NEXUSYS 11

THE ELEVENTH BODY

He remembered dying. Nothing after.

CHAPTER 02 — THE PERMISSION TO EXIST

The address had once been a warehouse.

It occupied the seventh level of a commercial stack whose lower floors sold licensed organs, obsolete computing hardware, and government-approved emotional assistants. Between the buildings, narrow bridges carried pedestrians beneath the elevated transit grid. They had been designed to remove human bodies from the roads, though the roads were mostly occupied by machines.

Roy approached from the west. On the district map, the laboratory appeared as a pale square among thousands of businesses, each outlined in the color of its compliance status. He had learned that green meant the owner had made the appropriate payments, not that the establishment was safe. Nothing he had observed in Shenzhen Central justified a stronger interpretation.

The merchant's address identified the business as ORISON MATERIALS, an independent firm specializing in biological interface failures. Independent, according to a notice beneath its directory entry, meant that its owners retained operational control under the Administrative Compute Charter. A second notice specified the conditions under which that independence could be suspended. Roy counted eleven conditions. He stopped reading at the eighth because conditions nine through eleven applied to categories of being he did not recognize.

Before crossing the bridge, he bought a cup of water with a transit chip retrieved from the coat in which he had awakened. He had discovered three such chips in its lining, each carrying a few anonymous credits. Whoever had supplied the coat had thought of food and transport, but had provided neither identification nor a message. Perhaps the chips were bait. Perhaps they were an apology.

The water came in a sealed cellulose vessel. A woman on the kiosk screen promised that it had been recovered from the atmosphere without taking a single molecule from the municipal allocation. Beneath her face, a seal certified its origins. The seal looked older than the machine that displayed it.

Roy drank. He could distinguish the dissolved minerals and the trace polymer contamination on his tongue. The analysis appeared in his mind without words, like the

recognition of a familiar smell. He did not remember learning to perform it. The discovery troubled him less than his ability to accept it.

A child stood beside the kiosk holding a small mechanical dog. Its left eye was missing. The child asked his mother why the dog had stopped walking. She answered that it was the end of the dog's service period. The child said they could replace the leg. The mother said they could not replace the permission.

Roy watched them leave.

On the opposite side of the street, a government display announced the success of a new harmonization initiative. A synthetic worker smiled in one of the approved poses. Under the portrait, in six languages, ran the slogan: A MEASURED LIFE IS A SECURE LIFE.

The same words had appeared above the pharmacy. The repetition suggested that the government was addressing a question it expected people to ask without ever allowing them to ask it aloud.

He started across the bridge.

A municipal inspection drone hovered beside the far railing. It resembled a flattened black seed, with four optical apertures and no visible propellers. Pedestrians passed beneath it without altering their pace. Roy let a group of delivery workers move ahead of him. Their thermal signatures filled the drone's view with ordinary, permitted uncertainty.

The drone rotated.

He saw a narrow band of polarized light sweep across the workers' faces. Their identity marks appeared momentarily in his vision, not as names but as spatial associations: five permitted persons, one provisional permit, two unpaid mobility levies. Roy blinked and the associations disappeared.

He had not been looking through a display. He had read something the drone was reading.

There were two explanations. The drone was broadcasting more than it intended, or his new body was receiving more than he wanted.

A third explanation came to him, less comfortable than the others: someone had made him to do precisely this.

The inspection drone held its position as he passed. Its aperture followed the delivery workers, then corrected toward him with the small delayed movement of a machine

seeking a confirmation it did not have. Roy kept walking. Whatever strength lived in his arms could not erase a record already written elsewhere.

Orison Materials occupied a corridor at the back of the seventh level. The name had been printed on a strip of polymer which had yellowed along its edges. Its door was mechanical, the kind that expected a hand rather than a code. A sensor over the frame took a reading as Roy approached. The light remained amber.

He waited.

A speaker crackled. "Appointment?"

"No."

"Corporate affiliation?"

"None."

A pause. "That is not an available answer."

"It is the one I have."

The door unlocked.

Inside, the room smelled of heated resin and old solvents. Cabinets crowded the walls. A man with thick wrists and a scar that passed through his left eyebrow sat before an inspection bench. Both of his hands were human; Roy noticed because human hands had become something he no longer took for granted.

The man looked up. "You found the door. That saves us ten credits."

"I need a diagnosis."

"Everyone does. What broke?"

"I don't know."

"Then we charge for discovery."

Roy placed a transit chip on the bench. The man examined it without touching it.

"That'll buy you an opinion," he said. "Not a report. Reports leave the room. Opinions can die here."

"I prefer an opinion."

The man introduced himself as Han. Roy did not ask whether this was a personal name or a license designation. Han produced an older handheld scanner, ignored the clinic's networked diagnostic cradle, and asked Roy to expose his wrist.

Roy rolled back the sleeve. Beneath the skin, where tendons should have been arranged in the disorderly compromise of natural evolution, Han found regularity. The scanner's display registered a lattice structure, a sequence of conductive interfaces and a surface whose thermal response did not correspond to known synthetic tissue.

Han's expression flattened.

