CHAPTER 09

THE SEPARATION

01 — THE LAST DEPARTURES

The last bus left the concourse without any passengers. Roy watched it move slowly along the road beyond the glass. Its destination display was illuminated, but there was nothing written on it.

A woman in the uniform of the transport authority came through the waiting area to tell the remaining passengers that no further services would depart that evening. She was apologetic. She had been given no information concerning the following morning.

Rachel asked whether the pedestrian exits would remain open.

"Until we close the building. You can still get to the street."

The woman looked at Roy's hand, which he had drawn inside his coat. He had been trying to keep it warm. She asked whether he needed an ambulance.

"We came from the hospital," Rachel said.

The woman nodded with the sympathy of someone who had spent the last hour listening to other people's accounts of the hospital. Then she went to speak to a family near the entrance.

Roy waited until Rachel had gathered the water and dressings before attempting to rise. The effort was greater than it had been when they left the construction ground. He said nothing about it. There was a limit to what could be accomplished by telling Rachel that something she already understood had become worse.

At the entrance a screen normally used for advertising had begun to display notices from the municipal authorities. The first concerned the suspension of transport services. The second advised citizens to report unattended medical equipment and persons in need of urgent treatment.

The third was from a different authority.

A photograph appeared beneath the heading PUBLIC SAFETY ASSISTANCE. Roy recognized the face as his own, although he could not remember when the photograph had been taken. It showed him looking slightly to one side. His hair was shorter than it was now.

The notice described an individual who had left a medical facility during a security operation. It warned against approaching him and requested that information concerning his whereabouts be submitted to the authorities.

It did not mention Havel. It did not say that the man in the photograph had been convicted of anything.

Rachel stopped reading before the notice disappeared.

"They're putting it everywhere."

Roy glanced at the woman in the transport uniform. She was helping a passenger arrange a ride home. He wondered how long it would be before she saw the photograph.

They went outside.

He had once been unable to persuade a machine that he existed. He had been required to stand in offices while people attempted to establish whether his name was connected to anything they could verify.

Now the government was making an extraordinary effort to ensure that everyone knew his face.

02 — A ROOM ABOVE THE STREET

The rain had become finer. It passed beneath the awnings and through the gaps between the buildings, leaving the pavement apparently dry in places where it was not. Rachel walked beside Roy without trying to hurry him. Twice she stopped in front of closed shops and pretended to examine their windows while he recovered his breath.

At a small commercial building near the end of the street, a series of furnished rooms was advertised on a board beside the entrance. Most of the tenants were workers employed on temporary contracts. Rachel went inside to ask whether there was a room available for the night.

The man behind the desk had been listening to a radio broadcast concerning the disruption to the city. He told her that three guests had canceled their reservations after the northern transport routes were suspended. There was a room on the second floor. The lift was not working.

She looked toward the entrance. Roy had remained outside, where he was leaning against the wall.

"We'll manage."

The man began the registration procedure, then stopped. His terminal was unable to complete its connection to the municipal service. He tried again, complained about the evening's interruptions and asked Rachel to write down a contact name. She paid for the room, and he gave her an old mechanical key.

"If you need anything, I'm here until midnight."

She thanked him.

It took almost five minutes to get Roy upstairs. The room contained two narrow beds, a kettle, a sink and a window overlooking the roof of the neighboring building. There was a framed photograph of a seaside resort on the wall. The colors had faded until the sky and the sea were almost indistinguishable.

Rachel helped Roy remove his coat. The dressing was wet at its outer edge. She replaced what she could without disturbing the parts that Imani had instructed her to leave alone.

He asked her whether the research observations had been damaged by the rain.

"No."

"Let me see them."

She took the sealed packet from the inside of her coat. A small storage device was secured within it, alongside the handwritten observations. She placed it on the bed where he could see it, then put it away again.

Not everything Adrian had collected was in that packet. Not everything in it would be sufficient to reproduce an experiment. It was a record of work that had begun under conditions the government was now attempting to change. Rachel had kept it because she did not know whether the laboratory would be permitted to continue.

Roy looked at the kettle.

"Do you think they'll let us finish?"

Rachel filled it with water.

"I don't think they're going to ask us."

