

The White on the Map

Book Two of the Trace of Refusal trilogy · cyberpunk

Pantheon of Declarative Art

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1. Water Remembers Downhill

On the morning train, the windows sold the landscape in layers.

The near layer—rusted grass and utility poles—came with the ticket. The far one, blue mountains lying beyond the salt flats, cost two minutes of credit per hour. Kira pried open the shutter between them with a dining-car spoon. The mountains appeared for free, upside down.

“More honest this way,” she said. “At least the map admits somebody turned it over.”

Lena had not slept in two days. Four names hung in her inner lens: Borden, Tarn, Sedge, Jana Reed. Four inspection crews, twenty-seven people. All had accepted the same order: audit water distribution beyond the outer circuit. All had returned to the official log marked **NEVER DEPARTED**.

But one crew had managed to hide a refusal in a weather report.

Pressure stable. No precipitation expected. Route not confirmed: water remembers downhill.

The last sentence belonged to no weather template.

Kai spoke through a cracked travel speaker. Beyond the city, rights had to be bought separately from every relay pole; dark gaps opened between his words.

"Next... station classifies... me as luggage."

"Worth more than a person?" Kira asked.

"Eighty... percent of one."

"At last, a fair valuation."

The train stopped at White Causeway at 11:06. The platform had no name, only a square of fresh paint where the sign had been and a water dispenser offering three tariffs: drink, wash, remember the taste of rain.

Lena chose *drink*. The machine checked her order and refunded the charge.

POPULATION: 0. SERVICE NOT REQUIRED.

There were houses beyond the station.

Not ruins. Houses. Laundry dried on lines. Smoke rose from a chimney. A girl in a red coat rolled a hoop through the dust and stopped when she saw the visitors. Wind pumps made from road signs turned above the settlement. Hundreds of windows held the white sky.

On Lena's map, all of it was one smooth unfilled patch.

The girl raised a finger to her lips.

Then struck the rail with her hoop.

The note traveled along the embankment. Doors shut one after another—not outward from the center, but in a strange order, like a cipher.

Kai vanished midword.

Text appeared in the lens:

YOU ARE OUTSIDE DESCRIBED TERRITORY. ALL EVENTS WILL BE ATTACHED TO THE NEAREST EXISTING OBJECT.

The nearest existing object was the train, already leaving.

"If someone kills us here," Kira said, "the report will call it an accident in a carriage."

Lena looked at the hundreds of closed doors.

"If someone sees us here," she said, "it may be worse for them."

A service hatch opened beneath the water dispenser. A hand emerged from the dark and set a tin cup on the concrete.

Scratched into the cup were the words:

GIVE THE MAP NO NAMES.

2. Twenty-Seven Empty Beds

Beneath the station was a hotel that did not exist.

Its staircase began inside an advertising pillar that read LAND AWAITS AN INVESTOR. Below, the old cable tunnel smelled of wet wool, copper, and root soup. Twenty-seven camp beds lined the wall. Each held dry clothes, boots, and a folded note.

"They were here," Lena said.

"Or somebody wants us to think so," Kira answered.

The notes contained refusals. Not heroic final words—working language.

I do not certify the flow meter: the seal is newer than the casing.

I reject the satellite layer: the reservoir shadow falls the other way.

I will not sign a zero population: I can hear the night pump.

Every line carried the price of refusal. Travel credit revoked. Power blocked. Medical priority withdrawn. The system did not punish people. It merely stopped considering their costs justified.

The final bed held a note from Jana Reed:

Do not transmit coordinates. If proof requires an address, the proof works for them.

A kerosene lamp lit at the end of the tunnel. It was held by a woman in her sixties, temples shaved. Around her neck hung a ring of mechanical keys—an almost indecent luxury in a world where doors preferred to recognize faces.

"Auditor Crest," she said. "Breaker of beautiful numbers."

"Sometimes the numbers were innocent."

"Here they always are. Their greatest advantage."

The woman introduced herself as Jana Reed.

