NEXUSYS 11

THE ELEVENTH BODY

BOOK III — THE SIX-YEAR STATE

CHAPTER 03

THE PUMP THAT COUNTED THE ABSENT

The first thing the old pumping station did was count them incorrectly.

Its entrance had been poured into the foundations of a newer structure, a flood-security complex assembled from dark ceramic and municipal optimism. A wheel of brass stood at the foot of the shaft. Nadira turned it four times. A needle moved from zero to three, hesitated, and advanced to five.

“There are three of us,” Irena said.

“The system isn't counting people,” Nadira replied. “It's counting liabilities.”

Roy studied the wheel. Its engraved divisions were uneven. Someone had repaired it with a piece of another dial, joining two chronologies without troubling to make them agree. A machine that failed to count accurately might simply be old. A machine that counted according to an obsolete definition could be dangerous.

“Five,” he said. “Who are the other two?”

“Ask it what kind of thing it thinks is arriving.”

There was no microphone. Beneath the needle were three labels in Malay and an older administrative English: PERSONS; INSTRUMENTS; WITNESSES. The pointer had moved across all three. It did not distinguish cargo from testimony.

Nadira applied pressure to a concealed catch. The door gave way with the sound of a heavy object relinquishing a claim. They entered a circular gallery, its walls lined with green ceramic tiles and pipes the diameter of small trees. Water transmitted every footstep. Far above them a government surveillance aircraft changed position, and its vibration arrived through the building after the aircraft itself had moved on.

Roy could feel the passage of time in two ways now. One was the ordinary progression of events. The other was a subtraction performed by a system he had not yet learned to name. He moved a fraction less than he needed to, every motion pared down to its necessary component. A desperate animal economizing its remaining blood would have been easier to understand. His body was consuming a liquid whose presence made thinking fast enough to survive possible, and whose absence would not be corrected by a night's rest.

His reserve was nearly full. The reserve was not the liquid.

He repeated this distinction silently, not because he feared forgetting it but because some part of him insisted that the two indicators should mean the same thing.

At the center of the gallery stood an electromechanical ledger. A column of removable brass teeth drove a printing head over narrow paper. Its display had no screen, only a window revealing the most recent entry. Nadira lifted the cover.

TRANSFER WITNESS: PENDING.

REPLACEMENT PERMITTED: SUBJECT TO REFUSAL.

ORIGINAL NOT PRESENT.

Irena touched neither the paper nor the machine. “It's the phrase from Venn's record.”

“It's older than his record,” Nadira said.

“How much older?”

“The registry changed hands six times. The machine never did.”

Roy watched a tiny gear turn and stop. “Why keep a machine whose statements nobody can verify?”

“Because there are people who do not want verification to be a permission somebody else can revoke.”

That sounded like an answer prepared for a political argument, not a technical one. He had heard too many such answers since waking. He wanted the sort of answer that could be tested by opening something and seeing what was inside.

“Where is its original?”

Nadira read the line beneath the glass, a row of coordinates in a dead harbor survey. “The original is not a document. Not necessarily.”

A door opened on the opposite side of the gallery. A woman stepped through carrying a shallow tray of ceramic cups. She was older than Nadira, with white hair cut close to her scalp and a narrow mechanical brace running along the outside of her left hand. The brace was stained blue by a pigment used in wet archival work. She wore no visible network device.

“You came through Venn's sluice,” she said. “That means somebody has already used law against you.”

Nadira inclined her head. “Mariam Sef.”

The woman set down the tray. “I used to be. Here they call me the third clerk, although there have never been three of us at once.”

“Can you explain the count?” Roy asked.

Sef looked at him for a long time. She did not look frightened. Roy had begun to distinguish fear from the concentrated appraisal of a technician. Her expression belonged to neither. It was closer to recognition of a difficult debt.

“The station receives three bodies,” she said. “It also receives two contested claims. We print both. The government would print three bodies and delete the claims.”

“What claims?”

“That someone may have the means to restart a system, and that the system may refuse to be restarted. The first can be transferred. The second cannot.”

