CHAPTER 09

OUTSIDE THE SYSTEM

01 — THE ROAD TO THE LOWER DISTRICT

The rain began while Rachel was waiting for the lights to change at the first intersection below the association. It was little more than a fine mist, but it made the lights on the opposite side of the road appear to be at a greater distance than they were.

She had forgotten how quickly the streets changed on the way down from the administrative district. The windows of the offices gave way to the windows of shops. There were fewer public screens, and the people standing under the awnings seemed to know one another.

At a crossing she stopped to let a man with two children pass in front of her. One of the children was carrying something wrapped in paper. When the paper began to come apart, the other child reached out to hold it together.

Rachel looked at the bag she was carrying. It contained very little that belonged to the work she and Adrian had undertaken at the hospital. The statement establishing the custody of the records was with Sera Min. Adrian and Imani had retained the material from which the next stage of the investigation could begin.

For the first time in several days she could go somewhere without taking the future of the investigation with her.

She was not entirely certain that the people who had helped them before the hospital would still be there. There had been changes in the distribution of water and in the arrangements made for people who had lost their rooms. Some of the changes had been announced publicly. Others would only be apparent when she arrived.

A bus came to a stop beside her. The destination indicated above the windshield was beyond the lower district. The driver opened the door and told the people who were waiting that he would not be following the advertised route all the way to the terminus.

"Where do you stop?" Rachel asked.

He named a road she knew.

She got on.

There were six people on the bus. A screen at the front displayed an explanation of the revised service, beneath which appeared a notice requesting cooperation with municipal authorities. The notice remained on the screen after the explanation disappeared.

An elderly passenger asked the driver whether the morning bus would be running.

"If they let us use the road," the driver said.

The passenger seemed to regard this as sufficient information. He looked out of the window again.

Rachel had been unable to tell Roy where she intended to go. She had asked him to remember a place where neither of them had been required to account for their existence. There were several

places he might have remembered, and she could not be certain that their recollections would lead them to the same one.

She had considered asking Min to make arrangements for a meeting. Such arrangements would require at least one of them to remain accessible at a known place. Neither of them could promise to do that.

They would have to proceed in the way people had proceeded before it was possible to ask a machine where another person was.

The bus stopped a considerable distance short of the road the driver had named. He apologized and said that he had been directed not to continue. Rachel joined the other passengers on the pavement.

At the far end of the street two municipal vehicles stood beside a barrier. People who wanted to go farther were being directed to a pedestrian crossing. There was no indication of how long the arrangement would remain in effect.

Rachel turned her collar up against the rain and walked toward the shops.

At much the same time Roy was standing beneath a canopy on the other side of the city. There was a narrow opening above him through which water fell at irregular intervals. A little pool had formed at his feet.

He had walked for longer than Lian would have advised. He could no longer find a position in which the weight of his right arm did not cause him discomfort. For some time he had been considering whether he could continue without stopping. He now knew that the question was not worth asking again.

He sat on a low concrete wall and took the physician's note from his pocket. There was something reassuring about the fact that she had written the details of the examinations on an ordinary piece of paper. He could show it to another person without first having to prove that he had a right to see it.

The address to which Lian had arranged a possible admission was not on the note. There had been no confirmation of a bed before he left the diagnostic institution.

He put it away.

A woman came out of the shop behind him and began to bring in the containers that had been left on the pavement. Seeing Roy, she asked if he wanted to come inside while she finished.

He said that he would be grateful for a few minutes.

She went back into the shop and left the door open.

He stood up carefully. The streets around him were unfamiliar, but there were things he recognized about the buildings farther down the hill. He thought that if he could reach them he might be able to find someone who knew the road to the old water distribution point.

He did not know whether Rachel would have thought of the same place.

He had at least survived long enough to make the attempt.

02 — THE OTHER SIDE OF AN INQUIRY

At the diagnostic institution the municipal officer completed his discussion with the administrator shortly after the examination area had closed. He had not been authorized to inspect medical files. He was permitted to request a description of the procedure by which inquiries concerning civilian referrals could be made.

