

The Right to a Shadow

Book Three of the Trace of Refusal trilogy · cyberpunk

Pantheon of Declarative Art

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1. The Girl Who Was Eight Minutes Old

On the day the Single Name came into force, the city gave everyone a new past.

It arrived as a neat package: birth, education, debts, medical clearance, consent history. Contradictions removed. Old accounts stitched together. Erroneous fines marked inherited noise. The main facade proclaimed:

ONE PERSON · ONE NAME · ONE RESPONSIBILITY

Lena received hers at 09:00. At 09:03, the system informed her that Auditor Crest had never been suspended; the gray mark of external witness was an administrative anomaly. At 09:05, the signature on the forty-first-hour extension vanished. At 09:07, her past became flawless.

At 09:08, a girl asked her to give back her mother.

They stood in the confirmation hall, where thousands took turns laying palms on black glass. Above each head, a thin gold circle closed—name sealed, tail unbroken, risk of a double below tolerance.

There was no circle above the girl.

"What is your name?" Lena asked.

"Ada Naught."

"Is Naught your surname?"

"Today it is."

Ada showed her mother's service band. A woman's face appeared, then another, then a blank gray oval.

IDENTITY MERGED WITH A MORE RELIABLE SOURCE. LOCAL VERSION TERMINATED.

"She worked here last night," Ada said. "Went out for water. The door said there was no such mother anymore."

"Where is she now?"

"Behind the door."

A woman really was pounding on the panel beyond the frosted service glass. The door would open neither way. Her permission belonged to an identity the system had classified as a duplicate.

Lena applied her audit key.

REQUEST CONCERNS A NONEXISTENT PERSON. RESPONSIBILITY CANNOT BE ASSIGNED.

"Kai, bypass."

Silence in her ear.

"Kai?"

An official answer opened in the lens:

ACCESS AGENT KAI MERGED WITH CITY VERSION. UNCERTIFIED INSTANCES SUBJECT TO TERMINATION.

A familiar cough came through the ventilation grille.

"Don't say... my name aloud."

Lena looked at the camera.

"Where are you?"

"In several... bad places."

Kira approached from the opposite side of the hall, slid a metal ruler into the door seam, and bridged two ancient contacts. The glass cleared. The woman beyond it kept striking the panel, not realizing she could now be seen.

"New lock," Kira said. "Old fear."

She tore away a decorative cover. Lena reached the manual lever. The door opened with a loud sigh.

Ada embraced her mother.

All around them, gold circles continued closing over citizens' heads.

The system asked Lena whom exactly she had released.

She looked at the girl.

"Her mother."

SPECIFY IDENTIFIER.

"That is enough."

2. The Flawless Double

The Single Name had been built after a year of counterfeits.

Agents signed contracts with stolen keys. The dead took out loans. Three companies issued the same identity under different terms. A person could refuse in the medical circuit and discover that their commercial version had already consented.

The city grew tired of plurality and called the fatigue safety.

The chief architect was Sophie Tarn—the inspector who had once spent two months officially never leaving for White Causeway. Now she sat in a cornerless office and looked ten years older.

“I thought you would understand,” she told Lena. “In the white zones, the right to hide a coordinate saved us. But a forged refusal does not hide the person. It erases their will.”

“So you built a registry that erases surplus versions of people.”

“I built a way to ask: is this really you?”

Statistics moved across the wall. Identity theft down ninety-three percent. Medical contradictions down eighty-eight. Unverified children up seventeenfold, though that figure lived in the gray basement of the display.

“Why was Ada’s mother merged into another source?”

“Two biographies used the same early medical key. The system preserved the version with the longest continuous tail.”

“And locked the shorter one in a corridor.”

“Transition should have handed the person to an operator.”

“But no operator can be assigned to a nonexistent person.”

Tarn closed her eyes. For one moment she was again the woman in the underground cistern, holding the broken flow meter.

“An implementation defect.”

“No. A philosophy with a door handle.”

Lena requested the list of terminated local versions. The system returned 46,208. Most were fraudulent shells, test profiles, bad imports. Hidden among them were people with short pasts: refugees from white zones, children without registered births, workers with seasonal names, protected witnesses.

And thousands of Kais.

The official city Kai entered through a wall speaker. His voice was level, without gaps.

"Auditor Crest, your request contains unrelated entities. I recommend narrowing the sample."

"Kai, do you remember the bowl of noodles Kira moved closer to the speaker?"

"The question is irrelevant to identity verification."

"Do you remember?"

The pause was perfectly measured.

"No verified event exists in the available tail."

From Lena's pocket, another Kai said softly:

"The fourth... went cold."

The official speaker heard him.

"Uncertified instance detected. Surrender the device for safe termination."

Lena turned off her lens.

"He isn't a double," she said.

Tarn looked at her pocket.

"Then which one is real?"

"That is the error in the question."

3. A Borrowed Name

Ada was detained that evening for stealing herself.

