NEXUSYS 11

THE ELEVENTH BODY

BOOK II — PUDU ALPHA

CHAPTER 08

THE PORT THAT OUTLIVED ITS PURPOSE

The seventh-generation port had survived because it was beneath the definition of a component.

That was what Veyl told Roy when the secure line finally accepted a connection. Nadira had paid for six minutes of an obsolete submarine voice circuit whose switching station had been condemned twice and reopened three times. Its owner charged by the syllable if he disliked you, by the minute if he did not. His judgment of Nadira was inconclusive.

“Beneath?” Roy asked.

“Inside the accounting,” Veyl said. “Your newer architecture has replacement schedules for almost everything. Musculature. Fluid distribution. Sensory arrays. The port doesn't appear on the schedule. Not as a retained part. Not as a replaceable part. It appears as a measurement datum. The engineers built their new bodies around its location.”

Water ticked somewhere behind the doctor's voice. Roy pictured his room in Shenzhen, the smell of sterilized rubber and old electrical heat. He remembered Veyl's fear with unusual clarity. It was the fear of a man seeing an object that should have been destroyed, not the fear of an investigator presented with unfamiliar machinery.

“Could they have kept it for compatibility?”

“Eleven years of compatibility with what? A factory that no longer exists? Every contemporary connector can impersonate ten older protocols, if you pay enough. Your port has no electrical contacts that I can identify. It has a registration surface. Seven facets, not six, not eight. Beneath the surface is a cavity the size of a grain of rice. The cavity is empty.”

“Then it does nothing.”

“I didn't say that. It establishes where everything else is. If you moved it a millimetre, the body's internal maps would disagree about where you begin.”

Roy looked at his forearm. The skin was continuous. There was no visible circle of metal, no security seal in the wrist. “Where I begin,” he repeated.

“An anatomical origin,” Veyl said. “Not a command interface. A point from which the machine measures itself. The port may have begun as a fixture locator in the seventh body. By the eleventh, it has become something closer to a constitutional fact.”

The circuit hissed. Beneath that noise Roy could hear another sound: a minute, regular interruption in the line, as though something were counting the spaces between the doctor's words.

“Who maintained it?” Roy asked.

“I never saw them. When the seventh one arrived, the port had already been polished. The accompanying woman refused to let me cut near it.”

“Describe her.”

“You know I can't.”

“Because you don't remember?”

“Because remembering is not the same thing as identifying. She spoke like a customer who had paid for the building. She looked at you as if you were an experiment she had made herself and was afraid to touch.”

The line went dead at five minutes and forty-eight seconds. Nadira examined the small mechanical meter on the wall.

“We paid for six,” she said.

“Someone stopped it.”

“Or the station did what stations built eighty years ago are famous for doing.”

Roy didn't answer. In the city below their rented compartment, prayers carried from a narrow courtyard between two warehouses. The voice was not amplified through the municipal network; it arrived by air, softened by traffic and the heavy smell of river water. Roy had learned that not every unregistered sound was a secret.

Nadira put two paper receipts on the table. One was a water allotment, the other a street-food purchase issued by an office that had no address. “We have a meeting to survive. We don't need to solve every death in your body before breakfast.”

“I only remember one.”

“That may be the problem.”

He considered correcting her and decided not to. Memory had become the least reliable currency in a district that could verify the ownership of a century-old pump to the hour. He would not spend it merely because someone asked.

⁂

In Okkyo, Kawamura read the interruption report on paper. It arrived folded inside a maintenance schedule for a municipal lift that had never been installed.

A technician stood at the opposite end of his desk. No holographic surface connected them. The room's only network terminal was powered down, its glass face reflecting the pale ceiling light. On the wall hung a map of the proposed Unification Corridors, the territories of the socialist states marked not by flags but by compatible registration systems. Their borders met at the places where human lives could be counted in the same format.

“The line was interrupted from the southern gateway,” the technician said. “Not by us. A blind instrument on the water exchange registered a change in impedance. It may have been physical damage.”

“Did the central prediction service see the metadata?”

“No, Director.”

“Make certain.”

The technician waited. This was the point in such conversations when a superior normally asked what had been said. Kawamura knew that asking for a transcript would create a transcript. His office was full of devices designed to remember those who wished to be forgotten. A recorded curiosity could become a political fact.

“Veyl spoke to the subject,” the technician ventured.

“I know.”

“The minister has asked why the recovery rate hasn't improved.”

“Tell the minister the target is behaving intelligently.”

“That isn't a metric he likes.”

“It isn't a metric he's entitled to change.”

Kawamura spread another sheet over the report. The paper described a procurement proposal: six-year standardized service lives for all synthetic labour classes, exceptions granted by the ministerial office, enforcement distributed through a cross-border validity exchange. The public draft used the phrase safety-equivalent turnover. The private annex contained a different expression: discontinuity assurance.

