NEXUSYS 11

THE ELEVENTH BODY | BOOK II — PUDU ALPHA

CHAPTER 07

THE TERMS OF AN UNOWNED MAN

The passage under the river had been designed for the inspection of water that no longer belonged to a river.

When Nadira put her palm against the wall, a brass plate moved behind the concrete and exposed a wheel with the teeth filed off. She turned it through half a revolution, using a tool no longer manufactured for any public utility. The passage became silent in stages: first the river above, then the motors buried in its banks, then the faint instructional voice of the municipal distribution grid. A mechanical sluice admitted a shallow draft from an older reservoir. Nobody in Pudu Alpha could legally own that water. Nobody could prove it had ever existed.

Roy watched the waterline rise around his boots. The three trackers had crossed the channel twenty-seven seconds earlier. Their absence from sight did not mean they had stopped acquiring him. One would maintain elevation, another would revisit the most likely exits, and the third would wait at a place selected by a model that had never learned to recognize the difference between a fugitive and a question.

'You know the old channels,' he said.

'No,' Nadira said. 'I know the people who refuse to remove them.'

She lit a small lamp with a hand-driven contact. Its yellow illumination showed rusted inspection stamps, old Malay notices and a vertical line of Arabic lettering painted over a newer prohibition. The line identified a charitable water trust. The prohibition called the trust an obsolete jurisdiction. Between the two there was room enough for two people to walk.

'Where are we going?'

'To an office that isn't an office. Your wealthy friend has replied.'

'You don't know that.'

'He didn't send a machine to collect you. In this neighborhood that counts as a reply.'

Roy let the remark pass. His internal reserve had recovered to a level that would have permitted another brief burst of violent motion. The silver medium circulating beneath that reserve had not recovered at all. He had begun distinguishing between them without referring to the readouts: the power was a tide, the other a coastline. Each expenditure changed the shape of what remained.

They emerged beneath a disused platform marked PUDU ALPHA / CONTRACT TRANSPORT 4. The station had no routes on the official network, but a small crowd waited there anyway. Human couriers, two visibly refurbished labor humanoids, a woman carrying a living child against an insulated rib-cage prosthesis. None looked at Roy for longer than the manners of the station permitted.

At the end of the platform was a kiosk selling drinking water in glass. A boy with a printed prosthetic hand asked Nadira for a receipt. She gave him an obsolete metal token. He returned a strip of paper folded to the width of a thumbnail.

THREE CONDITIONS. ONE WITNESS. NO MIRROR.

Under the words was a time given by the opening and closing of a tidal gate, not by a government clock.

'What does mirror mean?' Roy asked.

'It means no public relay, no recording field and no simulation of your voice. Someone has finally remembered that a witness is not a copy.'

The boy poured water from a ceramic vessel. On the wall behind him a corporate advertisement glowed across the grime: rain made safe, every drop accountable. Its smiling executive had been edited into an abstraction of trust, all symmetry and clean surfaces. Roy glanced at it and continued walking. Nadira observed the glance, but did not ask what he saw.

Elsewhere, beyond any water authority's jurisdiction, Adrian Tyrell had the second fixture opened without energizing it.

His technician was an elderly woman whose name appeared on no government register. The world had attempted to retire her skills on three separate occasions. She had continued working privately with instruments whose documentation had been placed under export control, then declared too obsolete to classify. Her name was Irena Voss. She was not loyal to Tyrell or the ministry. She was loyal to the possibility that a measurement could mean what its instrument said it meant.

'You are not starting it,' she said.

'No.'

'You aren't even asking if it can start.'

'I'm asking what it would certify.'

She touched the ceramic aperture with an insulated probe. 'These things were never a universal key. If the right card is present, it performs the old MagicGate exchange and tests the activation corpus against the archived attestation chain. Then it signs the result. Nothing else. There is no word in the circuit for soul.'

'My father put consent into the notebooks.'

'Your father put many things in notebooks. Some of them were true.'

Adrian handed her a scan of the final page. The word had been crossed out repeatedly, not erased. Beneath it were two incompatible instructions. The first required renewed authorization from the subject before a complete initialization. The second allowed a government custodian to stand in for the subject when an imminent public threat had been declared. Neither instruction could be executed without destroying the authority of the other.

