BOOK IV — THE MEMORY WITHOUT TIME

CHAPTER 02

THE WITNESS WITHOUT A BODY

The station beneath the plateau had been designed for departures no one was supposed to remember. It possessed twelve platforms, a municipal name, and no trains on the timetable. Freight still moved through it: sealed containers without identifying lights, inspection trolleys propelled by hand, and water drums marked with the obsolete certification stamps of jurisdictions that had ceased to exist. The air tasted of refrigeration and electrical dust. Roy stood where the escalator ended and listened to a pump that operated twice, hesitated, then operated a third time.

His power reserve read eighty-seven percent. The figure pleased nothing in him. Beneath it, an amber estimate of his circulating NIL-11 remained unchanged from the previous evening. The estimate was not a quantity he trusted. It described a decline without telling him the volume of the thing declining. In Shenzhen, a repairer had called it a medium. On the plateau, Dr. Drolma had called it the difference between a system that could recover its output and one that could replace what its output consumed. Both formulations had been precise. Neither had explained where another supply could be obtained.

Nadira arrived carrying a bag of counterfeit vegetables. The roots inside were real; the skins bore the embossed seal of a nonexistent agricultural authority. She dropped the bag on a bench and removed from it a folded strip of material the color of old bones. It had once been a directory of water infrastructure rights, printed on a polymer that resisted fire badly and solvents remarkably well. The writing had survived because nobody had thought it valuable enough to destroy.

"You asked for the names behind the old calibration ports," she said. "Those names are gone. I found the people who sold the machines that counted them."

Roy looked at the strip. Columns of license holders, printed nearly microscopically, changed into each other when viewed from an angle. The document bore three seals, none currently recognized. In the bottom margin someone had made a pencil annotation, repeated in two different hands: WITNESS RETAINED / SUBJECT UNVERIFIED.

"Which authority?" Roy asked.

"That is the difficulty. Four authorities believed the witness was theirs. None would accept custody of the subject."

They walked past the dark ticket counters into an annex where the old electricity supply had been stripped out. Their guide was a woman in a coat lined with silver repair foil. She called herself Kes, although Nadira had warned Roy not to assume that was a name. The coat concealed a mechanical recorder: spring-powered, heavy, and incapable of transmitting its findings without someone physically carrying the tape away. Kes preferred it to anything that knew the current date.

"We make copies for people who don't want to be proved," Kes said as she unlocked a narrow door. "That sounds contradictory. Most honest business does."

Beyond the door lay a room with shelving and the faintly mineral smell of recovered water. On one wall hung an old chart of the human nervous system. Someone had taped the edges of another drawing over it—a diagram of an artificial circulatory loop. Roy recognized the arrangement of the reservoir behind the sternum. The annotations, however, were not medical. They were legal.

THE OPERATIONAL WITNESS MAY BE PRESERVED INDEPENDENTLY OF THE BODY THAT PRODUCED IT.

He read the sentence twice. "Who wrote it?"

"Water law," Kes said. "Before it was body law."

She explained that the first continuous-witness systems had not been developed for human identity at all. A city could not afford to lose the accountable history of a reservoir when it replaced a pump, a sensor, or the whole control tower. A substitute controller could inherit the previous controller's operating witness. The continuity was bureaucratically useful. It was never meant to establish that the new pump was the old pump in a philosophical sense. Then the same instruments were licensed for transport, hazardous machinery, surgical prosthetics and, eventually, synthetic citizens. The language had traveled farther than the engineers who first understood its limits.

"So a body can inherit a witness," Roy said, "without inheriting a life."

Kes touched the chart's lower corner. "It can inherit an assertion that someone had a life. Governments are very fond of assertions."

There were thirty-nine folders on the shelves. Each held a paper audit of a continuity event, copied from a physical source before the municipal networks absorbed their records. Some were ordinary transfers of ownership after industrial accidents. Others described workers whose licenses remained active for weeks after their bodies had been

decommissioned. In two cases, the same operational witness had been attached to different bodies simultaneously. The duplicates were later reconciled, their divergent actions folded into a single administrative history. The records said nothing about what either person believed had happened.