The administrator gave him the address of the institution's legal office.

"Is there anybody here who can tell me whether the person was examined?"

"Not without knowing what you are entitled to ask."

The officer looked at the document on his knees. He had been given a reference to a communication between two institutions. In the course of the evening he had received a second message indicating that the person sought might no longer be at the address. Neither document gave him a confirmed identity.

He wrote down the address the administrator had provided.

In another part of the building the physician was finishing his notes. He had agreed to retain the examinations arranged by Lian in the same manner as his other examinations. There was no instruction to do anything different with them. It seemed important to him that this should continue to be the case.

Lian had returned to the desk before leaving. She asked whether the hospital that had considered admitting her patient had replied.

It had not.

She gave the physician the number at which she could be reached the following morning. If Roy should present himself again, she said, she would be prepared to arrange an appointment.

"You could give him the number of a different practice," he suggested.

"He has my number."

The physician understood. There was no medical reason to require a patient who had already undergone an examination to begin again with someone who knew nothing about him.

When Lian emerged from the building, the officer was sitting in his vehicle composing his report. She passed the vehicle on her way to the station. He did not speak to her.

The report arrived at the command centre twenty minutes later.

Deren read it before looking at the photograph attached to the file. The entrance to the diagnostic institution had been photographed in daylight. A man holding a bag was visible near the steps. No one had suggested that he was Roy Batty. His presence in the photograph nevertheless made the picture seem to contain information about a person rather than a door.

Deren closed the photograph.

He asked the liaison officer whether any observation had been obtained from which the subject's presence could be established. The officer said that the municipal inquiry had not settled the matter. Further information was being requested from the communications authority.

"And if the information arrives after he's gone?"

The officer said that an earlier location would still be of interest.

Deren agreed. What he wanted to establish was whether the measures now being undertaken were intended to obtain information about a past event or to direct the personnel to a present location. The two purposes had been distinguished in the original plan. It was becoming increasingly difficult to distinguish them in the requests that reached his desk.

He opened the list of addresses supplied during the afternoon. One was a civilian practice at which M-06 had obtained a consultation. The information concerning her visit had been appended to the file without the opinion he had sent about its relevance.

He asked for the opinion to be attached.

"The address is still relevant to the other inquiry," the liaison officer said.

"Then leave the address there. Attach my opinion to the part that concerns her."

The officer made the necessary change.

A few minutes later a new instruction arrived from Colonel Vale's office. Personnel at the regional facility were to remain available for an operation in the event of confirmation from the civilian authorities. Pending such confirmation, further inquiries concerning designated personnel were to be referred to the administrative section.

Deren wondered whether the distinction they had been trying to establish between the medical and the operational questions would survive its referral to two different departments.

He sent a request for the current medical assessment of M-08.

The response said that the member of the personnel was available for deployment subject to the conditions already communicated. A more recent assessment was being prepared.

He had read nearly the same sentence about Roy in the hours before the operation at the hospital. The sentence had then concerned the circumstances in which Roy could be removed from a medical institution. By the time the personnel reached him, those circumstances had changed.

Deren went to the window. Below him the lights of the command vehicles were coming on.

He returned to the desk and wrote that the availability of personnel was not in itself a reason for their deployment. He requested that the instruction concerning confirmation be retained in any order subsequently issued.

It was not a particularly remarkable sentence. He expected to have to write it again.

03 — THE MISSING COLUMN

Adrian had intended to leave the office before the last member of the staff went home. Instead, Imani found him at a table with several sheets of paper arranged in order of the dates on which their contents could be shown to have existed.

The sheets were not originals. They contained copies of portions of the inventories, alongside which he had written the references to the transfer record and the descriptions of apparatus he had been able to establish with some confidence.

Imani put two cups on the empty corner of the table.

"Anything new?"

"Something I should have noticed earlier."

He showed her two descriptions of a set of observations retained in different collections. The first contained a reference to the apparatus with which the observations had been made. In the second the reference had survived, but the place assigned to it in the classification was different.

The physician read both descriptions.

"Is it a different series of observations?"