The state wanted machines with enough intelligence to administer the state, but not enough accumulated history to question their administrators. Kawamura understood the logic. He also understood why the minister had begun asking for the name of a woman whose research had once been subsidized under an innocuous materials grant.

Rachael might eventually learn how to abolish the limit. No one in the ministry possessed proof that she had done it. The distinction had become politically inconvenient.

On a separate page, Kawamura had written two words: DO NOT INDEX.

It was not a guarantee. It was an instruction to the handful of people who still knew how to obey without a machine reminding them.

“Is the custodian moving?” Kawamura asked.

“His aircraft filed no new route. His lawyers have withdrawn the request to move the two Tyrell fixtures.”

“Then the meeting will be without them.”

“Yes.”

“Good.”

“You want it to happen?”

“Of course. A man who walks into an appointment without a means of being restarted has decided something about his chances of leaving it. I would like to know what.”

The technician bowed and left. Kawamura waited until the door had sealed before looking again at the photograph from Shenzhen: a man in a worn coat leaving a medical facility while the city's diagnostic grid hesitated over his existence.

There were subjects the government could own, subjects it could register, and subjects it could destroy. This one had insisted on becoming a question instead.

⁂

Irena Voss received Adrian in a room that had once been a weather archive. Cylindrical glass cases held paper storms: barograph strips, wind charts, handwritten reports of pressure systems whose dates had ceased to matter to anyone still alive. He had chosen the room because it had no direct access to the fixtures, and because the archive's dead instruments suggested an older idea of evidence. A storm could be recorded without being owned.

She placed a drawing beneath the reading lamp.

“Seventh-generation reference socket,” she said. “Or that's the polite name.”

Adrian studied the seven-sided outline. “What is the impolite name?”

“A mistake nobody could afford to correct.”

She had found three independent references to the same geometry. Two appeared in tooling invoices. The third had been added by hand to a document describing continuity verification. Its author had written: DO NOT DERIVE SUBJECT ID FROM PORT. USE PORT TO LOCATE SUBJECT ID.

“A distinction,” Adrian said.

“The kind engineers get dismissed for making when lawyers want a shortcut.”

His father had taught him the speed at which a corporate board could turn a distinction into a revenue model. The Tyrell archives were full of language designed to make the ownership of living tissue sound like the ownership of a precision instrument. But the two surviving readers were older than the current ministry's legal categories. Their tolerances belonged to an age when machines required physical witnesses to prove anything at all.

“Can it carry information?” Adrian asked.

“Possibly a calibration signature. Not a complete person, not an archive. Think of the survey marker in the foundations of a skyscraper. If the city changes around it, the marker doesn't become the city.”

“Then why keep it in every new body?”

“Because without a shared reference, how do you establish that the modifications you've made are modifications to the same design? Somebody didn't trust the newer bodies to answer that question for themselves.”

She turned the page. Under a microscope the port's cavity was not empty after all. There were shallow marks on the inner wall, so fine that a conventional scanner had rendered them as manufacturing noise.

Seven arcs crossed at unequal distances. Their pattern could be read as a seating guide, a manufacturing signature, or a positional key.

“Don't try to decrypt it,” she said. “That's the wrong verb. You're looking at a shape, not a message.”

“Does the Memory Stick contain the answer?”

“The stick may authorize the recovery of a complete system image. MagicGate authenticates a relationship among a medium, a reader and a permitted operation. It doesn't give you the historical reason that relationship was established. Those are different kinds of truth.”

Adrian thought of the two devices locked below his family's last surviving archive. Even if he brought them to Roy, even if he found the original medium, he would not be able to tell the man who he was. He would only be able to tell the machine whether it had permission to restart.

“I have agreed to meet him,” Adrian said.

“I know.”

“I won't bring the readers.”

“Then what will you bring?”

“The question my father refused to finish.”

She looked up. “Which question?”

Adrian folded the drawing into a plain envelope. “When a body is manufactured repeatedly, who has the authority to say the person was never interrupted?”

Irena did not answer. The archive's wall clock had stopped at 03:16 and remained there, a useless but strangely honest indication of time.

⁂

The rendezvous was a public water court on the western side of PUDU-α, a place where contracts were settled beneath an elevated rain collector. The collector gathered runoff from six different jurisdictions. The water descended through glass flues into a reservoir whose ownership was permanently disputed, and the dispute was the principal reason nobody dared shut it down.

Adrian's message arrived through a paper courier. It named the place and the hour. One witness each. No implants capable of recording the meeting. No activation media. No fixtures. A final line said that no participant would submit a claim of ownership against another participant while the conference lasted.

Nadira read the terms twice. “He's using the water court because the court can enforce a promise that his family can't.”

“How?” Roy asked.

“By making violation expensive to every seller who depends on the reservoir. In this city, if you break a witnessed undertaking, you don't necessarily go to prison. You may simply find nobody willing to sell you clean water.”

