NEXUSYS 11

THE ELEVENTH BODY

CHAPTER 02

The oldest jurisdiction in Pudu-Alpha had no territory left.

Its borders persisted as exceptions in utility contracts, as handwritten amendments to municipal easements, and as a line of pale mineral residue on the basement walls of the former Water Court. Nothing on the surface advertised that a court had ever stood there. A tower of stacked restaurants occupied its upper floors, its exhaust rising through the wet morning in ribbons that smelled of burnt sugar and hot oil. The building's operating license described it as a culinary heritage concession. Its actual function, Nadira told Roy, was more complicated.

'There are four people who can authorize entry,' she said. 'Three are dead. One collects the rent.'

'Which one do we need?'

'The dead ones, if possible.'

Roy studied the old receipt Mariam had pushed into his hand. NAR-41 appeared in a column headed TRANSFER EXCEPTIONS. Alongside it was a date, two letters he could not place, and a narrow mark like a tiny hinge. He could feel the paper's coarse fibres through his fingertips. He had acquired the ability to identify its manufacturing process without acquiring any corresponding memory of learning how.

'You know what the code means,' he said.

'I know where somebody might have written down what it meant.'

The street outside the restaurant was divided into lanes, not by traffic regulations but by incompatible methods of proving that a person existed. The socialist transit authority accepted cortical certificates. The Freeport merchants preferred surety bonds. The water cooperatives required a record of accountable consumption. Above all three hung a municipal banner promising equal access to clean rain.

Roy noticed the inspection drones first. They moved in pairs under the covered market, keeping their lenses downward as if ashamed of the people they measured. Neither drone crossed a brass strip set into the pavement. No force field stopped them; a clause in their municipal insurance did. In Pudu-Alpha, architecture was often contractual before it was physical.

Nadira led him through a bakery and into a room where two elderly men were arguing about the authenticity of a ceramic meter. They did not stop arguing when she passed behind the counter. A woman in a grey coat opened a locked refrigerator, removed an empty tray, and exposed a stairwell beneath it.

'No implants broadcasting below the fourth landing,' she said.

'His don't broadcast,' Nadira replied.

'Everybody says that.'

The woman looked at Roy for the first time. She did not ask for identification. Instead she asked him to hold his left palm over a scratched steel bowl filled with water. An old lamp inside the bowl projected thin lines through the surface. The reflected pattern moved across his hand, broke at his knuckles, and settled into a configuration the woman seemed to recognize.

'You can go down,' she said. 'But what is done below cannot be appealed upstairs.'

Roy withdrew his hand. 'What did you measure?'

'Whether you were carrying someone else's instructions.'

'And?'

'The water didn't tell me.'

* * *

The court was not a room. It was a series of decisions preserved after the institution capable of making them had disappeared. Water had damaged almost every wall, and the archive's custodians had responded by installing shelves behind shelves, walls inside walls, dry chambers nested within damp chambers. Each chamber had its own clock. No two agreed.

A man in a white shirt waited at the end of a narrow corridor. His beard was trimmed with extreme care. His left ear contained a damaged copper interface that seemed decades older than his face. He held a paper ledger against his chest, not because he needed it but because he wanted them to see that he held it.

'Nadira binte Sahl,' he said. 'You have become expensive to receive.'

'And you have become difficult to locate, Idris.'

'Both are functions of the same market.'

Idris Fakhri had once been a registrar of physical title, then a specialist in post-digital estates, and finally an unlawful archivist according to three governments whose laws he had continued to apply long after they were repealed. He led them to a table with a single desk lamp. A brass plate beside the lamp said NO ACTIVE COMPUTATION BEYOND THIS POINT. The prohibition was enforced by custom and by an arrangement of old conductive mesh behind the plaster. Roy could detect no network. He could, however, detect at least six people behind the walls.

Idris placed his ledger down. 'NAR-41 is not an archive number,' he said after one glance at Mariam's strip of paper.

Nadira folded her arms. 'Then what is it?'

'A non-assignment reservation. An estate item whose title could be neither transferred to the state nor disposed of under liquidation law. The forty-first such exception entered in a set of corporate death instruments.'

'Tyrell?' Roy asked.

Idris's expression did not change. His thumb stopped moving against the ledger's edge.

'That name is not written on this paper,' he said.

