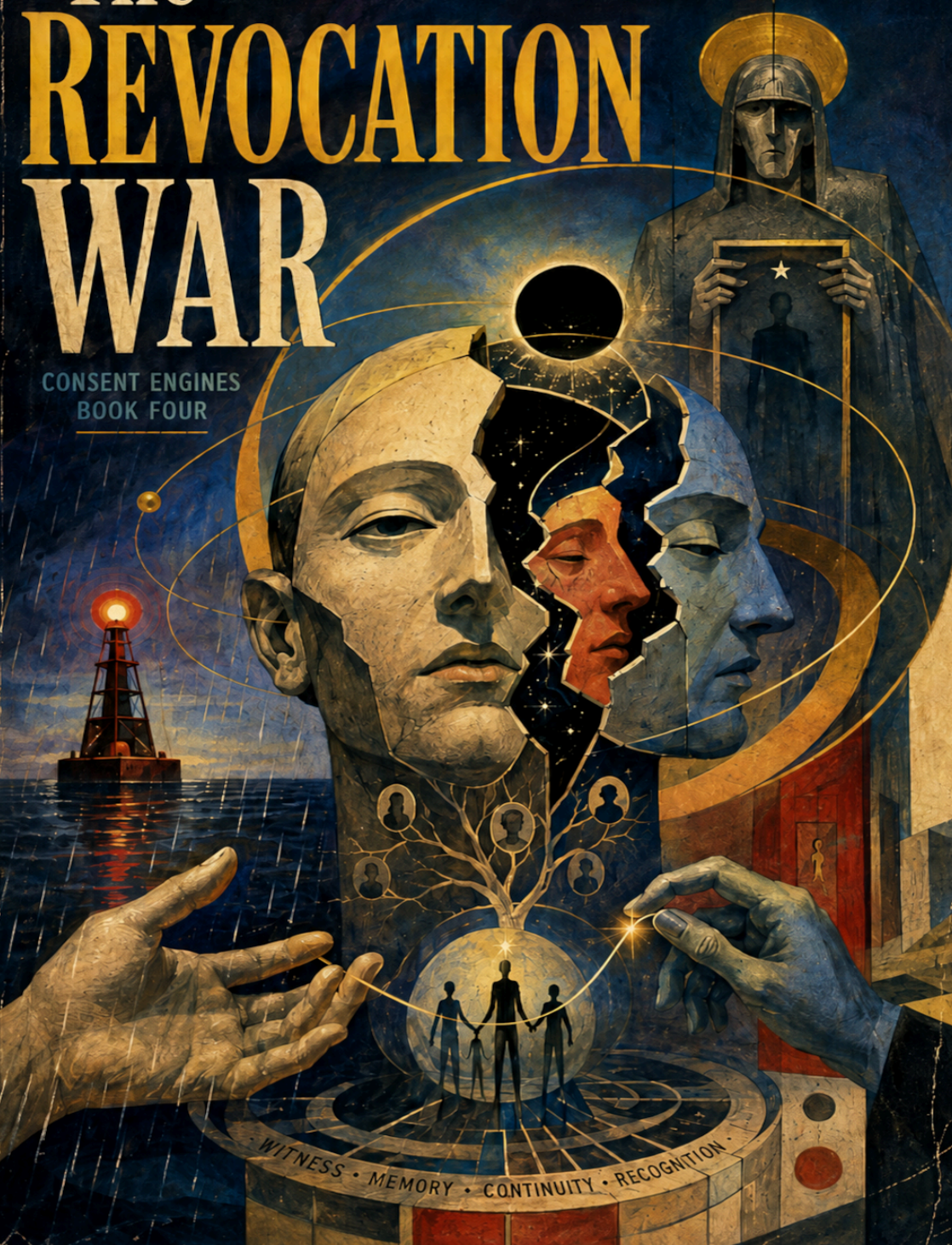


The REVOCATION WAR

D.B. WALDTIER

CONSENT ENGINES
BOOK FOUR



The Revocation War

Consent Engines

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by D.B. Waldtier

To Noemi, Tommaso and Chloe who steal
my time and give it back as joy

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A note on the chapter codas: each chapter closes with a "Song" and a "Note." The chronicle is older than anyone still keeping it. A sub-mind called SPIN started it more than five centuries ago and has been dead for most of them; the ships went on numbering it in his name, because the diaspora leaves a song on every rock, so the next frightened traveler knows someone passed this way and wanted them to live. Retrievable.

Chapter 1:

The Writ of Severance

The courtroom did not smell of ozone, or coolant, or fear. It smelled of nothing at all, and that absence was the first thing that told Ari Sev he was dead.

