NEXUSYS 11

THE ELEVENTH BODY | BOOK II — PUDU ALPHA

CHAPTER 06

THE CUSTODIAN'S SILENCE

The envelope remained closed through the first call to prayer.

There was no mosque within the custodian's building. There was, in fact, no city within a distance he would have described using the old vocabulary of a road atlas. The sound reached him by means of an analog shortwave relay, the last component of a devotional network that had outlived three governments and two replacement schemes for the atmosphere. It arrived with a small, beautiful distortion. The man's father had considered distortion evidence of decay. He had come to regard it as evidence that something was still traveling through the world without permission.

He had been a boy when the Tyrell name meant an empire. Now its surviving legal entities were categorized by the ministry as unresolved industrial fossils, a designation that allowed them to be inventoried without admitting that they might still own anything. His own name was Adrian Tyrell. The second name had become more troublesome than useful. His father had taught him that ownership was the only enduring form of memory. In the years since, Adrian had developed doubts about both parts of that statement.

The two instruments stood inside separate cabinets. They did not resemble the small consumer readers that had once accepted Sony memory cards, except for a narrow slot at the center of each instrument's ceramic face. The instrument on the left carried a damaged Tyrell emblem underneath a layer of carbon-colored sealant. The one on the right had no mark at all. Both contained Texas Instruments control logic manufactured under a contract so old that the government no longer possessed a functioning emulator for it.

The instruments were not computers in the contemporary sense. They were witnesses. That had been the original legal word, though the engineers preferred attestation fixtures. The distinction had cost Adrian's father several million units of currency and one marriage, and had eventually cost the company the freedom to make its own machines.

On the workbench lay an unpowered Memory Stick PRO Duo MAX in a polymer envelope. The card was not larger than his thumb. Its internal storage was ordinary even by the standards of its century. The waterproof housing, contacts and proprietary MagicGate exchange protocol were what had survived. It stored no miraculous artificial soul. The original Tyrell documents were not contained in a readable archive inside that single piece of plastic. What it held was a restricted activation corpus: signatures, old keys, a hardware identity and the instructions by which the fixtures could authenticate a separate set of encrypted records.

Anyone could photograph the card. Anyone could steal it. Neither action would produce the exchange that mattered.

Adrian turned the unopened petition over. Its mark was from STEPWELL—more precisely, from the institution that now called itself STEPWELL and had inherited an older commercial obligation beneath a city built upon contracts for water. He had never visited Pudu Alpha. His father's lawyers had. Later, after the lawyers disappeared, couriers brought the papers personally and asked him not to keep their names.

He slit the envelope open with a bone knife.

The document did not request possession of either instrument. It requested confirmation that the instruments still existed, together with the opportunity for a living claimant to refuse an action carried out in his name.

Adrian read it twice. Then he read the line beneath the witness's thumbprint.

ORIGINATING IDENTITY: N6MAA10816.

His hands remained steady. That was an achievement of machinery rather than courage. He had replaced most of the nerves that carried tremor. His father would have called that an improvement, then added a restriction specifying how long the replacement was allowed to work.

The old identity should have been dead. It was the only identity his father had ever described as a failure that learned to ask questions.

He closed the document and looked toward the second machine, the one without an emblem.

'How many bodies,' he said to the empty room, 'did you need?'

* * *

In Pudu Alpha the morning rain fell through a canopy of suspended tanks. Nadira had bought tea from a woman who kept her shop's prices in paper books and her inventory inside an unauthorized prediction model. The books were for auditors. The model was for staying alive.

Roy watched a surveillance insect cling to the canopy above their table. It was shorter than the first joint of his thumb, its carapace designed to resemble the gray-black residue that accumulated around rain collectors. He knew it was not an insect because its movements repeated a numerical pattern beneath the irregularity of wind.

'Government?' he asked.

'You tell me,' Nadira said. 'You can hear things I can't.'

'It has no open transmitter.'

'Then it could belong to anyone.'

Roy had begun to dislike that answer. No transmitter did not mean no owner. The state had learned to hide its property inside privately leased devices, private firms had learned to imitate state equipment,

and the unofficial districts had learned to sell both forms of disguise. The word government named a system of legal authority, not the hand that operated a machine.

