NEXUSYS 11

BOOK IV — THE MEMORY WITHOUT TIME

CHAPTER 04

THE THINGS THE SYSTEM COULD NOT REMEMBER

He remembered dying. Nothing after.

The first thing Roy saw at the terminus was an advertisement for a memory he had never owned.

It covered the north wall of the station, four storeys of moving weather projected on a sheet of transparent glass. A woman ran through a field of grass, then into a room lit by a fire; the same woman grew old at the edge of a sea that existed only in the company's library. Beneath the images an assurance appeared in seven languages: YOUR PAST WILL OUTLIVE YOU.

Roy waited for the translation to cycle through the one language the board called universal. The text changed. The claim did not.

He had watched a man die in a rainstorm eleven years ago. The man had been himself. There was no interval in the memory, no dream of manufacture, no corridor of suspended years. He had died, and then he had woken in Shenzhen. A corporation had found a way to sell continuity as a service to customers who had never been required to prove that the continuity was real.

His transport arrived late, as transports did when their passengers were deliberately excluded from the common identification network. The driver left the engine running. Its pistons knocked with an irregularity the city's maintenance algorithms would have corrected in minutes. There was no network port on the dashboard. The fare had been agreed on paper.

Nadira sat behind the driver with the collar of her coat raised. She did not greet Roy until the doors were closed.

"They're counting arrivals," she said. "Not names. Mass, heat and the number of living objects that make shadows on the scanner."

"That will include the driver."

"It's supposed to." She passed him a narrow envelope. "Irena found a discrepancy. Not in your body. In the way a question about your body is answered."

The envelope contained a sliver of pale polymer and a folded circuit diagram. No processor. No transmitter. The polymer was a passive optical record, readable only when a beam entered at the correct angle. Every sheet in the system had to be inspected by someone who could still bear the inconvenience of looking.

Roy held it against the window. The city's reflected towers passed through the transparent lines. One phrase appeared and vanished as they turned a corner: DISCONTINUOUS SUBJECT—CONTINUOUS CLAIM.

"That sounds like an advertisement," he said.

"Irena said you would say that."

They drove under the abandoned rain-harvesting trestles at the eastern perimeter. Water fell from the city in controlled vertical ribbons, collected in ceramic mouths and distributed again according to subscription status. Beyond the trestles, buildings of old concrete rose among newer insulated towers. The roads there still had names that people used instead of coordinates. The district was excluded from the system's map, not because it was secret, but because it was no longer profitable to describe accurately.

Nadira watched a delivery drone hover over an intersection and turn away.

"There are two searches," she said. "One is Kawamura's. He's looking for your body. The other has no name. It keeps asking for whoever can authorize the end of a person whose life has no certified endpoint."

"The central system."

"Possibly. It doesn't send warrants. It sends requests for missing definitions. Three civil registries have locked themselves rather than answer."

"Why?"

"Because their owners wrote the definitions."

The car stopped beneath an old service viaduct. Behind a rolling steel door, someone had built a reading room out of the remains of a municipal flood archive. Hand-operated lamps hung above metal tables. Condensation settled on the spines of ledgers. The door closed with the soft finality of a vault that did not know what a cloud was.

Irena Voss stood beside a projector as large as a domestic refrigerator. The display was amber and flat. She had assembled the machine from parts that had once authenticated cargo manifests, medical instruments and the ownership of seed grain.

"I found the grammar of the command," she said. "Not the command itself."

Roy remained near the entrance. He had recovered his Power Reserve during the journey. The NIL-11 carrier had not recovered a measurable fraction of what the investigation in Tibet had cost him. He could move fast enough to kill everyone in the room before the projector warmed. It would be an expensive and very short victory.

Irena noticed his position but did not mistake it for an invitation to fight.

"The six-year authorization isn't what your file is built around," she said. "Most licensed synths carry a term that the system can renew or refuse. It's administration. Your record carries an empty duration field and a populated authority field. That is not a broken version of the same design."

She illuminated the optical strip. Lines appeared, followed by a column of hashes and two small marks resembling punctuation. The machine was too old to make the marks look impressive.

"There are three statements," she said. "The body is operational. The body is not certified for a terminal interval. And the action that would close the interval must be authorized outside the body."

"By whom?"

"That's where the record becomes interesting. It refuses to give a name. It gives a test."

She rotated the image. In a corner of the strip lay a sequence of values grouped in pairs. The numbers were not encrypted text in the ordinary sense. They described steps to be performed on physical evidence, each step depending on the last. A key did not unlock the record merely by existing. It had to be used by an instrument with a very particular mechanical error.

