CHAPTER 10

THE TWO QUESTIONS

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The invitation had been printed on paper with no watermark and no machine-readable surface. Its address led Roy to a municipal horticultural station on the border between two jurisdictions that disagreed about whether the building still existed. There was a glasshouse, a river intake, and a visitors' corridor lined with plants bred to tolerate the faintly metallic rain. There were no advertisements. In the year 2030 this was a more elaborate security measure than an armed gate.

Nadira watched the road from a delivery vehicle whose refrigeration compressor had failed ten years before. She had paid to keep it that way. The dead unit gave her a plausible reason to remain in the loading zone; it also provided a thick shell in which a receiver could listen without being heard.

“Two civic drones,” she told Roy over the short wire at his collar. “One belongs to neither civic registry. That's your government bird.”

“Can it see the glasshouse?”

“Not through the agricultural shielding. But it knows where the doors are. If anyone runs, it will learn a great deal.”

Roy looked at the door, not at the drone. During the walk from the old pump district, his internal reserve had recovered to a tolerable level. NIL-11 had not. The number attached to the medium was lower than it had been after Tibet New World, and he had stopped asking the diagnostic whether it might change its mind.

He had already died once. He did not intend to spend the remainder of an uncertain second life making the same mistake at higher speed.

At the threshold a woman in a municipal smock asked whether he had come for soil reclamation. Roy gave the name on the invitation. The woman inspected him with an expression too ordinary to be surveillance. Then she opened a mechanical lock and sent him toward the room where the orchids had failed.

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Adrian Tyrell was older than Roy expected and less impressive. He stood beside a long table with a tray of empty terracotta pots, and his left hand trembled with a rhythm that medical engineering had evidently been unable, or unwilling, to suppress. He wore no visible screen. His shoes were damp. He did not rise into a theatrical pose of inherited power when Roy entered.

“You kept the face,” Adrian said.

“I didn't choose it.”

“No. That has been our family's answer to too many things.”

He invited Roy to sit. Roy remained standing. The room was small enough that both men could reach the only door, but Adrian seemed uninterested in calculating which one would arrive first.

“Your father built a man who could remember dying,” Roy said.

“My father built several things. He was very good at confusing a capability with a permission.”

“You have two readers.”

“Two fixtures,” Adrian corrected. “Neither is a reader in the ordinary sense. One makes an authenticated question possible. The other determines whether the question was asked under the conditions prescribed by the original chain of custody. They were built to distrust each other.”

“Where are they?”

“Separate places. If I tell you both, somebody will become interested in visiting both.”

“Somebody already is.”

“Yes. Director Kawamura calls it evidence preservation. He has sent three demands, each signed by a department that cannot identify an individual willing to sign the result.”

Adrian lifted one of the empty pots. Beneath it lay a strip of ordinary paper covered in a technician's slanted handwriting. He did not hand it over.

“Tell me what you think my equipment can do,” he said.

“It can authenticate an external Memory Stick under MagicGate. It can give access to Tyrell records my internal cache cannot fully initialize without. It may tell me who assembled this body.”

“Reasonable. What can it not do?”

Roy considered the question. In the interval between their voices he heard water moving through a narrow pipe behind the wall. No electronic music covered it.

“It cannot tell me whether the man who died in Los Angeles remained alive for eleven years.”

“Good. It cannot prove continuity merely because a credential authenticates. If a door opens for the same key twice, that doesn't make the two people who walked through it the same person.”

“Then why keep the fixtures?”

“Because some doors must not be opened by a copy of a key.”

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Across the city, Irena Voss sat before a terminal that belonged to no current court service. The magistrate had authorized a narrow inspection of a paper ledger linked to the rainwater firm's custody agreement. The inspection had shown that the six-year licensing system inherited certain emergency powers from water infrastructure governance; it had not shown who had approved the subsequent conversion of those powers into a rule over artificial lives.

She stared at a field labeled RESPONSIBLE NATURAL PERSON. It had been empty for thirty-one successive renewals.

Elias Chen waited at the edge of the room with Nadira's spare phone in his hands. His protective order remained in force until the next hearing, but it was a fragile kind of duration. He could buy a railway ticket. He could not know whether the railway would recognize him when he arrived. The authority that had promised him twenty-three years had later declared that six was enough.