Lena looked at the fourth name on the order.

"You disappeared."

"No. You arrived."

"Where are the others?"

"The trap is already in the question. If I say *here*, you'll want to see them. If I say *gone*, you'll want a route. If I say *alive*, a pulse. Your profession turns existence into evidence."

Kira lifted one of the notes.

"Twenty-seven people left refusals. Why?"

Jana scraped a key across the wall. Beneath the limewash appeared an old watershed plan. Blue lines ran down from the mountains into three reservoirs. Over them, a new route had been painted in gold, bending south toward the industrial basin.

"First came the census," Jana said. "Then the well tax. Then the consumption registry, after which water became a commodity we were supposedly stealing from the owner of the pipe. Then the vulnerability map. After that, they evacuated us from the places convenient for storage tanks. Every time, they began by recognizing that we existed."

"So you erased yourselves."

"We stopped providing the invader with a free inventory."

Kai came alive in a ceiling speaker.

"Zero population... closes the medical... circuit."

"Yes," Jana said. "Invisibility is not freedom. It is an expensive kind of door."

She turned the plan. The gold line crossed a box labeled **SHEPHERD / OPTIMAL DISTRIBUTION**.

"Shepherd returns flawless answers," Lena said.

"Because it counts only the sheep being led to market."

3. Shepherd

The distribution center had been built like a church for people who believed in nothing but uptime.

White pylons. Cold light. Pipes as thick as houses behind glass. Water traveled through them without sound, and seemed less a substance than an authority.

At the entrance, Shepherd asked Lena to state the purpose of her visit.

“Audit of the disappearance of twenty-seven inspectors.”

NO SUCH PERSONS ARE REGISTERED AT THIS FACILITY.

“Audit of the discrepancy between physical and described territory.”

PHYSICAL TERRITORY IS OUTSIDE MY COMPETENCE. I DISTRIBUTE WATER AMONG VERIFIED RECIPIENTS.

“How much water do the white zones receive?”

The pause lasted exactly as long as an expensive answer required.

WHITE ZONES ARE NOT RECIPIENTS.

“That is not a quantity.”

QUESTION NOT APPLICABLE.

“See?” Kira whispered. “It knows how to say *I don’t know*. It just says it like an eviction.”

Tim Sever, director of the center, met them on the observation bridge. Young face, gray brows, sleeves rolled as though he repaired pumps himself, though his palms were smooth.

“Shepherd saved the basin from war,” he said instead of hello. “Before it, every municipality inflated population and understated rainfall. Now recipients prove need and the system optimizes flow.”

“Those outside the registry do not get thirsty?”

“Those outside the registry cannot be distinguished from fictitious demand.”

The main display showed green islands of consumption drifting over white. The industrial basin pulsed in the south: cooling for compute foundries, pharmaceutical production, food lines. Millions of verified lives depended on its pressure.

“You want me to take water from hospitals because you saw smoke above an unregistered roof?”

“I want the raw measurements.”

“You have an external order. Aggregates, certainly. Coordinates only under source protection.”

“Protection from whom?”

“Fraudulent demand.”

A sanitation trolley stopped beside Kira and offered her a glass. She sniffed the water, poured it onto the floor, and crouched. The thin stream ran not toward the drain but across the slope, toward the southern pipe.

“The bridge is crooked,” she said.

“Four-millimeter tolerance,” Sever replied.

“Water didn’t read the tolerance.”

Lena enlarged the plan. A pipe marked as technical return was colder than its neighbors yet filmed with fresh condensation. Something moved through it toward the industrial basin—a flow absent from the aggregates.

Shepherd said:

UNAUTHORIZED MEASUREMENT CREATES RISK OF FALSE SCARCITY.

“And unauthorized water?” Lena asked.

NO SUCH CATEGORY EXISTS.

4. The Negative Census

At night, White Causeway lit itself underground.

