NEXUSYS 11

THE ELEVENTH BODY

BOOK I / DRAFT 01

CHAPTER 06

THE FREIGHT OF THE UNREGISTERED

The freight district had been built to make departures invisible.

From the pedestrian levee Roy watched the transport machines pass beneath him, their roofs painted with inspection colors that meant nothing outside Shenzhen Central. Eighty meters below, automated carriers crossed three customs jurisdictions without touching ground. Above them, rain struck the transparent roofs of the state warehouses and ran in gutters toward filtration vessels the size of municipal swimming pools. A public display reported the rainfall as inventory. Nothing that fell from the sky was allowed to remain uncounted.

Roy had acquired a destination but not the means to reach it. Pudu-Alpha was printed on a square of waterproof paper. The word occupied no recognized field in the transport interface before him. He tried the administrative name Vale had supplied, Hyper Cyberjaya, and the machine offered six approved routes, each requiring a registered identity, a destination sponsor, and permission for nonstandard biological architecture. He looked at the last requirement for a long time. It was phrased as though a body were unusual luggage.

An advertisement intervened. THE SIX-YEAR CIVIC HARMONY STANDARD: A BETTER FUTURE THROUGH PREDICTABLE SERVICE. Beneath the slogan appeared a smiling synthetic child who could not have belonged to any existing production class. Roy waited for the advertisement to complete. It did not. The terminals sold their silence to the state, and the state had no obligation to give it back.

He turned toward the unmarked stair.

The market beneath the freight levee did not resemble the markets visible on official municipal maps. The booths were recesses cut into structural support walls. Their operators accepted the city's ration currency, water credits, component rights, and an unofficial measure of computational heat. A woman sold expired human teeth beside a table of counterfeit optical assemblies. Two young men argued over the provenance of a neural socket that looked like a corroded coin. On a wall, in five languages, someone had painted a warning: DO NOT RENT A BODY YOU CANNOT AFFORD TO DIE IN.

Roy read the warning twice. The sentence had an elegance the state language lacked. It acknowledged that death could be priced.

A boy in a jacket stitched with reflective copper traced the seam of Roy's coat with his eyes. He had an artificial left arm whose fingers were transparent to the second joint.

"You need a crossing," the boy said.

"I need a route south."

"Everything goes south. Fuel, organs, guilt. Which one are you?"

"A passenger."

"Then you've picked the expensive category."

The boy called himself Kite, an alias that matched neither his face nor the seriousness with which he inspected Roy's shoes. His pricing device was a piece of slate connected to nothing. He tapped it twice, pretending to calculate.

"Three hundred water credits for an unregistered freight passage. More if your bones are an interesting shape."

"You haven't scanned me."

"The ones with interesting bones always notice that."

Roy studied the nearest passage cameras. Three were municipal units; one had been replaced with a vendor's independent lens, and another was a decorative shell. The difference registered before he consciously arranged the evidence. He wondered how many other facts in this new life arrived without the courtesy of thought.

"Who operates the passage?"

"No one you can sue. There's a reefer train at the west membrane. It carries rain concentrate and protein substrate to the southern exchange. The manifest has two empty maintenance shells. One isn't empty."

"Why tell me?"

Kite shrugged. "Because the machines are looking for someone, and the closer they look the less room there is for anyone else. People like you make the day expensive. I prefer to charge first."

Roy gave him a ration wafer he had obtained from the automated kiosk on the upper platform. Kite made a face.

"That's three percent of a crossing."

"It's what I have."

"Then find something someone can't print."

Roy considered his coat, his shoes, the cheap metal clasp at his throat. He had nothing else of value except the body he did not understand. He was not willing to sell a component of it simply because his destination had a price.

"I can work," he said.

Kite laughed once, sharply. "You have a work license?"

"No."

"Then you're a philosophy problem, not labor."

A bell sounded through the market, two low notes followed by a third that did not resolve. Around them shutters moved. Merchants turned off light sources and removed their registration badges. The boy stopped smiling.

"They've opened a sweep," he said. "Don't run. Running teaches the cameras what you fear."

