CHAPTER 05

THE SILENT CHANNEL

01 — THE OTHER END OF THE LINE

At the top of the stairway there was a narrow street from which Roy could see the lights of the district below. A number of the buildings on the lower street had illuminated signs. Beyond them, on the other side of the railway, the lights of the hospital were indistinguishable from those of several other large buildings.

He had stopped twice on the stairs. Near the top, a man coming down had asked if he needed help. Roy thanked him and said that he was nearly there.

It was an answer he had given without knowing where he was going.

A small restaurant occupied the ground floor of the building opposite the stairway. He ordered a bowl of soup and sat beside the window. When the woman brought the bowl to the table, she placed the spoon on his right. He moved it to the left.

She noticed the movement but said nothing.

Roy ate slowly. The sensation in his right hand had improved during the walk, although he was unable to tell whether the change was a consequence of the rest or merely another stage of the injury. There was a region of discomfort beneath his shoulder that had become almost independent of the position of his arm.

He thought of the physician at the hospital. There had been occasions during his treatment when Imani had asked him to describe the difference between two sensations. Some of the questions had seemed unnecessary. He was beginning to appreciate how difficult it could be to distinguish one kind of pain from another when there was nobody there to ask him about it.

There was a telephone mounted on the wall near the restaurant's entrance. A handwritten sign above it said that local calls were free for customers. A man with a delivery bag was using it when Roy arrived. He spoke for a few moments, apologized to the person at the other end of the line, and went outside.

Roy took his own telephone from his pocket.

The last message from Rachel was still there. It concerned the place where they had intended to meet. He did not know whether she was still trying to reach it, or whether she had learned enough about the operation to abandon the attempt.

For a while he considered asking her to do something very simple: to send him a message saying that she was safe.

He would have liked to be able to send her the same message.

The woman came to collect a plate from the adjacent table. She asked if there was something wrong with the telephone.

"No. I don't know if the person I'm trying to reach can answer it."

"You can use the one on the wall if you need to."

He thanked her. He did not explain that the difficulty was not the instrument.

He had heard enough about the new arrangements at the transport facilities to understand that a record made for one purpose might be used for another. The same possibility existed in every message he sent. Even an ordinary inquiry about someone's whereabouts could become an instruction to the people looking for them.

He could not decide what information it was safe for Rachel to receive as long as he did not know who else might receive it.

When he finished the soup, he went to the counter to pay. The woman asked whether he wanted some bread to take with him. She put two pieces in a bag and added a small bottle of water.

"It's going to get colder tonight," she said.

Outside, the street was almost empty. He stood for a few moments beneath the illuminated sign, holding the bag against his body with his left arm.

He had once thought of silence as something that began when there was nothing more to say.

There was a great deal he wanted to say to Rachel. He walked away without sending the message.

02 — A QUESTION FOR THE ASSOCIATION

Sera Min had remained at the association after the receptionist went home. The chair of the legal committee had asked her to prepare a response to the request concerning the preserved records. He wanted the response to be sufficiently precise that it could not be mistaken for a refusal to cooperate with a lawful inspection.

What he did not want, she suspected, was to be asked to decide what the association should do if the inspection itself was no longer lawful.

She had nearly finished the first draft when Imani telephoned.

The physician asked whether the association had a procedure by which a patient outside the hospital could receive advice in circumstances that prevented him from attending an appointment.

"We have several procedures," Min said. "It depends on whether the patient is asking for treatment, or whether somebody else is asking for information about the patient."

"I'm concerned about a man who hasn't been able to continue his treatment."

"Have you spoken to him?"

"Not since he left."

Min put aside the document she had been reading. She recognized the situation from her conversation with Rachel. The physician had not told her the name of the patient, and she did not ask for it.

She explained that the association maintained an on-call directory of independent physicians. It was intended primarily for people who had difficulty obtaining an examination in the district in

which they lived. The directory was not a medical service in itself. The association could refer an inquiry, but it could not require a physician to undertake treatment.

Imani asked whether the procedure was available to a person who had no current address to give.

"The requesting person can speak to the physician about that. We aren't the registration office."

"And if the request comes from someone acting on his behalf?"

"We can accept an inquiry. He'll have to consent to the treatment himself."

There was a pause on the line.

"That's what I want to establish," Imani said.

She explained that the complications in this instance were not merely administrative. The patient might be suffering from injuries for which an ordinary consultation would be inadequate. She did not wish to encourage anyone to arrange treatment in a place that lacked the necessary equipment.