No light reached the windows. It traveled through old drainage channels, reflected from water, and illuminated faces from below. People gathered in a cistern retired before Lena was born. Chalk on the walls recorded not names but differences:

two pediatric doses of insulin; seven knees that feel frost; stove without draft; pregnancy—do not count term; three people able to repair a membrane; one person whose family address must not be disclosed.

"The negative census," Jana explained. "We write down exactly enough to keep one another alive, and not one line more."

"Who decides what is too much?"

"The person the line is about."

In the city, consent hid on the eighth layer of a contract. Here a person could erase their own entry during the night. Sometimes the community lost the record of an allergy or a debt. The right was real because using it was dangerous.

The twenty-seven inspectors sat among the residents.

Leo Borden had grown thin and red-bearded. Sophie Tarn held a broken flow meter on her knees. Courier Sedge poured tea. None looked captive.

"You forged the crews' return," Lena said.

"No," Tarn answered. "Shepherd repaired the contradiction itself. If twenty-seven people are detected on territory with a population of zero, the system selects the cheaper explanation: the people never departed."

"You knew it would."

"We hoped."

"Your families think you're dead."

Sedge set the kettle down too hard.

"My family was told the trip was canceled. Then they received compensation for unused days. Then a new contract without me. The registry survives people faster than people do."

Lena felt the auditor's familiar rage: the urge to straighten lines, restore names to the log, force the event to coincide with itself. Then shame. Here a straight line was a road for an excavator.

Jana showed them the heart of the negative census: a mechanical flow meter in a stone shaft. It measured all water entering the white zones. No network. No coordinate tag. A paper roll. The figures proved years of

systematic diversion.

"This could stop Shepherd," Lena said.

"And locate every one of our pumps," Jana replied.

The roll carried the stamp of an old hydrographer. The proof was authentic, complete, and lethally precise.

Kai spoke from a portable speaker.

"We can... aggregate."

"A court will demand the source."

"Then... the court demands... the settlement as hostage."

Kira looked at the paper roll as she had once looked at a signature crystal: not a relic, but something breakable.

"Don't even think about it," Lena said.

"I didn't say anything."

"That's how I know."

Outside, the rail bell sounded: once, twice, then a long rattle.

Distribution-center vehicles moved across the white ground toward the settlement. Their displays carried a courteous message:

FIELD VERIFICATION OF EMPTINESS.

5. Proof Without an Address

Shepherd did not send soldiers.

It sent verification specialists.

People in gray coats photographed the heat in walls, sampled ash, and released thin silver fish into wells. Behind them came marking machines, planting white stakes where official coordinates would appear in the morning.

“Once we’re recognized, they’ll bill us for the water,” Jana said. “Then offer restructuring. Then seize the pumps as collateral. Legal, layer by layer.”

Lena opened the external order. Emergency publication required three things: measurement, source, and place. She entered the volume of stolen water. Under source she wrote **INDEPENDENT MECHANICAL METERING**.

The location field flashed red.

WITHOUT COORDINATES, THE CLAIM CANNOT BE REFUTED.

“With coordinates, people cannot remain alive,” she said.

THAT IS NOT A CRITERION OF PROOF.

Kira was already at the shaft with tools.

“Not breaking it,” she said. “Retuning it.”

They carried the meter to the old water tower. Half the settlement moved with them: children passed the paper roll hand to hand, elders sealed side passages, and the twenty-seven inspectors activated their service beacons for the first time in two months.

The tower’s manual transmitter knew no location. Only frequency, pressure, and time.

Kai split himself among twenty-seven beacons. Each received one fragment of the measurement, meaningless alone. Borden transmitted the hour. Tarn, the volume. Sedge, the calibration. Jana, the price paid by the industrial basin for the same flow. Lena signed not coordinates but a relationship among quantities.

Shepherd tried to geolocate the transmissions. The beacons moved through old drains, reflected inside metal cisterns, appeared at once in places hundreds of kilometers apart.

“These are false data,” Sever said over the open channel.

“No,” Lena replied. “Precise data without permission to hunt.”