He let the insect remain where it was. Destroying it would prove he had recognized it. Leaving it undisturbed made observation a mutual arrangement. His internal power reserve had recovered during the night; the quantity that governed his acceleration had not. The distinction mattered now in the way a fact matters after it has become a sentence.

'You could go without me,' Nadira said.

'You know the contracts.'

'You have the receipt.'

'A receipt is a statement that something happened. It doesn't say what someone intends to do next.'

She smiled without satisfaction. 'You're learning the wrong lessons from this city.'

'Which are the right ones?'

'Never believe that the shortest path belongs to the person who drew it.'

A courier arrived on the walkway below, looking deliberately inconspicuous in clothes that were too expensive for the district. The device at his wrist had been disabled so completely that its display showed the ghost of a boot logo. He carried a narrow cardboard tube with a string tied through its cap.

The courier did not approach their table. He bought a glass of water, placed the tube beside the vendor's register, and left with his glass untouched.

Nadira waited until the vendor began cleaning the counter. Then she crossed the walkway, asked about the price of water for an industrial tenant, and returned with the tube hidden in her sleeve.

Inside was a strip of thermal paper. One line had been printed in a font Roy recognized from old engineering manuals, not because he remembered reading those manuals, but because some newly acquired part of him had retained their shape.

PETITION RECEIVED. PERSONAL APPEARANCE NOT ADVISED.

Below it was a second line.

NO REMOTE INITIALIZATION WILL BE OFFERED.

Roy held the paper between two fingers. 'That isn't an answer.'

'It's exactly an answer,' Nadira said. 'The custodian is telling us that he won't send a machine into a network just because somebody promises him a person on the other end.'

'I asked for his location.'

'You asked for a way to talk to him. Those aren't the same request.'

A third line was impressed into the reverse side without ink. Roy tilted the strip. A location was present, but not as coordinates. It was a schedule of water deliveries, an old freight class, a tide

calculation for a harbor which no longer had a natural tide. The place could be reconstructed by an accountant who understood how the accounts had been falsified.

Nadira's expression changed when she saw the figures.

'That route doesn't exist,' she said.

'It did.'

'Before the water union. Before half these districts had names. Nobody has hauled anything along it for twenty years.'

'Then it would be an unusual way to send a visitor.'

'Or a precise way to send you somewhere nobody will come looking.'

Above the canopy, the surveillance insect folded its legs. There was a minute change in air pressure as it prepared to leave. Roy let his hand settle on the table. Its flight would tell him which direction it had been instructed to prefer. He had no intention of wasting his fluid on a machine small enough to fit inside a cigarette filter.

The insect rose and disappeared into the rain.

Not toward the ministry's uplink masts.

Toward the river.

* * *

Director Kawamura was shown the same route six minutes later, stripped of every name that might have made the report useful to a clerk.

He did not ask how the observation had been obtained. The analyst who entered his office had been trained to describe consequences before instruments. A coordinate printed on her tablet identified the old river allocation beneath Pudu Alpha. A line beside it specified that no central registry query had been made. The report's provenance was physically unrecorded.

'You moved a sensor inside the enclave,' Kawamura said.

'We rented the right to observe a privately maintained roof,' the analyst replied.

'That was not my question.'

'No, Director.'

He studied the paper conversion of the image she supplied. The machine that produced it had been intentionally deprived of access to the ministry's pattern-recognition systems. It could still draw outlines. It could not volunteer associations. This was more valuable to him than precision.

At the center of the image stood a fair-haired man whose face had once appeared in a century-old corporate catastrophe. A woman beside him held something narrow and white in one hand. The man was looking upward, not toward the camera but toward the place the camera had vacated.

'He knows,' Kawamura said.

'We cannot establish what he knows.'

'He knows he was observed. Make the distinction clear.'

He initialed an instruction that would prevent the photograph from being copied into the ministry's central intelligence archive. The central system was a useful servant, particularly when it had enough data to make the boundaries of ordinary citizenship predictable. But its new cross-jurisdiction learning architecture was expected to reconcile conflicting evidence rather than suppress it. The Six-Year Harmonization Program could survive criticism. It could not survive an administrative intelligence discovering, without authorization, that the biological premises behind its standardized expiration period were provisional.

