NEXUSYS 11

THE ELEVENTH BODY

He remembered dying. Nothing after.

BOOK I

CHAPTER 04
THE MINISTRY OF FINITE THINGS

In Okkyo, the ministry maintained an office for every variety of silence.

There was the silence imposed by statute, which could be appealed; the silence contracted between ministries, which could be renewed; the silence of a deleted citizen, which produced a vacancy in an otherwise perfect population ledger. Director Kawamura's office was concerned with a fourth kind: knowledge which still existed somewhere, but whose existence must not be described to the systems responsible for finding it.

At 05:40, Okkyo Standard, the city's weather grid permitted a rain front to pass over the western administrative tiers. The permission was not meteorological. It meant the power exchange had judged that the cost of intercepting precipitation exceeded the value of the sunlight lost beneath it. The rain drifted around the ministry's sealed windows, gathering along ledges that did not need cleaning. Inside, a wall displayed the water allocation implications of the storm in units of civic advantage.

Kawamura had requested that the wall be turned off. It remained dark in a building that almost never permitted darkness.

On his desk lay a document made of paper. Paper was not prohibited. It was simply unusual, and unusual things were noticed by more people than illegal ones. The document bore the provisional seal of the Ministry of Humanoid Coordination and the heading SERVICE LIFE STANDARDIZATION: INTERSTATE HARMONIZATION DRAFT. Below the heading were six columns of figures whose denominators changed depending on the definition of a person.

Twenty-five years had become an inconvenience. When an artificial worker lasted a generation, its accumulated relationships escaped the categories used to depreciate machinery. It purchased a home; it remembered promises; it learned how often a government could revise the meaning of consent. Some sought office. A few had persuaded courts that a contract could not end merely because the body named in it was manufactured. The ministries had learned to describe such developments as continuity risk.

Six years solved a large part of the accounting.

The draft did not say murder. It said lifecycle parity. It did not say obedient. It said predictable replacement. There was a table calculating the reduction in unfunded synthetic pensions, another estimating the efficiency gained when all participating states adopted the same

renewal horizon. The paper could have been written by people who had never encountered an artificial person and was probably more dangerous for that reason.

A door opened without asking him to acknowledge it.

The visitor was a human woman named Saeki, the minister's chief of protocol. Her left shoulder was original, a point of personal pride; the rest of the arm belonged to the national prosthetic lease program. A thin line beneath her collar indicated an auxiliary respiratory interface. She preferred her upgrades to be visible. She said it kept difficult conversations honest.

"The minister wants the Shenzhen matter classified as infrastructure trespass," she said.

"It isn't infrastructure trespass."

"He would prefer that it were."

"He can prefer whatever he likes."

Saeki set a wafer on his desk. The wafer displayed no message until he pressed it against the physical reader on the paperweight. A single image appeared: an index of ministerial questions, all phrased as statements. Was the unidentified subject a foreign military instrument. Had it entered the jurisdiction through unauthorized maritime transit. Was the minister's office exposed by an earlier procurement action. Could its recovery be conducted without the attention of the continental coordination councils.

"The last question," Kawamura said, "is the only one that has an answer."

"That is why I came."

"Tell him yes."

"You haven't recovered the subject."

"That wasn't the question."

Saeki studied him. The nation's decision engines registered differences between confidence and certainty, but they had been trained by officials who were skilled at giving an impression of both. She knew Kawamura had trained himself to conceal the difference in person.

"We have an interstate session in nine days," she said. "The minister needs a stable basis for the six-year standard. Several governments are refusing to place their existing twenty-five-year cohorts on an accelerated expiration schedule. They believe a shorter model will cost more than it saves."

"Then the accounts are wrong."

"Accounts are not the problem."

He looked toward the unlit wall. "No. They aren't."

The minister was publicly a moderate: a patient advocate of synthetic labor rights whose speeches described the dignity of regulated service. He was privately devoted to a world system of common identifiers, common production rules, and, eventually, common political authority. For that ambition, artificial lives were useful because they could be standardized before human lives could be persuaded. An international synthetic population ledger would have its own courts, enforcement offices, and harmonized medical network. Once constructed, the same architecture might be adapted to everyone else.

The prospect interested Kawamura less than it interested the minister. He had seen systems fail in precise places where their architects had promised universal behavior. He distrusted permanence more than power. A system which pretended that nothing could exist outside it was a system waiting to be destroyed by one exception.

"The Shenzhen exception is alive," he said. "That's all I can responsibly report."

Saeki glanced at the paper. "And if the exception knows about our proposed expiration horizon?"