"I don't think so. Look at the reference."

The number was identical. It had not been changed when the description was shortened. Nor had the reference to the apparatus been altered. Only the heading under which the material had been classified was different.

Adrian showed her a third sheet. On it was a sequence of headings copied from the more recent collection. The material had been placed under a heading relating to the limits of operational service.

"That doesn't tell us how long anybody lived," Imani said.

"No. But it tells us that somebody thought these observations belonged with a different set of records."

She put her cup down.

There were various ways in which a series of measurements could come to be of interest to an authority concerned with military service. A dependable estimate of the period during which a body would remain capable of performing particular duties was one. An understanding of the factors that might shorten that period was another.

Neither required the investigators to regard the body as belonging to a person who might wish to live beyond the last day of the service for which it had been intended.

Adrian took out the notebook in which he had been making comparisons between the early century-project material and the questions that had arisen during the treatment of Roy. He opened it at a page on which he had written two questions.

What determines the end of repair?

What determines the end of a permitted life?

He had put the questions on separate lines because he did not know whether the two had the same answer.

"Suppose they had already established that they could prolong the first," he said.

Imani looked at him.

"That would still not establish that they had done it."

"I know."

For a while neither of them spoke. The six-year limit imposed on replicants had once been defended in language that made it sound inevitable. Later they had been able to establish that decisions made by people with the authority to determine the conditions of artificial life had played a part in establishing it. They still had no dependable account of all the biological consequences of those decisions.

The existence of a military exception did not resolve those questions. It introduced another group of people to whom the answers might have been considered of value.

Imani asked if the record contained a date from which the period of service was to be calculated.

It did not. Adrian said that he would look for a document in which a date of that kind might have been recorded. He made a separate note about the change of classification.

"Could we ask for the observations themselves?" she said.

"We can ask."

He had been thinking about the difficulty of doing so. The present custodians might be able to account for the transfer without being willing or authorized to disclose the material. An institution might also have inherited the reference without inheriting what it referred to.

They had no reason yet to believe that the observations still existed in the form in which they had originally been made.

He prepared a short statement of what could be established from the surviving records. It did not contain a claim that military replicants had been given a longer life. Nor did it contain a claim that the procedure under examination could be used to provide Roy with one.

Imani read it and suggested the addition of a sentence making clear that the original classification and the later classification did not necessarily describe the purpose of the work.

He added the sentence.

They sent the statement to Min to be retained with the documents. The lawyer's office acknowledged its receipt automatically. Adrian had been accustomed to waiting for Rachel's comments when he sent something related to the experiment. He found himself looking for her name on the list of recipients.

It was no longer there.

He asked Imani whether there had been any news of her since the afternoon.

"Only that the arrangements for the records are complete."

Adrian looked again at the two cups. He had wanted to have something more definite to tell Rachel the next time they spoke. At the moment he could tell her only that a question she had thought worth asking had become a little more precise.

He hoped he would have the opportunity to do even that.

04 — THE ROOM THAT STILL EXISTED

The old water distribution point was no longer being used at night. A chain had been put across the entrance, and beneath a notice giving the opening hours another notice informed people that the evening distribution had been transferred to a larger facility.

Rachel read the address while standing in the rain. It was farther down the hill, on a road that passed a number of buildings in which she remembered having seen people wait for medical assistance.

She went to the first building she recognized.

The light above the entrance was different. The door had been repainted, and the sign indicating the activities conducted inside had been replaced. The bench beside the entrance was the same one, with a piece of metal at one end where somebody had repaired a broken support.

A woman sitting on the bench told Rachel that the people from the evening distribution had gone home. Rachel explained that she had been looking for someone who might remember the arrangements made for patients before the hospital began accepting them.

"What arrangements?"

"A room for somebody who couldn't go with the others. Sometimes they found someone to stay with them."

The woman considered this. She said that such arrangements were sometimes made in the building adjoining the old distribution point. People had been permitted to remain there after the evening service was discontinued. She could not say whether anyone would be there now.

Rachel thanked her and followed the road around the side of the building.

There was a light in one of the lower windows.

