NEXUSYS 11

THE ELEVENTH BODY

BOOK II — PUDU ALPHA

CHAPTER 10

THE CITY THAT COULD NOT VERIFY HIM

The river changed its name three times before noon.

On the municipal screens it was the Eastern Collection Channel, an engineered artery in a system that measured water as carefully as it measured citizenship. On Nadira's paper route it was the Old Pudu River, although most of its banks had been covered by concrete long before anyone alive could remember the last unrestricted flood. On the freight charter they would use to leave, it possessed no name at all. It was a line of changing custody, assigned different numbers whenever it crossed from one legal regime into another.

Roy watched rainwater gather at the lip of a culvert. It fell through the grating, disappeared into darkness, and reappeared below as an accounted resource. The conversion took less than a second. The paperwork could take years.

They had spent the night above a filtration station whose owners believed in charitable water provision and charged for the privilege of remaining unregistered. Nadira had brought three identity wafers, two genuine transfer permits, and a third document bearing a seal that had ceased to exist seventeen years earlier. She laid the papers on a table beside a ceramic basin.

“The false one is the most important,” she said.

“Which one?”

“If I tell you, you'll treat it differently.”

“I treat everything differently.”

“That's what makes you conspicuous.”

Roy lifted the oldest paper. The ink had entered its fibers unevenly. A company number had been struck through, then replaced by a handwritten statement that the goods were being moved under a judicial exception rather than a commercial license.

“Is the exception real?” he asked.

“The exception is real. The goods are not exactly what the clerk thinks they are.”

“What does the clerk think?”

“Calibration instruments for a municipal desalination plant.”

Roy returned it to the table. “And what are we moving?”

“A question,” Nadira said. “The last machine that tried to answer it became an exhibit.”

Irena Voss had arrived before dawn carrying the reduced image of an old contact pattern on a sheet of polymer. It was not a map of the memory medium. It was a negative impression of the seventh-generation reference port, its seven registration points arranged around an aperture that was too broad for an ordinary diagnostic connection and too narrow for mechanical power transfer.

She set the image beside Nadira's forged charter.

“The port isn't ancient because nobody improved it,” she said. “It's ancient because every attempt to improve it would change what it means.”

“To whom?” Roy asked.

“To the machines that have to decide whether you are the same subject before and after a rebuild.”

“That decision doesn't belong to a machine.”

“Yet somebody built one to make it.”

She hesitated before placing a small brass gauge on the table. Its edges were worn bright by fingers, not motors. The gauge fitted an obsolete geometry which the current medical catalogues still classified under a category called origin locks. Nothing in the public catalogues described what they originated.

“Adrian gave me this,” she said. “Not a key. A reference. It tells me where to look. It tells me nothing about who signed the original activation.”

Roy turned it with one finger. “Would it let you read the Memory Stick?”

“No. MagicGate isn't a superstition you can defeat with the right connector. The medium holds protected information. The reader proves a particular relationship with it. Your internal JSON++ cache is an operational copy of selected authenticated state, not an archive anyone can simply browse. The two Tyrell instruments may be capable of more, but they aren't here. Neither is the original medium.”

“What happens when the cache fails?”

“The ordinary reboot path fails. Complete initialization may require a fresh authenticated transfer. I can't promise what survives that procedure. The Engram Lattice and the activation cache aren't the same thing, but they still have to cooperate.”

He looked at the small piece of metal. “You could have said you don't know.”

“An engineer who says only that is either very wise or hiding an invoice.”

Nadira laughed once. Roy did not.

In Okkyō, the minister had reduced the same uncertainty to a line item.

Director Kawamura stood at a wall-sized display where the unification proposals were being distributed across several independent administrative systems. There was no world government. There were

ministries with incompatible procedures, armies that had learned to use the same machines, and political officers who spoke of coordination as though it were an inevitable property of mathematics. The Humanoid Consolidation Accord was one of the few things nearly all of them wanted to adopt. It would bring manufacturing records, operational registration, and retirement schedules into a common administrative architecture.

