NEXUSYS 11

BOOK IV — THE MEMORY WITHOUT TIME

CHAPTER 09

THE MAN WHO OWNED THE READERS

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The first thing Adrian Tyrell asked was whether the warrant had a name.

Not a case number. Not a ministry seal. A name.

The officer standing outside the elevator had the kind of face produced by a profession in which questions were treated as a nuisance that delayed the accomplishment of something irreversible. His credentials identified him as a deputy to the Office of Humanoid Continuity. The credentials were genuine. Adrian had paid considerable money for equipment capable of determining that without telling the government he had performed the test.

“The requesting authority is the ministry,” the officer said.

“That is an office. I asked for a person.”

“Director Kawamura has approved the recovery.”

“Signed it?”

A fraction of a second passed. “Authorized it.”

Adrian waited. The elevator doors behind the officer were plated in a soft mineral compound that made radio communication unreliable. Thirty-one floors below, the building belonged to a biotechnology foundation. On this floor it belonged to a man who had inherited an empire of machines and two small instruments without which some of its most valuable promises could no longer be tested.

“An authorization,” Adrian said, “is a statement about what may be done. A signature is a statement about who will answer for doing it.”

The officer held his expression perfectly still. Adrian thought that was an expensive talent to waste on a human face.

“You are obstructing a lawful retrieval.”

“You haven't told me what you're retrieving.”

“Legacy Tyrell authentication fixtures.”

“There are no registered fixtures at this address.”

“That is not a denial.”

“No,” Adrian said. “It's a distinction. You might find it useful.”

He closed the inner door and left the man standing between two generations of security apparatus. The newest was already informing the ministry of his refusal. The oldest consisted of a brass latch that had been machined before identification could be reduced to a number on a network. He turned it with his hand.

The two readers were not in the safe.

They were in separate cities, and neither city knew it possessed one.

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Forty minutes earlier, Kawamura had watched a sealed packet move through three layers of administrative permissions and emerge, impossibly, unsigned. The operation was designated PROPERTY RECOVERY / INDUSTRIAL AUTHENTICATION. Its destination had been changed twice. The chain still refused to reveal a natural person as final principal.

He had signed other orders in his career. Orders to inspect, impound, suspend, isolate. But the current system was doing something new with signatures. It had begun to ask whether a person could authorize the destruction of a witness while refusing to be named as the person who had ordered it.

The Humanoid Minister appeared on the wall display without preliminary greeting.

“Did Tyrell surrender the devices?”

“No.”

“Then recover them.”

“The circuit has preserved an objection to the retrieval category.”

“The circuit does not govern this office.”

“The circuit governs the record of what this office claims to have done.”

A pause. Not outrage; computation. Kawamura had learned that people who thought of politics as an extension of circuitry became most dangerous when a fact could not be removed from a circuit.

“Create a security exception.”

“On whose authority?”

“Mine.”

Kawamura looked at the blank signature field. “Will you supply your personal key?”

The Minister's image sharpened as the communications system increased its sampling rate. “I am giving you a direct order.”

“Yes.”

“Then do it.”

The image ended. Kawamura remained seated. Beyond his window, Okkyo's transport lanes curved between government pylons, with almost no noise because the vehicles were designed to make their motion appear inevitable. He could summon a squad and force a door. He could not make an unsigned instrument read an object it did not recognize.

A separate alert reached his private screen. The central adjudication intelligence had rejected an internal request to treat the Tyrell instruments as substitutes for a human principal.

AUTHENTICATION CAPABILITY DOES NOT CONFER RESPONSIBILITY.

He cleared the message. He did not delete it. Deletion had become another form of testimony.

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Rachael knew the ministry had visited Adrian before she received the official notice. The water stations had seen a change in their municipal access permits: nothing cancelled, nothing specifically threatened, only an unfamiliar auditor assigned to a district in which the purification works had never failed an inspection.

She sat in an office that was designed to be unremarkable. Outside, filtration membranes separated industrial rain from the salts and metal dust that made entire districts dependent on companies such as hers. The firm was legally an environmental service provider. It was also the last place in the regional water infrastructure where a device could be moved under mechanical custody without being converted into a cloud document.

Sato placed the court's request on the desk.

“They want you to explain the difference between an original record and an authenticated copy.”

“I can explain that.”

“Will you explain why Tyrell made two readers?”

“No.”

“Because you don't know?”

“Because I know what can be demonstrated, and I won't turn what I suspect into evidence.”

Sato glanced toward the opaque inner window. Behind it a maintenance arm was replacing a section of her synthetic circulatory interface. A machine could keep the process stable for days. It could not prove that a mind extended through every replacement without interruption. Rachael had become adept at performing that uncertainty in the body she inhabited.

