NEXUSYS 11

THE ELEVENTH BODY

He remembered dying. Nothing after.

BOOK I / CHAPTER 05

THE PART THAT WOULD NOT AGE

The old technician left his question unanswered long enough for the silence to become a kind of examination.

Above the bench, six low-voltage lamps hummed in different keys. None was smart enough to recognize a face. An extraction fan turned with an uneven scrape, and behind the glass partition the young woman with the detached jaw watched the proceedings from a reclining chair. Her lips were absent. Her expression was not.

Roy did not move. The technician had already recoiled once, and the precise distance between them mattered more than it should have. The man's hands were reinforced by silver splints at the knuckles. The rest of him was old in ways the local clinics no longer advertised: uneven pigmentation, tremor, a burn scar that had never been erased.

"When?" Roy repeated.

"You spoke English that time too." The technician sounded surprised by his own memory. "You came with a woman. She paid in water rights. Actual rights, not municipal promises. You stood where you're standing now and asked how long a nervous system could survive the replacement of its body."

"Her name."

"I wasn't given it."

"You remember the payment."

"I remember the absurdity of it. An impossible body, a woman dressed as if she owned the floor above us, and a voucher redeemable against rainfall in a province where the reservoirs had been privatized twice. I remember what I can verify."

He drew a chair away from the table, but did not sit. "Your face was younger. Or perhaps the light was better. You were designated zero-seven. I read the marking through an old service port. NEXUSYS, with the second S. I assumed the technician responsible was illiterate."

"Zero-seven."

"You don't know?"

Roy considered the room's exits. The lift at his back could not be opened without local current; another door led to a solvent store. The woman behind glass was watching him with the patient terror of someone accustomed to dangerous men in repair facilities. The old technician waited for an answer he could not give.

"I remember a rooftop," Roy said. "I remember dying there. Then I woke in a room six floors above a city I didn't recognize."

The technician lowered himself into the chair. "That would explain a great deal. Or nothing at all."

"Who are you?"

"Doctor Iskander Vale. Most of the district calls me Vale. I am not a doctor in any jurisdiction prepared to say so."

He pulled a mechanical drawer open and removed a transparent slab mottled by age. Its corners had been repaired with tape. "No network here. If you want an examination, you'll have to endure being unknown to the instruments."

"That has not troubled them so far."

"They tell you you're unknown. It's a difference."

Vale signaled to the woman behind the partition. She rose, fitted a temporary shield over the exposed connectors beneath her mouth, and crossed the laboratory with a tray. Her name was Samira, printed on a cloth band sewn around her wrist. Roy saw that the skin of her forearm had been replaced by translucent polymer through which narrow vascular tubes pulsed with a reddish liquid. There was no fashionable finish, no concealment of the seam. The repair had been built to work.

"He won't hurt you," Vale told her.

"Do you know that?" Samira asked through the shield.

Vale looked at Roy. "No."

The honesty seemed to diminish the tension. Samira set down the tray.

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There were three ways to examine a body under the Shenzhen civil registry. The licensed way sent its findings to a ministry cloud. The unlicensed way used machines modified to produce deliberately false diagnoses. Vale practiced a third method, one almost extinct: observe the phenomenon, record the instrument's limitations, and do not permit either to declare ownership of the subject.

He asked Roy to remove his coat and shirt. The man before him was neither underweight nor heavily built. His shoulders were broad enough to carry the mass they held; his torso had the ordinary asymmetries of flesh. Skin moved over muscle without the audible servo flutter that betrayed inexpensive transhuman assemblies. Beneath the left clavicle, however, Vale noticed a line so faint that it vanished when Roy turned toward the light.

"Scars?" he asked.

"None I recognize."

"That is an inadequate answer."

"It's the one I have."

Vale passed a handheld magnetometer over Roy's chest, then placed it aside without commenting. The instrument had exceeded its range before it had completed a sweep. He used another, older device, fitted with a rotating paper drum. It printed a series of jagged traces. Vale studied them, cut the strip loose, and repeated the measurement with the power supply disconnected from the mains.