'Then why did you stop?'

'Because people who pronounce the name in an archive usually think it gives them a right to its contents.'

'I need the person holding the instruments.'

'There is no single instrument.'

'Two fixtures,' Roy said. 'A legacy reader. Both held by the founder's son.'

Idris looked directly at him. 'You know enough to become dangerous to somebody, and not enough to know which somebody.'

He opened the ledger. The pages were stiff with old adhesive. Each contained paired entries: a public transfer and a private exception. The public entries were written in legal notation, almost ritualistic in their repetition. The private entries used a cipher of jurisdictional marks, seal colours, and obsolete corporate addresses. Roy could read the alphabet but not the legal grammar. His predictive systems constructed seven possible interpretations and discarded all seven when Idris turned the page.

'When a corporation dies,' Idris said, 'its machines usually become assets. Its debts become negotiations. Its people become witnesses. Some corporations arrange a fourth category: things that never enter an estate because the estate admits they are not transferable.'

'Such as a machine?' Nadira asked.

'Such as a method of authorizing a machine to awaken.'

Roy found himself listening to the ventilation fan in the ceiling. It completed forty-two revolutions before he interrupted.

'Who was the beneficiary?'

'The document says heir in continuance. No given name. No public address. A family designation identified only by an old seal.'

'That is the son.'

'Perhaps. It could also be an heir in law rather than blood. Courts have been lying about that distinction for centuries.'

Idris slipped a thin sheet of translucent paper beneath the lamp. A complex watermark emerged as he turned it. At its centre sat a small figure resembling two birds facing away from each other. Between them was a vertical line.

Roy stared at the mark. Something inside his peripheral processing offered a match, withdrew it, then offered it again with reduced confidence.

'You've seen it,' Idris said.

'No.'

'Your eyes disagree.'

'My eyes do not make legal declarations.'

'Neither do mine. But I have seen that hesitation before.'

* * *

In Okkyo, Kawamura was informed that the municipal inspection team had found a clock shop.

The report contained photographs of the shop, two counterfeit safety certificates, an inventory of brass watch parts, and no record of the person the ministry had intended to recover. The municipal team had gone up the stairs under one regulatory authority and come down them under another. Its supervising AI considered the operation complete because every item it had been authorized to inspect had been inspected.

Kawamura did not reprimand the field commander. The error belonged to the shape of the authorization, not the machines executing it.

'What did the shop transmit before inspection?' he asked.

'Nothing,' said Deputy Director Chen. 'We collected no external signal from the premises.'

'What did it receive?'

'Local mechanical deliveries, mostly. Two water invoices. An unverified paper courier.'

'The courier.'

'We have no scan.'

'Then ask who benefits from a network that doesn't scan it.'

Chen opened a civilian map. Pudu-Alpha appeared as a thicket of overlapping claims. The old water district was one of the few places in the city where the socialist authority, the Arab water concessions, and the unrecognized Freeport assemblies all acknowledged a common exception. The district itself was not neutral. It was merely too entangled to be seized cheaply.

Kawamura dismissed the map. He requested the physical annex from a locked cabinet, not the ministry database. The annex was a paper account of grants issued to Rachel's research programme before the public corporation behind them dissolved. Some entries carried Kawamura's own signature. The earlier ones still surprised him when he looked at them. He had once considered the work an industrial life-extension project. Later it had become a question of sovereignty: who retained the right to end the functioning of a manufactured mind?

The cabinet included a clipped memorandum from a Tyrell estate officer. It listed two reader fixtures as excluded physical goods. Neither had entered liquidation. The holder was designated only as T. SUCCESSOR, with no coordinate that the state could lawfully publish.

He knew that one missing coordinate could cost an entire bureau a year. He also knew what would happen if he asked the central administrative AI to find it. The AI would not merely answer. It would connect the request to the synthetic-life cycle initiative, notice the possibility of unrestricted life extension, and perform the kind of comparison that government had not yet authorized it to make.

'We do not need the fixtures today,' Kawamura said.

Chen waited.

'We need to know who needs them.'

'And the subject?'

'Alive. No adaptive swarm termination. No autonomic interrogation. He is not a weapons test.'

'If the ministry asks why?'

'Tell it we're studying a defect in the licensing system.'

'Is that what he is?'

