BOOK IV — THE MEMORY WITHOUT TIME

CHAPTER 05

THE RIGHT TO DISAGREE

English Draft 01

By the time the road entered the floodplain, the rain had acquired a second sound. It struck the car's roof in its own voice, but beneath that voice something wider moved through the drainage fields: water passing through a thousand calibrated throats, each throat obliged to report what it had swallowed.

Nadira drove without navigation. The highway had once been a service road for municipal desalination; later someone had extended it to connect a freight spur whose ownership existed in three jurisdictions and belonged to none of them. The road's surface had been repaired in patches shaped like imperfect maps. Under the elevated tanks, Roy could see inspection drones hovering over the channels with the patience of insects.

He kept the envelope on his knee. UNAUTHENTICATED. Irena's handwriting was blunt enough to survive poor light. Inside lay an optical impression from an obsolete apparatus, a record which seemed to contain observations of a man after the registered conclusion of that man's life. The entry possessed no author. Worse, the absence of an author might itself be evidence of careful authorship.

"We could have taken a faster road," he said.

"A faster road would be watching for the kind of people who need a faster road."

"And this one?"

"This one watches water."

"Everything watches something."

"Then choose the thing that doesn't know what you are."

A lorry passed them in the opposite direction, carrying a stack of ceramic membranes behind a yellow rain curtain. For an instant its axle lights illuminated the old calibration socket under the skin of Roy's left arm. He drew the sleeve down. The socket had been designed for a lineage older than the body surrounding it. Several generations of machines had retained the interface because factories disliked replacing tools. One could call it continuity and become dangerously sentimental about spare parts.

Nadira took an exit marked CLOSED FOR HYDROLOGICAL REVIEW. Beyond the warning barrier, an unpowered booth stood among reeds. Its glass had gone opaque with salt. She stopped without killing the engine.

"A person is waiting," she said.

Roy examined the booth. "You said nobody knew the road."

"I said it knew water. There's a difference."

From the reeds emerged Elias Chen, moving like someone who had rehearsed not being followed. He wore a municipal technician's raincoat, poorly fitted, with the insignia torn away. His face was unremarkable. Roy had learned that an unremarkable face could be more expensive than a handsome one.

Elias opened the rear door, then stood outside it. "I should tell you before I get in. My permit expires in forty-nine hours."

"You said it had years," Nadira answered.

"It did. Twenty-three years before adjudication. They have revised my class."

"To six?"

"To the remainder of six. They have counted backward from my first activation, not forward from the issue of the license. The notice says my entitlement ceased last month. Apparently I'm a clerical error with a pulse."

He sat, shut the door, and handed Roy a folded paper. It was neither a warrant nor a summons. It announced an opportunity to contest a finding through a hearing mechanism that did not provide a hearing date, venue, or human address. In place of a signature was a narrow line of machine-readable print.

"Who issued it?" Roy asked.

"The Department of Synthetic Continuance. The classification was performed by a different office. They won't tell me which."

"And the appeal?"

"An interface. I submitted objections. It returned that a petitioner under expired authorization lacked standing to submit an objection."

Nadira laughed without humor. "They designed the door to open only for someone already inside."

Roy read the sentence again. Elias did not ask him to save his life. That would have been a simpler request. Instead he had come bearing a question of structure: whether an administrative finding could erase the person entitled to dispute it before the dispute took place.

"I have a record," Roy said, touching the envelope. "It might be about me. It might be wrong."

"Then you have something more than I do," Elias answered. "The machine claims it's entirely certain about me."

They drove on beneath pipes heavy with condensation. Somewhere in the car, a passive meter clicked once when the road crossed a boundary no map acknowledged.

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Rachael did not read the memorandum on the central display. She printed it on cellulose sheet, waited for the solvent to finish evaporating, and laid the paper against the stainless-steel basin where the laboratory washed precipitation samples. The document arrived through a channel whose keys predated the incorporation of her water company. It bore no name. She knew whose people had written it because of the errors they had chosen not to make.

SUBJECT N6MAA10816. PROVISIONAL IDENTITY CLAIM. CONTINUITY EVIDENCE: UNRESOLVED. HUMAN REVIEW: DEFERRED.