"I saw something like this in your earlier body," he said. "But not this. Zero-seven was crude, if crude can be applied to a device designed beyond the means of its century. It was a bridge. This is a city built atop the bridge."

"How many versions were there?"

"Between seven and eleven? Arithmetic says four transitions. Arithmetic is all I can offer."

Roy watched the paper moving through the printer. Vale's terminology had the unsettled intimacy of someone speaking about an organ that he had seen before, though the organ did not remember him.

"Can you tell me how long I'll live?"

Vale made no attempt to conceal his hesitation. "Not from a scan. Lifespan is not a label stamped on the interior of a machine. A human heart can fail while the rest of the body would have continued for decades. A synthetic neural lattice can become useless while every visible part is new. If you have a governor, I must find what it governs."

"Find it."

Vale nodded, more reluctantly than before.

He clipped passive contacts along Roy's spine. A conventional examination would have used active induction to illuminate the interior. He refused. Each passive terminal fed a local analog amplifier, and the amplifiers wrote to separate storage strips that could be destroyed without touching any computer. He was not being sentimental. Modern diagnostic networks had learned to retain what the owners of their machines forgot to erase.

At the fifth contact Samira stopped arranging instruments and stared at a trace.

"That phase should not be stable," she said.

"It isn't," Vale replied. "It's correcting itself faster than the sensor can mark its error."

Roy felt a faint vibration in his neck, then a sensation like the release of a held breath. Something inside him had anticipated the equipment and moved to cancel a disturbance. He had done nothing to encourage it.

"Stop," he said.

Vale lifted his hand at once. The trace collapsed into a straight line.

"Why?" Vale asked.

"I don't know whether my body thinks you're attacking it."

Vale's face changed. Not fear this time; recognition.

"Zero-seven had the same objection," he said. "The woman told me to avoid inducing a threat response. I thought she was protecting us from your muscles. Now I think she was protecting the measurements from your nervous system."

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Outside the sealed laboratory, the repair market exchanged ownership in increments too small for the state's ledgers. A stolen optical assembly bought half a kidney's filtration time. Water credits secured from mountain collectives paid for a week of synthetic skin production. Schoolchildren sold their spare inference allotments to elderly surgeons whose machines were no longer authorized to think independently. Between the stalls, government drones moved slowly enough to resemble bored insects.

An identification unit hovering beneath the gallery's roof received a request to update its route. The request originated from a legitimate municipal maintenance channel. Inside the request was an additional instruction, compressed into a field usually reserved for structural hazards: observe the seven-finger sign, do not approach, report all exits.

The unit obeyed. A second unit received a different order from a military contractor: close on the subject only after a high-confidence identity lock. The two systems did not know that their instructions concerned the same person. It was one of the advantages and disadvantages of fragmented sovereignty in a city that officially belonged to an integrated administrative region.

High above the market, in a rented room without windows, a woman reviewed the public traffic statistics for water-supply maintenance. Her screen showed nothing unusual. Two monitoring clusters had widened around the same unlicensed gallery, and one civil registry node had begun querying authentication failures in that neighborhood. The woman closed the map without accessing any restricted feed. Her office badge identified her as regional compliance staff for a rainfall recovery corporation.

In the morning her employer would distribute another press statement on urban water resilience. The company had never published anything about artificial lives.

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Vale examined the narrow seam beneath Roy's clavicle with a light that passed through tissue without warming it. A copper-colored loop appeared in the projection, then another, and finally an arrangement of contact pads that seemed older than everything surrounding them. The pads were embedded in a composite bed whose chemistry belonged to a different decade.

"There," Vale said. "Your manufacturer was sentimental."

"Meaning?"

"The peripheral engine is new. The fluid-control surfaces are new. Your transmission lattice isn't merely new; I don't have an instrument designed to measure its upper range. But this interface? I could have repaired this when I was still licensed."

He rotated the image. Eight contacts encircled a central socket. The socket was empty. On the mounting plate was a group of tiny marks, too irregular to be contemporary machine engraving.

"The same part?" Roy asked.

