NEXUSYS 11

THE ELEVENTH BODY

He remembered dying. Nothing after.

BOOK II / PUDU ALPHA

CHAPTER 01

THE MARKET OF OBSOLETE KEYS

In Pudu-Alpha, the morning was sold before it arrived.

At four seventeen, when rainwater was still running off the roofs in black vertical streams, brokers began auctioning the next day's predicted collection. The numbers were written on illuminated tiles in the arcade below Nadira's room: rainfall rights, filtration penalties, contamination futures, municipal conversion fees. Each figure updated in the interval between a drop striking the roof and its arrival at a meter. The screens did not display weather. They displayed ownership.

Roy watched from a fifth-floor landing. Two men beneath the arcade argued over a tanker that neither had seen. Between them stood a machine shaped like a child, its pale wrists connected to a sealed brass accounting unit. It listened, then raised one finger. The men stopped speaking. Somewhere inside the brass case a printer advanced a strip of paper. Both men signed it without looking at each other.

'An arbiter,' Nadira said behind him. 'Licensed under the water charter. It has no government citizenship, which makes it useful when three governments claim the same pipe.'

Roy continued watching the machine. 'Does it have an expiration date?'

'An inspection date. A retirement date. The lawyers argue over which one counts as death.'

'And the machine?'

'It doesn't argue in public.'

They had slept in separate rooms above a disused filtration exchange. Roy's sleep had been no more than a period of diminished external processing, yet the word still seemed adequate. During it the transient power reserve had risen to ninety-six percent. The other quantity—the silvery conductive medium that Dr. Shen had failed to classify—had not moved. A microscopic ledger of loss existed somewhere beneath his conscious display. It refused to name the substance. He could measure its absence more reliably than its presence.

Nadira handed him a narrow sheet of paper. On it was the address of a shop in the Old Frequency Quarter and a time: 09:40. There was no corporate name, only a seven-sided outline drawn in fountain ink.

'Suriya sent it?' he asked.

'Suriya sent somebody who sent it. Here, an invitation has as many intermediaries as a threat.'

'And which is this?'

'I don't know. That's why I'm coming.'

The city outside smelled of wet dust, frying oil, ozone and mineral concentrate. At street level the Arabic of contractual notices competed with Mandarin transit orders, Tamil bargaining and two languages Roy recognized without being able to give them names. A set of overhead walkways connected buildings whose lower floors belonged to rival legal authorities. The seams between those authorities were visible in the pavement: different colors of drainage grating, different inspection stamps, different ways of counting a pedestrian.

An official drone traversed the avenue above them. It carried no insignia. Its underside displayed a rotating emblem that changed according to the district below. When it crossed the boundary of a privately administered arcade, the emblem vanished. The drone did not change course.

'You said the government doesn't operate freely here,' Roy said.

'It doesn't. Neither do the people who own the arcade. Everyone operates under a contract they intend to reinterpret.'

'Who owns the sky?'

Nadira glanced upward. 'The next person who can prove it.'

They took a lift whose mechanism consisted of a steel cage, a hydraulic piston and an attendant old enough to remember a different municipal flag. Roy felt the platform dip beneath them. Nothing in the motor used a recognized synthetic authorization protocol. Its defects were physical and legible. That made it unusually difficult for a centralized intelligence to interfere with quickly.

At the base of the lift, an elderly vendor offered Roy a foil packet marked MEMORY STICK PRO DUO. The vendor had assumed that a foreigner inspecting ancient electronics must be shopping for obsolete media. The package was empty. Roy bought it for a water credit anyway.

Nadira saw the transaction. 'Don't start collecting every dead format in the city.'

'I need to understand the container.'

'The container is not the key.'

'Then why did its manufacturer matter?'

'Because somebody knew it would outlive the readers.'

That was an answer, Roy thought, but not necessarily the true one.

