CHAPTER 04 — THE REGISTER OF BROKEN ORDERS

Expanded English reconstruction; not a recovered verbatim original

01 — Rebuilt Giant

Goliath lay under repair lights while technicians replaced the load-transfer assembly Roy had disabled. Chronos told him the defeat had required three meaningful touches, not a miracle. The giant wanted revenge. The child said he had lost because he had treated his opponent as a weaker body rather than a mind capable of reading mechanics. Goliath disliked the correction, but could not disprove it.

Goliath's repair chamber resembled a factory more than a hospital. Technicians moved among his exposed load-bearing assemblies while he demanded to know why two or three small points of contact had left him immobile. Chronos corrected his memory of the fight, then showed him a brief alteration of apparent distance that made the giant release the child's wrist. The lesson was unwelcome: force could be useless against a problem whose dimensions one did not understand.

There were no mirrors in Goliath's repair chamber, only metal panels polished enough to show vague reflections of his massive frame. He stared at the torn load assemblies and recognized how cleanly Roy had dismantled a single avenue for transmitting force. The repair team could install stronger components. It could build redundant paths for the pressure of an immense hand. But no component would erase the memory of lying helpless while another fighter walked away. Chronos approached with an expression the

giant mistook for amusement. The boy told him that the fight was lost before the final break because Goliath had assumed a smaller opponent was obligated to oppose his greater strength. Goliath hated the diagnosis because, even under the anger, he suspected it was true.

02 — The Third Signature

The Minister issued another recovery directive, expanding permission to damage civilian infrastructure. Vector noticed an authorization beyond the usual two signatures: C-05. Chronos watched his identification flash on a system older than the current Ministry. The Minister dismissed the anomaly, yet the child's expression changed. Someone had preserved authority for the observer without consulting the present government.

At the briefing the Minister demanded a quick recovery and unveiled an order authorizing damage to civilian infrastructure. Vector asked who had signed the waiver of independent review. A second signature appeared, then a third that none of the other operatives expected. For a moment the authorization system displayed C-05. Chronos stopped smiling. The code belonged to him in some sense, yet he had not volunteered it and did not accept that it gave the Minister any right to speak for him.

03 — Shade Replays

Shade watched the recording of Roy destroying her camouflage system and saving her from a shot. She could not explain the mercy through simple tactical rules. Vector admitted his own shot had carried a nonzero chance of destroying the components he had supposedly been ordered to preserve. Both began to suspect the mission concerned testimony, not stolen military hardware.

Shade replayed the filtration-room encounter. Roy had disabled her optical camouflage, then moved her out of Vector's line of fire. She studied the decision as if it were a flaw in her own calculations. An efficient enemy should have treated an exposed assassin as a disposable obstacle. Instead Roy had preserved her life. Vector admitted he had taken a shot with a narrow but real chance of destroying the very components their orders required. They wondered whether precision had made them forget responsibility.

In the equipment room Shade followed the water's path across her suit one frame at a time. The camouflage had perfectly reproduced the wall behind her until falling water drew the outline of her shoulders, wrist, and throat. Roy had needed only a moment to disable the controller. He had then stood close enough to inflict an irreversible injury and chosen not to. Vector arrived to explain the sniper shot, but she was no longer interested in percentages alone. His calculation had treated her life as a small residual risk. She realized that the same methods could be applied to any person whose survival was inconvenient to the Minister. It had never troubled her when that person was a target. It troubled her now because she had briefly been the target of a probability function.

04 — Different Movement

Roy trained without trusting his former strength. New reflexes were not faster; they were less wasteful. He allowed a machine to move him instead of paying the full cost of movement himself. Rachel observed that the hunting team had been trained against the old NEXUSYS-11. Their accurate predictions might now make them vulnerable.

On the training floor Roy discovered that the new output ceiling punished repeated assumptions more than it punished intelligent motion. He let a

mechanical arm commit to the wrong target and used the resulting momentum to solve the next movement. Rachel watched the numbers fall. The Minister's team expected the old overwhelming acceleration. Roy was learning how to be dangerous without supplying it. The surprise was that he seemed more interested in the method than embarrassed by the reduction.

05 — A Child’s Question

The isolated continuity index contained an unencrypted voice fragment. A technician called Roy a subject and reported no response. A child asked whether anyone had inquired if he wanted to come back. The technician replied that consent was outside the authorized protocol. Roy replayed the sentence. No signature proved the child could command a laboratory, but the record proved someone had recognized the missing question.

An isolated archive exposed a fragment that had escaped encryption. Adult voices called Roy a subject and discussed his lack of response. A child's voice interrupted: had anybody asked whether he wished to return? The question was not approved and the recording ended without an answer. Roy replayed it until he knew the cadence. Somewhere in the buried records was at least one observer who had distinguished an individual's wish from the convenience of an experiment.

