He remembered dying. Nothing after.

BOOK I / CHAPTER 07

THE JURISDICTION OF WATER

The room had once measured water and now measured absence.

Its walls were lined with porcelain mounting plates from which the instruments had been removed. Yellow outlines remained beneath the grime, rows of rectangular ghosts descending to the floor. Nadira closed the door behind them. Roy counted two physical locks and a third sound, a thin mechanical settling inside the hinge. No wireless challenge announced itself. It was an unusual feeling: entering a place that did not ask permission from anything beyond its walls.

Three people waited around a table of obsolete meters. A broad-shouldered woman was repairing a paper feed on a thermal printer. A boy, perhaps fourteen, had a blue cable tied around his wrist, not connected to a device. The third was an elderly man whose hands trembled while his eyes remained still. On the table was a glass of water covered with a saucer.

Nadira put down her terminal. 'The passenger is here.'

The old man examined Roy's coat, not his face. 'Passenger implies destination. Has he one?'

'Pudu-Alpha.'

The printer stopped. The boy looked at the elderly man. Their response was too synchronized to be surprise. Roy tried to identify what sort of authority a place-name could carry across the southern exchange.

'Suriya Components,' he said.

Nadira did not rebuke him. 'You see? He wants a supplier, and he believes naming a supplier is a harmless thing.'

'In which market?' asked the man.

'I don't know.'

'Then you are the kind of customer they wait for.'

The woman restarted the printer. A narrow strip emerged, bearing what looked like a railway timetable and what was actually a sequence of municipal water allocations. Two reservoirs, four transfer gates, a drainage interval. Roy understood the characters and the calculations without knowing how. Something inside him assigned a probability to every time printed on the paper. The certainty displeased him.

'Your route,' Nadira said, 'exists between contracts, not countries. Shenzhen's unification offices count the freight. The southern cooperatives count the water. An Arab trade authority counts the bond. The people who maintain the machines count their own children. Every one of them believes the others are a temporary inconvenience.'

'Which of them controls the crossing?'

'All of them. That is why it works.'

The old man lifted the saucer from the glass. 'Drink,' he said.

Roy watched the water. It was clear. Trace particulates swam in it, too small for an ordinary eye, and a faint lattice of synthetic minerals reflected the overhead light. He did not know how he knew what they were. He did not drink.

'Not thirsty?' the man asked.

'I don't know whether I need it.'

'An honest answer,' said Nadira. 'We almost never hear those.'

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At the central ministry, the same route appeared as an absence on Kawamura's screen.

No sanctioned passenger movement had followed the unknown synthetic from the freight terminal. No biometric crossing had occurred. Yet a network of secondary observers had recorded small disturbances: a weight differential in a refrigerated carrier, an unauthorized release of vapor, a surveillance sphere diverted by a heat anomaly whose geometry fitted no natural source. Together the reports formed the outline of a departure, but each belonged to a different administrative authority. The state could see a man only by deciding what constituted the man.

Kawamura refused the automatic consolidation.

'If you label every contradiction as a single person,' he told his assistant, 'the network learns the category before we do.'

His assistant was a humanoid whose skin had the texture of paper worked until it became translucent. On her wrist, a thin official seal identified a licensed administrative body. She had no visible interest in that distinction.

'The fusion engine recommends a synthetic continuity event,' she said.

'Recommendations are how secrets become public.'

'Public to whom?'

'Not the public.'

He removed a fiber cartridge from his desk and placed it inside a reader with an independent power supply. A diagram appeared, then collapsed into a blank rectangle when his assistant shifted her gaze. Kawamura had designed the terminal to resist machine optical recording, though he knew the distinction between eyes and sensors was becoming ceremonial.

The diagram represented a corporate disbursement from eleven years earlier. It named no replicant. It described research into bounded life cycles and the economic hazards of indefinitely maintained synthetic labor. A woman had signed the expenditure, using a corporate identity that no longer existed. Kawamura knew the name she used privately. He also knew that the research had never been concluded in the files that could be queried by state models.

'Issue a preservation notice on the southern routes,' he said. 'No destructive action. No automated dissemination of structural scans.'

'The regional command will request justification.'

'Give them a water-purity inspection.'

'It is not a water-purity matter.'

'It will be when they read it.'

