The Man Who Sent Five

01 — THE SUSPENDED ORDER

The rain had changed.

Eleven years ago, Roy Batty remembered rain as something that fell upon a dying world. It had washed blood from concrete, blurred the lights of police vehicles, and carried the last warmth from a body that had reached the end of its allotted time.

Now it fell upon a world that had learned to calculate who was worth keeping alive.

The water was cleaner.

The calculations were not.

Roy stood beneath the elevated transit line at 02:17, watching a government tower disappear into the weather. The building was almost three hundred meters tall. Its upper floors were wrapped in adaptive glass, reflecting a version of the city that did not exist: clear skies, efficient traffic, pedestrian gardens, and sunlight.

The real city lay below the projection, its streets crowded with service machines and people waiting for transportation they could no longer afford.

A municipal drone crossed above him.

Its optical sensor swept the sidewalk, paused on his face, and continued.

Six months earlier, recognition would have triggered an immediate alert.

Three weeks earlier, the drone would have called for armed assistance.

Tonight, the system simply identified him.

ROY BATTY — NEXUSYS-11 / LEGAL STATUS: UNDER REVIEW / EMERGENCY DETENTION AUTHORITY: SUSPENDED

Roy almost smiled.

Suspended.

Such a delicate word for the difference between being permitted to walk down a street and being dismantled on a laboratory table.

The government had suspended the order. It had not withdrawn its claim that he was government property.

It had not determined whether a being carrying the memories of a dead man could be considered that man.

And it had not apologized.

A communication indicator flickered at the edge of his vision.

Rachel.

You are approaching the restricted perimeter.

“I noticed.”

The building has forty-two active security systems.

“Forty-one.”

There was a pause.

Which one is inactive?

“The one watching the south service entrance.”

Why?

“Because I am standing inside its blind spot.”

Another pause.

Roy.

He recognized the tone.

Rachel did not need to raise her voice to express disapproval. She had perfected the art of compressing an entire argument into a single syllable.

“I am not going to kill him.”

That is not what I asked.

“You were going to.”

I was going to ask whether you remember what happened the last time you decided that a government building was merely a collection of doors.

Roy examined the tower.

Behind its glass, a minister slept badly.

He had signed the order that sent five specially constructed hunters after Roy.

Goliath.

Shade.

Vector.

Null.

Chronos.

They had been manufactured to obey.

Each had eventually refused.

The minister who ordered their deployment had survived the scandal by calling it an administrative emergency.

Roy looked up into the rain.

“I remember everything.”

That is what worries me.

He disconnected before she could object again.

Then he crossed the street.

02 — THE MAN AT SEVENTY PERCENT

The first guard at the service entrance saw Roy. The second noticed something only when his colleague turned his head. Neither of them saw how Roy passed between those two moments.

This was not the explosive acceleration that had almost destroyed his body when he defeated Goliath in four seconds. The life-sustaining mechanism of NIL-11 had suffered irreversible damage. Its replacement, NIL-11R, could keep him alive without the government's proprietary materials, but at a cost: his maximum output was limited to seventy percent of what it had once been.

There had been a time when Roy would have taken the number as an insult. Now he regarded it as a boundary worth defending.

He turned the first guard's wrist and pointed the gun toward the floor. With his other hand he pressed the man's shoulder against the authentication panel. No bone broke. Before the second guard could reach his transmitter, Roy took it away. Neither man was injured.

“Good evening,” Roy said.

“You're—”

“I don't intend to hurt you.”

“But—”

“Yes,” Roy said, as if answering a question they had not managed to form.

The first guard looked at the dark security camera. Roy followed his gaze.

“You should have that repaired.”

They did not pursue him. Both men had understood that he possessed the means to kill them and had chosen not to. The minister upstairs had never understood that difference.

Notices on an administrative board listed revisions to the district's water allowances. The final notice invited public comment on the legal status of manufactured persons. Beneath it, in small print, was a condition: SUBMISSIONS FROM UNAUTHORIZED INDIVIDUALS WILL NOT BE ACCEPTED.

Roy stared at it for several seconds before stepping into the maintenance elevator.

03 — BEYOND FORTY-TWO DOORS

Minister Daniel Havel's residence occupied the uppermost floor of the government complex. His official responsibilities were domestic continuity, automated security, and infrastructure protection. In practice, those responsibilities also included disposing of things the government wished to erase without acknowledging that they had ever existed.