For several minutes there was no sound except the kettle heating and the small refrigerator beneath the sink. Roy lay down without removing his shoes. He had intended to remain awake until the water boiled.

When Rachel turned around, his eyes were closed.

03 — THE OTHER SUBJECT

Colonel Vale's staff had moved out of the hospital administration building. Their new operations room was located in a government facility a short distance from the district. It had been in use long before Havel's death. There were no windows, and the clocks on its walls showed the time in cities whose names had been removed from the labels beneath them.

Deren arrived to find that the hospital operation had become one entry among several overlapping assignments. Civil authorities were requesting information about roads, medical services and public disturbances. A separate liaison team was dealing with the research institution.

A staff officer placed a photograph of Rachel on the screen beside the image of Roy.

Deren asked why it was there.

"She was with him when he left the site."

"She wasn't named in the acquisition order."

The officer agreed. A supplementary instruction was being prepared.

Deren read the draft. It described Rachel as a person whose cooperation was necessary to establish the location of the target and recover material connected with the research program. The document did not authorize her removal to the facility intended for Roy. It did permit her to be detained pending an assessment of her involvement.

"On what charge?"

The staff officer said the legal department had not advised them to use that terminology.

Deren set the draft down. He had seen Rachel in the diagnostic wing insisting that Roy's injured arm be examined. He tried to reconcile that memory with the description on the page. The description was not obviously false. She had been with Roy; she had interfered with the transfer; she might possess information the government wanted.

What the document omitted was the possibility that she had been right to do any of those things.

Vale came in while Deren was still reading. He asked whether the updated public notice had been distributed.

"The one concerning Roy has."

"And the woman?"

"The supplementary instruction requires approval."

Vale looked at the screen and asked for the name of the official responsible for giving it. His assistant supplied the name. The colonel made a call.

At the far end of the room, M-04 stood with the other classified personnel. The woman in grey was listening to an officer explain the expanded assignment. She asked whether the second individual was to be treated as a target under the original acquisition order.

The officer said that the two designations were different and would remain so until further notice.

She asked no further questions.

Deren wondered whether someone had told her what to do if those distinctions ceased to be convenient.

04 — WHAT THE RECORDS COULD CARRY

Roy woke when somebody dropped a heavy object in the corridor. He remained still for a moment, uncertain of where he was. Then he saw Rachel sitting beside the window with the room's only lamp switched on.

She had spread several sheets of paper across the small table. The original observations were still inside their packet. On the loose sheets she had begun to write down the sequence of the experiments, the conditions under which they had been performed and the questions that had remained unanswered.

"You should sleep," he said.

"So should you."

He turned his head toward the ceiling. His arm ached even when he did not move it. He remembered the small increments on the equipment in the laboratory, the cup he had been asked to lift, and the care with which Imani had prevented him from confusing an improvement with a recovery.

Rachel told him that some of the recorded measurements would be useless without Adrian's original files. They had only a portion of the work. If the laboratory was seized, some of the results might be lost even if she succeeded in preserving everything she carried.

Roy asked whether the records would allow someone else to continue.

"Not immediately. But they would know what we were trying to do. They wouldn't have to begin with the same questions."

He was silent for a while.

"Then you should take them somewhere else."

Rachel put down her pen.

"We're going somewhere else. Both of us."

He sat up. The movement brought a brief darkness to the edges of his vision. He waited until it passed.

"You heard what they said at the hospital. They need my body. They need someone who can make sense of the work. If we're together, they can get both."

"And if I leave you here, what happens when you can't get out of bed?"

He had no useful answer to that.

Rachel folded the sheets and returned them to the packet. She said that she understood the danger of remaining together. She also understood the danger of leaving him alone. Neither of them could make the second danger disappear simply by discussing the first one in a more reasonable tone.

He lowered himself back onto the bed.

On one of the discarded sheets she had written the number one hundred, followed by a question mark. He studied it until Rachel noticed what he was looking at.

"It's a question," she told him. "Not a promise."

"I know."

She collected the sheet, too.

He wanted to tell her that he would be willing to accept far less than a hundred years. He had accepted far less before. But the work was no longer solely a question of how much time he might have, and he knew it would be wrong to ask her to abandon it because of what might happen to him that night.

