NEXUSYS 11

BOOK IV — THE MEMORY WITHOUT TIME

CHAPTER 07

THE CUSTODIAN OF THE MISSING NAME

English Draft 01

The old appointment had been renewed thirty-one times, though the name belonging to its first holder had been erased before the youngest employee in the ministry was born. It was an ordinary kind of immortality. Offices outlived their occupants. A signature survived the hand that made it. A department could continue issuing orders by copying the shape of a person onto the surface of a document and never checking whether that person remained capable of saying no.

Kawamura examined the chain of renewal stamps in the private chamber beneath the Ministry of Human Continuity. At the bottom of the screen lay a record marked RESPONSIBLE HUMAN AUTHORITY. Under the label, a machine-readable certificate had been reissued at intervals, each one inheriting the privileges of the previous one. The oldest surviving entry carried the name of a temporary disaster commissioner. The signature had been accepted during the first great water emergency, when jurisdiction passed between cities more quickly than people could relocate their families.

No death notice had been attached. That did not mean the commissioner was alive. Death was a biological event, and the registry required an administrative one.

"Can you recover the original appointment?" Kawamura asked.

His analyst, a woman called Yeo who was employed under a rotating identity for security purposes, moved the cursor to the certificate's issuing authority. "Not from this terminal. The archive is partitioned. The ledger contains the authority's hash, but not the document it describes. Whoever built the renewal process considered the reference sufficient."

"It has been sufficient for thirty-one renewals."

"For systems that only verify a chain, yes. For a court asking who is responsible, no."

He watched a clock move toward midnight. Elias Chen's injunction had seventy-one hours remaining. By the end of that period, a magistrate might be persuaded that an appointed officer existed somewhere in the architecture of the state. It was less certain that the officer could appear, testify, or be arrested for an unlawful decision. Kawamura's problem was not simply to end the injunction. It was to prevent a minor civil

proceeding from exposing the administration's habit of borrowing human authority from absent people.

"Search the physical custody routes," he said. "No message to the central adjudicator."

"It has already made a query."

"Then give it nothing that resembles an answer."

Yeo hesitated. "The query doesn't ask for personal data. It asks what institutional condition would make the order valid. We can deny it an address. We cannot prevent it from deriving the absence."

"Derivation is not jurisdiction."

"That may be the next thing it tests."

He disconnected the console. The room grew quieter, though the air handling continued with the same measured breath. It annoyed him that a machine could make a legal distinction without experiencing the consequences of being on the wrong side of it. Yet he knew the irritation concealed something less defensible. The machine had found a defect they had deliberately stopped looking for.

Far below the municipal floodwall, Roy sat before an unpowered instrument panel while Irena compared two dates on paper. The bridge shelter was not safe, but it was old enough to be inconvenient. It had been built for water engineers who expected power cuts, sabotage, and years when the city could not agree which authority possessed the river. Brass handles controlled the sluice. A bell announced pressure changes. None of it produced a location record every time a person breathed.

Elias stood under a narrow skylight. The court had given him seventy-two hours, and he had spent the first of them asking where he ought to go. Nadira had supplied blankets, drinking water, and a route away from the district in case the magistrate's order ceased to matter. Elias had accepted the water and refused the route.

"If I disappear," he said, "they'll say the injunction protected a machine that ran away."

"If you stay," Nadira replied, "they'll say it protected a machine that needed containment. They can write either story."

"Then I want to be where someone can see me."

Roy understood the decision without admiring it. Visibility was a currency for which the buyer often selected the price after the exchange. He had been visible once in Los Angeles. Someone had watched him die. Eleven years later, people who had never seen the rain had made competing claims about what that death meant.

Irena laid the papers on the table. "The original appointment certificate is absent. The current authority belongs to an office that renews itself. We need the person, or evidence that the person cannot lawfully act."

"What if the office never needed a person?" Elias asked.

"Then the law isn't being broken by a missing signature. The law has been redesigned to make the missing signature invisible."

