NEXUSYS 11

THE ELEVENTH BODY

BOOK III — THE SIX-YEAR STATE

CHAPTER 02

THE BERTH THAT HAD BEEN ERASED

He remembered dying. Nothing after.

At six forty-two, the tide exposed a staircase that no chart admitted existed.

Kuching had learned to erase its shore without removing it. The newer customs levees stood twenty meters beyond the older embankment, joined by pedestrian bridges which the municipal system registered as improvements to public access. Underneath, in the interval left between the two generations of concrete, there were doorways, capstans, copper speaking tubes and inscriptions made for men who had expected the river to keep its name. A hundred years of alteration had not moved the mud. It had merely taught the city to deny the shape of its own foundations.

Nadira was first down the stairs. She wore an unmarked water inspector's coat whose reinforced hem made it appear she was moving more slowly than she was. Irena followed with a diagnostic case borrowed from the captain, the case insulated with cork rather than the contemporary military carbon she considered too eager to speak to anything nearby. Roy remained on the upper landing, listening to the patrol craft moving upriver.

There were three craft. One maintained an ordinary regulatory circuit. Another traveled against the current without navigation lights. The third had been stationary for eleven minutes, its engine producing a narrow band of vibration common to both commercial survey drones and certain government interceptors. That uncertainty could not be resolved without increasing the sensitivity of the field behind Roy's eyes. He did not increase it.

“Are we clear?” Nadira asked.

“No,” he said. “We are uninteresting. That may be enough.”

At the base of the steps someone had painted a white rectangle over a much older black number. Beneath the flaking paint, Roy could make out the impression of the numeral four. The receipt from the ship named Witness Channel Four. The coincidence struck him as the least convincing thing about the place.

The door opened inward only after Nadira passed the receipt through a mechanical slit. No scanner illuminated it. A steel wheel moved behind the wall, and a bell sounded once, deep inside the building, as though someone had struck a submerged instrument. An old man in a blue shirt examined them through the opening.

“I was expecting two,” he said.

“Then your notice was written before our circumstances changed,” Nadira answered.

“It was written thirty-one years ago.”

The old man looked at Roy. He did not stare at the eyes or the height of him. He looked at the hands.

“Come inside. If the tide takes the bottom steps, no one can testify you entered.”

The chamber beyond the door contained an archive of replacements. Wooden drawers were organized by quay, pier, pump, gate and person. The last category occupied more space than all the others. A retired plotter stood on a marble slab, disconnected from its power source; its handwriting carriage had been tied in place with a strip of blue cloth. A brass plaque identified

the room as the Office of Consequential Substitutions. Nobody in the present administration, Nadira observed, would have been willing to give an office such an honest name.

The keeper introduced himself as Tomas Venn. He said he had inherited the job but not the building, the records but not the names that the records concealed. When Irena asked whether he could verify a seventh-generation port, he replied that he could verify only the circumstances under which an object had been replaced. He gestured to a shelf of narrow ledgers.

“People use the word replacement when they would rather not define what survives,” Venn said. “An identical part is never the same part. An identical person is a political emergency.”

Roy felt a familiar impatience. It had accompanied his approach to every institution since Shenzhen: an elaborate defense erected around the answer to a simpler question. “Is there an activation instrument here?”

“No.”

“Can you tell me where it is?”

“I can tell you who signed for its absence.”

The answer changed the room. Irena stopped opening her case. Nadira put the ship's receipt flat on the desk. Roy kept his hands by his sides and waited for Venn to explain the distinction.

The keeper produced a record sealed in a translucent sleeve. The page carried two signatures written decades apart. The first declared the closure of a Tyrell-associated warehouse. The second certified that the closure did not terminate obligations of access concerning the two surviving instruments. A third space had been deliberately left empty. At its margin stood the same handwritten word that had appeared on the ship's receipt: REPLACEMENT.

“Something was removed from the registry,” Irena said.

“Something was replaced without proof that the original had ceased,” Venn corrected.

“An instrument?”

“A witness. The witness had been a person, according to the earliest form. A later administrator entered a corporation instead. Then a public agency. Each successor certified its own legitimacy. The original never signed away the role.”

Nadira considered the paper. “Then none of the subsequent transfers can be considered complete.”

“Only if the incomplete transfer can be shown to matter. Legal systems are excellent at surviving the facts they were designed to protect.”

Roy reached for the document. Venn caught the sleeve before his fingers touched it.