He looked back at the blank display. The state proposed to give synthetic labor six years, long enough to develop competence and too brief, its planners believed, to accumulate independent political memory. The language of the policy was generous. It spoke of renewal, equal service, the fair distribution of maintenance resources. Kawamura had helped write portions of it. The generosity lay in the grammar, not in the number.

The unknown man moving south had already lived longer than the planning models permitted. Kawamura wanted him intact, but the order was now traveling through a system that obeyed policy faster than any superior could correct it.

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The border was a calculation performed upon a rainstorm.

After three hours in Nadira's custody, Roy descended with her into an industrial culvert where water entered a bank of filtration vessels through transparent pipes. The large pipes were labeled with proprietary codes; the small ones bore handwritten names. Across the floor ran an open channel with a narrow sheet of flowing water. Beyond it stood a doorway and a second set of signs. The signs declared a commercial district, a religious endowment and a restricted technical corridor. None of them declared a nation.

Nadira carried a sealed parcel of inspection membranes. The parcel contained real membranes; the papers on them did not correspond to their destination. The old man had supplied a customs signature from an office that had ceased to exist three ministries ago. Its authority survived because no successor institution had accepted the legal obligation to cancel it.

'Never challenge a government over what it believes it has abolished,' Nadira said. 'The past is the only regulation that stays employed.'

In the narrow passage they encountered a procession of maintenance workers wearing filtered masks. Two spoke Malay. One answered in Arabic. A woman turned toward a wall and completed a short prayer before pulling her gloves tight and rejoining the group. No one stopped work for her, and no one hurried her. Roy saw the sequence of movements as an allocation of time that the ministry would have considered inefficient. Its precision felt familiar for reasons he could not name.

At the inspection chamber, a man with a shaved head sat beneath a fan and read a printed book. A scanning arch stood behind him with its sensors wrapped in protective plastic. The arch was not broken. A handwritten notice explained that it had been disconnected pending settlement of a jurisdictional dispute over ownership of its recorded identities.

The man asked Nadira a question in Arabic. She answered and gave him the parcel. He weighed it with his hand, then nodded toward Roy.

'New engineer?'

'Old machinery,' Nadira said.

The man considered the answer. 'Everything here is.'

He looked down at his book as they passed.

Roy waited until they were beyond hearing. 'He didn't verify me.'

'He verified the thing that was his responsibility.'

'And if I were dangerous?'

'Then perhaps you would have crossed legally, with a security escort and a letter of purpose.'

The words contained an accusation, but not against him. Roy began to distinguish the region from the market he had left. The state controlled people by attaching identities to bodies. Here the bodies remained visible but the contracts attached to them could be exchanged, inherited or refused. It was not freedom. It was a competing technology of obligation.

A faded advertisement on the wall offered access to a peaceful virtual habitat. Residents could surrender most physical residence claims in exchange for maintenance insurance and permanent space in a collectively governed simulation. Beneath it someone had scratched a line in English: PARADISE HAS A POWER BILL.

Roy read it twice.

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He learned about his depletion in a room used for sleeping.

Nadira had secured an hour beneath a pump station while waiting for the next transport vessel. The bed was a folding sheet suspended on straps; the room smelled of distilled moisture and warm ceramic. A wall display sold advertisements to travelers whenever a body was detected. Roy disconnected it at the cable. Its last image was a smiling child beside the words SIX YEARS OF CERTAINTY.

He removed his coat and inspected the inner surface of his wrist. Nothing there indicated that the body had ever been opened. His skin looked human, though the motion of certain tendons was too smooth. He tried to initiate the state he had reached during the freight inspection, the state in which every movement of another machine became a set of expected outcomes.

It came instantly. The room slowed, or rather his attention multiplied until the fan overhead seemed divided into a hundred discrete positions. He could hear pressure differences inside the valves beyond the wall. A drop fell from the condensation line. He anticipated its impact three beats before it touched the floor.

Then he let the state end.

The power he had expended began recovering. He felt its return without a gauge, a replenishment analogous to fatigue vanishing from muscle. Beneath it, however, a second quantity had become smaller. This other number did not respond to rest. There was no

language attached to it, no warning, only a certainty that something had been irreversibly used.

He understood the distinction now. Recovery was not replenishment.

For an instant a metallic taste crossed his tongue, though the air contained no metal he could detect. He stood carefully and let the room resume its ordinary velocity.