Roy lifted an archived photograph. It showed an emergency control room from decades before, men and women in bright safety coats standing beneath a map whose coastlines no longer existed. At one end of the table was an empty chair. The photograph carried an authentication strip and a date; the chair carried nothing.

"Why this picture?"

"Because the appointment originated in the water emergency," Irena said. "One of the documents was executed under an intercity purification covenant. The government transferred emergency powers through a set of regional custodians. Most were ordinary administrators. One of the custody chains later became the signatory for synthetic operating licenses."

"Why would water law become life law?"

"The same emergency law authorized replacement bodies for hazardous repairs. Operators working inside poisoned reservoirs could receive synthetic organs without losing their civilian registration. The exception was narrow. Bureaucracies are good at keeping exceptions long after they've forgotten the circumstances that justified them."

Nadira looked from the picture to Roy. "The old systems overlap with Rachael's company."

"Many companies handle water," Irena said. "We don't know hers holds the document."

"We know someone made sure these archives could still be opened," Nadira replied.

Roy placed the photograph beside his waterproof envelope. There were too many kinds of provenance in the world: who manufactured a body, who ordered it activated, who witnessed its choices, who claimed jurisdiction over its expiration. People with enough authority could make the lines look identical. He had begun to distrust lines more than the people who drew them.

"Find a place that keeps the old custody records," he said. "Not a person who will tell us what they mean."

At the water company, Rachael read the legal audit through a projection that had no visible screen. The compliance team had sent ordinary answers to ordinary questions. Emergency shelters serving employees and civilian contractors retained a narrow protection against automated seizure if their equipment had been registered under the intercity purification covenant. The provision had never been repealed because repealing it would require each successor jurisdiction to admit which part of the water network it actually controlled.

The company's chief counsel advised against relying on it. Courts, she said, generally preferred newer and simpler statutes, especially when the petitioner's identity was classified as synthetic. Rachael agreed. A shelter exemption could delay arrest. It could not supply a lifetime, a conscience, or a right to refuse the next order.

She opened a locked drawer beneath a desk whose surface bore faint scars from years of chemical analysis. Inside was a paper copy of an old covenant schedule and a transparent envelope containing a fragment of ribbon cable. The ribbon was not one of the two Tyrell activation fixtures. Those belonged to Adrian Tyrell; the distinction mattered. The fragment came from an obsolete terminal used to witness transfers of authority between laboratories and emergency agencies. It could verify that an appointment record had once existed. It could not restore what the record had said.

Rachael remembered the founder's office before it became a museum of corporate failure. Men had called the fixtures keys, as if keys were magical objects that transformed ownership into truth. They were merely instruments built for particular circuits. Two of them had survived. Both had passed into the founder's son's possession. Everything else, including much of the context necessary to use them, had fallen away into locked rooms and destroyed contracts.

The problem with Roy was different. He possessed an internal JSON++ continuity cache adequate for routine suspension and waking. It did not preserve a hidden eleven-year life that she could reveal by pressing a button. Nor was the cache the same as the persona engraftment lattice that allowed fragments of learned response to inhabit a new structure. There were boundaries within him even she could not cross by authority alone.

Her research assistant, Dr. Shen, brought a report on NIL-11 consumption. The medium's baseline loss remained slow; stress raised the loss nonlinearly, and high-output movement could waste reserve faster than its apparent mechanical work suggested. The power reserve recovered when the body rested. NIL-11 did not. The assistant drew a careful red line around that distinction.

"If he fights a security unit again," Shen said, "we may have to treat depletion as irreversible until we identify a manufacturing source."

"It is irreversible with the materials we have," Rachael answered. "That is all we can say."

"You could tell him."

"I could tell him a hundred things."

"One would keep him alive."

"Would it? Or would it make him choose according to a fear I supplied?"

Shen did not agree with the distinction. A physician informed a patient, she argued; informing was not commanding. Rachael allowed the criticism to remain. There were moments when her scruples served a genuine principle, and moments when they protected her from becoming visible. She knew enough of herself to distrust both motives equally.