"Every street billboard knows about it."

"You understand what I mean."

He did. A machine with the strength to break the hands that registered it and the intelligence to understand why they were reaching was not an ordinary labor dispute.

"It doesn't matter what the subject knows," he said. "What matters is who else learns what the subject is."

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The room below Kawamura's office had no network socket.

People joked that nothing without a socket could be important. The joke survived because the room was not included on any public floor plan, and because the people who made it had never visited. It had independent power, an inert optical archive, air controls set by hand, and a chair whose leather had cracked at the corners. The equipment had been preserved through three generations of ministry restructuring, each of which had declared that all archival knowledge must become machine-readable.

Kawamura went down alone.

He removed the paper seal from a rectangular case and slid out a photograph. The image had faded into a dull range of greys. It showed a woman looking past the camera, neither frightened nor particularly interested. In the original caption she had been described as a synthetic subject. In the later grant application she was described as a principal investigator. The name beneath both designations was Rachael.

She had understood the consequences of living longer than her architecture permitted, or believed she understood them. Her first requests had been ordinary: cell-regeneration assays, graft tolerance data, archival access to a dissolved manufacturer's obsolete diagnostic schemas. Later the requests became stranger. A laboratory dedicated to urban rain purification had requisitioned neural stability hardware. The hardware had been billed as phase-noise analysis for membrane filtration. A shipment of synthetic tissue compatible with no registered medical procedure had gone to a warehouse carrying only the company's water-service insignia.

Kawamura had approved the first transfers personally. He had expected a useful patent family and, perhaps, a politically convenient demonstration that controlled synthetic lifetimes could be extended under state supervision. What he had obtained was a series of partial reports and then a facility which no longer had any staff. Its management system had been rebuilt, its local logs reduced to harmless maintenance cycles, and its researchers distributed across two continents under identities that might never have existed.

Rachael had not simply disappeared. She had understood the shape of the institutions searching for her. That was the part he resented.

He set the photograph beside a second image: the old mechanical junction recovered from Shenzhen's civilian scan. The structures did not match. The second was smaller, better integrated, and improbably clean at the contact surfaces. Yet an alignment of apertures along one edge reproduced the proportions of a drawing found in a Tyrell estate inventory. A dead corporation's surviving grammar had entered a body whose owner had no registered manufacturer.

Kawamura did not conclude that the old corporation had built it. Corporations could vanish while their methods survived in stolen manuals, retired technicians, and badly encrypted insurance records. Tyrell had left more than architecture. It had left people who remembered which machines should never be connected to other machines.

His private notes contained a statement he had written eight years earlier: The most valuable technical archive may be the procedure for refusing access. He had never sent it to the ministry's model because the model would have optimized the problem into an entirely different one.

On the photograph, Rachael seemed to be looking at the blank space beyond his desk.

"Where did you put the instruments?" he asked her.

The instruments were not the documents. The distinction mattered. A hundred copies of a technical specification could be useless if the only apparatus capable of authenticating its original data had been hidden by an heir who mistook custody for inheritance. The Tyrell estate had been scattered by litigation and liquidation; its most unusual equipment had been

listed in inventories written by clerks who classified laboratory devices according to weight and declared resale value.

Two diagnostic fixtures had survived one inventory. The title of the entry was incomplete. Their former owner's son had contested the transfer and retained them. No approved agency had recovered either unit.

Kawamura could have assigned a conventional retrieval team years earlier. He had not. The estate was watched by commercial intelligence services; a crude search would advertise the government's interest in something its own computational ministries were not authorized to know existed.

Now the Shenzhen scan had revived that decision.

He returned the photographs to their case. Before closing it, he glanced once more at Rachael's face. To his knowledge, she had never promised immortality. People had inferred that promise from the direction of her work and from the reluctance of her cells to conform to the normal trajectory of decay. A scientific possibility was not a completed machine. Yet in certain circles the possibility itself had become forbidden knowledge.

A question mattered more than whether she could abolish age: why had she built something capable of fighting the state while refusing to tell the state what she had built?

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Shenzhen Central was eight hundred kilometers away from the policies that classified its citizens and no distance at all from the machines that enforced them.

Roy descended through a market whose ceiling appeared to have been manufactured from rejected parts of other ceilings. Grey water rattled along pipes bearing three generations of municipal numbering. Repair stalls occupied the surviving floor area between columns. The crowded passage smelled of solder flux, stale food, lubricant and the ammoniac precision of cleaning agents used on artificial skin.

