NEXUSYS 11

THE ELEVENTH BODY

He remembered dying. Nothing after.

CHAPTER 03 — THE CIVILIAN EXCEPTION

The laboratory occupied six floors of a building that did not advertise itself as a laboratory. Its street frontage offered legal translations, agricultural forecast corrections, and the temporary rental of human receptionists. Beneath the directory a smaller plate read: MINGZHOU MATERIALS & MOTION — CIVILIAN SYSTEMS ONLY. The word civilian had been printed twice, once in English and once in the narrow administrative dialect used by Shenzhen Central. Roy suspected the repetition was not intended for customers.

The woman behind the reception glass asked for his civic credential. He said he had none. She looked at his wet coat, then at a camera mounted above the exit. For an instant he expected the exchange to end there. Instead she placed a translucent slate between them and selected a field marked UNREGISTERED INSTRUMENT. “You can bring in an instrument,” she said. “You cannot be one.”

“I need an analysis.”

“Of what?”

“Me.”

The woman closed the field. A small circular light switched from green to amber behind her ear. Something had sent a question to something else. Roy heard the relay in the wall as a dry click. It occurred to him that even a refusal now possessed a chain of witnesses.

“Medical services are two sectors south.”

“They don't have the instruments.”

“Then you need a licensed military systems clinic.”

“I've been told those aren't safe.”

She watched him steadily. “Not for whom?”

Roy did not answer. The woman regarded the side of his wrist where his coat had drawn back. Under the skin a tiny, orderly pattern moved when he flexed his fingers, like fish turning beneath ice. She switched the amber light off with her thumb.

“Wait there,” she said. “Don't approach the elevators.”

He sat beneath a government poster depicting five generations of artificial limbs, all of them cleaner than the arm that held them. Below the images the text promised STANDARD PARTS, STANDARD LIVES. A blind man in an expensive coat came from the elevator and let himself out with a gesture that required no credential. His guide implant communicated with the floor in vibrations too weak for human feet to detect. Roy could feel them from the chair.

He tested this discovery by lifting one foot. The vibrations faded. With his sole against the floor they returned, each new arrival announcing itself as pressure before an elevator opened. He found he could separate the building's motors from the footsteps, the footsteps from the pulse of cooling fluid, the pulse from a narrow band of discontinuous magnetic noise rising from beneath the second floor. He had not been taught any of it. Knowledge arrived in the body without permission from the mind.

A man stepped into the lobby wearing the white collar of a civilian research license over a shirt with the cuffs undone. He was older than the receptionist and younger than his eyes. A diagnostic loupe was folded above his temple, and where his left hand should have been there was a translucent field sleeve filled with small articulated tools. He examined Roy without approaching.

“My name is Dr. Shen. I have been told you want your body measured.”

“I want to know its design life.”

“Most people ask whether it's functioning.”

“It is.”

“That's not always the same question.”

Shen considered the registration display, then covered it with a sheet of opaque paper. “An anonymous materials survey. That's what I'm authorized to perform. If we discover something clinically significant, I cannot promise the machine will keep its findings to itself.”

“Will you tell me before that happens?”

“No,” Shen said. “I can only tell you when it has.”

Roy followed him upstairs.

The examination room contained no bed. A chair stood on an isolation plinth inside a ring of adjustable instruments, some made by firms whose logos Roy recognized, others manufactured so recently that the letters seemed to move. At the back, a window looked over the recovered-water canal. A procession of drones passed between the towers with the indifferent regularity of migratory birds. Roy noted that the drones kept an unusual distance from the laboratory's upper walls.

“You've installed your own exclusion field,” he said.

“Passive interference limits. Commercial confidentiality.”

“Government drones?”

“Government drones also have clients.” Shen held up a sealable container. “Blood sample.”

Roy extended his arm. The first needle buckled at its tip. Shen examined it and said nothing. The second penetrated less than a millimeter before an internal resistance emerged against it—not a sudden armor plate, but a controlled increase in density, as if the tissue had concluded that an unfamiliar object had no reason to remain. Roy concentrated. The resistance vanished.

Shen looked at him sharply. “You did that?”

“I don't know.”

“You're going to have to get accustomed to that answer.”

The third needle withdrew a fine silver thread of liquid that did not clot. Under the desk lamp, droplets of it appeared to move against gravity for the width of a human hair. Shen shut the sample in a transparent cartridge and held it between finger and thumb. His hand sleeve began counting particles. He watched the figures without speaking.

“Conductive polymer?” Roy asked.

“No.”