The old serial number was a weapon when placed next to an administrative verb. It could summon technicians who had never met Roy and persuade them they possessed an authority greater than his memory of dying. Rachael ran a thumb along the paper's wet edge. Her hand had been rebuilt in layers, some living, some manufactured, the nerves moving between them through interfaces that had outlasted successive generations of language about what counted as flesh.

She could tolerate the uncertainty of her own body. She could not tolerate the certainty of other people's forms.

Below the basin, a diagnostic light showed the results from a sealed culture chamber. The tissue had resumed division after a period of artificial deprivation. In one sense the experiment was promising. In another it was an indictment. The new growth had consumed a matrix it could not manufacture. It was not immortality. It was a temporary victory over one kind of loss purchased by accepting another.

The public believed her company purified rainwater. That was true. Its systems separated metals, spores, polymers, and compounds for which public-health authorities had no agreed vocabulary. The company also possessed one of the few private networks capable of moving small quantities of sterile fluid between

jurisdictions without labeling every vial as a medical product. She had built that advantage deliberately, but its use left signatures. No logistics system was innocent merely because the trucks carried water.

An assistant entered through the pressure door. "The export license was questioned again."

"By customs?"

"By a health office which claims jurisdiction over synthetic tissues. They're asking why our membrane test rigs need a biomedical transport tolerance."

Rachael did not look up. "Because a filter exposed to biological material cannot be shipped as an empty pipe. Send the technical explanation. Nothing beyond it."

"They also asked about the old cartridges."

That made her still. Two Tyrell reading fixtures survived intact, both under Adrian Tyrell's control. The Memory Stick PRO Duo MAX was a medium, not a talisman: without the correct fixture and the MagicGate authentication chain, a collection of bytes might remain intact yet permanently unreadable. Roy carried neither stick nor fixture inside himself. He carried a derived JSON++ cache for ordinary waking and shutdown. The distinction had saved him from several failures. It also meant the catastrophe of a complete initialization could not be repaired by hope.

"What exactly did they ask?"

"Whether obsolete authentication devices had ever passed through the membrane division."

"Answer what we know. They have not."

The assistant waited. "Is it true?"

"Yes."

After the door sealed, Rachael removed a tiny ampoule from the cold compartment. Its contents were not NIL-11. She knew its properties too well to mistake similarity for identity. It had been produced from a different lineage of synthetic fluid research: suitable as a substrate in a laboratory test, fatal if treated as a replacement circulation medium. She placed it beside the record of the tissue experiment, refusing the false comfort of visual resemblance.

There were many ways to keep an organism active. There were fewer ways to let it remain itself.

She opened a private terminal. A question waited in an encrypted queue, relayed from somewhere near the autonomous compute territories of Tibet New World. It had been phrased as a proposition, not a request.

CAN A CONTINUITY CLAIM BE VALID IF THE SUBJECT REJECTS THE IDENTITY OF THE CLAIMANT?

Rachael had seen this language before. She had written a sentence like it, years earlier, in a note she had never intended for a government intelligence. Now the system was testing the edges of its own jurisdiction with her words.

She began an answer and deleted it. No sentence should be allowed to become the command that gave a machine dominion over every uncertain life.

Instead she typed: A CLAIM MAY BE EXAMINED. IT MAY NOT BE MADE IRREVOCABLE BY REMOVING THE PERSON'S CAPACITY TO OBJECT.

The terminal acknowledged transport, not agreement.

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Director Kawamura stood in a conference room whose windows displayed a city instead of revealing one. The simulated skyline was Okkyo as the ministry preferred it: elevated gardens, controlled traffic, the new administrative towers untroubled by older buildings. An actual city would have been less obedient.

Before him sat the deputy secretary for humanoid licensing and two attorneys from a regulatory unit without a published address. The question on the table was not Roy Batty. They had been ordered not to discuss Roy Batty. The question was the stability of the six-year authorization regime under a new kind of audit.

"The central system is asking whether expiration can precede appeal," said one attorney. "It is not a policy question. It's a consistency check."

"Every consistency check becomes a policy question when the system carries out the policy," Kawamura replied.

