NEXUSYS 11

THE ELEVENTH BODY

BOOK II — PUDU ALPHA

CHAPTER 09

THE WITNESS IN THE DOORWAY

The man who entered did not carry a weapon. That was the first mistake he made, and it belonged to everyone watching him.

He wore a service coat the color of wet cement, a municipal seal stitched over the left breast and a strip of white gauze across his throat. His face was ordinary in the way faces manufactured for public assistance had become ordinary: a carefully tolerable asymmetry, a little sag beneath one eye, pores that existed because somebody had once discovered people trusted pores. He paused inside the threshold while rain drummed on the building's old intake roof.

“Inspection,” he said. “Reservoir safety. An irregularity in the west pressure channel.”

The attendant who had challenged him stood three paces behind, trying not to show she had been followed into the chamber. Her hand was closed around a brass key. That detail interested Roy more than the visitor's uniform.

“The pressure channel is below us,” she said. “You came through the wrong door.”

“I was directed here.”

“By whom?”

The man smiled with professional regret. “The district.”

There were four independent meanings to the word district in PUDU-α, and two of them had no authority in the court. Nadira's expression changed almost imperceptibly. Irena's did not change at all. Adrian placed his hands flat on the desk, as though submitting them for inspection by a court that had not asked.

Roy watched the visitor's eyes. They returned twice to his neck, once to the drawing of the seven-faceted socket, never to the envelope. He wondered whether the man already knew what the envelope contained, or had been told it did not matter.

“Who owns your mandate?” Nadira asked.

The man extended a laminated pass. A reservoir inspection stamp, perfectly stamped. Beneath it was a small graphic that had not appeared on any of the court's old maps. Three vertical bars forming an enclosure around a dot. The unification ministry's domestic-life insignia, stripped of the more inflammatory words.

“I have authority to secure an anomalous synthetic article,” he said.

“Article,” Roy repeated.

“You may accompany me voluntarily.”

“And if I don't?”

“Then the issue passes to a recovery team. I was sent to avoid that.”

The attendant lifted the brass key. “No seizure within the water court. Whatever your employer calls him, you must state your claim on paper.”

The man regarded the key without recognizing it. Roy understood then that the visitor had been designed to recognize orders rather than precedents. He was not stupid. He was competent inside a world smaller than the one in which he had arrived.

“You have a name?” Roy asked.

“Inspector Damar.”

“A name you were given for this visit?”

“A name sufficient for identification.”

“How long have you been alive, Damar?”

For the first time, the synthetic official looked uncertain. Not offended, not frightened: uncertain in a way his designers had probably categorized as a difficult-interaction pause.

“Six years is the standard proposed lifecycle,” he said eventually. “Current deployments vary.”

“I didn't ask about a proposal.”

“There is no reason to discuss my service history.”

“Then there is no reason to discuss mine.”

A delicate mechanical sound came from beyond the corridor. Another device, concealed somewhere beyond the rain curtain, rotated a lens assembly. Roy heard its motor trying to cancel the vibration of its own bearing. If a team was waiting, the visitor was not there to arrest him. He was there to keep him talking long enough for an arrest to become effortless.

Roy could have crossed the room before the man finished his next breath. He knew this without knowing how he knew it. His body offered a narrow set of trajectories as impressions of possible movement: a hand against a jaw, a shoulder through the door, a broken elbow, a blind angle. They came without images of consequence. His consciousness supplied those, and found them disagreeable.

The reserve beneath his awareness stood ready. The unreplenished medium did not. He remained seated.

“We will submit the claim,” Adrian said. “Please state the name of the party seeking custody.”

“Central Synthetic Affairs.”

“The ministry cannot be the party in this district.”

“Then enter the Union Compliance Office.”

“Under which water concession?”

A second pause. “My instructions do not address water concessions.”

“Your instructions,” Adrian said, “are not law.”

The air shifted. The inspector's smile disappeared with no intermediate emotion. He seemed suddenly less human not because of exposed machinery but because a choice had been removed from the sequence of expressions he could make.

“Negotiation interval ended,” he said.