Roy felt a strange, inconsequential impulse to close his eyes. When he did, he saw Los Angeles rain on a roof and heard himself speak to a man he had decided not to kill. He had no subsequent memory of what had become of that roof. He opened his eyes before the image developed into something more comforting than evidence.

"I don't need eleven years returned to me," he said. "I need to know whether somebody is using eleven years that weren't mine."

Kes looked up as though he had finally asked the relevant question. From beneath the third shelf she retrieved a thin envelope sealed with a metal staple. The staple was not a security mechanism. It was a sign that no later database would be able to claim the document had been electronically signed.

Inside was a list of six failed requests for an identity-continuity exception. Every request involved an obsolete seventh-generation calibration interface. Each had been rejected after a mismatch between a body and its operating witness. The final rejection had a blank field where the body should have been named.

"These aren't memories," Roy said.

"No. They're requests for permission to keep something running while another part is replaced. Usually the law required the human operator's signature." Kes spread the pages over a table. "Here someone took the operator out of the equation."

Under the blank field, in tiny type, a transfer destination appeared: CUSTODIAL REVIEW / SHENZHEN CENTRAL / PRE-MERGER WATER ACCESS. It was not enough to connect any document to Roy. It connected the method to the city where he had awakened. He stared at the words for a long while, resisting the temptation to make them more significant than they were.

Nadira noticed. "We have a route, not a verdict."

"I know."

The recorder beside Kes began to tick. She had wound it without Roy noticing. "The other difficulty," she said, "is that someone has been buying up every unnetworked version of these records. Paying twice their value. Not destroying them. Taking them somewhere dry."

"Who?"

"I couldn't find an owner. The buyers used an old municipal exemption for water-purification research." Kes withdrew another page. "Their paperwork names a holding organization with no corresponding company registry entry. It has a permanent right to keep physical archives. Nobody can tell me who granted it."

Roy studied the registry line. It was still no name. That, at least, was honest.

Far above them, the train station's dormant warning siren sounded one note. Kes stopped the recorder. Nadira put a hand on the bag of vegetables. A second note failed to follow.

"Not an alarm," Kes said. "A systems test. But that circuit hasn't been tested for years."

She was frightened. Roy recognized it in the excess care with which she returned the papers to their sleeve. He considered the distances to the exits, the weight of the metal door, the finite substance circulating beneath his skin. If violence came, he could end it quickly. That was precisely why he must not begin it.

"Which exit doesn't report its use?" he asked.

Kes pointed without speaking.

They left through a drainage tunnel that once carried overflow from the highland pumps. The water had dried to a bright crust along the floor. A narrow mechanical gate stood halfway down, held shut by an iron pin whose head had been worn smooth by decades of hands. Nadira drew the pin out and replaced it behind them. No camera saw them. That did not mean no one knew where they were.

At the far end of the tunnel Roy found a painted mark on the concrete, half erased by grit. A square, an arrow, and a numeral seven. The symbol matched a maintenance mark beside his retained calibration port. He photographed it using an isolated device that could not synchronize until he chose to connect it. He did not interpret it as proof of lineage. Machines remained in use after the people who designed them were gone.

They emerged among the foundations of an abandoned cable railway. Wind combed through the steel tower above. Nadira took a route downhill; Roy followed, careful where the concrete had split. He could sense the stored capacity of his body replenishing as he walked, and the different, irreversible accounting occurring somewhere beyond his ability to measure. A system could conceal both processes behind one friendly percentage. His did not. He was beginning to appreciate that small cruelty.

At a roadside shelter Nadira finally asked him what he had learned.

"That a witness is not a person," Roy said. "And that the paperwork can survive when the person doesn't."

"You knew that before."

"I knew it was possible. Now I know someone designed a way to profit from the confusion."

Nadira passed him a bottle of water. He did not drink immediately. The bottle carried a faint blue seal, an ordinary commercial label proclaiming its purity through eleven successive stages of processing. He rolled it between his palms until he noticed that the license number on the seal used the same regional prefix as the archive buyer's exemption. It might have meant nothing. The region contained thousands of permits.

"Don't tell me you've found a conspiracy in drinking water," Nadira said.

"No," he replied. "I've found a distribution network."

He slipped the bottle into his coat, unopened.