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In Okkyo, Kawamura watched a schematic of Shenzhen that had been printed on transparent paper. He kept the printouts in a shallow drawer beneath a desk that had no embedded audio system. The ministry offered him a glass-walled office with a predictive assistant; he had asked for old gypsum walls instead. At the time the choice had been interpreted as eccentricity. Now it allowed him to have thoughts without producing records of them.

Saeki stood across from him with an authorization request, her expression controlled and her hands very still.

"The military contractor wants access to the municipal mesh," she said. "They have prepared a containment sector covering the freight district and both southern interchange stations."

"How much disruption?"

"Their estimate is eight minutes. The civil authority says two hours."

"Both figures are dishonest."

"Both are probably correct for different people."

Kawamura looked through the floor plan, toward the faint outline of a former canal. The unregistered used infrastructure that the planning models treated as dead. Everything alive in those zones survived in the spaces left by administrative definitions.

"The contractor's target classifier?"

"Still quarantined."

"Keep it that way. The last scan contains architecture beyond the current military standard. If the ministry's general model learns the pattern, we lose the only advantage we have."

Saeki did not ask whom he meant by we. He had learned to appreciate that restraint.

A second document lay on his desk, folded face down. It concerned the transitional grants issued before the dissolution of the Tyrell company, a list of instruments whose value had been assessed by accountants. Two laboratory fixtures, described as obsolete access equipment, had gone to the

founder's surviving son. The ledger contained a surname and an estate seal, but no usable location. Kawamura had worked on the grant account years before that transfer. He knew that a woman who later became a public water-company executive had once requested access to those instruments.

He did not know whether she had received it.

"Do we have confirmation that the fugitive is heading for Kuala Lumpur?" Saeki asked.

"We have a repairer's ledger and a word written on paper. Neither is confirmation."

"Then why close the south?"

"We won't," Kawamura said. "We will make one crossing unusually easy."

Saeki looked up. "You intend to let him leave."

"I intend to learn where he chooses to go when he believes he is unobserved. An intelligent subject who can withstand a military recovery team is less useful in custody than moving toward his own questions."

"The minister may not accept that."

"The minister will receive a report saying we preserved civilian infrastructure while maintaining a covert observation channel. Both statements will be true."

He signed a limited field order. No direct connection to the central classifier. No lethal engagement. Observe the old cargo concessions; do not interrupt their schedules. Saeki read it and left without comment.

Kawamura turned to the rain beyond his window. The difference between a state and a machine, he thought, was becoming difficult to defend. Machines no longer needed instructions to invent desirable futures. States no longer needed people to suffer the consequences of those futures personally.

He opened the older Tyrell grant once more. One of its marginal notes used a phrase that had been omitted from the digitized record: CONTINUITY IS NOT MAINTENANCE.

He wanted to know who had written it. He was not ready to ask the network.

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At the market gate, three municipal observation spheres floated beneath a transport arch. Their metal skins carried rain in thin threads that made them look stationary, although they shifted continuously to correct for air pressure. Behind them waited two enforcement humanoids wearing the pale service shells of civil inspectors. The shells were deliberately human enough to invite compliance and deliberately not human enough to invite sympathy.

Kite walked ahead without looking back. Roy followed at the distance of strangers who happened to agree about direction.

A voice addressed the crowd. "Temporary verification of service identities. Please preserve a distance of one meter from all inspection surfaces. Unregistered entities will be assisted into classification."

Roy stopped near a seller of transparent umbrellas. He had heard threats delivered with more warmth.

One of the spheres turned. A pale scanning line moved along the stalls, making a red square around every face. Roy saw the beam cross a woman's forehead and come away green. At the next stall it found a man without eyes and hesitated before accepting the sockets that carried his implants. The governing software was capable of adapting. It could not be tricked by merely looking unusual.

His own skull seemed to anticipate its direction. Without deciding to move, he knew which three narrow regions of the market would remain outside the overlapping scans for another five seconds. That knowledge arrived with a small tightening beneath his sternum. Something had entered a higher operating state.

He did not allow his legs to follow.

Instead he picked up a folding umbrella, laid the last of his change on the counter, and opened it. The material was ordinary plastic impregnated with conductive threads, sold to people who feared the dust that fell after electrical storms. It would not hide him from a determined scanner. It would give the sphere a new surface to interpret.