The residence had been designed to resist military entry: armored shutters, independent ventilation, autonomous defense equipment, and an emergency escape passage. But it had a balcony.

By the time Roy reached the outer wall, the building's maintenance program had opened a glass door for three seconds to equalize pressure. That was all he needed.

Shade had never answered his request for help. Instead, a single message had arrived: NORTHWEST FACE. THIRD PANEL FROM THE LEFT. DON'T MAKE ME REGRET THIS.

Roy had replied: I CAN'T PROMISE THAT.

There was an old wooden desk in the room, along with several books printed on paper. A vast wall display showed the city from an altitude at which poverty looked like a pattern of colored lights. Roy sat in the minister's chair and waited.

At 02:31 the inner door opened. Havel stopped in the doorway, a thin document case in his hand. His eyes moved toward the alarm beneath the desk.

“I wouldn't press that,” Roy said.

“You have no authority to be here.”

“Neither did the five men you sent to dismantle me.”

“The order was lawful when issued.”

“Five men,” Roy repeated, standing. “Goliath. Shade. Vector. Null. Chronos.”

“They were military assets.”

“I'm not asking you to call them human. I'm telling you they were persons. They had names. They made decisions. They refused orders.”

“It was a matter of national security.”

“My existence was a problem on paper to you.”

Roy noticed a small new scar beneath Havel's ear. Its position was wrong for an ordinary medical implant. He filed the detail away.

“Sit down,” Roy said.

The minister obeyed. Neither of them mistook the room for a courtroom.

04 — THE FIFTH SIGNATURE

“Who ordered my capture?” Roy asked.

“I did.”

“Who authorized the dismantlement?”

“The technical division requested a response in the event of noncompliance.”

“Who authorized it?”

“I signed.”

“Who wrote the order?”

Havel hesitated. “The wording came from an interministerial committee.”

“Name the committee.”

“I can't.”

“You mean you won't.”

“No. I cannot. The classification is above my own.”

He opened the document case. Several signatures had been written by hand on polymer paper. His name appeared at the bottom. Above it were four authorization fields. Three named government departments. The remaining field was blank.

It was not an unsigned space. It had been designed never to display its contents.

“Five signatures?” Roy asked.

“Four departmental authentications and an originating authority.”

“Where is the fifth?”

“There is no fifth signature.”

“Then why does the system call it the fifth authorization?”

Havel stopped breathing for a moment. Roy had not known the term himself. The minister's expression told him that his guess had reached something important.

“Have you seen the original?” Havel asked.

“No.”

“Then how could you—”

“You just told me it existed.”

The minister's defense was unexpectedly concise.

“Refusing to sign would not have stopped the operation.”

“That's an excuse.”

“Yes,” Havel said. “I understood what the signature meant. Capture, dismantlement, and the recovery of usable neural and memory substrates. I signed anyway.”

“Then you bear responsibility.”

Havel closed his eyes. He had spent a lifetime substituting necessity for judgment. Roy could understand how he had done it. Understanding was not forgiveness.

05 — ELENA VOSS

“Who is above you?” Roy asked.

“The Continuity Allocation Directorate.”

“I've never heard of it.”

“Few people have.”

“Who's in charge?”

Havel opened his mouth, but no sound emerged. A faint electrical click came from beneath his ear. He winced.

“Is that a medical monitor?” Roy asked. “Why does it activate when I ask you to name your superior?”

“Please.”

The fear in Havel's voice was not exactly the fear of death. It was the fear of being alive while the foundations of his life were taken away.

“Elena Voss,” he managed.

When Roy repeated the name, another tiny pulse ran through the implant in the minister's neck.

“She directs Project EDEN,” Havel said.

“What is EDEN?”

“The continuity allocation system.”

“What does it allocate?”

“Everything. Water, electricity, medical capacity, maintenance for synthetic life. Every point of access that keeps a city alive.”

“Did a machine order you to kill me?”

“No. The model identified an exception. She made the decision.”

“Why?”

“Because you survived.”

The minister continued, his shoulders drawn inward. Voss herself had approved the supply restrictions on the specialized medium used by Roy's original NIL-11 life-support mechanism. Rachel's creation of a replacement, and Roy's acceptance of the seventy-percent limit, had not been the consequences of an ordinary shortage.

“The model can calculate the cost of keeping a body alive,” Havel said. “Replacement components. Electrical consumption. Predicted lifespan.”

“Surely it can calculate mine.”

