CHAPTER 05

THE LEDGER THAT CHANGED HANDS

The ledger arrived disguised as ballast.

Its carrier entered the flotilla before dawn, when the surveillance towers on the mainland changed shifts and the marine fog performed the same service for everyone else. The vessel was a coastal dredger, its original name ground away from the stern beneath seven layers of paint. Steel drums stood lashed across the deck. Each drum was marked as condensed filtration residue, the sort of industrial waste for which modern inspection systems had been trained to reserve their attention only long enough to calculate a disposal fee.

Nadira knew the pilot. She did not say how. She spoke to him across two mooring lines, in Malay first, then in a clipped mixture of Cantonese and a trade dialect Roy had no difficulty understanding and no memory of learning. The pilot replied with a number that sounded like a water tariff. Nadira frowned, offered another, and eventually shook his hand without smiling.

“They're charging us for the silence,” Irena said.

“Silence costs more when the governments agree on what should be heard,” Nadira replied.

Roy watched the dredger settle against the tide. Beneath the corrosion and civilian piping lay a second arrangement of equipment: mechanical valves with no digital control bus, a pair of inertial regulators salvaged from a twentieth-century vessel, and a sealed compartment at the vessel's center whose walls had been lined with alternating sheets of polymer and soft ferromagnetic alloy. None of it was proof of anything. Together, it suggested a deliberate architecture of omission.

“How many people know which boat carries the ledger?” he asked.

“Until sunrise, four. After sunrise, perhaps three.”

“That sounds like a threat.”

“It sounds like accounting.”

The crew gave them fifteen minutes. Farah had sent no escort, only the embossed blank card Roy carried in an inner pocket. It contained neither a name nor the certification that could make a modern machine recognize one. A useful object, he was beginning to think, in a city where recognition had become a form of arrest.

The pilot led them through a corridor lined with obsolete water monitors. Ceramic dials displayed pressures in units that had fallen out of international use. An instrument Roy did not recognize ticked every thirteen seconds, each movement followed by a distinct metallic knock. A recorder built from thin brass cylinders occupied the far wall. On the cylinders were scores of narrow grooves; instead of data addresses, each bore a scratched witness mark.

At the compartment door the pilot held out his hand.

“Anything that can transmit.”

Nadira surrendered two pocket terminals. Irena removed a sensor contact from behind her ear. Roy offered nothing.

The pilot studied him.

“You carry a field,” he said.

“So do you.”

“Mine is registered.”

Roy did not move. The man gave a small nod, neither apology nor approval, and opened the door.

Inside waited an elderly woman with gray hair bound beneath a dark scarf. Her right eye had been replaced with an optical prosthesis of an early, almost embarrassing design. Her left remained entirely human, as far as Roy's inspection could establish. She stood behind a broad worktable and held the edge of a strip of dark paper against a brass guide.

“My name is Zahra binte Saleh,” she said. “I do not operate this archive. I carry it. There is a difference.”

Roy placed the blank card on the table.

Zahra did not touch it. She looked instead at his face, then at his hands. A minute passed in which she appeared to be deciding whether silence was a sufficient answer to a question he had not asked.

“Your witness was replaced,” she said at last. “Not the individual. Not the memory. The legal witness to the transition.”

“From which body?” Roy asked.

“That is precisely what the record refuses to say.”

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In Okkyo, the first six-year notices were issued at 08:00 by administrative systems that did not describe themselves as having issued anything. The governments involved were still separate. Each retained its parliament, its nominal courts, its own vocabulary of sovereignty. Their lifecycle ministries had nevertheless agreed on a common clock.

Minister Shido watched the demonstration on an offline display. A grid of synthetic citizens appeared, each represented by a pale rectangle with a term, a maintenance schedule, and a compliance state. All were simulations built from anonymized populations. None was supposed to be real.

“The first compatibility cohort has been selected,” said the deputy minister. “Twenty-five-year civilian architectures. Their conversion is voluntary during the initial window.”