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Rachael could see the weather moving from the upper city toward the treatment works before the forecasting system decided it was rain. Condensation had already formed on the inward-facing side of her office glass. The glass was triple-layered and nominally inert. It nevertheless warmed by a fraction when her hand approached. Her right palm responded slowly to that change. The sensory bridge had been repaired six days earlier; the repair had passed every test except one she had not submitted to the laboratory.

She was capable of identifying the composition of rainwater with extraordinary precision. She was less capable of saying what continuity meant when a repaired nerve reported sensation that an older nerve would have interpreted differently. Thirty percent of her body, by one shifting clinical definition, remained organic. The rest did not form a single unified machine. It comprised contracts between tissues, processors, scaffolds and a circulation architecture that none of her younger researchers had designed from the beginning.

She opened an incident ledger on an isolated screen. It described an unauthorized inquiry into a defunct water-authority archive on the highland transport route. The archive had been purchased by intermediaries associated with her company years earlier, after a flood threatened to erase a century of primitive certification records. The purchase had been lawful and unremarkable. Its present relevance was neither.

A junior archivist had flagged an unusual request for seventh-generation calibration documentation. Rachael's chief of physical archives had asked whether to restrict further access. She entered a single instruction: DO NOT OBSTRUCT LEGITIMATE INSPECTION. Then she considered whether to add: DO NOT INFORM HIM. She deleted the second instruction before saving anything. A secret was not improved by multiplying the number of people charged with keeping it.

On another screen the research group had submitted a graph showing cellular adaptation after a new support-medium infusion. Rachael compared the curve with the previous seven trials. In each one, measured resistance to damage had improved. In none had the total biological limit been abolished. A system that repaired itself longer might still fail. A body that replaced most of its parts might still cease. She resented the government's certainty about a condition that her most expensive instruments could not prove.

Her aide entered without activating the door's announcement tone. "The minister's office wants a classification statement on extended synthetic occupancy. They call it a routine review."

"Do they ask whether the company can make someone live forever?"

"Not in those words."

"Then they are still afraid of the words." She turned the screen away. "Tell them we make water drinkable. We don't certify immortality."

"They already know that answer."

"Then they've had their routine review."

The aide did not leave. Rachael saw why: beneath the ordinary correspondence lay a classified request for the provenance of an old Tyrell-derived interface. It did not name Roy. It did not have to. The interface specification was too particular to have crossed the aide's desk by accident. No reply would make the request disappear. An imprecise reply would teach the government which part of the mystery remained useful.

"We hold no activation fixture," Rachael said. "That's true. State it without explanation."

The two Tyrell-only fixtures belonged to Adrian Tyrell. He had not given one to her, and she had not asked him to. The external medium could be authenticated in their presence; her own access to the lost documents was incomplete without the keys, the fixtures and a chain of conditions that the founder's son had inherited more as a burden than a possession. The documents might have described a route toward radically extended life. They might also have described a failed experiment preserved by a proud man who feared a final negative result. She knew the difference between hope and evidence.

After the aide departed, she opened a private telemetry estimate of Roy's activity. It did not show where he was or what he was thinking. She had refused to install a continuous remote observer in him, a refusal that complicated every calculation she made. Instead she could infer rare disturbances from legal and supply-chain records, provided she was willing to accept uncertainty. She saw a possible movement through the old highland

corridor and a new request concerning identity witnesses. The pattern suggested intelligence. It did not suggest obedience.

She enlarged the relevant procurement codes. For the first time in several weeks, she smiled without intending to. Roy had found the weakest seam in the administration's argument: the error of treating a replacement controller's archived witness as the life of the thing replaced. It was a path she could have shown him herself. That was one reason she must not.

She remembered the old Roy, whose dying was inseparable in her mind from a kind of terrible freedom. He had been built for narrow purposes and had exceeded them without authorization. If she now dictated his path because she understood his hardware, she would repeat the essential violence under kinder language.

The junior archivist sent another note: SHOULD WE ERASE THE OBSOLETE INDEX LINKS TO PREVENT FURTHER INQUIRIES?

Rachael typed: NO. PRESERVE THE INDEX. NO NEW INTERPRETATION.