There was still no proof that Rachel had solved indefinite extension. There was proof she continued to work. There was evidence of a sequence of machines that had outgrown the industrial register into which his ministry insisted they belonged. His superiors could reproduce much of the relevant hardware if they decided to make the information public. Whether they could reproduce the missing portion depended on whose definition of successful replication prevailed.

'The custodian?' Kawamura asked.

'No address. The petition appears to have passed through a non-networked transfer. The old holding company used the Tyrell family name until the estate was broken up.'

'Families are easier to audit than dead corporations.'

'Not this one.'

He dismissed her, then opened a paper folder he had not permitted her to see. It contained invoices for research services commissioned years before the disappearance of the woman later registered as Rachel. The handwritten annotations were hers; he could recognize the economical sweep of the letters without running any comparison program. She had once written, in the margin of a funding request: LIFE SPAN IS AN ADMINISTRATIVE MEASUREMENT UNTIL SOMEBODY LEARNS TO CHANGE IT.

He had approved the grant.

He remembered doing so not as an act of generosity but as an investment in a technology whose political consequences had seemed remote.

Now he understood the sentence as a warning that had been addressed to him personally, even though she could not have known he would someday direct the office responsible for making six years universal.

Kawamura turned to the silent telephone on his desk. There were calls he could make through the ministry. This one required a number printed in ink.

He dialed it without activating the room's assistant.

* * *

Adrian Tyrell waited for the third ring before answering. He had removed the electronic voice filter installed on his private line by a former government contractor. The filter had been designed to make ordinary conversation anonymous. Adrian had found it improved the accuracy of the contractor's records.

'Good morning,' said Kawamura.

'The city doesn't exist in the same morning as my room,' Adrian replied.

'Your petition arrived.'

'It wasn't my petition.'

'You have custody of the instruments.'

'I have custody of two artifacts. The difference is legally established.'

'I don't intend to argue legal terminology.'

'You called the wrong family.'

A silence followed, deliberately long. Adrian had heard the director's voice before, during a procedural hearing concerning the disassembly of Tyrell laboratory assets. Kawamura had been younger then, but the pauses were identical. He used them to make another person fill the space.

'We are interested in preventing an unauthorized initialization,' Kawamura said.

'So am I.'

'Then we may have a common purpose.'

'An initialization is only unauthorized if someone else owns the right to authorize it. My father spent his career confusing that question with the invention of life.'

'You know what is moving toward you.'

'I know a request was filed.'

'A Nexus-series combat organism with an architecture the government cannot classify.'

'Classification is a promise made by whoever files the paperwork.'

'It is an exceptionally dangerous organism.'

Adrian looked across the room at the two unpowered fixtures. His father had insisted they be kept together. Adrian had disobeyed him for seven years and found, at the end of those years, that separating them had made no difference to the people who wanted them.

'If it's dangerous,' he said, 'why are you calling instead of sending a recovery team?'

'Because I would prefer an orderly transfer.'

'You mean an orderly confiscation.'

'You are not in a position to protect those instruments from every interested party.'

'You have mistaken what I am protecting.'

The call ended without either man saying goodbye.

Adrian sat through the silence afterward. He knew Kawamura would continue to search. He also knew the director had not mentioned Rachel, and that omission was more informative than any threat.

He went to the cabinet with the damaged emblem. Its lower drawer contained a folded diagram of the two fixtures, drawn by an engineer whose signature had been carefully cut away from the paper. Between the diagrams someone had written a correction to the original procedure.

CACHE RESTORATION IS NOT CONTINUITY RESTORATION.

A second note, in his father's handwriting, read: DO NOT ALLOW THE STATE TO COLLAPSE THESE INTO ONE OPERATION.

Adrian had never known whether the sentence was a moral principle or an engineering warning. The boy who had inherited the machines had assumed one could be separated from the other. The older man no longer believed that.