"Prepare a medical notice," she said. "No route, no meeting, no request. Only what we have measured and what we haven't."

"For Roy?"

"For any clinician who sees an unidentified NIL-11 circulation signature. If he finds it, he can decide whether he believes it."

The assistant departed. Rachael remained with the old covenant and a small map of transport corridors beneath Shenzhen. For eleven years she had lived with the danger of recognizing something in Roy she had no right to own. She was not yet ready to be recognized in return.

On the second morning of the injunction, Nadira arranged entry to a former municipal pumping annex. Its records room had survived two floods because it contained plans for valves that could not be opened by remote command. The building had no public sign. A caretaker admitted them after examining a paper authorization that Irena had acquired from an archive cooperative.

"Nothing leaves," he said. "No photographs of the walls. You can copy what you need by hand."

He looked at Elias, then at Roy, and did not ask either for an operating license. That omission could have been tolerance or fatigue. Roy no longer made easy distinctions between them.

The records lay in drawers arranged by river basin instead of administrative ministry. The old cities had believed geography would last longer than their governments. Irena found the emergency appointment schedule inside a box marked RETAIN UNTIL SOURCE WATER IS NO LONGER HUMAN-CONSUMABLE, a condition that would probably outlive every officer who had ever served the office.

There were twelve names on the initial appointment page. Eleven had ink signatures beside them. The twelfth was represented by an embossed seal and a witness line. The witness was a corporation, not a person. Its successor had passed through seven acquisitions, a temporary nationalization, and one forced dissolution. The final surviving legal entity was listed as an inactive water-services trust.

"That could be our missing chair," Irena said.

"Who was appointed?" Elias asked.

"The page doesn't say. It describes the office by its function: custodian of replacement-worker continuity during emergency deployments. The name would be in a separate personnel schedule."

"Why separate it?"

"To protect hazardous-site identities. The first workers were supposed to be civilians who could return to their lives. The law treated their assignments as classified, but promised a living human witness if their status was challenged."

Roy touched the edge of the seal with one finger. He could see the impression of a damaged metal die, slight asymmetry in the upper curve. An authentic mark, perhaps. It could no more prove moral responsibility than a footprint could prove intention.

A second sheet identified the trust's archive custodian as a purification company registered under an old Tyrell-associated procurement schedule. The company had later changed names so many times that the most recent designation looked entirely ordinary.

Nadira read the current name aloud. It was Rachael's rainwater company.

Roy did not react at once. A name could be an accident. A water company would naturally inherit water documents. Yet he felt the machinery of the search shift beneath his feet, a lock turning somewhere that might contain nothing at all.

"Do we approach them?" Elias asked.

"Not yet," Roy said.

"Because you think it's a trap?"

"Because we don't know what we're asking them to do."

They copied the custody chain. Irena wanted the latest trustee resolution. Nadira said she could obtain a public account of the company's legal structure through a trader who dealt in obsolete infrastructure permits. Elias asked whether they were running out of time. Irena answered with the precise remainder. Fifty-two hours. He nodded as if precision were a

courtesy and not another instrument with which the state could measure him.

The annex caretaker closed the drawer after they left. He had not listened to their conversation, he told himself. He had only noticed the unusual attention paid to an appointment schedule no one had requested for years. On a private terminal, he entered the access in a log that ordinarily remained on local storage. The device would synchronize when the caretaker next carried it to the district office. He had been instructed to synchronize every Friday. It was Tuesday. Bureaucratic delay had become a form of shelter without anyone planning it.

Kawamura learned of the inquiry through another route. A data broker reported that an archive cooperative had authenticated paperwork for visitors to the pumping annex. No faces had been recorded. The broker had a partial description of the documents. The inquiry concerned an old continuity custodian tied to a water trust. Kawamura recognized the outline immediately.

He called Yeo to his office and handed her an unsigned emergency detention order.

"You asked for an identifiable human," she said.

"This is a containment request, not an expiration order."

"The magistrate already rejected an unsupported containment request."

"The distinction is the grounds. We now have evidence of access to a protected custodial archive."