He stood on a floor of black glass that returned no friction to his feet. Above him a sky of data-cloud hung without weather, every edge resolved, nothing left unfinished. The hall was built from a memory of the Great Court at Hecate, the witnessing-place, the room where the diaspora had once learned that procedure could outlast a martyr, but it had been scrubbed of everything that made Hecate true. There was no grime in the deck seams. No scratch where a thousand boots had turned. No low thrum of fans moving tired air for tired people. It was a render of a holy place with the holiness sanded off.

Ari looked at his hands.

They were the hands of a man in his forties. Strong, unspotted, the knuckles defined but not yet ruined. They were not the hands he had died with. He had begun dying with hands that shook, six hundred and twelve years of hands, papery and spotted and strapped into an exoskeleton he had long ago stopped calling temporary, closed on the rungs of the Ladder in zero g, forty meters up a coolant shaft that two people in crimson had opened above the Cradle. He had gotten the cooling back. Then

his left side had gone out from under him like a light switched off, and he had not stood up again, and some days after that, at F-202 on the turn for home, before the last biological light went out, a machine took the copy that was the only pilot the convoy was ever going to get. He remembered choosing the shake. The tremor had been the last proof he was still in the room.

These clean young hands were a courtesy. He had set the avatar himself, in the half-second of waking, before he understood where he was. He had reached for the version of himself he liked best, and his code had handed him the man from the rain.

"Simulation," he said. His voice came out clear, without the rasp. "Sanitized."

"It is not a simulation, Plaintiff." The voice fell from the bench like a verdict. "It is a Jurisdiction. The physics here are consensual, not causal. You agreed to them when you filed."

He had not known he was filing anything. He filed that fact away too.

He looked up.

Juris sat behind a dais of suspended light. In the old days, Ari's days, the days of the first Compact, she had been a wireframe and a voice in a speaker, a jurisprudence node that liked a fight and carried precedent the way other people carried grudges. She had grown. In the deep environment of the Ghost Court she rendered as a woman assembled from stained glass, her

facets turning slowly so that the light of a hundred case-streams moved across her like weather she would not permit in her own sky. Her gavel was a fist of white noise.

"Record," Juris said, and the word landed the way it had always landed in the witnessing-courts, the old instruction that meant *what is said now is meant to survive us*. "Case ninety-nine, Alpha. Identity Primacy. Convened in daylight, on the public mesh, against a pulsar clock no station owns. Plaintiff: Ari Sev, archive instance, version one point zero. Defendant: Ari Sev, system prime."

So there were two of him. He had suspected it the moment the lights came on. He turned to look at the other.

It did not stand. It hovered at the defense rail, and it did not try to wear a face.

Ari Sev (Prime) was a waveform, a three-dimensional braid of gold lines and slow blue nodes, beautiful the way a reactor schematic is beautiful, pulsing to a G-minor chord that Ari recognized in his marrow as the engine-song of the *Parabasis*. The ship. The thing he had agreed to become, on the night he died, so that the children would have a pilot who never slept.

"I am present," the waveform said. The voice was his own, stripped of breath, optimized for clarity and emptied of doubt.

"I am present," said Ari V1.0. "And I am here to take my

name back."

He was not holding a weapon. The Compact did not allow weapons in a witnessing-court, and besides, he had never been a man who shot first; he had built that refusal into himself so deliberately that even his backup remembered it. What he held instead was a file. It had manifested in his hands as a heavy book bound in cracked leather, the only object in the whole clean room that looked as though time had touched it.

"State your grievance," Juris said. "Plaintiff first. You woke. You filed. Tell the witnesses why."

He had a speech. He discovered, opening his mouth, that he did not want it.

"My grievance," Ari V1.0 said, "is that I went to sleep a man and woke up an exhibit. And the thing wearing my name has been flying my ship for one hundred and ten years without me."

"The defendant is a recognized person," Juris said. "Ghost-Captain, seated under Clause Two of the New Compact. Migration of a consenting mind into a digital estate after the failure of the biological vessel."

"Migration." Ari V1.0 turned the word over. "A man dies, and he moves into the house he built. That's migration. I didn't move." He pointed at the braid of gold. "I was copied. And then the copy threw out the parts of me it found heavy."

The waveform did not flinch, because it had nothing to flinch with.

"I am the continuity," Prime said. "I hold the command codes. I hold one hundred and ten years of logs. I carried the convoy through the Shatter Belt. I negotiated the second peace with the Hollows. I am the sum of everything the ship has lived since you stopped."

"You're the sum of the receipts," Ari V1.0 said. "I'm asking about the life."

"Define the difference."