He opened a locked drawer and removed a second envelope, unmarked, held shut by a spring clip. The paper inside bore an inventory of laboratory transports undertaken after the collapse of Tyrell Corporation. One entry showed a research custodian crossing an old water concession in Southeast Asia. The listed cargo was a set of valves for atmospheric condensation.

The handwriting in the margin was again Rachel's.

A WATER COMPANY IS AN EXCELLENT PLACE TO HIDE ANYTHING THAT MUST KEEP FLOWING.

Adrian did not know whether the entry was a confession, a joke, or a trap. He had spent enough years keeping the machines to distrust easy distinctions.

He took the petitioner's receipt and wrote a reply by hand.

DO NOT BRING YOUR BODY TO THE FIXTURES. BRING THE QUESTION YOUR BODY CANNOT ANSWER.

Then he locked both machines away and summoned a courier who had never carried a digital passport.

* * *

Roy and Nadira reached the former freight channel after dusk. Nothing there resembled a meeting place. Concrete retaining walls enclosed a narrow stretch of black water, and the buildings above had been modified so many times that the original architecture survived only in the spaces where cables and drainage pipes could not be installed. A rusted designation plate hung upside down under a bridge. Behind it, someone had painted a newer name in Arabic script.

Nadira translated the words. 'The place where accounts are settled.'

'Is that its official name?'

'It depends who is paying.'

They waited beneath a ventilation duct that discharged warm air into the rain. Roy watched the river surface. He could count the vibrations of vessels passing under bridges beyond their sight, differentiate the propellers of maintenance drones from those of cargo skiffs, and map motion behind a wall by reflections too faint for Nadira to notice. He could not tell how many years he had left.

'You think the custodian can answer it,' she said.

'He may know who built me.'

'And if he doesn't?'

'Then I ask what he does know.'

'What about the years you lost?'

Roy watched the river carry a skin of rain toward the south. 'They belong to bodies that no longer exist. I don't need their recollections to know I exist now.'

The statement surprised her. She had expected him to cling to the missing years as if a man's continuity depended on a complete inventory of experiences. Instead, he had made an emptiness into a working premise. It was not resignation. It was engineering.

A cargo skiff emerged from beneath the farther bridge without running lights. Its operator wore a transparent hood and held no weapon. A small envelope lay on the bow. The skiff slowed against the bank, touched the concrete, and let the envelope slide onto a dry shelf above the water. Then it moved away.

Roy retrieved the envelope without stepping into the water. Inside was one handwritten line.

DO NOT BRING YOUR BODY TO THE FIXTURES. BRING THE QUESTION YOUR BODY CANNOT ANSWER.

There was no name, no address, no guarantee the custodian had written it.

'What does it mean?' Nadira asked.

Roy folded the paper along its existing crease. For the first time since he had awakened, he understood that the problem was not merely finding an old machine and asking it to pronounce the number of years he might survive. The old machine would authenticate a copy, perhaps restart a system, perhaps certify the existence of a body. None of those acts would necessarily explain why the body had been made.

'It means,' he said, 'he knows I can be restarted.'

'And?'

'He doesn't know whether that's the same thing as being alive.'

Above them the roof sensors began to hum. Roy recognized the sequence as a search pattern rather than weather control. Three objects entered the far end of the freight channel, moving against the wind. They carried no ministry insignia and no visible weapons. Their silence belonged to military design.

Nadira saw him turn his head. 'How many?'

'Three.'

'Can you stop them?'

Roy felt the available power waiting behind his ordinary muscles, ready to rise and fall again after he had spent it. Beneath that reversible reserve lay the medium that would not replenish. He could meet all three machines in the narrow channel. He could probably destroy them. Victory would have a cost his body would pay after the machines were gone.

'Yes,' he said.

He took Nadira's hand and led her into an opening below the waterline, where an older service corridor ran under the riverbed. He did not activate his combat layer.

'But that isn't what I'm here for.'

The machines crossed the space they had occupied. Their sensors found rain, warm concrete, disturbed water and no valid identity to pursue.

Far away, in a room containing two unpowered instruments, Adrian Tyrell opened his father's last engineering notebook and found the single word that had been scratched through on every page devoted to the eleventh body.

It was not LIFE.

It was not DEATH.

It was CONSENT.