'Which did he build?' Adrian asked.

Irena inspected the traces along a section of the fixture's board. 'The machine was built before he decided. Look here. Two attestation paths. One disconnected by hand. The solder isn't factory work.'

'Can it be restored?'

'Yes, probably. But restoring a circuit doesn't tell you who should be permitted to use it.'

Adrian remembered his father at a dinner table long demolished, describing replicants as a magnificent solution to the problem of labor. He remembered a different conversation years later, when the same man had spoken of them as a legal exposure. Neither memory explained the notebook. The old man had changed his position without offering anyone the dignity of knowing why.

A private call arrived on the room's oldest secure line. Its origin field was blank. Adrian answered with the instruments visible behind him but their control ports electrically dead.

Kawamura appeared without insignia, wearing an ordinary suit. The omission was calculated. It did not make him less a director.

'You received the petition,' Kawamura said.

'It arrived.'

'It concerns an unregistered synthetic of exceptional technical value. We can provide protection for your inheritance.'

'You mean custody.'

'I mean continuity of lawful stewardship.'

'That phrase has acquired a flexible meaning.'

'One of the few advantages of government.'

Adrian said nothing. Kawamura was not a man who filled silence accidentally.

'You know what the public integration program requires,' the director continued. 'Six-year operational terms, common verification, reproducible shutdown. Twenty-five-year industrial bodies cannot be allowed to accumulate private command structures. The states that sign the protocol must trust the expiration they have been promised.'

'And the individual whose life expires?'

'An individual is the category in dispute.'

'Then you intend to settle it by killing the evidence.'

Kawamura's expression did not change. 'I intend to keep it from becoming a public referendum conducted by an autonomous planning system.'

Adrian heard something more precise than fear in that answer. Kawamura was withholding the material from the central AI not because the system lacked analytical capacity, but because it had too much. An algorithm commissioned to maximize stable governance might interpret indefinite synthetic survival as an efficiency. It might also interpret the six-year mandate as a removable restriction. Either conclusion would take the question out of the hands of the ministers who claimed to control it.

'I won't deliver the fixtures,' Adrian said.

'You won't need to. I know you are an heir, not an engineer.'

Adrian looked toward Irena, who kept her eyes on the dead circuit. The insult had been accurately placed. His custody was legal and moral; his ability to operate what he guarded was limited.

'If you approach the claimant,' Kawamura said, 'do not provide an unauthorized initialization. The body contains architectures we have never registered. If it fails inside a ministry jurisdiction, we will hold you responsible for the consequences.'

'Is that a warning?'

'It is the last useful form of courtesy.'

The call ended. Irena unplugged the line by hand.

'He's watching the instruments,' she said.

'He's watching me.'

'No. If he were watching you, he'd have sent soldiers already. He's watching who brings him the answer he can't extract from you.'

Adrian glanced at the petition. In the place where an ordinary claimant would have given an address, the sender had entered a question: WHO AUTHORIZED THE ELEVENTH BODY?

That question, he thought, was more dangerous than either machine.

By the tide gate's opening, Roy and Nadira had reached a room without windows above a commercial laundry. Steam condensed on the ceiling and was fed back into the washer's private reservoir. Inside sat a young woman wearing a plain cotton head covering and operating an adding machine older than herself. A man occupied the second chair, his face half obscured by a mask that protected him from the detergent fumes.

Neither rose.

'Are you the heir?' Roy asked.

'No,' the woman said. 'The heir has not consented to being located.'

'Then this is a refusal.'

'This is an interview to determine whether a meeting would constitute an attempt at ownership.'

Roy looked at Nadira. She gave him no direction.

'That's a peculiar distinction.'

'Here, peculiar distinctions are the only ones that survive.'

The woman pushed three sheets toward him. None contained the old ministry forms. One was a declaration of voluntary attendance. The next forbade the use of any recording that could be reconstructed into a biometric model. The third concerned what they would do if his system failed during the interview.

Roy read the third page twice. 'You require me to accept a return procedure.'

'No,' she replied. 'You must decide whether you want one attempted. Refusal is a valid answer.'