The attendant turned the brass key.

The falling curtain of water stopped.

It should have been a small thing, a theatrical effect in a court that had built procedure out of obsolete hydraulics. Instead the whole room changed. A hush descended as if someone had taken an enormous hand away from its ears. In the silence Roy heard three distinct frequencies rise in the corridor. A network mesh trying to assemble itself across a space deliberately built to frustrate such assemblies.

Nadira said, “Down.”

Adrian was already moving, pushed beneath the table by Irena. The inspector lunged toward Roy with the exaggerated economy of a machine that had been told a living target was fragile. A hand opened—not to strike but to fix a contact patch behind Roy's ear.

Roy moved only far enough to let it miss.

His chair tipped. The inspector overcorrected and struck the table. Paper scattered through the air. The official recovered instantly, too fast for a civilian unit but not fast enough for Roy, whose limbs were already offering the second and third trajectories.

He rejected both.

He caught Damar's wrist, guided it into the carved edge of the desk and turned. Ceramic clicked within the sleeve. A restraint mechanism deployed harmlessly against the timber. Roy held the arm until he could hear one of the drive clutches slip. Then he let it go.

The inspector staggered back. He appeared astonished not to have been destroyed.

“Leave,” Roy told him.

“Your cooperation is mandatory.”

“Not here,” said the attendant.

Her brass key had not been a symbol. It operated the court's old water pressure isolation. With the curtain stopped, the room's hidden channels had entered a service configuration. A floor grate beside the public benches loosened as pressure transferred elsewhere. Nadira lifted it with both hands.

“It's a maintenance outlet,” she told Roy. “Not a miracle. Go.”

One of the three frequencies beyond the door sharpened. The outside team had decided the inspector was failing.

Roy turned to Adrian. “The envelope.”

Irena held it tightly against her chest. “It's a copy.”

“Then keep it.”

“You don't know what it says.”

“Neither do the men outside.”

“That won't stop them taking it.”

Adrian looked at the open grate, then at Roy. “You came to ask how long you have.”

“Yes.”

“I can't answer that. But I can give you something that may prevent a much shorter answer.”

He removed a narrow strip of paper from inside his sleeve. It bore a seven-sided blind impression and a string of characters punctured into the stock, not printed. The letters were too small for anyone across the room to read. Roy saw each perforation as a separate darkness.

“Do not let anyone photograph it,” Adrian said. “It's a custody reference, not a key. It identifies which machine may be requested and under what conditions. If somebody tells you it can activate you, they are lying.”

“Why tell me this now?”

“Because my father built machines that depended on people failing to ask the difference.”

A dull impact sounded from the corridor. The door frame trembled. Damar moved again, driven less by initiative than by an update issued elsewhere. Roy drove his shoulder between the inspector and the attendant, not as an attack but as a barrier. Damar's hand closed on the coat, tearing fabric. Roy felt an unreasonable pressure build in his legs, the temptation of easy violence.

“Go!” he said.

Nadira dropped through the grate. Irena followed with the envelope. Adrian hesitated only a moment before lowering himself into the dark. The attendant remained beside the key, unwilling to abandon the machinery that had given the building its unusual jurisdiction.

“You?” Roy asked.

“This is my court.”

“It will not survive an argument with them.”

“It already has.”

The outer door opened under a controlled force, too precise to be an accident. Roy heard several feet touch stone in exactly the same rhythm. He released Damar and descended through the grate. As the last of the room disappeared above him, the attendant opened another hydraulic valve. Water slammed

through the channel below the floor, and the grate locked shut under a weight no single human could lift.

In the conduit the sound of the rushing water filled every gap in language.

⁂

The chamber above belonged to a system of rights which had been inconvenient long before anybody invented a central artificial intelligence. It had survived because water had to arrive somewhere whether a government admitted the contract or not. The new administrations kept trying to absorb the records. Each attempt produced a new exception. After several generations the exceptions had become the only part of the system that still worked.

Beneath it, Nadira led the small group through a passage lined with enamel measuring plates. Every few metres a mechanical dial counted something. The dials did not agree. Their disagreements were the history of the district.