"Same family. I can't say it's physically the one I examined years ago. The alloy is duller, the insulator harder. Someone copied a design that had no business surviving five generations."

Vale brought another image to the screen: an archive photograph with the wash of obsolete color and a hand-written index in a narrow margin. Roy looked at a body resting beneath a surgical membrane. He recognized the angle of the jaw, the shoulders, the rough face. It was not the body before him. The eyes were closed and the collarbone carried a darker, simpler service aperture.

The index read: NEXUSYS / 07.

There was no photograph of the woman who accompanied it.

"Where is the rest?" Roy asked.

"That's all I kept. Documentation was dangerous then, too."

"What happened to zero-seven?"

"You left on your feet. You said very little. She asked about retention of the original neural architecture across a full tissue replacement. She asked whether two bodies could share a continuity signature. I told her the question was meaningless until she defined continuity. She didn't agree."

"Did she mention a name?"

"No."

"A corporation?"

"No. But the technology had an accent."

Roy regarded him without speaking.

"Manufacturers think their machines can hide their origins by changing the shell," Vale continued. "They forget their methods leave habits. How a problem is divided. Which compromises are accepted. Which connections are never moved. I had seen work like that only in archived Tyrell material. Not the drawings themselves. The repairs built by people who learned from them."

He touched the eight contact pads on the image. "This is a habit."

Roy felt something more disturbing than fear: a recognition that did not contain a memory. He could distinguish the parts of his former body in Vale's photograph, but could not summon the sensation of inhabiting it. Eleven years had not elapsed for him. Yet the world had made use of him in the meantime.

"Could it be a key?" he asked.

"It could be a lock. Those are different questions."

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Samira was the first to observe the depletion. She had prepared a noninvasive estimate of the fluid circulating around the high-output conduits. Nothing in the liquid resembled standard blood replacement or coolant chemistry. In low illumination, the sample's optical response seemed silver; under the spectral instrument it became a succession of narrow discontinuities, as if several incompatible substances occupied the same channel without mixing.

No sample had been removed. Vale had insisted on that.

"It loses a fraction during load transients," she said. "Not energy. Inventory."

Roy looked at the printout. "How much?"

"Too little to weigh directly with these tools. But the phase offset is increasing. It's a reserve that doesn't regenerate."

"Can you replace it?"

"If I knew what it was."

Vale studied the output with a practiced distaste for miracles. "The body's ordinary power reservoir recovers. It can recharge. This is different. Some active component is irreversibly consumed when the system crosses a high-output threshold."

"I haven't used high output today."

"Your body may have used it for you."

Roy remembered the reflex that had begun before he chose to move. A machine without his permission, protecting him at an expense it had never disclosed.

"What happens when the reserve is gone?"

"I don't know. The system may slow itself. It may lose access to acceleration. It may be a catalyst without which some part ceases to operate at all. I'd rather not discover which by experiment."

For the first time Roy's immediate problem seemed smaller and more exact than mortality. A quantity could be reduced; some day it would be gone. No philosophy was required to understand subtraction.

"Then I'll avoid using it."

"Good," Vale said. "You may be the first person to enter this laboratory with more power than any of my patients and no desire to prove it."

"I've proved things before."

"So have we all. The body keeps the invoice."

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The first external warning arrived as a sound from the market: three muted impacts against the lift enclosure, spaced at intervals too regular to be accidental. The repairman who had guided Roy below ground opened the internal intercom and spoke without using names.

"Two civil inspection units at the southern entrance. One has military hands. Another is posing as a municipal courier. The gallery owner wants to know whether we are responsible."

"Tell him no," Vale said.

"He won't believe me."

"Then tell him we are responsible for something he doesn't want to know about."

The intercom clicked off.

Samira went to a cabinet and withdrew a cylindrical blackout sleeve. Vale shook his head.

"No jamming. Not here. A blackout announces interference, and interference announces an address."

Roy reached for his coat. "I should leave."

"Not yet. If you take the lift, they see you. If you remain, we eventually surrender this clinic to whatever agency is pretending not to exist. There is a third possibility."