"Military?"

"No."

"You're sure?"

"I am asking you."

Han put down the scanner as though it had become warm. "You aren't the first man who's walked in here without knowing which company made him. But the others usually have a serial at the bone or a firmware signature in the peripheral layer. Everything has a signature. Even the illegal things. Especially the illegal things. Someone has to fix them."

"And mine?"

"The device thinks your wrist is a manufacturing defect. I think the device is the defect."

Roy took his hand back. "Can you tell how old it is?"

"Parts of it? Maybe. The whole thing? No. Not without opening you."

"Do it."

Han laughed, but there was no pleasure in it. "I don't cut people open because they ask nicely. This is a materials shop. You want lifespan analysis, you need a medical systems laboratory. You want a body with no registry, you need someone who doesn't care whether you return."

"Give me a name."

"You already got one opinion for your chip."

Roy did not move. He had threatened people before, in a life that had ended on a rooftop. The ability had not deserted him. He could see the path his hand would take to the

scanner, the angles from which the device might be broken, the place beneath Han's ear where pressure would stop the argument. The information arrived complete and unsolicited.

He refused it.

The refusal required a degree of effort he would not have expected. Somewhere behind the decision to remain still, another system continued to arrange the alternatives.

Han watched his face. "Whatever you're doing," he said, "don't do it here."

"I'm doing nothing."

"That's what I mean."

From a drawer, Han took a thin physical label and wrote on it with a pen. The address belonged to an engineering company in the western business zone. Its public listing identified work on prosthetic and neuronal interface stability for civilian customers. Its research license was renewed monthly. The precision of that requirement told Roy more about the firm than its description did.

"They'll tell you if you're something they know," Han said. "They might even tell you if you're something they don't. But understand this: their instruments are legal. Legal instruments make records."

"Could they avoid it?"

"A person can avoid a question. A machine can only be persuaded that it was never asked."

Roy folded the label into his coat. "Thank you."

Han returned to his work. "Don't thank me until you survive the visit."

Outside, a service lift carried Roy toward a level above the transit grid. Its walls displayed public notices and silent advertisements. A map offered three routes to the business zone. The fastest required biometric validation at two gates. The cheapest required only one. Roy chose the route that passed through an older pedestrian quarter where the city's new system had been installed around structures too expensive to demolish.

The lift had just passed the nineteenth floor when its lighting changed.

No alarm sounded. An indicator above the door turned pale blue. Roy felt a brief pressure beneath the left side of his skull. It was the same contact he had sensed in the covered passage: delicate, precise, and profoundly impersonal.

The lift announced an unscheduled inspection.

"Remain at rest," a voice said. "This is a nonintrusive identity reconciliation."

Roy looked up. At the ceiling's center, a lens opened behind a mirrored panel. Its optical axis descended until it met his face. A scanner measured him with an almost courtly slowness. He did not need to see its output to know it had found something it could not categorize.

The doors opened between floors.

A maintenance bridge waited beyond the threshold. Two humanoid figures stood in the passage. Their uniforms were the gray of municipal utilities; their posture was too symmetrical for exhausted city workers. Neither carried a visible weapon.

"Good evening," said the one on the left. "Your registration requires correction. Please accompany us."

"Who authorized the inspection?" Roy asked.

"The district."

"Which person?"

The figure's expression remained unchanged. "That distinction is not relevant."

The second figure took one step toward him. Roy saw the transfer of load through its hip, the micro-adjustment in its foot, a tiny oscillation in the shoulder assembly. None of it looked unfamiliar. His own body recognized the machine before his conscious mind could form a category for it.

A branching diagram formed behind his eyes. Evasion, disablement, escape. Twelve paths, then forty-eight. A pressure like rising temperature accumulated behind his sternum.

He remembered Han's face. The merchant's warning. The fallen inspector from the morning. He would not spend this body's unknown resources on every official who mistook obedience for law.

"I'll need the warrant," Roy said.

The first humanoid tilted its head. "A civil reconciliation does not require one."

"Then I decline."

The second figure reached out. Its hand moved in a precise, economical arc.

Roy stepped aside at an ordinary speed.

The hand closed on air. The machine corrected. Roy took its wrist, used the movement already underway, and guided the figure into the door frame. Nothing in the action looked theatrical. Yet the door frame cracked, and a panel fell from the ceiling. The humanoid struck the floor with its forearm still extended in a gesture of invitation.

The first figure ceased speaking.

Its eyes changed aperture. An internal transmitter began warming into a frequency Roy felt along the roots of his teeth.

He moved then, not to attack but to prevent the report.

For an instant the world became divided into exposures: the time required for the transmitter to establish a link, the time required for a finger to enter the unit's maintenance seam, the time before the second humanoid could recover. He did not choose the quickest violence. He chose the minimum force that would alter the signal.

His fingers found a recessed surface behind the figure's jaw and pressed. The transmitter emitted a dry noise. A small light in the ceiling flickered and died. The humanoid folded forward and struck the floor beside its companion.

Roy stood still. The pressure behind his sternum subsided. Something remained: a faint, foreign heaviness in his forearms, an impression of expenditure without fatigue.