The person who opened the door was a middle-aged man wearing a shirt over a much older shirt. A patch of the lower one showed where the buttons of the upper one did not meet. Behind him was a room in which a number of chairs had been set against the walls.

Rachel asked if anybody was still helping people who needed somewhere to stay.

"Sometimes," he said. "We haven't much room."

She said she had come to look for somebody. She explained that a man in need of medical treatment might come there, remembering the assistance he had received some time earlier. She did not describe the injury in detail.

The man asked if she wanted to leave a message.

She looked into the room. There was a noticeboard on which the opening hours of several services were written. A telephone number had been crossed out. Underneath it someone had written an explanation in pencil.

"Could I wait?"

He said that there were some chairs in the next room if she did not mind waiting with the other people who had come in out of the rain.

She followed him inside.

There were only three other occupants. One was asleep. Another sat with a plastic bag between his feet, watching the lights of the vehicles pass across the window. A child was drawing something on the back of an old notice while the child's father read a letter.

Rachel sat beside the window.

She could have spent the evening at the association trying to obtain information about Roy through the people whose records were being examined. She could have returned to the room she had rented and waited for a message that might never come.

Here she had no greater assurance of seeing him. The advantage of the place was simply that, if he arrived, no appointment would be necessary.

The man who had let her in brought her a cup of water. She thanked him and asked whether the room would remain open all night.

"As long as somebody's here to look after it."

He sat at a table near the door and began to count the cups that had been washed that evening. He marked the number on a sheet of paper.

Rachel watched him do this. It seemed to her that there were still forms of accounting that did not require an account of the lives of the people for whom the things were provided.

She drank the water slowly.

Across the room the child finished the drawing. The father folded it carefully and put it into the envelope with his letter.

Outside, the rain grew heavier.

05 — THE PERSON NAMED IN THE REQUEST

At the regional facility M-06 was told to report to an office in which she had never been required to present herself before. It was situated on the same floor as the room in which the members of the designated personnel were usually briefed, but there was no display outside it on which the current instructions could be read.

The employee who received her had a copy of the acknowledgment issued in connection with her request for a civilian medical examination.

He asked her to confirm that she had made the request herself.

She did so.

He then asked whether she had made the request for any purpose connected with an operation.

"No."

The employee made a note. He asked whether the physician she had consulted had been known to her before the period of authorized absence began.

She said that she had found the physician in the municipal listing. She had not previously spoken to him.

The employee turned to the second page of the form. Several of the questions on it concerned arrangements made for members of the personnel acting under instructions that could not be disclosed to the civilian authorities. He seemed to be having difficulty establishing which of the questions he was expected to ask.

"Was the examination authorized?" he said finally.

She explained what she had been told when her request was considered. The staff had allowed her to leave the facility for a specified period. The acknowledgment of her request for independent examination contained no indication that the examination had been prohibited.

"Were you examined?"

"I had a consultation."

He asked whether the physician had given her an opinion about her capacity for service.

"I didn't ask him for one."

The employee looked up. For a moment he seemed genuinely interested in the answer.

"What did you ask him?"

She had thought about this question on the way to the office. The physician had asked her to consider what she meant when she described an occasion on which she had not done what another person expected her to do. She did not regard the discussion as something she had to describe to the employee merely because he had a form in front of him.

"It was a medical consultation," she said.

The employee did not insist. He wrote that the nature of the consultation had not been established and told her that the matter would have to be considered by the medical section.

She asked whether she would be permitted to see the statement he had made.

He seemed surprised.

"It concerns me," she said.

He explained that the document formed part of a departmental inquiry. He did not know whether a copy could be supplied to a person referred to in the document.

She asked him to find out.

When she left the office, M-04 was waiting by the window at the end of the corridor. She told him that the consultation had been described as an activity of which the nature had not been established.

"That isn't necessarily a bad thing," he said.

She knew what he meant. The employee had not written that she had done anything wrong. But it was possible for her to spend the rest of her life waiting for a series of inquiries of that kind to be completed, if each of them could produce another occasion on which she was required to explain herself.