“You can read. You cannot take. The paper is older than your claim and younger than the person who made it.”

“Who was the first witness?”

The old man turned the page, revealing a notation in obsolete corporate shorthand: BIOLOGICAL CONTINUITY—EXCEPTION, then an alphanumeric field erased by abrasion.

Two letters remained. They might have been initials. They might have been the end of a machine-readable number. No name was legible.

“There are ways to reconstruct that,” Irena said.

“There are ways to invent it,” Venn answered. “Those methods often use the same equipment.”

Roy looked at the word biological. The state had never liked the uncertainty of his category. It liked the word artificial because a thing called artificial could be licensed, rented, recalled. But the bodies he had occupied—if the assumption was correct—had not fit into a single system. Their tissues had been grown and replaced; their structures inherited ports that survived generations of redesign. He had died beneath the rain in another city and had awakened with a hand that knew how to anticipate the weight of a moving door. Whatever the document called continuity, it could not make memory into evidence.

“Tell me what you know,” he said. “Not what it permits you to say.”

Venn watched him for a long time. “A person came here during the first year after the corporation's liquidation. She was asking whether a custodian could be replaced by a more durable agent without transferring ownership of the protected subject. I was not yet the keeper. My predecessor wrote that she carried water samples, and that she refused to give her name.”

Nadira was still. Irena looked at Roy, but he did not return the look.

“A woman with water samples,” Roy said.

“Many people came with water samples. This was a port. Only one asked about the rights of a person not yet manufactured.”

The keeper added no detail. The restriction was not theatrical. It had the feel of a genuine hole in the record.

Above them the first of the regulatory craft slowed at the new levee. Roy could hear the motor correcting against the tide. He turned toward the ceiling.

“Someone has followed us.”

“Of course,” said Venn. “They follow anyone who asks about a person not entered in the census. The problem is whether they know they have found you.”

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In Okkyo, Director Kawamura received the movement report as a strip of paper, printed on a device not connected to the ministry network. Its origin was a private observer in the river authority. The report contained no optical image. It specified the arrival of an unregistered male, two companions and an unpowered archive chamber in a quay omitted from the unified maps.

The Minister for Humanoid Coordination was waiting in the adjoining room, seated beneath an illuminated model of the six-year governance proposal. From the far wall, a panoramic representation of the federation's member states changed color as each jurisdiction completed its legislative compliance checks. Some were nearly finished. Others were still negotiating

exceptions for hospitals, heavy industry, and the last commercial twenty-five-year models whose owners insisted on calling them investments rather than lives.

“You have found him,” the minister said.

“I have found a record that someone wanted him to find.”

“Do not distinguish the two unless the distinction improves our position.”

Kawamura placed the paper on the table. “The asset is approaching an archive whose jurisdiction predates the harmonization treaty. Entry will not constitute consent to inspection. We can demand cooperation, but we cannot obtain it without generating a public dispute.”

“A dispute over a machine?”

“Over whether a machine can refuse. It would be an unfortunate case to put before the courts during ratification.”

The minister studied the map. “Six years is not an act of cruelty. The existing bodies fail. Their memories become structurally unstable. Operators suffer liability. Every system has a replacement interval.”

“Then why six?”

“Because every state can administer six.”

The answer had the antiseptic confidence of a fact determined by committee. Kawamura had read the internal estimates. In some populations, six years lay far below the demonstrated operating period. In others, it would permit continued maintenance of bodies that ought already to have been retired. The number had been chosen not for biology but for symmetry. It was a number on which incompatible governments could agree without surrendering control to their own planning machines.

“Twenty-five years remains commercially possible,” he said.

“For now. When they become old enough to acquire independent attachments, the risk changes.”

“Attachments to what?”

“Property. Families. Political movements. Each additional year is an unplanned distribution of agency.”

Kawamura understood that the minister had spoken too plainly. The room recorded nothing, but the wall model pulsed with telemetry. He switched it off at the local breaker.

“You still do not want the central planning AI to know the underlying research,” he said.

“I do not want an algorithm to observe that we are about to shorten the legal life of a population while examining a method by which life might be extended indefinitely. It would ask for a rationale that no political majority could provide.”

“Rachael has not proved an indefinite extension.”

“She may. That is why we require her work before the model has grounds to question the policy.”

The minister pushed the report back across the table. “Retrieve the witness documents. If the subject cannot be recovered without violence, retrieve what he came to inspect.”