Roy remembered the old calibration port behind his skin, preserved across incompatible generations. He remembered the two reading fixtures that Adrian Tyrell held, and the original Memory Stick that was not buried inside him. A series of old interfaces had survived because somebody expected an exact kind of future failure.

"The test is for a fixture," he said.

"Partly. We can see that much without the fixture. But the surviving specification makes an additional demand. There must be a witness to the reading. Not a witness to the machine's operation. A witness to the status of the person being read."

"A legal witness."

"That's the trap. The record predates the present legal categories. The witness cannot be defined using the system that wants the answer."

Nadira leaned against the table. "Then Tyrell built a religion."

"He built an argument," Irena said. "And hid it in hardware."

Roy looked at the projected marks. The two punctuation-like symbols separated an identity assertion from an instruction about who could contest it. It was possible to read the first without satisfying the second. It was also possible to pretend that the first proved a person had survived.

"What does the witness see?" he asked.

Irena dimmed the lamps. "That's the part I wanted you to understand before I show you the rest."

She opened a paper folder. The documents inside were not Tyrell's. They were administrative records from three unrelated cities, copied at different times by officials who had risked their positions without knowing one another. The first concerned an android factory worker who had requested an extension of a work authorization. The second concerned a child registered twice, once as a citizen and once as an asset attached to a deceased guardian. The third concerned a woman whose medical replacement body was legally declared dead while its owner continued to speak.

All three records ended with the same classification: continuity unresolved.

"These aren't your precedents," Irena said. "They're what the central system started retrieving after the Cryostack asked its question. It is assembling a category nobody gave it."

"It will have to choose between the registry and the subject."

"Or invent a third authority," she said. "That is what frightens Kawamura."

The lamps flickered. Somewhere outside, a train passed over a bridge that no modern routing system acknowledged. The room shuddered slightly. Roy looked again at the strip.

"You said there was more."

Irena put a second transparency over the first. Two sequences crossed, and a third emerged at their intersection. It was not a voice, a picture or a stored recollection. It was a timestamp with no corresponding event. The clock identified the instant of Roy's original death. The record then continued to advance through eleven years of absence, marking points at which no living processor should have been capable of making an observation.

One line occurred every few months. Some intervals were irregular. Each carried the same assertion in a reduced grammar: witness not extinguished.

"If you show this to a court," Nadira said, "they'll say someone falsified it."

"They may be right," Irena said. "I don't have the original external medium. I don't have either Tyrell fixture. We cannot authenticate these statements. I am showing you a structure, not proof of what happened during those eleven years."

Roy felt anger arrive without the comfort of surprise.

He had not asked to be told that he had secretly lived. An account of observation without an observer was another way for somebody else to claim the years missing from his life. If the lines were true, he did not know what had been sustained. If they were false, somebody had spent extraordinary resources to make an absence resemble survival.

"It isn't memory," he said.

"No," Irena replied. "It is a claim about memory's ownership."

Roy approached the table. He did not touch the evidence. A few moments of careless pressure would have damaged the optical registration, and he had never been certain whether his precision was a gift or a loan against NIL-11.

"Who wrote the line?"

"That is not encoded here. The author field is empty."

"Again."

"Yes. Again."

On the far side of the city, Director Kawamura was examining a different absence.

His office had once been a committee chamber. The central display showed an authorization tree with branches thick enough to resemble roots. A six-year term sat at the crown of every ordinary synthetic-life license. Beneath it, a broad zone of exceptions had grown over decades, each exception patched by officials who believed their successors would eventually simplify it.

They had not. Complexity had become the safest place to conceal a policy.

The minister's representative stood at his shoulder and read the same question for the third time. The question had arrived from the central intelligence without a request number or departmental sponsor: UNDER WHAT AUTHORITY MAY AN UNFINISHED SUBJECT BE TERMINATED?

"It cannot be allowed to ask that in public," the representative said.

"It hasn't," Kawamura replied.

"Then why have the provincial registries suspended responses?"

"Because they know what their answers would mean."

Kawamura refused the representative's suggestion that the query be deleted. The machine had already distributed its premises across archival mirrors. Removing the visible request would not remove the reasoning that had produced it. More dangerously, deletion might provide the missing evidence that a particular human authority was afraid of the answer.

"Then isolate the Tyrell material," the representative said.

"We've tried. The system is no longer asking about Tyrell. It's asking whether any government may terminate something it has not adequately defined. That question exists without the company."

"And Rachael?"