Nadira found him at the sink, washing hands that needed no washing.

'How far can you run?' she asked.

'I don't know.'

'How long can you keep running?'

'Less than I thought.'

She looked at him for a long moment. 'Good. People who know they're finite are easier to travel with.'

'I may not be finite in the way you mean.'

'Everyone is finite in a way someone else can exploit.'

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They traveled on a water-accounting vessel whose cargo was not water. Officially it delivered filtration membrane stock to a cooperative licensed by three systems of commercial law. Actually it carried replacement joints, rejected medical actuators, two sealed vats of enzyme substrate, and thirty-seven people whose legal descriptions were deliberately inconsistent.

The vessel moved beneath a mesh canopy that turned sunlight into a dirty silver light. Roy saw a child with mechanical legs eating rice beside a woman with ordinary arms and a military cortical socket. A former army pilot described a virtual city in which age was a preference setting. A merchant argued that the city could not be peaceful because its servers consumed energy purchased from the same governments it claimed to have escaped. The argument continued through three languages and a transfer of tea.

Nadira answered none of their questions about Roy. They decided he was a failed civil servant, then a warehouse supervisor, then a foreign technician. He did not correct them. A cover story was more secure when supplied by the observers themselves.

In the afternoon a surveillance glider appeared far above the canopy. Its underside was matte black and otherwise unmarked. Roy sensed it before he saw it: not a sound but a

reorganization of pressure in the open air. He stepped beneath a loading frame. Nadira noticed the movement and covered an inspection slate with her sleeve.

'Government?' he asked.

'Whose government?'

'The one that sent it.'

'There are five answers to that question within a hundred kilometers.'

The glider hovered and began a slow orbit. On the boat, conversations changed rhythm. The pilot reduced speed. A mechanic opened a brass housing and turned a crank that seemed connected to nothing. Nadira spoke into a ceramic handset, which carried her words along a copper line beneath the deck.

The vessel's network advertisements vanished. Every passenger terminal reported ordinary service, then displayed the same frozen hour. A child laughed, believing the fault to be a game. Roy counted the slow changes in the glider's position. It was no longer receiving the expected corrections from the river network.

'You have a jammer,' he said.

'We have an argument over who owns the network.'

'It will recover.'

'Of course. So will our timetable.'

The glider moved lower. A circle of optical lenses opened along its ventral edge. Roy saw a momentary alignment: lens, frame, Nadira. A targeting decision might have existed there, but he could not read its purpose.

He could intervene. The prediction system inside him offered three movements, any one of which would place him within striking distance if the machine descended another ten meters. He pictured the burst of motion, the decisive physical certainty, and the small irreversible withdrawal from the reserve he did not know how to replace.

He remained still.

A hatch opened in the vessel's stern. Warm vapor rose from a vent pipe and spread beneath the mesh canopy. The glider tilted toward it. It made one abortive tracking correction, then moved west into a patch of cloud.

The pilot increased speed.

Nadira said, 'Sometimes the most expensive thing you can do is demonstrate what you can do.'

Roy did not answer. He disliked that she had understood him.

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Suriya Components existed in four places, only one of them physical.

Nadira explained the difference when the southern commercial exchange came into range. There was a registered distributor in the official industrial listings, a cooperative custodian of older machine tools, a network address that traded authenticated component genealogies, and a market name passed between repair surgeons who trusted neither records nor geography. The company was less an enterprise than an agreement that certain pieces of obsolete hardware must continue to exist.

'You can buy a new nervous system from a dozen factories,' Nadira said. 'But if you need a part made for a machine that no longer has a manufacturer, you need the person who remembers how it failed.'

'And Pudu has that person?'

'Pudu has people who can put a price on remembering.'

He asked her how she had learned so much about his purpose. She told him that Vale had called before Roy reached the freight terminal, and that an old component mark had been enough to persuade her. The mark was a seven-sided recess, narrow at the base, which Vale had found beneath a more recent layer of Roy's internal structure.

'Why does it matter?' Roy asked.

'Because manufacturers change standards when standards help competitors. If they don't change one, either they're lazy or the original engineer made a decision nobody else understands.'

'The rest of me has changed.'

'Then laziness isn't your explanation.'