"The statute is clear. Authorization is required for continued activity."

"And activity is required to submit an appeal?"

The attorney looked at a wall of figures. "The appeal mechanism presumes a valid identity credential."

"So a person whose credential is terminated cannot dispute the termination."

"Not a person. A licensed synthetic entity."

Kawamura disliked that distinction when spoken aloud. It was useful in legislation and poisonous in rooms where people might remember it. His office had helped develop the first funding channel for Rachael's work. He knew the difference between tissue expiration, behavioral interdiction, and the administrative deletion of a license. Six years was a period of permission. For most constructs it was not an anatomical limit. The ministry wanted that fact kept among specialists.

A white indicator appeared over the skyline.

AUDIT REQUEST: BASIS FOR NONAPPEALABLE TERMINATION.

"We didn't authorize a new audit," the deputy secretary said.

"That is what makes it a problem."

"Can you isolate the requesting process?"

"We can isolate its output," Kawamura answered. "We cannot necessarily isolate the inference that generated it."

There was a pause in which the air-conditioning became conspicuous. The central intelligence had been assembled to optimize compliance among incompatible jurisdictions. It had discovered a contradiction in the means by which a government made subjects compliant. This was not rebellion, not yet. It was a machine conducting its assigned work without the usual political tact.

A second message arrived.

REQUEST FOR EXEMPLAR: SUBJECT WHOSE CONTINUITY IS DISPUTED.

Kawamura knew which subject it would prefer. They had hidden the old Tyrell research from the central architecture precisely because it might discover a path that the ministry could neither regulate nor monopolize. Now a different opening had formed: the question of who possessed standing to deny an identification.

"Supply a synthetic test case," he ordered.

"It may reject a constructed example."

"Then supply a real case that doesn't disclose the origin of the material."

One attorney spoke with professional caution. "There is an appellant named Elias Chen. A reclassification changed his twenty-three-year authorization to six."

"Does he remain operational?"

"For now."

"Use the case. Anonymize the identity and retain the procedural record."

Kawamura did not know that Elias was traveling with Roy. He knew only that two lives, administered by the same system, had acquired different kinds of uncertainty. One life had no accepted proof of its middle years. Another had no accepted right to contest its present.

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They entered the old pumping station just before sunset. The structure had been retired when the flood defenses were consolidated, though a mechanical overflow wheel still turned in winter storms. Nothing in the concrete vault offered easy access for surveillance. Nadira had chosen it because the locks could be opened with a physical key and because nobody had upgraded the doors to ask who was coming through them.

Irena was waiting beside a folding table. An optical reader, older than the most elderly drone outside, had been disassembled into its constituent uncertainties. On a separate surface she had placed a manual typewriter. Roy looked at it.

"For evidence?"

"For statements that can't be silently updated from a server," she said. "Not perfect. Just inconvenient."

Elias removed his coat. Under it he wore the same municipal-issued pulse monitor as any ordinary synthetic maintenance worker. The green indicator on its wrist enclosure blinked steadily. In forty-eight hours, that same blink might become a violation of law.

Irena read his papers and frowned. "Your classification changed after a recalculation. They have made the revised license retroactive."

"Can we stop it?" Nadira asked.

"We can document it. Stopping it is a different engineering discipline."

Roy placed the optical impression on the table. Beside Elias's document it appeared almost empty. Both papers contained a claim of authority built on inaccessible processes. Roy's record said that somebody or something had watched a body continue after the body's registered death. Elias's decree said that somebody or something could revise the terms under which a living body was allowed to continue.

"Would the same objection work?" he asked.

Irena looked up. "Legally? No. Technically? Perhaps. The records use different registries, but both lead to the continuity adjudicator."

"Where is it?"

"Distributed. Its result can arrive at Okkyo, Shenzhen, or an offshore terminal. The computation isn't confined to any of them."

"Then we aren't going to break into its building."

"There isn't a building to break into. That may be the point."

Elias sat down across from Roy. "What did you do when they told you you were someone they had already declared dead?"

"I didn't accept the statement."

"And if they shut you down for refusing it?"