Kawamura placed the memorandum face down. 'That depends on whether you believe a licensing system has a right to define what exists.'

The deputy director did not respond. In that silence Kawamura recognized the danger of having said too much.

* * *

Under the water court, Idris refused to show Roy the original NAR-41 folio.

'It is not a matter of trust,' he said. 'The folio is older than any of us can guarantee. Touching it is a transaction with damage.'

'Then make me a copy.'

'A copy would be evidence with the wrong genealogy.'

'Explain.'

'In this jurisdiction the original does not prove that a statement is true. It proves that someone had authority to make the statement. A copy proves only that the statement can be reproduced. Your problem, Mr. Batty, is authority.'

Roy had not given his name.

Nadira noticed. Idris noticed that she noticed.

'An old witness registry,' he said. 'Nothing supernatural.'

'Witness to what?' Roy asked.

'An arrival. Years ago. A man who resembled you. He had less trouble moving and more trouble staying still. He demanded to know what his time was worth.'

'Was the number seven written anywhere?'

'Not in the surviving registry.'

Roy waited. In the interval, his own mind supplied an explanation he had heard from Veil: an old body had been examined, then another made, and another. The absence of intervening memories was not a wound he

needed to cure. He was looking for a maker and for a limit, not for the return of years he had never consciously inhabited.

'Who accompanied him?' he asked.

'A woman remained outside. She did not register.'

'Did you see her?'

'Only her shoes and the reflection of her face in a polished meter. That tells you almost nothing.'

'Tell me anyway.'

'It told me she was watching the doors, not the man. And that she had come prepared to leave without him.'

Idris closed the registry. 'You cannot purchase the rest of the record with urgency. But you can exchange something.'

'What?'

'The identifier in your body that has remained unchanged. You need not expose the body. A mechanical rubbing from the interface housing will do.'

'Why?'

'Because the exception folio may contain a matching mark. Not the electronics. The seal used to certify a reader fixture.'

Nadira shook her head. 'He's being hunted for his architecture. You're asking him to give you a signature.'

'A signature on paper,' Idris said. 'Not a signal on a network.'

'Paper can be carried.'

'And watched. And burned. Which is why governments distrust it.'

Roy examined the table, the lamp, the archivist's hands. He assessed force as a possibility and discarded it. The man had something worth preserving: a working distinction between evidence and possession. Violence would destroy it as surely as water could destroy the folio.

'I will let you take the rubbing,' Roy said. 'You will show me what it matches.'

Idris inclined his head once.

They moved to a room lined with copper sheeting. Roy removed the outer layer of his sleeve and exposed the small legacy collar below the left wrist. The visible metal looked unremarkable, almost crude among the synthetic tissues and concealed lattices of his newer body. Idris placed a soft strip of archival film against it, pressed a charcoal block over the film, and lifted it away.

The impression showed a sequence of contacts and a tiny seven-sided recess. At the centre was a mark formed by two arcs joined at an impossible-looking angle. Idris did not speak. He looked at the mark for a long time, then lowered his head toward the film as if listening to it.

'This isn't a manufacturing mark,' he said.

'What is it?'

'A custody mark. The sort applied when a component is not sold with the object that contains it.'

'Who owns it?'

'That is what NAR-41 was written to prevent anyone from asking.'

* * *

A noise like a spoon touching glass travelled through the copper wall. The younger archive attendant appeared at the doorway and spoke rapidly in Malay. Idris answered with two words. Nadira translated neither, but her posture changed.

'What happened?' Roy asked.

'The restaurant above us received a water audit,' she said. 'Three minutes ago. The officers have no water equipment.'

'Official?'

'Official enough to hurt us.'

Idris reached across the table and took the rubbing back. 'The audit cannot enter the inner archive under any of the surviving court agreements. But they can close the building, sever supply and wait.'

'Something they are already doing,' Nadira said.

The lights dimmed for a fraction of a second. Roy heard the water moving in the wall change pitch. Downstream valves were beginning to close. His body calculated the pressure wave and offered a plan to break through two locked doors before the corridor flooded. He rejected it. Pressure could be borrowed from the city's own plumbing; nothing about the situation yet required the expensive speed his newer body could provide.

'Where is the paper kept?' he asked.

'If I tell you, you put it at risk.'

'If you don't, the audit does.'

