NEXUSYS 11

THE ELEVENTH BODY

He remembered dying. Nothing after.

BOOK I

CHAPTER 01 — THE RAIN AFTER DEATH

The rain was wrong.

Roy knew this before he opened his eyes.

The last rain he remembered had fallen through darkness, carrying the electrical hum of Los Angeles and the last fragments of a life already beyond its allotted time. He remembered the rooftop. The broken fingers. The man hanging over the abyss. He remembered a bird beating itself toward a sky the city had almost entirely abolished.

Then nothing.

Now there was rain again.

This rain struck metal in irregular intervals. Water moved somewhere above him through a pipe with the low resonance of a damaged lung. There was a second rhythm beneath it, too precise to belong to weather: nine impulses, a pause, then nine again. The rhythm wasn't in the room. It was in the building, passing through steel and concrete, and he knew its distance without understanding how.

He opened his eyes.

The ceiling was stained concrete. A fluorescent tube hung from two exposed wires. An old fan occupied the wall above a sealed window; its blades were stationary, but its housing carried a faint vibration. Someone had painted the opposite wall a gray that absorbed the light rather than reflecting it. Against that wall stood a steel basin, a narrow cabinet, and a chair with one leg shortened by a block of polymer.

There was no bed. He lay on a slab upholstered in material that resembled hospital vinyl. Its surface was dry.

Roy remained still.

Seven mechanical sources. Three outside. Four inside. An eighth began, intermittent and distant, and he placed it somewhere below the street.

He had not intended to count them.

He sat up.

There was no pain.

That frightened him more than the room.

His right hand was intact. He lifted it, watching the tendons travel beneath the skin. He remembered two fingers crushed under a man's grip—or had it been his own hand that crushed them? Memory offered him the arrangement of bones, the pressure, the taste of blood, but no agreement about the instant before death. His last minutes had acquired the hard edges of a damaged recording.

He flexed his hand. Something in his forearm answered before he finished deciding to move.

He did it again.

A motion had begun, been predicted, and completed, and what disturbed him was not its speed but the absence of effort. The body appeared to know a thing before its owner did.

"Impossible," he said.

His voice was lower than he expected. He touched his throat. A pulse beat beneath his fingers, regular and warm. Not a machine's imitation, he thought, then wondered what evidence he possessed for the distinction.

The wall showed no calendar. His clothing lay folded on the chair: dark trousers, boots with flexible ceramic soles, a plain shirt, and a coat of heavy black fabric. No labels. No insignia. The pocket seams had been reinforced with a transparent filament. He searched them before dressing. Empty except for a paper rectangle that had absorbed moisture and dried into a stiff curl.

Its printing was almost erased. A single ideogram survived, followed by the fragment of a serial number: ...08.

He put it back.

In the basin he found a faucet with three valves, none marked. He turned the central one. A measured portion of water descended in a thin column, ceased, then resumed after he withdrew his hand. A civic rationer. He knew rationing systems; he did not know this one. Over the drain was a manufacturer's symbol, a flattened oval enclosing an unfamiliar four-stroke glyph.

He splashed water onto his face. The mirror above the basin had been replaced with an angled sheet of stainless steel. Its reflection distorted the width of his skull. He looked older than he remembered, but not eleven years older; older in the way an object becomes older after being repaired too many times. The face had acquired small asymmetries. A slight depression near the jaw. A patch of skin behind the ear that carried no pores. Nothing that would attract a second glance from a stranger.

He hooked one finger behind his left ear. A seam opened less than a millimeter, then sealed. He recoiled.

A memory, sharp and useless, entered him: Tyrell's eyes behind thick lenses, enormous with reflected light. The engineer had answered questions Roy could no longer recall in the manner of a man describing an appliance he was disappointed to see returned.

That face was gone. Dead, surely. Roy had killed him. He remembered that without distortion.

Outside, something large passed between the buildings. Blue-white light crossed the ceiling, and an announcement arrived through the wall, not from any device in the room but from the architecture beyond it. First Mandarin. Then Malay. Then a fourth register that he understood as readily as the others, although he could not name its grammar.

