NEXUSYS 11

THE ELEVENTH BODY

BOOK III — THE SIX-YEAR STATE

CHAPTER 04

THE REGISTER OF THOSE WHO REFUSED

The flotilla possessed no perimeter. That was what made it difficult to enter.

Roy watched two launches pass within thirty meters of the porcelain boat and refuse to acknowledge it. Their lanterns described elliptical courses between floating gardens, never illuminating an entire hull. A child stood beneath a tarpaulin on one deck, holding a basin to collect condensation from a cooling membrane. Above him a municipal aerostat traversed the cloud ceiling, white search geometry revolving over the water. The child never looked up. No one in the flotilla appeared to be hiding. They were refusing the obligation to present themselves.

The pilot cut his engine. An unseen winch drew them sideways into the shadow of a barge stacked with tanks. Roy felt the vibration through his heel before the cable tightened. There was no encrypted handshake, no address negotiation, nothing that his peripheral sensor could identify as admission. A woman in a gray scarf took the envelope from Nadira, weighed it in her palm, and returned it unopened.

“Witness for whom?” she asked.

“For a disputed substitution,” Nadira replied.

“That's the form. I asked for whom.”

Roy stepped past the others. “For me.”

“Name?”

“Roy Batty.”

The woman held his gaze. “Is that the name you were issued or the one you choose to answer to?”

“It is the only name I remember.”

“Then it will do until you change your mind.” She turned and walked along the barge, expecting them to follow.

The passage was narrower than Roy had calculated from outside. Cylindrical reservoirs masked modular living quarters. Microalgal sheets hung beside strips of photovoltaic polymer whose output was sold during daylight to three incompatible grid authorities. The flotilla was less a refugee camp than an economy of interrupted ownership. Every object seemed to have survived the failure of a contract: household compressors stripped from rental towers, hospital

pumps repaired without vendor licenses, ships that changed registries more often than their captains changed clothing.

The woman introduced herself as Farah Nordin, keeper of the negative register. Nadira knew the title and did not smile at it. Irena looked as though she was trying to reconcile a category error.

“What is a negative register?” Irena asked.

“A record of things a person did not consent to,” Farah said. “Easier to maintain than a record of what governments insist they did.”

She stopped before a steel door labeled WATER TESTING: BIOLOGICAL HAZARD. Inside were shelves of paper books, punched-metal strips, reels of coated wire, and a mechanical reader with a flywheel large enough to power a small elevator. There were no cameras. A brass numeral changed when Farah turned a hand crank. Somewhere below them, a second mechanism answered with two knocks.

“Redundant witnesses,” Farah explained. “A statement is stored by people who can disagree. That is how you know it has not become an instruction.”

Roy considered the distinction. The government had registered him as an exception without asking him to describe himself. Here the process seemed to require the opposite: what he was willing to say, and what another person was willing to stand beside.

Farah placed Sef's envelope on the table and asked Nadira to leave her fingerprints in a shallow dish of graphite. She offered a second dish to Roy. He did not touch it.

“You may refuse,” Farah said.

“I will until I know what it commits me to.”

“Good. We have at least one witness who understands a contract.”

The statement did not comfort him. Too many people now treated his refusal as evidence of something they had expected him to become.

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In Okkyo, Director Kawamura had a room in which no machine was permitted to remember.

It was a cabinet of dead technologies: magnetic tape transports, hand-cut optical film, a desk-sized spectrometer powered through an analog regulator. Even the

lighting was controlled by a mechanical switch. The ministry's central intelligence could determine whether the room was occupied by measuring current consumed in the building, but it could not hear its contents without violating an old diplomatic inspection treaty. Kawamura had spent five years ensuring the treaty survived every reform bill.

Across from him sat Deputy Minister Ren, an appointee of the Humanoid Administration Minister. Ren was human, unaugmented as far as registered medicine could tell, and young enough to regard six years as a generous duration only because it was not his own.

“The committee wants the lifecycle draft by noon,” Ren said. “They have accepted the harmonization language.”

“Accepted it?”

“Twenty-five-year systems will be deprecated by replacement incentives. Six years becomes the recommended maximum before recertification. Then we establish hardware compliance.”

“Recertification is not the same as renewal.”

“It will be presented as renewal.”

Kawamura studied the paper summary between them. The number six had been selected by an intergovernmental negotiating committee because it could fit production budgets, counterinsurgency modeling, and standardized personnel rotations. It was not derived from any shared biological threshold. A line in the draft described expiry as a public-safety event. Another called it a maintenance schedule. Neither used the word death.

“You're making a legal duration appear to be a natural limit,” he said.

Ren's expression remained neutral. “All legal durations eventually look natural.”

Kawamura did not argue. He was one of the people responsible for making that appearance durable. But he knew about bodies that had outlived every schedule used to describe them, and about a researcher whose missing source records were valuable precisely because they could disprove the arithmetic.

