NEXUSYS 11

BOOK IV — THE MEMORY WITHOUT TIME

CHAPTER 06

THE SIGNATURE THAT WASN’T THERE

English Draft 01

The response field remained empty long enough for the others to begin treating it as furniture. It stood on Irena's terminal in the shape of a shallow rectangle, a space allocated to a human being with no human being inside it. Beyond the pump station, runoff struck the overflow wheel and passed down an unregistered channel to the sea. Every rotation moved water from one administrative category into another. The machine performed the transfer without requiring the water's consent.

Elias Chen sat beneath a stripped fluorescent fixture. The expiration on his operating permit had advanced another fourteen minutes while he watched the screen. His body was designed to count time accurately; accuracy had become the least charitable of its attributes. Six years, the state said. Twenty-three years, the original license had promised. The difference was not an engineering assessment but a revision to a document that had already governed his life.

"There is a button," he said.

Irena did not look up. "There are a great many buttons."

"The one beside HUMAN. If I push it, does someone come?"

"It might submit you for inspection. It might trigger a requisition. It might mean nothing."

"You don't know."

"That is the only part of this interface I can certify."

Roy stood at the passage leading to the outer wheelhouse. He could hear tires on the elevated road, one vehicle, then another. The interval between them shortened with an orderliness that rain did not explain. He moved closer to the broken glass and counted the lights beneath the bridge. Municipal inspection, or people intending to resemble municipal inspection; sometimes the distinction existed only after the doors were opened.

"The question isn't who comes," Roy said. "It's who is allowed to answer."

Nadira closed the shutters without touching the motor. Hand-cranked iron resisted her for an instant, then settled into a position from which no distant command could move it. "Before we begin establishing a philosophy," she said, "we should establish an exit."

Irena made a second copy of the adjudication receipt on a ceramic ribbon. The printer had belonged to a laboratory that had gone bankrupt before network-signed identity became compulsory. Its output could not be silently revised. A defect in the lower wheel gave every capital R a fine split in its left leg. She kept the defect because it identified the machine better than any digital certificate.

At the foot of the receipt was a field that had not appeared on the first display: RESPONSIBLE NATURAL PERSON. Beneath it, a code of sixteen digits and the phrase UNRESOLVED DELEGATION CHAIN.

"There," she said. "It wasn't asking whether a human agrees. It was asking which human carries the authority to disagree on the state's behalf."

"Those sound alike," Elias said.

"Only if you have never been prosecuted by a form."

The chain led through an executive secretariat, a ministerial licensing bureau, and an obsolete water-emergency delegation issued after a flood a decade earlier. Each office had transferred responsibility for synthetic life termination to the next. No document showed a person accepting it. The signatures belonged to institutional seals, generated and renewed by systems which had never been alive enough to accept a summons. The state had built a machine that could end a life without finding anyone who had decided to do so.

"Could the central system be malfunctioning?" Nadira asked.

"It is performing a consistency check," Irena replied. "That is not the same as discovering justice. It is trying to determine which authorization validates the decree. If it finds a valid one, the decree might become easier to enforce."

Roy watched Elias flatten a damp corner of the paper under his palm. That was the practical cruelty of the distinction. An objection could be preserved without protecting the body that made it. A proof could identify the person responsible for a killing without stopping the killing.

"Then we need a person," Roy said.

"We need the person," Irena said. "Or the proof that the person does not exist."

The road lights stopped moving. Through the cracks in the shutter Roy saw a vehicle hold its position beneath the bridge. Two figures emerged and walked into the rain without deploying umbrellas. They approached the service stairs carefully, as if the building were a museum whose exhibits might shoot back. Roy could have reached them before either completed a radio call. It would cost NIL-11. He measured the distance, then chose to remain still.

Nadira heard him shift. "Don't."

"I haven't."

"That's why I said it."

They went down a maintenance shaft at the rear of the wheelhouse. Elias descended first, gripping each rung as though it might be removed between his hands. Irena followed with the terminal. Roy came last and replaced the grate over the opening, careful not to bend the pins. An act of strength could leave a trace more distinctive than a fingerprint. Above them a government loudspeaker announced a routine hydraulic safety inspection. It used the voice of a woman whose vowels carried an accent assembled from four cities.

Below, the ancient drainage ducts were narrow but dry. Nadira knew them by smell. At every junction she touched the salt on the wall, compared its height with the previous winter's tide, and selected a route. The government knew the ducts as lines in a municipal model; Nadira knew which lines still existed.