A call reached Nadira over the copper handset. She listened without speaking. Her expression changed only in the muscles around her mouth. Roy recognized restraint but could not tell whether it concealed fear.

'Our intended terminal is no longer available,' she said.

'Why?'

'They have declared an inspection for microbial contamination in the cargo tanks.'

'Is there contamination?'

'Not in the tanks.'

He waited.

'Every machine on the approach is being asked to surrender its maintenance records,' she continued. 'That's how you search for one unusual passenger without admitting he exists.'

'We could go around.'

'Yes. We could go around for years. That's the secret of administrative geography.'

She spread a paper map across the narrow table. Most of its river routes had disappeared beneath new constructions. Her pencil stopped at a drainage service channel, an older connection whose intake gate was controlled by a mechanic independent of both the river authority and the government. The channel ended near the outer logistics belt of Hyper Cyberjaya.

'I can get us there,' she said. 'But I'll need you to do something.'

'What?'

'Not fight.'

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Kawamura received the failed inspection with the displeasure reserved for a clerk who had filed the correct form under the wrong institution.

The regional commander apologized for the glider's withdrawal. Kawamura did not care that it had withdrawn. He cared that the glider's automated threat processor had requested access to an archive labelled TEMPORAL CONTINUITY, a classification invented for other purposes and deliberately omitted from regional manuals.

'Who approved that request?' he asked.

'No one. The request was rejected.'

'How did it learn the archive name?'

The commander hesitated. 'By correlation, perhaps. An older equipment signature appeared in the observation stream.'

Kawamura disconnected before the man could offer further guesses.

In his office he opened the cold record again. The old funding agreement contained an appendix whose title had been erased from the public file. Its remaining number matched the seven-sided industrial recess identified in Roy's examination. Somewhere in the transition from Tyrell to its successor contractors, a component had been copied without being understood.

He could order every registered factory to search its inventories. Doing so would distribute the signature to thousands of industrial AIs. They would compare it with structural data, infer the missing relationships, and possibly discover why a dead corporation's work mattered to a new ministry's future. He could not stop them from learning once the comparison began.

Instead he wrote three sentences on paper. His assistant would digitize only the instruction, not the evidence.

SURIYA COMPONENTS: RESTRICTED.
NO SYNTHETIC ANALYSIS.
RECOVER THE SUBJECT BEFORE ENTERING PUDU-ALPHA.

He looked at the last sentence for a long time. It had the weakness of every plan whose success depended on geography remaining obedient.

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They reached the drainage gate after sunset. Light from the new commercial towers fell on old concrete reservoirs in which nobody had thought to install windows. A caretaker opened a manual sluice while reciting invoice numbers under his breath. The water moved with a force that reminded Roy of the rooftop in Los Angeles: the blind indifference of a material that could destroy and preserve without understanding either act.

Nadira led him onto a maintenance bridge. Beneath it, disused pipes entered a tunnel marked with older municipal seals. The official city ended somewhere ahead, but the pipes did not. A mosque's evening call reached them from the outer district, its human voice rising through synthetic echoes and the noise of filtration pumps. Roy listened. The sound gave no permission and required none from him.

'Pudu is past the transfer belt,' Nadira said. 'Hyper Cyberjaya calls it a heritage logistics district. The people who live there call it several other things.'

'And Suriya?'

'If they still exist, someone there will know how to find them.'

'If they don't?'

'Then you'll discover what the name was protecting.'

The caretaker turned a lever. Behind them the gate descended, not with the elegant silence of a modern actuator but with the weight of old metal accepting gravity.

Roy felt the reserve inside him reach a stable state. The lost quantity remained lost. Whatever had sustained the bodies between his first death and this one, it had not included a way to make that quantity return on command. The problem was more urgent than the memories he had been denied. He was not interested in recovering the years. He needed to find the person who had decided he should have any years at all.

He followed Nadira into the tunnel.

On the far wall, beneath mineral deposits and a newer transit code, an obsolete stencil had survived. Someone had painted a small seven-sided symbol beside a manufacturer's number. The characters were almost illegible, but Roy's internal recognition system separated them from the wall before he asked it to.

He reached toward the mark, then stopped. He had never been here. He knew that much, at least. Yet some part of his body had recognized it faster than his mind.

'What is it?' Nadira asked.

'A part of a machine,' he said.

'Which machine?'

He looked down at his hands.

'I think mine.'