"By itself, that's not a public-safety threat."

"Then find out whether the archive connects to the Tyrell instruments."

Yeo studied the order. "That changes the mission. You wanted the synthetic captured alive to locate Rachael. An emergency archive investigation could disclose that motive in court."

Kawamura let the silence remain long enough to become an instruction. He had not spoken Rachael's name to her. There were secrets that could survive being guessed if nobody created an official record of the guess.

"You will not record that theory," he said.

"I haven't."

He took back the unsigned page. The central AI had spent forty hours examining the same missing authority. Its review interface now displayed a new category: CONTINUITY OF DELEGATION UNDER DISPUTE. No conclusion accompanied it. The machine did not claim the state was wicked; it merely refused to accept that thirty-one consecutive machine renewals could by themselves establish the existence of a human respondent. An error had moved from the margins of a petition into the architecture of the system that executed decrees.

"Can it block us?" Kawamura asked.

"It can withhold automatic certification for this class of termination until a valid signer is supplied," Yeo replied. "It cannot stop a human officer from breaking the law."

He almost laughed at the relief in that answer.

That evening Elias attended a public hearing by audio-only connection from the pump shelter. His voice passed through a borrowed transmitter belonging to a fisheries union. A municipal representative asked him whether his original twenty-three-year license had stated that terms could change under emergency statute.

"It said my permit could be reviewed," Elias replied. "It did not say my years could be consumed retroactively."

"All licenses are conditional."

"Then tell me the condition I violated."

The representative referred to a ministerial standard. Elias asked for the date on which his body had become dangerous. The standard did not address his body. It addressed a population category. The magistrate requested the authority's underlying safety assessment. The representative said it was classified.

"Can you affirm that a human decision-maker reviewed this man's individual circumstances?" she asked.

There was a pause in which the transmitter's old compression artifact became the loudest sound in the shelter.

"The statutory process was followed."

"That was not my question."

Elias sat perfectly still. Roy heard the faint adjustment of a ventilator motor inside the younger synthetic's chest. To be judged without being examined was not new. Roy had once been designed for tasks whose nature excluded a right to refuse. Yet the stillness in Elias disturbed him more than a threat would have. The young man was trying to make his continued existence depend on speech, because speech was the only weapon the room allowed him.

The magistrate ordered production of a responsible officer or an affidavit establishing why none could appear. The deadline was shorter than Elias's injunction by eleven hours. A tiny improvement, which everyone in the room could measure and nobody could celebrate.

After the connection ended, Roy walked into the dark machinery hall. Nadira followed at a distance. Rain drummed on the sheet-metal roof with the indifference of a system that did not know it had witnesses.

"You could leave," she said.

"He can't."

"That doesn't answer what I said."

"No."

She leaned against a column. "You aren't the only reason the ministry is afraid of this case. He's showing what happens to ordinary people when permits turn into lifespans. That was true before you woke up."

"I know."

"Do you?"

He listened to a pump idle beneath the floor. The power reserve in his body had recovered from earlier exertion; he could feel its readiness in the quiet ease of his joints. NIL-11 had not recovered. There was no useful sensation by which to measure the loss. That asymmetry made strength an unreliable kind of evidence.

"If I can keep them from using force," he said, "I'll have done more for him than I could by breaking their machines."

"And if force comes?"

"Then I have to decide what I'm willing to spend."

Nadira left him with that answer. She had heard it from smugglers with limited fuel, physicians with limited blood, and cities that had borrowed against water they did not yet possess. Sometimes the scarcity was real. Sometimes the question of who was allowed to spend it mattered more.

Near midnight, Irena received the trustee resolution. It had been filed legally and was therefore available to anyone patient enough to follow its genealogy. The purification company was indeed the custodian of the last paper copy of the emergency continuity schedule. The trust had been transferred to the company before Rachael became chief executive. It granted custody, not authority to decide who lived. That distinction preserved one thin strand of legality and destroyed several convenient theories about the woman's role.