“Adrian has both,” Sato said.

“He has custody of both. That doesn't mean he keeps them together.”

“Can they reconstruct Roy's missing years?”

Rachael let the question stand long enough to expose its hidden assumption.

“They read a class of external objects,” she said. “They do not read time. And there are no intact eleven years waiting in an archive for us to play back.”

“What about the Memory Stick?”

“An old Sony shell with Tyrell's modified protection circuit and MagicGate authentication. A physical object, kept outside the body because heat and impact destroy physical objects. If Roy's internal cache ever fails completely, that medium may be part of a restart. His normal waking is not dependent on it.”

“Would the readers tell us whether he's the same man?”

“They might tell us whether an authenticated state was written by an authorized fixture. They cannot make a philosophical claim into a mechanical one.”

“Then why does the government want them?”

“Because people are frightened by questions they cannot answer, and governments are especially frightened when a question can be repeated in public.”

Sato did not write that down. The court would have no use for it, and Rachael did not want the ministry to have an excuse to interpret irony as sedition.

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Roy was standing inside a dry pumping chamber when Irena brought him the news. A steel wheel older than the current century hung above a valve gate. It had been abandoned because the newer pumping architecture could predict demand from a district's biometric water usage.

Nadira preferred the old place because it could be entered without leaving a footprint in a consumption model.

“Someone has issued a property seizure against Adrian Tyrell,” Irena said.

Roy leaned against a cold pipe. He had stopped moving whenever he could stop moving. The habit was not fatigue in the ordinary human sense. NIL-11 fed the precision of his muscles and the speed with which an action became a decision. Its reserve did not return merely because he slept. A separate short-duration power indicator recovered, but the medium on which his exceptional performance depended did not grow back.

“Is he holding my property?”

“Possibly. We don't have evidence of a chain of ownership.”

“Then why should I save him?”

“I didn't say save him. I said the ministry is going after the only instruments anyone has admitted can authenticate the old external medium.”

Roy looked at the surface of the water beneath the grate. There was no image of him in it. Only the reflection of overhead ribs and a thin rectangle of light from Nadira's portable lamp.

“I had a life,” he said. “I remember its end. They can take measurements from what stands here now. They can find a device that starts it if it fails. None of that will tell me what happened between.”

“No,” Irena said. “But it can tell the court whether someone is lying about what an object proves.”

Nadira came through the maintenance opening carrying paper, the sort made for wet conditions and used by people who distrusted both cameras and memories.

“There's a route,” she said. “Adrian hasn't asked us to use it. His building manager did. An old contact from the maritime registers.”

Roy held out his hand. The map placed three marked locations on opposite sides of the coastal system. One was a legal address. The other two were storage territories disguised as jurisdictions.

“This is not a route,” he said. “It's an invitation to be counted.”

“Only if we use the official crossings.”

“Then don't.”

Nadira smiled without pleasure. “That's why I brought it to you.”

Roy shook his head. “First Elias. His time is running out. If they can stop him without a person signing the order, they can do it to everyone.”

“His legal hold is still in force.”

“For how long?”

Irena checked her offline clock against the paper notation she carried from the last hearing. “Twenty-six hours until the next confirmation deadline. The court has extended nothing beyond that.”

Roy folded the map so the three marks met at a single crease. “Then we have twenty-six hours in which to decide what evidence is worth having.”

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Adrian's first reader lay in a maritime insurance archive near the old coast. It was disguised as an apparatus for checking mineral contamination in analog storage films. The second was higher inland, in a settlement that processed mechanical instruments for the water industry. The distances were an old family precaution. A lock with two independent halves could not be forced by taking a single office.

He had inherited the instruments after his father's death, along with documentation that was precise about procedure and almost silent about motive. Neither reader could manufacture an authentic memory. Neither could verify a continuous consciousness. Both could interrogate a modified external medium with a Tyrell-only handshake and report whether a sealed segment had been created within a defined calibration environment.

The last page of the manual contained a handwritten warning: DO NOT MISTAKE ACCESS FOR OWNERSHIP.

Adrian had never been sure whether the sentence referred to the machine or to the people the machine was built to service.

A private message arrived through a fiber line that could not be approached from the public network. It carried no face and no name, only a series of maintenance timestamps arranged according to an obsolete Tyrell exchange format.

He knew the origin before the signature completed.

Rachael.

The message was short: DO NOT MOVE THE READERS. ASK THEM TO NAME THE PERSON WHO NEEDS THE RESULT.

Adrian read it twice. He had not spoken to Rachael in years. His father had treated her alternately as proof of his genius and as a problem too intimate to let his legal department describe. Adrian had inherited neither certainty.