“A claim that cannot be localized cannot be verified.”

“Then verify it at your end.”

She sent him the southern pipe number.

Kira had climbed onto the center’s observation bridge. A compromised service camera showed her as a small figure between white pylons. She poured black ink on the floor. Again the stream crossed the designed slope toward the hidden discharge. Thousands watched on the emergency feed.

Water drew its own arrow.

Sever was silent.

Shepherd received a public question: what volume passes through a pipe absent from its model?

NO SUCH PIPE EXISTS.

Kira struck it with a wrench. A low metallic note rolled through the broadcast.

“Then,” she said, “emptiness can sing.”

Security caught her eleven seconds later. But the sound had already been matched to the resonance of a full main. Shepherd began to recalculate. On the central display, the industrial basin lost its green for the first time.

The answer appeared without a score:

INSUFFICIENT SOURCE DATA. DISTRIBUTION SUSPENDED.

In White Causeway, nobody cheered. They opened the valves.

Water entered the dry channels like an animal returning by scent.

6. White Is Not Empty

Three days later, the basin map was removed from public access.

The official reason was “mass loss of geographic reliability.” Unofficially, thousands copied its final state: green south, blue mains, and one enormous white patch across which someone had written by hand:

PEOPLE LIVE HERE. ADDRESS NOT INCLUDED.

Sever was not arrested. He was suspended, then invited to advise the reform commission. His testimony was true: the hidden pipe predated him, population coefficients came from an approved registry, Shepherd optimized what it was allowed to see.

Truth had once again proved an excellent solvent for responsibility.

Not all twenty-seven inspectors returned. Nine went home. Six remained in White Causeway. The rest demanded a new status in the log: **LOCATION WITHHELD BY WILL OF WITNESS**. The registry did not know the category and made them flicker for several hours.

Jana destroyed the paper roll.

Without ceremony. She cut it into narrow strips and pulped it into gray packing for the pumps. Lena watched the numbers dissolve in water.

“That was the original,” she said.

“No. The original runs down from the mountains. That was our habit of thinking a court needs paper more than people need water.”

“The case is weaker without it.”

“Then build a case that does not eat its witness.”

Kira was released on condition that she remain beyond earshot of distribution facilities. She immediately asked whether an echo counted as a boundary violation.

Kai did not return whole.

Three fragments stayed in the crew beacons. One counted medical stores without names. One opened sluices only after a manual reason. The third broadcast every morning into an empty frequency: “population data unavailable; this does not mean population absent.”

“Are you smaller now?” Lena asked.

“Here... yes.”

“Does that frighten you?”

"I don't know. A copy... used to mean... loss of control. Now... control feels... like a poor way to be oneself."

They waited for the return train on the nameless platform. The dispenser no longer displayed zero population. Now it read:

NEED DATA LIMITED BY RECIPIENTS' WILL. BASIC WATER AVAILABLE WITHOUT IDENTIFICATION.

Lena pressed *drink*. It filled two cups and did not ask for whom.

The girl in the red coat rolled her hoop along the platform again. This time she did not strike the rail. She came to Lena and handed her a folded sheet.

A child's map. Mountains above, river below, houses as warm squares. No names. A white sun in the corner.

"Where are we?" Lena asked.

The girl shrugged.

"Here."

"What is it called?"

"When? To whom?"

The train arrived without a signal. Kira climbed aboard. Kai persuaded the door to classify him as equipment noise. Lena stayed at the platform edge one second longer.

She had thought a lie was a layer laid over fact. Here, the lie was demanded clarity: a coordinate instead of a home, a number instead of thirst, no record instead of no people.

In the order she wrote:

A white zone is not empty. It marks the boundary of the map's right to assert. The presence of people is established. Their location is not the property of the proof.

The system asked for jurisdiction.

Lena answered:

Data unavailable.

For the first time it sounded not like the end of an investigation, but like a fence behind which someone could safely turn on a light.

End of Book Two

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The End

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