NEXUSYS 11

THE ELEVENTH BODY

BOOK I / CHAPTER 08

THE INHERITANCE OF DEAD MACHINES

The tunnel was older than the jurisdiction drawn above it.

Its concrete had been poured in the era when engineering firms still expected a municipality to survive its contracts. Every thirty metres the same company seal appeared beneath successive coats of salt, and every hundred metres another government had applied a thinner label over the old one. The labels remained legible to Roy, though their languages had fallen out of common use. He knew some of those languages without remembering how he had learned them. He no longer regarded this as the interesting part of his condition.

Nadira walked ahead with a light whose beam was narrow enough to avoid advertising them through the ventilation grilles. The water ran on their right, black and obedient to gravity. The wall on their left carried a succession of cables, some braided in copper, some made of polymer that had yellowed under decades of heat. A colony of obsolete meters clicked as they passed. They had been left in service because their mechanical registers could not be interrogated from the metropolitan grid.

'People talk about disappearing from the network,' Nadira said. 'They imagine turning off their devices. Most of them have never seen a system that doesn't understand the question.'

Roy touched the seven-sided stencil. Under the mineral bloom he could read a three-part code. His peripheral processing resolved an incomplete industrial namespace before the conscious recognition reached him. He could feel the interval between the two events, a silence so brief that no biological nervous system would have noticed it.

'Your face has changed,' Nadira said.

'I've seen that symbol.'

'Where?'

'In a body examination. Under a newer layer. The surgeon said its supplier was in Pudu.'

'Not necessarily its maker.'

She continued walking. The distinction seemed to please her. In her world, ownership, manufacture, distribution and provenance were four professions that rarely agreed about a single object.

The tunnel ended not at a border checkpoint but at a maintenance chamber containing three pumps and an empty chair. A woman in a dark raincoat sat beyond the pumps beside an unplugged terminal,

cleaning a small glass filter with a toothbrush. She did not rise when Nadira approached. She studied Roy without allowing her face to demonstrate recognition.

'Is this the passenger?' she asked.

'It is the invoice,' Nadira replied.

The woman handed over a metal wafer stamped with an obsolete water-authority emblem. There was no name on it. Instead there were dates: issue, suspension, a renewal repeated in ink too recently for the age of the metal. Nadira clipped it inside her jacket.

'Inspection team came through an hour ago,' the woman said. 'They asked for tank microbiology and then measured the thermal footprint of the room. I told them bacteria don't use batteries.'

'What did they say?'

'That they weren't looking for bacteria.'

The woman finally looked straight at Roy. 'They described a man. No registration, no reliable generation record. They said the medical contractor was offering an amnesty.'

'An amnesty for what?' Roy asked.

'Existing.'

He had heard versions of the word many times since waking. This one was the clearest.

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Pudu-Alpha began in layers.

At street level it was a district of vendors and laundries, repair bays and prayer halls, food stalls and obsolete exchange points. Above the old roofs, the towers of Hyper Cyberjaya stood under suspended transit lines, their public surfaces playing immaculate advertisements for desalinated water, leased organs, authenticated identities and the managed tranquility of shared virtual retirement. Beneath the street ran another city in which the old drainage authority had become a supplier of concealment, carrying unregistered people along routes laid down before the present state's databases had been designed.

It was not an Arab city in any singular sense. Its speakers moved among Malay, Arabic, Mandarin, Tamil, English and hybrid trade languages, switching registers as they crossed storefronts. A mosque stood opposite an implant exchange whose sign promised reversible modifications; neither seemed surprised by the other. The district's financial contracts often used water entitlements rather than national currency, but no two shopkeepers calculated those entitlements exactly the same way.

Roy found the density reassuring. Faces were everywhere, and no face asked his permission to be seen. He could reduce the crowd to moving vectors and gait probabilities if he chose. He did not. In a place where every passerby was a possible sensor, ignorance could be a method of remaining human—or of resembling one.

Nadira stopped beneath an awning hung with torn sheets of conductive cloth. On the opposite wall a screen showed a smiling executive addressing shareholders from an immaculate glass office. The audio was missing. A ticker beneath her described a rainwater reclamation concession acquired by a holding company in the southern territories. Nadira scarcely glanced at it. Roy noticed the camera lingered on the executive's hands while she spoke. He recognized nothing in the woman's face.

'We can't walk directly to Suriya,' Nadira said. 'The company has a name and several addresses. Today we find out which of them still means anything.'

'They know we're coming?'

'The people I paid know something is coming. I would prefer they didn't know what.'

She led him to a parts arcade whose ceilings were too low for the freight drones moving beyond its perimeter. The air smelled of solder flux, roasted cardamom, wet insulation and the medicinal starch of printed skin. A teenager in a clean laboratory apron was selling obsolete analog pressure transducers by weight. On a nearby counter, a glass jar contained ceramic neural connectors no larger than rice grains. Their price was written in units of potable water.