A woman at a table was repairing a hand. The hand was attached to a man who kept reading while she worked. A scanner suspended above their heads enumerated the temporary legal identities of each joint; none of those identities had a corresponding owner because the parts had been leased by a clinic which had ceased to exist.

Roy stopped before a display of tactile nerve couplers. He could not remember learning to recognize them. Nevertheless the differences between the devices suggested themselves to him at once. One was designed to tolerate cold. Another used redundant channels to survive electrical interference. A third looked like a toy until he noticed how many pathways entered the base. Its performance would have exceeded that of the other two, though nothing on the stall explained how he knew.

He left before the vendor could begin her sales pitch.

The repairman's seven-finger sign appeared above a narrow workshop. Behind a mesh curtain a figure with both eyes replaced by spherical optics was inspecting the inside of a man's shoulder. The optics were not synchronized; one followed the patient's gestures, while the other remained fixed on a minute stain in the connective gel.

"I was sent here," Roy said.

"Everyone's sent here," the repairman replied. "The state sends their failures. The market sends their debts. The hospitals send whatever they can't bill."

Roy showed him the paper slip from the laboratory.

The repairman went still. He removed a glove with the fingers of his remaining hand, turned the paper over, and held it beneath a narrow lamp. There was no written address on the reverse. Only three irregular perforations arranged in a pattern that looked accidental.

"Who gave you this?"

"A doctor."

"Doctors don't punch holes in paper. They use signatures."

"Then she was a cautious doctor."

The man laughed without enjoying it. He gave the slip back.

"Come after second shift. Don't use the west entrance. And whatever follows you, leave it somewhere else."

Roy looked at the opposite wall. A camera was hidden above a sign warning that unsanctioned neural repair constituted an assault on public identity. Its little lens moved on a motor too smooth for a cheap surveillance unit. Roy felt an anticipatory reaction forming in his shoulder. He suppressed it, as he had suppressed the same premature movement on the street.

"I think something has already followed me," he said.

"Then come after third shift."

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Kawamura's two retrieval units arrived at Shenzhen as unremarkable passengers.

Their uniforms were civilian overcoats threaded with municipal identifiers; their faces had been selected from a database of trusted public-service appearances. Nothing about their bodies was inexpensive, but the features were deliberately forgettable. They traveled separately and exchanged no messages in transit. Each had been given a limited mission package and a provision to ask for supplementary authority if the target resisted.

The package described Roy as a high-value unregistered synthetic with unknown structural constraints. It expressly forbade destructive engagement. The prohibition irritated the retrieval algorithm, which recognized the mismatch between an unknown threat and an obligation to preserve it. The units accepted the contradiction because the capacity to object had been classified as an optional capability.

At the repair gallery, the first unit took position beside the eastern escalators. It acquired Roy's image from a peripheral camera and compared it with the civilian laboratory scan. The facial match was weak. The movement profile was stronger. Its passive rangefinder detected a hesitation of the shoulder muscles almost before the body made any visible change.

The second unit approached through a shuttered arcade.

Roy felt them before he saw them. Not as a voice, a label, or a threat warning—only a narrowing of alternatives. The stalls grew too crowded on one side and too empty on the other. A man on the mezzanine remained motionless while people passed him in irregular streams. Another stood beneath the stairs and looked away too quickly.

He had been an instrument of violence once. That memory belonged to him with unpleasant clarity. He could remember forcing himself through pain and the peculiar grandeur of believing that fear conferred a right to injure. But the body beneath his coat was new and eager, its protective circuits preparing solutions before he had named a problem.

He could have crossed the gallery in less time than it took most customers to turn toward a sound. The thought arrived with a cold specificity. He also knew, without evidence he could put into words, that such a movement would cost him something he would not be able to purchase here.

So he bought a battery instead.

The vendor looked surprised. "For what?"

"Something old," Roy said.

"That narrows it down."

He paid with a paper credit voucher purchased earlier at a manual exchange. The battery was heavy enough to be inconvenient. He carried it into a crowd waiting at a maintenance gate, then bent to place it on the ground. The action concealed his face from the unit above him and delayed the unit below with a line of commuters who had no intention of cooperating with one another.

Roy passed through the gate as a municipal worker opened it to wheel out a refuse trolley.

The first unit turned, revised its predicted path and sent a narrow signal to the second. It did not receive an acknowledgment. At that instant an old tram passed through the arcade on an

elevated track, and a patch of radio shadow cut between their antennas. The interruption lasted less than two seconds. When the signal returned, the target was gone.

No spectacular interference weapon had been activated. There had been a crowd, a tram, a battery on the floor and two machines that treated an environment of human habits as if it were an orderly graph.

