NEXUSYS 11

THE ELEVENTH BODY

BOOK II — PUDU ALPHA | CHAPTER 05

THE MAN WHO KEPT TWO MACHINES

English draft 01

The floodgate opened six minutes late.

Roy counted the delay by the interval between the sluice's hydraulic knocks. Nadira counted it by the growing absence of sound behind them. The search equipment beyond the Stepwell had stopped tapping at the masonry. Its silence implied either retreat or a change of method; the government rarely paid for retreat.

Water unrolled beneath the iron gate, black with the sediment of several legal jurisdictions. The old district had been built over another district and then made into an argument about who owned the drains. In the passage the argument was literal: five different embossed seals covered the pipe beside Roy's head. All were void. The water still ran.

Nadira held Salim's route card against a strip of phosphorescent paint. 'Once we cross, no registry recognizes the passage. Don't mistake that for safety.'

'You use the word registry as other people use weather.'

'Weather kills less selectively.'

The gate rose one hand's width. Roy could have bent the hinges. He felt the architecture of the effort before moving: a surge in the fast reserve, an associated increase in the nonrecoverable circulating medium, a negligible gain in time. He waited for the hydraulic machinery to do its work. Each second was an expenditure he could afford. He had not yet learned what the other expenditures cost.

A gray insect lowered itself through a crack in the ceiling. Six legs, ceramic abdomen, optic no larger than a grain of salt. It touched a wet bolt, listened to the metal, and extended an antenna.

Roy placed his hand beneath it and closed his fingers without accelerating. The insect was soft enough to crush. He did not. He turned it over, saw the unmarked municipal maintenance stamp on the underside, and pressed it into the streaming channel of water. The current took it through the gate. A device that lost connection there would report a routine malfunction. A destroyed government sensor would report an enemy.

They passed into morning through a corridor that smelled of flood silt, cheap disinfectant, and hot cooking oil.

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Above the riverward floodgate the district was waking in languages that did not translate into one another. A muezzin's voice traveled across the old rooftops while a municipal water-price display flickered from ringgit denominations to the private credits used in the Upper Exchange. Below the display, a woman in a surgical apron repaired a man's artificial thumb. He held a cup of tea in his other hand and watched her work without interest. Two prayer mats lay rolled beside the repair bench, dry and carefully placed above the flood line.

Nadira bought breakfast with water rights she claimed not to own. She gave Roy a flatbread and a thin aluminum envelope containing the petition.

'You have a route,' she said. 'Not a destination.'

'What happens when someone follows the route?'

'The route notices. That's the point of an escrow petition. Delivery is permitted; possession is not transferred. It sounds straightforward until an armed ministry asks who possesses the right to refuse delivery.'

Roy read the envelope's impression. No recipient name. A case number—NAR-41—and a blank field reserved for the receiving witness. In one corner Salim had embossed a symbol made of three unequal semicircles. The symbol appeared nowhere in Roy's internal catalog, despite the catalog's unnerving breadth. He could identify a dozen industrial adhesives by smell, differentiate synthetic cartilage by tensile response, and read the degraded timing pulses of an obsolete tram controller. He could not identify the mark that might lead him to the person able to awaken him after a system collapse.

'Somebody knows where the instruments are,' he said.

'Yes.'

'And somebody designed a process to make sure knowledge does not pass into the public network.'

'Also yes.'

'Why?'

Nadira broke her bread. 'There are things a state cannot safely confiscate until it can first name them. If the state learns the name, it can request an inventory. If it gets an inventory, it can build a prison around the inventory. We inherited those rules from institutions that had very different uses for the word security.'

He looked toward the river. A freight dirigible hung between two towers, its carbon skin patterned with the logo of an agricultural cooperative headquartered three governments away. Beneath it swarmed inspection drones with the indifferent precision of a shoal of fish. Some were government property; some were privately leased; the difference was invisible until they decided who was allowed to leave.

'Could the petition be a trap?' Roy asked.

'Absolutely.'

'And you brought me anyway.'

'You refused to sign what you couldn't read. That changed how I calculate your risks.'

'You don't know me.'

'I know the difference between an expensive machine and someone willing to make his own mistakes.'

Roy said nothing. He had died with another man's life in his hand, and the last thing he remembered doing was letting it continue. It had not turned him into a saint. The original choice had occurred in a different world. Every subsequent decision had to be made again.

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In Okkyo, Director Kawamura received no image from the Stepwell. That was the most useful image he had received all morning.

The Ministry's surveillance floor displayed heat fields, network attestations, synthetic-life registrations, and movement probabilities. Every screen represented a form of agreement between the government and an object it could count. The Stepwell had registered as an absence shaped like a building. Absences were difficult to budget.

His subordinate, an analyst named Ueda, stood beside a sealed analog terminal. 'The acoustic probes detected the inner floodgate opening. We have a riverward egress estimate. There is also a maintenance drone washed out of the channel. The system labeled it a hydraulic incident.'