Roy glanced toward the brass machine. “Who made that distinction?”

“Someone who understood that ownership is not the same as consent.”

“Tyrell?”

“Tyrell employed people. Some of those people disagreed with him. A company can outlive the arguments it lost. A record can outlive the company.”

Sef pulled a key from a chain beneath her collar. It resembled a furniture key, absurdly small for a lock in this station. The drawer she opened contained paper strips wrapped around black ceramic cores. Each was indexed by witness sequence, not by date. She found one marked NAR-41 and placed it beside the cups.

Roy did not reach for it.

“I want to know whether I can be initialized again if my system fails,” he said. “I want to know who designed my body. And I want to know its life expectancy.”

“You want three answers that may belong to three institutions,” Sef said. “That is unfortunate. Institutions rarely know when they are supposed to speak to one another.”

“Which answer is here?”

“One of the questions.”

She unrolled the paper. A schematic of a seven-sided port occupied the center. Around it were serial references, mechanical tolerances and a set of checksum instructions written in a notation Irena recognized only in fragments. The port was not a keyhole. It was a reference surface, a way to establish that a physical architecture had been reconstructed according to a prior set of measurements. The drawing was annotated in a small, disciplined hand.

DO NOT CONFUSE DIMENSIONAL CONTINUITY WITH PERSONAL CONTINUITY.

Irena read the line aloud. “The port verifies geometry. It cannot tell you whether the person who wakes is the person who slept.”

“I know,” Roy said.

“Do you?” Sef asked.

He looked at her. “I know what I remember. I know what I don't. I do not intend to spend the rest of my life looking for memories that may never have been transferred.”

Sef's expression changed then, and only slightly. “That may be the first useful thing you have said.”

She reversed the paper. A second inscription appeared, almost invisible under the backing adhesive.

WITNESS REPLACEMENT — LEGAL PERSON UNKNOWN.

“Replacement doesn't mean another Roy,” Irena said slowly. “It means the original human witness to the commissioning couldn't be produced. A substitute witnessed the transfer, but the substitute couldn't certify identity.”

“Who was the original witness?” Roy asked.

Sef shook her head. “The registry records absence more faithfully than names. I can tell you who deposited the replacement declaration. A public extract won't carry the identity. A private witness roll might.”

“Where?”

“In this district there is no private roll. There is a route for asking the next custodian. It crosses a place with no jurisdiction anyone recognizes until they want to arrest somebody there.”

Nadira said, “The off-grid flotilla.”

Sef nodded. “They maintain the duplicate witness plates. Or they claim to. You will not receive a plate merely because you are the subject of it.”

“And if they refuse?” Roy asked.

“Then you will have to decide whether you believe rights apply only when they help you.”

* * *

In Okkyo the Ministry of Synthetic Affairs was preparing a public memorandum with no mention of death.

The draft used the term scheduled lifecycle convergence. It described a six-year term as an administrative interval for maintenance, redistribution and security assurance. Existing synthetic workers with longer contractual lives were to be placed on a transitional schedule. At no point did the memorandum use the word termination. That omission had required fourteen revisions.

Kawamura watched a junior legal officer mark the revisions against a red-lined original. Behind the officer, an artificial civil-service secretary stood motionless beside a pane of diffuse light. Its face was pleasingly neutral. It had not been invited to the private discussion, but the ministry had no facility for employing a secretary without admitting the secretary's data connections into the room.

“Disconnect it,” Kawamura said.

The officer hesitated. “It's the minutes system.”

“Then we will remember what we say.”

When the android was gone, the officer turned the memorandum face down.

“Ministerial approval will require a risk-model annex,” she said. “The federation's planning AI will ask why the limit is six rather than five or eight.”

“Give it an economic answer.”

“Which one?”

“The one that won't make it calculate whether our reasons are coherent.”

She regarded him without smiling. “That's an unusual standard for a risk model.”

“Only because you assume we're asking it to decide. We're asking it to sign.”