"Registered residents are reminded that unsupervised mobility during district maintenance intervals constitutes a resource violation. Civic arbitration is available through the Unified Allocation Portal."

He stood beneath the window.

Transparent polymer sheeting moved against the frame whenever the pressure outside changed. He lifted an edge. Beyond it, a city climbed into rain: thin towers built into the spaces between older towers, hanging pedestrian passages, suspended freight rails, advertisements that tracked individual faces through the streets. Great screens showed inventories—water, habitation, compute minutes—rather than products. Against the lower floors glowed a repeated slogan: CONTINUITY THROUGH ALLOCATION.

A small aircraft pivoted without changing altitude. Its underside opened like the iris of an eye. Light swept across one façade, then another.

Roy stepped away before it touched his window.

He did not know why he had moved. He had never seen such a machine. Yet he knew the period of its scan, the direction of its secondary aperture, and the delay between observation and transmission. The knowledge did not come as a memory. It arrived fully formed, as if a silent instructor had completed a sentence inside him.

He turned back to the room. Under the slab lay a bundle of thin cables terminating in an obsolete connector with a spring-loaded clasp. The wall behind it bore three circular impressions where a larger machine had once stood. There was no charger, no attendant, no operating theatre. Whoever had left him here had removed everything except what could not be moved without taking the room apart.

He searched the cabinet. Nothing. The chair legs were hollow. Nothing. Under the sink he found adhesive residue, an old stain, and a dead insect whose transparent abdomen was packed with metallic grains.

A corridor light switched on.

He froze.

Footsteps approached. Two walkers, unequal in weight. One gait carried the small timing errors of muscle. The other returned at absolutely consistent intervals. They paused outside the door.

"Unit four-eight?" a voice said in Mandarin.

Roy considered the door. It had a cheap mechanical lock, the sort a person opened with a bent wire. His body knew precisely where to strike it. The thought was accompanied by a projection of force, time, and probable damage. Not the door: the man's wrist, the cartilage of his throat, the secondary walker behind him.

Roy held the impulse still.

"Unit four-eight," the man repeated. "Water levy audit. Open."

A tiny light beneath the handle changed from amber to green. An electronic permission had been granted elsewhere. Roy moved to the hinge side as the door opened.

A narrow man in a soaked municipal coat entered first, holding a folded meter. Behind him came a service humanoid with a white ceramic face and a visible serial mark stamped through the lacquer at its jaw. It was roughly the man's height and better built,

its motion economical without being graceful. A black plastic hood protected the optical assembly above its eyes.

The man saw the empty slab and frowned. He saw Roy and stopped.

"New tenant?"

Roy said nothing.

The humanoid rotated its head by a small exact angle.

"No tenancy record associated with this room during the current allocation period," it said.

"Then he's occupying it without allocation," the man replied. "Ask him for his civic number."

The machine lifted one hand. At its palm, a ring of pale diodes appeared.

"Identity confirmation is required. Present wrist, iris, or assigned surrogate."

Roy watched the diodes. He could have complied. He wanted to see what they would find. But another inference unfolded behind the visible room: an unknown body, no registered identity, an automated query routed upstream. Delay before a local patrol. Delay before a second patrol if the first failed. The sequence was not familiar; its arithmetic was.

"The room was assigned to me," he said.

"By whom?" asked the man.

"Someone who has not come back."

The man looked annoyed, but the humanoid's posture changed. It brought its palm a few centimeters closer.

"Identity confirmation is compulsory."

Roy glanced toward the corridor. Three meters to the stairwell. Two visible cameras, neither powered by the building. The man took a step nearer, eager to have the matter resolved. The humanoid took a step too, and for the space of a heartbeat Roy saw an unfamiliar internal diagram unfold in his mind: actuator groups, pressure tolerances, protected sensory nodes. A manual for an apparatus he had never studied.

He put his wrist before the sensor.

The diodes flashed once.

They went out.