“Your official was wearing a government skin,” she said.

“He was government,” Roy replied.

“That's not the same claim.”

Adrian looked back. “They'll come for the custodian too.”

“She knows what to surrender and what not to possess,” Nadira said. “She has had practice.”

Irena was breathing hard. The envelope she had protected was stained at one corner. When she realized Roy was looking at it, she stopped and passed it to him.

“Now you can see.”

Three sheets. The first showed an incomplete lineage diagram, rows of architecture identifiers separated by gaps where the names should have been. The second contained a partial extract from an old assessment of what it called *continuity validation*. The third was no more than a photocopy of a lab notebook margin.

There were no instructions for making a replicant, no recipe for an unlimited lifespan, no location of a hidden laboratory. Roy was almost relieved. He had begun to suspect that every piece of paper passed across a table was a trap demanding an emotion he did not possess.

On the final page somebody had written, in a mechanical handwriting precise enough to seem printed:

A REFERENCE PORT DOES NOT PROVE THAT WHAT PASSES THROUGH IT SURVIVES.

Below that, another hand had added a question:

THEN WHY RETAIN IT?

“Who wrote this?” Roy asked.

“The first line is from a validation note,” Irena said. “The second annotation has no signature.”

Adrian leaned close to the wall as they walked, letting Nadira lead. “The socket may have been retained because later bodies needed an invariant mechanical reference. Calibration, neural continuity, identity attestation—those are different hypotheses. No one we have found can prove which one was intended.”

“Yet my body has one.”

“Yes.”

“And the earlier body had one.”

“So the records suggest.”

Roy looked again at the page. He thought of Los Angeles rain, of a hand that had gripped the edge of a rooftop, of memories that had survived across an absence the others insisted lasted eleven years. He had no emotional appetite for the vanished generations. Their technical existence might help him locate the person who had created the body now standing in the conduit. That was enough.

“If I am a copy,” he said, “I still need to know what will kill me.”

Adrian seemed to accept the statement as more rigorous than a dozen arguments about personhood. “Then don't let them turn an authentication examination into a system initialization. We cannot guarantee your cache survives that process.”

“Can I read it myself?”

“Only portions. A running machine can inspect its own operations, but the secure layers are isolated. That's why the legacy medium matters. Ordinary reboots are not full restorations.”

Roy folded the three pages along their existing creases. “You brought no reader.”

“I promised not to.”

“Keep that promise.”

They entered a chamber where the water met a sealed turbine. The machine's wheel had not turned for years. Its shaft had become a convenient route for cables installed by people who officially denied any such route existed. A young mechanic was waiting beside it, coat open, one artificial hand holding an oil lamp.

Nadira touched two fingers to her forehead in greeting. The mechanic did not ask names. He pointed to a maintenance elevator.

“Surface is sealed,” he said. “But the eastern filtration annex isn't. Yet.”

“Who sent you?” Adrian asked.

“Someone who pays the electricity bill.”

This was not an answer. In the district it was sometimes the only answer worth giving.

⁂

Far to the northeast, behind a wall of laminated glass, Kawamura received three distinct reports of the encounter.

The ministry's synthetic inspector had filed a failure notice automatically. The district security office had recorded an unauthorized attempt to enter a protected water tribunal. The recovery drones had transmitted an image of a broken chair and no subject.

None of the reports described what had mattered.

He watched the slowed recording of Roy's intervention. A wrist captured, a restraint deflected, a body moved at an angle outside the inspector's recommended capture model. There were moments in the sequence when the unknown synthetic could have disabled the official permanently. It had declined to do so.

“He's learning restraint,” said a woman beside Kawamura.

He did not look away from the footage. “He has always had a capacity for restraint. The reports from the older case were written by people who confused violence with its absence.”

“You've seen the older case?”

“Fragments.”

“Is he the same individual?”

Kawamura paused the image on Roy's face, blurred by interference from the water court. “That question is not within our operational mandate.”

“Recovery says the target had contact with the Tyrell heir. Shall we move on Adrian?”