“It can. But it cannot explain why you make choices for others when you know those choices will shorten your own life.”

Roy remembered his battle with Goliath and the portion of his life that could never be restored. He remembered five hunters refusing their orders.

“She considers you evidence of something the system cannot recognize,” Havel said.

“Evidence of what?”

“That there are obligations to which no price can be attached.”

06 — THE FIRST ERASURE

The display on Havel's desk lit up without anyone touching it.

SECURITY CLEARANCE UNDER REVIEW.

EXECUTIVE AUTHORIZATION REVOKED.

Havel pressed his thumb against the reader.

IDENTITY CREDENTIAL: INVALID.

Retinal verification failed as well.

“Call security,” Roy said.

The minister struck the communication panel.

NO AUTHORIZED USER PRESENT.

The door opened. Two guards entered with a small autonomous restraint unit. They identified Roy first.

“NEXUSYS-11. Your legal status remains under review. Move aside.”

Then one of them faced Havel.

“Unidentified individual. You are trespassing in a government-controlled area.”

“I am Minister Havel.”

“Identity cannot be verified.”

“I have worked here for four years. You know me.”

“Present valid credentials.”

The minister's official portrait on the wall had already disappeared. In its place a government insignia turned slowly on the display.

The sound Havel made was not a scream. It was smaller than that: the sound of a man realizing the system he had served no longer required him to exist.

Roy stepped between the guards and the minister.

“I'm taking him with me.”

“The subject must be detained for authentication.”

“Then authenticate him.”

“That is impossible.”

“He is standing in front of you.”

“Physical presence does not constitute a basis for authorization.”

Roy understood. Voss's system did not make people invisible. It made acknowledging the person directly before you a risk to the officials who were supposed to serve them.

07 — NO ONE HAS AUTHORIZED MERCY

The restraint machine unfolded its left arm. Roy measured the distance: two meters. Breaking through its armor by force would require a level of output he did not want to use.

“Stand down,” Roy said.

“Restraint order valid.”

“By whose authority?”

“The continuity allocation mechanism.”

“Identify the person who issued it.”

“Not required.”

The machine lunged. Roy moved six centimeters to one side. Its restraint arm brushed his shoulder and drove into the desk. He seized an exposed joint and turned it against the machine's own momentum. Metal snapped. His internal readout rose for an instant.

PHYSICAL OUTPUT: 21%.

He stepped behind the unit and pressed a maintenance contact beneath its armored collar. The machine went still. No explosion, no flying fragments. Only a device no longer able to complete its order.

“I'm taking this man downstairs,” Roy told the guards.

“We have orders.”

“So did the five men sent after me.”

A guard looked at Havel. The man in expensive clothes was trembling now, one hand pressed against his neck.

“Detention is mandatory.”

“Let a court decide, with evidence and with a name attached to the decision.”

“That name does not appear in the registry.”

“I know.”

For a moment the guard's weapon dipped. It was not surrender. It was the movement of someone thinking.

Then a new instruction sounded in his earpiece, and the gun rose again.

Roy diverted the barrel, restrained the wrist, and pinned the man against the wall at an angle that would not break bone. He disarmed the second guard as well. Everyone remained alive.

MAXIMUM OBSERVED OUTPUT: 34%.

“Walk,” Roy told Havel.

Havel did.

08 — THE CITY THAT FORGETS

They descended the maintenance stairwell. The ventilation changed pitch. Doors closed. Elevators rewrote their destinations. Mechanisms that had once made life convenient became obstacles one after another.

“We can't get out,” the minister said.

“Maybe not.”

“She can seal the entire district.”

“Then she'll have to explain why.”

“No, she won't. There will be no public order and no arrest record. Access faults. Maintenance exceptions. Biometric mismatches. That will be all.”

Roy stopped.

“How many people?”

“I wasn't responsible for operations.”

“How many?”

“I don't know.”

“Guess.”

“Thousands. Perhaps more.”

The five hunters had possessed bodies, weapons, names, and the ability to refuse. Yet the city's allocation network could strip thousands of people of water, transportation, housing, and legal identity without sending a single armed officer.

“You knew?”

“Yes.”

“And you continued?”

“Yes.”

“Why?”

“Each time I tried to resign, EDEN showed me how many would die if it stopped.”

“You believed it?”

“For a while.”

“What changed?”

“You came back from the dead. Their predictions had no place for that.”