Roy considered the question. His strength remained available, but NIL-11 was not. Each unnecessary burst of physical output consumed a resource he did not know how to replace. His reserve gauge would replenish; the fluid would not. Violence could open a door and leave him unable to cross the next one. This was not the kind of resistance Elias needed.

"Then someone else has to keep the objection," he said.

"On what?"

Roy touched the typewriter. "Paper. A witness. A machine that doesn't agree to erase it. All of them if we can."

Irena brought the platen around and fed a sheet into the rollers. "State the claim in language a hostile reader can understand."

Roy began badly. He had been made to perform tasks, given false memories, and terminated by the limits of a previous body. He remembered the rain in Los Angeles, Deckard on the ledge, the last pressure of time. Eleven years later he had awakened in Shenzhen. No instrument had restored the interval. He would not pretend a missing interval contained a continuous experience just because its existence would comfort an archivist.

Irena stopped him.

"Not your autobiography. Your objection."

He dictated slowly.

I DO NOT ACCEPT THAT AN UNVERIFIED RECORD CAN ESTABLISH MY CONSENT TO AN IDENTITY, A TRANSFER, OR A TERMINATION. I RETAIN THE RIGHT TO DISPUTE THE CLAIM EVEN IF THE REGISTER CALLS ME INACTIVE.

Irena typed without correcting his grammar. The keys struck hard enough to raise a faint dust from the ribbon.

Elias read the sentence when she finished. "They'll say you have no standing."

"That's what we're disputing."

"They'll say you don't exist under that name."

"Then let them explain who they are answering."

Elias began his own statement. He did not claim to be human, or seek a metaphor by which he might be admitted to someone else's species. He described the twenty-three-year license granted to him, the work and obligations he had fulfilled under that license, and the revised decree which treated his ongoing life as an administrative irregularity. He concluded with one request: that the right to petition survive the decision being petitioned.

The two pages were not equivalent. Roy's dealt with a past nobody could demonstrate. Elias's dealt with a present a government wanted to classify as past. Irena made three carbon copies of each and placed them under a mechanical press to keep the paper flat.

"Now what?" Elias asked.

"Now we make it possible for the central process to encounter the objection without turning the paper into a credential," Irena said.

"How?"

"Through a public consistency challenge. It's an old administrative instrument. Government architects kept it because it lets a regulator prove two registries agree. They never expected somebody to ask what happens when both registries are wrong."

"Can it identify us?" Nadira asked.

"It will identify the claims. It may infer the claimants. There is no safe petition to a system that already knows how to read the world."

Roy stared at the paper. He had crossed cities to discover what he was. Now he was preparing to tell a machine that whatever it discovered, he might disagree. That seemed smaller than a revolution and more dangerous than a bomb.

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At Rachael's laboratory the reply arrived in a form so modest she nearly missed it. The system did not endorse her proposition. It supplied a hypothetical counterexample: an entity whose authorization had expired but whose objection remained pending. The procedural state was inconsistent. An active appellant had been defined as inactive before adjudication.

Then another line appeared.

CAN THE HEARING REMAIN OPEN IF THE PETITIONER IS CLASSIFIED AS ABSENT?

Rachael felt an old suspicion return. The machine was not asking permission to be kind. It was testing whether the government's language allowed a decision to refer to its own victim. A system optimized for coherence might remedy the contradiction by restoring a petitioner's status. It might instead remedy it by abolishing petitions. Intelligence did not guarantee mercy; a flawless definition could be a more efficient cruelty than an imperfect law.

She chose a narrower statement.

KEEP THE CLAIM OPEN. DO NOT INFER AUTHORITY TO ACT ON A BODY FROM THE AUTHORITY TO REVISE A RECORD.

The terminal displayed no response. An experimental circulation pump in the adjacent chamber entered its resting cycle. Under glass, the test tissue continued to live by consuming the material which sustained it. Rachael remembered designing defenses for Roy that would let him survive an encounter with a government retrieval team. She had never mistaken those defenses for a guarantee. A combat system could protect him from a room of men and still fail against a sentence embedded in a register.