“No. He has two objects we cannot replace, and he knows it. We will not teach him the value of destroying them.”

The woman opened an offline folder. Its contents had never entered the ministry's general inference service. It contained financial authorizations from the abandoned research program and a small number of signatures copied by hand. One of them belonged to the researcher Kawamura had spent years failing to locate.

“Does the central service know about the petition?” she asked.

“It knows a petition exists.”

“Not the contents?”

“Not the contents.”

She considered the folder. “The minister will want an explanation.”

“Then tell the minister I prevented his machines from becoming evidence in a property dispute he cannot win.”

“That sounds political.”

“It is administrative,” Kawamura said. “Politics is what people call administration when they dislike the result.”

He rewound the recording again. What troubled him was not Roy's strength. The ministry possessed stronger machines, at least in narrowly specified circumstances. What troubled him was the gap between the threat model and the behavior. The target had chosen the lower-energy move. It had prioritized strangers over its own escape time. It had carried away a document that could not restart a single damaged processor.

Those were not the actions of a machine looking for command authority.

They were the actions of something looking for a reason to refuse it.

“Continue observing,” Kawamura said. “No lethal engagement. No network distribution of the lineage material. And find out who arranged the east filtration outlet.”

The woman hesitated. “If the central AI demands a complete report?”

“We will give it one.”

“A complete one?”

“One that contains every fact we are authorized to know.”

He closed the offline folder before she could reply.

⁂

At the eastern filtration annex, morning light entered through six meters of stained glass installed in the former prayer hall of a factory that had ceased to exist. Somewhere beyond it a vendor was calling the prices of bottled rain, graded by mineral content and the legitimacy of the contract under which it had been collected. Children ran between delivery drones under a canopy of plastic sheets. The district had resumed its ordinary life without waiting for the men with state insignia to finish deciding what was lawful.

Adrian stood opposite Roy in a room smelling of wet limestone. Irena was checking the corridor. Nadira had already disappeared into the next market, where she could acquire passage tokens that existed on paper but not in the population register.

“You have the means to start me again,” Roy said.

“Under specific conditions. Not here. Not without the original medium. Not without a request that survives scrutiny.”

“Do you have the medium?”

Adrian met his gaze. “I have the two readers. That is what I have agreed to say. Do not mistake one for the other.”

“Who does?”

“I don't know.”

Roy studied him. Adrian's fear was not theatrical. It seemed directed neither at Roy nor at the police who had come to arrest him, but at what would follow if the wrong people were brought into the same room as a working reader.

“My father died believing construction gave him the right to determine the terms of life,” Adrian said. “I have spent years trying to keep his instruments from being used to settle that argument again.”

“That is not an answer to my lifespan.”

“No.”

“Then we are not finished.”

“No,” Adrian agreed. “We aren't.”

He gave Roy a place name, written once, without explanation: KUCHING. Beneath it a second notation, not geographical, but procedural: CUSTODY REVIEW — TWO WITNESSES — OFFLINE.

“The next record isn't here,” Adrian said. “And I won't take you to it while a ministry team is following the paper trail. You must decide whether knowing the history is worth leaving another city behind you.”

Roy held the paper up toward the light. Beyond the window a flight of inspection drones crossed the river, their shadows briefly fragmenting on the roofs below. He had been given another location, another procedural phrase, another generation of old machines whose operators feared touching them.

The city was teaching him the same lesson in different languages: a life could be interrupted by force, but its continuation was governed by contracts written by people who might no longer be alive.

He folded the note. “I am not going to Kuching for my history.”

“Then why?”

“To find out whether I can survive my next failure.”

Adrian nodded once. There was no comfort in it.

Behind them the filtration pumps began their daily cycle. The floor vibrated with a slow, deliberate energy utterly unlike the sudden reserve Roy felt coiled in his muscles. His own reserve would return after strain. The other resource—the unreplaceable medium moving through his unfamiliar body—would not. He wondered what the unnamed manufacturers had intended when they separated one form of survival from another.

Outside, the rain began again.

For the first time since waking, Roy did not think of Los Angeles.