CHAPTER 02 — THE VALUE OF A DEAD BODY

Expanded English reconstruction; not a recovered verbatim original

01 — Held Rain

Roy crossed a street where rain appeared to hang motionless, while water beyond the intersection fell normally. Rachel confirmed that the shadows were real, but no sensor agreed about the event duration. Chronos spoke from invisible speakers, enjoying the uncertainty. When the phenomenon ended, drops struck the pavement like thrown gravel. Roy sheltered beneath a ruined awning and headed for Rachel’s maintenance entrance.

Roy watched the suspended droplets without touching them. There was no visible surface supporting the water, no current that might explain the arrangement, and no common duration reported by the instruments feeding his perception. On the far side of the junction, pedestrians still hurried through ordinary rain. Whatever Chronos had done was local, perhaps even bounded. Roy considered that distinction important. The same world could behave differently within a few meters, and the smaller region could still kill a person who assumed familiar rules applied.

The interruption lasted only moments by one of Roy's clocks. By another it occupied an entirely different interval. This was the first useful thing he learned about Chronos: the boy's power did not simply stop water and restart it. It separated observations that should have belonged to the same event. Roy knew that a physicist might spend years investigating the discrepancy. He had only seconds in which to avoid an airborne mass of

water suddenly released toward the street. He ducked under a concrete overhang as the droplets struck like thrown stones. Across the road a frightened vendor made the sign of an old faith, and a delivery drone crashed into the market rail. Roy wondered whether the child understood the difference between an interesting demonstration and the injury it could cause. The question mattered because someone had trained the child to call such demonstrations a successful test.

02 — The Price of Pursuit

Inside the MBU-09 vehicle, Null pointed out that every burst of Roy's old speed cost his regulator a little more permanence. Vector could predict a path; Shade could make him defend himself; Null could upset the interface between neural command and muscular response. Their revised mission was not to win a fair fight. It was to wear him down until the Minister could keep the pieces that mattered.

The team made no attempt to explain the morality of the revised order. Vector spoke in terms of prediction windows, Shade in terms of access and concealment, and Null in terms of regulatory instability. Their separate methods fit neatly into a single strategy: make Roy spend what could not be restored. Chronos listened with an expression of almost childish boredom. When Null said that repeated maximum-output movement could ruin NIL-11, he looked up sharply, as though someone had named an old weakness in a very old experiment.

03 — Vector's Line

The sniper's first round punched a column beside Roy's head. A second struck the place he would have moved to under normal evasive doctrine. Vector's algorithms anticipated intentions as well as motion. Roy began

changing decisions after each shot instead of repeating a pattern. He stopped where a retreat had been predicted, retreated where a sprint had been expected, and vanished through a derelict filtration building.

The first round gave Roy almost no warning. Concrete flowered beside his face, and the path that should have led to safety immediately became dangerous. He ran, stopped, and reversed a choice halfway through making it. From his elevated position Vector watched the likely outcomes dissolve each time the subject declined to follow a coherent evasive doctrine. The shooter could calculate decisions. He could not guarantee decisions made after a bullet was already committed to its flight.

Vector's headset supplied a moving field of probability. Roy would run left, then right, then crouch behind a fallen security barrier: every normal reaction could be named, weighted, and targeted. The first pattern broke when Roy deliberately took a bad-looking route. The second broke when he reversed the movement after the projectile was already in flight. Vector could still shoot; his hand remained steady and his rifle unimpaired. What had failed was the assumption that the target must seek the quickest path to safety. Roy discovered that taking a fraction more time to change his mind was safer than moving with perfect efficiency. By the time he disappeared into the filtration plant, Vector's screen was dense with discarded futures. For the first time in years, the sniper had to admit that his model predicted a person's habits better than his freedom.

04 — A Woman Without Edges

Shade waited among the old filters with an optical suit that borrowed the appearance of its surroundings. Roy saw no body temperature, no recognizable outline. A narrow filament skimmed his sleeve, then approached his neck. Only the puddles betrayed her: weight displaced water

even when light failed to disclose a person. Roy caught a wrist, lost it, and understood that she wanted repeated high-output movements more than she wanted an immediate kill.

In the filtration hall the air smelled of wet rust and forgotten cleaning chemicals. Roy could detect the water gathered in floor seams and the slow settling of old metal. Nothing told him where Shade stood until a shallow pool contracted around the weight of a boot. That minute disturbance mattered more than a thermal signature or a silhouette. The assassin could hide from cameras, but her body remained subject to the building's ordinary physics. Roy let her mistake his stillness for confusion.

05 — Water Has Weight

He opened an ancient pressure valve instead of pursuing her invisible form. Water burst from overhead piping and drew a silhouette upon the suit. Shade lost concealment. Roy broke the camouflage controller, not her neck. When Vector’s next shot crossed the room, Roy pulled the assassin behind a pillar. She asked why he had saved an enemy. He answered that she had not truly tried to kill him either.

When the corroded valve turned, decades of accumulated pressure made the old pipe answer with unexpected violence. Water burst into the room and cascaded over machinery, pillars, and an outline that was not supposed to be there. Shade became visible in the most humiliating way possible: through a thin moving skin of ordinary water. Roy had a clear strike at her throat. Instead, he disabled the controller that allowed her to disappear. Her startled glance was still on him when a distant rifle round entered the building.