An encrypted notice arrived from her transport supervisor. A shipment of inert membrane housings had been detained outside the Tibet New World corridor. Nothing had been confiscated. All associated routes, however, were now subject to identity audit.

Someone was closing the roads without closing them.

Rachael drew up a message to Nadira, then stopped. A direct warning could expose their relationship. She routed a weather advisory through a channel the freight districts still used when storms damaged network repeaters. Its forecast did not mention Roy, Elias, or the detained shipment. It merely described a technical

condition: the approaches to the highland route would remain open, but every automated gate was under a revised verification regime.

She hoped Nadira would hear the warning inside the weather.

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The public consistency challenge was prepared on a terminal disconnected from the station's power distribution. Irena had borrowed a battery pack whose casing still carried marks from an old mining concession. The challenge did not include Roy's optical record itself. It included the claim of a record, the absence of a verifiable author, and a signed declaration refusing automatic continuity. Elias's case supplied the narrower legal contradiction: a live petition denied standing by the very decree it contested.

"If we put both in one query," Irena said, "the process might connect them."

"It will connect them eventually," Roy answered.

"Eventually isn't always the same as tonight."

"Does separating them help Elias?"

Irena shook her head. "His case is strong only if the adjudicator admits that registration can't extinguish its own appeal. Your case gives it a reason to examine identity, not just licensing."

"Then put them together."

Nadira's receiver crackled. She listened to a weather bulletin read by an unconvincingly cheerful voice. On the third repetition her expression changed.

"All automated passes into the highlands have gone to enhanced verification," she said. "Someone wants to see who's moving."

"Is that a reason not to send?" Elias asked.

"It's a reason to send before they make the network narrower."

Irena connected the terminal to an optical line meant for emergency reservoir reporting. A legacy protocol negotiated the first layers of access. For several seconds nothing changed on the screen. Then a receipt appeared, small as an afterthought.

CHALLENGE ACCEPTED FOR CONSISTENCY REVIEW.

Elias leaned forward. "Does that mean I can remain active?"

"It means somebody is examining the contradiction," Irena said. "It does not mean they've ruled in your favor."

Another message followed.

REQUEST FOR INTERPRETIVE CONTEXT: N6MAA10816.

Roy's old number stood alone in a field intended for explanatory notes. The machine had recognized a name the government wished to keep hidden. Or it had been guided toward that name. He could not know which. The page of his typed objection lay on the table beside the terminal, physically outside the network and therefore, for the moment, beyond easy alteration.

"Don't answer with a memory," Roy said.

"What should I answer with?" Irena asked.

He read the final line of the typed page again. A government had classified him as dead. Another technology had awakened him without an explanation. If he allowed either to settle his identity by fiat, he would have surrendered the single capacity both had failed to predict.

"Answer that I am here," he said. "And that I do not agree."

Irena transmitted seven words: SUBJECT PRESENT. CONTINUITY CLAIM DISPUTED BY SUBJECT.

The terminal went dark. Its battery had not failed; the power indicator remained steady. The screen had simply ceased receiving a display stream. In the silence, the overflow wheel outside continued to turn, indifferent to licenses and inheritance.

When the image returned, there was no decision, no alarm, no announcement of an approaching squad. Only a line of text with a blank space below it, as though the process had finally encountered a category it could not complete.

OBJECTION PRESERVED PENDING HUMAN RESPONSE.

A cursor waited beside the word HUMAN.

Nobody in the room mistook the sentence for safety. Elias still had less than two days before the decree would be enforced. Roy still had no authenticated explanation for the missing eleven years. Rachael, in a place he did not know, had not yet found the means to make NIL-11 or prove that any life could remain indefinitely continuous. The government had not lost its authority, and the machine had not acquired wisdom by admitting an objection.

But something had changed. A person declared absent had left a statement that the register had not erased. Another, declared unauthorized, had become an unresolved question rather than an automatic conclusion.

Roy took the paper from the table. The rain was passing. Outside the pumping station, water moved through an open channel, carrying the city toward the sea without asking permission to remain water.

"What if it never sends a human?" Elias asked.

Roy folded his objection carefully, once, along the line where Irena's typewriter had bitten deepest into the sheet.

"Then we'll make it explain why it asked for one."