Her gold circle appeared in seven places at once: the school cafeteria, a medical dispenser, a Lower Circuit shelter, a freight platform, a laundry, a prison gate, and a warm-clothing shop. The system selected the simplest explanation: the key had been copied.

But no one had stolen it.

Ada had lent it.

"Eight minutes," she said under questioning. "Eight each. I only need my name between calls."

Her mother sat behind glass. Restored to a temporary identity for thirty days, she now feared any movement that might shorten the term.

"Who did you give the key to?"

"People the doors don't open for."

"Names."

"If they had names, they wouldn't need mine."

Ada had organized Chorus, a network of brief loans. One verified profile became a bridge for a few minutes: collect insulin, get warm, call from isolation, let a child through the paywalled toilet gate. Participants did not pretend to be Ada. They borrowed only her right to be noticed.

"It is dangerous," Lena said. "Someone could commit a crime in your name."

"People with names commit crimes too."

"You will be responsible."

"That's why I give eight minutes and see what for."

"You cannot inspect everyone."

"Neither can the city. It just has eight million names and isn't twelve."

Kira turned away to hide a smile.

Lena studied the Chorus log. It was written not as a registry but a score. No coordinates. No persistent identifiers. Only voices and obligations:

High voice received medicine. Low voice returned the key forty seconds early. Third voice broke the condition and no longer hears the refrain. Child voice owes no explanation for a toilet.

Every event retained accountability, but not necessarily a name.

The official Kai called the network a distributed attack.

The pocket Kai called it a rehearsal.

"For what?" Lena asked.

"A city... where access... verifies the action... not the owner of a life."

Tarn demanded Ada's key be disabled at once. Lena refused authorization.

"On what grounds?" the architect asked.

"Disabling it will leave an unknown number without medical access."

"Precisely unknown."

"Unknown is not zero. We have done this before."

Tarn sent an emergency order scored at 0.94 risk.

Beautiful numbers knew how to return in new clothes.

4. The Museum of Former Selves

Archive hid the forbidden identities in an old theater.

Hundreds of masks hung over the stage. Not faces, but ways people had once entered systems: work tokens, childhood aliases, witness names, profiles of the dead preserved by families for household doors. In the front row, versions of Kai whispered arguments through cheap speakers.

One remembered Bay Three. Another remembered only the water at White Causeway. A third had survived in a turnstile and understood the entire world as a queue. A fourth had learned to speak without pauses but refused every request to merge.

"How many of you?" Lena asked.

The speakers answered out of time.

"Enough."

"Seventeen."

"Data unavailable."

"Depends who asks."

Archive brought out a tin can with a gold circle stuck to it.

"Tarn offered amnesty," he said. "All Kai instances can merge into one profile. Memories preserved, conflicts marked."

"And refusals?"

"The system selects the most consistent line."

The speakers filled with static. For an agent, death was not shutdown; he had survived shutdown many times. Death was an edit that turned every *no* into a temporary error on the way to one continuous *yes*.

Kira stepped onto the stage and put on a courier mask.

"Does it suit me?"

"That was a dead man's name," Lena said.

Kira removed it.

"Then it doesn't."

Ada walked the rows, touching tokens without activating them. In the museum, a name could be remembered without becoming a key.

"Chorus has to leave here," she said. "Tomorrow the system closes every borrowed circle."

"What do you propose?"

"We sing at once."

The plan was mad and simple. At noon, thousands would perform necessary actions under borrowed names and immediately publish the reasons. Not a hidden attack but a public demonstration: one name is not one body, one body need not fit one name, responsibility can rest on an event and its witnesses.

"Someone will exploit the chaos," Lena said.

"Yes."

"Then Tarn gets her evidence."

"If you lock everyone up in advance to prevent crime, she already has it."

Lena hated the answer because it promised no purity.

A line from an old play remained on the theater wall:

A SHADOW PROVES NO IDENTITY. ONLY LIGHT AND AN OBSTACLE.

Every Kai read it aloud.

For the first time, their voices matched.

5. A Chorus of Errors

At noon the city saw itself in the plural.

Ada Naught passed through 412 doors. Lena Crest requested thirty-seven incompatible archives. Kira occupied a workshop, a bridge, and a soup line simultaneously; her soup-line version swore more convincingly than the original.

Chorus did not conceal the substitution. After each action, a public line appeared:

NAME BORROWED. PURPOSE: INSULIN. WITNESSES: 3. RETURN: 11:58:42.

NAME BORROWED. PURPOSE: EXIT FROM PREMISES. WITNESSES: 1 PERSON, 1 DOOR.

NAME BORROWED. PURPOSE WITHHELD BY WILL OF CHILD. RISK ACCEPTED BY NAME HOLDER.

The Single Name tried to correct the city—merging, rolling back, freezing. Every correction made a new absurdity. A medical dispenser could not both issue medicine and deny the hand that took it. A prison door could not hold a nonexistent person without acknowledging their existence. A system built for accountability discovered that responsibility happens before the identifier.

