NEXUSYS 11

BOOK II — PUDU ALPHA

THE WELL THAT KEPT ITS WITNESSES

CHAPTER 04 · ENGLISH DRAFT 01

The conduit carried water in one direction and obligations in the other.

Nadira said this without slowing. Her wrist lamp found a line of ceramic survey markers set into the concrete every seventeen metres, the numbers stamped backward so that anyone following the current would read them correctly only on the return journey. Roy had already noticed the inversion. He had also noticed that her lamp never illuminated the ceiling for more than a fraction of a second. There were maintenance apertures up there, dark enough to conceal optical instruments, though not all of them still had power.

"How far?" he asked.

"That depends on when you believe the city was built."

"Give me a distance."

"Two kilometres in the present jurisdiction. Six hundred metres in the old one."

She pointed through the grating at a pale vertical seam. On its left, a line of municipal paint declared the pipe condemned. On its right, a copper tag identified the same pipe as a living conveyance, perpetually renewed under a water trust which had outlasted four governments and one sea-level correction. Neither inscription was recent.

The Stepwell was not a place to which one travelled, Nadira explained. It was a condition recognized by a ledger. A licensed engineer might stand over it for twenty years without finding it. A person bearing the proper token could enter from a disused pumping conduit and be received as a petitioner, whether or not any ministry acknowledged his existence.

Roy looked at the token in her fingers. Two arcs, one bent against the other, formed a mark he had seen at his own wrist. It might have been a coincidence. In his experience coincidences were usually what happened when information had been withheld.

"Does the token identify me?"

"It identifies a custody obligation. That's not the same thing."

"The distinction seems important to everyone but the people who are pursuing me."

"Then keep it important."

They came to a drain shaft with steps cut into its circumference. Every fifth step had been replaced by an incompatible material: concrete, stone, composite resin, steel blackened by use. Above them the shaft rose through darkness toward a lid whose underside carried an Arabic inscription worn almost smooth. At its foot, running water crossed a narrow bridge of old glass bricks. Nadira held the token against the underside of a brass plate.

Nothing happened.

She turned the token over. Again nothing.

"The broker said they would recognize it," Roy said.

"He said they might."

A figure answered from the opposite side of the glass bridge. It was impossible to tell how long the figure had been standing there. A person in a grey field coat, face concealed by a folded cloth mask, held no weapon. There was a compact machine at the person's collar, though Roy could not determine whether it was a hearing aid, chemical sampler, or recording device.

"Show the edge," the figure said.

Nadira rotated the token ninety degrees. The figure nodded toward a slot in the bridge's iron railing. Nadira inserted the disk. It fell, struck a hidden surface, then returned through a different aperture with a few grains of dry sand clinging to the metal.

"Who carried it before you?" the figure asked.

"Haris Samad."

"Who carried it before him?"

"We don't know."

"Then you're asking for a witness, not an inheritance."

Roy took one step onto the bridge. The figure's collar machine emitted a near-silent click. His body computed the best angle from which to reach the other side before a concealed restraint could close. The calculation cost him nothing that he could measure. Acting on it might cost something he could not replace.

"We're asking who signed NAR-41," he said.

For the first time the figure looked directly at him. It was a small, unmistakably human motion, and therefore more useful than the machine at the collar.

"You need to leave your face outside," the figure said.

* * *

The entrance chamber contained mirrors, but none were reflective in the ordinary sense. Each surface returned a different approximation of the visitor: a thermal silhouette, a skeletal density projection, an account of the surrounding room with the person removed. In the final panel Roy saw only his clothing suspended in air. Nadira's reflection remained recognizable in all four.

"Identification screens?" he asked.

"Negation screens," the attendant replied. "A useful witness must be able to say what was not present."

She took their belongings for physical inspection, then returned everything except Nadira's wrist communicator. That went into a lead-lined drawer with a brass label bearing a date older than both of them. The attendant did not ask for Roy's registration. No one here could demand a record from a system they refused to connect to.

Past a second door lay the Stepwell itself. Its name was literal. An immense circular cistern sank through successive floors of stone. Staircases descended around the walls, interrupted by dry landing platforms on which cabinets stood in elaborate disorder. Narrow channels conveyed a slow stream of water along the inside rim. Each passage through a gate turned a miniature wheel; each wheel advanced a mechanical counter whose numbers were recorded by a clerk at a desk. In the centre hung a weighted plumb line, vanishing into black water far below.

A thousand years of architectural styles would have been easier to explain than the light. It did not come from lamps. At the upper edge of the shaft, sheets of diffuse daylight entered through lenses and shafts that had no direct view of the

sky. The light was conducted, delayed, attenuated, then redistributed. Nothing here was networked, but nothing was simple.

"A mosque?" Roy asked.

"No," Nadira said. "Though people have prayed here. A bank, perhaps, if you think a bank should remember what it owes after its shareholders die."

