CHAPTER 10

THE VANISHING POINT

01 — THE STREETS AFTER MIDNIGHT

The first street Roy reached was almost empty. Water ran along the edge of the pavement, carrying pieces of paper toward a drain that had begun to overflow. A delivery vehicle stood outside a closed restaurant. Its driver was asleep behind the wheel.

Roy had no particular destination for the next few minutes. He wanted to put some distance between himself and the place where he had last seen Rachel, but the distance his body could manage was becoming smaller.

He stopped beneath a shop window in which several inexpensive watches were displayed. All of them had been set to the same time. The one on his wrist told him that it was nearly one in the morning.

He considered calling Rachel. He had considered it several times since they separated. Each time he had imagined the sound of a telephone coming from somewhere it ought to have remained silent.

He left it where it was.

Above the watches, a screen displayed a municipal announcement. The authorities had extended the suspension of certain transport services until further notice. People whose journeys had been interrupted were advised to remain at their residences or seek assistance at a designated public facility.

Roy wondered which of the designated facilities would agree that he was a person seeking assistance.

The screen changed. His photograph appeared. There was a new sentence beneath it.

THE SUBJECT MAY BE IN POSSESSION OF CLASSIFIED TECHNOLOGY.

He read it twice. He could not determine whether the author of the announcement meant the contents of Rachel's packet or the structures inside his own body. Perhaps the distinction was no longer important to the people who had written it.

A woman came around the corner carrying two bags of groceries. She noticed him standing in front of the screen and slowed. Roy moved aside to allow her to pass. She looked at the screen, then at him.

For a moment he thought she was going to speak.

Instead she went on walking. At the entrance to the next building, she stopped to put down one of her bags while she found her key. He heard the door close behind her.

He did not know whether she had recognized him. He knew that he could not spend the rest of the night trying to decide what every person who looked at him had understood.

His shoulder was no longer the only source of discomfort. There was a deep ache beneath his ribs, and the movement of his right leg had become less reliable. Imani had warned him that a succession of demands within the permitted output range could still cause damage if he had insufficient time to recover between them.

He had remembered the number seventy. He had not been in a position to observe all the conditions that made it useful.

At the end of the street, he found a public bench beneath a canopy and sat down. Across the road, the upper floors of an apartment building were illuminated. Someone had opened a window despite the rain. He could hear music, faintly, from a room that he could not see.

When he had first awakened, eleven years after the death he remembered, he had wanted an explanation for the fact that he was still alive. At that moment he would have settled for a dry place in which to sleep until morning.

A light moved across the windows of the apartment building.

He stood before it reached the ground.

02 — THE EXTENT OF THE ORDER

Colonel Vale had been given another room in which to conduct the operation. The hospital administration building was too far from the growing number of authorities involved, and its communications had not been designed to accommodate an undertaking of this size.

The new room was located within a regional command facility. Its largest display showed the city divided into administrative districts. A second display carried the reports that were being received from civilian agencies. Most of the notices concerned people who had no connection with the operation.

Deren arrived shortly after one. He had been instructed to bring the records of the transfer attempt and the objections received from the hospital.

Vale glanced at the folder in his hands.

"You can leave those with my assistant."

"There are requests for the restoration of access to the northern wards."

"Have the medical authority identify the necessary routes."

"They did that three hours ago."

The colonel looked up. He told Deren that another officer would deal with the hospital. The purpose of bringing him there had been to obtain his firsthand assessment of the subject's condition.

Deren described what he had seen. Roy had been injured before the transfer attempt. The second encounter had almost certainly made the injuries worse. He had no reason to believe that the subject was capable of sustaining a prolonged engagement with the classified personnel.

"Then he should not be difficult to recover."

"He won't necessarily be able to survive being recovered in the manner you have authorized."

Vale asked whether that was a medical conclusion.

"No, sir. It is the conclusion of someone who saw him trying to get out of a chair."

Nobody else at the table spoke. A new report appeared on the display. A driver had reported seeing a man resembling the subject near a residential crossing. The time of the observation was uncertain.

Vale ordered that the report be assessed with the others. He then turned to a memorandum that had arrived from the joint staff. It confirmed that additional classified personnel could be made available on request. The relevant identities had not been included in the document.

There was also a clarification concerning the recovery of technology. If the preservation of a living subject became incompatible with preventing the loss of material considered essential to national security, the field commander retained authority to act under the secondary instruction.

Deren had read the original wording. He understood what had been retained.

"And the woman?"

Vale turned another page. Rachel was to be detained for questioning and the recovery of the research material. Her classification remained separate from Roy's. The distinction had not prevented the public notices from treating her as part of the same threat.