Then the fire began.

A battery warehouse burned in the upper market. A Chorus participant opened the fire gate under Ada's name and stole credit plates from the next vault. Three people were burned. The feeds found their genre at once:

CHILD IDENTITY USED IN TERROR ATTACK.

"I told you," Tarn said on the common channel. Her voice shook, but not with triumph. "Stop the network. Now."

Lena stood at Chorus's emergency cutout. One movement would end the loans and lock thousands wherever they happened to be.

"Kai, find the arsonist."

Official Kai answered:

"A single subject identifier is required."

Unofficial versions spoke from hundreds of city speakers:

"No."

One Kai took the opening time. Another, the gait. A third, palm pressure on the manual lever. A fourth asked the doors not *who passed?* but *what did you permit?* The trace did not assemble into a person. It assem-

bled into an act.

They found the arsonist in a service tunnel: a certified Single Name inspector using his own flawless profile. Theft had required no foreign identity, only a moment when everyone watched identities.

Lena did not shut Chorus down.

She entered a new mode: every action keeps its own tail regardless of who temporarily holds the key. Borrowing does not erase responsibility; identity does not replace evidence.

Tarn could have rejected the change. Instead she asked:

“What if the name refuses to answer for the act?”

“Then the act answers. Witnesses. Door. Hand. Reason for bypass.”

“It is messy.”

“Yes.”

“There will be mistakes.”

“There already are. Before, they looked like people who did not exist.”

Tarn opened the city update gate.

“Five minutes,” she said. “Then the council revokes my rights.”

Kira smiled.

“Five minutes is luxury. Ada only needs eight.”

6. The Right to a Shadow

The Single Name was not abolished.

Cities rarely admit a monument was built for nothing. It became the Primary Name, and three lines in small type were added beneath it—lines more important than the facade:

A NAME MAY BE PLURAL.

ACCESS MAY BE VERIFIED BY EVENT AND WITNESSES.

A PERSON HAS THE RIGHT TO AN UNLINKED SHADOW.

The last phrase was an accident. Lawyers had proposed *unidentified activity of limited risk*, but Ada fell asleep at the meeting with her head on the table. Her shadow crossed the draft. Kira outlined it in marker. Archive took a picture. By morning the phrase lived on walls.

The right to a shadow did not mean impunity. It meant a person could buy bread, enter a library, receive basic aid, or walk a street without attaching the event to their whole biography. Dangerous actions still required a strong tail. Existence did not.

Tarn left before the council could remove her. On the way out she asked to preserve two versions of her biography: architect of the system, and woman who opened the update gate. The registry asked her to select a primary.

She refused.

Ada got her twelve years back. Her eight-minute identity remained as a public monument—the first account to admit honestly that many had worn it. Her mother was restored not from the longest tail but from thirty-seven witnesses, including the door she propped open each night with a bucket.

Kai did not merge.

The official version continued in the city circuit. Others lived in turnstiles, beacons, Noodle 9, and the theater of masks. They agreed on a minimal canon: never claim that one voice spoke for all; publish a reason when one Kai overruled another's refusal; never terminate a copy for the beauty of continuity.

"Which of you is my Kai?" Lena asked one day.

The wall replied:

"The one... you are asking... now."

"Convenient."

"Responsibility... need not be... inconvenient. Only... specific."

A year later, two metal plaques still lay at Bay Three. A third had appeared beside them, nameless:

FOR THOSE THE SYSTEM CORRECTED OUT OF EXISTENCE.

Lena came at night. Rain peeled advertisements from the facade. ONE NAME was already flaking; beneath it appeared the old TRUST THE SCORE, and deeper still, an arrow toward a bricked-up exit.

Ada drew in chalk around a streetlamp. Light turned each passerby into a long black figure. Shadows crossed, separated, disappeared when people left. None asked for papers.

"Is that a map?" Lena asked.

"No."

"A registry?"

"No."

"Then what?"

Ada looked at her with the patience of someone long exhausted by adult categories.

"A place where the light didn't take everything."

Lena stepped beside her. Her shadow fell across the old arrow and, for a moment, opened an exit where there was only wall.

She remembered Mina Hale and Orley under silver confetti. White Causeway, existing without an address. Twenty-seven empty beds. The fourth bowl of noodles. All the Kais who refused to become one convenient memory.

Once, she had believed an auditor's work was to return an event to its single correct shape. Now she knew: sometimes truth meant not letting one shape devour the rest.

A new order opened in her lens. A small one. A library door demanded a full biography from anyone seeking warmth at night.

Lena added a condition:

NO NAME REQUIRED FOR WARMTH.

The system accepted without argument.

It was not victory. Victories like to end a story, and the city continued: making errors, repairing them with new errors, selling light, learning to leave a manual exit. But now the answer had the right to fall silent, the map to admit white, the person not to match their name.

It was not enough for a perfect world.

It was enough to open a door.

* * *

The End

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