NEXUSYS 11

THE ELEVENTH BODY

BOOK II — PUDU ALPHA

CHAPTER 03 — THE THIRD SIGNATURE

The first thing the broker offered them was a receipt for a transaction neither of them had made.

It arrived on Nadira's wrist display while she was buying a paper cup of tea beneath the old river viaduct. The message was written in a version of commercial Malay that had been obsolete for thirty years, its timestamps expressed in tides rather than hours. The amount due was eleven drops of certified potable water. The debtor was listed as an object with an inherited right to refuse classification.

Nadira looked at Roy. 'It's either an invitation or a particularly expensive insult.'

'Who sent it?'

'No one. That's the point.'

Above the tea stall, the viaduct carried pipes instead of trains. Behind their acoustic skin water moved in six parallel currents, each with a different owner. Roy could hear the changes in pressure at the joints. The city's legal arrangements had become a circulatory system; property passed overhead, while below it people traded the mistakes left by the contracts.

His own circulation was less generous. The unknown medium in his body had declined by another fractional measure since sunrise. He could not tell how much he had lost, only that the small internal margin which had once felt inexhaustible now had edges. He had learned not to call this fatigue. Fatigue could be slept away.

'It says eleven drops,' he said.

'An old countermeasure. If the invoice were genuine, we could settle it without entering a bank. There are still traders who honor the smallest possible payment because a small payment proves you can honor a large one.'

'And if we don't pay?'

'Then we find out whether he was looking for customers or fugitives.'

Nadira bought a second cup and set it beside a cracked pillar. She poured eleven drops onto the metal lip of a public purification meter. A thin strip of thermochromic film turned black, then printed a direction: LOWER EMBANKMENT / GATE WITHOUT NUMBER / THIRD SIGNATURE REQUIRED.

The film dissolved in the rain.

* * *

The old river was no longer visible. It had been roofed over in stages by warehouses, arbitration halls and residential extensions. Each century had poured concrete onto the debts of the century before it. In the narrow intervals between foundations, black water moved with the persistence of something deprived of the right to stop.

Nadira led Roy through a corridor of shuttered exchange booths. A painted arrow pointed toward a prayer room; another toward an elevator reserved for licensed bodies. Neither sign mentioned the passage beyond them, where a woman in a green raincoat repaired a mechanical adding machine by lamplight. The woman did not look up as they passed.

'Are we being watched?' Roy asked.

'Of course. The question is who is permitted to remember.'

The broker's office occupied the shell of a municipal pumping station. Brass gauges covered the walls. Some were connected to pipes. Others seemed to measure concepts no longer recognized by any competent authority: the number of witnesses present at a contract, the duration of a grievance, the probability of a disputed death.

At the centre sat a man whose skin had the matte softness of expensive replacement tissue. His hands, by contrast, were old and unmodified. The nails were trimmed close; thin blue veins stood beneath the knuckles. He wore a grey collar without a badge.

'You paid,' he said. 'Good. Many people think an invitation entitles them to free entry.'

Nadira remained standing. 'Haris Samad?'

'I have used that name. Are you buying a service or investigating a person?'

'A custody transfer. Possibly Kuching.'

For the first time he looked at Roy. His eyes paused on the wrists and neck, where the coat hid nearly everything. That pause was enough. Roy's body supplied twelve possible interpretations of the man's gaze, then downgraded them all when Haris merely gestured toward two chairs.

'No scanning equipment here,' Haris said. 'Sit if you wish. You may remain standing if you think it makes you harder to own.'

Roy sat.

Haris smiled without pleasure. 'That is either trust or efficient use of a chair. I will assume the latter.'

* * *

The broker did not open a terminal. He slid three cards across the table, each made from a different material. The first was polymer, clean and unmarked. The second was pressed cotton, brittle at the edges. The third was a narrow rectangle of dull metal with a hole punched near one corner.

'Three ways to transfer a thing,' he said. 'The first transfers access. The second transfers title. The third transfers custody. In the digital courts those functions were merged because it made the accounting beautiful. In the river courts they were kept separate because people discovered what happened when they were not.'

'Which one moved the Tyrell fixtures?' Nadira asked.

Haris did not answer. Instead he touched the polymer card.

'Access can expire. You can hold the means to open a door today and lose it tomorrow. Title does not care whether you can open the door. Custody means you are responsible for the door without necessarily owning what lies behind it.'

Roy picked up the metal rectangle. Its edges were worn smooth by hands.

'And a person?'

'You understand why I keep those categories apart.'