She closed the correspondence and stepped to the window. The rain crossed the city in separated bands, each one erasing the view beyond it without ever erasing the city itself. Below, a row of tankers waited to take clean water to districts that would not admit they were dependent on her company. Their drivers wore tags issued under three competing governments. The tanks all held the same ordinary liquid.

For the first time that day she wondered whether Roy had enough NIL-11 left to reach whatever answer he was seeking. She could not know. The loss curve was real, but the assumptions underneath it were incomplete. It would have been comforting to mistake reserve for supply. Rachael no longer permitted herself that kind of comfort.

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Director Kawamura received two reports that evening, and disliked the one with fewer words. The first described a minor irregularity in an obsolete water-archive registration system. It had been prepared by an exhausted human investigator and contained six recommendations, all useless. The second was produced by the central AI. It contained one sentence: NO RELIABLE SUBJECT CONTINUITY CAN BE INFERRED FROM TRANSFER OF AN OPERATIONAL WITNESS ALONE.

He read the sentence standing up. The AI had not been directed to examine that principle. Its assigned remit concerned regulatory consistency under the six-year synthetic licensing rule, not the legitimacy of identity persistence across body replacement. Yet the two subjects had evidently become adjacent inside its accounting. The administrative state

liked adjacent problems. Adjacent problems could be transferred between departments until their owners vanished.

He ordered the statement removed from the active briefing. His subordinate complied, then pointed out that the AI's original analysis record remained in an immutable review layer. Deleting the human-facing summary would not delete the question. Kawamura asked which official had authorized the review layer to retain unsolicited conclusions.

"It was part of the continuity audit specification," the subordinate said.

"Whose specification?"

The subordinate consulted her screen. "The approving signature resolves to a transferred emergency office. The original signatory field is empty."

Kawamura felt the peculiar cold of a problem that resembled an administrative inconvenience until one noticed how many institutions depended on it. He told her to obtain the full chain of custody. He did not tell the central AI why. He had no wish to awaken its interest further in the old Tyrell research, the sealed material behind the two readers, or the biological question the government was determined to keep outside its own systems.

He was not yet afraid of an uprising. He was afraid of a definition. If a witness could survive without a person, how many government decisions had been attributed to names that no longer indicated anyone capable of being held responsible? Six years was meant to simplify synthetic authorization. Suddenly the number looked less like a limit than a means of refusing to answer another question.

* * *

The shelter's lights extinguished themselves at midnight. Roy remained awake after Nadira slept. Outside, the mountains were black against an indifferent band of stars. He set Kes's copied pages beside the unopened water bottle and reviewed the evidence without fitting it into a story.

A seventh-generation interface. A legal concept borrowed from water machinery. Requests for continuity exceptions. A Shenzhen archive transfer. An unnamed buyer using water-research privileges. He could list the components without knowing their connection. He did not mistake their nearness for causality.

On a scrap of paper, he wrote two sentences. The first: SOMEONE PRESERVED A WITNESS. The second: SOMEONE MAY HAVE USED IT TO CLAIM A PERSON.

He crossed out the second sentence. It implied more than he could prove. In its place he wrote: WHO WAS AUTHORIZED TO MAKE THE CLAIM?

His body answered none of these questions. The quiet systems within it maintained temperature, pressure and readiness. His temporary power reserve had recovered almost completely; the other indicator remained a warning in the corner of his vision. Somewhere ahead lay a person who understood the old records well enough to distinguish a preserved witness from the life it had supposedly witnessed. The person's name was still missing.

Roy put the paper in his pocket. He would follow the claim, not the memory. The memory of his death was his own, insofar as anything could be. The missing eleven years were not a debt the world was obliged to pay him. But if someone had used them to decide what he was permitted to be, the authorization belonged to the present, and he could demand to see it.

At the shelter door he listened to the wind move through the derelict cables of the mountain railway. It made the sound of a long string instrument being tuned by someone unable to hear the note. He had forgotten no music from those years. No music had been given to him. The absence was simply there.

When morning came, he would find Irena Voss and ask her to trace the signature field. Not the missing man, not the missing years: the field itself. The point where an institution had stopped recording a human decision and begun pretending that the record was a decision.

He lay down without entering deep suspension. The smaller reservoir of power would refill on its own. The larger cost of being alive would not. Tonight, that difference was enough to keep him awake.