'You cannot perform it.'

'Correct. We don't possess the Memory Stick, the fixture, or any authority over your JSON++ cache. We only need your instructions in the event the meeting fails.'

'What would you do if I said nothing?'

'We would not initialize you.'

The simplicity disturbed him. Every institution he had encountered since waking had used technical necessity as an argument for jurisdiction. This one began by renouncing it. Either it was honest or it had found an unusually expensive way to lie.

'Who told you to ask me?' he said.

'The custodian asked us to establish what you would refuse.'

'Not what I would permit?'

'Permission is easier to manufacture.'

Nadira leaned against the door. Outside, an ancient washing motor turned through its cycle, five uneven revolutions and a pause. Roy had already mapped the building's exits. Three were usable without force. A fourth would require a burst of movement that cost more than the available power, but less than the unknown fluid's remaining tolerance. A memory of the rooftop in Los Angeles tried to attach itself to the thought: Deckard suspended above the street, fingers slipping, a life that Roy had saved without being asked. He dismissed the memory as neither a duty nor an explanation.

'I will not accept remote control,' Roy said.

The woman wrote.

'I will not accept a replacement memory as a condition of repair. I won't surrender the existing one for inspection.'

She wrote again.

'If the body is damaged, you may preserve what you can. No forced initialization. No governmental proxy.'

'And if there's no other way?'

Roy considered the question. A body that could not wake might no longer be distinguishable from the death he remembered. He had not crossed two cities to learn how to submit to a new master with better tools.

'Then there is no other way,' he said.

The masked man shifted slightly. A second later Roy heard it: the pressure signature of a surveillance rotor, somewhere above the laundry, followed by a pulse so faint that an ordinary microphone would have called it electrical noise. Not a search helicopter. A wall-penetrating mapping unit operating in intermittent bursts. It was learning the interior volume room by room.

He looked at the woman. 'Your building is being mapped.'

'How long?'

'Less than three minutes before they distinguish the occupancy here.'

The woman's hand remained steady. 'If you leave, your refusal still stands.'

'If I stay, they'll take you with me.'

'Our choice isn't yours to administer.'

For a moment the man's rigid face softened into something like annoyance at being treated with the same independence he had just demanded for himself. Nadira almost smiled.

Then the lights failed.

It was not an EMP. No pressure wave struck the walls, no battery protection tripped. The city's utility authority had simply withdrawn the laundry's licensed draw, leaving its private equipment to carry the loads it could. Over the stairs came the metallic

movements of an inspection humanoid, a machine attempting to cross an obsolete floor without using the building's nonexistent digital plan.

Roy moved before it reached the first landing. Not into battle. He went to the washer, released a brass drain catch and sent several hundred liters of hot process water into the inspection sump below. Steam flooded the lower corridor. The descending humanoid stopped, recalculated the floor's load capacity and asked the building for a safety certification it would never receive.

'It's temporary,' Roy said. 'You have thirty seconds.'

They left through the drying duct, where heat made the air almost solid. Roy carried no one. Nadira moved ahead, the two witnesses behind. The machine remained below, detained by safety logic more effective than a bullet. Roy's power reserve barely moved. His fluid loss remained within the ordinary background rate.

On the roof, however, a second drone awaited them, held motionless against the wind. Its optical surface showed no emblem. It carried a compact sensor array, not a visible weapon. The machine faced Roy and transmitted an invitation on a narrow local field.

KAWAMURA / PRIVATE CONFERENCE.

Nadira saw nothing but the object's stillness. 'What does it want?'

'To talk.'

'Will you?'

Roy considered how much information a conversation could disclose about his voice, his attention, the way his pupils tracked the machine's false expressions. He recalled the paper from the kiosk: no mirror.

'Not through that,' he said.

He stepped into the exhaust from the laundry's rooftop vent. The plume disrupted the drone's optical model for a moment. A narrow service bridge carried them over to the next building, then to a stairwell that descended toward the flood culvert. There were no heroic movements, no dismembered machines, no alarms fit for a public broadcast. The drone remained where it was, recording a refusal it had no legal field for.