The recording that escaped encryption was shorter than a normal conversation. A researcher announced that the subject had not responded, a child requested another approach, and then came the question: had anyone asked the man whether he wished to return? There was no convincing reason for that question to survive except that someone had refused to erase it. Roy replayed the fragment until its silence afterward felt nearly as significant as the words. He had spent days avoiding people who presumed to define him as dangerous property. In the archive he met evidence of

people who had used gentler language and arrived at a similar conclusion: his wishes could be deferred until after the experiment. Rachel watched him listen and knew that her earlier objections would not free her from explaining what she had allowed to continue.

06 — What Rachel Knew

Rachel acknowledged that continuity work had included multiple attempts to preserve or reconstruct identity. Some had used bodies, others neural patterns or surviving memories. She objected to certain procedures, but did not stop every one. Roy asked whether a reconstructed person who believed himself to be Roy was automatically the same Roy. Rachel could not answer. Roy said the next choice, at least, belonged to the person now standing before her.

Rachel acknowledged that continuity research had moved through several physical and computational approaches. Some participants were still living, some records had been deliberately isolated, and not every experiment had earned valid consent. Roy asked whether she had objected. She said yes, but he could see how far that answer fell short of a complete account. They stood beside the underground reservoir while he contemplated the difficulty of holding someone responsible without pretending one knew every choice that person had made.

07 — A Pre-Ministry Authority

The Minister tried to revoke the unfamiliar C-05 signature. The old system refused, requiring authorization from that same observer. Chronos arrived and said he remembered receiving orders eleven years earlier. He was not sure the new Minister understood the power he claimed to have inherited. The room’s clocks lost agreement while they spoke.

The Minister discovered that the third signature belonged to an authority created before his own administration. A government office might inherit buildings and records without inheriting absolute control of the safeguards built into them. When he ordered C-05 removed from the register, the terminal requested C-05's authorization. Chronos appeared in the doorway and asked whether the Minister understood the consequences of restoring obedience to a system that had been designed, at least partly, to preserve dissent.

The Minister expected the continuity registry to operate as an instrument of his department, but the old authorization screen showed a third signatory whose entry was not dependent on contemporary officeholding. C-05. He ordered the mark removed, and the system required C-05's own consent. The contradiction infuriated him. He was a man accustomed to inheriting legal powers, security personnel, and technical budgets. He had not imagined inheriting obligations to people the previous administration had refused to recognize as people. Chronos entered during the audit and watched the Minister discover that some conditions were older than his instructions. The child's question was simple: if an authority can be used only with another person's agreement, whose authority is it really?

08 — The First Refusal

Null calculated that demolishing a partition of Rachel’s hydraulic system could interrupt drinking water across several neighborhoods. The Minister called collateral damage acceptable. Vector regarded the risk as unjustified; Shade agreed. Their obedience had always depended on treating orders as someone else’s moral calculation. Now the calculation was being transferred back to them.

Vector and Null studied the civilian water network Rachel's enterprise supplied. Demolishing the medical wing might propagate pressure changes into reservoirs that served entire residential districts. The Minister had marked such damage acceptable. Null insisted that approval could not repeal hydraulic physics or make contaminated water safe. Vector postponed the assault rather than pretend a signature could do so. Shade, listening, recognized the first visible cracks in a unit assembled to obey without reflection.

09 — The Register

An offline record inexplicably updated with five operational identifiers: G-01, S-02, V-03, N-04, C-05. Beside them stood ORDER STATUS: CONFLICT. Rachel recognized the group as MBU-09. Roy recognized something stranger: an archive built for continuity review was also recording whether the Minister’s own agents consented to serve his orders.

Back in a sealed instrument room Chronos was ordered by an unseen voice to return to assigned parameters. The command reminded him of the white room, where questions had been listed in advance and spontaneous refusal treated as a malfunction. He raised a hand and the suspended silver sphere seemed to occupy several places. The clocks stopped agreeing. None of the effects made him feel free. It only showed him that even immense ability could coexist with an old fear of being put away.

In the empty synchronization chamber the command to comply came from the ceiling as though the room itself had learned to speak. Chronos knew the tone. It was the tone of an adult who expected the correct answer and cared little whether the listener understood the question. He raised his hand and watched a metal sphere divide into incompatible images. The clocks stopped agreeing. For a brief instant, he could make the room

disobey its own geometry. Yet he could not make himself stop remembering the white door. The command to return to assigned parameters was frightening not because he lacked the power to resist it in that moment, but because he feared what would happen to him if he stopped resisting even once.

10 — Consent Pending

The terminal displayed DO YOU CONSENT TO CONTINUITY? Rachel told Roy not to answer until they understood whether the machine interpreted a response as acceptance of another experiment. Roy stepped away. He was willing to examine evidence, not to surrender future decisions. Before consenting to anything, he wanted to know who had written the question and whose refusal had once been ignored. — END OF CHAPTER —

When Roy's archive unexpectedly updated, the five operative codes appeared beside a status of conflicting orders. The government had already lost the cooperation it had designed into its hunters, but a deeper system was recording that fracture independently. Then the screen asked whether Roy consented to continuity. He refused to answer a question whose terms no one had explained. Rachel agreed that even touching the wrong button might count as consent. Roy wanted to know who had composed the question before he agreed to anything.