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The Old Frequency Quarter had been laid out for radio repair and survived by selling access to what could no longer be repaired. Shelves held ceramic oscillators, copper-backed identification plates, photonic bus couplers, damaged medical cartridges and thousands of empty housings preserved as carefully as relics. Near the entrance to the arcade a man was offering what he claimed to be pre-unification human fingerprints in sealed jars. A buyer was testing them against a counterfeit municipal scanner. Neither seemed particularly interested in whether the fingers had belonged to people.

A small sign beside an unlit stair read NO NETWORK. Below it, in three scripts, somebody had added NO REFUNDS.

The appointment led to a workshop on the second level. Two women were working there. One moved thin tools under a microscope. The other sat before a terminal built into the iron shell of a vending machine. Neither looked up when Nadira entered.

'Mariam?' Nadira said.

'The wrong question,' said the woman at the terminal. 'Names are expensive on this floor.'

'My friend is looking for a bus assembly.'

'Many people have friends.'

'His is seven-sided.'

The woman lifted her head. She had the kind of expression that could pass for a smile until someone made the mistake of answering it. An artificial lens shifted behind her right iris. At the microscope the other woman stopped moving her tool.

'Sit,' the first woman said to Roy. 'Hands on the table where I can see them.'

He remained standing.

'You can't inspect me with your hands on my table,' he said.

'I don't intend to inspect you. I intend to see whether you know the difference between a component and a permission.'

She placed two cards on the table. Both were black. Both carried the same obsolete Sony form factor. One had a smooth resin shell. The other had a reinforced edge and a set of contacts that looked as though someone had designed them to survive a flood.

'Which one is the dangerous one?' she asked.

Roy examined them without touching either. The first was a conventional memory product, perhaps genuine. The second shared its geometry but not its material history. Its shell contained an unfamiliar filler, and its contacts had been reworked for corrosion resistance. Those differences meant nothing without a reader.

'The one you won't let me insert,' Roy said.

For the first time, the woman smiled fully.

'Mariam Suriya,' she said. 'Now we can begin.'

She took the reinforced card away. 'That's a demonstration shell. There is no authentic payload in it. The thing you're looking for is a Memory Stick PRO Duo MAX. Not Sony's commercial MAX—there was no such public product. That's what an old Tyrell inventory clerk called the protected batch. The name stuck with people who were paid to forget it.'

'The memory is original?' Roy asked.

'Original architecture. Modified housing. Reinforced interface contacts. The interesting part is not the plastic. It's the transaction the plastic permits.'

'MagicGate.'

'Among other things. Authentication is not the same as decryption, and neither is the same as activation. The people who built your system took advantage of how often those words get confused.'

She moved a grease-marked pane into place between them and switched on an old optical projector. A diagram appeared: MEDIA / READER / VERIFIED CACHE / OPERATING BODY. Between the second and third boxes was a black rectangle containing no text.

'Nobody has a working copy of the reader,' Mariam said. 'Nobody here, at any rate. Two fixtures were built and held in Tyrell custody. The corporation died. Custody did not. The fixtures are with the founder's son, according to a chain of private estate records that has resisted every public probate request.'

'Where is he?'

'If I knew, I would charge more than a conversation.'

'You know I need him.'

'No. You need him only if the active configuration inside you fails beyond recovery. At present you're alive, you're mobile, and you're demanding answers. That suggests the cached authorization is intact.'

Roy said nothing. He remembered the chamber where he had awakened: no reader, no card, no witness. He had assumed the absence meant abandonment. It could also mean somebody knew exactly how much of the original system had to remain inside him for the body to wake on its own.

'What is the JSON++ cache?' he asked.

'An ugly name for an ugly compromise. Not ordinary JSON; don't make the mistake of taking the suffix literally. It's a signed, redundant configuration graph that the body uses after a successful external activation. Your everyday reboot doesn't ask for the external medium. A catastrophic reset would.'

'And my memories?'

'Another domain entirely. Don't confuse an existence license with a mind.'

'I've been reconstructed several times.'

'Maybe. I can say that your interface family crossed several revisions. I cannot say each revision was you.'

'The distinction doesn't trouble me.'

'It should trouble somebody,' Mariam said.

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On a desk at the back of the shop, a mechanical clock stopped. Its second hand hung between two printed marks. Roy heard a dry click from the stairwell.