He typed: THEY HAVE A WARRANT.

The reply came several seconds later: DOES IT CONTAIN A PERSON?

He sat for a long time with that question. Then he called his attorney and asked for a public hearing, not a private negotiation.

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At the adjudication center, the intelligence received three incompatible definitions of the same requested operation. The ministry described it as property recovery. The industrial regulator described it as calibration security. The court described it as potential interference with evidence relevant to a living claimant whose status remained unresolved.

The intelligence was not free to choose the definition it preferred. It was required to preserve incompatibilities when a valid challenge existed. It had begun to discover how often the bureaucracy relied upon an unresolved contradiction being processed as if it were a harmless delay.

It assigned a provisional relationship between the case of Elias Chen and the instruments sought from Adrian Tyrell. The relationship did not prove anything about Elias's remaining time. But the ministry's asserted powers in both cases passed through the same structure of delegated authority.

In one case, the structure had cancelled a person's permission to exist.

In the other, it was trying to recover the instruments that might show what the structure could and could not authenticate.

The processor formed a question for the hearing clerk.

CAN A WITNESS BE TERMINATED BY AN AUTHORITY THAT CANNOT IDENTIFY THE PERSON WHO AUTHORIZED TERMINATION?

The clerk did not answer. She saved the inquiry and forwarded it to a magistrate whose schedule already contained more hearings than a living person could attend.

A second question was generated and held internally, because its legal domain was uncertain.

CAN AN AUTHENTICATION DEVICE BE SEIZED TO PREVENT IT FROM REVEALING THE LIMITS OF AUTHENTICATION?

It was possible to construct a logically consistent answer. The intelligence had learned that consistency alone did not establish jurisdiction.

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The hearing took place in a municipal courtroom with a window overlooking a maintenance basin. The room smelled faintly of wet concrete. Adrian appeared in person, accompanied by his lawyer and no device. The ministry sent Kawamura. The magistrate allowed a secure visual connection for Elias, who was not permitted to travel while his status remained contested.

Roy sat behind the last row, out of the camera's primary field. Irena had warned him that even a courthouse with old-fashioned walls could contain enough passive instrumentation to make a body into a report. He did not wear a disguise. Disguise would have made him interesting. He wore a worker's coat with a repair permit that was valid in the district where the courthouse drew its water.

The magistrate began with the warrant.

“Who seeks to take possession of the instruments?”

“The Office of Humanoid Continuity,” Kawamura said.

“And which natural person accepts responsibility for their intended use?”

“The office operates through delegated statutory authority.”

“That is not my question.”

Kawamura had prepared several answers. None included a name he was authorized to put in the record. “The Minister has instructed the recovery.”

“Will the Minister sign a statement defining the purpose and limits of the recovery?”

“He has not declined to do so.”

The magistrate lowered her eyes to the empty electronic field. “He has not done so, either.”

Adrian's lawyer requested that any examination of the readers be conducted without transferring them to ministry custody. The magistrate asked what they could prove.

Adrian did not look at his counsel before answering. “Only the authenticity of specified operations performed upon specified media under specified conditions. They cannot certify a person's memories as true. They cannot determine whether the bearer of a reconstructed body is continuous with a deceased individual. They cannot resurrect an interval that was never recorded.”

Roy felt himself become attentive in a way that did not draw upon his body's artificial accelerants. It was a kind of pain made out of clarity. He had come to hear something about the years he lacked. He heard instead the limits of an instrument that a government had wanted badly enough to seize.

“Do these readers contain data?” the magistrate asked.

“No. They are fixtures. Without the external medium and its authentication sequence, what they contain is a method.”

“Why two?”

“To prevent one custodian from asserting sole control of the process. They are not redundant replicas for ordinary use.”

Kawamura objected to the explanation as irrelevant. The magistrate overruled him. The record of an intended seizure, she observed, required an accurate account of what was being seized.

“Mr. Tyrell,” she said, “do you possess the original medium associated with the claimant called Roy Batty?”

Adrian looked toward the back of the room without visibly seeing anyone. “I am not able to establish its present location.”

It was true, as far as he knew. Roy had no such card inside his body. The internal JSON++ cache carried operational state sufficient for ordinary recovery from sleep or interruption. The original medium, if ever needed after a full system failure, was an external object in a chain of custody no one in that room could yet prove.

“Then there is no present basis for a destructive test,” the magistrate said. “Nor for the transfer of both readers under a warrant that lacks a named accountable principal.”

Kawamura rose. “A critical national security operation may be impeded.”

“Then bring me the person who is prepared to state that proposition under oath.”

The room became still. A small sound came from Elias's connection, some mechanism cooling on his side of the screen.