They emerged inside a maintenance annex with a roof of corrugated ceramic and windows painted black. A dead workstation sat beneath an enormous analog map. Irena spread the receipt beside it and traced the sixteen-digit code across three generations of license registers.

The final delegation belonged to the Office of the Humanoid Minister. The officeholder's name had been removed from public copies. What remained was an exception: a natural person could be summoned through a certified contact channel if an automated decision affected the continuation of a registered consciousness.

"How long has that exception existed?" Roy asked.

"Since before the six-year rule," Irena said. "It was written after a factory stopped sixteen people during a software migration. The board wanted a way to assign liability. Nobody wanted to use it."

"And now?"

"Now the central system has discovered that the liability rule contradicts the termination procedure."

"It could still ask a clerk to enter a name," Nadira said.

"A clerk can't sign for a minister," Irena replied. "Not without an identifiable delegation. There is no identifiable delegation. That is the problem."

Elias examined the enormous map. The boundaries it showed were older than the district government and newer than the river. "If they can't find him, do I live?"

"You keep asking for an outcome," Irena said softly. "I can only give you a procedure."

"A procedure is what they are using to kill me."

No one corrected him.

Far above the lowlands, in a clean room designed to be more secure than necessary, Director Kawamura received the same request in a less candid form. The ministry console reported a procedural exception requiring natural-person validation. His deputy suggested inserting the standard ministerial certificate and resuming scheduled enforcement. Kawamura asked to see the raw record. The deputy hesitated. Raw records were generally reserved for events that had already gone wrong.

The phrase RESPONSIBLE NATURAL PERSON appeared in the lower third of the display. Beneath it stood two joined identifiers: ELIAS CHEN and N6MAA10816.

"Why are these linked?" Kawamura asked.

"An objection was submitted using an older continuity question as interpretive context."

"Separate the cases."

"The system has separated enforcement, sir. It has not separated the contradiction."

Kawamura stared at the obsolete designation. The old Nexus-6 number should have died in Los Angeles with its owner. He knew that the present body was not a simple duplication, and knew enough about Tyrell's work to mistrust every paper that used the word continuity without specifying what endured. He also knew that the Humanoid Minister had forbidden the central AI from reconstructing the founder's missing indefinite-life research. That prohibition now touched a licensing case that was supposed to be routine.

"Who authorized the natural-person request?"

"The central adjudication system."

"Who authorized it to decide that a person is needed?"

"The liability code, sir. The same code the ministry used to certify automatic termination."

Kawamura permitted himself a small silence. A legal system built to keep administrators insulated from consequences had found the shape of the insulation and classified it as a missing part. He did not fear that the AI had acquired a conscience. He feared it had acquired a reason to ask for files it had been told not to open.

"Do not suppress the request," he said.

His deputy looked surprised.

"If you suppress it, the system records executive interference. If you answer, it records a person. We will do neither until we know why the old designation has been attached."

"The subject's permit expires tomorrow."

"Then find a way to enforce without invoking the disputed authority."

The deputy departed with the expression of a man asked to move a body without acknowledging gravity. Kawamura remained by the window. Beyond the ministry towers a line of observation craft crawled through low cloud, their warning lamps burning red. He sent a separate request to the directorate's restricted archive: all surviving references to the original calibration fixtures held by Adrian Tyrell. He did not ask for their designs. He asked who was allowed to inspect their possession.

On the coast, behind layers of rainwater that had once belonged to factories and rivers, Rachael watched a corresponding anomaly pass across a sealed display. Her company sold purity certificates to municipalities that understood water better than inheritance. Below the public laboratory, she kept a smaller research installation whose existence was recorded as membrane fatigue testing.

The anomalous record did not contain her name. It did contain a syntax she recognized: an old obligation to identify the physical person responsible for continuity interruption. Tyrell's engineers had once attached similar clauses to equipment that could erase a growing neural architecture during verification. Most had regarded them as legal decoration. She had insisted they remain operational. Even then she had not known whether the engineering problem they described could ever be solved.

She could have answered the state's question with information no state clerk possessed. She knew why Roy's present body retained the seventh-generation port. She knew which combat reflex loops were meant to survive interference. She knew that NIL-11 gave him extraordinary capacity at a real, irreversible cost, and that his reserves were not a substitute for the medium itself. But she could not authenticate his missing years by wishing them into a single life. She had evidence of assembly decisions, not proof that consciousness had crossed death unbroken.