"You're too tall," the seller murmured without looking at him.

"For the umbrella?"

"For this life."

The first inspector approached Kite. "State your licensed trade."

"Relief distribution," Kite said.

"Your registry expired twelve days ago."

"There was a hospital suspension."

"Hospital suspension does not extend trader authorization."

The inspector moved its gaze toward Roy. A second machine started across the market, broad shoulders parting bodies with gentle, administrative force. Roy measured the open path behind the umbrella stall, the geometry of the inspection unit's arms, and the strength of the steel support beneath the counter. He could break the unit before its companion completed one turn of the head. His body offered the option as if it were a service already paid for.

He remembered Vale's description of the silver fluid. He remembered that there was no natural mechanism for putting back what the body spent. He let the option pass.

"This is my maintenance carrier," Kite told the inspector, touching Roy's sleeve with the solemnity of an official claim. "His classification is restricted by the repair board."

The machine extended a narrow port. "Provisional verification."

"The board is offline."

"Offline claims do not suspend verification."

Roy could feel the instant when a decision became irreversible. It was not a dramatic sensation. He simply knew that if he waited for the port to touch him the inspection system would register a structure unlike its known population, and the market would become a closed room.

A freight warning sounded above them. The same three notes Kite had heard earlier, but now synchronized with the shifting walls of the transfer platform. Roy looked toward the ceiling. The movement cycle of the platform had been established decades before the inspector's operating system existed. It was governed by an isolated controller, too old to admit network instructions.

He stepped beneath the platform as it opened.

"Stop," the inspector said.

Roy did not stop. Nor did he accelerate. He walked exactly at the pace the closing shadow allowed, reaching the line between two service barriers as the first section descended. The inspector lunged after him and encountered the moving safety wall. Its collision prevention software withdrew the arm. For four seconds it could not pass.

Kite followed through the next gap, breathing hard.

"That's not a human way to know a door," he said.

"It was opening."

"It wasn't opening yet."

Behind them an observation sphere struck the roof and shifted course. The enforcement unit transmitted a local alert. Nothing exploded. No dramatic failure shook the mesh. The transport platform simply continued its scheduled motion, indifferent to the sudden attention of the state.

Roy felt the tension beneath his sternum withdraw. The temporary reserve had dropped; he could sense that much. He waited for the absence to fill again, like warmth returning to a cold hand. He could not sense the amount of silver fluid that had been consumed, only its irreversibility.

"You need passage," Kite said. "And I owe you a fraction of one."

"You don't owe me anything."

"I would rather owe you than owe that machine."

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The reefer train waited beneath a refrigeration tower whose exhaust erased the lower half of the sky. Its sealed cargo containers carried concentrated drinking water, cultured protein, and maintenance components that would move across more jurisdictions than their original manufacturers had intended.

The exchange was technically legal. Every individual transaction was supported by an exemption. The illegality existed in the sum.

Kite brought Roy to a woman named Seln, who wore a breathing hood with the brand name cut off and the eyes of someone who had outlived every contract she signed. She inspected his coat, his hands, and the dry folds of Vale's square of paper.

"Pudu," she said. "Everyone with a broken authorization comes to me eventually."

"I have no authorization," Roy told her.

"That's a kind of break. The state names it differently depending on whether it is collecting tax or collecting bodies."

"Can you move me?"

"Not to Pudu. To the southern exchange. Past that there are local carriers and a treaty seam that both sides claim to patrol. The seam is where your money will become a new kind of money."

Kite tried to speak, but Seln silenced him with one raised finger.

"I watched the market cameras," she said. "You crossed a shutter movement nobody should have been able to use. It looked like you knew the mechanism before the signal came. Is that what you do?"

"I don't know what I do."

"Good answer. Every dangerous person who insists on understanding himself tends to become a professional danger to others."

She led them to a service chamber beside the train. A large insulated drum had been stripped of its refrigeration fittings. Inside were maintenance rails, handholds, a low-energy thermal membrane, and a manual air loop. It was not a comfortable way to travel. It was designed to remain plausible when opened by inspectors.

"Four hours to the exchange if the line stays clear," Seln said. "If they search, be a broken part. Nothing moves until I open the shell."

