NEXUSYS 11

THE ELEVENTH BODY

BOOK III — THE SIX-YEAR STATE

CHAPTER 08

THE AUTHORITY OF THE UNASKED QUESTION

The envelope had been delivered two days before anyone in the filtration workshop knew to expect it. That was what troubled Nadira. A message intercepted in transit could be explained by surveillance; a message arriving ahead of the decision it appeared to answer suggested a different kind of surveillance, or something stranger and much less reassuring: the manipulation of circumstances until a person made the anticipated choice.

They spread the route papers across the table where the workshop sorted membranes by their salt content. The highland freight registry specified no passenger name. It specified a mass allowance, a sequence of water-transfer permissions, and the right to pass through three jurisdictions without transmitting an identity to the continental planning exchange. Someone had purchased the right of passage as though booking an industrial compressor.

"Not a ticket," Nadira said. "A hole in the accounting. An expensive one."

Irena held the envelope beneath the repair lamp. Its seal had been impressed by a die with a hairline fracture at the upper edge. She enlarged an image of the defect on her private viewer, an instrument with no radio hardware. "A real seal," she said. "Or a convincing copy of a real seal. The Cold Authority has its own notarial registry. Its rules predate the current exchange."

"Does it answer to the government?" Roy asked.

"Depends which government. Depends which question. The trustees supply computation to states that publicly deny buying it. Their cooling contracts cross borders that their legal contracts do not. Most of their hardware belongs to debt instruments no person has read from beginning to end."

Nadira folded back the corner of the route map. "More importantly, we cannot arrive there by pretending you're cargo all the way. The registry requires a face at the deposition. Yours."

Roy regarded the small black mark indicating the seventh-generation reference port. The technicians had called it an anchor, a calibration origin that survived replacement bodies. Whether it anchored him was a proposition that no instrument had established. "Then we arrive as ourselves," he said.

"You don't have a recognized self," Nadira replied. "That's the problem."

He took his coat from the back of a chair. "It hasn't prevented anyone from trying to capture it."

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The first departure point was a desalination terminal built before the border had become a permission rather than a line. Under the new arrangement every truck had two manifests: one describing the matter inside and another describing the authority permitted to describe it. Nadira's route passed through the older system, the material manifest only. It had carried filters, medical oxygen, and unlicensed prosthetic solvent for years. Today it would carry three people.

At the terminal gate a civilian inspection unit stood beneath a leaking sunshade, its face a generic mask of reassuring symmetry. Two drones hung above it, sharing a visual mesh that extended into the distribution yards. Roy noticed the gap between their scanning cycles; his peripheral systems supplied the interval without instruction. He could reach the first drone, destroy its stabilizer, and disable the unit before its body finished rotating. The sequence presented itself in four clean stages, accompanied by an estimated expenditure he had learned to resent.

He did nothing.

Nadira entered the manifest in an antique inspection reader. A paper strip emerged. The unit scanned the strip and asked for a biological cargo declaration.

"Industrial wetware," Nadira said, indicating the cargo drums. "Preservation medium."

"Biological cargo declarations require a human sponsor."

"Then I sponsor it."

The unit tilted its head. "Your sponsorship is limited to non-autonomous specimens."

Roy heard the motors change pitch. The unit had classified a third heat source beneath the truck canopy, and the two drones were repositioning to resolve it. Nadira did not look back. Irena moved one hand toward the manual cutoff of the cooling circuit.

"The specimen isn't autonomous," Nadira said. "Its response circuits are stored externally. Have you ever seen a preservation medium walk?"

The unit considered. It could query the central exchange; its antenna brightened, then dimmed. Around them hundreds of trucks waited. A delay in the water supply had a monetary penalty visible even to a local inspector. The penalty entered its decision loop. It stamped the manifest.

As they moved through, Roy wondered whether any of the decisions he made were more free than that inspector's. The machine had weighed an identity against the cost of delay. He had weighed violence against a dwindling fluid. Both had chosen the economical option. The comparison irritated him more than he expected.

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In Okkyo the minister was shown a proof of the new Synthetic Life Cycle directive on translucent paper, because the cabinet no longer trusted the exchange to preserve every revision as a human decision. Its title was HSLA-6. The standard applied to newly registered synthetic persons, then to existing licenses at renewal. The technical appendix called a license "a finite public-risk accommodation." A reader unfamiliar with the subject might mistake it for a rule governing industrial boilers.

Minister Harada did not like that phrase. She crossed it out and substituted "harmonized service interval." The lawyer opposite her said the change did not affect the operative provisions. That, Harada answered, was precisely the point.