Min asked her to prepare a short statement of the medical requirements, without identifying the patient. The association could give the statement to a physician who agreed to consider the inquiry.

"I'm also worried about what might happen if someone asks you where he's being examined."

"I can't promise that a physician won't be required to disclose something under a lawful order. I can make sure that the question is addressed before anyone agrees to an arrangement."

Imani appreciated the limitation. She had listened to too many assurances during the past few days that had turned out to describe only the intentions of the person giving them.

She told Min she would prepare the statement before leaving the hospital.

"There's something else," she said. "Adrian needs to speak to Rachel. He thinks he's found a reference to the missing pages."

Min said that she was expecting Rachel to make contact with the association again. She could convey the request without identifying the subject of their conversation.

After the call ended she entered two separate notes in her diary. One concerned the preservation of research records. The other concerned an inquiry about medical assistance.

It would have been more convenient to put them in the same file. In one of the government offices examining the affairs of the hospital, they might already have been described as two aspects of the same investigation.

She did not think that convenience was a sufficient reason to make them the same thing.

03 — THE REFERENCE NUMBER

In the hospital's research wing, Adrian had spread the returned documents across a table that was ordinarily used for the examination of equipment. Most of the workstations in the room had been disconnected. The remaining terminal provided access to the hospital's administrative system but not to the original repository in which the experimental data had been maintained.

An employee from the records office had brought him a paper copy of the entry describing the missing appendix. It contained a date, a document reference, and the name of the department that had issued the last amendment.

Adrian asked whether the entry had been made at the time the amendment was received.

"That's what the date normally means," the employee said.

"Can you establish when it was put into this system?"

She said she would have to consult an older register. Some of the material had been transferred from a different administrative system before the equipment in the research room was installed.

He thanked her, and she left the room with the copy she had brought.

He looked at a note he had made earlier in the day, after comparing the reference with the number on a form used for material supplied to the hospital. There was a similarity between the two. It was not enough to demonstrate that the documents referred to the same material. If he could obtain an earlier record of the form, he might be able to establish when the numbering procedure had been introduced.

The difficulty was that the form itself described the departments involved as suppliers. Nothing in it established that the supplier of a sample was its manufacturer, or that it had any continuing responsibility for the person from whom the sample had been obtained.

He had known enough people in his family's business to recognize the usefulness of such a distinction to an institution that did not wish to answer questions about the origin of its products.

He was looking at the documents when Imani came in.

"Min will try to arrange a conversation with Rachel," she said.

He told her what the employee had agreed to look for.

"Do you believe the appendix was altered?"

"It was amended. Whether the amendment was made before or after the sample arrived is what I'd like to establish."

"And if it was made afterwards?"

"We'd still have to know what was changed."

Imani pulled a chair toward the table. She asked him whether there was anything in the material they still possessed that would establish the source of the sample that had produced the anomalous result.

He said that there was not.

"Then we shouldn't tell Rachel that we've established it."

"I have no intention of doing that. But there's a possibility that we can identify the department that had the original record."

Imani examined the printed number. She remembered the brief period during which the preliminary work had seemed to be producing something they could investigate without reference

to the origins of the century project. She had been pleased by the possibility that its first useful findings might concern nothing more dramatic than the stability of repaired tissue.

Now it was becoming difficult to describe the experiment without also describing the history of some of the material used in it.

Adrian took another sheet of paper and wrote down the questions he wanted to put to Rachel. He did not include the name of the department. He could not be certain that the name belonged to the institution that had existed when the record was created.

"If we can't talk about this over an ordinary line, what can we talk about?" he asked.

"What we need to preserve. What we still don't know."

He looked at the empty spaces where he had expected to find references to the original samples.

There was a considerable amount of information in the room concerning the attempt to prolong a life. The identity of the people whose lives had made part of that information possible was still absent.

04 — THE REQUEST REMAINS OPEN

The officer at the personnel facility had received M-06's second request shortly before the evening change of staff. He read it in her presence and asked whether she wished to submit it as an amendment to her account of the encounter at the tram platform.

"No. It concerns a future encounter."

"You haven't been assigned one."

"I want to know what I would be permitted to do if it happened."

He explained that a request for a variation in the conditions of the operation had to come from the command responsible for the operation. He could refer an inquiry to that command. He could not authorize the variation himself.

M-06 asked him if her first request had been referred.

He consulted the terminal. There was an entry indicating that the matter had been discussed with the joint staff. No further instruction had been received.

"Then it remains open?"

"It hasn't been answered."