Deren asked if there was an independent authority to whom a person detained under the order could appeal.

"That's outside the scope of this briefing."

He had expected the answer. It bothered him that he had begun to expect it.

Vale dismissed him a few minutes later. On his way out, Deren passed three uniformed officers waiting to enter the room. He recognized none of them. One carried a list of institutions with which the military had established direct liaison overnight.

The operation had begun with an attempt to take one patient from a hospital. By morning it would be difficult to find a municipal department that had not been asked to do something about him.

03 — A ROOM WITHOUT QUESTIONS

Roy found shelter in the entrance of a building that had once served as a commercial laundry. Part of the premises was still in use. Behind a partition, a machine was running with a regular metallic sound.

He had intended to remain standing until the rain weakened, but his leg gave way while he was trying to move closer to the wall. He caught himself with his left hand. The noise brought a man from behind the partition.

The man was older than Roy had expected. He wore a stained apron over his clothes and carried a plastic container that he placed on the floor when he saw him.

"Are you all right?"

"I need to sit down for a minute."

The man brought a chair. Roy lowered himself onto it with an effort that made the explanation he had prepared unnecessary.

The man asked whether he could call someone.

"No. Thank you."

"There ought to be a clinic open on the next street."

Roy shook his head.

For a while the man said nothing. He went back into the laundry and returned with a cup of warm water. Roy accepted it with his left hand.

A small television was mounted on the wall behind the partition. Its sound had been turned down, but the broadcast showed images of the hospital and the vehicles outside it. The man looked toward it when a photograph of Roy appeared.

Roy set the cup down.

"I should go."

The man did not answer immediately. He looked at the doorway, then at the television.

"My daughter works in a hospital," he said. "Not that one. She says they don't tell the people who work there what's happening until it has already happened."

He picked up the cup and refilled it.

"I haven't seen what they say you did. I don't know what you did. But I can see you can't stand."

Roy remained in the chair.

The man explained that there was an unused room behind the laundry. He had intended to clear it out before the end of the week. It contained a table and some old blankets. Roy could rest there for a little while, but the man could not let him stay after the morning staff arrived.

It was not an offer of allegiance. The man knew nothing about the research, the charter or the official distinction between a civilian and a manufactured person. He was frightened. Roy could see that his hands were not steady when he reached for the door.

"You don't have to do this," Roy said.

"I know. A little while. That's all."

The room smelled of detergent and damp cardboard. Roy sat on a low wooden platform and rested his back against the wall. The man left him a blanket and returned to his work.

For the first time since the crossing, Roy heard something other than the city outside. The machinery continued operating through the wall. At intervals, the sound stopped and resumed.

In the hospital, he had been surrounded by people whose work depended upon an extraordinary amount of knowledge about him. Here, he had been given a chair by someone who had understood almost nothing about him.

He closed his eyes.

He had intended to sleep for only a few minutes.

04 — A RECORD THAT HAD SURVIVED

Rachel did not sleep.

The building in which she had taken shelter belonged to a community association that had permitted stranded travelers to use its waiting area. By two in the morning, someone had brought in a second kettle and several folding chairs.

She sat at the end of a table, the packet beneath her coat. In the adjoining room people were discussing the transport announcements. A man had been trying to obtain information about a relative whose appointment at the hospital had been canceled.

She listened without joining the conversation.

Of the pages she carried, the ones that mattered most were not necessarily the most recent. Several concerned failures. One recorded a trial in which an apparently favorable response had been followed by deterioration in the sample. Another contained Adrian's warning that the behavior of isolated material could not be used to establish what would happen in a complete body.

Without those observations, whoever continued the work might mistake a promising result for a successful treatment.

There was also the older material they had discovered during the experiments. It was incomplete, and some of its classifications could not be reconciled with the later public descriptions of the research. Rachel had wanted to ask Adrian about it again. The opportunity had disappeared when the military entered the hospital.

She did not have an explanation for the discrepancy. She had a question that might otherwise be lost.

A volunteer asked whether she needed anything.

"Somewhere to go in the morning."

The woman said that a list of available accommodation would be provided when the transport authority issued its next announcement. She apologized for not being able to give Rachel more information.

Rachel thanked her.

She considered the place she and Roy had discussed beneath the roadway. She had intended to wait there when she arrived. Now she could not be sure that either of them could reach it, and she did not know whether he had managed to move beyond the commercial district at all.

She opened her telephone. There were no messages from him.

For a moment she resented the absence of a message. She knew that his silence might be the most sensible thing he could do, but it did not make it easier to look at the empty screen.