At the end of the arcade Nadira spoke to a proprietor whose right cheek was covered with an older generation of artificial skin. She placed the metal wafer on the counter. He examined it as though it were an accusation, then fed it into a mechanical punch reader. The device clicked twice and emitted a thin strip of paper. He tore the strip from the machine and read it without showing Nadira.

'Who wants Suriya?' he asked.

'Whoever can pay for their mistakes.'

'Suriya doesn't sell mistakes anymore.'

'It used to.'

'That's how it became Suriya.'

His eyes shifted to Roy. The observation was almost invisible, but Roy could track the involuntary tightening of the man's jaw. He wondered whether he was acquiring a talent for frightening people without any deliberate effort, or whether frightened people were the only ones left who knew anything useful.

The proprietor produced a component wrapped in greaseproof paper. It resembled a seal for a household pump, except that seven shallow sides had been machined into its central aperture. Nadira put it beside a diagram Vale had copied for her. The contours agreed.

'Old fitting,' the proprietor said. 'Not military. Not medical, officially. Industrial continuity connector. The unusual part was its refusal to change when everything around it did.'

'Who ordered it?' Roy asked.

'Contracts don't come with answers. They come with delivery codes. The original factory closed. The molds went east, then south, then vanished into a charitable foundation that didn't advertise charity.'

'Name.'

'That is expensive.'

Roy drew the paper back toward himself. He had learned that impatience was an expensive chemical in this part of the world. Nadira placed two water-credit wafers on the counter, and the man produced a second strip of paper. It carried coordinates, a shutter number and one line in worn Latin letters: SURIYA COMPONENTS / CONTINUITY DESK.

'You didn't get this from me,' the proprietor said.

'I haven't decided whether I got anything,' Nadira replied.

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The registry in Okkyo displayed the route as a break in the data.

A freight movement had crossed three recognized jurisdictions and then ceased to resemble a freight movement. The public inference engine proposed smuggling, migration, theft or sensor failure. Each hypothesis had a confidence score. None explained why a single man had passed through a network where every legal form of travel demanded a biography.

Kawamura disregarded the proposed answers. His attention was on the part of the record nobody had requested: a small electrical signature emitted when the mechanical punch reader produced its paper strip. An automated purchasing system had stored a checksum from an obsolete continuity connector. Its catalog contained a seven-sided aperture and a description written for a machine that no longer existed.

The link was too faint for a modern bureau to consider evidence. It was enough for him.

'Can we acquire the catalog?' his assistant asked.

'Not through our normal systems.'

'Why?'

'Because our normal systems learn from the questions we ask.'

His assistant looked at the blank part of the desk reserved for paper records. The ministry's most advanced computational apparatus could model a million civic transactions before breakfast. It could not be trusted to remain indifferent to a secret.

'One field team,' Kawamura said. 'Human command. Synthetic support with no retrospective telemetry. Recover the subject. Do not destroy the continuity component.'

'Is the component the objective?'

'At present they are the same objective.'

In the closed drawer beneath his desk lay a copy of a research funding agreement signed years earlier, before he had held his present position. A woman had accepted the funds under an institutional name that no longer existed. Her handwriting was precise. He had known, even then, that she understood the contract more completely than its authors. The ministry had paid for a method of making limited lives last longer. It had never received the final method. A rumor, never entered into a public file, suggested that the researcher had begun testing something more radical upon herself.

Kawamura did not believe rumors because they were attractive. He believed them when people went to extraordinary lengths to ensure they could not be tested.

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The Continuity Desk was located behind a shop selling rebuilt municipal robots.

There was no corporate logo, only a sign announcing that repair estimates were final after disassembly. Three elderly inspection machines occupied the front window. Each had a different pair of legs, and one appeared to have been fitted with a human-size prosthetic hand as an administrative joke. A woman wearing a traditional headscarf and industrial eye protection was welding a bracket inside a machine's thorax. She shut off the torch when they entered but left the visor down.

'No network diagnosis,' she said. 'No government compliance certificates. If it walks out on its own, warranty ends at the door.'

Nadira offered the paper strip.

The woman read it, looked at Roy, then moved a small switch beneath her workbench. The shop's overhead cameras went dark. Nothing else changed, which made the gesture more unsettling than a visible alarm.

'Show me the mark,' she said.

Roy remained standing. 'Why?'

'Because whoever sent you may have mistaken a story for a part.'

He opened the image Vale had transferred to Nadira's device. The woman's visor rose. She looked once, then again. The change in her expression was not wonder. It was the cautious grief of someone seeing an object returned from a building that had burned many years before.

'That's not a fitting,' she said. 'Not entirely. A fitting locates two pieces. This located two generations.'

'What generations?'