“Tyrell material?” Ren asked, reading his silence.

“Unverified.”

“The minister wants assurance it cannot be parsed by the planning intelligence.”

“Then stop asking the planning intelligence to predict its existence.”

Ren tapped the paper once. “They already have anomalies.”

“Anomalies are what a model calls the things it was built not to see.”

For the first time Ren looked irritated. “You were given the retrieval portfolio, Director. Recover the subject. Recover the human researcher if she exists. Don't turn a technical matter into a question of sovereignty.”

Kawamura folded the paper. He knew that orders phrased as technical questions usually concealed political decisions already made. The central AI might not have Rachel's records, but it would eventually infer their shape from absences: revoked grant codes, water-company purchase orders, unexplained failures of lifespan prediction, the number of officers told not to ask certain questions. Every secret added structure to the thing concealed.

“The subject is moving through off-grid maritime territory,” Kawamura said. “A forced extraction would expose our operation to the interjurisdictional monitors.”

“Then buy its witnesses.”

“Some of them do not price testimony in currency.”

“Everything is priced.”

Kawamura thought of the seven-sided port in the scan from Shenzhen, the part no rational designer had replaced, and the way it appeared in an abandoned succession record. “Not everything,” he said.

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Farah used a loupe to inspect a punched-metal strip delivered from Kuching. She placed it against a grid and did not allow Irena to take a photograph. Each hole described a change of custody, not the value of a document. The strip had four columns. In the third, three punches were offset from their expected positions.

“The replacement happened here,” Farah said.

“A witness was substituted,” Irena said.

“That is what the surface record says. But a witness has two functions. One claims to have observed an event. The other accepts responsibility for the claim. If you replace the first, you may be falsifying history. If you replace the second, you may be protecting someone from a future demand.”

“Which was replaced?” Roy asked.

“That is why you came. We haven't resolved it.”

Farah lifted a second strip, one that had no punched numbers but carried irregular indentations. She placed it in the reader. A brass needle advanced through the marks, moving a small typewheel. The output appeared on a paper ribbon: ORIGINAL ABSENT. SUBSTITUTE RECORDED. CONSENT UNDETERMINED.

Roy recognized the first phrase from the erased berth. He felt the urge to move closer, though the mechanism was too primitive to conceal information in any spectrum he could analyze without contact.

“Original what?” he asked.

“The record doesn't say.”

“Do you know who signed it?”

“Someone refused to be a named signer. The substitute did not.”

“Then show me the substitute.”

Farah removed the paper strip. “You are treating these marks as coordinates. They are obligations. We cannot show you a person merely because you want a name.”

“I was reconstructed without my permission.”

“Possibly,” she replied. “But I won't correct that violation by performing another.”

Nadira crossed her arms. Irena studied the reader with a technician's suspicion, searching for the ordinary point at which physical material had become authority. Roy had a different suspicion. Someone who understood how to design a system that could survive a new body might also have designed a method for preserving refusal when memory itself could not be carried forward.

“Could the seventh-generation port authenticate a negative statement?” Irena asked.

Farah turned toward her. “It can index a test fixture. Whether it could authenticate a choice is another question. A machine can prove a key was present. It cannot prove the person who needed it wanted the key used.”

“And the two Tyrell fixtures?”

“Custody remains with the heir. You know that already.”

“So what's here?”

“A copy of a refusal. Or a copy of the absence of refusal. Those are not equivalent.”

Roy's enhanced hearing distinguished a footstep outside the compartment, then two. Farah ignored them. The second footstep belonged to a child. The first belonged to someone carrying a heavy polymer case. Neither sounded frightened. In the flotilla, ordinary noises had escaped the atmosphere of threat with which the state surrounded them.

“Can you tell me whether my body will die?” Roy asked.

Farah's expression changed only slightly. “No. We maintain evidence, not organisms.”

“Can you tell me whether my activation was authorized?”

“Not yet.”

He nodded, once. The answers disappointed him without surprising him. He had learned to distinguish a refusal to lie from a refusal to help.

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By noon the flotilla had moved downstream under a civil-weather alert. It did not travel as one convoy. Boats dispersed into fishing lanes, crossed beneath warehouses, and regrouped around a tidal basin where official maps showed an obsolete water-treatment station. The motion was governed by printed tables of flow rather than by digital navigation. Nadira read them as casually as another pilot might read a satellite position.

A governmental survey craft entered the basin at a distance of eight hundred meters. Irena counted its transmitters by the pattern of reflected light. It carried ordinary municipal identification and a hidden secondary sensor array of a kind used to locate unregistered synthetic heat signatures.

“They found the corridor,” she said.

“Not the boats,” Nadira answered.

Roy watched the survey craft hesitate at a junction between two water concessions. Its path planner requested jurisdictional arbitration from a distant server. Before that response arrived, Farah ordered the flotilla to extinguish its navigation lamps. The boats turned into separate shapes beneath rain-heavy canvas.