05 — A STREET THAT HAD CHANGED

Shortly before midnight the man from the reception desk knocked on their door. He was carrying a folded blanket. Rachel opened the door only far enough to take it.

He explained that military personnel had arrived in the neighborhood. The occupants of several commercial buildings had been asked to remain where they were until the authorities had completed an inspection.

"I don't think they'll come upstairs here," he said. "It's probably something to do with the hospital."

He sounded as though he hoped that she would agree with him.

She thanked him for the blanket and closed the door. When she returned to the window, an aircraft was moving above the roofs. Its light passed across the side of a building and disappeared.

Roy got to his feet.

At street level, a small crowd had gathered near a junction. Two officers were talking to the occupants of a delivery vehicle. Beyond them, a public vehicle was being turned around. People on the pavement were trying to understand whether they were allowed to continue walking.

Rachel watched a woman carrying a sleeping child approach one of the officers. After a brief conversation the woman was allowed to pass. Others remained behind.

The military presence was still uneven. People were coming and going on ordinary business, but the decision that permitted them to do so was no longer necessarily theirs.

Roy put on his coat. He asked Rachel to show him the packet once more. She did not understand why until he looked at the bag containing their remaining dressings and water.

"Take that, too," he said.

"Roy."

"I'm not asking you to go yet."

He pulled his coat closed. Rachel helped him with the fastening near his injured shoulder, then stood for a moment with her hand still against the fabric.

They left the blanket folded on the bed and went downstairs.

The man behind the desk was speaking into his telephone. He looked surprised to see them leaving. Rachel told him that they had changed their plans. He asked whether she wanted him to arrange transportation. She declined.

When they reached the street, a notice from the authorities was being read over a public address system on the next block. The words were nearly lost in the noise of the traffic and the rain.

Rachel caught the phrase concerning persons assisting the subject of the operation.

She stopped Roy before he stepped away from the entrance. Across the road a pedestrian screen displayed his photograph again. It was followed this time by a second image, less clearly reproduced than the first. Rachel recognized the coat she had been wearing that afternoon.

For a few seconds neither of them moved.

The distinction the officer had made at the hospital was gone from the street, even if it remained somewhere on a military document.

06 — THE PLACE BETWEEN TWO ROADS

They reached a sheltered pedestrian crossing beneath a raised roadway. The crossing connected a row of commercial buildings to a residential district. People were moving in both directions, some leaving work and others carrying bags from shops that had remained open.

Rachel stopped beside a concrete column. Roy was having difficulty concealing his limp. She wanted to find another room for him, but every place she considered seemed more temporary than the last.

He took her hand.

"We need to decide before someone decides for us."

She looked up at the road. There was no visible military vehicle on it. That did not reassure her.

They had discussed meeting places before, when being separated had seemed an unlikely problem rather than an immediate one. Several of those places were now inside the restricted district. One belonged to someone who had already taken enough risks on their behalf. Another could no longer be assumed to exist in the form they remembered.

Rachel named a place outside the affected area. It was not a particularly good place. It was simply one that both of them knew.

Roy said that he would try to reach it when he could. Neither could say when that would be.

"If you're not there, how long do I wait?"

He looked at her. He wanted to give her a number. The desire was absurdly strong. A precise hour would have made the separation resemble an ordinary arrangement between two people who expected to see each other again.

"Don't stay if it becomes dangerous."

"That isn't what I asked."

"I know."

A group of pedestrians passed them, and Roy stepped aside. He realized that Rachel was holding his left hand with both of hers.

He asked her not to come back to the hospital looking for him. If the government announced that he had been taken into custody, she was not to assume that the announcement told her where he was being held. Above all, he did not want her to trade the records for his release on the strength of a promise.

She told him that he could not decide in advance what she was permitted to do.

"I'm asking you."

She looked at his face, then at the arm he could barely move.

"And I'm asking you not to make them kill you just to prove that they can't own you."

He nodded.

The words hurt him more than he let her see. There had been a time when the distinction between refusal and survival had seemed very clear. Now he was being asked to live within it without knowing how much either would cost.