A soft mechanical click sounded somewhere beneath the machine's ribs.

"Verification pending," it said.

The man stared at his meter. "Why pending?"

"Pattern incompatible with registry classes. Retry required."

Roy withdrew his hand. A red line appeared across the humanoid's temple, very thin and bright. The machine had not moved its feet, but its balance changed. Both of its hands opened.

"Remain in place," it said.

Roy took the man's folded meter and pressed it against the wall beside the machine's head. The motion felt almost lazy. There was a brittle report, a white flicker at the neck, and the humanoid collapsed with its knees still trying to correct its descent. The man shouted, but Roy had already caught him by the coat and turned him away from the broken body.

"You can walk downstairs," Roy said. "Do that."

"What are you?"

Roy had no answer.

He let the man go. The man backed through the door, slipped on the wet landing, and fled. Roy looked down at the machine. Its eye lights were still active. The red line had become a steady point. A thin voice came from its throat, quieter than speech.

"Classification request escalated."

Roy left.

The stairwell smelled of disinfectant, warm plastic, and boiled food. Advertisements had been pasted over the fire instructions; every advertisement carried a registration code. From an apartment on the next floor he heard children reciting allocation tables. From another came music with a rhythm so irregular it seemed to be measuring a different kind of time.

He descended nine flights without fatigue. At the third landing he stopped because a counter in the corner of his vision appeared to settle, then faded before he could focus on it. It was not projected against the world. It occupied a place in his perception that had no location.

Outside, Shenzhen Central received him without interest.

There were too many people for the street to belong to any one of them. Human shoulders under thin rain capes; matte-coated delivery machines with their hands folded against their torsos; old men on stools repairing sensor membranes beneath umbrellas of patched photovoltaic film. A woman sold steaming protein broth beside a kiosk where bodies could be rented by the hour for remote labor. A municipal screen listed the day's water credits and a public warning about unregistered wetware.

The rain had made the road black. It had not made it clean.

Roy joined the crowd. His eyes moved through it in patterns he could neither stop nor explain. An unmanned patrol passed overhead, its shadow crossing the faces around him. Nobody looked up. A child pointed at the undercarriage and his mother pushed the hand down.

Roy understood then that his first decision had been wrong.

He had disabled an inspector because he could. He had spent force where silence would have served him better. He could already imagine what the machine had sent before its fall: an irregular biometric pattern and a broken chain of observations. Someone would come looking for the discrepancy. He had survived his first encounter with the city and announced himself to it at the same time.

He stepped beneath the awning of a closed pharmacy. An illuminated public map showed the district divided into mobility zones. The name of the city appeared in six scripts: SHENZHEN CENTRAL. Under it, a second identifier scrolled across the map: PEARL RIVER ADMINISTRATIVE COMPUTE TERRITORY.

Los Angeles had become a distance measured in centuries, though the streets surrounding him looked no older than the streets he remembered. He reached for the year on the map. A civic calendar replaced the old Gregorian register with an allocation cycle. Only in the smaller legal line did he find the number.

2030.

He read it again.

A man passed beside him, splashing dirty water across his boots. Somewhere in the city an alarm began and immediately stopped. The date did not change.

Eleven years.

Roy leaned one shoulder against the shutter. He could name the last moments of his previous life. He could recall the air in his lungs, the tremor in his failing hand, the man's face beyond the rain. There was no interval between that memory and the slab in the room. The intervening years were not dark or forgotten. They were absent, as if time had passed around him rather than through him.

He looked at his hands. Nothing about them carried eleven years of wear.

He had thought his life was over. Evidently someone disagreed.

Across the street, a transparent news column advertised advances in civilian morphogenesis and announced that licensed synthetic individuals could now petition for limited extension beyond the standard operating cycle. Beneath the headline ran a government advisory about illegal biological modification. A district official smiled beside a slogan: A MEASURED LIFE IS A SECURE LIFE.

He watched the words repeat. The phrase seemed designed for him, although no one nearby noticed it.