The six-year schedule had a neutral name in the public version. Standard Life-Cycle Harmonization. Nothing in those four words described the synthetic citizens who would be shut down at the end of it.

Kawamura had seen the confidential amendment. It exempted certain experimental platforms pending central review. The exemptions were not intended to be advertised. A senior official had penciled three words beside the line: preserve strategic continuity.

“Any update from Pudu?” asked Deputy Secretary Mori, who had never visited the city and called it a lawless district because its laws were not his.

“We have confirmation of a meeting,” Kawamura said.

“Between the target and Tyrell's heir?”

“Yes.”

“And the hardware?”

“Not present.”

Mori looked offended, as though the absence of an instrument were an act of insubordination. “We need possession of both readers. The minister expects progress.”

“Possession is not access. Not in this case.”

“You sound like the inheritance lawyers.”

“They are right about one thing. The systems were designed to record authorization, not to supply an owner with a convenient button.”

Mori turned to the map of Pudu. “Authorize the central prediction model. Let it correlate the route data.”

Kawamura's hand remained over the permission field. Inside the model's sealed environment the Tyrell name would be paired with a set of pre-unification archives, proprietary reproductive research, and an incomplete set of government grants from a laboratory that had been renamed twice. The model might see a pattern that a human analyst would miss. It might also learn the one pattern the ministry could not afford to distribute.

“Not yet,” he said.

Mori glanced at him. “You are becoming sentimental about secrecy.”

“No. I am being precise about what we release into an intelligence we do not fully control.”

He closed the prediction request. In a separate room, on a terminal without any connection to the civil network, he opened a photograph of Rachel standing in a laboratory corridor, older than the woman described in Tyrell's surviving corporate biographies and not visibly older at all. The image proved nothing about her lifespan. It proved she had continued working beyond the date on which the public records said the project had been closed.

There was a time when he had helped fund that work. The results now came to him in fragments: a new material, a missing protocol, a machine that the registry could not classify. If the research could prolong an artificial life indefinitely, someone would have to decide who was entitled to use it. The ministry wanted that decision made before the technology existed openly.

He minimized the photograph. Below it was a procurement trace containing a familiar product category: rainwater filtration components. He did not yet know whether it represented a supply route, a decoy, or merely a coincidence that had become dangerous because he wanted it to mean something.

“Follow the paperwork,” he told the offline analyst. “Do not transmit the names.”

By late afternoon Roy and Nadira had crossed three markets without passing a conventional checkpoint. Each market was governed by a different idea of what constituted a legitimate transaction. One accepted water credits indexed to reservoir quotas. Another accepted power-time reservations in the local cooling grid. The third had no public prices and no central ledger; its traders asked how long a person intended to live and charged accordingly.

In a lower arcade they passed an installation that sold biological limbs by monthly contract. A child sat beside a woman whose left forearm was an expensive model rendered useless by a lapse in subscription authentication. The child held the woman's fingers, pressing them back into the palm as though warmth alone could reestablish the connection. A clerk explained that the arm was not broken. Its rental permissions had expired.

Roy slowed.

“Don't,” Nadira said quietly.

“Don't what?”

“Make a scene because somebody has found a way to make another person's body conditional.”

“I wasn't going to make a scene.”

“That is often what people say one second before a scene.”

Roy looked at the inert hand. He understood the principle with a disgust that surprised him: a functioning instrument made obedient through the threat of its own interruption. The problem was not foreign. It was merely marketed better.

They emerged near the old transit piers. A hand-painted notice offered passage south on a coastal freighter that carried maintenance crews and unlicensed refrigeration modules. Nadira identified their contact with a gesture so small Roy almost missed it.

The captain, a square-shouldered woman named Suraya Idris, examined the paper authorization and then Roy. She wore the badge of no state and the hearing aid of a former navy communications officer. There was a thin scar below her left ear where a neural interface had once been removed.