'Was it?'

'Its external antenna was folded against the body. Not damaged. Folded deliberately.'

Kawamura considered that. The target knew enough of their instrumentation to produce a harmless failure instead of a threat signature. The implication was not that he was more dangerous than the machines following him. It was that he knew the cost of being noticed.

'Increase passive observation. No weapons discharge without local authorization.'

'Our field commander believes direct capture is feasible.'

'He is permitted to believe it. Do not permit him to attempt it.'

Ueda waited. She had been trained to distinguish an unfinished command from an invitation to speculate.

Kawamura opened a paper folder. A former Tyrell funding memorandum sat between two sheets of ordinary office correspondence, precisely where the central planning AI would be least likely to find it. He could have scanned the pages and asked the machine to correlate names across the defunct corporation's successor trusts. He did not. The world government project needed AI to coordinate synthetic production and labor assignment. It did not need AI to become aware that the six-year lifecycle cap was technically optional.

The minister's office had called the proposed restriction SLC-6. Six years of certified synthetic operation, followed by mandatory withdrawal, recycling, and reissuance. It was sold as distributive justice: no permanent class of synthetic labor accumulating privileges or retaining state secrets. Kawamura knew how many arguments that wording silenced. The public had learned to ask whether synthetic bodies were useful, expensive, dangerous, or replaceable. They were discouraged from asking who owned the authority to specify the last day.

'An escrow petition may have been opened,' Ueda said. 'The court's public system shows no activity. A water authority flagged unusual physical transfers at NAR-41.'

Kawamura closed the folder.

'Do not search the NAR identifier on the network.'

'It is already known.'

'Then let it remain known at that level. A query binds the unknown to the questioner.'

'Who is the receiving party?'

'A man who has inherited two machines and may not know what they are worth.'

'Name?'

Kawamura's face did not alter. 'Not for this terminal.'

He had once paid for Rachael's laboratory without asking for the complete experimental protocol. In those years, financing a biological extension study had seemed politically routine. The error was not the funding. The error was assuming the limits of a synthetic life were always visible to the people financing it.

He remembered a conference room with rain going down the outer glass, Rachael turning an obsolete storage medium between two fingers, telling him that a system which could be restarted did not thereby belong to the person holding the key. At the time he had regarded the remark as a legal precaution. Now he wondered whether she had been warning him.

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The receiving station had no company name. It occupied the upper floor of an apartment block overlooking the abandoned branch of the river. The corridor smelled of damp wallpaper and printer solvent. Each door carried a brass plate engraved with a year instead of a tenant's name.

At the end of the corridor, a man with a mechanical left hand let them in. He wore the unremarkable gray clothes of someone who had discovered that anonymity was a practiced trade.

'I am Yusuf Dar,' he said. 'You may call me a receiving witness. Nothing else I do here is a service.'

Nadira showed the embossed envelope. Yusuf did not touch it. He asked Roy to place it on the table, then stepped back.

'There are three conditions,' Yusuf said. 'The request must be yours. The request must concern restoration, not ownership. The request must be delivered without a machine-readable copy.'

'I didn't ask to restore anything,' Roy said.

'Not yet. You are asking for the location of the means. The petition must remain valid if you later choose to destroy the means instead.'

'That is a peculiar service.'

'An expensive history created the peculiarity.'

Yusuf slid a blank sheet under the envelope. Two pressure rollers moved across it and exposed embossed characters without opening the original. He checked their alignment with a jeweler's lens. Then he handed Roy a stamped receipt bearing an appointment window, not an address.

'Delivery will be attempted at the next neutral transfer. You will receive one reply. If the custodian refuses, that refusal will also be recorded.'

'And the custodian is the Tyrell heir?'

Yusuf's mechanical fingers stopped. 'An heir may own the instruments. An heir may not know how to use them. Sometimes those are different inheritances.'

'What happened to the original records?'

'I cannot tell you. I can tell you the petition protocol was devised before the company disappeared. The designers expected someone to need a renewal after the company's death.'

'Expected whom?'

The witness held Roy's gaze. 'That question is beyond my office.'

The metallic hand resumed its movement. Its index fingertip had an old surface finish that no present manufacturer would choose: a faint crescent of polished ceramic in the joint. Roy saw it with an unnatural certainty. His internal recognition system returned a string of probable suppliers. One was from Texas Instruments, listed as legacy fabrication support rather than a component maker. The correspondence was weak, and he did not trust it. The obsolete was not necessarily significant merely because it was obsolete.

He took the receipt. It felt lighter than the obligations it represented.

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They were halfway down the stairs when the building's water meters began to disagree. Each landing displayed a different consumption total. Then all the displays froze.