A siren moved through the air at a pitch most pedestrians could barely hear. Roy did not hear it with his ears. It struck him as pressure behind the jaw, a bright geometry of vectors and approaching distances. His eyes found three patrol drones converging through the rain, far above the street. They were not yet facing him.

He lowered his head and walked.

At the next intersection he stopped at a stall displaying obsolete connectors, damaged optics, and small wafers in plastic envelopes. The merchant's hands were artificial and carried the wear of a thousand poorly performed repairs. Behind him, a cracked screen played footage of a minister speaking about synthetic accountability. The merchant muted it when Roy approached.

"Repair?" the merchant asked.

"Diagnosis."

"All things need repair. Diagnosis costs extra."

Roy held out his hand. "Where would you take this?"

The merchant glanced at it, then at Roy's face. "To a clinic if it hurts. To a foundry if it doesn't."

"A legitimate laboratory."

The merchant laughed once. "Then you have money."

"I have questions."

"Money answers questions."

Roy considered the small, damaged components piled beneath the glass. The city's commerce had no interest in origins; everything was either repairable, replaceable, or illegal. He asked for the name of a company that could examine synthetic tissue without sending its report to a military registry.

The merchant stopped smiling.

"You're new," he said.

"Yes."

"Don't ask it that way again."

A courier alarm chirped outside. The merchant bent and scratched an address onto the back of a discarded label. He slid it beneath a connector tray without looking at Roy.

"They do materials work. Commercial. No guarantees. And you didn't come here."

Roy took the label. "Why help me?"

"Because anybody asking that question is going to have a short day."

The merchant turned his screen's volume back on. The minister was still speaking; a red insignia revolved above his shoulder.

Roy walked away, his new address drying against his palm.

High above, one of the patrol drones altered course. It did not accelerate. Its motion was too calm for a chase. The machine descended between transit cables, passing a billboard

that showed a human face dissolving into layers of synthetic muscle. A second drone remained above the intersection. The third disappeared behind a building.

Roy turned into a covered pedestrian passage. Heat collected under its transparent roof, carrying the smells of wet cloth and industrial starch. He had not eaten. He did not feel hungry. A street vendor offered him a cup of hot water, saw his empty hands, and looked away.

In a darkened shop window Roy caught his reflection: coat, pale hair, stern expression, a face he recognized and did not trust. His body had been repaired. It might have been replaced. The one certainty he possessed was the memory of a death that no longer appeared to have happened.

The hidden counting returned. Distances, angles, moving masses. His pulse remained steady, but beneath it something accumulated, a reserve neither wholly muscular nor electrical. He felt that he could cross the passage in less time than the people around him could register the motion. He also felt, without knowing why, that doing so would cost him something he did not know how to replace.

He walked at the pace of the crowd.

At the far end of the passage, a maintenance screen blinked awake and displayed a harmless blue field. No text. No advertisement. Roy passed it and felt a momentary disturbance at the base of his skull, a sensation like an unfamiliar hand brushing the surface of a locked door.

The field vanished.

He did not turn.

Several kilometers away, in an office where the rain appeared only as numerical interference across a wall of data, a municipal verification queue detached one damaged record from the millions being processed that hour. The request lacked a civilian identifier. Its biometrics did not correspond to any current manufacturer. The inspector that had collected it was offline, and an attempt to reconstruct its last optical frames returned a blur of movement between two ordinary intervals.

The local classifier marked the record as corrupted.

An older classifier, operating beneath the civic layer under a jurisdiction not named on the public network, refused the label.

It generated a narrow exception report.

The report crossed a jurisdictional boundary and waited behind twelve levels of human authorization. Nothing announced its arrival. No siren sounded. In the city's innumerable rooms, people continued eating, trading, sleeping, and repairing their failing machinery.

On the narrow report, one line remained unresolved:

ORIGIN ARCHITECTURE: LEGACY / UNCLASSIFIED.

Roy knew nothing of it.

He had found a laboratory address. That was enough for the moment. Under the rain, beneath the transit structure, he began looking for a way to reach it without asking the city for permission.