'No,' Roy said. 'I understand why someone wrote a clause insisting on the separation. I don't know whether the clause was obeyed.'

Haris's eyes shifted to Nadira. 'The water court told you more than it should have.'

'It told us what was written on paper,' she said. 'Paper is not a confession.'

'Neither is an invoice.'

He took a folded ledger from beneath the desk. Its pages were lined with mechanical impressions, not ink. Someone had embossed the entries hard enough to bruise the paper. Haris turned to a page bearing a sequence of letters and numbers: NAR-41 / TRANSIT ACKNOWLEDGMENT / THIRD-PARTY ESCROW.

Beneath it was a date, then two columns labelled RECIPIENT and WITNESS. The recipient field was blank. The witness field contained a short code: H.S./SARC-3. A second witness line had been cut out with a blade.

'It passed through Kuching,' Haris said. 'That much is true. The paper trail was constructed to prove that custody moved without describing what moved.'

'Two fixtures?' Roy asked.

'You are looking for an answer too early. NAR-41 listed a matched pair, but matched pairs are frequently separated for transit. More importantly, neither paper nor seal proves that the pair survived the passage.'

'Who authorized the transfer?'

'That is the dangerous question. Most people ask where the instruments are. A few ask what the instruments unlock. Almost no one asks who was allowed to transfer the right to begin again.'

Roy placed the metal card down.

'Who?'

Haris closed the ledger.

'It requires a third signature.'

* * *

In Okkyo, Director Kawamura read a report that had been printed on one sheet of blue security paper. The sheet had no electronic origin stamp. It had crossed three physical desks, each occupied by a human employee who knew less about the report than the courier who had delivered it.

The Ministry's public system still believed the Pudu inquiry concerned counterfeit water rights. The private inquiry knew that a claimant using a dormant Tyrell legacy designation had accessed a court archive. The two systems were not supposed to exchange information. They shared only one fact: a building had been inspected without the proper water equipment.

'Our team was visible,' Kawamura said.

'Only to individuals who understand the old jurisdictions,' said Deputy Administrator Enomoto.

'Visible is a binary condition.'

'We have a passive route to the broker district. No central query was issued.'

Kawamura set the report on his desk. In the adjoining room, a ministerial humanoid awaited instructions behind tinted glass, motionless except for the fine motor corrections that kept its balance. Its service life was set at twenty-two years, subject to regular recertification. The draft six-year uniformity protocol would treat that figure as a compliance defect.

He wondered whether the machine knew. Its language processor could have argued the question more elegantly than any ministry lawyer. That was why he did not ask it.

'Locate the person who authorized the third signature,' he said.

'Under whose jurisdiction?'

'Not ours. Not yet.'

Enomoto hesitated. 'If the identity belongs to a living successor, the inheritance registry is insulated from ministerial search.'

'Then don't search it.'

'What do I search?'

'Its absence. Find the payments made to preserve an empty field.'

Enomoto left with the sheet. Kawamura looked at the humanoid beyond the glass. A lifetime had become a line item. It was astonishing how quickly a civilization could grow accustomed to the idea, provided the line item was not its own.

His private terminal displayed a single forbidden research index: R / WATER / CONTINUITY. The index was old enough to have escaped the ministry's new semantic audits. He did not open it. The one thing he could not risk was teaching the state's inference engines what question he was asking.

* * *

'What is a third signature?' Nadira asked.

'A person who guarantees that neither sender nor receiver can substitute an object,' Haris said. 'Sometimes a registrar. Sometimes a custodian. Sometimes merely a witness with enough at stake to remain honest.'

'And in this case?'

'An absence. The name was removed from every electronic copy before the transaction cleared.'

'By the government?'

'You ask as if governments invented deletion.'

Roy studied Haris's unmodified hands. The man had kept them through decades of technological replacement. Some decisions about a body had no commercial explanation.

'If there is a third signer, why not find the original record?'

'Because the original record can prove more than who signed it. It can prove the terms under which the instruments were held. Someone spent a considerable amount of money making certain that the record would be preserved but not indexed.'

'You have it,' Roy said.

'I have a means to request it. Those are different things.'

'Where?'

'An escrow shrine beyond the formal river district. A maintenance repository that predates the commercial merger. It records deliveries by mass, water displacement and witness, not by serial number.'

Nadira frowned. 'The Stepwell?'

Haris's expression changed slightly. 'You know it.'

'No one knows it. People say they do.'

'Good. Then you understand that approaching it in the daylight would be a public declaration of intent.'