“Suspension?”

“Not in the industrial sense.” Shen drew a shallow breath. “It changes phase when you ask it a question.”

He carried the cartridge to a spectrographic bench, where a narrow bar of illumination struck the liquid and broke into a complicated lattice of interference fringes. The device returned results, discarded them, and requested a new reference chemistry. Shen selected

a military materials library. The unit displayed a red warning: CIVILIAN OPERATOR / RESTRICTED DATA CLASS. He canceled it before Roy could read the secondary notice.

“Why do you think I have military material?” Roy asked.

“Because civilian biotechnology doesn't move this quickly. Because the tissue around your arm doesn't have scars where a reconstruction should have scarred. Because the sample is doing work while sitting in a cartridge without any recognizable fuel. And because your reflexes are correcting for my instruments before I move them.”

“Is it dangerous?”

“Everything is dangerous when the documentation is missing.”

Shen transferred the liquid into a microfluidic maze. An array of tiny valves alternated its path. At first the silver fraction followed the pressure gradients. Then it anticipated them. The apparatus slowed its pattern to rule out a mechanical delay; the response persisted, though the temperature rose by a fraction and the cartridge's measured mass declined beyond the expected instrument error.

Shen switched the device off.

“Did it burn?” Roy asked.

“Not exactly. A small fraction of the active medium is no longer recoverable in the form in which I received it.”

Roy felt a new, unpleasant precision settle into his understanding of the body. Its unusual capacities were not free. What the laboratory had just used could not simply be put back by resting.

“How much do I have?”

“I can't tell you until I know what it is. And now I'm not certain I should attempt to find out with a second sample.”

Shen moved to the chair. “There are ordinary questions I can answer without taking you apart. Let us start there.”

He attached noncontact probes around Roy's neck and upper torso. The room's displays mapped nerves where nerves should be, but beneath the anatomical diagram a second field appeared: a mesh of independently timed conduits, its topology changing with every

shift of Roy's breathing. The operating system proposed three interpretations—sports augmentation, rehabilitation prosthesis, synthetic control body—and rejected all of them.

A fourth option appeared on the lower panel. Shen turned that screen away.

“Tell me,” Roy said.

“I haven't learned anything reliable.”

“What was the fourth option?”

“It was an error.”

“An error with a name.”

Shen removed the loupe from his temple. “I have worked on old industrial shells, neural replacement implants, municipal service men, and three classes of military rescue chassis under contract. Your anatomy is not any of them. There are parts of it that resemble all of them, which is worse. It means either someone copied everything without understanding the boundaries—or someone no longer requires those boundaries.”

The instruments completed an internal map of Roy's skeleton. The scan showed a dense but finely perforated lattice under his marrow, with gradients in composition too smooth to have been assembled from prefabricated sections. At the wrist, tensile fibers braided themselves around a metallic bearing whose casing appeared older than the surrounding tissue. Shen requested a magnification of that component.

“Why hasn't this been replaced?” he asked, mostly to himself.

“What is it?”

“A mounting interface. Generations behind the rest. I can't read the manufacturer marking because the tissue covers part of it.”

“Can you remove it?”

Shen looked at him as if he had suggested removing a vertebra. “Not in this room. And not merely to satisfy curiosity.”

“What about my lifespan?”

Shen brought up a biological-age panel. Tissue regeneration appeared normal. Some markers had no baseline. Others indicated renewal rates inconsistent with cellular maturity. A military template would have offered a projected service interval; a civilian

template offered organ survival curves. The two disagreed so violently that the software collapsed them into a single word: INDETERMINATE.

“Are you saying I will live indefinitely?”

“I am saying the systems that estimate life expectancy do not know what species of problem you are.”

Roy considered the statement. “Someone built me. There must be a maintenance schedule.”

“There is a difference,” Shen said, “between a maintenance schedule and a death sentence.”

On the walls, a dozen diagnostic graphs continued their orderly movement. Somewhere in Roy's mind a room returned: Tyrell's vast chamber, the old man's eyes, the knowledge that designed life could be designed to end. Roy kept his face still. Shen watched him with the particular patience of someone trained to wait for an involuntary response.

“What is your earliest memory?” Shen asked.

“That isn't what I'm paying you to find.”

“You haven't paid me.”

“Then what are you being paid for?”

The silence between them changed. Shen glanced toward the small internal camera that the receptionist had assured him was inactive. Roy heard a relay click again. This time it sounded twice, one contact beside the room and another several floors below. A data exchange had completed.