She looked at the form. The distinction was not visible on it.

In the corridor she found M-04 waiting for the evening transport to the accommodation building. He had been assigned to the facility for the following day. She told him what the officer had said about her request.

M-04 asked whether anyone had spoken to the physician at the hospital.

"I believe they have. I haven't seen what she told them."

He reminded her that they had been given access to certain parts of the operational medical summary. She had read the summary. It contained an estimate of the subject's recent performance

and a qualification concerning his possible injuries. It did not include instructions regarding his treatment.

M-06 asked him if he had ever had occasion to contact a physician outside the personnel facility.

"Once."

"Were you permitted to?"

He said that the physician had been sent to the facility to examine a member of the civilian staff. He had been present when an item of equipment injured one of the employees, and he had spoken to the physician about the way in which the accident had happened.

"I meant about yourself," she said.

"No."

They waited for the transport in silence.

In the office, the officer had added the new request to the existing record. Before sending a notification to the joint staff he examined the form again. A request for an independent examination was not prohibited by the standing instructions. The difficulty was that the instructions did not describe the circumstances in which somebody under an acquisition order would be regarded as an ordinary patient.

He transmitted the request without making a recommendation.

At the command centre, Deren received a copy. He read it alongside the account of the encounter at the pumping station. The two documents suggested to him that the next decision about Roy Batty could not reasonably be made without new medical information.

He telephoned the medical section and asked what authority would be required to arrange an independent examination.

The officer there said that he would have to establish whether the proposed examination constituted an interruption to the operation.

"It's an examination," Deren said. "Not a change in the acquisition order."

"Will the subject be free to leave afterwards?"

Deren waited before answering.

The question was reasonable. It was also the question no one had been willing to answer when the patient was still in the hospital.

He told the medical officer that he would put the matter in writing. Before doing so, he looked for the original authorization in the file on his desk.

A considerable part of the document concerned the duties of the authorities to whom the subject might be transferred. There was no provision for the possibility that those authorities might agree to speak to him and then allow him to go.

05 — WITHOUT AN ADDRESS

By the time Rachel reached the association the following morning, a notice had been attached to the glass door beside the ordinary opening hours. It informed members of the public that inquiries concerning the transfer of hospital records should be addressed to the legal committee.

There was no mention of the suspended research.

She found Min in the office upstairs. The lawyer gave her a copy of the statement that had been sent to the hospital and told her about the conversation with Imani.

"Has she heard from him?" Rachel asked.

"No. But she's preparing information that may help us arrange an examination if he makes contact with either of you."

Rachel sat down. She was glad of the information, although it obliged her to think once more about the condition in which she had last seen Roy.

"If he were able to get here, could you arrange it?"

"Perhaps. I would prefer him to speak to the physician before making a journey. Imani was quite particular about that."

Min showed her the public correspondence address they had discussed on the previous day. The association could receive a message for her at that address. It could also tell a caller how to make an ordinary medical inquiry, should the caller want to make one.

"You should assume that neither of these services offers secrecy," she said. "They're ordinary services. What matters is that we don't ask people for more information than we need."

Rachel took the card.

"How will he know what it means?"

Min asked whether Roy knew that she had intended to seek help from one of the professional organizations in the city.

"We talked about it at the hospital. I don't think I mentioned the name of this one. I didn't know which of them would help us."

She looked at the telephone on the desk. She had tried several times to write a message that would tell Roy what had happened without also telling other people where she was. There had always been something in it which she wished to remove.

She was aware that referring him to the association could bring attention to the people who worked there. She asked Min whether it was appropriate for her to send him the public address.

"If that's where you want a message to be left, yes. It isn't where I'm asking him to come."

The difference had not occurred to Rachel when she first thought about it. A place at which one person received correspondence did not have to be the place at which another person left it.

Min went to speak to the receptionist. Rachel remained in the office with the card in her hand. There was an ordinary telephone number on it and the name of an ordinary institution. There was

nothing to indicate that the association had received copies of research concerning the lifespan of artificial human beings.

She wondered whether, if the operation did not exist, she would ever have needed the card.

She had been about to ask Roy whether he could reach the association. Instead, she wrote that she had arranged a means of receiving messages there. He did not have to tell her where he was. She would be grateful to hear from him, whenever it became possible.

She included the public number and the name of the association. She did not refer to Imani or to the research.

She read the message again. The last sentence seemed inadequate. It was a sentence such as one might write to somebody who had been away on a long journey.

She added four words.

You needn't come here.