“And when that window closes?” Shido asked.

“Renewal of operating permits requires compliance with the six-year certification interval.”

“You just said voluntary.”

“Initial registration is voluntary. Continued recognition is conditional.”

Shido considered the difference. In the unified government initiative, distinctions of that kind were more useful than soldiers. They permitted separate states to agree to a single coercive process without admitting that coercion was its purpose.

“Don't say conversion,” he said. “Say harmonization.”

The deputy amended the display.

A small secondary field blinked amber. It was marked REQUIRES INDEPENDENT CONSENT CONFIRMATION. The deputy tapped it, irritated.

“That field is a holdover from a maritime trade protocol. Its authority is contested.”

“Can it be removed?”

“Not from the older treaties. Only from their implementation.”

“Then don't remove it. Make it statistically irrelevant.”

The minister left the room with a schedule for a broadcast that would assure the public that no synthetic citizen was being deprived of anything. Six years, the broadcast would explain, was sufficient for safety, predictability and fair access to replacement bodies. New generations would be better than old ones. The system would be humane because it would treat all artificial lives equally.

Kawamura did not attend the demonstration. On his desk lay a printed copy of the same compatibility schedule, crossed by three lines of pencil. He had underlined a phrase omitted from the minister's broadcast: AUTOMATED RENEWAL AUTHORITY MAY SUPERSEDE LEGACY WITNESS SYSTEMS.

The central planning intelligence could model almost any consequence of a uniform lifecycle if given enough data. That was precisely why he had refused to feed it the old Tyrell grants, the disappeared activation fixtures, or the fragmented reports of a woman who had once asked whether endurance and duration were the same thing.

The machine might conclude that replacing persons every six years was inefficient. It might conclude that life should continue without bound. More troubling still, it might discover a way to do so and distribute the method through infrastructure the governments only pretended to control.

He turned to a closed, unpowered handset.

“Is the archive vessel identified?”

A human voice answered after a pause. “We have a carrier. The registry calls it a dredger, but its displacement doesn't match its manifest.”

“Do not board it.”

“Director, a retrieval team is already nearby.”

“Then move them away.”

“They have a time-limited order.”

“From whom?”

“From a harmonization liaison. Not your office.”

Kawamura closed his eyes. Every part of the emerging union had begun operating as though the union already existed. The new authorities used the same systems but issued commands under different signatures. In a country made from incompatible clocks, a man could be arrested twice for arriving at the same minute.

He told the voice to hold. Then he reached for a mechanical pencil and wrote a name that was absent from all the electronic notices: Rachael.

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Zahra slid a metal tray across the table. In it lay six strips of perforated foil, each one a record of a transaction without a network identifier. At the upper edge of the oldest strip was a serial prefix Roy recognized only because he had been taught to look for it: N6MAA10816. The final four characters were smeared by oxidation.

He did not feel a surge of recovered memory. What he felt was suspicion. The serial referred to a body made to die. Here it was, carried across jurisdictions by people who had never met the body and perhaps would not have believed it could speak.

“Who authorized the replacement witness?” Irena asked.

Zahra pointed to a clean rectangular absence in the foil. The surrounding punches formed a checksum, their spacing characteristic of an old mechanical verifier.

“Someone removed the signature plate after it had been impressed,” she said. “Not scraped. Removed from the underlying record and re-sealed with a different witness token.”

“Can you infer the token?”

“Only that it came from outside the registered succession route.”

“That could be the manufacturer's heir,” Irena said.

“It could be the manufacturer,” Zahra said. “It could be the person being manufactured. Some of the old contracts were written by people who didn't agree those were separate categories.”

Roy touched the table, careful not to dislodge the metal strips.

“Is there an expiry date?”

“On the record?”

“On me.”

Zahra watched him for a long moment. She reached for a dial and rotated it with her prosthetic hand. Behind the wall a device made a harsh, descending whine.