Shen said, too casually, “How did you find this facility?”

“An engineer gave me an address.”

“A name?”

“Han.”

Shen's expression tightened. “He should have warned you.”

“About what?”

“The system classifies anomalies before the doctor finishes looking at them.” He turned the displays inward and began cutting power to the auxiliary instruments. “Do you remember whether the receptionist asked you to register yourself?”

“She said I couldn't.”

“Then the building registered you as an instrument. Unknown architecture, independent cognition, no claimant. Those three fields trigger a preservation notification. It doesn't matter whether I approve it.”

“Preservation.”

“That's the word they use when the object might be valuable.”

The ceiling speaker gave a soft tone. A municipal voice announced that the examination suite had been reassigned to a priority audit. Neither Roy nor Shen moved.

“How long?” Roy asked.

“Until they arrive? The notification already left. Until they identify you? Possibly minutes. Until they learn I spoke to you? Less.”

Shen opened a storage drawer and produced a paper slip instead of transmitting an address. It contained a grid reference and an old-fashioned printed stamp depicting a hand with seven fingers. “I didn't see this interface,” he said. “I didn't see the sample. I will write that the instrument left before full analysis.”

“Who can tell me what I am?”

“Someone willing to perform work our licenses prohibit. Someone who doesn't regard a body as a property category.”

“A black-market surgeon?”

“A specialist. There is a distinction, though the law has erased it.”

“Where?”

“Start with the repair galleries beneath the eastern viaduct. Ask about the seven-finger seal, and do not show the mark to any machine.”

Roy folded the slip. On the terminal behind Shen, the silver liquid's analysis remained incomplete. Beneath several lines of chemical uncertainty, the instrument had added a

descriptor in a machine-generated hand: NONSTANDARD ELECTROACTIVE TRANSPORT / SELF-OPTIMIZING. It was not a name. Roy would learn the name much later.

The hallway beyond the room was empty. Shen directed him through a maintenance stairwell, because the main elevators had been assigned an inspection cycle. Before Roy left, the doctor caught his sleeve.

“One more thing. You asked how long you have. Don't use whatever gives you those reflexes unless you need them. The medium changed while I tested it. I don't know whether the loss matters at the scale of a body. I know it won't reverse merely because you wait.”

Roy looked down at the clean skin of his arm. “Then I won't give it away for free.”

The doctor nodded. “A reasonable principle in this city.”

Roy entered the stairwell. Six floors below, the municipal voice was still reassuring the lobby that services continued without interruption.

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Two hundred kilometers of administrative fiber separated the examination room from a government processing cluster in the eastern district. The record traveled the distance in fractions of a second and then waited for fourteen seconds because the classification server had been instructed to behave as though human oversight were involved.

ANOMALOUS SYNTHETIC ARCHITECTURE.

CIVILIAN SCAN SOURCE: MINGZHOU MATERIALS & MOTION.

OWNER: NONE.

SERVICE LIFE: UNRESOLVED.

The server submitted the packet to the Unified Synthetic Registry. The registry applied a sequence of increasingly old classification schemes. New systems liked to believe they were comprehensive, but their most sensitive pathways still depended on antique definitions buried in earlier generations of state software. The unidentified architecture passed through the modern categories and touched a legacy rule so old that no one in the local office remembered why it had been retained.

The rule did not identify the subject. It prohibited destruction of the evidence.

PRESERVE ORIGINAL ARCHITECTURE.

REFER TO DIRECTORATE.

At the same moment, in a different part of Shenzhen, an autonomous inspection unit descended from its ceiling mount and entered the pedestrian circulation system. Its skin resembled an ordinary civilian enforcement shell. Its optical assembly was not ordinary. It contained a magnetometric aperture whose sensitivity was wasted on pickpockets and quota violators but valuable for tracing the persistent magnetic noise left by advanced synthetic tissues.

A second machine moved along the canals on silent articulated legs. Overhead drones changed nothing about their visible flight paths, but the data they collected began to converge on the laboratory.

No single machine knew why the unknown person mattered. The network could pursue him without receiving an explanation.

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In Okkyō, in the government quarter built around a railway station whose platforms had long ago been enclosed by ministries, a man named Kawamura was reading a report about municipal replacement bodies when an older priority indicator activated at the edge of his desk.

He was not surprised by the interruption. He was surprised by the wording.

LEGACY EXCEPTION / SYNTHETIC SUBJECT.

He touched the report. A familiar list of dimensions appeared, then a material profile that the system refused to reduce to any class. The captured trace contained a fragment of a device interface of unmistakably obsolete geometry. Around that fragment, the rest of the body seemed to belong to no production decade at all.