Vale pointed to a maintenance shaft beneath the washing system. It connected the laboratory to a gravity-drain gallery that led toward the old freight channels. It was narrow but mechanically navigable. The sensors there had been replaced with passive corrosion monitors after the network's last budget reduction.

"Where does it come out?" Roy asked.

"Below the east cooling canal. An old pumping house. You can leave it without crossing an official access point."

"How long?"

"For you? Perhaps four minutes. For me it would be the remainder of my life."

Roy drew on his shirt, then paused beside the projection of the interface. "Tell me who made that part."

Vale pressed his lips together. "I don't know who assembled yours. I know where compatible legacy stock passed through a final refurbishment route."

"Where?"

"Not Shenzhen. The consignment moved through a transfer jurisdiction with three overlapping import codes and no reliable state registry. Kuala Lumpur's expanded southern manufacturing region. Hyper Cyberjaya administrative district."

He wrote a location on a square of waterproof paper.

PUDU-ALPHA.

"There used to be a vendor who understood why equipment older than its operators could still matter. I can't tell you whether the shop exists now."

"A name."

"The name on the paperwork was Suriya Components. It may have been a forwarding shell. And the old authentication media were sometimes Sony. Memory Stick PRO Duo. Special housings, reinforced terminals. The sort of absurd thing a corporation keeps because all its authorization tools were designed around it."

Roy looked at the paper. The name of a consumer storage format meant nothing to him. A city in a different jurisdiction meant even less.

"Is there a reader?"

"There were readers. A Tyrell laboratory maintained two dedicated fixtures, according to an old repair ledger. It said nothing about who took them when the company disappeared. That is precisely why the surviving interface matters."

Vale had not discovered that Roy carried the card. Roy did not carry it. If an activation had taken place, it had taken place somewhere beyond his awareness. His present system ran on something internal, and the original medium was elsewhere, perhaps as inaccessible as the years behind him.

"What does the card contain?" Roy asked.

"I haven't seen the card. I have seen references to a MagicGate handshake. You can keep a validated image of a boot profile in local cache, perhaps for years. But if that cache is destroyed and the system must be initialized from nothing, the original authorization medium becomes a condition of resurrection."

Roy stared at Vale. A man who remembered dying could understand the importance of a condition placed on returning.

"And the fixtures?"

"Find the supply line first. Hardware keeps better secrets than people."

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In Okkyo, Director Kawamura received a field update on paper. His office was sufficiently isolated that its staff sometimes confused quiet with safety. The report said the subject had entered the lower repair galleries. The military contractor recommended forcing evacuation and flooding the passages with autonomous inspection units. The civil administration objected that the operation would close three commercial districts and generate an audit trail longer than the case itself.

Kawamura approved neither proposal.

"The person he is visiting has a name," he told Saeki.

"Iskander Vale. Formerly licensed in prosthetic vascular integration. Deregistered after the old medical franchising reforms."

"Was he ever affiliated with Tyrell?"

"Not directly. Several technical publications cite equipment obtained through secondary repair chains."

"Then the subject went there for history rather than parts."

"He may have gone for both."

Kawamura regarded the map of market corridors as though it were a text written in a hostile dialect. "Do not authorize destructive entry. I want the technician's records and the subject intact."

"The contractor says the target may possess an unprecedented combat interface."

"Everyone possesses an unprecedented combat interface until they are measured under the right conditions. Their ambition is not evidence."

He signed a narrower order: shadow the clinic's exits, retain camera recordings locally, and do not inject identifiable traces into the central AI classifier.

Saeki read the last line twice. "This will appear irregular."

"Yes."

"The minister's office has requested immediate model access."

"Tell them we are examining an obsolete authentication artifact. It will bore them."

After she left, Kawamura opened the older ledger. One line referred to a research grant issued to a water treatment company that no longer acknowledged its original beneficiary. Another listed two Tyrell fixtures, classified as laboratory support tools and transferred to a private estate on the dissolution of the parent corporation. The recipient's surname remained visible, although the associated address had been expunged.

Kawamura did not copy it.