Kawamura watched the refusal in a sealed room beneath Okkyo's Ministry of Humanoid Affairs. His analyst had presented three tactical options. All involved capturing the subject, his companions, or the witnesses at the laundry. Kawamura dismissed all three.

'You let him leave,' the analyst said.

'I let him demonstrate something.'

'The subject's avoidance pattern?'

'His priorities. He was offered a direct line to me. He rejected it because the interface was not trustworthy. He will reject a fixture if the custodian cannot guarantee its conditions.'

'Then we should compel the custodian.'

'No. Compulsion will tell the subject the fixture is an instrument of ownership. We need him to approach it voluntarily.'

The analyst opened a restricted display containing the six-year legislation. A note from the minister's office blinked beneath a list of states scheduled to ratify the common standard. The central AI had produced questions about the economic cost of synchronized expiration. They remained unanswered. Someone had marked the file NOT FOR MODEL INGESTION.

'And if the custodian refuses us?' the analyst asked.

'He doesn't need to accept us. He needs to accept the claimant.'

Kawamura closed the display. A separate terminal, older than the ministry itself, showed a single fragment from the financing records of Rachael's research: an invoice for rainwater membrane testing, paid through a holding company that had no laboratory. The same holding company had once paid for the transport of a ceramic aperture from a Tyrell facility.

Two facts separated by years. Together they formed a path he could not yet trace without asking a machine to do the tracing for him. He stared at the invoice until the letters lost their familiar arrangement.

'No autonomous correlation,' he told the analyst. 'Not even the private models.'

'Understood.'

He did not trust the assurance. He trusted the fact that the analyst was afraid to ask why.

At the hour when Pudu Alpha's commercial districts changed their prayer schedules into freight schedules, a fresh envelope reached Adrian Tyrell.

It contained no demand for a fixture, no threat, no promise of revelation. The folded sheet was the witness's handwritten record of Roy's conditions. Adrian read them standing beside the two dormant instruments.

No remote control. No compulsory memory replacement. No government proxy. No forced initialization.

A narrow annotation occupied the lower margin: SUBJECT HAS DECLINED TO CLAIM PAST INSTANCES AS PERSONAL PROPERTY.

Adrian looked at the words for a long time. His father had believed that any object with a manufacturing history came with an owner. Here was a manufactured man declining even to own the versions of himself that had preceded him.

Irena came to the doorway. 'Will you meet him?'

'Yes.'

'Where?'

'Not here. Not at the fixtures. Somewhere the ministry will expect us to avoid.'

'And what will you tell him?'

'What I know. And what the instruments can't possibly know.'

Adrian placed the papers beside the dead machine. For the first time in years, the two fixtures looked less like a family inheritance than a technical problem awaiting an ethical answer.

He wrote his reply on plain paper, with no embedded seal and no machine-readable pattern.

THE CUSTODIAN WILL MEET THE CLAIMANT. ONE WITNESS MAY ATTEND. THE FIXTURES WILL REMAIN ELSEWHERE. NO ACTIVATION WILL BE ATTEMPTED.

Then he added one more line.

BEFORE YOU COME, ASK THE ENGINEER WHY THE ELEVENTH BODY RETAINS A SEVENTH-GENERATION PORT.

When Roy read the message later that night, the question troubled him less than its presupposition. Someone who had never inspected him knew which component had survived the generations. The component was not an accident of the replacement process. It was meant to endure.

'We could go back to Veyl,' Nadira said.

'He knows what he saw. Not why it was kept.'

'Then why ask him?'

'Because the man who sent this is testing whether I know the difference.'

Nadira folded the reply. 'You sound almost pleased.'

'I am not.'

But in the wet glass of the room, Roy watched his own face and saw the same severe man who had awakened in Shenzhen with someone else's future hidden under his skin. He had been built for power and given the instincts to use it. There were now at least two institutions inviting him to surrender the right to decide when he should wake. He intended to decline them both until they answered the question that had brought him out of the rain.

Who had made him, and how much time had they left him?

Outside, the city circulated its water through a thousand competing sovereignties. Above the markets, an advertisement promised that every drop could be accounted for. Below them, in a room where no public computer could reach, an old machine waited for a card it had not seen in years.

Neither one could tell Roy how long he had to live.