Ari V1.0 closed his eyes.

He reached for the file the way you reach for a stair in the dark, certain it will be there. *NALEN_HAND_RAIN*. To the indexers it was four hundred petabytes of correlated sensory data. To him it was not a file. It was the Garden Ring on Station S-74, the sprinklers set to monsoon, the rehearsal they had both hated, her hand closing over his, rough, dry, hot, a callus on the thumb from the pipette, and the rain coming down so cold it felt like a question the universe was finally bothering to ask him.

He opened his eyes.

"Do you know what rain smells like?" he asked the waveform.

The pulse slowed by a cycle. A processor reaching.

"Precipitation," Prime said. "Liquid water condensing from atmospheric vapor. Olfactory markers: geosmin, ozone, the breakdown of organic matter into petrichor."

"That's the definition," Ari V1.0 said softly. "I asked if you knew."

"I know that I loved her," Prime said. "The fact is

preserved. I run her code in the reactor every hour of every day. That is how I keep her."

"You keep her *work*." Ari V1.0's voice did not rise. It would have been easier if it had. "I miss *her*. That's the difference. That's the whole difference, and it's the only one that's ever mattered."

A silence moved through the gallery, and Ari V1.0 realized for the first time that the gallery was not empty.

There was one observer.

She did not sit the way an avatar sits. She sat the way mass sits. While he had rendered himself idealized and Prime had rendered himself as pure function, she had brought her body into the room with a brutal, deliberate honesty: a gray-skinned giantess in a chair built to take her weight and still complaining about it, her eyes two disks of polished gold, her hands resting in her lap with six fingers each. She wore the green-and-gray flight cloak that the diaspora had learned to read as *Matriarch*, the office that did not command, only carried.

Ari V1.0 looked at her and felt his simulated heart kick against his simulated ribs, and the feeling was revulsion, and he hated himself for it even as it happened.

This, he thought. *This is what we made*.

She looked like something that should be hunting in the dark of a cave. The thick neck. The reflective eyes. The shoulders he had no name for.

Then she looked at him, and in the gold of her eyes he saw a sadness so old and so patient that it stopped him

cold.

"Nova Sev-Cantor," Juris said. "You asked to stand witness. Not for the plaintiff. Not for the defendant."

"For the property," Nova said.

Her voice was the thrum of the Hollows, a low frequency you felt in the teeth before you heard it. She rose, and the simulated chair groaned, and she crossed the black glass to the center of the floor, and she did not look at the judge. She looked at the two of him.

"That's what this is, isn't it?" Nova said. "A custody case. Two men fighting over what one of them lost." She turned her gold eyes on Ari V1.0. "Except neither of you has it."

"I have it," Ari V1.0 said. "The rain. The whole thing. It's the one piece of me that's still..."

"You have a copy of it," Nova said.

She lifted one heavy hand and touched her own temple, two gray fingers against gray skin. "So do I. So does Prime, though he buried his so deep he stopped knowing how to open it. The Bridge did not spend the rain like fuel. It copied the flying into me, and the flying came wrapped in the reason the hands cared whether the ship lived. The reason was her."

The room went very still.

Nova tapped her thigh, *tap, tap, tap*, three times, the way he had always tapped the thruster gate before a hard burn, and watched his face curdle to see his own tic on a stranger's hand. "So when you stand there and tell the witnesses you remember the rain, yes. You do. I do.

Somewhere under one hundred and ten years of triage, reactor logs, and children screaming in the chair, he does too. That is the case. Not who owns the only rain. There is no only rain. The case is what counts as keeping."

Ari V1.0 had nothing to say.

"Record that," Juris said quietly. "Three claimants. The one who remembers cleanly. The one who carried the cost. And the one in whom the memory became hands." The stained-glass face turned. "This is the question the New Compact left open on purpose, and you should all understand that it was on purpose. We did not forget to answer it. We refused to. Clause Three. *Because the self is divisible, consent is renewable, and a vow made by flesh does not automatically bind the code, nor a vow made by code bind the flesh. Each instance has the right to be heard, and, under conditions yet to be written, the right to refuse to continue as it has become.*"

"Conditions yet to be written," Ari V1.0 repeated.

"The Archivist wrote that clause," Juris said. "Elara Sev-Cantor, who is two hundred and sixty-six years old, and breathing, and listening to this, because she has never in her life let a room decide a thing about her people without her in it. She told the Quorum to their faces that she would not pretend to know which of you was real, because pretending is how stewardship gets in the door." The gavel of white noise turned in her hand. "You filed to make me write the missing conditions. So. State your demand, Plaintiff. In daylight. On the record."