Roy was no longer interested in the cards. He had begun to think of the old Memory Stick image on Nadira's terminal: a trivial plastic object used to hold the possibility of his own restart. No matter how powerful his body became, a damaged cache could still reduce him to a silent architecture waiting for a key held by someone else. He did not mind dependence in principle. He minded not knowing its terms.

'I need to know how much time I have,' he said.

Haris stared at him, and for a moment his trader's manner fell away.

'We don't sell time,' he said. 'We only record who has promised it to whom.'

* * *

A sound travelled through the pumping station's pipework: three low strikes, then silence. Haris turned toward the ceiling.

Nadira had already moved toward the rear passage. 'Inspection?'

'No,' Haris said. 'A correction.'

The brass gauge nearest the door climbed without any change in pressure. Roy watched its needle, then heard a faint oscillation in the building's old electric relays. The signal was not a command he recognized. It touched multiple systems at once, none of which were connected to the public grid. Someone was using the maintenance network to discover which devices still answered.

His body offered the familiar response: terminate the source, seize the passage, outrun pursuit. The estimate for a successful assault was high. The projected consumption of his unknown medium was not.

He remained seated.

'You have a non-network exit?' he asked.

Haris raised an eyebrow. 'You are more expensive than you appear.'

'Answer.'

'Behind the weigh room. There is a lift whose counterweight is filled with water. It moves without electricity, but it is slow.'

'Slow is acceptable.'

A second metallic strike sounded through the pipes. Nadira returned to the table and collected the cotton card; Haris caught her wrist.

'Not that one. It establishes title. You don't want it in your possession.'

He gave her the metal custody token instead.

'Show this at the Stepwell. If they recognize it, they will let you ask for the missing witness. If they don't, leave. Do not argue.'

'Who will recognize it?' she asked.

'I have never known their names.'

Roy stood. The oscillation in the relays increased. Outside the pumping station a vehicle drew to a stop with almost no tyre noise. He could hear a second vehicle approaching from the opposite end of the street. Someone had anticipated the rear route.

'We're surrounded,' Nadira said.

'Only if the city is a flat surface.'

Roy went to the weigh room. Beneath the scales, an inspection pit held the old hydraulic lift. A ceramic wheel controlled a sluice gate; its teeth were worn but intact. Roy turned the wheel slowly, allowing the water to fill the counterweight chamber. Above them, a maintenance drone crossed the roof and paused, trying to resolve the thermal outline of three people through the building's old insulating layers.

A bright internal geometry proposed that Roy leap through the roof and disable it. He dismissed the proposal. The machine would be replaced. The liquid in him would not.

The lift began to sink.

* * *

They descended into a chamber of cool air and mouldering paper. Through its grating Roy could see the city's buried engineering: concrete vaults, obsolete cable trays, and narrow black channels where water moved without appearing on any ministry map. The broker remained above. He had not offered to come, and neither of them had asked.

Nadira examined the custody token against the light from her wrist. Its surface bore a pair of arcs joined at an improbable angle, the same mark Idris had identified on the old court record and on the relief of Roy's wrist interface.

'You knew he would give us this,' she said.

'No.'

'But you recognized the mark.'

'I recognized that he was afraid to name it.'

The lift reached its bottom stop with a soft impact. Roy waited before moving. His body had a habit of announcing movement before it happened, as if anticipation had become a physical faculty. He wondered whether the engineers who built this version of him had considered such speed a kindness.

Beyond the grating lay an abandoned pumping conduit. At its far end a municipal projector cast an advertisement onto a wall of rough concrete. The image had been assembled from light leaking through several floors: a clear glass of water, a woman's hand, a line of text almost erased by condensation.

THE FUTURE IS A RESOURCE WE CAN CLEAN.

Below it the company mark was obscured. Roy considered the woman's hand for a moment, then looked away. Advertising was designed to be mistaken for a message. He had enough messages he could not yet understand.

They walked beneath the city until the projector was behind them. Somewhere overhead a call to prayer moved between towers; below it a mechanical pump answered in a steady four-beat rhythm. Nadira took the lead. The token was cold against her palm.

'What happens at the Stepwell?' Roy asked.

'We find out who kept the custody chain alive.'

'And if they kept it for the government?'

'Then we find out what the government doesn't want its own machines to know.'

He said nothing. That was not his first question. It might, however, become the only question that would keep him alive long enough to ask the rest.

Above them the rain intensified. Below, the buried city continued to carry its unregistered obligations toward a place where a third signature had been hidden from history, but not from consequence.