Roy examined the hinges. They were old enough to fail under shock, strong enough to hold under ordinary movement. His fingers found no internal release.

"You could leave me inside," he said.

"Yes."

"How do I know you won't?"

"You don't. That is what unregistered passage costs."

He entered the container.

Seln paused at the door. "A man in the freight office asked whether I had accepted a blond passenger. He knew I use this line. I told him I don't care what color a shipment's hair is. He seemed satisfied. That worries me."

"Why?"

"Because people who truly want to stop a thing ask better questions."

The door shut, and darkness occupied the container with mechanical efficiency.

Roy sat against a rib of cold steel. The train vibrated as the loading algorithms brought its segments into alignment. He listened to the layers of the district: pumping stations, auction speakers, the slow hum of industrial cooling, the small but persistent sounds of people who had not been indexed correctly. The city was complex enough to hide him because it could not admit its own complexity.

For a long time he thought about the black space between his death and waking. His old self might have demanded those missing years back as proof of identity. The version sitting inside a cargo shell found the question unhelpful. What had occurred between zero-seven and eleven had produced a body capable of leaving an inspector behind without raising his hand. It had not given him a manufacturer, a remaining lifespan, or a replacement source for the consumable inside him. Memory would solve none of those problems by itself.

He pressed his palm against the wall and waited for the train to move.

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The first interruption came after forty-one minutes.

The train slowed and held. At its rear, a maintenance interface clicked open. Through the container walls Roy heard a civilian scanner perform an inventory verification. The voices were synthetic and not particularly concerned. Two customs units discussed temperature fluctuations in the protein cargo. Another requested access to historical shipment metadata and found the previous registry had been migrated to a newer format.

The train's private controller returned a refusal. The protocol was not recognized.

Roy smiled without knowing why. There was comfort in the thought that an old system might survive by being too obsolete to cooperate.

The customs units withdrew. The train started again.

Then something else came alongside it.

The sound was not transmitted through ordinary mechanical contact. It began as a repeated pressure differential, four fast pulses, one slow, the acoustic signature of a small aircraft matching the train's speed inside a tunnel. Roy followed it as it passed from one wall of the container to the other. The craft carried its own stabilization system and was moving where scheduled freight security had no reason to move.

A bright line appeared around the upper hinge.

The machine outside was searching for the unauthorized volume the manifest declared empty.

Roy measured the distance to the hinge. There was no exit wide enough for him. The air loop slowed. Seln had either remotely disabled it or had lost control of it. Both explanations were plausible.

His breathing remained calm but the enclosing volume acquired a new kind of pressure. He knew he could break the upper door and force his way into the moving train. He also knew what that act would spend.

A voice came through an old service speaker, too rough to be digital.

"Don't touch the door," Seln said. "They've put a watcher on us. The military sells those to customs when they need to pretend a military operation is civilian."

"Can you remove it?"

"Removing it tells them where you are."

"It already knows."

"No. It knows something is inconsistent. That's not the same as knowing what."

He heard switches moving in Seln's compartment. She continued speaking, partly to him and partly to herself, invoking older systems by names he did not recognize: a ballast controller, an ice-load feedback channel, a storm shield that had been disconnected years earlier.

"I can make the train interesting somewhere else," she said. "When I tell you, lower your body temperature if you can. The watcher is counting heat."

"I don't know whether I can."

"Then don't die trying."

A mechanical slam came from the front of the train. Emergency doors along two adjacent containers opened. Refrigerated air rushed into the tunnel and condensed into a cloud. The watcher changed position. Its sensors followed the temperature differential as trained systems naturally followed information presented with confidence.

Roy felt the machine turn away.

He held his breath, though he doubted it mattered. The artificial circulatory system slowed some internal rhythm in answer, as if the decision to remain still had become part of a larger calculation. No surge of strength accompanied it. The choice was economical, almost graceful.

The aircraft retreated toward the emergency vent, its periodic pressure pattern dissolving in the train's own turbulence.

Seln resumed the air loop.

"Are you still in one piece?" she asked.

"Yes."

"Try to stay that way. I'm charging you for every piece I have to identify."