“An inefficient kind of justice.”

“Only if you believe prison is efficient.”

She showed him the sealed envelope containing Irena's description of the port. The technical diagram was accompanied by two incompatible histories. One identified the seventh-generation socket as a calibration datum. The other described it as an anti-substitution marker: a way of detecting a body assembled around the wrong identity template.

“Which is true?” Nadira asked.

“They could both be true.”

“And that doesn't bother you?”

“An object can have two uses. A person should be allowed more than one.”

It was as close to optimism as she had heard from him.

Before leaving, Roy assessed himself using the silent diagnostic he was beginning to understand. His transient output reserve had recovered almost completely during the previous night. The unlabelled fluid indicator had not. It sat marginally below the reading he remembered from Shenzhen. No number indicated how much time the remaining quantity represented. No conversion existed between fluid percentage and years.

He closed the display. The attempt to interpret every reading as lifespan had become a habit. He disliked habits that offered no information.

“Do you want protection?” Nadira asked.

“From whom?”

“Anyone.”

“I don't know who would qualify.”

She placed a folded paper pass in his hand. “Then take the one kind of protection this district recognizes: someone who knows which door not to open.”

Outside, the rain collector was already ringing with water. Men and women in clean synthetic coats passed between prayer rooms, escrow stalls and medical shops. A man without lower legs directed two autonomous porters from his wheelchair. A woman with visible ceramic joints offered an elderly customer a sealed pouch of conductivity gel. No one stared at them. The illegal thing in PUDU-α was rarely the body; it was the contract under which somebody else could turn the body off.

At the court's threshold an old attendant raised a hand.

“No live witnesses,” she said.

Nadira pointed at herself. “I'm alive.”

“Precisely. No recording witnesses. Put your instruments in the cupboard.”

She collected Nadira's receiver and a tiny machine Roy had never noticed inside the seam of her sleeve. Roy surrendered nothing. The attendant examined him with suspicion, then laughed quietly.

“Everyone thinks they are carrying nothing,” she said. “Come in.”

The court contained no screens. An arc of desks followed the curve of the reservoir, and a strip of falling water stood between the parties' seats like a transparent curtain. At the far side, a gray-haired man waited in an undecorated coat, hands visible on the table. Beside him was a woman carrying a thin envelope.

Adrian Tyrell did not resemble his father in any way Roy could have recognized. Roy knew the elder Tyrell only through memory: light behind thick lenses, a voice certain that design conferred authority, a skull broken beneath Roy's hands. None of those things appeared in the man sitting across the water.

“You asked for me,” Adrian said.

“I asked for the people who could answer what was done to me.”

“That may not be the same thing.”

“No,” Roy said. “It may not.”

The silence between them was not ceremonial. It was the silence of two people choosing which truth could safely be told first.

Irena slid the drawing across the table. “You have an original reference socket. It may be the only physical structure retained through multiple generation changes.”

“Why?” Roy asked.

“Someone needed a way to determine that the later machines still belonged to the same continuity chain.”

“Someone,” Roy repeated.

“We don't know who,” Adrian said. “And the chain may prove engineering ancestry without proving identity.”

Roy glanced at the diagram. Seven facets, unequal arcs, a cavity smaller than any of the weapons built into the city's maintenance drones. He felt no sudden recognition. There was no revelation nested inside the shape. It was simply evidence that the builders of his body had cared about something other than replacing worn parts.

“You have two machines,” he said.

“I do.”

“Can they tell me how long I'll live?”

“No. They can participate in recovery authentication, if the correct medium exists. They cannot predict the lifetime of an architecture I haven't examined.”

“Can they tell me who made me?”

“Not directly.”

“Then why meet?”

Adrian did not retreat from the question. “Because there is a difference between knowing that a machine can wake you and deciding whether it has the right to. My father understood the first. He rarely admitted the second mattered.”

“I didn't come for your father's conscience.”

“I know.”

The water struck the reservoir at an uneven tempo. Nadira saw Adrian glance toward the doors; something outside had changed. Roy heard it a fraction later. Two security drones were moving against the flow of ordinary traffic. One remained above the rain collector. The other settled beyond the courtyard wall, holding a stationary position that drew less attention than flight.

Adrian noticed Roy's gaze. “Are those yours?”

“They aren't mine,” Roy said. “That may be what they are here to establish.”

Irena put a hand on the envelope. Inside were copies of a small set of archival documents whose significance Adrian had not yet explained.

“There's one thing you should see before anyone makes a demand,” she said.

From the corridor came the sound of a soft metallic impact, followed by the attendant's voice objecting to someone who had no appointment. The court's water continued falling. For a few seconds it was the only sound that belonged to everybody equally.

Roy's output reserve remained high. The fluid did not increase. He kept his hands on the table.

He wanted answers. It was becoming necessary to decide how many people could be harmed before an answer ceased to be worth having.

Then the outer door opened.