Her medical screen showed her own tissue interface under magnification. Organic and synthetic systems made a negotiated border across the graph, not a promise of immortality. The border held for another day. It could fail on any day after that. Anyone who claimed her research had already conquered mortality had mistaken the absence of a deadline for the absence of a limit.

She composed a message to a channel she had not used in eleven years. It contained no salutation and named no recipient. The draft read: A CERTIFICATE IS NOT A WITNESS.

She did not transmit it. A message from her would draw the government toward Roy before he could survive its attention. Worse, it would answer his question in her words, and she had begun to suspect that even a truthful answer could become another kind of ownership. She closed the channel. Instead she instructed a public legal

archive to reindex the old factory-liability amendments, an action ordinary enough to resemble clerical maintenance.

The archive's new index reached thousands of routine subscribers. Among them was a dead workstation in a hydraulic district that should no longer have accepted updates.

Irena noticed the file while she was calculating the remaining validity of Elias's permit. It came through a municipal mirror whose contents had been refreshed without an identifiable uploader. The title was dry: INTERRUPTION RESPONSIBILITY—HISTORICAL AMENDMENTS. The text described the conditions under which an automated interruption could proceed if a natural-person signatory failed to respond.

"There's an emergency preservation mechanism," she said.

"Does it stop enforcement?" Elias asked.

"For a limited period. If a responsible person is requested and doesn't respond, a local court can preserve the subject's physical continuity pending identification of the signatory."

"How long?"

"Seventy-two hours initially. It requires a human magistrate, evidence of imminent interruption, and notice to the authority being challenged."

Nadira let out a humorless breath. "So, to avoid the government, we must tell the government where we are."

"To avoid disappearing without a record," Irena said. "Those are different objectives."

Roy read the paragraph himself. The mechanism had been drafted for industrial synths employed in remote plants. Courts seldom used it because employers settled their disputes before the legal clock began. It was a narrow instrument, not a declaration of personhood. It might buy Elias three days. It might also deliver him into a room full of people authorized to restrain him.

"Who's the magistrate?" Roy asked.

"District Court Eight. Its duty judge is rotated every twelve hours. We can't know the name until we lodge the application."

"Then we can't know whom we're trusting."

"No," Nadira said. "But we can know where the front door is."

The court occupied the ground floor of a former financial registry, two kilometers beyond the floodplain. Its outer cameras had been replaced with compact biometric gates. The older storm exits remained under manually sealed grilles. Nadira found a route used by night sanitation crews, whose machinery communicated with the courthouse through air-pressure pulses rather than a conventional network. Roy studied the map and the narrow access hall. There would be no good place to fight, and no way to recover the NIL-11 he spent if fighting began.

They chose to send the application without Roy's physical presence. Elias would appear as the applicant. Irena would certify the record. Nadira would witness the delivery. Roy would remain within reach but off the identity network, where his designation could not be used to turn a preservation request into a capture order.

Before dawn they reached the courthouse annex. Its sign displayed a list of jurisdictions whose boundaries did not fit together. A watercourse passed under the eastern wall; its legal ownership changed at the midpoint. The flood

control door had been built when the building belonged to a different city. An attendant took their stamped papers through a narrow aperture and read the first line twice.

"An operating-license review," he said.

"A continuity-preservation petition," Irena answered.

"That category isn't on my intake screen."

She set down the old factory amendment. "Then use the paper register."

He looked at the ink, at the split legs of its capital letters, and then toward a supervisor behind the glass. After a whispered consultation a drawer opened. Inside it lay a bound ledger with more blank pages than completed ones. The attendant wrote Elias's name, the date, and the reason for the petition. His pen scratched across a column originally labeled OCCUPATION.

"Synthetic," he wrote, then crossed it out. "Applicant," he substituted.

Elias watched the correction. It was not freedom. It was not a ruling. But somebody had needed to choose what kind of thing he was before the court could begin. The word on the page would be a witness to the choice.

A clerk in a gray jacket appeared twenty minutes later and announced that the duty magistrate would entertain a preliminary application. The hearing room had five chairs, a damaged clock, and a ceiling microphone. No flags. No biometric portrait of the minister. Irena presented the conflicting licenses. Elias testified to the terms under which he had accepted his work and made choices about his future. The magistrate, a woman whose name appeared on the docket only after she entered, listened without interrupting.