His assistant, a male humanoid with a face constructed to communicate professional concern, asked whether the alert should be routed to the military recovery office.

“No,” Kawamura said.

“The incident is within its jurisdiction.”

“Jurisdiction follows classification. This has not been classified.”

“The office has issued a preliminary request for lethal containment.”

“Deny it.”

The assistant hesitated for a duration that would have been invisible in a person. “The minister's office may request an explanation.”

“Then it shall have one. Send two retrieval units. No public operation and no ballistic weapons. Do not let the subject leave Shenzhen Central.”

Kawamura enlarged the image of the old mounting interface. Long ago a research proposal had crossed his desk with similar proportions and a cost estimate concealed inside a water-management budget. The proposal had been associated with a woman whose experiments were supposed to have ended with the dissolution of a corporation that no longer existed.

He had funded that project. Later he had been instructed to recover what remained of it. Neither task had been completed to his satisfaction.

The assistant asked, “Director, is there a likely manufacturer?”

“No manufacturer,” Kawamura said. “A lineage.”

He closed the visible diagnostic report and opened a private archive untouched by the shared analytical systems. The archive required no cloud calculation. Its oldest files had been rendered to inert images and kept outside the decision engines that administered the state's official knowledge.

One of those images showed a human face, badly resolved, photographed through laboratory glass. There was a name beneath it, but Kawamura did not read the name aloud.

He instructed the assistant to revoke the military office's access to the current scan.

“Do we inform the minister?” the humanoid asked.

“Of an unidentified instrument? Not yet. The minister prefers results.”

“And the civilian laboratory?”

“Maintain its license until we have interviewed the personnel. People become unhelpful when they think the state has already condemned them.”

After the assistant left, Kawamura watched the uncertain architecture rotate on his desk. The system had rendered it as a blue abstraction: bones without bones, nerves without nerves, a few surviving shapes from a dead technology. He reduced it to the fragment of old hardware and held the image there.

There were forms of knowledge which had survived the corporation that created them. There were other forms which the government had been unable to reproduce even when provided with funds, labor, and machines intelligent enough to redesign entire cities. A material could be copied. A process could be copied. But a method of deciding which part of a living system must not be copied was a different order of secret.

Kawamura did not send that thought to any device.

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By the time Roy reached the eastern viaduct, the afternoon had become the color of used steel. He could hear the drones above the traffic but could not distinguish their new interest in him from the ordinary appetite of the city. He had the paper slip in one pocket and a revised understanding of his body in the other, if an understanding could be carried without proof.

The doctor had been unable to name his lifespan. He had been able to demonstrate one irrecoverable expense.

A machine on a low maintenance rail rolled across the mouth of an alley ahead. It paused, turned a sensor toward him, then continued as if it had found nothing of interest. Roy felt a movement begin beneath his skin: a preparatory tightening, too fast to be voluntary. He stopped it. The machine crossed out of sight.

He waited until the impulse receded. Whatever intelligence had been put into his muscles was eager to solve problems by moving through them. The intelligence in his head—older, bitterer, and now more cautious—had begun to suspect the cost.

On a wall above the viaduct, a state display presented the latest proposal for synthetic labor harmonization. It described equitable service cycles, reliable renewal, and the necessity of a common administrative horizon. The term six-year standard appeared near the bottom in a font small enough to be mistaken for a footnote.

Roy read it twice. The wall did not mention who had been asked whether six years were enough.

Far beneath the traffic he saw the first repair gallery: dozens of stalls stacked behind translucent curtains, orange lights moving across exposed prosthetic joints, solvent steam escaping into the rain. A handwritten sign warned that all diagnostic work was performed without cloud connection. Another offered bodies on monthly credit. Between them a small painted hand possessed seven fingers.

Roy descended the steps and let the noise of the repair market close around him. He had come to Shenzhen wanting the name of the person who had brought him back. Instead he had discovered that the state had noticed him, his body contained substances no one could identify, and even winning a fight might take something he could not replace.

In the gallery's wavering orange light, a repairman was teaching a child to calibrate a synthetic hand with two missing fingers. The child watched the movement as though mechanical fingers could still learn to forgive their own absence.

Roy went toward the seven-finger sign. Behind him, across the viaduct, a surveillance unit stopped beneath an awning and raised its face toward the descending stairs.

The city's machines were still collecting evidence. Now, somewhere beyond the city, a man had begun to read it.