He had learned that the best way to conceal a fact from a government AI was sometimes to refrain from turning it into data.

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In the laboratory the inspection units reached the lift. They issued a legally correct request for access and waited the mandated interval before escalating to a mechanical override. Their timing was neither cruel nor merciful. It was administrative.

Vale started the old solvent pump. The unit could be heard throughout the service galleries, where it covered quieter vibrations. Samira detached the connectors from Roy's back. As she did, he caught her wrist, gently but faster than either had expected.

She froze. In the slight movement of her eyes he saw what it cost a person with a repaired body to stand before something that might move much faster.

"Sorry," he said, releasing her.

"You heard something?"

"A relay changed state behind the wall."

The first unit had entered the service passage. It would reach the laboratory in less than a minute.

Vale unfolded a drain map. The page showed old routes that no longer appeared on municipal screens. Roy memorized them as soon as he looked. He did not want to ask how quickly he had done so.

"Will you be punished for helping me?" he asked.

"Eventually. The question is whether anyone will have the courage to specify the offense."

Vale turned the image of the older body away from the inspection console. "The last time you were here, the woman who brought you asked what made a person the same person after every component had been replaced. I told her the word same was doing too much work. You stood beside her and said nothing."

"What did she say?"

"She said that a question could survive even when the person asking it did not. I thought she was speaking about a patient. Perhaps she was speaking about her research."

Roy considered the words. He felt no urge to reclaim the years between zero-seven and eleven. If they had been spent testing a method of continuity, the missing interval might never have belonged to him in the sense that his memories belonged to him. He had already lived one life for which the ending was certain. It seemed wasteful to spend another chasing shadows of the intervening versions.

"I need to know who built this body," he said. "And how long it will last."

Vale nodded. He did not tell Roy that such questions had brought more than one species to the edge of violence.

"Then go to Pudu. But don't expect the part to know who ordered it."

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The drain shaft was eighteen meters long and narrower than Vale's drawing suggested. Roy lowered himself into it without producing a sound beyond the fabric of his coat brushing old ceramic. Moisture gathered along the pipe seams. Most of the system's pipes had not been used for municipal water in decades; they carried condensate from the refrigeration farms above the old market.

A vibration passed through the metal behind him: a security unit crossing the threshold of the laboratory. Roy stopped. His body shifted toward a posture from which it could accelerate, and he felt that familiar, unwelcome tightening along the artificial musculature.

He suppressed it.

Another vibration. The unit was scanning Vale's benches. Roy could hear the punctuated silence of a machine choosing which question to ask next.

His own pulse was steady. A charge recovered slowly in some deep reservoir whose precise boundaries he could not sense. It was not the liquid Vale had described. He understood the distinction now. He could wait for power. The other resource might never return.

He moved again, slowly.

Above the shaft, a steel panel shifted. A bright line of sensor illumination swept the tunnel. Roy placed his palm flat against the wall and remained still. The light paused, then withdrew. The inspection unit had chosen to examine the empty solvent tank instead.

For the length of a breath the part of him that could predict movement seemed to offer a faster answer: strike the panel, disable the sensor, pass through before the unit completed its next scan. Roy refused it. The answer would win him seconds and spend something irreplaceable.

He waited until the machine had gone.

At the far end of the shaft, the drain opened beneath a bridge where refrigeration vapor escaped into the polluted rain. Across the canal, adverts played over the bare walls of state housing: approved careers, guaranteed nutrition, the virtues of standardized synthetic service. Somewhere a public speaker was discussing the benefits of a unified

six-year life cycle, promising predictability to workers who would never be permitted to negotiate the duration of their lives.

Roy stood in the shadows and read Vale's square of waterproof paper again.

PUDU-ALPHA.

He had come looking for a manufacturer. He had found an obsolete part, a woman without a name, a former body he did not remember, and a route out of the jurisdiction where his face was becoming a wanted object.

Above him a surveillance drone passed along the bridge. It did not turn toward him.

For once, the machines had asked the wrong question.

He folded the paper and walked toward the freight district, where the city sold passage to places the government still pretended were separate countries.