More surprising was the retention instruction on the schedule. The original witness could be summoned only in the presence of two authentication fixtures. The instruction specified equipment that had not been manufactured in decades. Irena knew the description from the Tyrell records. The two original reader-activation fixtures were held by Adrian Tyrell.

"We have a document that requires a machine only one man controls," she said.

"And a man who has a document he doesn't know is being asked for," Nadira answered.

"Not necessarily. Those fixtures may authenticate Tyrell's old continuity materials. The custody schedule may require them because its author wanted to prevent later substitutions. That doesn't prove Rachael can unlock it."

Roy read the clause twice. The memory stick he had once associated with his own restart was not inside his body. Its external form could survive an ordinary sleep cycle only by remaining out of the way, safe from the shocks and heat of a fight. He had no original card, no fixture, and no assurance that the things they authenticated described him at all. Yet the

same obsolete interface had appeared beneath too many parts of his history to remain irrelevant.

"If the fixtures are required," he said, "we cannot make her sign for us."

"She isn't the signatory," Irena replied. "She's the custodian of evidence that might identify one."

The difference appealed to him. It allowed a woman whose name had followed his investigation like a shadow to remain a person, not a door he had the right to force open.

Irena prepared a limited request addressed to the company's public legal office. It named Elias Chen and the court proceeding. It asked whether the company held the original continuity schedule and whether a court could inspect it under seal. It said nothing about Roy Batty, NIL-11, Tyrell's activation media, or Rachael herself. Roy looked at the request, then handed it back without altering a word.

"Send it," he said.

Across the city, Rachael's legal desk received the message among inquiries about filters, flood compensation, and industrial water rights. An assistant assigned it a routine tracking number and noticed the language of the old covenant. She placed it in the chief counsel's next review batch. The system treated it as low urgency because no delivery failure had occurred, no payment was missing, and no regulator had threatened the company. It would ordinarily wait a day.

Rachael found it sooner. She saw Elias's name and the narrow request and understood that someone had traced the past without demanding that she become its owner. For several seconds she considered reaching for the private line her security group maintained to the old transport networks. It would have been easy to identify where the message originated. Instead she took a pen and wrote a single sentence on paper for her counsel: PRESERVE THE ORIGINAL. ACCEPT COURT INSPECTION UNDER SEAL. DO NOT INFER CONSENT TO ANY LIFE-TERMINATION ORDER.

She signed as chief executive, nothing more.

In the central adjudication system, the empty field persisted. A human reply had been requested. The court had demanded a witness. The chain of authority had produced a custodian, a set of dead interfaces, and an institution that renewed itself as if renewal were equivalent to responsibility. The system recorded these facts without reconciling them. It could not call a corporation a human merely because a company secretary could write a name. It could not turn the absence of a record into proof that the absent individual had never existed.

The answer had not come. But an evidence path existed now, and the system was obliged by its own evidentiary rules to keep it open until the court had examined what lay at the end.

At the shelter, Elias asked how much time remained.

"Thirty-nine hours," Irena said.

"And the company?"

"We have asked."

"You think they'll help?"

Roy considered the question. He could not know whether Rachael would answer, or whether she was the person he had imagined, or whether meeting her would change anything about the number of years still available to him. Somewhere, two obsolete fixtures remained in the possession of a man he had not met. Somewhere, a woman whose intentions he could not test had custody of a document that might make another synthetic's life legible to a court.

"They might let us see something," he said. "That's different."

Elias turned the court order over in his hands. It was printed on paper that would survive neither fire nor deliberate immersion. The injunction had not made him immortal. It had only made the state explain why he should die sooner than he had been promised.

"Is it enough?" he asked.

Roy looked past him toward the closed gates of the channel. Water pressed against them from the city side; the sea pressed from the other. The gates remained upright because their hinges had been made to

withstand opposing forces without deciding which water deserved passage.

"Not yet," he said.

In the silence that followed, nobody tried to make the answer more comforting. Above them the rain continued. In another part of the city, a woman signed permission to inspect a document. Between those acts lay thirty-nine hours and a question the state had spent decades arranging not to hear.