On Kawamura's desk lay a separate folder printed on cellulose that could not be remotely rewritten. It concerned Kuching, a vanished berth, and the unexplained status of a synthetic individual who should not have possessed any valid civil identity. A field team had reported the old pumping works as a potential refuge. Its operators had not yet requested force authorization.

Kawamura did not grant it.

Instead he wrote three instructions. Maintain physical observation. Recover mechanical provenance evidence without connecting it to the central index. Do not damage the subject's cranial and vascular interfaces.

A fourth instruction he did not write: do not allow the subject to become a story the federation can tell itself.

The officer noticed the separate folder. “Is that the anomaly from Shenzhen?”

“No,” Kawamura said. “An anomaly is something the system can measure but not explain. This is something it has no category for.”

“And is that better?”

“It depends who is allowed to create categories.”

After she left, he opened an old funding ledger from the defunct research program that had once received government support. One name appeared only in the paper appendix, never in the later digital digest. Rachael. The ledger did not prove that she had discovered indefinite life extension. It proved that researchers had been willing to pay to find out whether a limit designed into a body could be treated as a design decision rather than as fate.

Kawamura had funded a question. Now he was being asked to govern the consequences of its answer without seeing the work.

He closed the ledger. If the planning AI learned the question had been asked, its solution might not resemble the policy the minister wanted.

The secure line chimed once. A field commander in Kuching reported that the pumps could not be infiltrated through the municipal mesh: the site had no municipal mesh. Entry would have to be physical.

“Then enter physically,” Kawamura said. “But do not confuse a witness with an enemy.”

“Are we authorized to detain?”

“Only if the subject attempts to leave a lawful inspection.”

“The site isn't under our inspection jurisdiction.”

“Then you understand the difficulty.”

He terminated the call before the commander could offer to solve the difficulty with violence.

* * *

Below the old city, Irena discovered why the pumping station had kept its counting mechanism operational.

A conventional archive could record a transaction and, later, an administrator could alter the meaning of the record. The station's mechanical register recorded a physical event instead: a witness standing at a particular plate, exerting pressure in a particular sequence. A handprint did not establish the truth of a statement. It established that someone had chosen to make one.

The plates were connected through water-driven linkages. No network port entered the room. No general-purpose processor sat behind the wall. It was inefficient, difficult to maintain and nearly impossible to query. Those disadvantages were the source of its security.

“It's not incorruptible,” Irena told Roy. “It's merely corruptible in different ways. You need hands and access instead of credentials and computing power.”

“Then someone can break it.”

“Of course.”

“Why not?”

“Because breaking it would admit that it matters.”

Sef brought them to a bronze platform sunk into the floor. Four rectangular plates surrounded a central hexagonal slot. The slot had been crudely altered into seven sides at some point after construction. A newer material lined the contact surfaces, but the underlying mechanism was old enough that its creator had expected human hands, not synthetic authentication systems.

Roy recognized the geometry. Not from memory. His body recognized it before his conscious mind had classified the shape. A low-level diagnostic opened at the edge of his vision and closed so quickly that he could not read its identifier.

He stepped back.

“You felt that,” Irena said.

“Yes.”

“Does it want you to connect?”

“It attempted to prepare a connection.”

“Without asking?”

“Apparently.”

Sef regarded the platform. “We do not require you to use it. It's a witness station, not a medical device. Too many people have tried to make them the same thing.”

Roy stood still. In another life, he might have torn the mechanism from its mount and examined it in fragments. Now he kept his hands at his sides.

“Could a connection initialize me?”

“Not here,” Irena said. “No MagicGate source. No Tyrell instrument. No verified cache rebuild. This station can witness a refusal. It cannot restore a damaged person.”

“Then I refuse the connection.”

Sef took the refusal without disappointment. She rotated an iron lever, and the dial near the entrance advanced by one half-step. The machine printed a narrow strip.

CONSENT NOT GIVEN. PERSON PRESENT.

Roy read it twice.

For the first time since waking, an institution had recorded that he existed without first requiring proof that someone owned him.

The distinction interested him, but it did not answer how long he had left.

A sound moved through the wall—three metallic taps, followed by a long silence. Nadira looked toward the northern service stairs.