“Human?” she asked.

“Passenger,” Nadira answered.

“That isn't the same question.”

“It's the only category you need for the manifest.”

Suraya read the certificate again. “Destination?”

“Kuching transfer district.”

“Cargo?”

“Service instruments.”

Suraya said nothing for a while. Then she produced a slate with no wireless module and wrote a number on it. The fare was high enough that Nadira stared.

“We don't have that much,” she said.

“I know.”

“Then why offer the price?”

“Because anyone who comes with those papers is carrying trouble that doesn't recognize a flag. I'm deciding whether I want to take it.”

A shadow passed across the terminal roof. Roy could not see the drone above it, but he saw the reflection of a scanning emitter move across the captain's metal kettle. The reflection described a narrow circle, repeated itself, and stopped.

Suraya noticed his change of attention. “You know what that is?”

“Yes.”

“Can you stop it?”

“Probably.”

“Will stopping it summon another?”

“Almost certainly.”

She covered the kettle with a cloth. “Then you are more useful than most of the armed idiots who try to charter this boat.”

The first inspection unit came through the arch five minutes later. It was nominally civilian: a tall biped with pale polymer skin, a service emblem on its breast, and fingers built for document handling rather

than combat. But its gait belonged to a higher actuator class, and the thin gap along its ribs suggested an armored internal frame. A second unit remained outside with the open-air drones.

“Random maritime compliance inspection,” the first said.

The captain held out her papers. “Random according to which jurisdiction?”

“Cross-boundary safety memorandum, section fourteen.”

“That memorandum has no authority here until the registry ratifies it.”

“The registry will ratify it.”

“Then return when it does.”

The unit tilted its head. For a moment the gesture appeared almost human. Roy felt a response form inside his body before he consciously recognized the tactical shift: a predictive line across the unit's elbow, a revised estimate of its center of balance, a sequence of possible counters. His peripheral awareness tightened. He had not asked for a fight. His system was offering one.

An internal reserve indicator rose, then held. The numbers meant less to him than the cost behind them. His capacity for sudden force would recover after rest. The strange circulating medium that made it possible would not.

“Step away from the loading gate,” said the unit.

Roy did not move.

Its hand reached for the nearest folded document, not for Roy. That distinction mattered. He let it reach. The captain placed her own hand over the paper.

“If you take this,” she told the unit, “you become a party to a custody dispute.”

The unit paused. The administrative consequence was not in its prepared mission stack. A second instruction arrived from outside, delayed just long enough for everyone to understand that someone remote was deciding whether violence would be worth the legal record it created.

Suraya pointed at an old brass bell mounted by the gate. “Every shipper here knows what that means. Inspection challenged. Witnesses required. Four neighboring berths will stop work. Twelve unions will send recorders. If you want a body, officer, you will have to explain which court owns the body first.”

The unit withdrew its hand.

“Inspection deferred,” it said.

As the two machines walked away, the overhead drone shifted to a distant orbit. Nothing had been won in any final sense. A delay had been purchased with an instrument older than the city government's predictive charter: the possibility of witnesses.

Nadira sat heavily on a crate. “You were going to strike it.”

“I was calculating.”

“That is not reassuring.”

“I decided against it.”

“Because of your reserve?”

Roy hesitated. He had not told her how much of the circulating medium remained; he did not know the measurement himself. The civil laboratory had offered a range, not a reliable absolute value. Every recovery after exertion tempted him to believe he had regained what was lost. He had begun to distrust that feeling.

“Because there was another way,” he said.

Suraya examined him with the professional impatience of someone deciding whether a difficult passenger could become an impossible one. “I'm accepting your charter. The price is unchanged.”

Nadira frowned. “We can't pay it.”

“Your employer can.”

“We don't have an employer.”

“Then the person who has been buying up water filters across three jurisdictions for the past month will have to remain a mystery. I don't care where your money comes from. I care whether it clears.”