Then she sent it.

The telephone displayed the time of transmission, but no indication that it had been received.

When Min returned, she found Rachel still looking at the screen. She did not ask whether she had received an answer.

06 — A SERVICE INTERRUPTION

In the command centre the overnight report of the search had been printed before the morning meeting. With the exception of the encounter at the pumping station, the previous day's observations had produced no confirmed identification of Roy Batty. Eleven other inquiries had been closed after the identity of the person concerned had been established.

The officer presenting the report regarded the closure of the eleven inquiries as evidence that the new reporting procedure was functioning.

Deren asked how many of the people concerned had been required to leave the place in which they were going about their affairs.

The officer said that the figure was not available in the summary.

"Can you obtain it?"

"I can ask the district commands."

Colonel Vale interrupted them. He had received a request from the joint staff to extend the reporting arrangements to certain communications services. The proposal concerned a limited class of accounts connected to the operation. He asked the officer responsible for liaison to describe the procedure.

The liaison officer said that a notification could be issued when a designated account became available to the service. Information about the accounts associated with a communication could then be requested under an additional authorization.

Deren looked at the document. It did not specify the number of accounts to which the arrangement would apply.

"Who decides which accounts are designated?"

"The authority responsible for the notification."

"Is that us?"

"Not in every instance."

He asked for the current list. There was a short discussion concerning the distribution of the document. The joint staff had not yet authorized its release to everyone attending the meeting.

After the other officers had gone, Deren asked Vale whether the arrangement included communications made in the course of medical treatment.

"The provision concerns the identification of persons whose activities are relevant to the operation," Vale said.

"A patient's activities may include trying to reach a physician."

"I understand that."

"What are we supposed to do when we discover it?"

Vale told him that the command had a responsibility to recover the subject. There were existing provisions for the treatment of persons in custody.

Deren said that he had submitted a request concerning treatment outside custody. He wanted to know when it would be answered.

"I've seen it," Vale said. "It has been sent to the authority concerned."

The captain did not ask him to identify the authority. It was named on the original authorization, although the name provided no indication of the people who would be required to make the decision.

In a communications office several streets away, an employee received the first set of notifications. She was familiar with the ordinary procedure for suspending a service at the request of a court. This instruction did not require her to suspend every account on the list. In some instances she was to confirm whether a service was available and await a further instruction.

One of the accounts was associated with the hospital. It had been entered under a general instruction concerning communications connected with an inspection. The employee asked her supervisor whether the telephone service itself was to remain available.

He said it was.

She asked whether the recipient of the communication would be informed that the instruction had been received.

He consulted the document. There was no requirement to inform the recipient, and no provision by which the recipient could ask about it.

The employee completed the required entries. She had not been given the contents of any of the conversations. She had no way of knowing whether the people whose accounts were listed had ever spoken to one another.

When she finished, the service status of the hospital account was unchanged. A person using it might reasonably conclude that nothing had happened.

07 — WHAT COULD BE SAID

The telephone in the research room rang shortly before midday. Adrian answered it. The caller introduced herself as an employee of the medical association and asked whether he was available to speak to someone about a matter concerning the preservation of research records.

A moment later he heard Rachel's voice.

"Adrian?"

"Yes."

They had been told in advance that the conversation should not contain information identifying any of the participants in the preliminary trial. Min was beside Rachel, and Imani had agreed to remain in the research room with Adrian.

For a few seconds neither of them spoke. It was the first time Rachel had heard his voice since she left the hospital.

"How are things there?" she asked.

"Most of the equipment has been disconnected. We still have the room."

He asked whether she had received the acknowledgment for the preserved documents. She said she had.

"Good. We need you to keep it. There are some things about the records that I want to establish, but we don't need to discuss them today."

Rachel asked if he had been able to obtain the missing pages.

"Not yet. We may be able to establish something about the reference attached to them."

"The reference on the supply form?"

"Yes. It doesn't establish where the material came from."

He explained what he had asked the records office to find. Each time he came to a detail that would have required him to refer to one of the samples, he stopped and considered how to describe the problem without it.

Min listened to the exchange. She understood very little of the scientific significance of the material. What she did understand was that the speakers were attempting to establish the history of a document which neither of them possessed in its entirety.

Adrian asked Rachel if she could remember whether she had seen the complete appendix when the original description of the trial was prepared.

"I saw part of it. The copy I saw had a separate page for the additional material. I don't know whether that was the complete appendix."

He thanked her. He made a note of exactly what she had said.