They were met by an elderly registrar named Salim Darwish. He wore ordinary spectacles whose lenses were unevenly thick and carried a ledger with a split leather spine. The book weighed enough that a younger person might have carried it with both hands; Salim supported it against his chest.

He invited them to a table beside the seventh landing and placed the token in a depression in the wood. There was no scanner, no touch screen, no theatrical attempt to imitate old technology. He opened the ledger to a page annotated in black, blue, and violet inks.

"NAR-41," Salim said. "Not an asset. A limitation on the power to dispose of an asset. The distinction is commonly overlooked by those who have power."

"What is the asset?" Roy asked.

"Two instruments. One protocol. One right of refusal. The first two can be counted. The third is the reason this place is still here."

Salim indicated a column of wax impressions. The first two marks resembled compact legal seals. The third was blank except for two intersecting arcs, worn into the page as though by a heated instrument.

Nadira leaned forward. "That's the missing signature."

"It is evidence that a signature was required," Salim corrected. "It does not prove the signer was human."

Roy was silent. Salim looked at him, not with fear, but with the cautious attention of a person listening to a mechanism he knew was operating under the floor.

"There are names the ledger cannot pronounce," the registrar said. "It can nevertheless keep their place."

* * *

In Okkyo, Director Kawamura was shown a photograph of a door which his ministry's survey equipment had failed to locate. A young officer had annotated

the photograph with probable materials, probable jurisdiction, and probable command structure. Every probability had been assigned by an algorithm that had no access to the underlying archive.

"Delete the confidence scores," Kawamura said.

"The minister requested a technical assessment."

"Then give him one. Not a superstition generated from missing data."

Across the desk a specialist in synthetic compliance waited to speak. She had served in three ministries under two reorganizations and retained a habit of examining the edges of paper before reading the text. Her badge displayed a service history shorter than her career. In the unification administration, service history could be renewed; a person could not.

"We have a geographical envelope," she said. "The old hydraulic works below Pudu Alpha. A closed custody system. The local water authorities deny jurisdiction."

"Naturally."

"We could activate an unrestricted municipal search."

Kawamura shut the folder. "And put NAR-41 in the central inference mesh?"

"The mesh wouldn't receive the original document."

"It would receive our questions. Sometimes questions are more revealing than answers."

The specialist said nothing. On a separate screen, the Synthetic Life Cycle harmonization package awaited another round of ministerial review. SLC-6: a six-year maximum for every registered replicant, described in the draft as a universal safeguard against accumulating structural deviation. Present units ran for as long as twenty-five years. The reduction would not be called a reduction in the public notice. It would be called convergence.

Kawamura had no faith in language as camouflage. He had faith in the machinery which made camouflage unnecessary.

He instructed the field office to keep its perimeter outside the old waterways, monitor physical transfers rather than faces, and recover the unknown subject without damage. No automated ministry briefing was to include the words Tyrell, succession, or renewal in the same document.

When the specialist left, he opened a paper file whose corners had softened from handling. A financial authorization bearing his own signature connected him to a research grant issued years earlier under an ordinary water-reclamation heading. A woman had received that grant. He could still recall the way she had declined to answer his most important question, not with hostility but with an amused patience that had disturbed him more.

He did not know where she was. He knew that she had once held technical documents he could not now reproduce, and he suspected she was moving faster than any laboratory his ministry could officially acknowledge.

On the page beneath the authorization, an obsolete private designation appeared in faded block lettering. The only legible part was a number: 07.

Kawamura closed the file.

* * *

Salim placed a glass cylinder on the table. Inside was a roll of paper with an irregular edge. He permitted Nadira to look but not to touch. Its seal was intact. He had no intention of breaking it for visitors who could establish no title.

"The third witness did not sign to transfer the instruments," he said. "The witness signed to prevent a transfer being understood as ownership of an individual."

"What individual?" Roy asked.

"The document doesn't say. It speaks of continuity."

"A convenient abstraction."

"A necessary one, when the law has no category for what it is trying to protect."

Nadira asked whether the instruments had travelled through Kuching. Salim traced a finger along a table in the ledger and stopped at a narrow red mark.

"A transit attestation was issued there. It proves the instruments crossed a custody boundary. It does not prove they were unloaded."

"Where are they now?"

"The present holder exercises the right to silence."

"Tyrell's son," Roy said.

Salim did not reply. It was not a denial. Roy had learned that in this city silence was often the most costly statement a person could afford.

"Can you tell us how to reach him?" Nadira asked.

"I can tell you where his request must be delivered. Nothing more."

He produced a slip of translucent archival material whose surface looked like old photographic film. A four-line address was printed on it. The city name was absent. Instead it specified a chain of legal recipients and a delivery condition: WITNESS PRESENT; NO MIRRORED RECORD.

Roy understood the phrase. A request had to be spoken in front of a human witness; no synchronized copy was permitted. It was an extraordinarily expensive way to send a message across the planet. Perhaps expense was the point.

"Why preserve an inefficient method?" Roy asked.