She returned to the packet and wrote a brief note describing the circumstances under which the observations had been removed from the laboratory. She included what she could establish concerning time and custody. She did not write that the research had been stolen, rescued or completed. None of those words described everything that had happened.

At the bottom she added the date. Midnight had passed. A new day had begun while they were standing on different sides of a crowd.

She folded the note and placed it with the rest.

Through the windows the street was still dark. Rachel tried to imagine Roy finding a place where he could lie down. She could not prevent herself from imagining the other possibilities.

She got up to make another cup of tea. It was something she could do without an answer from him.

05 — THE MAN WHO RETURNED ALONE

M-04 reached the regional facility before dawn. The other two classified personnel had been assigned separately. He was asked to report on his encounters with the subject at the hospital.

The officer conducting the interview wanted to establish whether Roy had demonstrated any capability absent from the material supplied before the operation. M-04 described the movements he had observed. He distinguished the ones he had interrupted from those he had not.

"Did the subject injure you?"

"No."

"Did you determine why he was unable to continue resisting?"

"I observed an impairment in his right side. I did not establish its origin."

The officer asked about the structural failure in the diagnostic building. M-04 gave the sequence of events as he remembered it. He had prevented a section of the ceiling from falling further while injured civilians were removed. During that interval the subject had left the area.

"Were you ordered to provide that assistance?"

"No."

"Did anyone instruct you to release the subject?"

"No."

The officer stopped writing. He asked M-04 why he had acted as he did.

"There was insufficient time for the civilians to be removed before the remaining structure failed."

"That wasn't the question."

M-04 waited.

The officer repeated it. There was no obvious change in M-04's expression. He gave the same answer, adding that the subject's departure had not been an objective of his action.

The interview ended without a conclusion on that point.

In the corridor, a medical employee examined the condition of his hands. There were several small cuts where the concrete had broken against them. The employee cleaned them and asked him to report any loss of sensation. He said that he would.

He was then given the details of his new assignment. He would remain available to the field command until the subject was located. If a positive identification was made, he was to assist the personnel already deployed in the relevant district.

M-04 asked whether the subject's medical condition had changed since the last encounter.

The officer delivering the instruction said that no reliable assessment was available.

"If one becomes available, will it be provided?"

"If it's relevant."

M-04 acknowledged the assignment. He was directed to an adjoining waiting room.

There was a television on the wall. It was showing the first domestic news bulletin of the morning. The presenter spoke of an operation to protect citizens from a dangerous individual. A short recording from the hospital showed several military vehicles arriving beneath the entrance canopy.

M-04 watched until the recording ended. Then he sat down.

He had not been asked to explain the difference between the report the citizens had been given and the report he had just completed.

He did not offer an explanation.

06 — THE LAST FAMILIAR STREET

Roy awoke to the sound of someone opening a door. For a moment he expected to see Rachel. The expectation vanished before he was fully awake.

The man from the laundry stood in the doorway. It was getting light outside. His employees would arrive shortly, and the radio had announced that several inspections were being conducted in the surrounding district.

Roy thanked him for the room. He folded the blanket before trying to get up. The man watched him make the attempt and brought the chair closer.

"You need a doctor."

"I know."

"You won't get very far like that."

Roy looked down at his right hand. It was not as cold as it had been the previous night, but closing it still required a deliberate effort.

"I'll go slowly."

The man gave him a small bottle of water. He refused the money Roy offered. Then he opened the door and stood aside.

Outside, the rain had stopped. The city was grey rather than dark. A few businesses were beginning to open, and workers were waiting near a transport stop where there was no indication of when the first service would arrive.

Roy recognized a street in the distance. He had been there with Rachel before the hospital, when they had still been able to travel through the district without considering each public announcement a change in their circumstances.

He began walking toward it.

A notice addressed to residents had been attached to one of the entrances. Officers might request that occupants provide identification and make common areas accessible. The notice referred to a temporary security measure. No date had been specified for its conclusion.

Farther along, a military vehicle stood beside a crossing. People were being directed away from one of the adjoining streets. Roy stopped with the others while an officer explained that the road would remain closed for the time being.

He could see the street on the other side. He remembered a shop there where Rachel had once stopped to buy something for him. It was not the place they had agreed to meet, but seeing it brought the idea of reaching her unbearably close.

Then a man in grey stepped out from behind the vehicle.

Roy recognized neither his face nor his coat. The man was speaking to one of the uniformed personnel. There was nothing unusual about his appearance except the precision with which he turned to look at the people nearest him.

Roy felt the familiar impulse to prepare himself for an encounter. He did not move toward the man.