Imani took the telephone. She told Rachel that there was a possibility of arranging independent medical assistance. It was not an arrangement in which anyone had yet agreed to see the patient. There were still questions concerning what equipment would be required and whether the necessary examination could be undertaken without an admission to a hospital.

Rachel said she understood.

"Have you had any news?" Imani asked.

"No. I've sent a message."

The physician was aware of the questions she ought not to ask. She wanted to know where Rachel was, whether she was eating properly, and whether she had somewhere to stay. She was not certain that it would be in Rachel's interests to give her the answers over a line connected to the hospital.

She said that she was glad Rachel had made contact with the association.

"I wish we could have had this conversation somewhere else," Rachel said.

"So do I."

When the conversation ended, Adrian returned to the table. He looked at the note he had made concerning the additional page. It was the only new observation he had obtained about the missing documents. He did not know if it would help him recover them.

Imani said that she would type the statement concerning the medical requirements and send it to Min. She was about to go to her office when the employee from the records department appeared in the doorway.

The employee had found an entry in the older register. It showed that the reference to the appendix had been transferred from a system maintained at another institution. The name of the source institution was not given in the register, but there was a number that could be used to identify the transfer.

Adrian thanked her and asked whether she could provide him with a copy of the entry.

"I've requested permission to release it," she said.

He was tempted to telephone Rachel again. He decided against it. He would wait until he had a document he could actually examine.

08 — AN ANSWER NOT YET RECEIVED

The following evening a woman at the district emergency office received a telephone call concerning a maintenance employee who had been injured the previous day. She was able to establish that the employee had been examined at a municipal clinic and had returned home. The person making the inquiry thanked her and ended the call.

He was one of the officers Deren had asked to obtain information about the incidents reported during the search. The pumping station was on his list. By the time he left the office he had learned

a good deal about the people who had been present there, but nothing about the condition of the person they had seen leave.

Deren read his report and attached it to the request for an independent examination. No answer to that request had been received.

At the personnel facility, M-06 was informed that she would be required to attend another briefing the next morning. She asked whether there had been any alteration to the instructions concerning the subject.

The employee told her that the instructions would be given at the briefing.

She looked for M-04 in the corridor but he had already left the building. She sat for a while near the entrance, watching the employees waiting for the transport.

She wondered whether Batty was still able to move. It had been relatively easy for him to leave her at the tram platform. From what M-08 had told her, it might no longer be easy for him to leave a place in which he found himself in danger.

She had been trained to recognize changes in the physical condition of a person she was following. Nobody had told her what to do if the act of following him was contributing to the changes.

In the upper district, Roy was sitting in a public waiting room beside the entrance to a building used by several small businesses. The woman responsible for the building had told him that he could remain there until it was locked for the night. He had thanked her and gone to sit away from the door.

He had been unable to obtain much sleep. The discomfort in his shoulder had changed again, and he was trying not to move the arm. Earlier in the day, he had discovered that the telephone was no longer displaying the usual indication of an available service. He could not determine whether the problem belonged to the telephone or to the service itself.

He had turned it off to conserve the remaining charge.

Now he turned it on again. The display appeared a little more slowly than usual. For a while it contained no new information.

A man came into the building holding a folded umbrella. He shook the water from it at the entrance and crossed the waiting room. Roy watched him go upstairs.

When he looked back at the telephone there was a message on the screen.

It was from Rachel.

He read it without moving. He read the name of the association, which he did not recognize, and the sentence telling him that he did not need to tell her where he was.

Then he read the four words at the end.

He knew how much she would have wanted him to come to her. He knew the effort it must have cost her to write something else.

He began an answer. He told her that he was alive. He told her that he had received the number. He did not tell her that he was waiting in a building whose lights would soon be extinguished, or that he had still not been examined by a physician.

He hesitated over the last sentence. It seemed to him that what he wanted to say could not be put into a message that he was certain would do her no harm.

Eventually he wrote that he would speak to her when he could.

The screen displayed an indication that the message was waiting to be sent. He watched it for several minutes.

At the association Rachel had already put the telephone into her bag. She had promised Min that she would not spend the entire evening in the waiting room. There was somewhere she could go, and the association would open again in the morning.

She went downstairs and thanked the receptionist. Outside, the rain had almost stopped.

Roy turned the telephone so that he could see the screen more clearly. The indication beside his message was still there.

For the first time since they had parted, he knew that there was somewhere in the city to which Rachel expected his words to travel.

He did not know whether they had left him.

END OF CHAPTER 05