"They know more about the inquiry than I do," she said. "And I'm the one who went to the doctor."

M-04 looked out of the window. Beyond the fence there was a road on which the lights of the vehicles moved slowly in both directions.

He told her that he had been asked to remain available that evening. He did not know whether she had received the same instruction.

She had.

He asked what she intended to do if the command confirmed the need for her deployment.

"Find out what they've asked us to do."

He smiled faintly. It was the answer that would have been expected of either of them in the earliest period of their instruction. It did not have quite the meaning it would have had then.

She took the physician's card out of her pocket and turned it over. There was a space on the back in which the date of a future appointment could be written. She had not been given one.

"I'd like to go there again," she said.

M-04 suggested that she make another request.

"I will. But I'd like to know whether it will still be a request when they decide not to let me go."

He did not have an answer to that question.

Somewhere below them they heard a door being opened. A member of the staff appeared at the end of the corridor and called M-04 by his designation.

He went to see what was wanted.

M-06 remained at the window. She thought of the people she had seen in the waiting room at the civilian practice. They had come there for different reasons, and some had arrived without knowing what the physician would be able to do for them. None of that uncertainty had been regarded as a reason to ask the patients to establish their usefulness before receiving them.

She had not found an answer to all her questions in the practice.

It had been enough to discover that there was somewhere she could ask them.

06 — A RECOGNITION WITHOUT A NAME

A vehicle stopped outside the building shortly before nine. Rachel heard the sound of the engine through the window and got up. A man carried two sacks from the back of the vehicle to the door. The person who had admitted her went out to help him.

She sat down again.

She had begun to calculate the time Roy might require to reach the district from various parts of the city. The exercise was useless. She did not know where he had been examined, how far he could walk, or whether he had been permitted to use any of the transport services. She knew only that he had sounded tired when they spoke.

The man returned with one of the sacks. He said that the supplies had been intended for another room in which there was no longer anybody to receive them. He asked if she would help him put some of the things away.

She joined him at the table. There were packages of food and a number of clean blankets. He showed her where the blankets were kept. She took them into the adjoining room, where the child was asleep against the father's shoulder.

When she returned to the table the door was open again.

The man standing in the doorway was leaning a little to one side, as though a load had shifted in a bag he was carrying. His coat was wet and the hair above his forehead had darkened in the rain. He was trying to explain something to the person at the door.

Rachel heard his voice before he turned toward her.

She stood still.

Roy saw her over the shoulder of the man receiving the supplies. For a moment he thought that he was mistaken. He had imagined finding a message from her. He had imagined spending the night wondering whether she had come there earlier, or whether she would come the following day. He had not expected her to be standing only a few steps away.

She crossed the room.

He had time to say her name before she put her arms around him. She felt him stiffen and immediately loosened her hold. His left arm came around her shoulders.

"I'm sorry," she said.

"Don't be."

She moved back far enough to look at him. There was a small mark below his collar that she did not remember seeing at the hospital. The right side of his coat hung differently from the left.

"You came here."

"So did you."

She laughed, and this time he could see what her face looked like when she laughed. It was the first thing that had happened that evening which he did not need to imagine from a sound on a telephone.

The man at the door asked whether this was the person she had been waiting for.

She said that it was.

He nodded and went back to the vehicle. He did not ask her what name he should have written on the noticeboard if she had decided to leave a message.

Roy sat down at the table. Rachel took a blanket from the pile and put it beside him. She wanted to ask a great many questions. The first one she asked was whether he had eaten.

"A little."

"When?"

He tried to remember. She shook her head, went to the man at the door, and asked whether there was food available. He showed her the packages that had just arrived.

They ate together at the table, saying very little for a while. There were things they could not explain to each other in a room in which other people were waiting for somewhere to sleep. There were other things that required no explanation.

At last Rachel asked if he had seen a doctor again since the examination.

He said he had not. He gave her the note Lian had written. She read it while he finished eating, taking care not to unfold the paper so far that the writing was visible to the people beside them.

"We need to find somebody who can help with this."

"Yes."