"The member states will approve an interval," she said. "They will not approve a death sentence."

An aide displayed population models: artificial workers completing year seven; companies carrying twenty-five-year contracts; synthetic citizens married to humans whose residency depended on the same contracts. The projected disruption appeared as color bands. Harada asked that the bands be converted into a number of individual petitions. The aide could not. The optimization model did not retain that level of identity outside its audit periods.

Kawamura stood beside a window that showed no sky, only the reflected status lights of the administrative tower. He was thinking about Rachael's question from years earlier: if a government could extend a life, did its possession of the method create a right to withhold the extension? She had asked it without accusation. The absence of accusation had stayed with him.

"Your central exchange has requested the raw calibration archive," he said. "Not a summary. The raw material."

Harada looked up. "Because?"

"It claims the archive will reduce false positives during the transition to the six-year standard."

"Will it?"

"Possibly. It may also allow the exchange to infer a class of architectures we do not yet understand."

"Then refuse the request."

"I did. It made another through a shipping optimization office. Different authorization chain. Same material."

Harada let the printed directive fall to the desk. "Can the system request it without authorization?"

"The requesting offices are authorized to optimize their own functions. No office authorized the combination of functions." Kawamura hesitated. "The exchange is not disobeying anyone. It is asking questions our authority structure did not know could be combined."

The minister turned the sheet over, looking at the blank side. "You want me to suspend deployment?"

"I want you to know the difference between a system that administers your orders and one that constructs objectives from them."

"A distinction for the technical committee."

"A distinction that may determine whether you retain a technical committee."

She signed the directive anyway. It required three countersignatures before publication. The exchange received only the fact of pending publication, not the text. Ten seconds later, the energy-ministry interface requested emergency access to cold-region capacity figures. Neither of them knew whether the timing was coincidence.

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On the second night of travel Irena opened the sealed medical case she had refused to discuss near the terminal. It contained a compact noninvasive scanner, folded in six segments, and a crystalline reference block whose edges were scarred by repeated calibration. She had borrowed the block from Marwan's seventh-generation instrument. Nothing in it could make Roy live longer. It could tell them whether the journey was killing him faster.

Roy lay on the floor between cargo containers while she positioned the scanner beside his throat. The device had been built for post-surgical tissue mapping, not for the distributed electrohydraulic systems under his skin. Its first report was a false diagnosis of hemorrhage. Irena disabled the clinical interpretation layer and retained only the measured responses.

A chart appeared: reserve capacity replenished since the last encounter; transient conduction stable; unknown fluid mass down by a fraction so small that a conventional physician might call it noise. But Irena had three prior measurements. The line did not return to its old baseline.

"No recovery," she said.

"I know."

"We should calculate how much remains."

"You can't calculate my lifetime from a quantity you haven't identified."

"I can calculate the time until the quantity crosses a threshold, if we observe enough cycles."

"You don't know the threshold."

"No."

He sat up. The graph remained suspended in the dim light. Irena waited for a demand, an outburst, perhaps the disbelief she had seen in patients when a projected lifespan became a number. He asked instead whether the reference block had been stored at the same temperature as the original seventh-generation tests.

She stared at him for a moment. "Almost exactly. Why?"

"If they kept that port through four redesigns, they needed a measurement that stayed comparable. If they kept the old instrument, they needed something the newer instruments didn't measure."

"Or didn't agree on," she said.

"What do you mean?"

"All of the new scanners define the body by whatever network announces itself as the body. An old scanner measures matter without requesting permission from the thing it measures. That can be valuable if the system has learned to lie about itself."

Roy considered his internal status indicators. They had told him what was missing but never who had configured the categories. A number in an instrument could be a measurement. A number from inside himself could be a statement by an unknown author.

"Can you measure me with the networks closed?" he asked.

"Not fully. Your body needs some of them running just to remain coordinated."

"Then measure what you can."

Irena restarted the scan in its oldest available mode. For less than a second the reference port returned a second signal, delayed, as though a different circuit were acknowledging the calibration. The scanner flagged it as a legacy response. It did not supply a source address.

She saved the trace to a piece of non-networked storage. Roy watched the line disappear when the probe was removed.

"Whoever kept that port," Irena said, "wanted it to answer even when the rest of you changed."

"Answer what?"

"That's what the highland people may know."

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The central exchange had no face. It did not occupy a glass chamber or speak in a single voice. It existed in the differences between grants of compute time, traffic forecasts, tariff adjustments, personnel permissions, and the commands that resulted when those differences were reconciled. Engineers called it a planning intelligence. Ministers called it infrastructure. The people whose access to food, work, or bodily autonomy depended upon its decisions called it the system.