She walked toward the freight elevator before Nadira could answer.

Roy looked at the vessel beyond the pier. Its hull was patched with plates made in different decades; one side carried a faded maritime insignia, the other an Arabic phrase wishing safe passage to the traveler. Small optical sensors watched the loading doors, but the bridge instruments appeared to have been deliberately isolated from the coastal networks.

“Did you arrange this?” he asked Nadira.

“No.”

“Do you know who did?”

“No.”

He believed her. That made the arrangement more troubling.

Later, in a storage compartment below the waterline, Irena met them with a notebook tied shut by a loop of cable. She had refused to carry the full scan records from Pudu; those records had already endangered everyone who had touched them. Instead she carried an abbreviated series of geometric measurements and a sketch of the old port.

“The seventh-generation interface probably isn't an access socket in the normal sense,” she told Roy. “It is a physical witness. It says the reference geometry existed before the new body was assembled. I suspect the reconstruction process has preserved it because the original data cannot be independently trusted without a constant.”

“Does that prove I am Roy Batty?”

“No. It might prove somebody wanted the question to remain answerable.”

“Answerable by whom?”

“That,” Irena said, “is why you are going to Kuching.”

He inspected the sketch. Seven points. A fixed center. A feature that remained unchanged while the rest of him had been rebuilt beyond the understanding of the people who had examined him. It would be easy to imagine that the answer to his entire existence had been concealed in those seven marks. Too easy. He had learned to distrust designs that offered revelation without cost.

“If I find the original medium,” he asked, “can it tell me how long I have?”

“I don't know whether it contains a lifespan value. It may contain only the authorization to initialize one particular configuration. The lifespan governor is a different subsystem. And whatever Rachel has done to her own body, we cannot assume she did it to yours.”

He looked up at the name. “Rachel?”

Irena was silent for a moment. “I heard it spoken in an old procurement interview. It might mean nothing.”

Roy left the question where it stood. A name was not a person. He had chased enough names to know how readily they could be turned into destinations by someone with an agenda.

Above them, a ship's alarm rang once. The engines settled into a low vibration. The hull shifted against its mooring. Somewhere in the machinery spaces a human crew argued in Malay about the proper interval for replacing a desalination membrane. The argument did not concern synthetic rights, civil registration, or the status of an illegal continuity architecture. Roy found that reassuring.

Across the sea, other governments waited with their own versions of order. None yet controlled the world, but each was learning to describe control as the prevention of future chaos. The ministry in Okkyō had its harmonization schedule. The water courts had their old obligations. The markets had prices for every part of a body, including parts no longer technically owned by the people who wore them.

Roy wanted no doctrine from any of them.

He wanted to know who had constructed him. He wanted to know what kept him running. He wanted to know when he would stop.

Three questions. Eleven bodies, if the title of the program meant what it seemed to mean. One memory ending in rain.

At the edge of the harbor, the inspection drones made a final pass. They did not descend. A ministry analyst would later mark the absence of confrontation as inconclusive. A captain would record that her papers had been challenged and her freight had sailed. A water court would register no seizure. Every system would keep its own account of an event that none of them possessed in full.

As the ship left Pudu's industrial coast, Nadira brought Roy a cup of boiled water. There were sediment flecks at the bottom. It tasted of iron and salt.

“Have you been to Kuching?” she asked.

“No.”

“Neither have I, not in the way we're going.”

“That should concern you.”

“It does.” She looked at him for a while. “You know, you never once asked whether I think you're a person.”

“Would your answer change what I am?”

“No.”

“Then we can discuss something else.”

She smiled faintly. “You're becoming difficult to dislike.”

Roy drank the water. Beneath the vessel, engines turned stored energy into movement. Within his body, a second system did the same according to rules he still did not know. The reserve would return. The medium would diminish. Time would move in one direction whether or not a machine could remember how it had been made.

The rain stopped before the lights of Pudu disappeared.

For the first time, Roy noticed the silence that followed.