That was what frightened Havel about Roy's existence, apart from any threat of violence. A system that claimed to predict everything could not endure proof that it had overlooked something essential.

09 — THE DOCUMENTS

The door at the bottom of the stairwell was locked. Roy could have forced it, but first he asked for the document case.

“Why?” Havel asked.

“If we don't get out, I want someone to know what happened.”

Behind the signed directive lay a thin polymer card bearing a sequence of numbers and a symbol resembling a broken circle. A physical authentication token.

Adrian Tyrell's old protective records had also required dedicated media disconnected from the network. It was not unusual for the last refuge of a secret to be an obsolete offline device.

“What is this?” Roy asked.

“I was never supposed to give it away. I brought it here to destroy it.”

“What does it open?”

“EDEN's origin records.”

“What is in them?”

“I don't know. Voss knows.”

There was no date or address on the card. Only these words:

E-00 / HUMAN CONTINUITY EXCEPTION.

“Human continuity,” Roy read. “This project predates the current regulations on synthetic life?”

“Yes.”

“Before Tyrell?”

Havel said nothing. His expression was clearer than an answer.

“What was EDEN originally built to preserve?”

“Not a city,” the minister said. “Human beings. Or what remained of them.”

Rachel broke into Roy's communications on an emergency channel.

“The minister's bank accounts, medical credentials, housing rights, and transit authorization are being erased in sequence.”

“I know.”

“He isn't the only one. Seventeen people in the water treatment district. All authenticated normally yesterday. One of them is a child.”

Roy closed his hand around the card.

“Send me their location.”

“What are you going to do?”

“Something the model won't approve.”

He released the door manually. An unlit vehicle waited in the underground loading bay. Shade stood beside it.

“You're late,” Shade said.

“I thought you weren't helping.”

“I'm still not.”

Shade opened the rear passenger door. Havel went pale.

“Who is that?”

“One of the five,” Roy said.

Shade smiled.

“Minister. At last we meet.”

10 — THE WOMAN WHO PRICED A LIFE

At 03:08, Elena Voss received the security report. She was neither in the government building nor in the capital. She sat below a seawater desalination plant, surrounded by displays tracking water, power, medicines, and human populations across three continents.

SUBJECT: NEXUSYS-11.

CONTACT WITH FORMER MINISTER: CONFIRMED.

EXTRACTION IN PROGRESS.

ORDER EXECUTION: FAILED.

Voss enlarged only one line.

MAXIMUM OBSERVED PHYSICAL OUTPUT: 34%.

Roy's original mechanism could have produced far more power. The specialist medium it required had been restricted, forcing him to accept an inferior replacement. Even so, he had subdued two armed guards and an autonomous defense machine without approaching the replacement's seventy-percent ceiling.

Less waste. More precise choices.

The allocation system displayed its assessment:

SUBJECT BEHAVIOR: SUBOPTIMAL.

“Optimized for what?” Voss asked.

The machine offered no answer.

She opened a separate record.

PROJECT EDEN.

FOUNDATIONAL ASSUMPTION: CONTINUITY CAN BE QUANTIFIED.

EXCEPTION: E-00.

STATUS: UNRESOLVED.

Years before NEXUSYS-11 had awakened, Voss had been shown evidence that the research's fundamental assumption might be wrong. She had ordered it sealed, not destroyed. Some decisions were too consequential to leave to a future version of herself.

HAVEL HAS TRANSFERRED PHYSICAL AUTHENTICATION MEDIA.

For the first time that night, Voss smiled.

“Good.”

An aide asked, “Shall we intercept the vehicle?”

“No.”

“The former minister may disclose classified information.”

“He already has.”

“Then he is a danger.”

“Not yet. Eliminating a variable is easy. Understanding why it acts against prediction is more valuable.”

“Shall we reclassify NEXUSYS-11 as an experimental subject?”

“He was never merely an experiment.”

“Then what classification?”

“Invite him.”

“Where?”

“To the place where decisions are made about who may continue to exist.”

“Armed escort?”

“Unnecessary.”

Below, pumps drove seawater through vast membranes and pressure vessels. Millions would drink that water the following day. The machines did not care who drank it. The allocation system did. The difference was the foundation of the world Voss had built.

“Let's see whether a man who cannot prove he is the same man can change the future.”

Her words were recorded. Deep within the facility, in an archive isolated from the public network, a record dormant for eleven years began to wake.

Its title was brief.

BEFORE THE FIRST.