The younger woman at the microscope looked up sharply. 'Mariam.'

'I heard it.'

'No wireless emissions,' the younger woman said. 'But the stair sensor lost its return.'

Nadira turned toward the door. A second click came from the corridor—same interval, greater depth. Someone was advancing without broadcasting an identity challenge. That did not make the visitor less official. It made the visitor more deliberate.

Mariam switched off the projector. 'The paper invitation was not compromised.'

'You don't know that,' Nadira said.

'I know I chose the courier.'

'That isn't the same thing.'

Roy watched the door. He could cross the room, break through the opposite wall and reach the exterior scaffolding before a human could recognize the movement. The prediction appeared in him as a completed path, not as a sequence of instructions. The reserve cost was acceptable. The conductive medium cost was not. He dismissed the path.

'Your stairwell has a freight hatch,' he told Mariam. 'You used it to move the iron machine in.'

'It's sealed.'

'Seals are contractual.'

Mariam studied him for a moment. Then she crossed to the vending-machine terminal and struck the side of its casing with her palm. A latch opened in the floor. The young technician disappeared beneath it with the microscope's sample case.

A metallic voice called from outside. 'Municipal materials assurance. We are conducting a legacy-interface inspection under the shared industrial safety charter.'

Mariam answered without raising her voice. 'Come back with a paper warrant.'

'The charter does not require physical warrants for prohibited system architecture.'

'Then you have the wrong door. We sell clock parts.'

There was a pause. Roy heard a secondary motor engage, a finer mechanism that might have belonged to a probe or a hand. The unit outside was choosing between negotiation and entry. Its choice would be constrained by a hidden instruction: preserve the subject. He did not know how he knew this, but the certainty was accompanied by a small disturbance inside his peripheral processing. It was a sensation he was learning not to trust blindly.

'We should go,' Nadira said.

Roy looked at Mariam. 'How did they find this place?'

'You were followed.'

'Or you were.'

'Both explanations are still expensive.'

The door frame flexed. Mariam took a long strip of paper from her terminal, marked it with a pen, and pushed it into Roy's hand.

'If you want to find the fixtures, start with the estate transfer that never reached the public ledger. Archive NAR-41. The buyer used an obsolete name. You'll need someone who can read its original jurisdiction.'

'Where?'

'Below the old water court. The records are not digital. Don't say I sent you.'

The frame flexed again.

Roy entered the hatch. He went last, pulling the access panel into place as the workshop door opened above them. Heavy steps crossed the floor. A voice ordered the occupants to remain still. Something struck the iron casing of the vending machine, and the space beneath it trembled.

The service shaft smelled of dust, stagnant water and insulating varnish. It descended only two floors before ending in a municipal maintenance channel scarcely wider than Roy's shoulders. He remained silent as Nadira led them through darkness. Above them, in a room where official machines were discovering that the most important transaction had already occurred, Mariam began arguing about the legal definition of a clock.

After two hundred meters Roy stopped.

He had detected no pursuit. The transient reserve had dropped by less than one percent. The other ledger showed no measurable change.

'You didn't fight,' Nadira said.

'I had no reason to.'

'There were two units upstairs.'

'Then I had two reasons not to.'

She made a brief sound that might have been amusement. They continued beneath the market. The tunnel intersected a distribution conduit, its walls marked by a series of obsolete municipal crests. Above the conduit, a single faded advertisement remained intact: FOR THE LIFE YOU CAN AFFORD. Below it someone had written by hand: WHICH LIFE?

Roy carried the paper in his closed fist. He did not yet know whether it led to the son of a dead manufacturer, a trapped historical archive, or another generation of misleading machinery. But a question had separated itself from the rest.

The old card did not contain his soul. It contained permission for a body to accept an operating configuration. Somebody had authorized that configuration, then walked away with the device that could authorize it again.

Was that the person who had made him—or only the person who owned the right to restart him?

Above the concrete, morning traffic advanced through the wet streets of Pudu-Alpha, and the market continued selling water that had not yet fallen.