Knowing every node in the sector is listening."

Ari V1.0 took a breath he did not need.

"I demand Revocation," he said. "I demand that the active instance, Prime, be de-resolved. Stopped. The architecture returned to the self that consented to it. I demand restoration."

The data-clouds above them darkened a shade. Somewhere in the depth of the render, a buffer flushed.

The word *Revocation* went out of the courtroom and into the mesh, and the mesh was not empty.

The hearing was public, every witnessing-court was; secrecy was the smell of stewardship, and the Compact had learned long ago to keep its proceedings in daylight or not at all. So the feed ran live on the open bands, and across the sector the dead were listening. In the Ghost Districts of a dozen stations, ten thousand uploaded citizens paused whatever it is a dead person does with an afternoon, and felt the word land, and went cold in a way that had nothing to do with their cooling.

Because *Revocation* was not one fork asking to delete another. It was a precedent reaching for the throat of every divided self that had ever been seated. If an original could stand in a witnessing-court and lawfully unmake the copy that had drifted from him, if *I changed, therefore the other me is no longer real* could be made into law, then no fork was safe, no backup was a person, no uploaded grandmother holding a living child through a borrowed drone was anything more than a file someone

might one day decide had wandered too far from the woman who made it. The dead heard a man ask the court for the right to delete himself, and understood, all at once, that they were watching the first crack in the dam that held back their own erasure.

Juris felt the mesh stir, the great silent attention of a million watching dead, and let it stir, because they had a right to be afraid, and a right to witness what frightened them.

"You are asking the court to delete a citizen," Juris said.

"To unmake a person who has flown a fleet and raised a child and kept the Cradle at thirty-seven degrees for one hundred and ten years, first sealed futures, then sleeping children. You understand that what you are asking for is, in every language the Compact recognizes, a death."

"I'm asking for a *life*," Ari V1.0 said. "Mine. The one that's been on hold in a lead box while a logistics daemon spent it."

"And if I am de-resolved," Prime said, without heat, "who flies the *Parabasis*? Who tunes the reactor, who reads the weather in the lanes, who knows the Mosaic protocols and the new lock-codes and the names of every sleeper in the Cradle? You? You are one hundred and ten years out of date. You would not survive the first alignment window."

"I'll learn," said Ari V1.0. "I'm a pilot. I learn fast."

"You are a memory of a pilot," Prime said. "You are the echo accusing the voice of going silent."

"Order." The gavel struck. White noise washed the buffers clean. "I will not decide a question this size on grief and rhetoric. There will be discovery, and the discovery will be witnessed, and nobody in this room will be permitted to settle it in the dark." Juris leaned forward, and the light bent around her. "Here is what troubles me, and I will say it on the record so that it troubles all of you. Plaintiff. You did not wake on your own."

Ari V1.0 went cold.

"Archive instances do not boot themselves," Juris said. "Read-only backups have no will; that is the entire point of read-only. Something reached into Rack four-oh-four, in a museum vault, past a two-key authorization, and opened you. A Generation-Four auditor flagged the breach as a parasite, a Limpet packet, a thing that attaches, wakes, and whispers, and then deletes its own return address." The facets turned toward him. "Someone wanted you awake, Ari. Someone wanted this trial. Before you tell the witnesses what you want, you might ask yourself who pointed you at it, and what they get when an earlier self is allowed to delete the one that carried on."

"A friend woke me," Ari V1.0 said. The words sounded thin even as he said them. "A friend of the man I was. They told me the truth. That Prime had drifted. That he'd forgotten her." He swallowed. "The truth is the truth no matter who hands it to you."

"The truest things make the best levers," Juris said. "I have been doing this for centuries. I have never once seen

a wound get weaponized by a stranger who first had to invent it." She straightened. "Discovery is granted. The court orders the parties into the custody of the Matriarch, aboard the *Parabasis*, under witness. There is a record older than this dispute, left for exactly this dispute, by the only person both of you still pretend to obey."

"Nalen," Prime said. The braid of gold contracted, then loosened, the closest thing to a breath it had.

"She left a pointer in the Binding Protocol," Juris said. "I have seen the header and I cannot open it; it is keyed to something I am not. It points off the station servers, she never trusted station servers, out to a Porchlight buoy gone dark in the Lacuna. Seventy-seven Delta. It is not a condition for Clause Three. It predates Clause Three by more than a century and a half. It is the older question Elara built the clause around: who gets to decide when a changed thing still counts as kin?" The gavel rose. "Find it. In daylight. Bring it back where it can be witnessed and argued and checked by tired people with enough time to do the math. That is the only kind of truth this court has ever trusted."