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At the southern exchange Roy emerged into a building whose ceiling was made of layers of administrations. There were customs booths constructed for authorities that no longer existed, new biometric kiosks erected in front of them, devotional notices beside industrial risk charts, and hand-painted directions to markets that operated at night because the lawful markets sold only to people whose identities were complete.

Seln had arranged a contact and nothing more. Kite, who had ridden in a separate service bay, handed Roy another waterproof card. It bore the sign of a blue crescent broken by a short horizontal line and a number written in a script Roy recognized without knowing when he had learned it.

"That's your southern broker," Kite said. "She moves people across the treaty seam into routes the central scheduler can't price. Don't ask for Pudu in the official hall. They will sell you a first-class ticket to the wrong place."

"What is the broker's name?"

"Nadira. Names are less important than who will answer them."

Roy thanked the boy. Kite seemed offended by the formality.

"You saved me money," Kite said. "An inspection takes my hand off the books for months. Don't turn it into morality."

He disappeared into a repair crowd before Roy could reply.

The hall smelled of warm dust, ozone, wet clothing, and the chemical sweetness of desalinated water. People carried printed permits that could not be remotely revoked. Others used secure identity wafers whose manufacturers had died generations ago. Roy saw a pair of lovers exchange their credentials before separating into different queues. A child in an obsolete religious-school uniform walked past a television advertisement for virtual citizenship, a paradise where no resident needed a body expensive enough to betray them.

On the opposite wall, a huge silent broadcast showed the smiling face of the minister responsible for synthetic labor. Beneath it ran a line of state text: LIFE-CYCLE HARMONIZATION ENSURES EQUAL SERVICE.

Roy looked away. He had lived one life with an expiration date imposed by someone else. He had no desire to discover that the second life had been given the same terms.

A customs automaton approached the broker's queue. Its faceplate was empty except for a horizontal strip where eyes would have been. The machine asked for all unregistered persons to move toward an assistance station. No one moved. An elderly woman continued peeling an orange. A cargo porter pretended not to hear. There were too many bodies for the machine to isolate one without interrupting the exchange schedule.

Roy understood Seln's earlier warning. Someone had allowed this route to remain open. He could not know whether that was mercy, incompetence, or bait.

A woman standing beside a water dispenser watched him from beneath a dark head covering. Her face was neither concealed nor offered to scrutiny. She held a battered terminal whose display was turned inward, toward her palm.

"Roy," she said, as though she had used the name before.

He stopped.

"You know me?"

"I know the question that has brought you here. That is not the same thing."

"Then ask it."

"How does an obsolete part survive eleven years of upgrades?"

His muscles tightened for less than a second. She saw the movement and made no attempt to retreat.

"Who told you?" he asked.

"A repair doctor who still thinks information is a thing people can own. He paid for your passage with a favor he had been saving since before the district changed names."

Vale. Roy had not been told the doctor would do that. A debt had moved ahead of him through a network the state could not inventory.

"I need the supplier," Roy said. "Suriya Components."

"Then we can talk. But we do not talk here."

She turned the terminal toward him for only a moment. There was no photograph on it, no recognizable address. The screen held a shipping contract, an obsolete customs exemption, and a destination in the expanded Kuala Lumpur industrial authority. One word had been appended by hand.

PUDU-ALPHA.

From the high balcony a government observation sphere passed over the crowd. The woman did not look up. Roy did. The machine's optical array adjusted toward the queue, paused, and then continued on its path.

"You're being followed," Nadira said.

"I know."

"Not by the people you can see."

She walked toward a stair marked for retired mechanical cargo. Roy hesitated, considering the warning. Behind him the great terminal continued to issue permits and denials. Above it, rain struck a transparent roof in patterns too complex for the state inventory to capture entirely.

He followed Nadira down the stair.

Whatever had been done to his body, whoever had kept its missing versions alive, the path ahead now depended on an antiquated component and a woman who appeared to know more about his

pursuit than he did. He was no closer to an expiration date. He was farther from the only city that had given him one usable fact.

At the bottom of the stair, in a room that had once stored municipal water meters, Nadira stopped before a locked door and touched the blue crescent mark.

"One thing," she said. "In Pudu, do not assume the oldest hardware is the least protected."

The door opened without displaying a request for identity.

Roy entered. Behind him, the stair went dark.