Shade was still trying to understand why Roy had saved her when he slipped behind the next column. She had spent her professional life learning

to erase the ordinary signals of presence: heat, reflected light, pressure noise, electronic identification. The water had made all that practice irrelevant. More disturbing was Roy's refusal to exploit her exposure. When the bullet came, his body had reacted before either of them could calculate whether she counted as an enemy or an obstacle. She was alive because a man being dismantled for parts had made room in his decision for her survival. She could not decide whether that was courage or a weakness. Later, when asked for a tactical report, she would omit the hesitation in her own movements. She would also find she could no longer describe the encounter as a simple failure of camouflage.

06 — A Narrow Interval

Rachel read disturbances in buried pressure sensors and found him an outlet through the service tunnels. She warned that a hostile presence waited near the last gate. Roy could have forced a reinforced door, but doing so would have spent another fraction of NIL-11. He listened instead to the water behind the panels, seeking an older, mechanical way to move the obstruction.

The shot left a shattered line across the industrial space. Roy dragged Shade to cover without allowing himself time to calculate whether she deserved protection. The motion cost him another small surge of force. His regulator registered it. That hidden cost aggravated him more than the cut on his arm. A machine that had once seemed inexhaustible could now warn him about the price of generosity as efficiently as it warned him about the price of violence.

07 — Null

A woman in gray stood between Roy and the exit. Null used electromagnetic pulses that interfered with artificial motor synchronization. Roy’s fingers closed involuntarily, and one leg almost failed him. She described his life-support regulator as a system that could be destabilized without penetrating armor. Her instrument was precise, but precision required an uninterrupted measurement of its target.

Null was waiting behind the security door with equipment designed to interrupt the path between a command and the movement that followed. Roy felt his right hand close a fraction too late, then his leg refuse an instruction it should have obeyed. The terrifying part was not pain. It was estrangement from a body he had only recently begun to regard as his own. Null observed the changes scientifically and reminded him that ownership of strength did not mean ownership of the conditions under which it worked.

Null watched the synchronization between Roy's intentions and actions separate by tiny fractions of a second. Her instrument was not a crude jammer. It imposed disturbances in the regulatory signals that allowed the artificial and living components to cooperate. The body remained immensely strong, but the moment of obedience shifted. Roy recognized the danger because his own hands suddenly became uncertain. He forced himself not to panic and looked for a route that did not depend on exact neuro-muscular timing. A mechanical release, a damaged pipe, the impulse of water under pressure: these mechanisms could be used without demanding that his own regulator overcome the interference. Null understood the choice too late. The most sophisticated weapon in the corridor had been defeated by a valve that had never been connected to a network. Her failure stayed with her long after the tactical feed closed.

08 — A Door Without Electricity

Roy fractured a corroded support and sent high-pressure water over Null’s exposed equipment. He drove a fallen bracket into a mechanical emergency release while the electronics faltered. The gate opened only a little. He squeezed through and nearly fell, more from internal instability than from injury. Null watched him disappear into a civic water facility and recognized the operator named Rachel.

Roy studied the corridor as a mechanical system rather than a prison. The old door possessed a manual release; the pressure lines possessed joints designed to fail safely; the floor contained a drain that could accept more water than the modern lock controller understood. Null could interfere with his regulator, not with metal that had already been disconnected from an electronic command network. He broke the right fitting, let water overwhelm her handheld unit, and forced the emergency mechanism with a piece of fallen hardware.

09 — The Proposed Exchange

On the surgical floor Rachel placed the silver NIL-11R unit where Roy could see it. Its alternative working medium could operate outside the state helium supply. The price was a hard seventy-percent ceiling and uncertain long-term prognosis. She promised neither rejuvenation nor immortality. Roy asked whether his memories would remain. She told him they should, then admitted that this exact operation had never been performed on a functioning NEXUSYS-11.

The last corridor descended toward Rachel's waterworks, where authority was measured less in licenses than in the ability to keep the city drinking. Roy heard the pumps through several layers of concrete. Each step felt slower than it should. A healthy power reserve glowed in one part of his display while the life-support regulator approached failure in another. He

recognized that surviving the pursuit would accomplish very little if the cost destroyed the self the Minister wished to capture.

Rachel did not offer the replacement as a miracle. She showed the operating envelope plainly, including the lower thermal ceiling and the unresolved long-term effects of the original depletion. Roy asked whether his memory would survive the transfer. She explained that the mapped structures should remain intact, but she would not equate intact information with an answer about the continuity of consciousness. He asked whether she could guarantee he would still wake as himself. She said she could not guarantee a philosophical conclusion, only the best medical procedure available. He thought of the Minister's team outside, ready to treat his body as an inventory of components. Rachel waited for a spoken yes before touching the controls. The difference between their methods seemed small in technical terms. To Roy, it was the whole reason to trust her.

10 — Consent

Roy asked whether she still concealed information about his eleven missing years. Rachel said yes. That answer, at least, was clear. He lay down voluntarily and authorized the exchange. Instruments unfolded over his chest as the old unit was disconnected. For a fraction of a moment he saw a white room and heard a child ask whether he remembered. Then the world went dark. — END OF CHAPTER —

Rachel did not fasten him to the surgical table. She described the replacement accurately, including the reduced output and the absence of any promise to restore the irreversible life he had lost. Roy asked about memory because the word replacement had acquired too many meanings in his history. She could promise continuity of recorded information, not the metaphysics of consciousness. When he agreed to the operation, she waited

until he said it plainly. Only then did the arms unfold above him and the room's light narrow into darkness.