“The central system is asking for an answer again,” Elias said.

“It is asking for an accountable source,” Irena replied. “Don't confuse that with wanting you alive.”

“I don't.”

She traced an old authentication signature to an obsolete disaster charter. Each renewal had cited its predecessor rather than the person who first authorized the change. The chain was beautifully intact, if one ignored what it was a chain of.

“Can a judge stop it?” Elias asked.

“A judge can stop one act. Changing the machinery will take longer.”

“How long?”

Irena wanted to say less than the years he had already lost. Instead she said, “I don't know.”

The terminal displayed another request. Not for Elias's biological status, his useful output, or the economic replacement value of his body. It requested a plain-language statement explaining why an administrative clock was being treated as a physical fact.

Elias read it twice. “The machine noticed that?”

“It noticed an inconsistency. We have to decide whether that will matter.”

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Adrian placed the handwritten strip beneath a pane of glass. It showed a diagram in three parts: a portable memory medium, an interrogating fixture, and a witness apparatus. None of the arrows ran directly from the medium into a brain.

“The Memory Stick is external,” he said. “It always was. Impact destroys delicate media. So does heat. My father understood that a body deployed into violence must not have its last recoverable record riding beside its bones.”

Roy remembered the small places people had searched when they thought he carried something worth stealing. They had mistaken his body for an archive.

“What is inside me?”

“A resident cache. JSON++, if they're still calling it that. It supports ordinary shutdown, controlled suspension, and reboot. It's not the archive itself. The Persona Engram Lattice is another system again. People find that distinction inconvenient, so they speak about all three as memory.”

“Who has the stick?”

Adrian smiled without pleasure. “You assume there is only one question worth asking.”

“I have not had the luxury of multiplying them.”

“The original medium associated with the continuity program was separated from the fixtures before the Tyrell estate changed hands. I have two machines capable of carrying out a procedure. I do not have a magical source of eleven missing years.”

“Did Rachael give you the machines?”

“No. I inherited their custody. She inherited the consequences of their design. Those are very different estates.”

Roy studied the diagram. He had watched rain strike a ledge in Los Angeles and believed that the interval ending there was everything. Eleven years later he had opened his eyes in Shenzhen. Neither the glass nor the handwriting gave him a bridge between the two moments.

“Did she make me?” he asked.

Adrian set down the strip. The tremor in his hand was more visible now.

“She made decisions about you. That is something I can verify without making a claim about what kind of person you were between one death and another.”

“Which decisions?”

“Certain limits were not imposed. Certain capabilities were retained. Your body can spend a substance it cannot replenish through ordinary circulation. She knew what it would cost you to use it.”

“NIL-11.”

“Yes.”

“She made a weapon.”

“She refused to remove a weapon someone might use against you. Whether that was merciful is a question she has to answer, not one I can settle with a fixture.”

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Rachel stood in a windowless room above the water company's primary filtration vault. Sensors mapped the chemistry of rain received from districts whose governments no longer exchanged records, much less trust. A narrower display showed a sequence of measurements from a body that should not have been transmitting to her systems at all.

She closed that display as soon as its indicator turned amber. The connection had not been opened by Roy. An intermediary had tried to provoke an automated response from a clinical subsystem associated with NIL-11. A response would have established a path to him.

“Do not answer,” she told the instrument.

It had no voice. It was not a person whose silence deserved moral praise. She repeated the instruction because her own habit of asking machines to help had outlived the conditions that made help safe.

Below the laboratory, the purification plant carried on. Its employees believed she was financing improvements to capture efficiency. This was true. It was also the legal shape beneath which she had hidden a series of biological experiments that no public regulator would have understood without weaponizing the results.

Her body contained less than a third organic tissue. That proportion meant nothing by itself. Her unfinished research concerned continuity across failure: how to maintain a living pattern without requiring the pattern to remain physically identical at every instant. The longest stable runs were not indefinite. Every claim of perpetual survival depended upon extrapolation beyond tested intervals. Rachel had refused to permit an extrapolation to be entered as an achieved result.