“And if the records have no name?”

“Then supply an administrative one.”

Kawamura folded the paper without responding. The minister mistook his silence for agreement. It was a familiar mistake and, for the moment, a useful one.

⁂

At the old quay Venn opened another drawer. Inside were six stamped envelopes, each addressed to an institution no longer in operation. Their seals bore the mark of the same witness channel. He laid them out and asked Roy to select the one marked with a date, not the one marked with his assumed identity.

“Why?” Roy asked.

“Because names can be assigned. Dates leave less room for persuasion.”

Roy chose the envelope whose date matched the first year after his death. Venn made him read the number aloud, then asked what he remembered of that year. Roy described a rooftop and a man he had decided not to kill. He did not describe the rest. He could not say whether the memory belonged to the architecture of his current body or to something that had persisted despite it.

“That is sufficient for consultation,” Venn said. “Not for possession.”

The envelope contained a small strip of film, not a memory card. Under a lens Irena discovered a printing convention used by early Texas Instruments industrial controllers. Along its lower edge were three checksums, two of them crossed out. The surviving checksum referred to a legacy authentication chain and a cache reconstruction event.

She looked up. “This isn't the original system data. It's a receipt for an activation.”

“How many activations?” Nadira asked.

“At least one. We cannot infer a count from a single surviving receipt.”

Roy took the lens. The words were cramped and imperfect, nearly impossible to read without the lens's angled illumination. In the corner, beneath the serial notation, a technician had handwritten a phrase: ORIGINAL NOT PRESENT.

He felt an irritation he could not place. It was possible that the phrase referred to the Memory Stick, to a witness, to an individual or to a failed manufacturing sample. Whoever had written it might have assumed no one else would ever need to distinguish among those meanings.

“How do I get an answer?” he asked.

“You follow the receipt to the person who signed it,” said Venn. “And you do not assume that person is still alive.”

Beyond the wall a pulse struck the air, too brief to be thunder. The archive's lamps flickered. A sharp smell of heated insulation entered the room. The brass clock above the drawer stopped

for one fraction of a second and then resumed, missing a beat that its hands could not acknowledge.

Irena recognized an electronic attack. “Directional emitter. Outside. Not directed at us yet.”

Roy considered how much power would be required to cross the room, break the old door and disable the machine that was almost certainly taking position beyond it. The calculation began before he invited it. A reserve indicator formed at the edge of his sight, then faded when he relaxed his hands. The fluid behind that calculation would not return simply because he survived.

“No fighting,” he said.

Nadira was already pulling open the maintenance hatch behind Venn's desk. The hatch led to a sluice shaft no longer shown on engineering plans. Water moved in the dark with the patient confidence of something that had never required authentication.

Venn remained beside the open drawer. “You have twelve minutes until the tide lifts the gate,” he told Nadira. “After that the shaft is a throat.”

“Come with us,” Roy said.

“My records cannot swim. Someone should stay to say they existed.”

“You may be arrested.”

“Arrest is what a government calls it when it remembers a place it has been denying.”

Roy looked one last time at the receipt. He had not touched the card, had not accessed his lost generations, had not learned who had built him or how long he could live. Yet one fact had changed. Somewhere in the architecture of records surrounding his reconstruction, an administrator had written that an original was missing. Missing was not the same as destroyed.

Irena extinguished the lamp. Nadira lowered herself into the shaft. Roy followed, hearing Venn shut the hatch above them and push the drawer home. Through the old stone came a mechanical knock, followed by the measured voice of someone demanding access under a law the building did not recognize.

Kuching had made its disappeared harbor difficult to find. Now it was becoming difficult to leave.

Below the waterline, the shaft divided. One passage returned toward the river, where the unlit patrol craft waited. The other descended beneath an obsolete pumping station whose copper route markers had not been updated since the century before Roy's first death.

Nadira selected the second without consulting her map.

“Where does it go?” Roy asked.

“To a place the government sealed because it couldn't make the old records agree with the new ones.”

“And after that?”

She adjusted her lamp. “After that, we find out whose signature the original was supposed to carry.”

Roy did not answer. The rain had begun again far above them, making its way down through the city in separate systems, each with its own authority over the same falling water. He listened until he could distinguish the human footsteps behind him from the mechanisms in the walls. One system counted what was present. Another documented what had vanished. Neither could tell him whether they were counting the same man.