Nadira glanced at Roy. 'No one comes to this building to fix meters. If they all freeze at once, someone is measuring more than water.'

A patrol drone moved outside the frosted window. No active scanning beam crossed the room; its optics remained dark. Passive. Patient.

'Kawamura,' Roy said, reading the pattern rather than recognizing a face.

'Probably.'

'I could disable it.'

'And another unit would investigate a disabled drone. We need the third floor.'

The third-floor apartment housed six beds and a row of failed domestic service androids. Their torsos had been stripped of expensive components; their faces were intact. A child sat cross-legged among them, threading colored copper into the fingers of one empty hand.

'Are they dead?' Roy asked Nadira.

'They're retired. The owners surrendered their leases. It doesn't mean anyone here agreed about what that meant.'

A middle-aged woman emerged from the kitchen with a metal jug. She looked once at the envelope, once at Nadira, and opened a narrow access panel behind a shelf of prayer books. The panel disclosed a maintenance shaft full of water pipes. No mechanical hatch blocked it. Old infrastructure was dependable in a way new technology could rarely advertise: nobody had paid to make it smart.

Roy waited while Nadira lowered herself into the shaft. He heard the drone pause beside the third-floor window. Its motors adjusted pitch. A search algorithm had found a statistically improbable pattern in the building's meter failures.

A voice came through the glass. 'Municipal integrity inspection. Please remain where you are.'

The woman held her jug beneath the tap and let the water run.

'It has been inspected every month for years,' she called. 'Why do you never bring the replacement seals?'

The drone repeated its instruction.

Roy considered the distance to the shaft, the woman's exposure, the child's position. The fast reserve offered several trajectories; all but one ended in damage. The one that did not require violence began with waiting. The woman finished filling her jug. She moved to the shelf, blocking the drone's view with her own body, and tipped her chin toward the opening.

Roy lowered himself into the dark.

For a moment the drone could hear only water. Then the child started one of the retired androids playing a lullaby from its broken speaker. The tune was almost recognizable, an old song reduced to incorrect intervals. It occupied the microphone long enough for Roy's footfalls to vanish beneath the rushing pipes.

He did not thank the child. He might have placed her in danger by using a word the drone would record.

* * *

A kilometer away, in a sealed vehicle, a field officer asked permission to enter the apartment block. Kawamura denied it.

'We have a high-confidence acoustic track,' the officer said. 'The target is descending through a utility shaft.'

'Then you know where he is going without alarming everyone above him.'

'You risk losing him.'

'We risk learning nothing if he stops seeking what he needs.'

The officer fell silent. Kawamura disliked the silence; it usually meant an officer was saving anger for a subordinate.

'Ueda,' he said, 'find out whether a petition has been delivered. No contact with the escrow keepers. We only need the answer to one question: has somebody begun to respond?'

'If a recipient answers, we can follow the reply.'

'Perhaps. But do not put the reply into a machine.'

He disconnected before Ueda could ask why the ministry employed machines it was forbidden to trust.

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In the dark of the service shaft, Roy's diagnostic reserve recovered toward its ordinary ceiling. The circulating medium did not. He could not measure its true volume, only a drift in the system's willingness to grant him peak acceleration. Even at rest the gap between those two readings widened by fractions too small to assign a unit. Something in him was being used up by existing.

Nadira emerged into an abandoned pumping gallery and climbed onto a concrete ledge. Roy followed. Above them, an older channel carried water under a bridge lined with market stalls. The bridge was loud with bargaining, hard drives being dropped into bins, coffee grinders, and prayers transmitted by tiny speakers bolted to shopfronts. From beneath, it sounded like a civilization suspended over its own plumbing.

'How soon will the custodian reply?' he asked.

'No one knows. The neutral transfer isn't a time in a calendar. It's a condition.'

'Which condition?'

'When both sides have something they refuse to put on the network.'

Roy looked at the stamped receipt. Its date field was empty. Its witness field contained a mark that resembled neither a letter nor an official seal. Two Tyrell instruments existed, if the old records were accurate. Their custodian was the son of a dead man. One system in Roy's body could restart from its own cache until catastrophic damage rendered the cache useless. He knew none of this when he woke in Shenzhen. Knowledge had made him safer in some respects. It had also made his dependence measurable.

Nadira watched him put the receipt away.

'You still want to know how long you have?' she asked.

'Yes.'

'Even if the answer is six years?'

'I have already had the answer they gave me the first time.'

She did not ask what he meant. The words had sounded less like anger than an old measurement.

They walked along the flooded gallery until light arrived through a grating. Above them, somewhere in Pudu Alpha's layered jurisdictions, the ministry listened to pipes and paper and people who refused to say what they knew. At the same hour, in a room beyond any city registry, a custodian received an envelope that carried no address on its face.

He laid it beside two machines he had not connected to power in years.

He recognized the seal.

He did not yet open it.