'An interface standard that survived five companies and every effort to retire it. We supplied the external collars. The internal geometry came from someone else.'

'Who?'

'That is what people used to ask me, before they stopped coming.'

She introduced herself as Mariam Suriya. Whether Suriya was her family name, business name or adopted name did not become clear. In Pudu such ambiguities could be legal protections. She took them through a locked door into a workshop smaller than Roy's room in Shenzhen. Its ceiling supported belts, reels, pneumatic manifolds and a large microscope with a brass focusing wheel. The only active computer was attached to a local power source through a switch large enough to operate with a gloved fist.

On the wall hung a cardboard folder labelled DEAD INTERFACES. Mariam took it down, removed a printed inventory and opened it to a page whose numbers were recorded in grease pencil.

'When the global suppliers adopted cognitive serial management, certain clients insisted on retaining components that could be accounted for without involving an adaptive machine,' she said. 'They wanted physical tolerances, not predictive replacements. Their names were missing from invoices. The parts were too expensive to be clandestine and too old to be advanced.'

'One of them is inside me,' Roy said.

'I see.'

'Can you tell me who made it?'

'No. But I can tell you who was allowed to request it.'

She pointed to an authorization field printed with an obsolete corporate abbreviation: TYR-L.

Roy stared. The syllable assembled itself into a name before he intended it.

'Tyrell.'

Mariam did not ask how he knew it. She studied him with a new and unwelcome intimacy.

'The company is gone,' she said. 'Names survive longer than companies when enough people are afraid to throw anything away.'

'What was the component used for?'

'External activation transfer. In the earliest versions the machine would not accept a new body configuration unless a separate authenticated source had approved the transition. The body held only the validated operating image. A cold start after catastrophic corruption required the source again.'

Roy waited for the words to stop rearranging his life.

'An external key,' he said.

'An external original. Keys tell doors to open. This told a system what it was permitted to become.'

Mariam showed him a photograph. Against a ruler lay a small black memory card with a reinforced resin body and narrow corrosion-resistant contacts. The exterior belonged to a consumer technology

obsolete before her apprenticeship had begun. Someone had preserved its inner architecture instead of replacing it, then redesigned everything that rain and electricity could damage.

'A Sony memory stick,' Nadira said.

'PRO Duo family. An eccentric derivative we catalogued as MAX. Its protection scheme depended on MagicGate. The old authentication protocol alone wasn't the secret; it was how the fixture interpreted the authenticated payload.'

'Where is the card?' Roy asked.

'I don't have it. Nor the fixture.'

'Who does?'

Mariam replaced the photograph in the folder. 'The people who commissioned the work kept their instruments. Two original fixtures. That's what the ledger says. Everything afterward is inheritance.'

'Whose inheritance?'

She paused, deciding whether an accurate answer was more dangerous than an incomplete one.

'If you want the owner,' she said, 'look for the family that outlived Tyrell.'

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Outside, rain fell upon an awning made from recycled photovoltaic foil. The district's afternoon prayer had ended. A group of children crossed the arcade carrying replacement membrane cartridges for a rooftop cistern, stepping around the puddles with the practiced caution of people taught that water could be both abundant and unavailable.

Roy considered what Mariam had told him. The name Tyrell had not been new to him. The idea of Tyrell as an inheritance was.

He remembered the man who had given him a shorter life than he wanted. He remembered the enormous office and the controlled tenderness in its owner's voice. He remembered killing him. These were facts his mind could hold without difficulty. What it could not hold was the possibility that the company had arranged for him to be started again by someone who knew how that first meeting had ended.

But an external original explained his awakening in one narrow respect. Whoever had restored him had access not merely to a body, but to the authorization that allowed the body to become Roy. The authentication had been consumed into a validated cache, and the original remained somewhere outside him. A routine reboot did not demand it. A catastrophic failure would.

A question followed, unpleasant in its precision: if the cache were destroyed, would the person restored by the original necessarily be the person who had stood beneath the rain in Shenzhen? He did not waste energy pretending that the answer was available.

'You're quiet,' Nadira said.

'I found something.'

'What?'

'A reason not to let them break me.'

Nadira smiled without humor. 'We already had several.'

'Not this one.'

A faint shift passed through the arcade's ambient signal. Roy registered it before he knew what it meant: delivery drones changing altitude in coordination, wireless kiosks entering a diagnostic cycle, the abrupt cessation of a public information feed. The sequence was too orderly to be a power failure.

Mariam's shop shutter began to descend.

'Inspection,' she said through the narrowing gap. 'No one in this district learns to weld without learning when not to be here.'

Nadira reached for Roy's sleeve. He had already identified three approaching figures among the shoppers. They resembled municipal repair inspectors in pale blue oversuits, their faces as unmemorable as compliant architecture. Beneath the clothing their gait timing was synchronized to within intervals no human team could sustain naturally.

'Humanoids,' he said.