“Government,” she said.

“Not necessarily,” Sef replied. “There are debt collectors who sound the same.”

Irena listened. “Two heavy units. One lighter. The light one has an active emitter. They're measuring the pipes.”

Roy did the calculation involuntarily. Twenty-three meters of narrow corridor. Two armored bodies in a passage where speed would matter more than mass. He could cross the distance before the first unit

raised its weapon. A reserve would be spent. A fraction of fluid would never return. He had no reliable way to replace it.

He considered whether the men behind the wall were really a threat or merely following a route assigned to them. Their instructions were made elsewhere by people who might never see the consequences.

“Is there another way out?” he asked.

Sef pointed to the water wheel. “A drainage culvert beyond the governor housing. It leads to the river. You'll have to open the flood bypass manually.”

“And the witnesses?”

“The register stays. We can hide the duplicate plates.”

A voice echoed from the stairwell. It stated an inspection authority, then repeated it in a second language. Nobody in the gallery answered.

Nadira removed a lantern from a wall bracket and motioned toward the governor housing. Irena followed, drawing a compact sensor from her sleeve without activating its transmitter. Roy waited while Sef tore a duplicate strip from the register and sealed it inside a waxed envelope.

“Take this to the flotilla,” she said. “They won't accept a name from you. They may accept proof that someone allowed you to refuse.”

Roy took the envelope. “Why help me?”

“I haven't decided to help you. I've decided the government doesn't get to be the only witness.”

There were fewer reasons to trust that answer than he would have liked. It was still better than most he had been offered.

They passed through the pump governor, whose great flywheel was no longer turning. Nadira opened a rusty valve. Cold water came up through the floor grilles, moving with deliberate slowness. Behind them, the voice at the stairs grew louder; metal struck metal as an inspection tool tried to persuade an old lock to admit a modern authority.

Roy did not look back.

He could have destroyed the pursuing units. Instead he put his shoulder beneath the swollen gate and raised it just enough for the others to pass. The effort registered as a short spike. His reserve dipped, then began its gradual recovery. Somewhere deeper in him, something else diminished by an amount too small to feel.

He was becoming accustomed to the difference between surviving an event and paying for it.

* * *

At the edge of the river, the city was arranged into three overlapping jurisdictions. The water authority governed the surface. A consortium of freight firms claimed the pontoons. The state claimed the air above them. None of the three controlled the space beneath a low line of floating gardens, where boats connected to one another without permanent moorings.

Nadira led them to a narrow vessel painted the color of old porcelain. Its pilot wore a faded utility jacket and a necklace of identification tags, all stamped with different registries. He examined Sef's envelope under an oil lamp. He did not open it.

“Witnesses?” he asked.

“One present,” Nadira said. “One absent. One substitution disputed.”

The pilot's eyes rested on Roy. “And the subject?”

“He can answer for himself,” Roy said.

The pilot nodded as if that had settled something. “Then don't tell me your origin. We have nowhere safe to store it.”

Across the channel, a government drone scanned the water. It passed over the floating gardens twice, finding nothing that belonged in its model of the harbor. The small vessel remained dark.

Irena placed her sensor on the deck. “The replacement plate may identify a signer. It still won't tell you how much time you have.”

“I know.”

“And it may not identify whoever assembled your eleventh body.”

“I know that as well.”

“Then why keep following it?”

Roy looked at the river. A single current moved beneath every jurisdiction imposed upon it. He did not mistake that image for a philosophy. Water could drown a man as easily as carry him, and names did not change its chemistry.

“Because the person who could have refused my reconstruction may know why it was performed,” he said. “And the people who guarded that refusal may know what the designers were afraid would happen if no one could say no.”

The boat slipped into the dark corridor between floating gardens. Behind it, the city's cameras continued to watch the channels from which their maps had been made. Ahead lay a flotilla that had made itself difficult to register, where records did not prove that the past was true but established who had taken responsibility for saying it was.

Roy felt the reserve approach its old level. The other measure remained lower.

He no longer believed that the recovery of one meant the restoration of the other.