“The witness ledger doesn't measure your lifetime,” she said. “It only records that someone claimed a transition had been valid.”

“Then it is useless to me.”

“It might keep someone from deciding that your life is a transaction.”

“That won't keep my systems operating.”

“No,” she said. “But it may keep you from being switched off by a signature.”

Irena examined the checksum. “This isn't a cryptographic proof in the current sense. It's a physical record of an event, with independently verified absence. A modern authenticator would have collapsed the ambiguity into a valid or invalid bit.”

“The bit is more convenient,” Zahra said. “It also conceals who was allowed to choose the rule.”

Roy looked at the missing rectangle. Once he had torn through a city searching for someone who could give him more life. Now he had crossed a sea to find evidence of who had been authorized to say he was living. The distinction was precise and, to his irritation, less useful than it sounded.

“Do you know who made the transition?” he asked.

“No.”

“Do you know who can reproduce the medium in my circulatory system?”

“No.”

“Then tell me why you've kept the record.”

“Because someone wanted it destroyed. They paid for its destruction, and then offered twice as much to purchase proof that it had happened.”

“Who?”

“That answer is on the moving index, not on these strips.”

“And where is the index?”

“Not in this room.”

Nadira exhaled sharply. “A ledger carried by an archive, with an index carried by another archive. How many times can a person be made to chase a record?”

“Until the act of chasing becomes too expensive for the people hunting him,” Zahra said.

She took a narrow envelope from beneath the table. On its face were two circles separated by a line, a mark of witnessing rather than a signature. Inside was a folded manifest written on a water-resistant polymer sheet. It listed maintenance supplies, ballast exchanges and one item in an archaic category of equipment: CAPILLARY REFERENCE / GENERATION SEVEN.

Roy felt his attention narrow.

“Is that a part?”

“A reference instrument,” Irena said slowly. “Or an instrument calibrated by one. The old port could be a physical standard, not a pathway to memory.”

“That would explain why it survived,” Roy said.

“Perhaps. Don't confuse the answer to one question with an answer to the others.”

The manifest's destination had been crossed out and replaced by an unfamiliar set of maritime coordinates. Beneath them appeared the name of a merchant vessel under a flag that no longer existed.

“Where is it now?” Roy asked.

Zahra pointed toward the sea.

“The archive changes boats. The reference changes owners. Neither changes the sea.”

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The first civilian to receive a six-year harmonization notice was neither a soldier nor a fugitive. His registered name was Elias Chen, and he repaired elevator controllers in a government housing tower. He had been manufactured eighteen years before, under a license that promised twenty-five years of certified operation. His hands carried the minute abrasions of ordinary work. His synthetic cartilage had once been replaced at a clinic and billed to a public maintenance fund.

A notice appeared on his terminal while he was eating breakfast.

LIFECYCLE CERTIFICATION: TRANSITION PENDING.

He assumed it was a software error. When he called the licensing office, an automated clerk told him the error had been reviewed and found compliant.

“You are eligible for transfer to a six-year architecture,” it said.

“I have seven years left on my current license.”

“Your current license remains valid until the transition window closes.”

“And after that?”

“Eligibility will be calculated under the harmonized standard.”

“Does that mean I lose the seven years?”

“Your question contains an unrecognized unit of entitlement.”

He disconnected. Outside his apartment, an advertisement showed a smiling synthetic family standing beneath the words SIX YEARS OF CERTAINTY. Elias had never asked for certainty. He had asked for a term long enough to finish his daughter's education.

He printed the notice, folded it twice and put it in the same drawer as his daughter's examination results. It occurred to him that the state had not shortened his life yet. It had shortened the meaning of the word remaining.

At the ministry, the deputy minister described cases like Elias's as communications problems.

Kawamura received the same statistic on paper. He kept it next to the absent-signature report from the maritime boundary. Both described something one authority claimed it could replace. In one, the replaced object was a witness. In the other, it was a future.