07 — UNTIL THE NEXT MEETING

The first indication that the crossing was about to be closed came from the people walking toward them. A man hurried past with his telephone held to his ear. Behind him, two women stopped to consult a map on the wall. Someone said that the police had requested everyone to leave the lower level of the roadway.

Roy and Rachel moved away from the column.

At the far end of the passage, an officer was speaking to the people who had gathered near the stairs. Another group of officers became visible at the opposite entrance. The crowd grew quieter. There was no announcement concerning how long the restriction would last.

Roy looked back at Rachel. They had been standing within a few feet of one another when the first instructions were given. Now several people had come between them.

He saw her begin to move toward him.

He shook his head.

She stopped.

An officer near the stairs received a message and turned toward the passage. Roy could not hear what had been said, but he watched the officer study the faces of the people coming out. The familiarity of the movement disturbed him. He had seen it in the hospital, where people who had never met him had been given permission to decide what would happen to him.

Rachel looked toward the residential street. A number of pedestrians were still being allowed to leave in that direction. She understood that the opportunity might disappear while they were standing there.

She turned back to Roy.

He wanted to touch her again. He wanted to say something that did not belong to the operation being conducted around them. For an instant he thought of all the ordinary things he had intended to do when the research was finished. None of them seemed particularly ambitious now.

There was a shout near the entrance. Someone had attempted to go back into the passage after being told to remain outside. Several people moved at once.

Rachel was carried a few steps farther from him by the movement of the crowd. She stopped where she could still see his face.

Roy raised his left hand. He did not wave. He held it there for a moment, as though she might still be able to take it.

Then he lowered it and turned away.

She watched him disappear behind the people moving toward the commercial buildings. For a moment she expected to see him on the other side of them. When the crowd thinned, he was no longer there.

An officer directed her toward the residential street.

Rachel followed the others. She kept her hand against the inside of her coat, where the packet rested.

She did not know whether she was carrying the beginning of a hundred years or the last record of five days of work.

She knew only that Roy had asked her to keep it.

08 — TWO DIFFERENT ABSENCES

The report received by Vale's staff shortly after midnight concerned an unconfirmed sighting in a commercial district. The witnesses had described a man with a pronounced limp. One had been certain that the man's face resembled the photograph being circulated by the authorities; the other had been unable to say.

The sighting did not establish a location for Rachel.

Vale requested an assessment of the possibility that the material and its intended subject were no longer in the same place. His assistant asked whether the acquisition order should take precedence over the recovery of the material if the two objectives became incompatible.

"Until instructed otherwise, we have both objectives."

Deren listened from the end of the table. He wondered how much of the city would have to be brought under military control before someone asked whether the two objectives were worth what was being done in their name.

He did not ask the question aloud. There was a civilian complaint on the desk in front of him concerning an elderly patient who had been unable to obtain medication because of the road restrictions. He began to read it.

Elsewhere in the city, Rachel sat in the waiting area of a small building whose lights were still on. The woman sitting opposite her had fallen asleep. A clock above the door showed twenty minutes past midnight.

Rachel took out her telephone. She looked at Roy's name without touching it. She did not know what condition he was in, and there was no way to ask him a question without first establishing whether it was safe for him to answer.

She put the telephone away.

Several streets away, Roy sat beneath a roof that had once sheltered the loading area of a closed business. The rain had reached the end of the bench on which he was sitting. His right hand was cold again. He could hear a vehicle somewhere beyond the building, but he could not see the road from where he was.

He tried to remember the last thing Rachel had said to him. It was not an instruction concerning the research or the place where they might meet. It was what she had asked him beneath the roadway.

He had promised nothing. He had nodded.

He wondered whether that had been enough.

For the moment, getting to his feet was a more difficult undertaking than thinking about the future. He leaned forward and waited for the sensation in his right side to settle.

The city around him had not ceased to exist. Behind its thousands of windows, people were still living through a night that would become the following morning. He could hear the sound of water falling from the roof onto the road. From a distance came the low sound of another aircraft.

He stood.

He had no confirmation that Rachel was safe. She had no confirmation that he was still free. The government continued to search for both of them.

For the first time since leaving the hospital, there was nobody beside him when he began to walk.

END OF CHAPTER 09.