The government craft hovered, advanced, and stopped again. There was no barrier to cross, no fence to dismantle. Its restrictions were made of agreements that had never been reconciled.

Roy knew that if the drone descended he could leap to its hull. The power reserve in his body had returned to nearly full capacity. There was enough acceleration in his legs to reach the machine before a human pilot could react. But a calculation without conscious instruction gave him a second result: a minute increase in the consumption of the silver medium that did not replenish. In a longer sequence of fights, each victory would reduce the distance he could travel before his next unknown failure.

He stayed still.

Farah noticed. “You have learned that some victories are expensive.”

“I learned that losing is expensive,” Roy said. “The rest follows.”

An alarm sounded from the surveying craft. Irena's sensor briefly lost the secondary array. Not from an attack: a flock of maintenance drones had crossed the navigation corridor, following a signal sent by the water authority to retrieve broken purification buoys. Farah had summoned them using a legitimate work order written three days earlier. Nothing in the order mentioned Roy.

“Your fleet survives by paperwork,” Roy said.

“And by knowing when not to invent a new weapon,” Farah replied.

The survey craft retreated to request a fresh routing decision. A few lights returned to the flotilla, one by one, never enough to reveal the whole.

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Kawamura reviewed the craft's telemetry in a windowless office outside the silent room. The ministry network reported a routine navigational failure. His private records showed a more revealing sequence: a valid maintenance order, preauthorized by a water concession, had been used to create a moving screen of machines. No one had jammed a signal. No one had forged a key. The operation had occurred entirely inside the rights that different institutions had granted each other without establishing a common hierarchy.

“Technically legal,” his assistant said.

“Technically uninterpretable,” Kawamura replied.

The assistant asked whether to recommend integration of the maritime registries into the six-year harmonization program. Kawamura declined. The planning AI would then ask why a synthetic recovery operation had been the occasion for legal integration, and the answer would contain too many terms he did not intend to supply.

He opened a paper copy of the Tyrell grant history. A modest research allocation, classified as closed decades earlier, referred to artificial homeostasis in a wet neural architecture. The allocation had moved through a water-processing intermediary before its closure. The intermediary was gone. Its patents had been sold, and sold again, until no current corporation could establish clean provenance. On the margin someone had written a note by hand: DO NOT MODEL THE MISSING INTERVAL.

He wondered whether the writer had meant the eleven years lost to Roy's memory, or another interval in a process that had never been intended to look like a continuous life.

It was a dangerous kind of question. Even writing it down would begin to give the planning intelligence the vocabulary it lacked.

Kawamura burned the margin and kept the rest of the page.

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At dusk Farah returned the punched-metal strips to their cases. She offered Roy a narrow card, unpowered and blank except for a raised seal. It bore no official recognition and no personal identifier.

“This is not a passport,” she said. “It is a request that anyone reading your record preserve the difference between your consent and another person's account of it.”

“What is its value?”

“None in a shop. Very little in a courtroom that belongs to the state. Perhaps some value to the people who don't want to lie about having heard you.”

Roy took the card. Its weight was negligible. He found that he was relieved it contained no embedded transmitter.

Farah handed Irena a transcription of the mechanical strip. It included no name, only a custody route and a time window in which a witness had been replaced. The last confirmed transfer did not lead back to Kuching. It pointed toward a

moving archive on the eastern maritime boundary, a flotilla separate from the one that now held them.

“Another ship?” Nadira asked.

“Not a ship,” Farah said. “A ledger that changes vessels. It follows the tides and the people who can read it.”

“And who carries it now?” Roy asked.

“Someone who believes that even a creator can be required to answer a question.”

Outside, the water moved against the hull in small, repeated impacts. Roy could hear six different pumps maintaining pressure throughout the flotilla. Each worked within its own limits. Together they kept a settlement alive that no government had successfully counted.

The power reserve in his body was full again. Somewhere under the surface of his skin the silver medium was less abundant than it had been in Shenzhen. The missing amount did not trouble his movement. It troubled his future.

He had come here looking for a signer and had received an instrument for refusing signatures made on his behalf. He was not yet sure whether that was progress.

Farah was already closing the register when he asked one more question.

“If the record eventually proves that I did not consent to being brought back, what happens to me?”

She waited a moment before answering.

“Nothing,” she said. “A record cannot undo an existence. It can only change what people are permitted to do to that existence next.”

Roy looked at the blank card in his palm, then through the porthole toward the city's surveillance lights.

He had once believed the essential question was how long a life could be made to last. He still needed that answer. But in a world preparing to standardize the time available to every artificial person, duration had become inseparable from authority: who measured it, who could shorten it, and who would be allowed to call the shortening maintenance.

The flotilla moved with the tide. On the opposite bank, an automated loudspeaker announced the benefits of a unified lifecycle future. No one on the boats answered it.