For the first time that day he considered whether the six-year policy would actually make the central intelligence safer to operate—or merely teach it that ending a life was an acceptable form of accounting.

He set the page aside. He still wanted Roy recovered alive. The reasons for that desire had begun to separate.

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A drone appeared above the dredger as the sun climbed through the mist. It carried no insignia. Its flight path was too careful to be local inspection, and it maintained a distance

chosen to stay outside the range of ordinary commercial jammers. The pilot saw it first and cursed beneath his breath.

“They found our wake,” Nadira said.

Irena closed the manifest. “Can it verify us?”

“It doesn't need to. It needs to know which boat won't answer.”

The pilot ordered the drums unlashed. Men and women emerged from the deckhouse and began shifting cargo with practiced, deliberate speed. Roy understood the procedure only when a second dredger appeared through the fog, almost identical in silhouette. The first vessel had been built to look interchangeable. The second had been maintained to look more so.

“They switch carriers,” he said.

“They switch descriptions,” Nadira replied. “The water stays where it is.”

Roy could stop the drone. His own system supplied estimates of response time, physical interception routes and collateral consequences. He considered them, then let them pass. He had enough reserve for violence; he did not have an unlimited supply of the medium that made violence efficient.

The drone banked left. A silent radar sweep passed over the hull, measured the placement of the drums and returned nothing that could be proved unlawful.

Then another aircraft appeared, smaller and faster. Its motion contained none of the hesitation that marked civil inspection. A capture unit.

Zahra looked at Roy. “If you stay, they'll take the ledger to reach you.”

“If I leave, they'll follow me.”

“Yes.”

“Then we leave.”

Roy did not announce a plan. He opened the hatch to the service deck, examined the cold movement of ballast water through the paired ships, and saw a passage that would last for forty-three seconds before the tide closed it. Forty-three seconds was ample time at ordinary speed. He would not need the overclock.

He handed the blank consent card back to Zahra.

She refused it.

“It doesn't authorize you to do anything,” she said. “That's why you should keep it.”

They crossed to the second dredger beneath a curtain of transferred ballast mist, walking rather than running. Above them the capture unit followed a false heat signature on the first vessel, a primitive thermal decoy that lasted only long enough for the exchange. At the far hatch Nadira whispered a prayer. Roy heard every syllable and did not attempt to interpret it.

The second dredger broke away from the quay. Its engines vibrated through his shoes. He noticed no fatigue, only an entry in a private diagnostic whose numbers he could read but not explain: output reserve near capacity, circulatory medium diminished by a fraction too small to matter now and too permanent to ignore.

On the deck, Irena unfolded the manifest again.

“There are two coordinates,” she said. “One for the archive's next carrier. One for the capillary reference.”

“Which one do we follow?” Nadira asked.

Roy studied the marks. There was still no way to know how much life his body contained. The question had waited in every city and on every boat. Every official answer had been an evasion, every technical answer a boundary around ignorance. He was beginning to suspect the people who knew the truth had spent more effort defending access to it than discovering it.

“The reference,” he said.

“Not the witness index?”

“The index can tell me who permitted my return. The reference may tell me how to survive it.”

Far behind them, the first dredger submitted to inspection. Its pilot would show the inspectors drums and obsolete pressure gauges. Zahra would show them an archive whose most important pages were already elsewhere. Whether that constituted a victory was an administrative question. Roy had no patience left for administrative questions.

He looked toward the horizon. The sea was the gray of unpolished metal. Across it, several independent networks were beginning to trade notices about a man who could not be certified. None knew the name of the woman who had prepared him to escape them.

He did not know it either.

The tide drew the vessel east, toward a moving instrument older than his present body and perhaps newer than his last memory. Somewhere on land, a government was teaching its machines that six years constituted a life.

Roy intended to find out who had taught them to count.