He remembered the diagnostic building. He remembered the woman's hand against his arm, and the absence of any opportunity to recover after she had moved. He remembered that M-04 had been able to stop him without doing more than the encounter required.

That knowledge had not diminished overnight.

The officer told the people at the crossing that they could return in the direction from which they had come. Roy went with them. He could not tell whether the man in grey had seen him.

The farther he walked, the more difficult it became to believe that he would be able to reach the place he and Rachel had discussed that day.

He did not try to convince himself otherwise.

07 — THE END OF A CONFIRMED POSITION

At half past six, Vale received a consolidated report of the observations made since midnight. There were more than thirty possible sightings of Roy. Several could be excluded because the men described had subsequently been identified. Others were associated with contradictory times or locations.

No report established a confirmed position for Rachel.

The officer presenting the assessment said that the previous day's hospital footage remained the last reliable record of Roy in the custody of the operation. The witnesses near the crossing had provided useful information, but the subsequent reports did not form a continuous account of his movements.

Vale asked whether he had left the city.

"We have no evidence that he has."

"Do we have evidence that he is still here?"

"Not at this time."

A request had been received from the municipal authorities to reduce the extent of the restrictions. The absence of ordinary morning transport was creating difficulties far beyond the initial area of the operation. Vale agreed to the restoration of services in several districts. The acquisition order itself remained unchanged.

Deren was present when the revised instruction was distributed. On the display, parts of the city returned to their usual color. Other parts remained marked for military activity. It was possible to look at the display and imagine that life was returning to normal.

He thought of the hospital complaints that had accumulated during the night. Normality meant something rather different to the people who had submitted them.

The colonel called for another assessment at noon. Until that time, the classified personnel would remain on standby.

An assistant began to prepare a briefing for the civilian authorities. He asked whether the subject should be described as having evaded a military operation.

Vale told him to state that the subject had not yet been located.

Deren looked at the empty field beside the heading CURRENT POSITION. Earlier, someone had entered a district there. The entry had been removed after the report on which it depended was withdrawn.

Roy's photograph remained on the display.

He was still wanted. He was still in danger. The absence of a confirmed position did not cancel either fact.

For the first time since the order was issued, however, there was no place to which the colonel could send the classified personnel with the expectation that they would find him waiting there.

08 — THE VANISHING POINT

By morning, Roy had reached a part of the city he knew only in outline. The buildings were older, and many had been altered so often that their original purposes were no longer recognizable. Beyond them stood a series of unfinished developments.

He found a sheltered place near the end of a disused commercial building. It was not comfortable. It was not a place he could expect to remain for long. But from where he sat he could no longer see the bright screens that had carried his photograph through the night.

He took out his telephone and looked at Rachel's name.

There was still no message.

He had no way of knowing what she had been able to accomplish since the crossing. He hoped that she had reached somewhere warm. He hoped that the packet was still in her possession. Above all, he hoped she had not stayed in a dangerous place because he had failed to arrive.

He put the telephone away without making a call.

The light was changing on the wall in front of him. He could hear the city beginning its day: an engine starting, a metal shutter rising, a distant voice. There was also the sound of an aircraft, brief and almost too far away to distinguish from the rest.

He looked at his right hand. He tried to close it again. The movement was incomplete.

There had been a time when he might have considered that failure a reason to make another attempt immediately. He lowered his hand instead.

He had not recovered his former strength. He did not have a hundred years. He had learned enough about his own body to know that the numbers displayed in the laboratory did not give him permission to disregard it. The government had shown him that he was no longer the most formidable manufactured person in the room.

None of those facts told him what he was supposed to do next.

But they did not tell him that he had to return, either.

He remembered what Rachel had said when they stood beneath the roadway. He had thought then that she was asking him not to fight. He understood it differently now. She had been asking him not to let his enemy decide what his courage required of him.

Somewhere beyond the buildings, the roads led toward places they had discussed and places they had never seen. He did not know which of them he would be able to reach.

He could not return to the hospital. He could not confront the men who had been sent to take him. For now, he could not even keep the appointment he had made with Rachel.

He sat still until the sound of the aircraft faded.

The government had an order bearing his identity, a photograph of his face, and records of what his body had done. It had men and women capable of stopping him. It had not withdrawn its authority to kill him.

It did not know where he was.

Roy leaned his head against the wall and closed his eyes. He allowed himself to rest, not because the danger had passed, but because he would need to be able to stand when he opened them again.

There would be another road. There would be another attempt to reach Rachel.

For the moment, he was alive.

That would have to be enough.

END OF CHAPTER 10.