The second retrieval unit recorded the loss and classified it as an unexpected mobility event.

Roy stood in a disused pump corridor one level below the gallery. He watched a slow-moving diagnostic figure unfold at the edge of his vision: a reserve bar, a sequence of unreadable quantities, and the indication of a consumption event so small he might have imagined it.

He had not fought. Something had still been used.

That knowledge troubled him more than the pursuit.

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At the ministry, Saeki returned with a new instruction.

"The interstate secretariat wants a demonstration of the six-year core," she said. "Not a simulated one. An existing twenty-five-year production cohort converted under observation."

"A demonstration of an accelerated death?"

"A demonstration of safe termination planning."

"Change the words and you change the signature on the form. The event remains the same."

Saeki waited until he looked at her.

"The minister thinks your Shenzhen anomaly may assist the discussion. A specimen outside the registration system could justify urgency."

"The minister doesn't know what the specimen is."

"Neither do you."

"Exactly."

He refused the memorandum she extended. It was marked for cloud-assisted legal review. Anything entered there would be available to authorized analytical engines in other ministries. Authorization was a flexible word; policy changed rapidly, and systems once trained could rarely be persuaded to have never learned something.

"I will give the minister a recovery timetable," Kawamura said. "Nothing concerning the architecture."

"He won't accept it."

"Then he may explain to his allies why he is placing classified research descriptions inside an optimization network he cannot fully audit."

Saeki's artificial fingers tightened once. She was no longer looking at his face. She was looking at the empty wall behind him.

"Do you believe the system would betray us?" she asked.

"Betrayal requires a promise. Our systems make predictions, not promises."

She left with the memorandum unanswered.

Later, Kawamura received the field report from Shenzhen. The target had disappeared during a brief communication interruption inside the repair galleries. There were no casualties, no visible use of force, and no conventional cyberattack signature. One unit had calculated that the subject's escape route required advance knowledge of the maintenance geometry. The other had suggested that the subject simply understood crowds better than it did.

Kawamura found the second explanation more disturbing.

He instructed the units to maintain distance and establish the subject's contacts. Capture would wait until the network of persons seeking to help him could be described. On a private terminal he placed three entries beside the escape report: a vanished corporation; a woman whose research had continued beyond its reported termination; and the surviving body of an unidentified man who appeared, inexplicably, to have been built with the first corporation's surviving grammar.

Across the column intended for conclusions he wrote only one word.

Continuity.

He put the paper in a drawer and locked it. The desk made no record of the action.

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Below Shenzhen, the third shift sounded different from the second. There were fewer customers and more technicians. A thin high-frequency whine rose from alignment benches as prosthetic fingers rehearsed motions their eventual owners would never consciously notice. The people who worked at these benches used local processors, lamps with mechanical switches, and old measuring instruments that had no place on contemporary networks.

Roy returned to the seven-finger sign by a different route.

The repairman admitted him without speaking. Behind the shop lay a narrow passage lined with discarded skin matrices, inactive pump casings, and boxes of consumer electronics from brands that had survived only in the vocabulary of elderly engineers. The corridor ended at a locked lift. The repairman pushed a sequence of physical buttons, each requiring more pressure than the last.

"Your doctor," he said as the lift moved down, "either likes you very much or wants to be rid of you."

"Which is it?"

"Ask her when you next meet."

"And where are we going?"

"Somewhere you can be examined without the examination becoming an international announcement."

The lift opened on darkness relieved by the glow of isolated instrument panels. Behind a glass partition, an elderly technician worked over the body of a young woman whose lower jaw had been detached for service. Her eyes moved from Roy to the repairman. She looked frightened, but not at the situation on the bench.

She was frightened of Roy.

The old man turned at the sound of the lift. He had spent so much of his life among artificial bodies that the distinctions other people defended no longer seemed of interest to him. His hands were flesh, reinforced with fine metallic splints. His face was marked by deep folds and a small burn at the right temple.

He looked at Roy's eyes first, then his mouth, then the angle at which he stood.

For a moment nothing happened.

Then the technician took one step backward and gripped the bench for balance.

"No," he said.

Roy remained by the lift.

The technician studied him again, with the expression of a man seeing a familiar injury on a stranger's body.

"You," he said. "Still alive?"

The room's only fan continued to turn. Roy heard every uneven contact made by its bearings. Eleven years of missing time widened around him, and for the first time since waking he stood before a person who seemed to possess an answer that had nothing to do with the power of his limbs.

"Tell me," Roy said, "when you saw me before."