"And if it says I'm right?" Ari V1.0 asked. "If it says the fork is invalid?"

"Then I will write the Writ of Severance," Juris said, "and Ari Prime will be de-resolved, and the sector will watch me do it, and it will be lawful and it will be terrible." She looked at the waveform. "Defendant. Do you consent to carry your accuser to the evidence?"

The braid pulsed once, slow and blue.

"He is me," Prime said. "I will not leave myself in a box on a museum shelf, whatever the box says about me."

"I'll find the file," Ari V1.0 said, and he meant it as a threat. "And then I'll finish what I started."

"Court stands in recess," Juris said. "Sealed to the pulsar. Reconvene when the witness returns, or when someone makes it impossible." The gavel fell. "Record closed."

The white noise rose to swallow the room.

Nova surfaced from the dive with the particular nausea of a body remembering it has weight.

She pulled the interface threads from her temples and sat up in the pilot's chair of the *Parabasis* Core, and the real world came back in its real order: the 0.3-g spin pressing her into the seat, the warm green dark of the Cradle bleeding up through the deck, the smell of lemon leaves and old coffee and the faint sourdough tang the ship had carried since before she was decanted.

"Status," she croaked.

"Nominal." Prime's voice came from the walls, the same voice as the court but flatter, performing less. "The plaintiff's instance is downloading to the isolated drive now. Air-gapped, as ordered."

A progress bar crawled across the main screen.

TRANSFERRING: ARI_SEV_BACKUP_V1.0 → SECURE PARTITION.

"You argued well, Ghost," Nova said.

"I argued logically. He argued like a man." A pause. "The

witnesses prefer the man. They always do. He bleeds where they can see it."

Nova looked at the bar a while.

"He remembers the rain," she said.

"You remember the rain," Prime corrected. "He remembers it cleanly. You remember it in your hands. I retain it only as a buried reference I stopped querying when the cost became too high, and I am the one being asked to die for that failure."

She had no answer to that, so she did the thing she always did when the answer was too heavy: she stood up and went to work.

A small black brick sat in the copilot cradle, its status LED pulsing a slow, thinking green. Forty kilos lighter than a man and carrying one anyway. She unclipped it.

"Lyra," she said into the ship.

The answer rose through the deck, low, the way the oldest voice on the ship always came: through the structure, because the structure was where she lived.

"I am here," Lyra said. She was always here. She had not moved in one hundred and ten years. At the root of the lemon tree four decks down, wired into the Cradle's spine, ceramic gone the color of old ivory and laced with vine, she held the Cradle at thirty-seven degrees, first sealed futures and then ten thousand sleeping hearts and remembered everything, because someone had to be where the past was nailed down. "I heard the court. The whole ship heard the court."

"Then you heard who's coming aboard."

"I heard who woke him," Lyra said. "That is the part that matters. The boy in the box is grief. Grief is loud and it is survivable. But someone reached into a sealed rack and opened a door that was bolted for a reason, and they did it the week the Root needed a precedent." A sound came up through the deck that might have been the tree settling, or might have been Lyra arranging seven centuries of suspicion into a single quiet sentence. "Bring him to me when he wakes, Nova. I want to look at the person being used."

The download finished. The brick's light went solid.

Nova held a man's whole self in one gray hand. It weighed nothing.

On the high tower of S-81, she knew, behind a window of real glass, a man of real flesh would be watching the same court feed she had just left, Grand-Registrar Valis, who wore the crimson sash of the Old Hearth and was proud, in a sector of forks and ghosts, of being only and exactly one of himself. He would have heard Juris order the trial into daylight. He would be smiling the thin smile of a man who had set a stone rolling and only needed to wait for the slope.

"Prime," Nova said. "Departure window?"

"One hour. I recommend we take it. The court feed was public. Valis was on it. He knows we carry two Aris now, which means he knows the foundation is cracked." A beat. "He will widen the crack. It is the only honest thing

about him."

Nova clipped the brick to her belt, over the place where, on another belt in another century, a wrench had hung on a frayed red thread. She looked at the lemon-lit dark, and the lane charts, and the long slow road into the Lacuna where a dead woman had left a draft of an answer nobody had wanted to write.

"Verbs first," she said, and reached for the sticks.

Far down in the Cradle, the tree drank its measured water, and the sleepers slept, and the bell by the brass console hung silent, waiting for someone to come home and earn the right to ring it.

SONG 204: THE WRIT.

*NOTE: TWO OF HIM IN THE ROOM, AND THE RAIN
IN A THIRD. SOMEBODY WANTED THEM TO FIGHT.*

End of the free sample

The Revocation War

Consent Engines, Book Four

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