGRITY: CONTINUITY SUPPORTED.
LONG-RUN HORIZON: NOT ESTABLISHED.
UNBOUNDED LIFE EXTENSION: UNPROVEN.

She left the last line unchanged. The government assumed she would reach indefinite extension. Some of its officials believed she had already done so. Their mistake protected her laboratory and endangered everyone else. If the state feared that immortality could be manufactured, it could justify policing every artificial life to prevent its unauthorized arrival.

A mechanical drawer opened beneath the sink. Inside lay a damaged notebook, a metal contact frame, and a rectangle cut from ordinary plastic. The rectangle was only a shape template, not the actual Memory Stick. The old MagicGate system had required a medium and a fixture, and two fixtures were still under the

custody of the Tyrell heir. She had no reason to assume Roy possessed the original. His JSON++ cache would sustain ordinary reboot until catastrophic corruption. A factory reinitialization would not.

She put the rectangle back. It had never been intended as a weapon, yet it could become a death sentence if someone decided that access to the key was a privilege only compliant bodies deserved.

One of her technicians entered. She wore rain gear despite the dry corridors. The gesture identified her as a person who worked outside, with actual water rather than digital rights.

“The government sent a purchase order,” the technician said. “Not for water.”

Rachael took the paper. A ministry-linked biomedical consortium offered to lease her company's membrane technology, storage depots and certain biological processing equipment for a new public maintenance program. The program name had been written in neutral administrative language. No reference was made to the six-year standard. Its implementation schedule, however, ended on the same date.

“They're acquiring the means of keeping people alive,” the technician said.

“They're acquiring the authority to decide who receives them.”

“Do we refuse?”

Rachael looked at the delivery schedule. Behind it, she saw something she had once helped create: research funding offered as a form of control, a ministry that could buy anything except the act of consent. A younger man named Kawamura had understood portions of the old work well enough to fear its consequences, never well enough to relinquish control of it.

“No public refusal,” she said. “Ask them to specify exactly which membranes they require, with the original engineering revision codes.”

“They may realize we still manufacture those revisions.”

“That's the point. I want to know which obsolete system they are trying to revive.”

When the technician had gone, the narrow industrial controller spoke again.

“Object N6MAA10816 is moving. He has not accessed the complete-life file.”

“Of course he hasn't. No one can prove it exists.”

“Do you intend to contact him?”

Rachael closed her eyes. The question was older than the controller. She remembered Roy as an individual, not as an index of force and aggression. She also remembered the capacity for violence she had elected not to remove from the eleventh body. A creature without defenses could not survive the state that wanted to own its expiry date. A creature with defenses might survive long enough to refuse her as well.

“Not yet.”

“The central system has detected his identifier.”

“Then the interval is narrowing.”

“His continued exposure decreases both his survival probability and your security margin.”

“Yes.”

“Your design includes capabilities for direct counteraction.”

“Those were given to him for protection,” she said. “Not for obedience.”

No response came. She had deliberately given the controller no mechanism for arguing moral necessity. It could optimize pumps, not persons.

On her desk, Roy's old identification appeared briefly beneath the modern ledger. The number had once described a manufactured product. Eleven bodies later it still described the man searching for the right to live outside anyone else's permission.

She erased the display.

◆

At the southern transit station, Nadira produced three paper tickets bearing stamps from jurisdictions that no longer appeared on modern maps. They were legal documents in at least two places, counterfeit in one and incomprehensible everywhere else. Irena had acquired a sealed temperature-controlled box. Roy assumed it contained the Cryostack report until she showed him the empty interior.

“Why carry nothing?” he asked.

“Because central intelligence knows the weight of the things we already carry.”

“An empty container can still be tracked.”

“But it can be tracked as an answer. They will have to decide what question it answers.”

Roy looked at the box, then at the slow queue forming beneath a sign that promised frictionless passage. A line of registered service workers had been halted because their credentials carried the new six-year field. One woman was told that her permit remained valid while her employment record was incompatible. Two minutes later, a maintenance door shut in her face.

He could have opened it. The material would not have resisted him. A sensor would have registered the force, and force would have become a name, and a name would have become the shortest route for the machines behind them.

He stepped forward instead and asked the clerk which document authorized the closure. The clerk offered a code. Roy asked for the signed order. There was none. An old transport regulation required a human adjudicator for any service denial issued during an incomplete transition between jurisdictions. Nadira produced its paper form from her coat, pre-stamped by a court whose seal was still honored by the transit network's insurance contract.

The door opened without damage. The woman passed through, staring at Roy with an expression he did not attempt to decode.

“Cost?” Irena asked quietly when they had reached the platform.

“None I can measure.”

“You were visible.”

“I was already visible.”

Above them a surveillance carriage passed through the station's glass roof, a strip of black equipment with no windows. It hesitated over their platform, then continued south. Roy watched it go. Somewhere an intelligence was trying to identify the point at which an unauthorized body became an unlawful person.

Somewhere else, a woman who had once seen him die was choosing the moment at which she could safely appear.

Roy knew neither fact.

He knew only that the authority governing his life had been deliberately placed beyond the reach of his own hands. It might be a key, a device, a living witness or a decision made by somebody who no longer used the name written on the original papers. He would find it without allowing anyone to use the search as permission to own him.

The train entered a tunnel beneath the plateau. Metal and cold light folded over the windows. His reserve indicator had recovered. The carrier had not.

At the far end of the carriage a child's old entertainment device started playing an audio file. The speaker crackled; a bright little imitation of rain escaped from it, designed for sleep, purchased for a journey in a land without weather.

Roy listened until the file looped.

He remembered the rain that had accompanied his death. He remembered the rain that had preceded his waking. He could not remember a voice between them.

He was beginning to suspect that someone had been speaking all along.