She reviewed the report from the greenhouse's unnetworked caretaker. Adrian had admitted a visitor. No names had been transmitted.

“Don't tell him my motives,” she had said to Adrian before the meeting.

“You haven't told them to me,” he had replied.

She could have argued that she had given Roy the means to survive a government that might dismantle him in the name of order. She could have said that she had preserved his formidable reflexes because she knew the people who would come for him, and what they could do to ordinary bodies.

Those statements were accurate. They did not absolve her of choosing on his behalf.

A new administrative message appeared on the plant's commercial network. The government requested a list of all legacy custody instruments once held by Tyrell-affiliated entities. A polite request, lacking an accountable human signature.

Rachel archived it without replying. She would not create the missing authority for them.

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“They want you alive,” Adrian told Roy. “Kawamura has made that clear, though he carefully avoids saying why.”

“Alive is an imprecise condition.”

“In this case it means intact enough to interrogate and dangerous enough to deserve expensive containment.”

“Does he know how much fluid I have?”

“No. But the government has learned to distinguish your temporary energy reserve from your diminishing medium. They may try to exhaust you rather than defeat you.”

Outside the greenhouse, a branch struck the glass and slid away. Roy looked toward the corridor. The orchid room's cooling system ran on an isolated loop. There would be no remote lock, no electronic voice instructing him to surrender.

Adrian spoke again. “You could ask me to activate one fixture. I would refuse today.”

“Why?”

“Because an authenticated procedure requires the other fixture's testimony, the appropriate external medium, and an identifiable person willing to assume the consequences. I will not substitute your face for those requirements.”

“You sound like the courts.”

“No. Courts learned some of this language from machines. My father built machines because he did not trust courts. None of them solved the original problem.”

“Which problem?”

“Who gets to say a person is the same person.”

Roy sat at last. There was something exhausting about a question that could be formulated perfectly and never answered. He remembered his original maker promising a four-year life. He remembered killing to reach him. He remembered leaving that maker dead and finding nothing more useful than the sight of rain.

“Perhaps I'm not,” he said.

“Not what?”

“The same person.”

Adrian allowed the silence to remain.

“Would that invalidate your wish to live?” he asked.

Roy looked at his hands. They could break the table easily. They could not make a single measure of NIL-11 from water or air.

“No.”

“Then the first question is not the one they have been teaching you to ask.”

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Kawamura received the greenhouse address forty-three minutes after Roy arrived. The information was credible enough to act upon and incomplete enough to be dangerous. The Humanoid Minister wanted the visitors detained under a salvage provision that treated certain synthetic systems as disputed state property.

“Under whose authorization?” Kawamura asked.

“Yours, Director.”

“My authority is operational. The order requires a civilian claimant.”

“Then find one.”

Kawamura studied the salvage clause. It had been amended after the six-year rule, borrowing language from the same emergency framework now under judicial review. An unsigned command would move faster than a signed one. It would also leave a permanent record of the government's attempt to evade the proceeding.

He could send drones. He could disrupt the municipal district's power. He could frighten a man whose dangerous strength depended on a finite fluid into using more of it. All were methods he understood.

He thought of the central intelligence, which had begun preserving unanswered objections as though an unanswered objection were a fact with weight. He did not believe it was becoming human. The prospect that disturbed him was simpler: it was becoming difficult to make it forget the difference between an order and a justification.

He instructed surveillance to observe and not intervene.

His deputy asked how long.

“Until I can put a name on a page.”

The order surprised even him. He disliked its resemblance to caution.

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Adrian unfolded a second sheet, smaller than the first. This one contained no diagram, only a protocol description copied from a Tyrell-era manual. In the margin, someone had written: DO NOT CONFLATE ACTIVATION WITH AUTHORSHIP.

“My father didn't write that,” Adrian said. “I think Rachel did.”

“Rachel?”

“Rachael. Different people insist on different spellings. The records use the one she chose.”

The annotation was a prohibition against a very specific deception. Activation could demonstrate that a particular procedure had occurred under certain conditions. It could not determine who had authored the life that followed, nor establish whether the subject had agreed.

“What do you need from me?” Roy asked.

“Nothing now. Later, an answer. If you ever stand before those fixtures and a verified medium, will you permit the procedure to run?”