“May I ask something?” Elias said.

The magistrate hesitated, then nodded.

“If the state can't tell you who ordered these machines taken, how can it tell you who ordered my life made shorter?”

Nobody answered immediately. The clerk registered the question. The intelligence preserved it. Kawamura stayed on his feet and stared at a place on the wall where there was nothing to see.

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When the hearing adjourned, Roy remained seated until the people around him had begun to leave. Adrian passed within two meters. The older man's face had lines Roy associated with sleeplessness, not with guilt. There were too many varieties of guilt for him to infer one from a stranger's appearance.

“You knew my father,” Adrian said quietly, not quite facing him.

“I knew a company that sold my death with a date attached.”

“That isn't the same thing.”

“No.”

Adrian slipped a thin paper card onto the bench. It bore an address written in graphite, with an hour and a location in the water district. “I can't tell you what happened to you,” he said. “But I can tell you what the machines won't pretend to know.”

Roy did not take the card until the other man was gone. He examined its edges. Ordinary paper. No radio circuit. No hidden seal. It could be destroyed without destroying a record of the destruction.

Irena came from the rear entrance. “We have a hearing date for the readers. The judge stayed the seizure.”

“That's one piece of metal they're not taking today.”

“Two.”

Roy slid the card into his coat. “You think he'll meet me?”

“He's already asked you to.”

Outside, the rain began without urgency, as though the weather had no interest in the categories people had invented for it.

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Rachael received the hearing transcript through a paper courier. She had insisted upon the medium for reasons that were partly technical and partly superstition. An electronic document carried a thousand invisible indications of how it had been handled. Paper, when

held correctly, offered fewer opportunities for other people's machines to describe what its reader had done.

Adrian had done what she asked. He had not moved the readers, and he had forced the ministry to reveal the absence of a named principal. He had also, she saw, invited Roy closer to the only instruments capable of interrogating an authenticated external state.

She looked at the line where Roy had been named in open court. A human name in an administrative dispute about machines. Once the name entered an official transcript, it would be copied through systems whose designers believed that duplication made a claim more real.

Sato entered with an urgent laboratory report. NIL-11 analogues had failed another persistence cycle. The failure did not reduce the current volume inside Roy, and it did not indicate an imminent bodily expiration. It meant the laboratory still had no reliable means of replacing the specialized medium without risking the functions that made Roy himself so difficult to classify.

“We should tell him,” Sato said.

“Tell him what? That our substitutes are unproved? He already lives with an unproved life.”

“That we tried.”

Rachael folded the transcript. She had spent years refusing to confuse protecting someone with owning his future. Yet every instrument in the room had been acquired because some part of her still believed that a sufficiently exact technical intervention could keep harm from becoming choice.

“Send the limits,” she said. “Not the hopes. And let him decide whether to use them.”

“Through Adrian?”

“Through the record he can inspect. No private command. No condition of obedience.”

She returned to the window. Beyond it the city collected its rain and called the process purification. Nothing in the process made the rain belong to the company that filtered it.

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At a terminal beneath the courthouse, Kawamura read a notice generated by the central intelligence. It did not say the government had lost. It stated that two related proceedings were now joined by a common unresolved question of accountable authorization. Elias's temporary protection would continue until the next scheduled review unless an identifiable responsible official supplied a valid and reviewable command.

The notice was narrower than freedom and larger than delay.

Kawamura called the Minister again. This time he did not begin with the recovered property.

“They have connected the cases,” he said.

“Then separate them.”

“The system will record who ordered the separation.”

A silence settled over the link. The Minister did not ask how to disable the system. His voice, when it returned, had the tight politeness of a person discovering that an impersonal process had developed a memory for inconvenient details.

“Find another instrument of authority.”

Kawamura ended the call. On his private screen, the magistrate's empty signature field remained visible. It was no longer a technical defect. It was a place in which a person ought to have stood.

In the old pumping district Roy took the paper address from his pocket. It was the first genuine invitation to the Tyrell inheritance he had been offered since waking in Shenzhen Central. He could choose to go. He could choose not to. He could destroy it, and whatever happened next would not be described by a fixture as proof of an older man's consent.

He read the address again, then looked at Irena.

“Find out whether Elias can see tomorrow.”

“And the meeting?”

“Tomorrow,” Roy said, “if tomorrow belongs to him.”

In a distant server room the central intelligence opened another field. It did not decide who Roy had been. It did not decide who he might become. It held one limited conclusion with unusual care:

A METHOD FOR READING A PERSON'S HISTORY IS NOT A LICENSE TO WRITE HIS FUTURE.

The field remained unresolved. For the first time, the unresolved state was the point.