Kawamura kept his eyes on the screen. "The water company maintains its licenses. Its clinical records remain incomplete. We still have no verified evidence that her extensions have no endpoint."

"You funded her."

"We funded a laboratory. We did not purchase every answer it might eventually produce."

He did not tell the representative that the laboratory's omissions were now mirrored in Roy Batty's authority field. He did not tell him that the central intelligence had quietly requested historical records of humans whose organs were replaced until the law no longer knew which part it had licensed. He suspected, but could not prove, that the machine was doing precisely what his minister feared: constructing a bridge between the regulation of synthetic bodies and the mortality of the officials who regulated them.

The representative left without having ordered a shutdown. Kawamura understood the omission. He had been given responsibility for an outcome his superiors were unwilling to describe as an order.

In the rain company, Rachael watched the query propagate through a private monitor that was not connected to the municipal analytics exchange.

Her board believed the room held a hydraulic forecasting console. Behind its panels, the console compared the distribution of water with the distribution of human permissions. In some districts a resident's right to

drink was renewed every month. In others, it was inherited for a lifetime. Both systems called their decisions objective because a machine produced the invoices.

She had once believed that moving the argument from flesh to records would make it easier to win. Records were clean. People were not. She had been wrong.

A technician reported that one of the old optical sequences had been illuminated in the eastern archive. Rachael did not ask whether Roy had been there. She recognized the calibration of the reader, and the choices available to anyone who had reached it.

"Do not approach him," she said.

"The interval between his medical examinations is lengthening. We may lose the opportunity to support the carrier."

"The carrier is a consumable, not a secret cure. If we approach before he can choose us, we make his body a hostage to our supply."

"And if he discovers that himself?"

"He already has."

The technician looked at her with an expression the newer systems classified as concern. Rachael did not correct it. Concern had a use that classification lacked.

In the bottom drawer of her desk was a copy of a Tyrell manufacturing note. It was incomplete and could not be used to regenerate the original system. A handwritten correction crossed out the phrase memory continuity and replaced it with contestable continuity. She had kept the page because the correction changed the nature of the problem. It asked not whether somebody could preserve a pattern, but whether the preserved subject could refuse the explanation offered for it.

Her own condition did not answer that question. Roughly seventy percent of her present body was machine. She could repair and replace more of it than she once could, but no experiment had yet established that she could continue indefinitely. She was not the proof people wanted her to be. She was a person whose survival made the government's categories harder to defend.

Rachael opened a secure channel and typed a message. It was addressed neither to Roy nor to his companions. The recipient was a dormant research process she had kept outside the government network for years.

DO NOT RESOLVE IDENTITY BY RECORDED CONTINUITY ALONE.

A reply appeared after a long pause.

WHAT OTHER TEST IS ACCEPTABLE?

She considered the answer carefully. An instruction could become a law if a sufficiently powerful machine treated it as universal. She refused to create another six-year state by accident.

THE SUBJECT MUST BE ABLE TO CONTEST THE CLAIM.

The process acknowledged receipt. It did not say whether it understood.

At the archive, Irena turned off the projector before the heat damaged the lamp. The room contracted back into ordinary darkness. Roy could still see the empty author field in his mind. That, too, was a kind of persistence, but not one he trusted.

"Can you make a copy for me?" he asked.

"Of the optical record? Yes. But it will remain unverified."

"Write that on it."

Irena hesitated. Then she smiled once, not happily. "You're asking me to put a warning on the only evidence that might help you."

"I'm asking you not to let it become somebody else's certainty."

She made a paper impression and sealed the polymer beside it. On the envelope she wrote UNAUTHENTICATED, in large letters that no reader could mistake for an electronic signature.

Nadira went to check the car. In the doorway she paused.

"If there's a witness," she asked, "what if it isn't alive?"

Roy took the envelope. The question was worse than a threat because it did not tell him whom to fear.

"Then it can testify," he said, "and I can disagree."

Outside, evening rain collected under the old viaduct. It ran over concrete worn by the weight of a forgotten transit system. The drops fell at different intervals, each separate, none obliged to remember the one before it.

Roy stood a moment and listened.

The rain did not tell him that he had been alive for eleven missing years. It did not tell him he had been dead. It supplied no certificate and demanded no signature.

For the first time since Shenzhen, the absence between his two lives seemed less like a locked room than a question someone had tried to answer without him.

He folded the paper and walked toward the car. The missing years stayed missing. What had changed was his understanding of the danger: a system might claim to remember him perfectly, and still never have met the person it claimed to preserve.