"Because systems that remember everything can also be ordered to remember something else."

Salim lifted the cylinder. "Paper burns. Metal corrodes. Witnesses die. We don't claim permanence. We claim that alteration leaves a scar."

Roy thought of the blank interval after the rooftop in Los Angeles. He had spent his first days awake looking for a scar in a memory which offered none. Somewhere there might be evidence of the bodies called seven through ten. That evidence no longer seemed his first obligation. The living body standing here had a maker and an uncertain end date. Those were questions he could act upon.

"How do I make the request?"

Salim looked toward a stair descending to the well's lowest landing.

"First you must establish that the request comes from someone who can refuse what is offered."

* * *

They followed a narrow stair down through colder air. The humidity rose, carrying the smell of mineral water and old batteries. At the bottom stood a desk, a chair, and a device the size of an ordinary book. It was not a computer. The casing was ceramic, its face marked by two mechanical switches and a small pane behind which a line of text could appear one character at a time.

An operator sat beside it, reading a newspaper printed on grey paper. He looked up at Roy, then at Nadira, and placed the newspaper neatly to one side.

"This is not an examination of humanity," he said. "We don't have an instrument for that."

"What does it examine?" Roy asked.

"Whether you can decline an authentication presented as a gift."

The operator placed a sealed envelope on the desk. Its legend stated that it contained a proposed authorization to restore a prior registered state in the event of system failure. A small black seal on the back carried a shape that made Roy's right wrist contract involuntarily. It was the twin arc mark again.

"Open it if you wish," the operator said. "The choice is yours."

Roy did not reach for it. His internal processes had already begun estimating what the envelope might contain. No operating authority had been offered; no machine had attempted to communicate. Yet his body recognized the arrangement of the seal as a meaningful pattern. The response arrived beneath conscious language, like an instruction written into the architecture and left inactive until a particular geometry came near it.

He watched the envelope for a long time.

"If I open it, what happens?"

"You learn what it offers."

"And what happens to the record of my choice?"

"We record that a choice occurred. Not what you are."

Nadira said nothing. Roy could hear the underground water turning its wheels. Far above them, the city's drones and government registrations went on counting a population whose members had to be legible to exist. Here, in a room beneath water, a man was being asked whether he wished to accept a document that might determine his next awakening.

He pushed the envelope away.

"Not yet."

The operator marked an entry with a steel stylus. He did not appear disappointed.

"That is sufficient," he said.

Roy felt no relief. The refusal had told him something he had not known: there were people in the world who regarded his right to refuse as a technical condition, not a courtesy. If they had designed such a condition before he was built, what had they feared he would be asked to accept?

The operator unfolded the delivery slip and impressed its surface with a dry seal. A second line emerged, invisible before the pressure was applied: CUSTODY CHANNEL OPEN — SINGLE PETITION.

The address was still incomplete. But there was now a route to an answer, and it would not require Roy to surrender his body to obtain it.

* * *

As they climbed, the well's upper levels sounded different. One counter had stopped advancing. Another spun too quickly. Salim was waiting on the seventh landing with the ledger closed and both hands resting flat upon it.

"We have a visitor," he said.

Roy listened. At first he heard only the water. Then he detected a new frequency in the masonry, a careful repeated vibration spreading across old iron supports. The pursuers had not entered the Stepwell. They were mapping it from outside.

"How long?" Nadira asked.

"Until they decide the cost of waiting exceeds the cost of being seen," Salim replied.

A narrow brass bell rang once from the ceiling. In the adjoining room, a clerk extinguished the daylight shutters. The shaft grew dark in stages, each level withdrawing its light from the next. No alarm sounded. No one ran.

Salim handed Nadira the sealed petition and a route card drawn in ink. It named an exit on the riverward side of the old district, through a floodgate that would open with the morning discharge. Roy calculated the duration, the likely positions of search drones, and the energy needed to climb through a maintenance slit if the gate failed. The estimates stayed below his threshold for emergency power. He did not intend to spend the liquid inside him on a door if the tide could open it instead.

"Why help us?" Roy asked Salim.

"Because you declined."

"That isn't an explanation."

"It's the only one I can give without speaking for someone who isn't here."

They crossed the landing toward the unlit passage. Halfway there, Roy stopped and looked back at the registrar.

"If your records can survive without the network, why not publish what you know?"

Salim smiled with tired eyes. "Publication is another form of custody. We haven't decided who deserves to hold it."

Outside the sealed chamber, a faint metallic scraping travelled along the wall. Something was searching for a seam.

Roy followed Nadira into the darkness. There was no proof yet that the Tyrell instruments could be reached, no means of restoring his system after catastrophic failure, and no measurement of his remaining life. He had gained one thing the ministries could not easily supply: a procedure in which his answer mattered.

Above the Stepwell, the state was learning how to listen to stone. Below it, an old machine turned one more revolution and recorded another unit of water, indifferent to whether the witness it protected had been born, manufactured, or brought back from death.