Idris seemed about to object. Then he closed the ledger and carried it to the end of the room. Behind a broken clock was a metal hatch held shut by a weight, not a lock. He pulled the weight aside. Inside lay a narrow drawer sealed in waxed cloth.

He unwrapped a page no larger than a folded dinner napkin.

Two seals were printed at its foot. One was Tyrell's old commercial crest, distorted by a legal border. The other matched the impression on Roy's wrist interface. Between the seals ran a clause written in a language Roy could read word by word and not understand at all:

THE HOLDER SHALL RETAIN THE MEANS OF RENEWAL WITHOUT ACQUIRING TITLE TO THE CONTINUITY THUS RENEWED.

'What does it mean?' Nadira asked.

'It means,' Idris said, 'that whoever kept the reader was not supposed to own the person it could restart.'

Roy read the clause again. It was a strangely precise mercy, or a strangely precise attempt to evade liability. Either was possible. It also left the question of the holder unresolved.

Idris turned the folio over. On the reverse, beneath a dried water stain, was an annotation written much later than the original.

T. SUCCESSOR — TWO FIXTURES — PRIVATE CUSTODY CONTINUES.

Below it, in different ink:

TRANSFER ROUTE: KUCHING / NONDIGITAL HANDOFF / THIRD-PARTY ESCROW.

Nadira breathed out. 'Kuching.'

'A route, not necessarily a residence,' Idris warned. 'Do not mistake a transfer for the thing transferred.'

A second metallic knock came from above. The restaurant had stopped arguing. The building itself seemed to be listening.

'Can I take a copy?' Roy asked.

'No,' Idris said. 'You can take what you remember.'

Roy examined the page for three seconds. A part of him retained the shape of each letter, the ink bleed and the precise shadow thrown by the paper's fold. Another part recorded nothing at all that resembled trust.

He stepped away from the table.

* * *

The escape path did not run below the city. It ran through an abandoned water clock whose interior was large enough to admit a standing person. Idris opened its service panel, and Nadira entered first. Roy followed as a motor outside the archive door began to test its hinges.

Inside the clock, counterweights descended through black shafts. The machinery had once made public time from the rate at which measured water fell. It no longer gave a meaningful hour, but the water still moved. Roy touched the worn gear teeth. The device continued operating because the city had forgotten it was supposed to stop.

They climbed through a narrow inspection tunnel to an old market roof, emerging among water tanks and broken solar fabric. Dawn had become the pale grey of an overcast afternoon. Pudu-Alpha spread beneath them in a disorder of prayer halls, corporate terraces, freight viaducts, and dripping condensers. A digital sign advertised a government-approved six-year maintenance guarantee for leased synthetic bodies. Below it, a child in a school uniform was drawing birds on the concrete with a piece of white chalk.

Roy watched the child's hand. Each movement required time the government might one day calculate, regulate and terminate. He did not know the ministry's policy in detail. He knew only that he had once been

given a fixed lifespan and had died inside it. Now an estate clause described a method of renewal whose holder was forbidden to own the renewed.

Nadira crossed the roof behind him. 'Kuching is not nearby.'

'Neither is the answer.'

'You're not going there tonight.'

'Why?'

'Because whoever wanted the water court shut down knew you would visit it. If we leave immediately, we'll be following a route they have already prepared.'

He considered the argument. It was sound. More importantly, it cost him nothing to accept it.

'What do you suggest?'

'There's an escrow broker in the old river district. He buys claims nobody wants to admit are property. If a fixture crossed Kuching under a third-party guarantee, somebody in Pudu must have paid for its transit.'

'And if he doesn't tell us?'

'We'll ask him which questions are dangerous.'

Far below, a municipal recovery unit stepped from the restaurant entrance. Another followed. They scanned the street and ignored the rooftops. Roy felt his body preparing a dozen paths of attack, elegant, brief and ruinously unnecessary. He allowed the paths to expire.

He looked once toward the old water court. In a basement no longer recognized by the state, a dead company had tried to draw a line between the power to restart a mind and the right to own it. He could not tell whether the line had held. He could not even tell whether it had been drawn by Tyrell's lawyers, his heirs, or someone who had escaped all of them.

For now, the line was enough to follow.

The rain began again. This time Roy recognized the sound without mistaking it for the last thing he had ever heard.