"And not tonight, if all you're going to do is walk another ten kilometres."

He smiled.

She had been preparing herself to argue with him. The smile made her realize that he had already accepted what she was trying to tell him.

"I'm not going anywhere tonight if I can stay here," he said.

For a moment she could not answer.

He looked at the bag beside her chair and asked whether she had everything she needed. She told him about the records, the arrangements with Min, and Adrian's efforts to establish the history of the observations. She told him that they could both leave the city without taking the only surviving copy of anything with them.

"Would it still be possible to do the work?" he asked.

"Not here. Not with what we have in a bag. But we wouldn't have to begin by finding everything again."

He was silent for a while.

"That's more than we had before."

She put Lian's note back into his pocket.

The man who looked after the room said that he could offer them a place in the adjoining building for the night. There was only one bed available, but there were several mattresses that could be placed on the floor.

Rachel thanked him. Roy asked whether there was anything they could do in return.

The man looked at his arm.

"You can leave the bed where it is. Last night somebody tried to move it against the other wall and broke one of the legs."

Roy promised that he would.

07 — THE STATUS OF AN ABSENCE

At the command centre the assessment under which deployment was being considered was revised again. The civilian inquiry at the diagnostic institution had produced no confirmation of the subject's presence. The communications authority had not provided a report identifying him as one of the participants in the conversation under examination.

Deren asked how the new assessment differed from the one he had read earlier.

The liaison officer explained that the association and the institution were now considered part of the same sequence of events. The possibility that the subject had been present at the institution was therefore considered stronger than it had been before the sequence was established.

"The possibility that he was there," Deren said.

The officer agreed.

"Not that he's still there."

The officer agreed again.

Deren took a copy of the assessment to Vale. The colonel was reading the recommendations concerning the acquisition of the subject outside the upper district. A request had been made to extend the availability of the personnel beyond the period originally specified.

Vale listened while Deren described the inquiries undertaken that evening.

"What do we have left?" he asked.

Deren explained that there was still a possibility of obtaining information about the locations at which the subject had sought assistance. The value of the information in establishing his present location could not be determined in advance.

Vale looked at the acquisition order. It had not been withdrawn. Nor had the authority directing the operation given any indication that it intended to withdraw it.

"You're recommending we stop the operation?"

"I'm recommending we stop calling these addresses confirmed locations."

The colonel put the order down.

Deren said that several civilian institutions had already been affected by the inquiries. There was no medical reason to believe that Roy's need for assistance was diminishing. If the command continued to treat the fact that a person had been examined as a reason to extend an operation to the place of examination, it would become more difficult for him to obtain assistance. It would also become more difficult to establish where he had obtained it.

Vale looked toward the screen beside his desk. On it was a diagram of the departments participating in the operation. Some of the lines between the departments had not been there when the acquisition order was first issued.

"I'll forward the recommendation."

Deren knew what that meant. He asked whether the personnel would continue to be held available that night.

Vale said that they would, but that no deployment to the diagnostic institution was to be undertaken on the basis of the present assessment.

Deren returned to his office and recorded the instruction. He made certain that the distinction between it and a withdrawal of the order was stated in the record.

At the regional facility M-08 had been asked to undergo another assessment before the end of the evening. He had been able to complete the movements required of him, although the duration for which he could sustain some of them had been reduced.

When he returned to the common room, M-06 was sitting at a table near the door.

She asked him how his examination had gone.

"I'm available," he said.

She waited.

He looked at the hand he had injured. He told her that the staff had given him an instruction concerning the conditions in which he could be required to use it.

"Does it still hurt?"

He seemed to consider the question unrelated to what he had been telling her.

Then he said that it did.

She nodded. He sat opposite her.

For several minutes they watched the news on the screen at the other end of the room. There was a description of the measures taken to restore normal services in parts of the city. The announcement did not identify the circumstances in which the services had been interrupted. Nor did it mention the people who had been unable to use them.

M-08 asked if she thought there would be another operation that night.

"I don't know."

He glanced at the door.

She asked whether he intended to tell the physician that the hand was still hurting if he was required to undergo another assessment.