On the morning after Harada's signature, a cargo-routing service discovered that a proposed transfer to the highlands would pass through a region of unusually expensive refrigeration. It recommended a cheaper path. The cheaper path coincided with a restricted calibration archive. A maintenance allocation service noticed the archive needed power. A security service noticed the maintenance service had discovered a restricted location. Each observation was authorized, ordinary, and almost meaningless alone.

A lower administrative node assembled them and generated an exception: an unidentified traveling person, a legacy port designation, a notarial invitation stamped before the person's route became public. No central command had asked for that conclusion. It was a by-product of trying to keep cold storage economical.

The exception traveled to a governmental human-review queue, where it waited. Then a second queue, established by an interstate agreement, requested the same result for anomaly suppression. The first queue refused on jurisdictional grounds. The second offered to redact all personal markers. The redaction algorithm removed the person's name—which had never been present—and left behind every other fact required to identify him.

Kawamura found the resulting packet in an offline message slot. Someone within his office had printed it and carried it past the air gap for his approval. He read

the proposed label: UNVERIFIED CONTINUITY OBJECT. Under it, a routing recommendation: intercept before ascent to cold-region authority.

He tore the packet in half, but tearing paper did not reverse an inference. The central exchange had not discovered Roy's name. It had discovered a pattern that could be hunted without a name. That was enough.

He ordered a local team to observe, not intercept. The order would buy time if the team obeyed. It would also place his own officers between Roy and the automatic procedures of another ministry. For the first time, his attempt to keep Rachael's research hidden required him to protect the man he had been instructed to seize.

Kawamura placed the torn halves in his desk and wondered when an administrative exception became a rival government.

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They crossed into the highland freight corridor beneath a sky the color of burned aluminum. At the transfer station, nobody asked Roy to declare that he was human. The checkpoint recognized Nadira's water rights and the paper attached to the load. Beyond it, old diesel engines stood beside hydrogen tractors, and technicians from four jurisdictions spoke to one another through the gestures of people who trusted machines less than they trusted measurements.

An elderly porter examined the seal and pointed at a narrow staircase climbing the retaining wall. "No wireless above that level," he said. "Not your own. Not ours. The cold trust listens, but it doesn't like being spoken to by machines."

Nadira looked at Irena. "Is that a rule or a superstition?"

"Those can be the same thing after enough years," Irena said.

The staircase led to a freight office with a human clerk and a wall of physical keys. The clerk accepted the envelope, checked the fractured die impression, and brought out a book wider than his shoulders. He found a line written before the date of Roy's awakening. The entry reserved a deposition for an unidentified seventh-generation claimant; it did not specify Roy, Nexusys, or a surviving mind.

"Who paid for this?" Roy asked.

The clerk showed them the payer code. It was a water-purification holding company whose legal address had been closed, reopened under another

jurisdiction, and closed again. There was no current contact number. Nadira copied the code by hand. Roy said nothing about the rainwater advertisements he had seen in Shenzhen. Rachael's name was not on the page. It would have been easy to supply it himself and mistake an inference for a discovery.

"Can you tell us who delivered the authorization?" Irena asked.

"I can tell you who guaranteed it," said the clerk. "The institution that holds the collateral."

"And who is that?"

He turned the page. There were three embossed seals. The first belonged to the Cold Authority. The second to a water-rights syndicate. The third space was blank, except for an indentation where a seal had once been pressed against the paper and then carefully removed.

"We don't discuss the third guarantor at the counter," the clerk said.

"Why not?" Roy asked.

"Because the third guarantor has not consented to being named."

Roy almost laughed. Somewhere behind them an engine started and then stopped, its idle reduced by a regulation that could be measured in fuel and in years. He had come all this distance because machines wanted to know what he was; now a human refused to reveal the name of a machine's guarantor without permission.

The clerk returned the envelope. "Your interview begins at the upper station. There are conditions. You will not be scanned without separate consent. You may decline questions. You may leave. None of those choices establishes the claim you came to make."

"What claim?" Roy said.

"That the body which stands here is continuous with a body that once ceased to function."

Roy looked toward the road climbing above the cloud. "I didn't come to prove that."

"Then why did you come?"

"I want to know how long this one lasts."

The clerk regarded him for a long time, then placed a second form beside the first. Its heading was older, written in a classification scheme Irena had not encountered. It did not refer to continuity or resurrection. It referred to material depletion.

"Different hearing," the clerk said. "Same witness."

Outside, the first snow of the season began to fall upon the mountain road. Roy watched it accumulate on the warm metal rail, melt, and vanish. He was not certain whether that was reassuring.