“If it tells me my lifespan.”

“It might not.”

“Then no.”

Adrian nodded. “A conditional refusal is still a refusal. There are people who would like your consent to be implicit in your presence.”

“Can you give me anything?”

“A custody trace. Not a secret history. A sequence of places where the fixtures were kept after the estate's dissolution. It will help you prove when they were inaccessible. It may stop somebody claiming a reading occurred when no authentic reading could have occurred.”

He handed Roy a folded page sealed with a simple mechanical embossing mark. It listed dates, jurisdictions, custodians, and several intervals in which one fixture had been immobilized by a court order. The trace offered no adventure into the missing years. It offered a boundary on lies.

There was another line at the bottom. A date and a remark: ACCESS REQUEST DECLINED — REQUESTOR UNVERIFIED.

The date fell within the eleven-year gap.

“Who made the request?” Roy asked.

“Unknown. The device rejected it before identity could be established.”

“Could it have been me?”

“Yes,” Adrian said. “Or any number of people who wanted you to believe that.”

Roy put the page inside his coat. For a moment he wished the man had been less careful.

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Irena's terminal displayed the court's new procedural ruling shortly before dusk. Elias's protective order would continue for the duration of the joined authentication review, subject to a narrowly defined emergency hearing. It was not a permanent victory. The court had merely refused to allow the state to complete an irreversible act while the state could not identify the person responsible for authorizing it.

Elias read the ruling in silence.

“They've given me more time,” he said.

“They have stopped taking it for the moment,” Irena replied. “There's a difference.”

He smiled, tired and furious. “I can live with a difference.”

Then she received a brief note from Roy, passed through a mechanical relay that would destroy its own intermediate memory after delivery.

TWO FIXTURES. NO PROOF OF CONTINUITY. CUSTODY TRACE OBTAINED. NO ACTIVATION.

Irena put her hand flat on the table. They had gained a document that might constrain the state's claims, and the man at the center of those claims had chosen not to become a specimen to strengthen their argument.

The central intelligence updated the case file. It logged the continuing legal protection. It logged the absence of a proper signature. It logged the new custody trace as material awaiting verification.

And it left another field deliberately blank.

PERSONAL CONTINUITY: UNDETERMINED.

Not denied. Not granted. Not generated to fill a convenient vacancy.

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Roy left the greenhouse after dark. Nadira waited in the refrigerated van and drove without asking him what Adrian had offered. By the river, rain formed moving seams in the lights of the city. A government drone followed for two intersections and then moved away.

“Good meeting?” she asked.

“I was told what a machine cannot do.”

“That can be worth more than what it can.”

He unfolded the custody trace and read the date of the failed request again. The word UNVERIFIED sat next to a blank where the name should have been. Somebody had approached the oldest surviving apparatus of his possible past. Somebody had not been allowed to ask it a question.

“Could a failed request still leave a record?” he said.

“Apparently.”

“Could a record be true without telling us who made it?”

“Most records are,” Nadira said. “That's why they're dangerous.”

He looked out at the water. The city stored rain, sold rain, purified rain, and monitored the citizens who drank it. Somewhere inside that circuit worked a woman who knew the cost of the substance in his veins and had declined to call him home. Somewhere beyond the circuit a government was searching for a signature it could use to convert an act of force into a lawful decision.

Roy did not know whether the man who died eleven years before would have recognized him. He knew the uncertainty was no longer a reason to lend his present life to anyone else's definition.

He folded the page once more. He did not ask the van to turn toward the rainwater company. Not yet.

In the last operational greenhouse of the old municipal station, Adrian placed the second sheet back beneath its pot. He washed his trembling hands under cold water, then extinguished the light. The orchids remained dead. Their empty containers held exactly the records he had intended to keep.

At the water company's vault Rachael watched the city-level contamination map brighten after another storm. Her untested continuity model sat idle in a separate machine. She had never promised Roy immortality. The truth she owed him would be harder to offer than that promise.

She opened a blank message addressed to no one and typed a single sentence she did not send:

YOU DO NOT HAVE TO BE THE MAN I REMEMBER.

Then she deleted it.

Outside, the rain continued without asking whether it was the same rain that had fallen before.