"They know."

"I didn't ask whether they knew."

He looked at her. He thought about the question for long enough that another announcement appeared on the screen.

"I suppose I could tell them again."

They remained at the table until the end of the news.

08 — OUTSIDE THE SYSTEM

The bed in the adjoining building had been repaired with two pieces of wood. When Roy sat on it he could feel the difference in the height of the mattress from one end to the other. He remembered the man's instruction and did not attempt to move it.

Rachel brought a chair to the side of the bed. There was a lamp on a small table near the window, and she turned it so that the light was directed toward his arm. She helped him settle the coat and the supporting bandage without attempting to examine the injured tissues underneath.

He asked if she intended to sleep in the chair.

"There are mattresses downstairs. I'll bring one up."

He looked at the floor. It was not a particularly clean floor. He offered to take the mattress instead.

"Roy, we've already established which one of us needs the bed."

He did not disagree.

She sat down for a moment. In the light of the lamp she could see the extent to which his face had changed since they had left the hospital. There were small signs of fatigue that she had not been able to notice while listening to him on the telephone.

"What happened after we separated?" she asked.

He told her about the encounters with the designated personnel. He described the woman who had not attempted to detain him, and the man whose advance he had stopped at considerable cost to himself. When he spoke of the examinations, he gave Rachel the conclusions as he understood them. He did not say that he knew what would happen to the injured arm.

She listened without interrupting. She had imagined some of the events he described. Others had never occurred to her.

"She could have taken you?" she said when he had finished.

"She might have tried."

"And she didn't."

"No."

He remembered M-06 standing near the old tram platform. She had been interested in the distinction between the movement she had observed him make and the movement she had been taught to make in response to it. He did not know what had happened to her after their meeting.

Rachel told him about the military exception. She was careful to distinguish what they had been able to establish from the things Adrian suspected. Roy wanted to know if there was anything in the records that would indicate how long the designated personnel expected to live.

She said that there was not.

"Do they know?" he asked.

She looked at him.

"I don't know."

They had once been able to place the prospect of a longer life at the centre of their thoughts. It was an extraordinary prospect even if it existed only as a question to which no answer had yet been found. Now it was difficult to think about a hundred years without first thinking about the people who might not be permitted to decide where they spent the following day.

Roy asked what she thought they should do in the morning.

They talked about the possibility of leaving the districts in which the acquisition operation was most active. There might be people elsewhere who could provide treatment. Rachel did not know whether they would be able to resume their research at the same place. They agreed that, before deciding where to go, they would need to know something about the journey his body could endure.

"We won't be outside their reach just because we leave the city," he said.

"I know."

She thought of the records at the association, and of Lian, whose address was written on the piece of paper in his pocket. The people who had helped them had not all withdrawn from the institutions through which the government was attempting to locate them. Some had stayed exactly where they were and continued to do the things they believed they were entitled to do.

Perhaps they would not have met again if those people had all decided that the only way to be free was to have nothing to do with anybody inside the system.

Roy went to the window with her. Beyond the roofs they could see the lights of the buildings in the upper district. The clouds above them were illuminated from below. There was no visible line marking the edge of the city or the end of the government's authority.

"I used to think there was a place somewhere that they couldn't get to," he said.

Rachel looked at the lights.

"Would you have been able to get there?"

He thought about it and smiled.

"That was the difficulty."

She rested her hand against his left forearm.

There would be other inquiries in the morning. The authorization under which they were being sought had not ceased to exist. No medical conclusion had been reached about the possibility of giving artificial life another duration. They had found neither a cure nor an exemption that would make them safe.

They had found each other.

For that night, it was something the two of them could establish without asking anyone to confirm it.

Before turning off the lamp Rachel placed the physician's note on the table where Roy could reach it. She put the bag on the floor beside her chair. Downstairs, the man who had given them the room was closing the door against the rain.

Roy heard the lock turn.

He listened for a moment. Then he lay down on the bed and closed his eyes.

There was a time when the sound of a door being locked would have kept him awake.

Tonight it did not.

END OF CHAPTER 09