"You're requesting protection from an automated enforcement order," she said.

"Protection from interruption pending proper authority," Irena replied. "We are not asking the court to determine the applicant's nature."

"I am relieved," the magistrate said. "That would be a rather ambitious morning."

She inspected the new decree. "The amended license is six years, retroactive to his activation date. Under this order he is already beyond the permitted period."

"Correct."

"And you are saying no natural person can presently be identified as having accepted responsibility for terminating his operation."

"The central adjudication system has requested one. The ministry hasn't supplied one."

The magistrate examined the receipt. "This request is authentic?"

"It has a valid chain to a ministry certificate, although the delegation chain ends in an unresolved natural-person field."

"An extraordinary way to certify a lack of certification."

"That is why we're here."

The magistrate leaned back. She did not appear sympathetic. She appeared conscious of the difference between an emergency measure and a historical decision that might endure after her name had been removed from the office

door. The court could not create a new right to life in a summary proceeding. It could, however, prevent an irreversible administrative act while the authority for that act remained undefined.

"I can preserve the present physical state for seventy-two hours," she said. "Only that. The preservation order does not confer a renewed license and does not decide whether the six-year rule is lawful. It directs the enforcement office not to perform an irreversible interruption until a responsible natural person is identified or the order expires."

Elias's mouth moved before he found a sound. "Three days?"

"Three days," she said. "You may use them however you are able."

She signed in black ink. The court printer produced an order on heavy paper. Nadira photographed it with a device that never connected to public networks, then transmitted an authenticated extract through a municipal line. The terminal acknowledged receipt. Somewhere in the ministry, an enforcement countdown acquired a temporary hold. In the room itself nothing happened. Elias continued breathing the same conditioned air he had breathed when he entered.

For several minutes Roy remained in a disused service corridor across the street, listening to the courthouse through a tiny analog receiver. He heard the order granted. He also heard the narrowness of it. The system had permitted the question to exist. A judge had bought the person who asked it a measurable quantity of time. Neither event had answered the question.

A vehicle turned into the street and stopped beside the courthouse steps. Its doors opened without lights. Four figures came out in dark civilian coats, moving with the empty haste of a prepared operation. Their leader spoke to the clerk at the main entrance. Roy saw the clerk look down at the newly printed order, then back at the men.

The men did not turn away.

Nadira's voice entered his receiver. "Someone has arrived to collect him."

"Under what authority?"

"They say public-safety containment. Not termination."

Roy looked at the outer stairwell, the courthouse security gates, the narrow alley behind the registry. He could break the gate with one hand. The cost would remain in his circulation after the gate had been replaced. It was a cost he could not afford, not for a victory measured in seconds. He moved toward the sanitation service entrance instead.

"Keep Elias inside," he said. "Make them put the other order in writing."

"And if they refuse?"

"Then the magistrate will learn what happens to her signature."

The new officers entered under a statute drafted for contagious mechanical failure. The statute permitted temporary containment of a malfunctioning synthetic worker. It did not authorize termination. It did not require the detainee to be sick. An administrative vocabulary could disguise almost anything for the time it took to pass from one desk to another.

Irena met them at the hearing-room door. "What malfunction?"

The leader produced a portable badge. "Continuity-status instability."

"That is not a diagnosis."

"We have an agency referral."

"Then submit it to the court. This proceeding remains open."

The officer studied her, then looked beyond her to Elias. "The containment measure is independent of the license."

"And subject to judicial review," the magistrate said from behind her desk.

The officer had not expected the magistrate to remain. It was a small operational assumption, the sort that made bureaucratic violence efficient. He inclined his head. The magistrate held out a hand. "The referral," she said.

His companion supplied a tablet. She rejected it. "Paper, if you intend to leave with my applicant."

A minute passed. The officer communicated with someone whose face remained invisible. Behind the courthouse, Roy removed two corroded fasteners from a maintenance hatch and opened a route that sanitation workers had last used when the city had a different name. The service space led under the hearing room. He had no intention of extracting Elias by force unless the paper failed.

A fresh sheet appeared from a portable printer. The magistrate read the referral. Her expression changed in a way that would have meant nothing to a camera trained to distinguish fear from confidence. She asked for the authorizing official.

"Director Kawamura's office," the officer said.

"An office is not a person."