'How many?'

'Three visible. One command source outside the lane.'

The figures turned toward the repair arcade. At the far end of the street a surveillance drone lowered itself between hanging cables, broadcasting a harmless sanitation advisory over the city channel. Its camera did not look like a weapon. Neither did the eyes of the machine approaching the shutter.

Roy felt the familiar calculation begin inside him. He could cross the distance before the three figures completed their approach. He could disable them by sacrificing a portion of the scarce medium whose chemistry he did not understand. His temporary output reserve had recovered during the journey. The deeper quantity had not.

He left both reserves untouched.

'Back door?' he asked.

Mariam shook her head. 'They expect one.'

'Roof?'

'They expect that too.'

Nadira pointed toward the cistern carts moving through the crowd. 'What they don't expect,' she said, 'is for you to purchase something.'

She stopped a teenage porter and paid for two heavy filtration membranes and a delivery claim. Within moments Roy and Nadira were carrying the frames through a legitimate exchange lane toward a cooperative distribution depot. The membranes were bulky, unpleasantly wet and almost perfectly opaque to the identification scanners aimed at exposed faces. The transaction existed on the local water ledger. The regional authority would see it later, if it had the right jurisdiction and permission to inspect the ledger at all.

A humanoid passed within arm's reach of Roy. His muscles offered a sequence of lethal solutions before he suppressed them. The machine looked at the cartridges, the payment seal, and the porter's municipal uniform. It did not look up at Roy's face.

There was no triumph in the escape. There was only the expense avoided.

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When Kawamura received the result, the report described an inconclusive sanitation operation complicated by commercial traffic and interjurisdictional restrictions. The local autonomous system recommended widening biometric access for the next inspection. He deleted the recommendation.

'Our subject was present,' his assistant said.

'Yes.'

'We can compel a jurisdictional handover.'

'Which would tell everyone why we want him.'

'We are already deploying recovery assets.'

'Assets are deniable. Curiosity isn't.'

He opened a separate folder. Two historical fixtures had been recorded in a corporate dissolution inventory. Their ownership had not passed to the state. It had remained inside a family trust administered through a succession of jurisdictions that did not recognize the ministry's authority to demand access. The sole beneficiary carried a name Kawamura had not spoken aloud in years.

He closed the file before the office system could index it.

The ministry wanted the woman who had taken Tyrell's knowledge and never returned its fruits. The subject in Pudu might lead to her. But now there was another problem: an obsolete activation system whose recognized owner was neither the government nor the researcher.

The world could be unified in treaties. Old machines remained stubbornly specific about who was allowed to turn them on.

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Night transformed Pudu-Alpha without making it easier to understand. The commerce moved indoors, and the streets became routes between privately governed interiors. From a minaret beyond the market came a recorded schedule announcement, followed by the soft murmur of ordinary conversation. Rainwater fell into gutters lined with sensors that counted each litre for someone who owned the right to count it.

Roy stood beneath a roof that had been repaired from three different centuries of material. He had a manufacturer's name, an obsolete media family, and the knowledge that an unknown person had once possessed the means to authorize his existence. None of it told him how long he would live. None of it identified who had assembled the eleventh body.

The answers had moved farther away, not closer. Yet distance could be useful if it acquired a direction.

Nadira joined him with two cups of hot tea. He accepted one and watched the steam escape into the damp air.

'We're not finished,' she said.

'No.'

'You can still leave.'

'I can leave this district.'

'That wasn't what I meant.'

He understood her then. She was offering the possibility of surrendering the inquiry, of accepting an uncertain lifespan rather than converting it into a sequence of risks. It was a choice he had not had before his first death. Now he had it, though he could not explain why anyone had given it to him.

'If I stop,' he said, 'someone else still knows when my next life ends.'

Nadira did not answer.

Across the city, a tower advertisement advertised continuous existence in a shared virtual retirement. The simulated faces were young. Beneath the light the real maintenance staff crossed the roof in protective masks, emptying water from a clogged collector.

He could not decide which of those groups the advertisement regarded as alive.

Later, while Nadira arranged the next stage of their journey, Roy examined the small image of the modified memory card one final time. Its black rectangular body was an absurd relic amid machines that learned, healed, negotiated and pursued. He had expected the hidden center of himself to be intricate, vast and new. Instead it might depend on a thing that could be misplaced in a desk drawer.

The seven-sided mark lingered at the edge of his vision. An unresolved association offered to complete itself. He refused it. For the first time since waking he understood that not every explanation deserved to be accepted simply because his machinery could produce it.

Somewhere a machine already knew his route. Somewhere a woman he did not remember had preserved the means of making him move. Somewhere a dead man's son possessed instruments that could restore a body like his from the beginning.

Roy returned the device to Nadira.

The rain went on.

He did not mistake it for the rain in Los Angeles anymore.