He inspected his hand. It trembled once and became steady.

The machines were not dead. One tried to move its head. Roy could hear the effort of its actuators, the low internal argument between a damaged command pathway and the instructions still arriving from elsewhere.

He could have destroyed them. He left them operating.

A maintenance hatch stood behind the fallen ceiling panel. Roy opened it and entered a narrow shaft crowded with cable trunks, inspection rails, and pipes sweating condensation. He did not know where the shaft led. The geometry of the building appeared to him as a problem that could be solved by touch and sound. At every junction

the structure offered its small confession of air pressure, vibration, temperature, and the habits of people who had repaired it poorly.

Three floors lower, a hatch opened behind a kitchen exhaust system. He emerged into a restaurant whose customers were watching a silent tournament in a virtual sporting league. None of them looked at the large pale man coming out of the maintenance wall. In Shenzhen Central, everybody had seen something they were paid not to notice.

Roy sat at the end of the counter and ordered soup. He paid with the second chip.

The cook served it without asking for an identity. Its liquid was dark and smelled of mushrooms, preserved roots, and artificial meat. The act of eating steadied him in a way the body's instruments did not attempt to quantify. He listened to the room. Two delivery workers complained about quota penalties. A woman argued into a private audio channel about the renewal of her father's synthetic assistance permit. At the far table, three young men in immaculate clothing wore glasses that projected a private landscape over the room; they moved their fingers in gestures understood only by whatever world they preferred to this one.

Roy ate slowly.

On a muted government channel above the kitchen, an official spoke of synthetic renewal. The caption described the debate as a matter of stability, efficient resource use, and interterritorial compatibility. No one mentioned death. This was curious, since the language of renewal seemed designed to control precisely that.

He searched his memory for Tyrell's room. The old man had spoken of the impossibility of extending a designed lifespan without destroying the chemistry that made the body function. Roy remembered rage, and afterwards a silence. Now, in this new body, the problem had become larger than one corporation. A civilization had built offices to administer the end of lives it manufactured.

He felt no interest in correcting its philosophy. First he wanted to know what had happened to him. Then he wanted to know how long the answer would remain alive.

A girl walked past his table with a repair kit on her shoulder. She had a thin line of exposed interface ports along her neck and a synthetic left forearm covered in cheap insulation. She looked at Roy's wrist, then away. Her glance contained recognition of a kind, but not of him personally. She had seen the repair patterns of another world and understood that his were not for public inspection.

When he finished the soup, Roy bought a paper map from a vending slot intended for tourists who distrusted the network. The map was printed on waterproof polymer and described its own obsolescence in small legal type. The route to the civilian engineering company passed through two controlled districts. A third route followed a waste-recovery canal under the eastern viaduct. It was longer, quieter, and omitted from the recommended mobility plan.

Roy selected the third route.

He had almost reached the street when the girl's voice stopped him.

"That line on your cuff," she said. "It's not a seam."

He turned.

"I know."

"Then you're wearing the wrong kind of cloth over it. The salt gets in."

"Can it be repaired?"

She regarded him for a moment. "Anything can be repaired. The question is whether it remembers how to be itself afterwards."

The girl left through the kitchen door before he could ask where she had learned that.

Outside, the rain had intensified. It moved in white sheets between the buildings and drummed on the canal's protective grating. Roy walked beneath a row of condensation towers, thinking about the girl's warning. A line on his cuff. Salt. Memory. In this city every ordinary conversation seemed to lead back to the condition of manufactured flesh.

At a junction above the canal, he stopped before an advertising panel displaying a woman's face. She was not young in the manufactured sense. Her expression held a confidence that suggested the freedom to be older than the company allowed. The advertisement concerned recovered rainwater, sold in sealed volumes at a premium over state supply. Beneath the woman's portrait, the words WATER WITHOUT DEBT appeared in thin, unadorned lettering.

For a moment he felt the pressure behind his skull again, so faint that it could have been an echo of the inspection scanner. No name accompanied the image. The advertisement dissolved into a certification stamp and then another advertisement.

Roy continued walking.

The civilian laboratory lay on the other side of a stretch of streets where the buildings grew cleaner and their inhabitants more closely measured. Above the canal, the government drones kept their routes. He could not tell whether they had begun looking for him or were merely doing what they always did. It made little practical difference.

In the administrative subsystem, the incident in the lift had already been separated into two records. One described a maintenance accident. The other, closed to civilian inspection, described two incapacitated compliance units, a missing biometric subject, and an anomalous movement interval of less than one second.

The subject had used no known external weapon.

A provisional request for lethal authorization was generated and automatically suspended. Somewhere above the district's ordinary law, a standing directive required that certain unidentified architectures be preserved intact.

The directive did not provide its author's name.

Roy reached the last canal bridge before the engineering zone and looked back. The city had erased his route in rain and light. He could not erase the machines he had touched. He could not erase the report they might have made. The only useful thing left was to proceed before the invisible record acquired a human reader.

He unfolded the label from Han's shop. The address was still legible.

Then he went to find someone capable of telling him what he had become.