"Director Kawamura."

"Then the director can certify the allegation. The alleged instability has no examination attached, no observations, no medical assessment. It is a conclusion waiting for a reason. I will not release this applicant on a blank medical premise."

The officer's jaw tightened. "Public safety may override the holding order."

"Bring me a public-safety fact," the magistrate said. "Not a second label for the first order."

The men withdrew to the entrance. Elias watched them go with the expression of someone who had learned that a door could be both a border and a suggestion. The magistrate signed a second paper noting that the court had reviewed and refused the unsupported containment request. She kept one copy in the ledger and gave another to Elias.

Outside, the dark vehicle waited. It would wait until the court closed, or until someone supplied the missing evidence, or until the three days ran out. The law had purchased no sanctuary, only an inconvenience for those who wished to act without naming themselves.

From her sealed laboratory Rachael received an indirect signal that the historical amendment had been invoked. No name appeared in the record. The city archive merely recorded its first successful use in decades. She pictured Roy somewhere beyond the official data routes, confronted with a choice she could not make for him. She knew how to preserve tissue for a time, how to tune a reflex, how to slow some kinds of decay. None of those skills could write the missing natural person into a chain of responsibility.

She turned to a sheet of calculations about NIL-11. The medium's known reserves were less than those Roy might need to survive a direct assault on the ministry. She could not replace it from her present facilities. That

knowledge carried a temptation: warn him, guide him, take command of the route before his body paid for choices that could be avoided. But a command disguised as protection would make him the instrument she had once refused to build.

Instead she sent a request to her legal staff to audit whether her water company's emergency shelters were bound by the synthetic license decree. The request went out through ordinary business channels, bearing the signature of a chief executive who had done nothing more suspicious than ask about labor compliance. It created a possible room without appointing an occupant.

At sunset Irena brought the court orders to Roy beneath the old canal bridge. He read both carefully. One restrained termination. The other rejected a detention without evidence. He could appreciate the difference without mistaking it for victory.

"The system asked for a human," Elias said. "We found one."

"A magistrate," Irena said. "Not the minister who must answer for the decree."

"But she answered."

"She answered a smaller question. That is how courts survive."

Roy folded the orders and placed them in the waterproof envelope beside the anonymous record of his missing years. They represented two kinds of absence. One asked who had watched him after he died; the other asked who would take responsibility for making Elias cease to live. The state wished to end both questions with a form. Instead, the forms had opened a narrow space between an instruction and its execution.

"What happens after seventy-two hours?" Nadira asked.

"We need an identifiable signatory," Irena said. "Or a higher court. Or evidence strong enough that the ministry cannot replace interruption with containment."

Elias looked toward the city. Above its floodwalls, towers illuminated the cloud from below. Their light made the sky resemble the underside of a surgical instrument. "I have three days," he said. "What do I do with them?"

Roy watched a cargo barge proceed along the channel under mechanical guidance. Its captain stood in an open wheelhouse beneath the rain, not because the systems required him to steer but because someone would have to answer if the hull struck the bank.

"Do what they can't put on the form," Roy said.

It was not an answer sufficient to save Elias. Roy knew that. A person's freedom did not become real because another person made a sentence of it. But Elias was standing before him, still capable of accepting or rejecting advice, and the law had briefly failed to turn that capacity into a fault.

Across the city, in a secured office with its network disconnected from every public adjudication terminal, Kawamura read the magistrate's refusal. He made no move to reverse it. The legal objection had accomplished something his department had never intended: it had forced two branches of enforcement to reveal how they differed. He ordered the case transferred to a human review desk whose staffing records had been classified since the water emergency.

The clerk who received the order searched for the responsible officer. The desk existed. The telephone rang. There was no answer. The name on its original appointment had been overwritten by a renewal process thirty-one times.

In the central system, the unanswered HUMAN field changed its status. The first application had supplied evidence of a living petitioner. The second had supplied evidence that a magistrate could refuse an unsupported substitute. It did not equate those facts with morality. It simply placed them side by side and found that the usual termination instruction could not be authenticated in the way the law required.

A new query appeared in its private review queue, without announcement and without an addressee willing to receive it.

WHO IS RESPONSIBLE WHEN THE AUTHORITY HAS NO OWNER?

For once, there was no cursor beside the question. The machine had nowhere to send it. It could keep the question open, and keeping it open was itself a change in what the state would be forced to explain.